
Vol. 1

January / February 2021

No.11

CMER Middle East Report

The Council on Middle East Relations
Canberra, ACT, Australia

Aims and Scope

The *CMER Middle East Report* (ISBN 978-1-921492-39-6) is an electronic journal (e-journal) published by the Council of Middle East Relations, designed towards fulfilling one of the principal missions of the Council, namely the dissemination of academic research and other scholarly works. With all its inherent advantages, an e-journal serves as the best vehicle to carry CMER to the forefront of the global Middle East scholarly community.

The *CMER Middle East Report* is a scholarly, multidisciplinary, internationally refereed publication focusing primarily on the Middle East and North Africa. The disciplines of interest encompass politics, history, religion, the environment, ethno-history, cultural heritage, social issues, economic development, war and conflict resolution, prehistory and the arts.

The Council on Middle East Relations make every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in our publications. However, we make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content.

Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed of by The Council on Middle East Relations. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information.

The Council on Middle East Relations shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to, or arising out of the use of the Content.

ISBN: 978-1-921492-39-6 (Online)

Editor-in-Chief: Arthur Tane

Email: info@thecmer.org

Website: www.thecmer.org

Table of Contents

Articles

Editorial

1. Biden Unravels Middle East Security
Arthur Tane 5

The Biden Administration

2. Will the Trump Successes in the Middle East Survive?
Guy Milliere 7
3. Arab States Warn Biden: We Do Not Want another Fool like Obama
Khaled Abu Toameh 14
4. Iran Considers Biden Weak
Peter Rawlings 18

Iran

5. Iran: The Mullah's Pursuit of Obtaining Nuclear Weapons
Maajid Rafizadeh 20
6. Iran Oil Exports to China Soar
Susan Yao 22
7. Iran to Enrich U235 Stockpile to 60%
Zara Dawoud 24
8. Iranian Militia Groups Claim to have active cells in Washington DC
Jack Phillips 27
9. Lebanon Wants an End to Iranian Occupation
Khaled Abu Toameh 28

Pope's Visit

10. The Pope to Meet the Ayatollah
Hamia Nair 30

Oman

11. New Oman's Sultan First Year
Hamia Nair 33

Syria

12. Ten years on, Syrian Christians say Assad ' has taken us hostage '
Sophian Aubin 36

13. 10th Anniversary of Syrian Uprising
Lina Zaidi 40
14. The Assad Regime has failed to restore full sovereignty over Syria
Fabrice Balanche 41

Woman's Rights

15. Kylie Moore-Gilbert Freed
Anastasia Kravtsov 44
16. Egyptian Activist Sanaa Seif sentenced to 18 months in Prison
Zara Dawoud 46
17. Princess Latifa: Dubai's Double Standards
Free Princess Latifa Campaign 48
18. Filipino Women Trafficked & Sold in Syria
Chan Ling 51

Turkistan

19. Uyghur Women Raped, Sexual Abused, and Tortured
East Turkistan Government in Exile 53
20. President Trump Designates CCP Atrocities as Genocide
Don Gibbons 55

Israel & Palestine

21. Israeli Elections
Arthur Tane 58
22. The Palestinian Plan to Dupe Biden
Bassam Tawil 61

Turkey

23. Turkey: Erdogan's War on Peace
Burak Bekdil 64
24. Turkish Reforms: From Imperial Repression to Thuggish State
Burak Bekdil 66

Russia & The Middle East

25. Is Russia Trying to Play Kingmaker in Lebanon?
Anna Borschchevskaya 68
26. Russian Mercenaries still in Libya
Anastasia Kravtsov 70

Biden Unravels Middle East Security

By Arthur Tane
TCMER Executive Director



If there is not honest and objective assessment of this already flawed American President, you cannot overlook Biden's

- deteriorating mental health
- his abrogation of key foreign policy responsibilities to the Vice President
- his imposition of marital law throughout Washington DC, weeks after assuming Office and
- his rapidly faulting voter approval numbers

while enjoying a "dream honeymoon" from the mainly left-wing American media.

It is only one month into his term in office, and Biden has authorised useless military strikes on Syria while facing increasing criticism from Arab nations over his regime's soft policy toward Iran.

The Arabs say they are worried because Iran sees Biden as a "weak" president, and that is why the mullahs in Tehran and their proxies in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon have increased their terrorist attacks throughout the Middle East.

"In Tehran's eyes, Biden is a pushover," wrote Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, former editor-in-chief of the Saudi newspaper *Ashraq Al-Awsat*.

Another Saudi columnist, Hella Al-Mashouh, also criticized the Biden administration's soft approach toward Iran. She specifically criticized the Biden's recent decision to revoke designation of Yemen's Houthi militia as a terrorist group. The decision reversed actions taken by President Donald Trump.

Now Biden has distanced himself from the close relationship President Trump had with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. In what is another example of his cognitive disabilities, Biden is trying to pin suspicion on the death of Jamal Khashoggi directly onto the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, HRH Mohammed bin Salman.

Questions over Biden's mental fitness that were largely hidden throughout the 2020 campaign are now on open display as Americans observe almost daily his declining mental health. In his first weeks in the White House Biden does not strike me as somebody who is a decision-maker.

Biden's mental decline is highly likely to result in Kamala Harris taking over as President of the United States possibly this year.

In early Februarys, US political commentator Megyn Kelly told *Good Morning Britain* that Joe Biden has no mandate from the American people. He doesn't even know the American people, he was in his basement sitting on a beanbag during the entirety of the Presidential campaign. Moreover he cannot remember the names of his own Cabinet members.

If you have encountered a person with dementia, you know Biden has it. No one who has been close to someone deteriorating from that disease could fail to see the same signs in Biden. In online discussions Biden apologists somehow try to say that a senile Biden is better than Donald Trump. Is this truly horse-shit!

None of the media seem interested in the truth about Biden. His partisan and poisonous media allies like CNN, MSNBC, The New York Times and The Washington Post are running interference by failing to ask any questions about Biden's mental fitness.

It is clear US President Joe Biden is not up to the task he has been sworn in to do. Never before has the leader of the free world been so cognitively compromised. As Biden has chosen to conduct his administration's foreign policy based on personal relationship, alas within a month that approach is in tatters.



This is not just about politics. It's about the stability of the Middle East and North Africa and American's reputation as a sound ally and a good friend. In 2021, given the many challenges facing our world, the democracies, our partners and allies, need an American president that is fully, completely engaged. And it's now becoming a problem that the blinded mainstream media can no longer ignore.

US President Donald Trump had a record of strength and success. Biden has a record of weakness and failure.

However Biden is not an idiot. He has dementia. It is those who voted for Joe Biden who are the real idiots!

Will the Trump Successes in the Middle East Survive?

By Guy Millière



The Abraham Accords, solemnly signed on September 15, 2020 at the White House by Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and the United States set in motion a new peace process that many observers would have considered unimaginable just a few years ago. Pictured from left to right: Bahrain Foreign Minister Abdullatif al-Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, US President Donald Trump, and UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan participate in the signing of the Abraham Accords.

December 22, 2020. 9:30 am. A plane takes off from Ben Gurion Airport in Israel for Morocco's capitol, Rabat. Economic, political, cultural and strategic agreements between Morocco and Israel are signed for a full normalization of relations between the two countries. Morocco is the fourth Arab Muslim country in 2020 to sign such an agreement with Israel.

The Abraham Accords, solemnly signed on September 15, 2020 at the White House by Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and the United States, set in motion a new peace process that many observers would have considered unimaginable just a few years ago. This new peace process has continued well beyond the 2020 U.S. elections and is at the heart of a broader revolution that has changed the Middle East and the Arab world. It is a revolution that is one of the major achievements of the Trump presidency.

With the new administration in Washington, DC showing an eagerness to drag everything that bears Trump's name through the mud, it may be important to analyze this revolution and the strategy that made it possible – starting from the situation in the region when President Donald J. Trump arrived at the White House.

Syria was ravaged by a catastrophic civil war that left more than 400,000 people dead and millions of refugees. A jihadist terrorist organization had occupied a vast territory in eastern Syria and north-western Iraq, called it the "Islamic State", and was using it as a base for preparing bloodthirsty worldwide jihadist attacks.

In Iran, the mullahs' regime was destabilizing the entire region and advancing toward regional hegemony. Iran ruled Lebanon through Hezbollah; areas of Syria that are still in the hands of Bashar Al-Assad through thousands of Revolutionary Guards and

militiamen dispatched by Tehran, and half of Yemen's territory through the Houthi militias it was financing and arming. It was also financing and arming Hamas in the Gaza Strip and continuing to move towards possessing nuclear weapons, despite the July 2015 nuclear agreement (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), which had served no purpose other than allowing the regime to dispose of billions of dollars, become the main financier of global Islamic terrorism, and continue its uranium enrichment toward a legitimized nuclear breakout.

The countries of the Sunni Arab world were weak and shaken. Egypt was just beginning to find calm after years marked by the fall of Hosni Mubarak; the rise to power in 2012 of the Muslim Brotherhood; its overthrow a year later by large demonstrations; the rise to power of Abdel Fattah al Sisi, and ongoing Islamist uprisings that the army has severely repressed.

Libya, since the destruction of the Gaddafi regime, has been in ruins, and abandoned to Islamic terrorist groups. Yemen has been largely destroyed. Saudi Arabia was threatened both by Iran and Islamic State, which had launched attacks in the east of the country. Sudan was in the hands of Omar al-Bashir, a bloodthirsty ruler who accepted the use of his country for Iran to transfer arms to the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian Authority, after abandoning all negotiations, proceeded to organize bloody anti-Israeli attacks without receiving the slightest reprimand from the Western world, and carry out with impunity a campaign committed to delegitimizing Israel in international organizations.

Israel had been under constant pressure from the Obama administration, as well as from President Barack Obama himself, who constantly stressed the "imperative" of creating a Palestinian state within the "1967 borders". Obama, apparently hoping to create a Palestinian state on his way out the door, had decided not to veto a UN Security Council resolution on December 23, 2016, which described Israeli settlements as "territories occupied by force", including the Old City of Jerusalem, and Israel as "acting in violation of international humanitarian law".

In addition, the Obama administration and Obama had explicitly supported the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak and the ascent of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Obama administration had also distanced itself from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies; contributed to the destruction of Libya's Gaddafi regime; signed the JCPOA enabling Iran to enrich uranium and possess nuclear weapons - a deal Iran never signed - and had poured more than \$150 billion into Iran's coffers.

President Trump, from the moment he took office, acted quickly and decisively. He destroyed the Islamic State. By December 2017, the group controlled only 5% of the territory it had controlled ten months earlier. By March 2019, it had lost its last stronghold.

On May 21, 2018, Trump moved to incapacitate the regime of Iran's mullahs by announcing that the United States was abandoning the "nuclear deal". He then implemented sanctions aimed at curtailing Iran's adventurism.

Trump also distanced himself from the "two-state solution," stillborn in diplomatic circles by a Palestinian veto of any suggestion, as well as other untenable Palestinian demands.

Trump improved U.S. ties with much of the Muslim Arab world, and in May 2017, made a crucial trip to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. There, he told the 54 leaders from Sunni Muslim countries gathered for the occasion that the United States would be on their side in facing Iranian threats, and that the US was ready to help them overcome instability on the strict conditions that they lead a fight against terrorism and radical Islam, and that they modernize.

Trump, clearly aware that discreet meetings had been held between Israeli leaders and leaders of several Sunni Muslim countries, suggested that regional economic and strategic rapprochement would help move towards peace. He referred to "citizens of the Middle East" in general and added that if "the three Abrahamic Faiths can join together in cooperation, then peace in this world is possible".

Trump saw that the intransigence of the Palestinian leadership, which the leaders of the Arab world had long supported, was now seen by them as an obstacle. While in Riyadh, Trump did not say a single word about the Palestinian Authority.

He travelled on the first flight from Riyadh to Israel; visited the Western Wall - the first President of the United States in office to do so - and affirmed his unwavering support for the US ally. He then went to Ramallah, where he accused Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas of being a supporter of terrorism and a liar.

In November 2017, Trump asked a team led by his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to draw up a peace plan that respected Israel's security imperatives and that took into account not the demands of the Palestinian Authority, but benefits for the Palestinian people.

During the following months, he asked the Palestinian Authority to stop its terrorist activities. When the Palestinian Authority refused, Trump reduced the financing granted to it by the United States, and ceased to treat its leaders as constructive and legitimate interlocutors.

On December 6, 2017, Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and decided to locate the U.S. Embassy in Israel there. It was a way of saying that Israel's presence in Jerusalem was fully legitimate and that no one would be permitted to push Israel around. The US embassy was inaugurated less than a year later, on May 14, 2018.

On September 7, 2018, Trump asked the US Department of State to issue a statement saying that from now on, the US would recognize as refugees only the Arabs who had personally left Israel in 1948-49 and added that the US would no longer fund the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), an organization that claims there are more than five million Palestinian refugees, almost all of whom have never set foot in Israel and who therefore cannot claim to "return" to lands where they have never been. (UNRWA includes all the descendants of actual refugees through the generations, in a method of accounting not done by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.)

Trump said that the idea of a "return" to Israel of millions of people who are not actually refugees was no longer on the negotiating table.

Trump's peace plan, at least its economic component, was presented in Manama, Bahrain, on June 25 and 26, 2019. Representatives from 39 countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Gulf countries were present, as well as businessmen from all over the Arab world.

The plan, presented at the White House on January 28, 2020, talks about a Palestinian state, but stipulates that Israel's security would be guaranteed. If a Palestinian state were to come into being, it would be demilitarized, have borders controlled by Israel and no border with an Arab state. The plan offered the prospect of sovereignty, within this security framework, to the Palestinian Arabs. The proposal allows Israel to retain a necessary control of the Jordan Valley, and pledges that Israel would be sovereign over 30% of Judea and Samaria - a percentage that many Israelis considered woefully insufficient, considering that historically, Judea and Samaria have been part of Israel.

Above all, the plan says that a Palestinian state can only come into being if the leaders and the Palestinians fully renounce and end terrorism.

Palestinian leaders immediately rejected the offer. A few days later, at the insistence of the Palestinian Authority, the Arab League condemned the plan, however Arab representatives present in Manama continued to prepare the next step.

The Abraham Accords soon followed. They were in line with the prospects for peace mentioned by President Trump in May 2017. They had not been condemned by the Arab League.

As anticipated by Trump in May 2017, the Abraham Accords have both an economic and a strategic dimension. They not only offer economic opportunities to all the signatories but also reinforce their military strength. As the plan includes the Palestinian Arabs, the Arab signatories can say that by signing the agreement, they did not forget the Palestinian population.

The Abraham Accords - between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain - will lead to billions of dollars of investment and trade between Israel and its partners in peace. The Accords will also allow the Emirates and Bahrain to benefit from Israeli technology, and see their defence strengthened against Iran.

The Abraham Accords have also led, more broadly, to a cultural and religious opening of the Emirates and Bahrain to Judaism: the Crossroads of Civilization Museum in Dubai is now the first museum accessible in the Hebrew language in the Arab world. The museum displays old maps of Jerusalem, a sword from the Yemenite Jewish community, a pre-Holocaust Jewish marriage contract and original letters by Theodor Herzl. Restaurants in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Manama are increasingly serving kosher food. A giant Hanukkah candelabra, a menorah, was lit up in front of Dubai's Burj al-Khalifa, the world tallest skyscraper, to celebrate the Jewish holiday. Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, has been working for years to spread a non-political vision of Islam and has entrusted the management of the country's religious issues to a Sufi scholar, Sheikh Abdullah bin Bayyah, now in charge of disseminating this vision.

The Trump administration's agreement with Sudan has an even more striking dimension. Sudan was on the list of terrorist states and, until its dictator, Omar al Bashir, fell in April 2019, it had contributed to the war against Israel. The current Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, shares a similar vision of Islam to that of Sheikh Abdallah bin Bayyah, and has appointed a Christian Coptic woman to the Sovereign Council, a body that will rule the country until late 2022 when free elections are planned. Israel now has peaceful relations with a country that had long been an enemy. Sudan, freshly removed from the list of terrorist states, now has help from Israel, one of the

world-leaders in agricultural technologies, and will be able to improve its food production.

As for the Trump administration's agreement with Morocco, the kingdom already had low-key ties with Israel. Around a million Jews of Moroccan origin are part of Israel's population, and Jews in Morocco are considered by the kingdom - and its visionary monarch, HRH King Mohammed VI - as citizens equal to Muslim Moroccans. Diplomatic links are in the process of being fully re-established. Israel has normal relations with one more Sunni Arab country, and Morocco has ties with Israel that will lead to investment and economic development. President Trump added to the agreement the recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, a territory claimed by a guerrilla group supported by Algeria and more recently by the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah. President Trump's decision strengthened Morocco, an ally of the United States, rather than rewarding enemies of the United States.

Saudi Arabia has not yet reached a normalization agreement with Israel. King Salman seems committed to the idea that a Palestinian state must be created before Saudi Arabia normalizes ties with Israel. However, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known familiarly as MBS, apparently sees that cooperation with Israel in the field of security can only strengthen the defence of the kingdom and that Israeli technologies would be most useful for the economic transformation he envisions for his development project, Vision 2030.

MBS is evidently aware that need to be profound changes in a country subject to the strict application of the Wahhabi version of Islamic Sharia law, and changes are underway. Saudi Arabia's educational curricula are being modified in a direction of tolerance, apparently with a goal of removing anti-Semitic content. The religious discourse in the country is also changing. Sheikh Abdulaziz al-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti, now says that religion should be spread through words, not through the sword.

On September 6, the Imam of Mecca's Grand Mosque, Abdulrahman al-Sudais, delivered a sermon preaching dialogue and kindness to non-Muslims, and made specific reference to Jews. He was criticized, but could not have delivered the sermon without the agreement of the royal family. *Um Haroun* (Mother of Aaron), a Saudi television drama series was broadcast last year on a Saudi Arabia's state-sponsored channel, MBC, and in other Arab countries. It shows Jews, Christians and Muslims living together in peace. True, the Saudi kingdom may still have a way to go to become an open and tolerant country, and the path is fraught with opposition. People eager to keep their perch and hostile to the evolution of the country may step forward; the response could well be brutal. The murder in Istanbul of the Muslim Brotherhood associate Jamal Kashoggi is still fresh in everyone's memory. Saudi Arabia is nevertheless moving in an extremely promising direction. Let us hope that outside forces do not thwart it.

The outline of a more stable Middle East, less marked by war, appears to be taking shape - if other countries will just let it. Islamic terrorism has reached its lowest level in decades, although countries remain in ruins and hotbeds of war persist. Iran's regime seems on the road to asphyxiation. Let us hope that process is not thwarted, either.

Other countries apparently would like to follow the path that was beginning to take shape. In October 2020, Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen spoke of Oman, Indonesia, and five

or six other countries that he did not name; Mauritania has also been mentioned. The more countries that are encouraged to sign the Abraham Accords, the warmer all the peace agreements in the region could become. The idea of a regional peace is not out of reach. In a mere four years, the Trump Revolution in the Middle East provided an invaluable foundation for a profound and fruitful transformation of the region.

The new Biden administration is already threatening to undermine these and other victories. It had indicated, despite worried messages from Israel and the Sunni Arab world, that it would like to return to the catastrophic nuclear "Iran deal". The new administration claims to want to impose strict conditions on Iran's regime, but these conditions seem to boil down to a demand that Iran respect the terms of the JCPOA, which Iran has, in fact, never respected. Evidently perceiving an America wishing to appease Iran, the mullahs announced on January 4 that they had decided to resume enriching uranium to the 20% level, close to the purity used for nuclear weapons. The same day, the mullahs seized a South Korean-flagged chemical tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.

The Biden administration also seems eager to restore U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority and reconnect with its leaders - without doing anything about their support for terrorism, treating them again, as "partners for peace", no matter how much evidence there is to the contrary, and attempting to move toward renewed support yet again for a potentially lethal "two-state solution".

American pressure on Israel may intensify and go hand-in-hand with other pressures. On January 11, the French and German foreign ministers, meeting in Cairo with their Jordanian and Egyptian counterparts, issued a statement affirming their "commitment to a two-state solution that ensures the emergence of an independent and viable Palestinian state on the basis of June 4, 1967 lines" - a mere armistice line that has been called "Auschwitz borders" for its clear unsustainability.

If the sanctions against Iran are lifted, it is positioned to acquire nuclear weapons within weeks, according to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Other countries in the region would probably do everything possible to acquire nuclear weapons too, and regional nuclear proliferation, probably impossible to stop, would likely be set in motion.

After three years of a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar, the recent rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, negotiated by Jared Kushner and Avi Berkowitz, may seem like good news, and a step in the right direction. Qatar's close ties with Iran, however, make it likely that Qatar accepted the agreement with the consent of Iran - undoubtedly seeking to strengthen its credibility with Biden's new team, as well as its own geostrategic position. Presumably Iran can only want to weaken the agreements between Israel, Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco and Sudan. On January 18, Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani said that the time had come for the leaders of the six-member Gulf Cooperation Council to "broker negotiations with Iran to patch up their differences".

China reached agreements with Iran in July 2020 and, on its self-declared quest for world domination (for instance, here, here, and here), presumably intends to expand its role as a major regional player in the service of the enemies of the United States and peace.

A Biden administration might not directly touch the Abraham Accords, but could be tempted, by a passion to re-engage Iran, seriously to weaken them. Some members of the US Congress are questioning the planned sales of F-35 aircraft to the United Arab Emirates, even though the Israeli government does not oppose it. Some members of Congress have also expressed their interest insuing the struggling new democratic government of Sudan - in a cynical attempt to undermine it - for its past links to terrorism, which occurred under the *previous* regime. The incoming Biden administration said they are also considering challenging Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, which, again, would empower Iran, cited by the US as the "world's worst state sponsor of terrorism," and Hezbollah, but raise tensions with stable, peace-seeking American allies such as Israel and Morocco.

The transformations that have taken place in the Middle East since 2017 are remarkable, but, as was seen in the Second World War, even the strongest countries can conceivably be destroyed.

"The Middle East," wrote the Middle East expert Mordechai Kedar, "is built on sand dunes that change their shape according to the prevailing winds". It is to be hoped that the prevailing winds will not change to the point of sweeping away what is the greatest transformation that has taken place in more than seven decades in a region so often ravaged by war, and that a return to past mistakes will not lead once again to sand dunes covered in blood.

Dr. Guy Millière, a professor at the University of Paris, is the author of 27 books on France and Europe.

Arab States Warn Biden: We Do Not Want another Fool like Obama

By Khaled Abu Toameh



Prominent Arab political analysts and commentators are dumbfounded that the Biden administration has chosen to appease Iran and Islamists instead of working with Washington's traditional and long-time allies in the Arab world. Pictured: Then Vice President Joe Biden (left) speaks with then Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal (center) at the Riyadh airbase in Saudi Arabia on October 27, 2011

Prominent Arab political analysts and commentators are dumbfounded that the Biden administration has chosen to appease Iran and Islamists instead of working with Washington's traditional and long-time allies in the Arab world.

In a series of articles published after the release of the US intelligence report on the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, many Arab analysts and columnists have warned that the Biden administration was harming US interests in the Middle East.

Some said they saw the decision to release the report as a kind of sequel to the Obama administration's failed policy of meddling in the internal affairs of Arab countries.

They noted that the Saudi authorities had already punished those involved in the 2018 murder of Khashoggi inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey. The Biden administration, some Arab writers have said, "has adopted a policy of "antagonizing allies while appeasing enemies."

"The Saudi judiciary has imposed the most severe penalties on the perpetrators of this morally and legally unacceptable act," wrote Syrian journalist Abduljalil Alsaeid, referring to the murder of Khashoggi. "The Saudi leadership was keen not to politicize this case." Alsaeid said he believed that former Obama administration officials who are now part of the Biden administration are intentionally trying to damage US-Saudi relations:

"The wing of former President Barack Obama among the Biden team considers itself in a state of hostility with Saudi Arabia because of the kingdom's diplomacy that succeeded in persuading former President Donald Trump to withdraw from the ill-

fated nuclear deal... The Obama wing inside the ruling Democratic Party accepts the Iranian regime and turns a blind eye to Iran's terrorism in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon."

Alsaeid pointed out that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are opposed to a return to the old nuclear deal with Iran:

"The failed campaign of pressures on Saudi Arabia will ultimately produce an unwanted American scenario, which is to antagonize allies and appease enemies... Riyadh, like the Arab Gulf states, has very important alliances with America, and the Saudi partnership with the US extends for long decades, and has resulted in a serious fight against terrorism."

President Biden, he added, "has the right to talk about America's democratic values, but why have these values not been expanded to hold Hezbollah accountable for the recent killing of [anti-Hezbollah Lebanese publisher] Loqman Slim or the slaughter of thousands of thousands of Syrians by pro-Iranian groups?"

Emad El Din Adeeb, a prominent Egyptian businessman and famous political television show host, said that the Biden administration was "rewarding Iranian despotism while punishing Saudi Arabia."

The Biden administration, Adeeb warned, was dealing harshly with Riyadh "because of one crime, the killing of Khashoggi, while rehabilitating Tehran, which has carried out a million crimes worse than Khashoggi's crime."

Adeeb pointed out that Iran was continuing with its human rights violations while Saudi Arabia has in recent years embarked on large-scale reforms.

"Freedom of expression, assembly and association are prohibited in Iran," he said. "It prevents normal social life and attacks protests, private parties and intellectual seminars. It issues death sentences against political opponents and practices all forms of systematic torture against detainees and prisoners. The Iranian authorities also practice persecution and oppression against religious minorities."

Instead of punishing Iran, Adeeb said, "The Biden administration is seeking to bring Iran back to the negotiating table, lift sanctions, and release its assets while halting arms and spare parts shipments to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates."

"Now Washington is revoking the terror designation of the Houthi terrorist movement in Yemen, thereby encouraging it to increase its missile attacks against innocent Saudi civilians and installations. Washington is now turning a blind eye to Iran's proxies in the region."

Emirati writer Mohammed Khalfan Al-Sawafi said that one of the "calamities" that the Arabs suffered during the presidency of Barack Obama was US interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries. Al-Sawafi warned that Biden was repeating the "same mistake" of the Biden's White House by publishing the report about the murder of Khashoggi.

"As Arabs, we do not have any problem with regional or superpower parties playing a role in the international arena... But we reject the interference of any political system or administration that believes its international status and military and financial power allow it to harm our leaders. It seems there are certain agendas that were not

completed during the Obama era, and the Biden administration wants to take us back to the time when Biden was Vice President. Instead of confirming the Arab's concerns about the return of Obama's policy to the region, it would be appropriate [for the Biden administration] to respect the Arab's social and political culture, which does not accept any harm to political and religious symbols."

According to al-Sawafi, the release of the report on the slain Saudi journalist was a sign that the Biden administration "stands against the aspirations of the Saudi and Gulf people in achieving reform and stability. The Biden administration, he added, should avoid getting itself into a situation that could damage US relations with the Arab countries. "The Obama administration pushed a number of Arab countries toward rapprochement with China and Russia," he remarked. "The Biden administration is now working on the basis of: If you have a problem and are unable to solve it, complicate it or work against it."

Saudi columnist Hamood Abu Talib accused the Biden administration of handing out gifts to Iranian-backed terror groups while punishing its Arab allies, including Saudi Arabia.

Abu Talib noted that on the same day the Biden administration announced its intention to remove the Houthi militia from the US list of foreign terrorist organizations, the Yemen-based terror group fired ballistic missiles and explosive drones toward Saudi Arabia. "America is now providing free gifts to the Houthi militia," Abu Talib said.

"The false accusations adopted by the Biden administration against the kingdom and the attempts to interfere with its sovereign decisions complicate the situation and make cooperation with the kingdom more difficult. America knows well that the kingdom plays an important pivotal role in all regional issues, in addition to its political and economic weight and depth in the Islamic world and its position in the Arab world, as well as its strategic partnership as a reliable and strong ally of America for eight decades. Therefore, it would be a great folly for the Biden administration if it continues to provoke the kingdom or if it continues to support the Houthis and stand by and watch their attacks."

The Saudi columnist advised the Biden administration to avoid complicating the problems of the Middle East and "stop supporting terrorist militias that threaten the region's security, such as the Houthi militia that is supported by the Iranian regime, which is the worst terrorist regime in the world."

Another Saudi columnist and political activist, Zuhair Al-Harhi, expressed fear that the policy of Biden in the Middle East would be similar to Obama's "capitulation."

"American hesitation and inaction, interpreted by Tehran at the time [of the Obama administration] as weakness, is what tempted it [Iran] today to think in the same way and blackmail the new president... The new administration in the White House is in a state of retreat and is lacking a clear vision. The Iranian regime practiced these methods before and is applying them today with the Biden administration in light of behavior similar to that of former President Obama. The state of political numbness of the administration that we are witnessing these days does not have a logical explanation, especially when comparing it to what the administration of former President Trump did to curtail the Iranian regime. It is important for President Biden to feel the real dangers facing the Gulf States, the role of US allies, and the danger of enemies. Former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was right when he asserted that the

Iranian regime understands only the language of force. We expected Biden to employ the sanctions that Trump re-imposed on Iran to force it to negotiate issues that were not included in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action."

The last three years of the Obama presidency were "catastrophic in every sense of this word," al-Harathi said.

"Will Biden fall into the same trap? Washington's standing declined during the Obama presidency. Will Biden repeat Obama's fatal mistakes? The US dealings at the time with regional issues were a source of ridicule, as Washington delivered Iraq and Afghanistan on a golden platter to Iran and supported the Muslim Brotherhood."

Egyptian writer Emile Amin also warned Biden against replicating the policies of the Obama administration in the Middle East, especially with regards to endorsing and "flirting with Islamic fundamentalism." Amin said that no one in the Arab world knows the reason behind Biden's rush to "fall into the arms" of Iran and Islamists.

"Looking at Washington today, and before the first hundred days of Biden's presidency have elapsed, it appears the US has not learned from its bad experiences," he wrote. "Biden's team is very close to repeating the mistakes of the past, especially concerning the Islamists."

The Arabs, in short, are telling the Biden administration: The President's first days in office have hardly elapsed and you are already putting your relations with your Arab allies in serious jeopardy. By blowing the Khashoggi case out of proportion, you are losing your friends in the Middle East. By appeasing Iran, you are emboldening Muslim terrorists. Be aware: repeating the misguided and mistaken policies of the Obama administration will not serve US interests, but considerably harm them.

Khaled Abu Toameh is an award-winning journalist based in Jerusalem

Iran Considers Biden Weak

By Peter Rawlings
TCMER Board Member



Arabs are turning to the Biden administration with the frank plea: Your weak approach to Iran's regime is already threatening whatever precarious stability exists in the Middle East. It is already emboldening terrorist groups.

It is only one month into his term in office, and US President Joe Biden is already facing criticism from Arabs over his administration's soft policy toward Iran.

The Arabs say they are worried because Iran sees Biden as a "weak" president, and that is why the mullahs in Tehran and their proxies in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon have increased their terrorist attacks in the Middle East.

"In Tehran's eyes, Biden is a pushover," wrote Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, former editor-in-chief of the Saudi newspaper *Ashraq Al-Awsat*.

"It has only been eight weeks since President Joe Biden was sworn into office, but Iran has already tested him on several fronts. First, thousands of the Iran-backed Houthi militia rushed to threaten the densely populated city of Marib in Yemen. Afterwards, Iranian militias targeted Basra and Baghdad, and more recently, Erbil and Iraqi Kurdistan, with dozens of missiles, killing and wounding several individuals in a US facility. Then Lokman Slim, Iran's most prominent and vocal opponent in Beirut, was murdered and his body was found on the sidewalk."

Al-Rashed pointed out that Iran "does not deny responsibility for all these events that were organized by its affiliated militias in Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon."

According to Al-Rashed, all these attacks were "a test of Biden's administration, and so far, we did not see anything from Washington except for verbal condemnation. This is an expected start on both sides; Iranian provocations and American silence."

If the Biden administration wants Iran to return to the negotiating table and discuss the nuclear deal and the war in Yemen, the Saudi columnist advised, "then President Biden needs to flex his muscles."

Another Saudi columnist, Hella Al-Mashouh, also criticized the Biden administration's soft approach toward Iran. She specifically criticized the Biden administration's recent decision to revoke designation of Yemen's Houthi militia as a terrorist group. The

decision reversed actions taken by the former US administration of President Donald Trump regarding the Iran-backed militia.

Commenting on the decision, Al-Mashouh wrote: "Today, we are facing an imminent Iranian threat and a lenient American administration policy toward this danger. We will face this Iranian threat over the next four years. The question that arises here: Who benefits from this Iranian terrorism and tampering with the region? Syria is devastated, and Hezbollah is dominating Lebanon, which is collapsing economically, politically and socially. Iraq is being flooded with weapons and militias of Iranian terrorism. The Houthis and Al Qaeda are tampering with a disintegrated and ravaged Yemen. So what next? Who will deal with the head of the snake?"

Sayed Zahra, deputy editor of the Gulf newspaper *Akhbar Al-Khaleej*, predicted that Iran and its proxies would step up their terror attacks in the Middle East in the next few years.

Zahra said that the recent escalation of terror attacks by Iran's militias in Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon were aimed at "practicing direct terrorism" against the Biden administration to force it make the concessions Tehran wants from the US. According to Zahra:

"The Iranian message to Biden is clear. It wants him to understand that Iran has many terrorist cards and can undermine security and stability in the region and present his administration with major challenges. The Iranian regime, in other words, wants to force the Biden administration to yield to its demands regarding sanctions and the nuclear agreement. The Iranian regime bases its calculations on the basis that Biden is weak with regard to the nuclear file."

Zahra pointed out that Iran knows that many Biden administration officials, especially those concerned with the issue of relations with Iran and the nuclear agreement, are the same people who worked in the Obama administration:

"Most of these people are sympathetic to Iran in general, and it is not possible for them to engage with it in any form of confrontation. Iran knows that Biden does not have Trump's resolve and strength in dealing with it. Biden, for example, does not dare to take a step like the assassination of Qassem Soleimani. Iran is testing Biden's weakness." Soleimani, commander of Iran's Quds Force, was assassinated in a targeted US drone strike on January 3, 2020 in Baghdad.

Iraqi journalist and political analyst Ahmed Al-Adhame said that the recent terror attack on a US facility in Iraq "came because of the failed policies of the Biden administration toward Iran." Al-Adhame noted that the US administration gave orders to withdraw the aircraft carrier Nimitz from the Middle East, a move that further emboldened Iran and its proxies.

Arabs are turning to the Biden administration with the frank plea: Your weak approach to the Iranian regime is already threatening whatever precarious stability exists in the Middle East. It is already emboldening terrorist groups. We are begging you: do not back down to Iranian threats.

Such messages show that many Arabs share Israel's concern over US and European efforts to revive the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. It is, frankly, the last thing the Arabs want. It will only lead to war and set back the region more years than one would care to count.

Iran: The Mullah's Pursuit of Obtaining Nuclear Weapons

By Majid Rafizadeh



In spite of the Iranian leaders' claim that their nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, evidence reveals that the Iranian regime has long sought to acquire nuclear weapons. The regime's ballistic missile program to deliver nuclear warheads, a core pillar of its foreign policy, is closely linked to the nuclear program. Pictured: A Shahab-3 ballistic missile on display in Tehran, Iran on September 26, 2019

In spite of the Iranian leaders' claim that their nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, evidence reveals that the Iranian regime has long sought to acquire nuclear weapons.

A recent report by the International Atomic Energy Agency pointed out that "Samples taken from two sites during inspections in the fall by the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) contained traces of radioactive material".

This case was first brought to the world's attention in 2018 when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Yukiya Amano to inspect an "atomic warehouse" in Iran. Netanyahu pointed out in his speech to the UN General Assembly that the Iranian government had a "secret atomic warehouse for storing massive amounts of equipment and material from Iran's secret nuclear weapons program."

The IAEA at first did not take these reports of a secret Iranian atomic warehouse seriously. This should not be surprising: the IAEA has a long history of misreporting the Iranian regime's compliance with the deal and declining to follow up on credible reports about Iran's illicit nuclear activities. Generally, other state or non-state actors - not the IAEA or the UN - have been the first to reveal Iran's clandestine nuclear sites. Iran's secret nuclear sites in Natanz and Arak, for instance, were first disclosed by an opposition group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran in 2001.

After a significant amount of pressure was imposed on the IAEA, the UN nuclear watchdog, inspecting the suspected site that the Israeli Prime Minister referred to

was implemented two years later, in the fall 2020. Even then, although Iran's leaders certainly had enough time to clean up the facility, the IAEA's inspectors nevertheless reported that traces of radioactive uranium had been detected by examining remaining samples. It should also not come as surprise that the ruling mullahs of Iran are declining to answer the IAEA's questions.

It is also important to point out that one of the most basic requirements of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), to which Iran is a party, as well as one of the terms of the 2015 "nuclear deal," was that the Iranian regime is required to reveal its nuclear activities to the IAEA - a condition with which it also failed to comply.

The detection of radioactive particles in Turqz Abad points to the high probability that Tehran has been undertaking work on nuclear weapons in secret. It also points to the high probability that Iran's ruling mullahs were most likely violating the nuclear deal since it was reached in 2015.

Despite this critical revelation, however, the Biden administration - with the seeming prescient objections of Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Biden's nominee for Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines - still seems to be pushing for the return of the US to the nuclear deal.

Iran's nuclear deal has dangerous fundamental flaws, specifically the ability to enrich uranium in the first place - as the pre-eminent US nuclear negotiator Ambassador John R. Bolton wrote a few years ago, without it, no bomb - and the deal's notorious sunset clauses that remove restrictions on Iran's nuclear program after the deal soon expires. The deal, rather than preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, in fact paves the way for Tehran to become a legitimized nuclear state. The deal, furthermore, exempted Iran's military sites, such as Parchin which is reportedly where nuclear development and research is conducted, from the reach of the International Atomic Energy Agency's inspectors. The deal, which the Iranian regime understandably loves, also fails to refer to the ability of Iran's ballistic missile program to deliver nuclear warheads, a core pillar of its foreign policy and closely linked to the nuclear program. The nuclear deal also gives Iran's regime a global legitimacy that makes it even more difficult to hold its leaders accountable for any malign behavior, predatory aggression or terror activity.

The nuclear deal also allows the flow of billions of dollars into the treasury of Iran's leaders, thereby providing the revenues for their militia, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that they needed to escalate their military adventurism in the region. This includes financing, arming and supporting their terror and militia groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip, as well as South America. Finally, the nuclear deal increases Iran's meddling, interventions in the region and its funding of militia groups.

The Biden administration would do well for both American and international security to take the recent revelations about Iran's clandestine work on nuclear weapons more seriously - especially to halt the regime from obtaining nuclear weapons before it is too late.

Dr. Majid Rafizadeh is president of the International American Council on the Middle East.

Iran Oil Exports to China Soar

By Susan Yao
TCMER Board Member



Shipments of oil from Tehran to Beijing have soared in recent months, reaching nearly 500,000 barrels a day in February

China's purchases of Iranian oil climbed to record highs in 2021, according to data from Refinitiv, a global provider of financial market data. Over the past 14 months, Iran sent 17.8 million tonnes (approximated 306,000 barrels per day) of crude oil to China. Three-quarters of these shipments were "indirect" imports that had been identified as coming from Malaysia, Oman, or the United Arab Emirates and primarily entered China via ports in Shandong and Liaoning provinces.

Official purchases accounted for only 25 percent of the imports tracked by Refinitiv as China has retained small volume purchases despite stringent U.S. sanctions imposed under the former Trump administration (which returned sanctions against Iran to levels in place before the Iran nuclear deal). These sanctions triggered a steep drop in Iranian oil exports, particularly in Asia, since late 2018. This latest data, however, suggests that China, and other Asia markets, may be hedging with the transition to new leadership in the United States, as the Biden administration has openly offered to restart talks with Iran.

Still, a changing stance in Washington is not the only factor in the expansion of ties between China and Iran. Renewed reports of massive Chinese investment into the country emerged in mid-2020 as the two countries appear to be close to finalizing negotiations on a long-term comprehensive strategic partnership deal. It would provide an influx in capital to Iranian industries including banking, infrastructure, telecommunications, and transportation sectors in exchange for discounted oil. Leaked documents also suggest that the pact will go beyond trade and investment and pave a path for additional military cooperation in the region. (China, Iran, and Russia also conducted unprecedented joint military exercises in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean in late 2019, a move that raised concerns about the prospect of cooperation among what Washington paints as revisionist actors.)

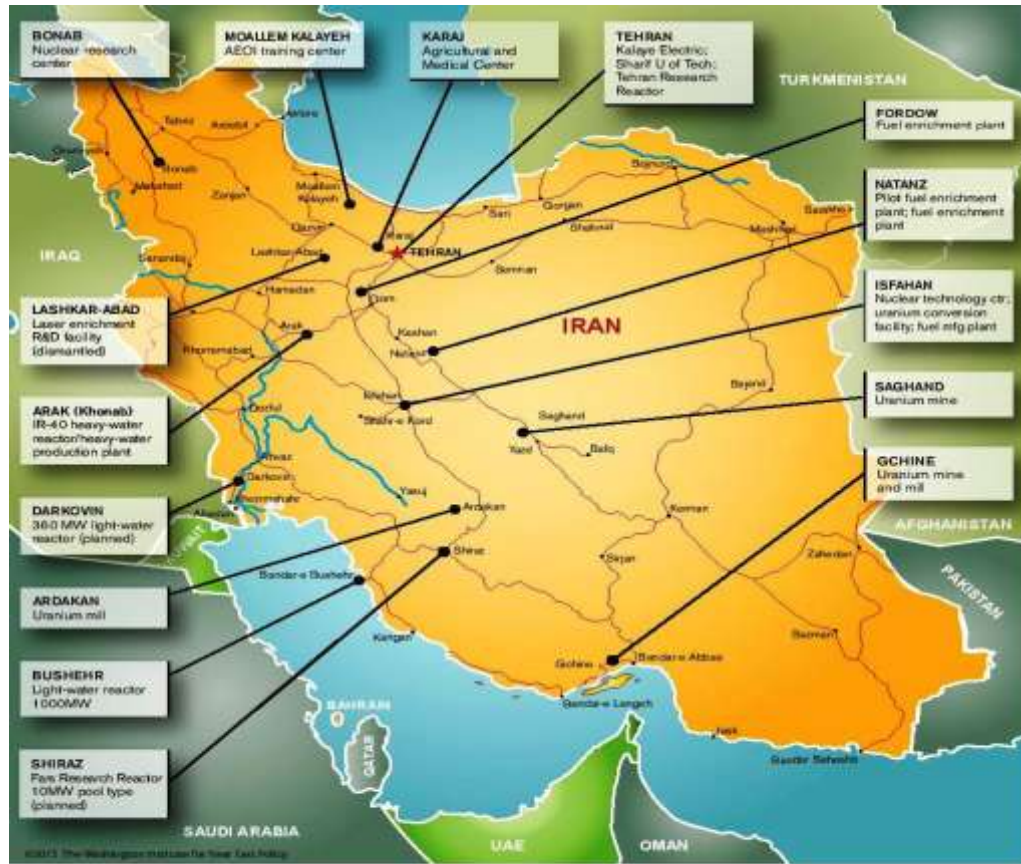
Once finalized, the agreement is likely to be a much sought after economic lifeline for Iran. In Beijing's eyes, the deal would aid in its efforts to diversify its energy supply and lay the groundwork to extend the Belt and Road Initiative, connecting. Infrastructure development, including the southern port city of Chabahar, could also further facilitate bolstering China's energy security. "navigation through the Persian Gulf is of great importance for China," wrote Alam Saleh, lecturer at Australian National University's Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, and Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas, a research fellow at the Center for Middle East Strategic Studies for Foreign Policy.

While there are clear incentives for both Beijing and Tehran to boost their two-way relationship, limitations and challenges remain. China is seeking to diversify its links to the Gulf, but is also reluctant to be pulled into economic or geopolitical liabilities. In addition to regional tensions, China may have to contend with domestic backlash. In countries like Iran, where social capital and public trust in the government are in short supply, Chinese investments run the danger of being perceived and/or portrayed as propping up unpopular governments who tend to sacrifice national interests in order to safeguard their own survival.

Energy security concerns are unlikely to abate anytime soon for China. Oil accounts for approximately 20 percent of the country's energy consumption and it has been the world's largest importer of crude oil since 2017 (surpassing the United States). In 2020, Chinese oil imports grew to 10.85 million barrels per day (bpd), up from around 4 million bpd in 2009. However, Iranian oil is just one source among many for China, accounting for only 3 percent of Chinese oil imports, and Iran does not rank among the top suppliers. (Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iraq, and Brazil are the top four oil suppliers to China.) Although the conclusion of a two-way pact may further increase the volume of Iranian oil destined for China, Beijing is likely to remain wary of forging ties that deviate from the delicate balance it has struck with numerous Gulf partners.

Iran to Enrich U235 Stockpile to 60%

By Zara Dawoud
TCMER Board Member



Map: Nuclear installations in Iran.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei threatened that his country could begin enriching uranium up to 60% purity, a day after Tehran and the United Nations' atomic watchdog resolved a standoff over nuclear inspections.

Iran "will enrich uranium to any extent that is necessary for the country," an account believed to belong to Khamenei tweeted. "Iran's enrichment level may reach 60% to meet the country's needs."

After President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear agreement known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and reimposed harsh economic sanctions, Iran began steadily violating its terms of the deal. In January, Iran announced that its Fordow nuclear plant was enriching uranium to 20% purity, far surpassing the JCPOA's 3.67% limit and bringing Iran closer to possessing weapons-grade fuel.

In apparent reference to his arch-enemy Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Iran's Supreme Leader went on to taunt, "That international Zionist clown has said they won't allow Iran to produce nuclear weapons. First of all, if we had any such intention, even those more powerful than him wouldn't be able to stop us."

Iran has been openly breaching its 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with six world powers since the U.S. withdrew in 2018. The accord caps

the fissile purity to which Tehran is permitted to refine uranium at 3.67% – well under the 20% rate achieved before the agreement to which it recently resumed.

The “break out time” needed to produce enough fissile material at the 90% rate necessary to produce nuclear bombs is estimated between 2-3 months to a year.

US State Department Spokesman Ned Price said Khamenei’s comments “sounds like a threat,” and declined to respond to what he described as “hypotheticals” and “posturing.” He then reiterated Washington’s willingness to engage in diplomacy over renegotiating the JCPOA.

The Biden administration announced last week it is ready to hold a dialogue with the Ayatollah regime about the return of both countries to the nuclear accord abandoned by former US President Donald Trump. Tehran has yet to issue a response to a European Union proposal to hold an informal meeting between the JCPOA’s current members, which it said is under review.

The latest rhetoric from Khamenei is widely viewed as a tactic to further up the ante in a stand-off with the White House. Even though Iran is contending with rising domestic pressure to ease economic hardship worsened by sanctions re-imposed by Trump, the Ayatollahs have demanded Biden must first end the punitive campaign in order for the JCPOA to be revived while Washington insists Tehran must first return to full compliance.

Hardline Iranian parliamentarians yesterday protested Tehran’s compromise with the International Atomic Energy Agency to permit “necessary” monitoring of the country’s nuclear sites for up to 3 months. The angry lawmakers claimed the deal, announced by the United Nations watchdog on Sunday, broke an Iranian law passed last year to nullify the Additional Protocol to the JCPOA authorizing such snap inspections unless sanctions were fully removed.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken yesterday reaffirmed Washington’s offer to lift most punitive economic measures on Iran in exchange for the bolstering and extension of the JCPOA. In a pre-recorded speech to the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, Blinken said, “The United States remains committed to ensuring that Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon. Diplomacy is the best path to achieve that goal.”



In making the argument for a negotiated return to the JCPOA, the top American diplomat maintained that the “so-called maximum pressure on Iran” implemented by the Trump Administration “has not produced results. In fact, the problem has gotten worse. Iran is now much closer to being able to produce on short order enough fissile

material for a nuclear weapon. That so-called breakout time had been pushed past one year by the nuclear agreement. It's now down, based on published reports, to just a few months. And meanwhile, Iran has been not standing down but acting up in the region with various destabilizing actions, attacks on our own forces in Iraq and elsewhere, on our partners."

After saying that "President Biden believes strongly that strong, principled diplomacy is the best way to try to deal with these issues, to put the nuclear problem back in the box and to push back on Iran in other areas," Blinken underscored that, "our leverage has now increased because we're now, once again, on the same page with our European partners. Because they very much disagreed with the United States pulling out of the nuclear agreement, they were expending most of their energy on trying to keep the agreement alive, not in exerting pressure on Iran for some of the other egregious actions that it takes in the region and beyond. We're now all in the same place and we're united in purpose, and that's a very powerful thing."

Secretary Blinken also held a telephone conversation with Israeli Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi on Monday. The US State Department said the two diplomats discussed the strong bilateral bond and agreed to work together to meet the challenges ahead, including any anti-Israeli initiatives in the international arena.

"Great speaking with @Gabi_Ashkenazi today to discuss our partnership, regional challenges, and Israel's efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic," Blinken wrote on Twitter later, adding, "The United States remains unwavering in its commitment to Israel's security."

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, who remains firmly opposed to a US return to the JCPOA, convened senior cabinet officials to discuss the matter. Israeli Alternate Premier and Defense Minister Benny Gantz also attended the meeting, along with Foreign Minister Ashkenazi, Mossad Head Yossi Cohen, National Security Advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat, Israeli Ambassador to the US and Permanent Representative to the UN Gilad Erdan and other senior security officials.

The ministers agreed to create a new committee of intelligence and diplomatic officials to advance Israel's perspectives with their American counterparts, including the sharing of Israeli intelligence on further Iranian nuclear violations.

Iranian Militia Groups Claim to Have Active Cells in Washington DC

By Jack Phillips, Epoch Times



A Telegram channel affiliated with Iran-backed militia groups in Iraq posted in English a claim that Iraqi resistance cells have the capacity to target U.S. troops in Washington and other U.S. cities, according to a report.

“The axis of resistance today is stronger than before. Resistance cells are rooted even in America and its capital,” reads the social media post, according to the Middle East Media Research Institute, which posted a screenshot of the message.

The post, which includes a picture depicting caskets of U.S. troops, was made by the Kawtheryoon Electronic Team, a Telegram network said to be used by Iranian militia groups and supporters. Officials at the Pentagon didn’t immediately respond to a request by The Epoch Times for comment about the claims.

The Telegram channel post also claimed that terror factions associated with Iran are growing stronger and gaining support, while it called on U.S. forces to withdraw from not only Iraq, but the Middle East entirely. The group also appeared to threaten Israel, referring to it as the “Zionist enemy,” saying, “I will summarize for you in words only the horror of the south, which is stronger than before, and we have thousands of men like Imad Mughniyeh.” Mughniyeh is believed to have been the Iran-aligned Hezbollah chief of staff in Lebanon.

“Do not think that you and the Americans, by killing Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, will survive the torment of the resistance,” the post added, referring to the Iranian commander and the Iraqi militia commander who were killed in an airstrike last year. “We lie in wait for you evil (sic) and the next thing is worse.”

The United States has carried out airstrikes against facilities belonging to Iranian-backed militia in eastern Syria on, in response to rocket attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq. Tehran meanwhile has denied being behind recent attacks in Iraq, against shipping in the Gulf, or on Saudi installations by Yemen’s Iran-backed Houthis.

Lebanon Wants an End to Iranian Occupation

By Khaled Abu Toameh



A recent announcement by the chief of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Brigadier General Amir-Ali Hajizadeh (pictured), that Iran intends to use Lebanon as a "forefront" for waging war on Israel, has enraged many Lebanese, who say that the time has come to end the Iranian occupation of their country.

Iran's recent announcement that it intends to use Lebanon as a "forefront" for waging war on Israel has enraged many Lebanese, who say that the time has come to end the Iranian occupation of their country.

The Lebanese are worried that their country will meet the fate endured by Iraq, Syria and Yemen, where the Iranians and their militia proxies are playing a major role in the civil wars currently plaguing these countries.

The Lebanese were reacting to statements by the chief of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Brigadier General Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, who was quoted as saying that Lebanon is at the forefront of Iran's battle against Israel.

Referring to the missiles Iran has supplied to Hezbollah and Palestinian terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip, Hajizadeh said: "Whatever you see in Gaza and Lebanon is with our support; these days they use missiles instead of simple rockets.

"Making Lebanon an extension of Iran violates the country's sovereignty and independence," wrote Lebanese commentator Souad Lazkani. "Iran can and will use its rockets to fire from Lebanon to Israel if need be and whenever it wants, even if Lebanon does not agree to it. It will fall on the Lebanese people to pay the price of the heavy consequences as its territory becomes an arena for Iran's battle with Israel."

Hussein Wajeh, media adviser to Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad Hariri, warned against turning Lebanon into an Iranian province: "Some Iranian officials are trying to involve the Lebanese people in the Iranian regime's open wars with the international community.

"Lebanon has not – and will not – be the front line on behalf of Iran in any confrontation. The Lebanese will not pay the price for the Iranian regime. Lebanon is an independent, free and sovereign country."

To express their rejection and fear of Iran's malign intentions, many Lebanese have taken to social media to warn that they will not allow the mullahs of Tehran and their Lebanon-based Hezbollah terrorist organization to drag their country into another war with Israel.

A hashtag currently trending on Twitter under the slogan "Beirut is Free, Iran Out," shows how eager the Lebanese are to end the Iranian occupation of their country. The criticism, of course, is also directed toward Hezbollah, which has long been using Lebanon as a launching pad for carrying out terrorist attacks against Israel with Iranian-supplied weapons. One of the posts on Twitter reads: "The defendant: The Iranian Hezbollah. The charge: Participation in the wars in our region."

"No to terrorism, no to Hezbollah, no to Iran," wrote Aline Hatem, a Lebanese woman. "Lebanon is always going to be independent."

Addressing Hezbollah and all Lebanese who support Iran, a Lebanese social media user called Cactus Jack commented: "if you love Iran so bad, why don't you go there and leave us the f*** alone? Lebanon is not for Iran or any rapist terrorist or warlords. Lebanon is for us, always life will win over death."

Adding insult to injury, Iran's allies in Lebanon unveiled in Beirut statue of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, who was assassinated in a US drone attack in Iraq a year ago. In the past few weeks, several images of Soleimani have appeared on boards in the Hezbollah-controlled districts of Beirut and southern Lebanon, sparking a wave of online criticism from many Lebanese.

"Hezbollah seems pretty damn desperate to make late Iranian General Qassem Soleimani a local hero, despite knowing that for a majority of the people in Lebanon he simply represents a foreign power," said Lebanese researcher Nizar Hassan.

The Lebanese Social Democratic Party, Kataeb, urged the Lebanese government to summon the Iranian ambassador to Beirut for clarification regarding Tehran's ongoing military support for Hezbollah. The party accused Iran of holding Lebanon hostage and violating its sovereignty. "Hezbollah's illegal weapons did not protect Lebanon in the past and will not protect it today," according to a statement by Kataeb. "Instead, these weapons subject Lebanon to all forms of isolation, boycotts and sanctions."

The Lebanese, like a growing number of Arabs in the Gulf states, are saying that they prefer peace, stability and prosperity over weapons, statues and wars with Israel. The Lebanese are making it clear that they have suffered more than enough from Iran's endless meddling in their internal affairs. The Lebanese are demanding an end to Iranian occupation of their country; they are clearly hoping that the international community will intervene to assist them in freeing Lebanon from Iran's control.

The message the Lebanese people are sending to the international community is encouraging: Lebanon does not want war with Israel; Lebanon wants to get rid of Hezbollah and Iran. We Lebanese ask you to support this goal by applying unyielding pressure on the mullahs in Tehran. A policy of appeasement or engagement with the mullahs will yield only one thing: blood running even more freely in the streets of Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq – as well as nuclear weapons.

The Pope to Meet the Ayatollah

By Hamia Nair
TCMER Board Member



As part of his March trip to Iraq, Pope Francis will visit the holy city of Najaf to meet with Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of the world's most prominent Shia Muslim authorities. According to Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, the trip's purpose is "to console and encourage" all those who have struggled under Iraq's waves of invasion, civil war, sectarian strife, terrorism, and instability—not only the Muslim majority, but also Catholics and other religious minorities. Sandri noted that Iraq's Christian community has been attacked and persecuted to such a degree that its population decreased from 1.5 million in 2003 to less than 300,000 today.

Ayatollah Sistani is a potentially promising candidate for outreach on this and other interfaith issues. He is internationally recognized for his largely constructive role in managing Iraq's crises since the ouster of Saddam Hussein, and widely respected for refusing to seize any executive, managerial, or political post throughout this period—in sharp contrast to the all-encompassing power grabs that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his predecessor carried out in Iran. For the most part, Sistani's public statements have supported reconciliation between Shia and Sunnis, called for intertribal and ethnic peace, and facilitated the drafting and ratification of a new constitution by referendum, all in the midst of major political turmoil.

This is not the first time that Pope Francis has visited a Muslim-majority country. He has paid significant attention to interfaith relations and dialogue since the beginning of his tenure, visiting Turkey in 2014, Azerbaijan in 2016, Egypt in 2017, and Morocco and the United Arab Emirates in 2019, among other countries.

Yet this is his first trip to Iraq, home to four major Shia holy cities and the historically important Najaf seminary. This will also be the first meeting of any type between a pope and a grand ayatollah.

According to Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, the Iraqi-born priest who heads the Chaldean Catholic Church and has been instrumental in organizing the trip over the past two years, the pope and Sistani will release a joint declaration against "all those

who attack life.” Yet he could not confirm “if the two would sign a document on human fraternity, as is the cardinal’s wish.” Cardinal Sandri mentioned one potential touchstone: the February 2019 “Document on Human Fraternity” that Pope Francis signed in Abu Dhabi with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar and a widely respected figure in Sunni Islam. According to a Vatican correspondent, Sandri also described the visit “as being ‘in continuity’ with the desire of Pope John Paul II, who wanted to visit Ur—the homeland of Abraham, considered the father of faith in one God in Judaism, Christianity and Islam—during the Great Jubilee Year 2000 but was unable to.”

Unlike the pope, who is officially regarded as the chief pontiff for Catholic communities worldwide, none of the ayatollahs can claim exclusive leadership over Shia Muslims. This pluralistic authority and the confluence of spiritual and political matters in post-revolutionary Iran have limited the ayatollahs’ ability to exert unified religious diplomacy independent of national boundaries. As a result, relations between the Vatican and Shia leaders are controlled by states, not seminaries, and the Iranian regime has systematically blocked genuine efforts to bridge its faith with other religions.

Philosophical and theological factors also pose substantial obstacles to broader Islamic dialogue and rapprochement with Christianity and other religions. These factors make the signing of a fraternity declaration in Najaf more unlikely than not. First of all, mainstream Islamic theological branches regard modern Christianity as an inauthentic version of the original religion, one that has been altered by church fathers. For instance, they view Jesus as the divine prophet, not as the incarnation of God and his son. In short, for official Islam, today’s Christianity is nothing short of heresy. Such attitudes help explain why Christians cannot enter mosques or visit Mecca, and why numerous Shia fatwas and the laws of the Islamic Republic assert that conversion from Islam to Christianity (or any religion) should be punished by death.

Second, unlike in the West, where interfaith relations and religious tolerance have been a matter of philosophical and theological contemplation since at least the eighteenth century, such debates are almost nonexistent in Shia seminaries. In practice, this lack of intellectual foundations for interfaith dialogue has curbed the practical appetite for significant initiatives in that direction. In the Christian world, these intellectual grounds have been institutionalized in religious offices and bureaus, including inside the Vatican. But in the Shia world, no marja (grand ayatollah) has created a specific office bureau to address this issue or stationed a representative in the Vatican.

Third, the ayatollahs do not share the papal habit of publicly calling out the persecution of other faiths. In 2017, for instance, Pope Francis expressed sympathy with the Muslim-majority Rohingya people undergoing a military crackdown in Myanmar, declaring, “The presence of God today is also called Rohingya.” Yet Shia authorities have rarely reacted to violence against non-Muslims, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere in the world.

The record of ecumenism between Shia and Sunnis has hardly been fruitful either. Since World War II, Muslims have engaged in war and violence against each other much more often than non-Muslims have. Sunnis in Iran and Shia in Saudi Arabia are still treated as second-class citizens. Again, this friction stems from a combination of

political tensions, theological antagonism, and the lack of an intellectual basis for true intra-Muslim ecumenism.

Pope Francis is not welcome in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Christians, Jews, and other faiths face systematic legal discrimination and social segregation. Openly proselytizing any religion besides Shia Islam is forbidden by law—converts to Christianity are often imprisoned and sentenced to death, and several priests have been brutally assassinated by intelligence operatives over the past forty years. The regime has established official relations with the Vatican, but they can hardly be characterized as warm.

As for the pope's visit to Najaf, Iranian leaders recognize its historical significance—and also the threat it poses to their authority. The meeting will constitute exceptional recognition of Sistani as perhaps the world's paramount Shia authority, and of Najaf as the center of the Shia clerical establishment. Given the longstanding competition between Sistani and Khamenei (and Najaf and Qom), Iranian leaders are likely uncomfortable about the trip. For their part, the clerics who head Sistani's office in Qom have been careful to avoid highlighting the meeting in a way that provokes the regime. In fact, the pope's visit has generated little debate or attention in Persian-language state media, semi-independent media, or even social media.

One of the main problems with Shia grand ayatollahs is that they tend to live in isolation from society. They rarely go anywhere apart from their homes, offices, and mosques, let alone make trips to other countries or even other cities. They do not give interviews to media and generally keep out of public sight. This partly explains their usual silence in the face of human tragedies elsewhere in the world and violence at home.

Thus, while interfaith initiatives may eventually help burrow under these Shia walls, the West cannot afford to harbor delusional expectations about the practical outcomes of papal visits and similar events in the short term. Mainstream Muslim leaders do not take enough responsibility for what is happening in their own communities, so they can hardly be expected to hold great value for interfaith initiatives and their requisite political risk. For now, then, Western governments seeking durable and productive engagement with the Muslim world should focus more attention and investment on secular and liberal intellectuals, academics, and influential personalities in the region.

New Oman's Sultan First Year

By Hamia Nair
TCMER Board Member



One year into his rule, Sultan Haitham seems to be putting the final touches on reshaping Oman's government and royal family hierarchy to meet his view of the challenges ahead. These changes are monumental for the country, even if they have received little outside attention.

Last August, he apportioned the sultan's traditional titles of defence minister, foreign minister, finance minister, and chairman of the Central Bank to other people, including non-royals. He also formed a new cabinet, with most of the changes focused on the economic and finance portfolios.

Five months later, he has rewritten swaths of the constitution (including new language that creates a formal heir for the first time), clarified the law governing the legislature, replaced most military leaders, and issued a budget in line with the economic goals of Oman's "Vision 2040" plan. More decrees are expected in the coming weeks to cap off this overhaul. So far, the sultan's reforms suggest a preference for professionalizing the government, clarifying responsibilities, and delegating duties more broadly.

Burn the Envelope?

The most eye-catching change is the fundamental restructuring of the succession system to one based on primogeniture. Under the late Sultan Qaboos, succession was based on royal family consensus or, failing that, the opening of an envelope wherein the sultan had written his choice for successor. When Qaboos died on January 10, the family opted to have the Defence Council open the envelope, and Haitham's name emerged. Omanis and regional players alike have long been anxious about this envelope system—which was only created after Sultan Qaboos narrowly avoided death in a 1995 car accident, sparking fears of a leadership vacuum. Citizens and foreign diplomats no doubt welcomed Haitham's move to a more transparent system.

According to the new constitution, the sultan's eldest son is to be the designated heir. If the heir is under twenty-one years old, an advisory council is to be established

within the royal family. In the absence of a son, the heir is to be the sultan's eldest brother.

The constitution is clear that the title of heir does not come with specific duties; instead, "the sultan shall choose his heir's duties and position." This language suggests some similarities with the British system, wherein the title does not carry formal power until the holder of the crown passes away or abdicates, but the ruler may grant that person certain responsibilities in the meantime.

Under these rules, Haitham's eldest son Theyazin is now heir to the throne. The question is whether he will be given a new position/title in addition to being named heir, similar to crown princes in other Gulf countries. More likely, he will maintain his current minor government portfolio for now (minister of culture, sports, and youth) and move up the ranks over time. He just received that portfolio a few months ago; future royal decrees will likely add responsibilities.

Even before Theyazin's designation as heir, Omanis often cited him as the most likely successor, and his ministerial appointment in August was seen as the first step to burgeoning his credentials. A thirty-year-old Oxford graduate with a political science degree, he joined the Foreign Ministry in 2013 and was posted to the London embassy as second secretary in 2018. Following his father's ascension, Theyazin returned to Muscat and joined Haitham in several symbolically important meetings, including meet-and-greets with tribes and important Omani constituencies last fall.

Many Omanis will likely welcome a move toward younger leadership. Moreover, primogeniture is neither alien nor radical to them, as sons often followed fathers into leadership in the past even if that practice was never codified into law. The decision to officially appoint an heir suggests that Sultan Haitham does not share his predecessor's concerns about creating alternate sources of power or popularity in Oman.

A Brother's Rise

The fingerprints of Haitham's full brother Shihab bin Tariq also appear on some of the latest decrees. Shihab was appointed deputy prime minister for defence last year, taking over the duties of defence minister from the sultan. In the rewritten constitution, Haitham clarified that it remains his duty to appoint and remove military commanders. He put that power to far-reaching use on January 18, decreeing that the heads of all military branches except the army would be replaced. The former navy commander was promoted to chief of staff of the Sultan's Armed Forces—a decision that Shihab surely had a say in given that he once headed the navy himself. Over the course of the week, Haitham also replaced the secretaries-general of three entities—the Defense Ministry, the Royal Office's national security council, and the Royal Office's military affairs bureau—as well as the commanders of the Royal Guard and the Sultan's Special Forces. In monarchical systems, such full-scale turnover of top brass is typically as much about creating loyalty as putting one's own team in place.

In his role as deputy prime minister for defence, Shihab will also be joining the National Defense Council alongside the newly minted chief of staff of the Armed Forces, while the commanders of individual armed services were removed from that body. And as is often the case in the Gulf, Shihab's importance has been further solidified through marriage—his daughter is engaged to Theyazin.

Haitham and Shihab's half-brother Assad—who, as the eldest, was a leading contender for the role of sultan—remains deputy prime minister for international

relations and cooperation affairs and a personal representative of the sultan. But this role appears nominal at present.

Professionalization of the State

Amidst the changes in government, Oman's economic problems remain paramount. The 2021 budget and five-year plan released on January 1 demonstrate a renewed focus on Vision 2040, which Haitham led prior to his ascension. The budget creates caps for government agencies, lowers expenditures, and assumes a lower oil price (\$45 per barrel). The five-year plan similarly emphasizes fiscal sustainability. Combined with the August cabinet shuffle, which focused on creating a solid economic team, this suggests that implementation of Vision 2040 and the economic changes that technocrats have been quietly pushing for years are finally underway.

Moreover, the new law governing the legislature clarifies the council's procedures, delineates its responsibilities for advising and promoting government policy, and codifies a ministerial oversight function with direct reporting to the sultan. Omanis will welcome such accountability, even if the body falls short of Western ideals regarding legislative power.

February 20 will mark the anniversary of the beginning of Haitham's rule, and in that time he has put his stamp on the government by devolving power to ministers, reshuffling the cabinet and military, codifying a new succession system, and facilitating desperately needed economic reform. The sultan may be betting that he can accomplish more by delegating. This bet seems worth taking given that the country's major economic problems are unlikely to be resolved by a handful of ministers, but will instead require efficiency throughout the bureaucracy.

Ten years on, Syrian Christians say Assad 'has taken us hostage'

By Sophian Aubin



An Assyrian Christian Syrian in the Assyrian Church of the Virgin Mary, destroyed by the Islamic State group, in the village of Tal Nasri, south of Tal Tamr in northeastern Hasakah province on 15 November 2019

"His name isn't on the list."

Five years on, Najwa, who declined to give her surname for fear of being identified, still remembers feeling nauseous as she pleaded with a Syrian officer for information about her missing son, 16-year-old Hani.

She later learned what had happened from a friend of his. Nabil, then 18, told her that a man working with the Syrian army had recruited the two teenagers to join troops based at Tabqa military airport, in the northern Raqqa governorate, to repel an assault by the Islamic State (IS) group.

"You Christians are our nation's elite, Bashar [al-Assad] has chosen you to fight," the recruiter said to them, as Nabil later told Najwa.

The next day, their unit retreated to the government-controlled village of Ithriya, in Hama province. But they never arrived. After taking refuge for the night at a farm near the air base, the unit was attacked by IS once again.

Nabil was one of the few who escaped their bullets, hiding in a vehicle. Hani, however, was never found. "And Assad dares to say that he is protecting us?" Najwa said, with tears in her eyes as she sat in a quiet cafe in the Latin quarter of Paris, telling her story to a journalist for the first time.

Syrian Christians are often portrayed as supporting President Bashar al-Assad throughout the uprising that began on 15 March 2011 and escalated into a war that is now 10 years in the fighting on 15 March. Yet far from Damascus, in France, Christian refugees who survived the war tell a much more complex story.

The hierarchy of Assad's Syria

While much of Syria's Christian leadership has indeed opted to side with the Syrian government, untold numbers of Syrian Christians don't support it, while others were active members of the opposition.

The conflict has hit Christian communities hard. They numbered 2.2 million when the war sparked in 2011, but their number dropped to 677,000 in 2021, according to the Index of Persecution of Christians in Countries Worldwide published by the NGO Open Doors.

Regardless, Assad, himself an Alawite, an offshoot of Shia Islam, has positioned his family as an ally of Syria's minorities.

Using the threat of radical Islamist groups, even though he let many of their fighters out of prison early in the conflict and dealt economically with them later, Assad has managed to retain relative legitimacy among some western political circles despite official disavowal of his government, said Ziad Majed, a Franco-Lebanese political scientist and professor at the American University of Paris (AUP).

"The Syrian regime has established a social hierarchy that distinguishes minorities perceived as 'useful' - including part of the Sunni upper and middle classes - from the rural or suburban, working-class Sunni majority," Majed said.

In summer 2012, when the conflict escalated in the wake of the massacre of more than 100 civilians in the western region of Houla, northwest of Homs, Dr Haissam Saad's life was turned upside down.

He was filmed treating political dissident Riad Seif, one of the many wounded flooding hospitals in the Syrian capital Damascus as the army repressed demonstrations. A short while later, the surgeon was arrested by a branch of the Syrian intelligence and imprisoned.

Many of the dozens of prisoners sharing Saad's cramped, unheated cell died from the cold during the winter months, he recalled. Others bled to death after the guards' frequent beatings.

"When you are tortured with electricity by five people at the same time, you would rather die a thousand times. I tried to end my life by banging my head against the walls, to no avail," the 60-year-old said, speaking from his Parisian living room. "After a few weeks of this hell, I begged my torturers to execute me," he added. But a guard objected: "'Mr Doctor is a Christian, we can't finish him off,' he said."

Saad paused his story to show three fingers of his left hand. He hasn't been able to move them since the day they were broken under torture. "But to me," he said, his expression darkening, "all these pains are nothing compared to the tragedy that followed."

When Saad was released in June 2013, he learned that his son, having deserted the army, had been killed by a loyalist sniper. That Christians civilians are shot, beaten to death, or left to perish in prison cells by the same authority that presents itself as their protector is no surprise, according to Mazen Darwish.

The lawyer and president of the Syrian Centre for Media and Freedom of Expression, a non-profit organisation based in France, was detained by the authorities from 2012 to

2015, and declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. He himself is from the Alawite minority, like the Assads, but that has spared him no more than it spares Christians.

Divide and rule

In the Syria of the Assads - both Bashar and his father, Hafez al-Assad, who ruled the country with an iron fist for 29 years - the government has tied its fate with the Alawite and Christian minorities, prioritising these communities for government jobs or perks to foster support.

Damascus has "used" religious minorities "to build its political system," explains Fabrice Balanche, specialist in the political geography of the Middle East and author of *The Alawite Region and Syrian Power*.

By aligning himself with Christians and the educated and urban middle class of all confessions - at the expense of poor working-class, rural and conservative Sunnis - Assad's intention has been to present himself as more progressive than most Syrians, political scientist Majed notes in *In The Mind of Bashar al-Assad*. It has been an image geared towards the international scene but also to the more up-and-coming, "westernised" part of the Syrian bourgeoisie.

Even before the war, this tactic resulted in a two-pronged use of violence: against some, it is targeted and secretive, resulting in assassinations and imprisonments, according to Majed. For the rest, it is all-encompassing and indiscriminate, taking the form of starvation through siege (a strategy used against the Palestinian camp of Yarmouk south of Damascus in December 2012) and massive bombing.

By discriminating against Syrian citizens and exacerbating sectarianism in spite of its secular rhetoric, the Baathist rule under both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad has made itself appear indispensable to put out the flames it had itself stoked.

Playing the diplomatic Christian card

In one of his rare wartime appearances outside of Damascus, Assad chose to appear in the Christian village of Maaloula on Easter Day 2014, escorted by members of the clergy. The town had been retaken from rebels a few days earlier. Who was he trying to seduce with these pictures, broadcast around the world? Syrian Christians have no doubt: it was "El-Gharb" - "the West" in Arabic.

In France at least, where thousands of Syrian Christians have taken refuge, the tactic seems to have borne fruit. In an article published in French daily *Le Monde* on 20 April 2018, a humanitarian aid worker described French NGO SOS Chrétiens d'Orient (SOS Christians of the East) as "an excellent and inexpensive lobbying agency for Assad". This ideological mixture has attracted fierce criticism, including from the Catholic church.

Assad's portrayal as a defender of religious minorities was amplified with the rise of IS in Syria and neighbouring Iraq in 2013. Assad now shared a common foe with the international community.

The so-called Islamic State, headquartered at the time in the town of Raqqa, viewed all those who did not follow their strict interpretation of Sunni Islam - including Christians, Shia Muslims, or Assad's own Alawite community - as heretics.

While the benevolent treatment of the Christian minority is certainly a showcase for Damascus to boast about in the West, which has largely sided with the opposition in the war, above all it allows the Assad's government to burnish its credentials with its main strategic ally since 2015 - Russia, Tigrane Yegavian, journalist and author of *Eastern Minorities, the Forgotten of History*, said.

Yegavian points out the close ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church of Syria, ties that are as much spiritual as they are economic. In 2013, the Orthodox Church of Antioch in Damascus received \$1.3m from the Russian church.

In 2015, Russian fighter jets carried out their first strikes over Syria, with the blessing of the Russian Orthodox Church's patriarch. Russian President Vladimir Putin at the time claimed to be defending Eastern Orthodox communities, as Yegavian points out in his book. In the aftermath, Assad told French right-wing weekly *Valeurs Actuelles* that he saw the master of the Kremlin as "the only defender of Christian civilisation".

'Assad took us hostage'

The fact that there were Christians among the opposition to Assad does not, however, change the reality that the drive to revolt in Syria came predominantly from the Sunni community, according to Frederic Pichon, a historian and author of several books on the Syrian conflict.

Christians never engaged as a collective in the protests. Some Christian opponents see this weak participation as evidence that Assad's plan to divide and conquer the country worked.

One of them is Samira Moubayed, vice-president of Syrian Christians for Peace, an NGO critical of both the Syrian government and the use of arms by its opponents. "We are being triply punished." Christians are as much victims of Assad as the rest of their fellow citizens, she said, while also being exploited on the international stage.

"By presenting Christians as his proteges and allies, Assad took us hostage."

The Christian community's caution in supporting the opposition comes first of all from the fragility of their situation in Syria, Yegavian said. According, Christians represented 25 percent of the Syria population in the wake of World War II, but between only 5 and 6 percent before the Syrian civil war in 2011. Their number has only gone down since, with Christians representing only 3.6 percent of Syrians in 2021 according to some estimates, a high price to pay for their supposed support for Assad.

"Some of my Muslim compatriots say to me: 'You Christians are with the persecutor, Bashar'," said Samir, a former resident of Aleppo who asked to use a pseudonym as some of his family remain in Syria.

The former university professor is eager to explain the role that his fellow Christians have played in Arab and Syrian history, before coming back to the present day. "We are not just threatened by terrorist groups, we also have to suffer the Syrian regime's injustices like our Muslim brothers. We would like to live in a state that respects freedom and justice."

It was a gesture, like many others before and since, that defied violence and political considerations. Some may read it as an example of interreligious coexistence - others, perhaps, as a simple demonstration of human solidarity.

10th Anniversary of Syrian Uprising

By Lina Zaidi



Daraa, currently under Assad control, was the centre of major demonstrations in the early days of the uprising in March 2011

Hundreds reportedly gathered in the Syrian city of Daraa to mark the tenth anniversary of the beginning of anti-government demonstrations in the country, which later devolved into a devastating war.

Demonstrators in the main city chanted slogans against the government of President Bashar al-Assad and flew the three-starred flag of the Syrian opposition. Video footage appeared to show protesters assembled near the Omari Mosque in the old city. Daraa is often cited as the genesis for the 2011 protests.

The harsh government crackdown on protesters would see the situation in Syria descend into an armed conflict which has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and displaced millions both inside and outside the country.

In 2018, after years of opposition rule, Russian-backed government fighters recaptured Daraa in a major symbolic blow to the rebels. There have been intermittent attacks since the region came under government control.

A spate of bombings and assassinations has targeted government forces, former opposition figures and civilians, most of which have remained unclaimed. Recently a military convoy came under an ambush in Daraa, in which 21 Syrian soldiers were killed, forcing the Syrian army to send reinforcement to the area, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights

The Assad Regime has failed to restore full sovereignty over Syria

By Fabrice Balanche

In an official sense, at least, the situation on Syria's borders has hardly changed at all over the past couple years. The Western agenda still excluded any international solution comparable to what the Dayton Accords established in the former Yugoslavia. Russia and its partners in the "Astana process," Iran and Turkey, oppose any formal efforts to partition the country or cement the existence of a separate Kurdish entity in the north. Moreover, the problems that followed the partition of Sudan have given Western policymakers serious doubts about the viability of such a solution for Syria. Yet none of these abortive international possibilities has prevented external powers from informally dividing the country into multiple zones of influence and unilaterally controlling most of its borders, thus depriving the Assad regime of a major instrument of sovereignty.

Borders Tell the True Sovereignty Story

The regime's counterinsurgency strategy has certainly borne fruit inside the country. Bashar al-Assad's forces now control two-thirds of Syria's territory, including all six main cities (Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Latakia, Tartus, Deraa, and Deir al-Zour), as well as 12 million people out of an estimated resident population of 17 million (another 7 million Syrians are still living abroad as refugees). This is a complete turnaround from the low-water level of spring 2013, when Assad's forces controlled only a fifth of the country.

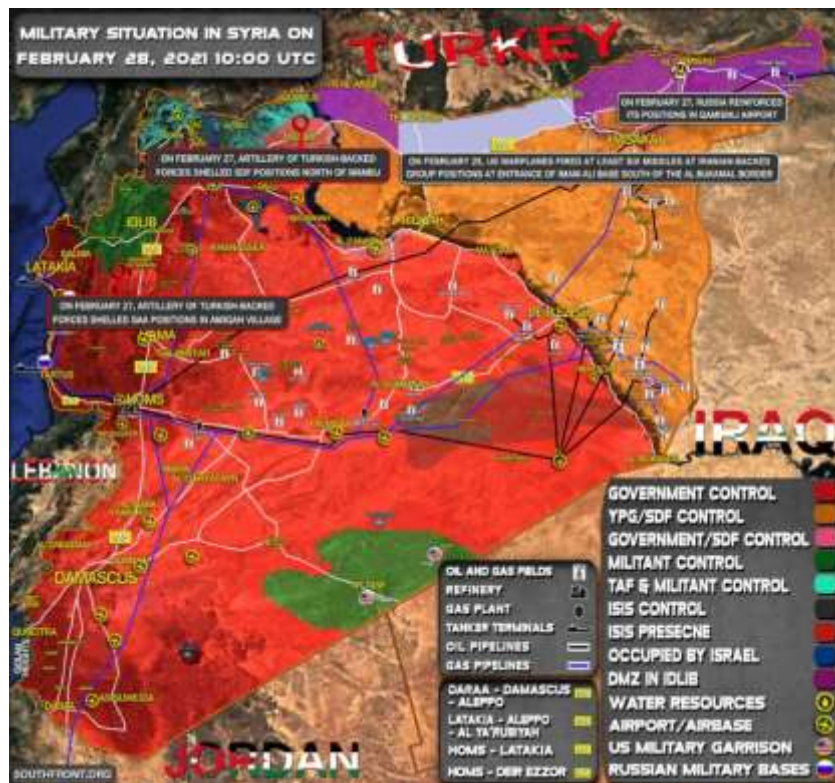
Yet borders are the sovereignty symbol par excellence, and the regime's scorecard remains nearly blank on that front. The Syrian army controls only 15 percent of the country's international land borders; the rest are divided between foreign actors (for maps showing the border situation and other trends).

The West and South: Illusory Regime Control

Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Shia militias currently control around 20 percent of the country's borders. Although Syrian customs authorities are officially in charge of the crossings with Iraq (Abu Kamal), Jordan (Nasib), and Lebanon (al-Arida, Jdeidat, al-Jousiyah, and al-Dabousiyah), the reality is that true control lies elsewhere. The Lebanese border is occupied by Hezbollah, which has established bases on the Syrian side (Zabadani, al-Qusayr) from which it dominates the Qalamoun mountainous region. Similarly, Iraqi Shia militias manage both sides of their border from Abu Kamal to al-Tanf. The stranglehold of pro-Iranian forces also extends to several of Syria's military airports, which often serve as receptacles for Iranian weapons destined for Hezbollah and the Golan Heights frontline with Israel. This situation reveals Syria's complete integration into the Iranian axis.

After the reconquest of the south in June 2018, the Syrian army returned to the Jordanian border and reopened the Nasib crossing with great fanfare. Yet traffic remains very limited today, and the army's presence in Deraa province is superficial. To quickly tamp down growing resistance in the area, the regime was forced to sign reconciliation agreements brokered by Russia, leaving local rebel factions with temporary autonomy and the right to keep light weapons. Ex-rebels have also

maintained strong cross-border links via the Jordanian frontier, giving them a potential source of logistical support in the event of a new conflict (and very lucrative smuggling income in the meantime).



The North: Turkish Proxies and Russian Troops

In 2013, Turkey began construction of a border wall in the Qamishli area, a stronghold of the Syrian Kurds; it has since extended this barrier along the entire northern frontier. One objective was to prevent infiltration: first by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group that Ankara regards as its chief domestic enemy and the parent organization of the Kurdish factions that control large parts of north Syria; and later by the Islamic State, after a wave of jihadist terrorist attacks rocked Turkey in 2015.

Another objective was to block the flow of additional Syrian refugees into Turkey, where 3.6 million are already being hosted. Individual crossings are still possible via ladders and tunnels, but Turkish police stop most such migrants and bluntly send them back to Syria.

In effect, the only portion of the northern border under Assad's control is the Kasab crossing north of Latakia, and even that has been closed on the Turkish side since 2012. From Kasab to the far eastern border, the Syrian side of the frontier is successively controlled as follows:

- By pro-Turkish Turkmen rebels until Khirbet al-Joz
- By the Sunni Arab jihadist group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham between Jisr al-Shughour and Bab al-Hawa
- By pro-Turkish rebels of the so-called "Syrian National Army" (SNA) up to the Euphrates River
- By the Russian army and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) around Kobane
- By the SNA between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain
- By the Russian army and SDF from Ras al-Ain to the Tigris River

In October 2019, Turkey launched a cross-border offensive in the north, spurring American forces to withdraw from most of the territory controlled by the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Russia then took control of the contact zones between the SDF, Turkey, and its SNA auxiliaries in accordance with the ceasefire agreement concluded in Sochi that same month. Russian-Turkish patrols replaced U.S.-Turkish patrols on these contact lines to ensure that the SDF withdrew from the Turkish border area.

Down to One Crossing

All of the northern crossings into Turkey remain closed, and the border wall blocks smuggling activities. This makes Semalka/Peshkhabur the only international window open to the AANES. On the Iraqi side of Syria's eastern border, Shia militias have been in charge of most areas since fall 2017, when the Kurdistan Regional Government lost control over disputed territory between Kirkuk and Sinjar. Crucially, though, this lost territory did not include Peshkhabur. The SDF control the Syrian side of the border with the support of U.S. troops, but Iranian proxies have prohibited them and other actors from using any other crossing points, partly with the help of Russian diplomatic cooperation.

For instance, the official al-Yarubiya border crossing has been closed to UN humanitarian aid ever since Russia vetoed its renewal at the Security Council in December 2019. Another consequence of this decision is that all UN aid to the entire AANES must first be sent to Damascus before it can be transferred to the northeast.

The Semalka/Peshkhabur crossing is therefore vital to the autonomous region's political and economic survival, serving as the only entry point for the numerous NGOs who operate there and provide indispensable support to the local population. Yet the Syrian government still considers entry via that crossing to be a crime punishable by up to five years in prison, so NGOs entering the AANES from Iraq must be careful not to conduct any activities in regime-controlled areas. The regime's intransigence on humanitarian issues is likely Assad's way of trying to reassert at least one aspect of border sovereignty. Meanwhile, Russian patrols are still trying to reach Semalka and test the SDF's resistance, and Iraqi militias have repeatedly threatened to capture Peshkhabur.

A Future of Limited Sovereignty

In addition to ceding most of its land borders to Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the United States, the Assad regime has also failed to reestablish control over Syria's skies and territorial waters. Its maritime zones are monitored by forces from Russia's base in Tartus, and most of its airspace is controlled from the Russian base at Hmeimim. Iran relies on Moscow's air assets for protection from Israeli strikes—a limited safeguard at best, since Russia does not shield Tehran's more provocative activities such as transferring missiles to Hezbollah or strengthening its positions in the Golan. For its part, the United States maintains an air corridor between the Khabur River and the Iraqi border, where its last ground troops are located.

Despite its occasional public declarations about reconquering all of Syria, Damascus seems content to submit to this game of foreign powers and hold limited sovereignty over reduced territory for the long term. Even if U.S. troops fully withdraw from the east, the country will remain in the hands of the "Astana triumvirate," so Assad has little choice in the matter.

Fabrice Balanche is an associate professor at the University of Lyon 2.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert Freed

**By Anastasia Kravtsov
TCMER Board Member**



A British-Australian academic, who was jailed in Iran for spying, said the Iranian authorities tried to recruit her as a spy during her detention. Kylie Moore-Gilbert was also kept in solitary confinement for seven months - a form of "psychological torture" she says drove her to consider suicide.

She was arrested in Iran in September 2018 and sentenced to 10 years in prison. But she was released in a swap for three jailed Iranians last November. In an interview with Sky News Australia, Mrs Moore-Gilbert said Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps tried to recruit her as a spy "many times" in exchange for her freedom.

"I knew that the reason that they didn't engage in any meaningful negotiations with the Australians [for my release] was because they wanted to recruit me, they wanted me to work for them as a spy," she told Sky News Australia.

She also described her time in solitary confinement which she says was "designed to break you". "It's psychological torture. You go completely insane. It is so damaging," she said. "I would say I felt physical pain from the psychological trauma I had in that room. It is a two-by-two-metre (6.6ft) box - there is no toilet, there is no television. "I felt if I have to endure another day of this - you know if I could I would just kill myself. But of course I never tried and I never took that step," she added.

Speaking for the first time publicly, she also said she considered escaping - but said she decided not to proceed as she was in a prison uniform, didn't speak Farsi and feared the consequences of being caught. She also found out when she returned home that her husband and PhD supervisor had been having an affair while she was in prison. She is now seeking a divorce.

"The nature of it, given my closeness to both of them, was very disappointing for me. In a way, it's been harder for me to process and come to terms with that than it has been what happened to me in Iran."

A lecturer in Middle Eastern studies at Melbourne University, Mrs Moore-Gilbert has consistently denied the accusations against her. She had been travelling on an

Australian passport in 2018 when she was detained at Tehran airport as she tried to leave following a conference.

Iran has detained a number of foreign nationals and Iranian dual citizens in recent years, many of them on spying charges. Human rights groups and governments have accused Tehran of using the cases as leverage to try to gain concessions from other countries.

Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe is an Iranian-British dual citizen who has been detained in Iran since 3 April 2016. In early September 2016, she was sentenced to five years' imprisonment after being found guilty of "plotting to topple the Iranian government. She has been temporarily released.



The prosecutor general of Tehran had stated in October 2017 that she was being held for running "a BBC Persian online journalism course which was aimed at recruiting and training people to spread propaganda against Iran". She was released by the Iranian authorities, but was scheduled to face second set of charges on 14 March 2021.

Egyptian Activist Sanaa Seif sentenced to 18 months in Prison

**By Zara Dawoud
TCMER Board Member**



Egyptian activist Sanaa Seif was sentenced to a year and a half in prison. Seif, a prominent activist and film editor, was abducted outside the prosecutor-general's office in Cairo on 23 June last year as she was seeking to lodge an official complaint about being attacked the previous day while camping outside Tora prison, where her brother Alaa Abdel Fattah is held.

Her sister Mona Seif says that a Cairo court sentenced her to 18 months in prison on charges of "spreading false news related to the Covid-19 pandemic", and "using a Facebook account to terrorise people". The activist and her mother, Laila Soueif, had been attempting to stage a sit-in in front of the Tora prison gates after they were barred from visiting Abdel Fattah or communicating with him in writing.

A day before Seif's arrest, she had suffered an injury to the head when she, her sister and mother were attacked outside the prison by a group of plainclothes women who reportedly took instruction from the prison guards and policemen. Seif was then abducted by officers in plainclothes in front of the public prosecutor's office while she was trying to lodge a complaint with the prosecutor in relation to the attack.

Two months after she was initially detained, the case was referred to the criminal court. Her trial began on 12 September. Mona Seif documented her sister's wounds online, accusing the public prosecution of disregarding 11 complaints filed by the family to investigate the physical assault.

Five Egyptian rights groups condemned Seif's continued detention, and said the case has been marred by "clear and documented violations", including the falsification of the official arrest report about the place of her arrest.

The organisations added in a statement that the prosecution interrogated Seif on matters related to her personal life and "turned a blind eye to her complaints about having wounds all over her body", especially her feet and back. They added that the prosecution only recorded the reason for her wounds, namely the assault by four unidentified women in front of the gate of Tora prison.

The rights groups also said that Seif and her lawyer were prevented from accessing the investigation report and arrest warrants.

Her pre-trial detention was also renewed on paper without allowing her to attend the sessions held to renew her detention on 5, 19 and 28 July, and 17 August 2020. The prosecution claimed that she could not attend as a precautionary measure against the Covid-19 pandemic.



A mural of Sanaa Seif in Rome, painted by Ammar Abo Bakr in 2015

Seif had previously been detained on two other occasions since President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power following a 2013 coup. She was first detained from June 2014 to September 2015 for taking part in "unlawful protests", and was held for another six months in 2016 on charges of "insulting the judiciary".

Seif and her family have been among the most well-known Arab Spring activists in Egypt since the revolution that ousted longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Human Rights Watch has estimated that more than 60,000 political prisoners are languishing in Egyptian jails since Sisi came to power in 2014.

Sisi has routinely jailed critics, including secular and Muslim Brotherhood politicians, journalists, and human rights defenders. Hundreds have died in custody due to medical negligence or other poor detention conditions.

Princess Latifa: Dubai's Double Standards

By Free Princess Latifa Campaign



Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum is accused of keeping his daughter Latifa imprisoned since she was caught escaping in March 2018. Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed Al Maktoum recorded her life in a jail villa but six months ago the messages to her friend stopped abruptly.

Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, has been doing a lot to change his country from a dusty oil-dependent spot in the desert to a modern, ultimately rich and oil independent business and tourism destination. Only last week, the country made headlines for its successful Mars space program.

This week, however, the 71-year-old billionaire, who has been serving as vice-president and prime minister of the UAE since 2006, has been the focus of unwanted attention. In stark contrast to the country's otherwise well-administered news, growing pressure from global human rights organizations, the UN and international politicians have turned the focus on the alleged treatment of his daughter, Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed Al Maktoum.

Dark side of the bright image

Princess Latifa is one of Al Maktoum's estimated 30 children of several wives and has two sisters bearing the same name. Ever since her escape and forced return to Dubai in March 2018, she has been held in a villa that she refers to as a "jail." Tiina Jauhiainen and David Haigh, the co-founders of the Free Latifa campaign, have now released secretly recorded video footage, after they hadn't heard from Latifa in more than six months.

Latifa's lawyer, and co-founder of the campaign, David Haigh of Detained International, a legal advocacy NGO in the UK is also pressing for her release. He's called on UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan "to order the UAE Vice President and Dubai's ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum to release his hostage daughter without further delay and end a horrendous period of parental and human rights abuse that has significantly damaged the reputation of the UAE and has disgusted the world."

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch as well as the UN and several politicians have followed suit and have called on Sheikh Al Maktoum to present evidence that Princess Latifa is still alive.

Hiba Zayadin, a Gulf researcher for HRW, has also pointed out that Latifa's older sister, Princess Shamsa, "hasn't been seen since she was snatched off the streets of Cambridge in 2000." In 2019, London's High Court of Justice concluded that Shamsa, now around 40-years old, had been abducted, flown to France and had forcefully returned to Dubai. "In doing so, it [the court] cast a spotlight on the United Arab Emirates' sheer disregard for the rule of law — both within and outside its borders," Zayadin posted on Twitter.

Dubai has an escaping Princess problem, caused by domestic violence and forced marriages according to the ex-wife of Dubai's ruler. Sheikha Latifa bint Mohammed al-Maktoum has resurfaced in a smuggled video after a failed escape attempt in 2018. The princess is the daughter of billionaire United Arab Emirates and Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, 71.



Princess Latifa's escape took 7 years to plan, involving the help of a Finnish dance trainer and a former French spy, falling apart in less than a week. After boarding a yacht meant to take her away from the UAE, a commando raid caught the yacht, where she was allegedly bound and tranquilised and forced to return to Dubai. Shortly after, her family shared a picture of the Princess seated next to Mary Robinson, former Irish president and former UN human rights commissioner.

In a leaked video, the Princess claimed she was asked to join the lunch by Princess Haya, one of Sheikh Al Maktoum's wives, without knowing who Robinson was. She also revealed that her family's statement that she was undergoing treatment was also a lie.

Nearly a year later, Princess Haya, who had hosted the lunch, fled to the United Kingdom with her children and filed for divorce. The Princess claimed that Sheikha Latifa was not the only one attempting to flee, with at least one other sister who was punished severely for making the attempt. In self-shot videos shared with the BBC, Princess Latifa claims that she is a "hostage" and fears for her life.

Broken ribs

Why do so many Emirati female royals try to flee, and what drives them to it? According to one royal, it's a combination of domestic abuse and forced marriage. Princess Latifa's attempt was followed by Princess Haya's successful escape to London. But they're hardly alone.

Lebanese-born Princess Randa Al-Banna, ex-wife of Dubai's first ruler, reveals the harrowing details of her divorce, her only child's suffering throughout her life.

"Sheikh Muhammad is not an easy man, he isn't like that, he is very stubborn. I made my decision, and now I cannot see Manal (daughter) now. I do not know how she looks. I chose to leave, so this is my punishment, not to see her," says Princess Al-Banna, speaking to the Sunday Times.

She tried to reach out to her daughter multiple times.

"I tried to enter the UAE secretly in 2005 as part of a Saudi princess's entourage to attend Manal's wedding, but days before my travel date, a man with a baseball bat attacked me, leaving me with a long wound requiring 27 stitches, and breaking four of my ribs. When I woke up, Sheikh Muhammad was there to express his sympathy and offer his willingness to pay for my medical expenses," she relates. "I was very afraid, and I asked him: What have you done?"

He allegedly replied, "Are you crazy? You are my family, I can never harm you."

Al-Banna met Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum when she was 16. After a brief courtship, they were quickly married. Al-Banna, now in her mid sixties, only shared the sordid details after the escape of Princess Haya bint Al Hussein, the sixth wife of Dubai's ruler.

Vicious battle

Princess Haya, who fled from Dubai to London in July 2019 with her two children, would go on to get her divorce from the High Court of Justice in London. The Princess recalled meeting Dubai's ruler at an equestrian event, describing their connection as so intense, they understood each other "without the need for words". Princess Haya also expressed fears that her daughter would be subject to a forced marriage by her father, while citing domestic violence in his palace, saying that it was an unfit environment for her children.

The court case would reveal stunning revelations, namely that Sheikh Mohammed had ordered the abduction of another daughter, Princess Shamsa, from the streets of Cambridge, United Kingdom to Dubai in 2000. She has not been heard from since. Princess Haya also testified that Princess Latifa was forcibly returned home in 2002 and 2018. The first came after an attempted escape near the border of Oman, while the most recent involved a yacht off the coast of India. Both were placed under house arrest after their return.

Mystery and Secrecy

After Princess Latifa's most recent attempt at escape, Sheikh Mohammed released a statement calling the self-described former French spy Herve Joubert a "convicted criminal", who sought to kidnap in exchange for a \$100 million ransom.

Human rights organisations have tried to call on the international community to investigate the Princess's fate, but little headway has been made against the power and connections wielded by Dubai's ruler. After Princess Latifa's most recent video, the office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights stated that it would question the UAE regarding her condition.

Campaign To Free Princess Latifa Al Maktoum
c/o Detained International
7 Bell Yard
London, WC2A 2JR
England

Filipino Women Trafficked & Sold in Syria

By Chan Ling
TCMER Board Member



Dozens of women and children from the Philippines have been recruited to work in the United Arab Emirates only to be forcefully trafficked to Syria to work as domestic workers

About 35 women have sought refuge in the Philippine's embassy in Damascus after allegedly enduring physical and sexual abuse while working for affluent Syrian families, the Washington Post reports. The women now await repatriation, a process that could take years. After speaking to 17 Filipino women and children - some said to be as young as 12 - the Post reported that the victims were denied payment for the work they were forced into.

Flordeliza Arejola, a 32-year-old currently at the Philippine's embassy, told the Post that she was brought to Syria in 2018. "My employer slapped me and put my head into the wall. I escaped because he did not give me a salary for nine months," Arejola said. "I waited until he was asleep and climbed over the wall. I had some money for a taxi [to the embassy]," she continued.

The women told the Post that they arrived in Syria after first being brought to the UAE on 30-day tourist visas by recruitment agencies. Upon arrival in the UAE, the women said they were kept in cramped, dirty living quarters - a practice well documented in the Gulf and other regions. They said they were told that they could go to "conflict-free" areas of Syria where they would work for rich families in better conditions. They told the Post that refusal often led to physical abuse and threats.

Josephine Tawaging, a 33-year-old still trapped in Syria, said she was locked in a dark room after arriving in Dubai and told she was being taken to Damascus despite her protests. "They got angry with me and said, 'If you don't go, we'll kill you', " she said in an interview with the newspaper, recounting the 2019 ordeal.

Subjected to violence

Another woman, a 48-year-old grandmother who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told the Post that she "felt like a prostitute" after arriving in Syria "because we all stand in a line, and the employers choose who they want". The wealthy Syrians were

willing to pay between \$8,000-\$10,000 to take one victim home, according to several of the women.

The women said that those who were not chosen quickly were subjected to increasing violence by the Syrian middlemen. "I was told to be good, so I won't get raped and hurt. I stayed quiet and just said yes," said Joymalyn Dy, 26. The agency boss "wanted to sleep beside me and touch me. Luckily, the next day, my employer took me," Dy continued.

Four of the women identified one of the broker agencies in Damascus that held the human trafficking markets as Nobalaa Alsham. Contacted by WhatsApp, a lawyer for that company, Ramdan Mohammad, told the Post that the women's accounts were "absolutely incorrect". He said the women "consent to come to work in Syria and that is [confirmed] by video with their voice and pictures by the sending office before they travel, and we do our part to secure sponsors, homes and people who treat them very well and humanely". Mohammad also said that the brokers check in on the women periodically to make sure they receive their full wages and to ask about their access to a way to communicate with their families back home.

But the women tell a far different story, saying once they were sold, the violence often continued or escalated.

'Slapped, kicked and bitten'

Geraldine Pahigon, 30, said she was repeatedly assaulted by her "employer". "I was slapped, kicked and bitten many times," she said. "I endured this for four months." In addition to the physical and sexual attacks, the women said they were not paid the wages they were promised for their work, which often included 18 hours a day, seven days a week. Pahigon said she was promised about \$500 a month, but never received it.

After arriving at the Philippines embassy in Damascus, some of the women described continued abuse, telling the Post they were punished for infractions, withheld meals and were being kept in cold and crowded dormitories that are locked at night. They also said staff had confiscated their phones.

"For almost five months, we couldn't communicate with our families because our phones were taken by the ambassador," said a 48-year-old woman seeking refuge at the embassy. "It's like being in prison."

The Philippine department of foreign affairs told the Post that it had launched an "investigation into allegations of poor treatment while under temporary shelter and recommend the necessary actions accordingly". The department said it "has actively taken measures to ensure the safety and well-being of Filipino victims of trafficking" in Syria and has been trying to secure exit visas for the women. Part of that process includes paying any outstanding fees and fines imposed by the Syrian government.

Since December, when the Post contacted the department for comment, Philippine officials said they had begun repatriating some of the women. But some women said they had been kept at the embassy for as long as two years because they were unable to obtain Syrian exit visas and money for flights home. The women said embassy officials have often tried to pressure the women into returning to the homes of Syrian employers. "I want to die," Juvie Balondo, a 27-year old who has been staying at the embassy for a year, told the Post. "We are all so stressed."

Uyghur Women Raped, Sexual Abused, and Tortured

By the East Turkistan Government in Exile



With the Chinese invasion and occupation of East Turkistan, women in society have become more marginalized when Beijing began to target Turkic women, without whom there would be no East Turkistani nation, in a bid to eradicate the future of East Turkistani national identity. Through its policies of forced relocations, forced abortions, state sponsored rape through forced marriages, and forced sterilization of women, the Communist Party of China has not only caused physical injury to East Turkistani women, but also deep traumatic psychological damage that has impacted the whole of our nation.

- Since the invasion and occupation of East Turkistan, the Chinese Communist Party has been subjecting East Turkistani women to forced abortions in a bid to control and prevent the growth of the Turkic population in the region. Between 1969-2009 some 3.7 million forced abortions were carried out in East Turkistan.
- In 2006, the Chinese government launched its 11th Five Year plan, which set a policy goal to transfer 400,000 Uyghur women to Chinese provinces in eastern China. That year some 240,000 Uyghur women from East Turkistan's Kashgar state were forcibly transferred to eastern China.
- East Turkistani women are among the most repressed, if not *the* most repressed women across the world. Hundreds of thousands – if not millions – of them are locked up in concentration camps, prisons, and labor camps, where they are subjected to political and cultural indoctrination, forced starvation, forced medication, rape, torture, organ harvesting, sterilization, and even summary execution.
- Due to the fact that majority of the East Turkistani men are either in concentration camps, prisons, and labour camps, many East Turkistani women have been left to tend the fields, engage in hard labor, and have thus become vulnerable to all types of violence. Over 1.12 million Chinese officials (usually males) have been sent to live in the homes of Uyghurs & other Turkic peoples. Often times, the head-of-household has been detained or executed. Reports

have come out of the region that Turkic women are being subject to sexual humiliation, assaults, and even rape within their very own homes.

- China's government has been putting out advertisements and even sending "recruiters" to find Chinese males from China Proper to migrate to and settle in East Turkistan, plying them with promises of "beautiful Turkic women waiting for a Chinese husband" as part of comprehensive incentivize packages to attract colonists.
- Tens of thousands of Uyghur and other Turkic women have been forcibly married to Chinese men. This is, in essence, a form of state sponsored rape. Women who refuse to marry Chinese men are being sent to concentration camps, labour camps, and prisons.
- Many East Turkistani women have not only been torn apart from their husbands, but also from their children, as part of China's policy of forced family separation in East Turkistan.

For decades Uyghur and other Turkic women in East Turkistan have been victims of sexual violence, rape, forced sterilization, forced abortion, forced marriages, and other crimes perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party. The systematic rape of Uyghur and other Turkic women are part of China's ongoing genocide against East Turkistan's people. We urge the international community to support our case against China at the International Criminal Court. Our complaint also highlights the systematic rape and other sexual violence against Uyghur and other Turkic women.

The East Turkistan Government in Exile and the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement has filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court on July 6, 2020, that provides detailed and extensive evidence that the Chinese government is committing crimes amounting to genocide and other crimes against humanity against the Uyghur and other Turkic peoples.



The East Turkistan Government in Exile urges the U.S., UK, EU, India, Japan, and other countries in the Free World to bring China's genocide to the agenda of the UN Security Council and act immediately to end this ongoing genocide.

East Turkistan Government in Exile
www.east-turkistan.net

President Trump Designates CCP Atrocities as Genocide

By Don Gibbons
TCMER Board Member



In the last days of the first term of the Trump Administration declared that the Chinese government is committing genocide and crimes against humanity through its wide-scale repression of Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic minorities in its north-western region of East Turkistan (renamed Xinjiang by the CCP), including in its use of internment camps and forced sterilization

The move is the culmination of a years-long debate over how to punish what many consider Beijing's worst human rights abuses in decades. Relations between the countries have deteriorated over the past four years, and the new finding adds to a long list of tension points. Foreign policy officials and experts across the political spectrum in the United States say China will be the greatest challenge for any administration for years or decades to come, reports the NY Times on Tuesday.

"We thank the US Government, especially Secretary Pompeo for designating China's atrocities against Uyghur and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan as genocide," said Salih Hidayar, Prime Minister of the East Turkistan Government in Exile. "We are hopeful that this will lead to strong actions to end the genocide. We are hopeful that this will be the first significant step toward ending China's occupation of East Turkistan and bringing justice and freedom to its people."

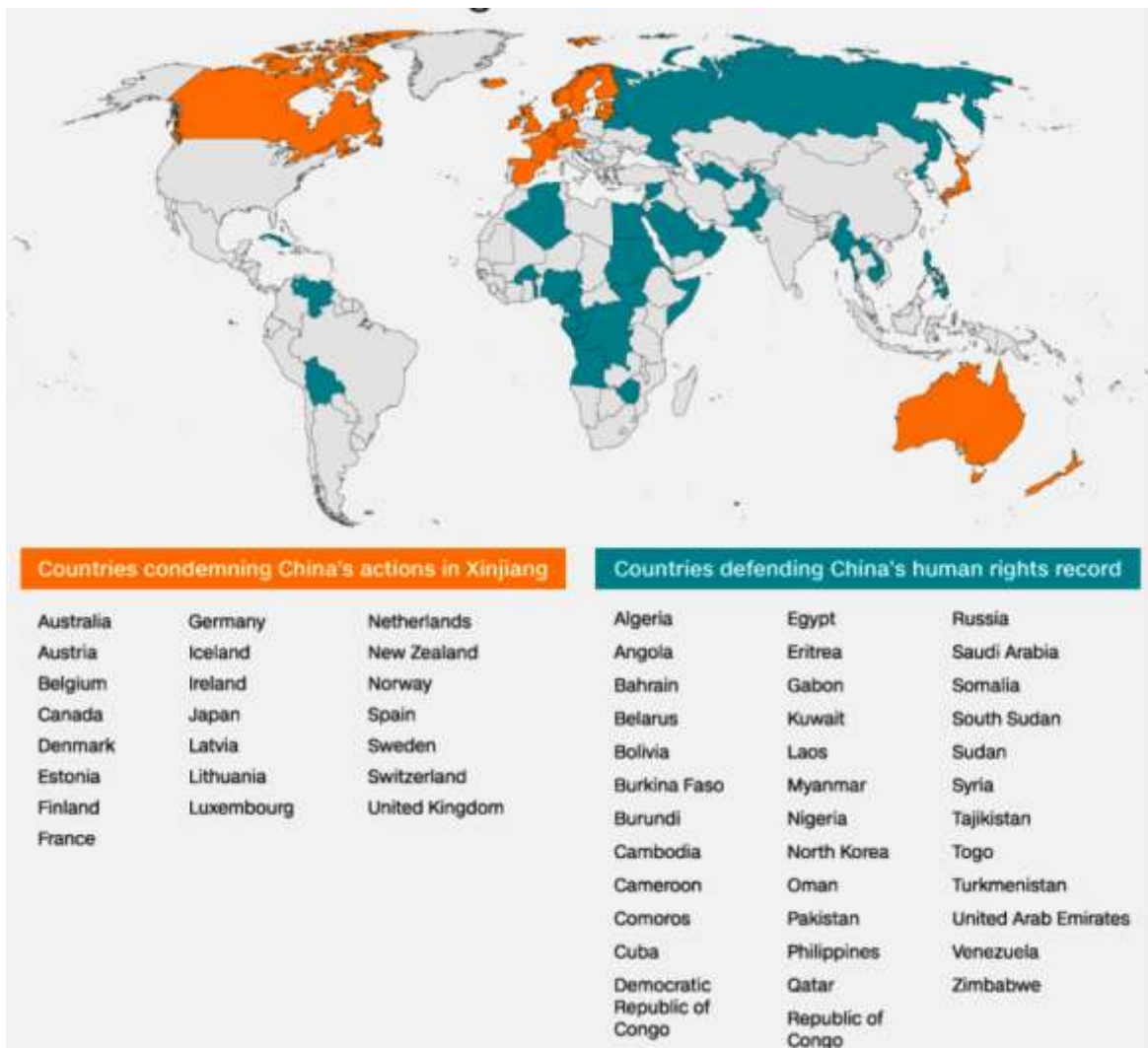
"We continue to urge all governments across the world to follow suit and take action against China's genocide," Mr. Hidayar said.

The East Turkistan Government in Exile and many in the global East Turkistani – Uyghur diaspora have high expectations for the incoming Biden Administration to uphold their campaign promises to the Uyghurs but also to continue the tougher stance on China, especially over human rights and the atrocities happening in East Turkistan, initiated by the Trump Administration.

“We strongly encourage the incoming Biden Administration to urge U.S. allies across the world to recognize China’s atrocities in East Turkistan, and to Boycott the Beijing 2022 Olympics,” Mr. Hudayar said. “The U.S. Government must take a more active approach to resolve the East Turkistan issue by formally recognizing East Turkistan as an Occupied Country and by treating it on par with Tibet.”

In late December, the outgoing Secretary of State Mike Pompeo ordered a review to determine if China’s atrocities against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan (what Beijing calls “Xinjiang”) constitute genocide.

Since China invaded and occupied East Turkistan in late 1949, it has been waging brutal colonization, genocide, and occupation campaign, said Mr. Hudayar.



In recent years millions of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples have been sent to concentration camps, prisons, and forced labor camps where they have been subjected to forced indoctrination, forced medication, rape, torture, organ harvesting, slave labour, and even death.

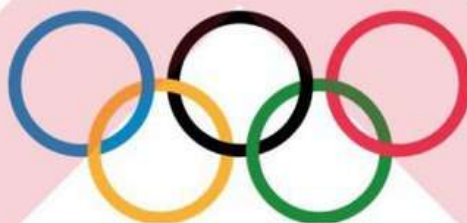
Hundreds of thousands of Uyghur and Turkic women have been forcibly sterilized. Over 3.7 million babies were forcibly aborted since 1979 due to China’s campaign to eradicate the Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in East Turkistan.

STAND WITH HONG KONG

STAND WITH UYGHURS



BEIJING 2022



**BOYCOTT BEIJING
WINTER OLYMPICS**

Say no to concentration camps in China

The Xinjiang re-education camps, officially called Vocational Education and Training Centers by the government of the People's Republic of China, are concentration camps that have been operated by the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional government for the purpose of interning Uyghur Muslims since 2014. The camps were established under General Secretary Xi Jinping's administration.

Israeli Elections

By Arthur Tane
TCMER Executive Director



Israel's March 23 parliamentary election will once again be a referendum on Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's leadership. But two main factors distinguish it from previous rounds of voting, apart from the COVID-19 pandemic and the more active phase of Netanyahu's corruption trial. First, the vote will happen amid a sizable fracture within the political right. Second, the apparent lead that the centre-left currently enjoys in the polls is deceptive.

On the second point, multiple centre-left factions are hoping to cobble together a government following the collapse of the previous governing coalition. Yet they lack a single, galvanizing leader due to the plummet of Benny Gantz and the Blue-White Party, and a few of them could easily fall below Israel's electoral threshold for entering parliament. Even if they do prevail, the resultant government would be politically heterogeneous to a precarious degree, raising questions about its policies and stability. Meanwhile, the pathway for the right is a pure right-wing government, despite internal fissures. In the end, many Israelis will once again vote in a pro- vs. anti-Netanyahu fashion and treat other centre vs. right policy issues as secondary—but the new political math that emerges post-election will nevertheless be consequential.

Cracks in the Right

The scope of the challenge that Netanyahu's Likud Party faces from other right-wing factions has grown considerably. Former Likud politician Gideon Saar's New Hope splinter faction has accused the prime minister of undermining institutions, reflecting a widespread view that Netanyahu is seeking parliamentary insulation from his ongoing corruption trial. Saar has vowed not to sit with Netanyahu in any government, and although his parliamentary list comes from the right, polls suggest many of his voters come from the centre. Indeed, centre-minded Israelis are turning to him as someone who can thwart Netanyahu given his political savvy and experience as the prime minister's former protege.

Netanyahu faces another challenge on the right from long-time rival Naftali Bennett, whose Yamina faction is skewering him for instituting nationwide pandemic lockdowns

and allowing small businesses to wither. Unlike in past rounds, Bennett has refused to commit to a post-election alignment with Netanyahu, instead coyly saying he will entertain offers from either side, which could make him a kingmaker.

An extraordinary tactician, Netanyahu has taken steps to prevent parties from “wasting” votes on the right, including a highly controversial decision to task his aides with stitching together small far-right factions before the February 4 party registration deadline. In doing so, he granted a role for Itamar Ben-Gvir, a politician tied to the legacy of infamous racist figure Meir Kahane (Ben-Gvir says he has distanced himself from the late Kahane’s calls for mass expulsion of Arabs, but he still supports expelling Arabs who are openly disloyal to the state). Because Ben-Gvir’s faction could make or break a potential new Netanyahu government, its presence may hold profound policy implications.

By securing this collection of right-wing parties and wooing Bennett, Netanyahu could get very close to the 61 seats needed for a majority in the 120-member Knesset. A February 5 poll by Channel 12 puts the pro-Netanyahu bloc as follows: Likud with 29 seats, the ultraorthodox/Sephardic party Shas with 8, the ultraorthodox United Torah Judaism with 7, and the new party involving Ben-Gvir with 4. This puts them at 48 seats—or 59 if they convince Yamina to add its projected 11 seats.

Netanyahu’s First Positive Campaign—Up to a Point

Over six elections since 1996, Netanyahu’s highly successful campaign strategy has been to paint his adversaries as not just politically misguided, but also risky for Israel’s security. Yet his current campaign has shown a more positive spin so far.

First, he has relished Israel’s position as the world leader in vaccination efforts—in fact, a large majority of the country’s adult population will likely be vaccinated by election day. Many Israelis credit Netanyahu for paying more than other countries for early vaccination and providing Pfizer and Moderna with ample data.

Second, he is likely betting that the wide domestic support for the Abraham Accords will still help him at the ballot box. This apparent hope persists even though current polls have his party running several seats below its tally in the previous election, which took place before the Arab normalization breakthroughs.

Third, Netanyahu has launched a charm offensive with Arab Israeli voters. During a January trip to Nazareth, he publicly apologized for fear mongering about Arab voters in the 2015 campaign. He has also granted Arab requests for more police stations to deal with criminal violence. Moreover, he cajoled a key faction—Raam—to start its own election list, dropping the Joint List’s projected seat tally by a third. Seemingly overlooking Raam’s Islamist hue, Netanyahu has highlighted his camp’s affinity with the social conservatism espoused by many Arab Israelis—and, in the process, forced his rivals on the centre-left to hastily woo Arab factions to their lists.

The public positivity of Netanyahu’s campaign has its limits, however. In press releases over the past two weeks, he has targeted Lapid as his main rival—a notable shift because he has criticized Lapid as insufficiently tough on Israel’s enemies in the past and will likely return to this strategy. Such criticisms are partly intended to sow doubt among Saar and Bennett voters, convincing them that right-leaning leaders will join up with centre-left factions and accept unpalatable policies just to topple Netanyahu.

Even so, the prime minister has serious vulnerabilities in round four. This campaign is the first to be conducted while his corruption trial is in its active phase (he asked for a trial delay on February 8 to avoid public perceptions of judicial interference in the elections). Moreover, his government's economic safety net for COVID-battered small businesses has been relatively weak. His ultraorthodox allies are likewise being pilloried because a small but highly publicized minority of them have systematically flaunted coronavirus regulations—indeed, current polls indicate that an astonishing 52 percent of right-wing voters do not want the ultraorthodox in the next government. Making matters worse, Saar is now working with the Lincoln Project, the American Republican group that waged a massive media campaign against Donald Trump.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Three early implications stand out. First, while the campaigns have not focused on West Bank annexation or Iranian nuclear negotiations, one can imagine these issues getting more attention in the coming weeks, especially if Netanyahu decides to turn the election from a referendum on his leadership to a right vs. center struggle with Lapid. In this scenario, some of the campaign rhetoric could put Netanyahu at loggerheads with the new U.S. administration, despite his efforts so far to emphasize friendship and cooperation with President Biden.

Second, given the complex realities of coalition negotiations, Israel is unlikely to have a functioning new government until at least May. This could complicate efforts by Washington and other capitals to engage Jerusalem on a range of important policy issues, including efforts to re-establish ties with the Palestinians that could be sensitive for Israel.

Third, if the election remains a referendum on Netanyahu's leadership, one end result could be a parliament that leans even further to the right on foreign policy. Netanyahu's right-wing coalition may not win more than 60 seats, but the overall right-leaning contingent in the Knesset could be as high as 70-80 seats. Saar, Liberman, and possibly Bennett are reliably right-wing on foreign policy issues, and they would presumably remain so even if they convince centrist voters to choose them as part of a centre-left anti-Netanyahu coalition.

In short, it is far from certain that this fourth round will settle the instability of Israeli politics. And even if it does, the forces taking shape could create challenging political math for Washington on Israeli-Palestinian issues once the dust settles.

The Palestinian Plan to Dupe the Biden

By Bassam Tawil



Palestinian elections proposed by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas are part of a scheme designed to deceive the international community, specifically the US and EU, into believing that the Palestinians are serious about implementing major reforms, ending financial and administrative corruption, and engaging in another peace process with Israel

One week after he entered the 17th year of his four-year term in office, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas finally announced new parliamentary and presidential elections, scheduled to take place in May and July 2021. His announcement was carefully timed to coincide with the inauguration week of President Joe Biden and in response to immense pressure from the European Union.

Abbas's announcement, which many Palestinians take as seriously as they would take the alleged sighting of a UFO, is part of an attempt to curry favor with the Biden administration and the EU.

There is only one word to describe Abbas's announcement: deception.

The proposed Palestinian elections are part of a scheme designed to deceive the international community, specifically the US and EU, into believing that the Palestinians are serious about implementing major reforms, ending financial and administrative corruption, and engaging in another peace process with Israel.

Abbas, who boycotted President Donald Trump's administration since December 2017, is hoping that the Biden administration will, among other things, resume financial aid to the Palestinians and the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA); reopen the PLO diplomatic mission in Washington, DC., and cancel the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Abbas did not call for elections because he suddenly believes in democracy and pluralism or because he wants to pave the way for new and young leaders to rise to power. Abbas did not call for elections because he wants to give the Palestinians the opportunity to elect new leaders through a free and fair electoral process.

Perhaps the 85-year-old Abbas called for elections because he wants to retire and spend his time playing with his grandchildren. Better not count on that.

Not only does Abbas have no plans to depart from the political scene anytime in the near future, he is even said to be considering running in the presidential election, if and when it takes place on July 31.

There is one reason, and one reason only, why Abbas is now talking about holding general elections: to continue milking the cash cow he has in the form of American and European governments. Abbas wants the money to ensure his continued dictatorial rule over the Palestinians.

He knows that without money from the US and EU, his regime would not survive for one day. Abbas also knows that without Israel's security presence in the West Bank, Hamas and his political enemies would easily remove him from power. Abbas is trying to show Biden and the Europeans that he is not an autocrat or an illegitimate leader whose tenure ended in January 2009.

In addition to money, Abbas is apparently hoping that his election farce would persuade the Americans and Europeans to support his plan to hold an international conference for "peace" in the Middle East. Abbas does not want to return to direct negotiations with Israel: he knows that Israel cannot comply with 100% of his demands (a full withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines and the "right of return" for "millions" of Palestinian refugees and their descendants to Israel).

Abbas is hoping that such an international conference, under the auspices of the United Nations, European Union, Russia and China, would impose a solution on Israel. Abbas has only one solution in mind: one that would see Israel fully withdraw to the pre-1967 lines, including east Jerusalem, and the establishment of a Palestinian state that would undoubtedly be used in the future as a launching pad to wage war on Israel.

If Abbas's rivals in Hamas win the parliamentary and presidential elections, the future Palestinian state that Abbas is aspiring to establish will be an Iran-backed Islamist terror entity, similar to the mini-state that already exists in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

In 2006, Hamas defeated Abbas's Fatah faction in the parliamentary election, triggering a bitter and bloody power struggle between the two rival parties. At the peak of the conflict in the summer of 2007, Hamas militiamen threw Fatah activists from the rooftops of tall buildings and killed hundreds of others.

Since then, the Palestinians have had two independent and sovereign mini-states: one to the east of Israel, on the "West Bank" of the Jordan River; and one to the west of Israel, on the Gaza Strip. The Gaza Strip, controlled by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian terrorist groups, is being used as a launching pad for carrying out various forms of terrorist attacks against Israel, including firing thousands of rockets into Israel over the past 15 years.

Hamas leaders have welcomed Abbas's announcement. They say they intend to participate in the general elections. Hamas is now hoping to repeat the victory it scored in the 2006 parliamentary election. Public opinion polls have shown that more than 60% of the Palestinians would like to see Abbas quit. This means that a vast majority of Palestinians do not believe in Abbas and his Fatah lieutenants.

In 2006, many Palestinians voted for Hamas because they were fed up with Fatah's corruption and incompetence.

The polls now show that the views of many Palestinians toward Abbas and Fatah have not changed, which means Hamas has a good chance of winning another victory in the upcoming elections. Another Hamas victory means that the West Bank would become another terrorist entity ruled by Iran's Palestinian allies and proxies. Thanks to the presence of Israel in the West Bank, there is less terrorism there. If Israel pulls out, the West Bank will fall into the hands of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, who will start firing rockets at Israeli in the same way they have been doing from the Gaza Strip for years.

A reminder of Hamas's dangerous ambitions was provided on January 18, 2021, by none other than its leader, Ismail Haniyeh. Addressing a conference in Tehran, Haniyeh said that the "resistance" against Israel remains an "ideal choice" and the "strategic option" of his group.

"Resistance" is a euphemism for continuing the war of terrorism against Israel by using rockets, suicide bombings, car-rammings, stabbings and shootings, as well as throwing rocks and firebombs at Israeli soldiers and civilians.

In early February, leaders of Fatah and Hamas are expected to meet in Egypt's capital, Cairo, to discuss preparations for the elections. The two sides are saying they want to reach agreement not only on the issue of elections, but "real partnership." Fatah and Hamas are ready temporarily to lay aside their differences to form a unified front against Israel.

Abbas wants money, while Hamas wants legitimacy and recognition from the international community. Hamas, of course, also wants to extend its control to the West Bank, overthrow Abbas and proceed with its plan to destroy Israel.

For Abbas and Fatah, the talk about elections is important because they want to dupe the US and EU into giving them more money. Hamas, for its part, is hoping that the elections will legitimize it in the international community it and turn it into an acceptable player in the Palestinian arena.

If Fatah and Hamas really cared about elections and the interests of their people, they would have held elections a long time ago. The two parties, however, have spent the past 15 years torturing and arresting each other, denying their people both free elections and basic public freedoms.

The Palestinians live under two dictatorships: one in the West Bank and one in the Gaza Strip. Elections, even if they are held, will not produce new leaders. They will produce Fatah flunkies and Hamas henchmen who bow obediently to their corrupt bosses.

Bassam Tawil is based in the Middle East.

Turkey: Erdoğan's War on Peace

By Burak Bekdil



The race for the Istanbul election on March 31, 2019 went full steam ahead. Islamist parties had controlled Turkey's biggest city since 1994 – a full 25 years. Istanbul was not just another city to win for any party. Turkey's Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, had put it: "Who wins Istanbul, wins Turkey."

In the run-up to the 2019 election, Erdoğan realized that his Justice and Development Party (AKP) might lose if Istanbul's two million or so Kurds voted for the opposition candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu. What to do? State broadcaster TRT read a statement from Abdullah Öcalan, the jailed leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a terrorist organization. Öcalan's letter called on Kurds to remain neutral between the government and opposition candidates. That would result in *de facto* support for the AKP candidate, former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım.

The vote count on March 31, however, proved to be a political fiasco. İmamoğlu had won by a narrow margin of 13,000 votes (in a city of 18 million) but the AKP-controlled Supreme Election Board ruled for a rerun on June 23. This time İmamoğlu won by a margin of 800,000 votes. The margin of victory shocked Erdoğan and his party establishment. That night marked an unforgettable defeat for the invincible Erdoğan. It also marked a new, advanced phase in Islamists' war on Kurds. Apparently the Kurds, ignoring Öcalan's letter, voted for İmamoğlu.

Erdoğan's staunch ultranationalist ally, Devlet Bahçeli, has been persistently calling for a permanent ban by a Constitutional Court of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the third-largest party in the Turkish parliament. Erdoğan advocates more subtle ways to intimidate the opposition. He has been jailing HDP's democratically elected leaders, MPs and mayors, and appointing trustees in their place.

Erdoğan does not have to shut down the HDP when he has *de facto* crippled it. The party's two co-chairmen, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, have been in jail since 2016. Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ were arrested on "terrorism" charges but theirs remain a curious and bitter legal story. In 2014, HDP called on its supporters to peacefully protest the capture by Islamic State of a northern Syrian Kurdish town,

Kobane. What initially began as peaceful protests turned into violence between protesters and security forces, as well as between protesters of rival ideologies.

After a week of violence swept Turkey's predominantly Kurdish cities in the country's southeast, 46 people had been killed and 682 injured. More than 300 people were detained for the violence. Turkish prosecutors drafted indictments against Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ (along with nine other HDP MPs) for provoking violence - 6½ years after the incidents. "This is an attempt to ban politics," wrote Turkish columnist Mehmet Yılmaz.

In order to bypass the more radical option of closing down a political party, Erdoğan may also be considering additional measures to deal a further blow to the HDP. These include stripping the party of state funding, as party closure looks as if it would not work as a deterrent. HDP is Turkey's eighth pro-Kurdish party: seven others have been banned. Kurds formed their first one in 1990. Between 1994 and 2015, however, the Kurdish vote in Turkey rose from 4.1% to 13.1% of the total vote, or from 1.1 million votes to more than six million.

The HDP claims it is facing an unprecedented legal crackdown. 16,000 of its members have been detained and dozens of deputies ousted from parliament and jailed under Turkey's anti-terror legislation. The government currently is working on lifting the parliamentary immunity of all HDP deputies who are subject to summary proceedings - expedited rulings - on charges of "terrorism." So far, 56 deputies from HDP have 914 summary proceedings against them.

"Seriously," asked columnist Akif Beki, "would the crackdown [on Kurdish politicians] take place if Istanbul's Kurdish voters had remained neutral and the AKP won Istanbul?"

With a new court ruling on another prominent Kurdish politician in February, the crackdown took a new ugly turn. Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, a former Islamist, human rights activist and HDP MP, retweeted a post in 2016, advocating peace in the Kurdish dispute. A Turkish court sentenced him to 2½ years in jail for the retweet - although, ironically, the original tweet source had not been indicted. In February, the Supreme Court of Appeals upheld Gergerlioglu's sentence for "spreading terrorist propaganda" - five years after the retweet.

Erdogan's Kurdish problem, however, has the potential to cost him more than just Istanbul. Research has found that the fertility rate in the Kurdish-speaking, eastern part of Turkey was 3.41, as opposed to an average of 2.09 in the Turkish-speaking, non-eastern areas. Kurdish votes in the presidential election year 2023 may reach seven million: Kurds could be the kingmakers.

There are signs that more and more Kurds feel disenchanting by Erdoğan's hawkish policy. Rawest Araştırma, a pollster, found in February that one quarter of Kurds who had previously voted for Erdoğan said they would not vote for him again.

Erdoğan's war on peace may prove self-defeating.

Burak Bekdil is one of Turkey's leading journalists.

Turkish Reforms: From Imperial Repression to Thuggish State

By Burak Bekdil



The Turks' political journey toward the West began a century and a half ago, but Turkey now remains as distant from universal democratic values as the Ottoman Empire was at its collapse. The parallels between failed Ottoman and Turkish reforms are worth a look.

During that 150-year period, in addition to building railway systems on imperial soil, systems for registering the population and control over the press were established, along with the first local modern law school in 1898. The most far-reaching reforms occurred in education: many professional schools were established for fields including the law, arts, trades, civil engineering, veterinary medicine, customs, farming and linguistics.

It was Sultan Abdulhamid II who was under Western pressure to reform his ailing empire. On December 23, 1876 the Ottoman constitution was solemnly promulgated with the aim of winning the hearts and minds of the Great Powers of Europe, only to be suspended when external pressure abated, and its author sent to exile. At the beginning of the 20th century, another constitutionalist reformer group, the Committee of Union and Progress, threatened the sultan with a coup d'état, ending Abdulhamid's reign.

Modern Turkey's darkest years came between 1976 and 1980, when a campaign of political violence, wrought by a multitude of far-left and far-right urban guerilla groups, killed more than 5,000 people. That era only came to an end when the military took over the country in a completed coup d'état and the violence subsided. Twenty years later, a militant Islamist, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, pledged radically to reform Turkish democracy and make it an inseparable part of Europe - via full membership in the European Union. Two decades after that pledge Turkey's democracy remains as remote from Europe's civil liberties, democratic culture and checks and balances as Abdulhamid's empire was in 1876.

Cornered by the threat of EU sanctions, Erdoğan tactically said on January 10, he repeated that Turkey wants to "turn a new page in its relations with the EU in the new year." Turkey claimed that it was once again back at its reform agenda.

Meanwhile, Utku Çakırözer, an opposition member of parliament, said that five journalists were physically attacked in the first 15 days of 2021. "This shameful track record on impunity regarding physical attacks should come to an end," he said. Three of the attacks were particularly indicative. During the first incident, Selçuk Özdağ, deputy chairman of an opposition party, Future, was attacked by a gang of five men in front of his home. The attackers were armed and used sticks to hit Özdağ on the head. He was rushed to an emergency room for surgery. "This is political terror," said Future's chairman and former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. Apparently, Özdağ had angered supporters of Erdoğan's ultra-nationalist coalition partner, MHP. An MHP official "congratulated" the attackers.

Ultra-nationalists also attacked journalist Orhan Uğuroğlu and television anchorman Afşin Hatipoğlu, whose anti-Erdoğan reporting had angered MHP loyalists. In his column on January 13, Uğuroğlu had interviewed Future's Özdağ.

Ankara's police directorate tweeted that three suspects in the attack had been taken into custody, and that the police were searching for a fourth. Before the fourth attacker was caught, the others were released. The police were hardly convincing, given the Erdoğan government's track record of totally failing to punish crimes against his opponents.

In a February 2020 report, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said that the violence comes after years of authorities harassing and jailing journalists who are critical of the ruling party or its political allies. The CPJ noted: "While no clear motive has been established in the attacks last year, local journalist associations have speculated that the general climate of hostility has made journalism riskier. In May, local journalist unions told the Turkish service of the BBC the violence was in part due to a climate of impunity, with authorities not effectively investigating violence and the government targeting journalists and not publicly condemning attacks."

After recounting recent examples of how Turkish courts unconstitutionally refused to comply with rulings handed down by supreme courts such as the Turkish Constitutional Court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), columnist Mehmet Ocaktan wrote: "If this is your understanding of reforming... there is nothing more to say." His column's sarcastic title was "We are begging you; do not reform!" - as all of that repression and violence are happening after Erdogan pledged democratic reforms, do not reform, do not make things worse.

A December 29 report from *Expression Interrupted* gloomily noted: "Of all 47 members of the Council of Europe, Turkey has the most violations of freedom of expression under Article 10 of the Convention. Of the 845 judgments ECtHR delivered between 1959 and 2019, 356 were against Turkey — almost five times as many as against the distant runner-up, Russia."

It went on to note: "Turkey also tops the list of rights violations pertaining to all articles of the constitution. "Between 1959 and 2019, 3,645 of the 22,535 judgments delivered by the Court were against Turkey, making it the country against which the ECtHR has delivered the most judgments." Out of 5,231 cases currently pending execution by signatory parties, 689 of them are against Turkey."

A century and a half after Ottoman efforts to reform and more than 15 years since EU accession talks began, Turkey is further away from joining the rich club than ever.

Is Russia Trying to Play Kingmaker in Lebanon?

By Anna Borshchevskaya



In the backdrop of Russian police rounding up the country's own politicians and journalists at a peaceful conference, it seems only fitting that Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov welcomed a Hezbollah delegation in Moscow. After all, Hezbollah has its own distinguished history of harassing and killing opposition journalists. Unlike Western states, the Kremlin does not consider the Iran-backed and Lebanon-based Hezbollah a terrorist organization. Lebanon is important to Vladimir Putin's aims to expand Russian influence in the Middle East. The country is now in the midst of its worst economic and political crisis in decades and experts note that Hezbollah is losing popular support. Is Moscow now trying to play kingmaker in Lebanon by using Hezbollah?

The first time a Hezbollah delegation came to Moscow on an official visit was in October 2011, upon Moscow's invitation. Few details of the visit were made public, but reportedly Hezbollah, for its part, wanted to enhance cooperation on "issues of mutual concern." These likely included Syria and Moscow's support for the Assad regime. Now, just as in the past visit, Lebanese parliamentarian Muhammad Raad of the Loyalty to the Resistance bloc headed the delegation in Moscow. Again it was Moscow that invited Hezbollah. And, as ten years ago, few details of the visit are available. In response to a question about the meeting Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry said laconically, "We confirm the fact of the meeting." Raad told Hezbollah's Al-Manar the meeting focused on how to "strengthen stability in Lebanon and Syria and the achievements that were made against terrorists." The meeting also comes about a week after Lavrov met with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri as part of Lavrov's trip to Abu Dhabi, where the two officials discussed Syria and strengthening Russian-Lebanese ties.

For Moscow, Lebanon, a strategic country on the Mediterranean, is important both as an extension of Putin's Syria interests and in its own right. Moscow supported Hezbollah in the 2006 war in Lebanon as part of broader efforts to improve Russia's relations with Tehran and undermine the peaceful pro-democracy 2005 Cedar Revolution. Putin saw these events as an extension of Western effort of fomenting "color revolutions," chiefly in the post-Soviet space, to unseat corrupt and authoritarian regimes—including his own. In Lebanon in particular the Cedar

revolution threatened to weaken Hezbollah and Syrian influence in Lebanon, as well as strengthen that of the West; Putin could not sit idly by.

Fast-forwarding to Putin's intervention in Syria—planned most likely during another Hezbollah visit to Moscow, when in July 2015, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Commander—and Hezbollah master— Qassem Suleimani opened a map to show that Assad was in danger of falling. Moscow then deepened its cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah, whose members fought side by side with Russian forces, coordinated with and learned from them. Moscow also armed Hezbollah, while Russian ambassador to Lebanon Alexander Zasytkin praised Hezbollah in February 2019 for its actions in Syria. "The [Hezbollah] party took a responsible approach to what was happening in Syria and the region as a whole and contributed significantly to terrorists' defeat," he said.

In this context, Moscow also deepened its ties with Lebanon, including in the military sphere. It does not surprise that in the wake of this summer's tragedy of a massive explosion in the port of Beirut that laid bare the corruption and incompetence of the ruling elite and led the Lebanese into the streets to demand fundamental political change, Putin worked to preserve the political status quo. The kind of reform protestors envisioned would cause Putin to lose influence.

That Lebanon remains in crisis, though, is not necessarily bad news for Putin, especially because at least in the short-term, the Lebanese protestors have not achieved the reform they envisioned, while much remains uncertain in terms of what pressure the West is willing to exert when it comes to upcoming nuclear talks with Iran. If Lebanese Hezbollah comes to Moscow at a time when it is weak, then Putin could use the situation to shape the future political outcomes in the country in a way that suits his interests. Western policymakers would be wise to deny Putin such opportunities, pay more attention to Lebanon and draw clear lines when it comes to Iran and Hezbollah.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute and author of the upcoming book, Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence

Russian Mercenaries still in Libya

By Anastasia Kravtsov
TCMER Board Member



The new report from UN experts warned that an embargo that had been imposed on Libya since 2011 was "totally ineffective", citing "extensive, blatant" violations by actors, including UN member states. The six experts, who were charged with monitoring the embargo on the war-torn country, said numerous actors, including private mercenaries and non-state armed groups, were guilty of violations.

The report said around 2,000 Russian mercenaries from the private Wagner Group had been deployed in Libya, adding to previous reports which said up to 13,000 Syrian rebels and Chadian or Sudanese fighters were in the country, acting for various sides. The report also backed up accusations aimed at Erik Prince, founder of the now-defunct Blackwater security company. Prince has denied having sent or wanted to send a force of foreign mercenaries and weapons to military commander Khalifa Haftar in 2019.

A UN report in February said Prince had been involved in an \$80m operation to provide support to Haftar, which included plans to form a hit squad to track and kill Libyan commanders opposed to him, including some who were also European Union citizens. The plot, which was allegedly planned with a Dubai-based British businesswoman, broke down after promised equipment failed to materialise and the group was forced to make a night-time evacuation.

The experts said Prince had "at the least facilitated the transfer of military equipment to a private military company providing other assistance relating to military activities to an armed group in Libya." Since the overthrow and killing of former ruler Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has been gripped by conflict and politically split between the Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, and an eastern-based administration, backed by Haftar.

Numerous foreign countries such as Egypt, Russia, the UAE, Turkey and Qatar have supported different sides in the conflict, further fuelling the violence.

The report said these countries' violations of the embargo on Libya were "extensive, blatant and with complete disregard for the sanctions measures".

"Throughout its mandate, the Panel of Experts on Libya has identified multiple acts that threatened the peace, stability or security of Libya, and increased attacks against state institutions and installations," read the more than 550-page report.

"Civilians in Libya, including migrants and asylum seekers, continue to endure widespread international humanitarian law and international human rights law violations and human rights abuses. Designated terrorist groups remained active in Libya, albeit with diminished activities. Their acts of violence continue to have a disruptive effect on the stability and security of the country. "

The report recommended that the UN Security Council impose "flag deregistration; a landing ban; and an over flight ban" on aircraft identified as having violated the embargo, as well as authorising "member states to inspect, on the high seas off the coast of Libya, vessels... that they have reasonable grounds to believe are illicitly exporting or attempting to export crude oil or refined petroleum products".

