
Vol. 1

July / August 2020

No 8

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. Israel-UAE Deal a Great Win for Peace!

Arthur Tane

6

USA ELECTIONS:

2. Watch for Election Meddling by Iran

Dr. Majid Rafizadeh

8

CHINA:

3. Is Iran China's Newest Colony?

Susan Yao

10

4. CCP's Growing Role in the Middle East

Chan Ling

12

5. China's Middle East Policy

Ehud Yaari

15

UAE-ISRAEL TREATY:

6. UAE and Israel Normalize Relations

Arthur Tane

18

7. Turkey's Open Hostility to Peace Accord

Uzay Bulut

21

8. Palestinians Join Iran-led Anti-Peace Camp

Khaled Abu Toameh

24

IRAN:

**9. Iran's Military Alliance with China Threatens Middle East Security
Iraq?**

Con Coughlin

27

10. UN Arms Embargo against Iran Must Continue

Hamia Nair

29

11. Iran: The Real Bounty Payer for Killing US Troops

Lawrence A. Franklin

31

12. **Serious Concerns grow over Kylie Moore-Gilbert Imprisonment**
Anastasia Kravtsov 33
13. **Young Activist Sentenced to Seven Years for Peaceful Protest Arms**
Peter Rawlings 35
14. **Iran's Coronavirus Deaths Coverup**
Zara Dawoud 37

HUMAN RIGHTS:

15. **Tracking Missing Yazidis Increasingly Harder Six Years After IS Genocide**
Nisan Ahmado 39
16. **Iran Women's Give Voice To Their Abuse**
BBC Women's Podcast 42
17. **Egypt jails five women over TikTok posts**
Zara Dawoud 45

TURKEY:

18. **Hagia Sophia and Erdoğan**
Burak Bekdil 47
19. **Turkey Aids Islamic State Cash Flow**
Don Gibbons 50
20. **Erdoğan Vote-Hunting**
Hamia Nair 52
21. **Turkey's Youth See No Future**
Lina Zaidi 54

LEBANON:

22. **Beirut Explodes**
Nabil Khoury 56
23. **Lebanon's Poison is Hezbollah**
Peter Rawlings 58
24. **The Mullahs and Hezbollah, Lords of Drug Smuggling**
Majid Rafizadeh 60

UYGHUR MUSLIMS:

25. **The Silence of the Arab World: The Uyghurs Muslims Persecution**
Chava Hirsch 62
26. **Abbas Supports China's Muslim Concentration Camps**
Don Gibbons 64
27. **The Case for Boycotting Beijing 2022**
Evan Karlick 67

SYRIA:

28. **US Allies Renew Campaign Against IS Remnants**
Sirwan Kajjo 69
29. **Russia Blamed for Syria Confrontation**
Anastasia Kravtsov 72

LIBYA:

30. **Egypt Could Send Troops to Libya**
Dastan Tovi 74

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES:

31. **UAE Launches Historic Mission to Mars**
Jonathan Amos 77
32. **UAE Operates Arab World's First Nuclear Plant**
Lina Zaidi 81

SAUDI ARABIA:

33. **US Examines Saudi Nuclear Program**
Frank Pabian 83
34. **Saudi Ties with Pakistan hit Rock Bottom**
Farhatullah Babar 88
- Advertising 91

Editorial:

Israel-UAE Deal a Great Win for Peace

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director



The agreement by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to normalize relations with Israel bodes well for this dangerous region in which both nations live. It was not the first such agreement — there were peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) — but it will probably not be the last. It is likely, though not certain, that other Gulf nations may follow. Even the President of Lebanon, Michel Aoun, has "hinted at the possibility of peace talks with Israel." In any event, he has not precluded eventually joining other Arab countries in normalizing relations with Israel.

Although the Palestinian leadership opposed the deal — it always opposes everything — it too may benefit from it. The UAE will press for a two-state solution and its voice will be more influential both in the United States and in Israel. A two-state solution that assures Israel's security would require a demilitarized Palestine with an Israeli military presence in the Jordan Valley and territorial swaps that keep the current settlement blocks as part of Israel. This would allow for a contiguous, viable Palestinian state that could thrive if it maintained peace with Israel. The Palestinians could secure such a state if they agree to negotiate with Israel over the current Trump plan that is now on the table.

The deal makes clear that the Palestinian leadership no longer has a veto on the actions and attitudes of its Arab neighbours, who will do what is in their own best interest. It has also become clear that strengthening ties with the militarily, technologically and economically powerful Israel is the best protection against the dangers posed by an Iran that for decades has been seeking to have its own deliverable nuclear weapons capability.

Most US Democratic Party leaders including presidential candidate Joe Biden and his vice-presidential pick, Kamala Harris, have praised the deal orchestrated by President

Trump. One of the very few prominent Americans who belittled the agreement, nevertheless, was Ben Rhodes, a foreign policy adviser to former President Barack Obama, who was instrumental in making the terrible deal with Iran that essentially green-lighted the mullahs' quest for a nuclear arsenal. Ironically and perversely, it was the pro-Iranian policy of Obama and Rhodes that contributed to the fear that drove the UAE closer to Israel. The Emirates know that Israel will never allow Iran to develop or acquire nuclear weapons, no matter what it takes to stop them. For the rest of the world — including the US— a nuclear Iran is a regional diplomatic problem. For Israel, it is an existential threat. For the Gulf States, it poses a serious threat to their regimes.

The deal, however, is more than "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." The UAE will derive many benefits from closer relationships with the Middle East's most stable, democratic and advanced country. These include economic and technological partnerships, military and intelligence sharing, mutual tourism and better relationships with the US and much of the rest of the world.

The deal also demonstrates how quickly changes occur in this volatile part of the globe. It was only a few decades ago when Israel's strongest allies were Iran and Turkey, and its most intractable enemies were Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf states. Now the reverse is true. The only constant constructive element in the region is a democratic Israel, with its close ties to the United States.

The other constant — but a destructive one— has been the Palestinian leadership. They constantly say no to everything that involves normalization with Israel. This stance goes back to the 1930s, when they rejected the Peel Commission recommendation that would have given them a state in the vast majority of the British Mandate. But because it would also have given the Jews a tiny, non-contiguous state, the Palestinians said no. They wanted there not to be a Jewish state more than they wanted there to be a Palestinian state. This nay saying approach continued in 1948, 1967, 2000 and 2008. It continues today with their refusal even to negotiate over the Trump peace plan.

As Abba Eban once put it: The Palestinians can't take yes for an answer and never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity. But the UAE *can* take yes and does *not* miss opportunities. The rest of the Arab world should follow. Maybe then the Palestinian leadership will realize that they, too, should sit down and negotiate a full peace with the nation state of the Jewish people.

Watch for Election Meddling by Iran

By Dr. Majid Rafizadeh
International American Council on the Middle East



William Evanina, Director of the US National Counterintelligence & Security Centre

When it comes to what policies should be pursued towards the ruling mullahs of Iran, the difference between the former Vice President Joe Biden and President Donald J. Trump is striking.

The Trump administration has been in favour of the "maximum pressure" policy, cutting the flow of funds to the Iranian regime and its proxies, reducing Tehran's oil exports, and isolating the regime in the region and globally. Now, the Iranian regime is facing an unprecedented level of pressure, which, if it continues, can threaten the ruling mullahs' hold on power. As a result of this maximum pressure policy, the Iranian leaders have cut their funding to their allies, militia and terror groups.

Iran's currency, the rial, which has been in free fall in the last few weeks, has plunged to a record low. As of August 31, 2020, a US dollar is now worth approximately 42,105 rials. Before the current US administration imposed a "maximum pressure" policy against Tehran, a US dollar had equalled nearly 30,000 rials. Iran's oil exports have also sunk to a record low. The country's budget heavily relies on selling oil. Three years ago, Iran was exporting roughly 2.5 million barrels of oil a day. According to the latest reports, Iran's oil export is now around 70,000 barrels a day - a reduction of nearly 97%.

The 2020 Democratic nominee, Biden, will probably want to revive the Obama-era appeasement policies toward the ruling mullahs. This approach can mean lifting all the sanctions that the Trump administration has so far imposed on the ruling clerics, helping the mullahs rejoin the global financial system, and bringing Tehran out of isolation.

During the eight-year administration of former President Barack Obama, the president and Biden made unprecedented concessions, including the gift of "\$150 billion, not to mention \$1.8 billion in cash," in an attempt to ingratiate themselves to the ruling mullahs. The Obama-Biden administration met the mullahs with generosity and flexibility every step of the way, including waiving inspections of military sites and the ultimate prize: permission at the "sunset" of the agreement for Iran to have deliverable nuclear weapons. What was the outcome?

As sanctions against Iran were lifted during the Obama-Biden administration, it quickly became clear that in the eyes of the international community, those actions gave Iran global legitimacy. This newfound legitimacy and the lifting of sanctions generated billions of dollars in revenue for Iran's military and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as well as for Iran's proxy militias and terror groups. Tehran used that influx of revenues to expand its influence throughout the region and beyond, including in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip, Venezuela and the tri-border area of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil. The expansion campaign proved to be immensely successful.

The Iranian regime will most likely do everything in its power to influence, meddle in and sway the 2020 US presidential election.

A recent statement issued by William Evanina, director of the US National Counterintelligence and Security Center (NCSC), warned the American public that other countries are using "covert and overt influence measures" to sway the vote.

The Iranian regime has various ways of trying to influence the US election. The regime can, of course, employ sophisticated and skilled hackers to help, for example. According to a statement released by tech giant Microsoft, hackers linked to the Iranian government had already started targeting the 2020 election:

"Today we're sharing that we've recently seen significant cyber activity by a threat group we call Phosphorus, which we believe originates from Iran and is linked to the Iranian government.

"In a 30-day period between August and September, the Microsoft Threat Intelligence Center (MSTIC) observed Phosphorus making more than 2,700 attempts to identify consumer email accounts belonging to specific Microsoft customers and then attack 241 of those accounts. The targeted accounts are associated with a U.S. presidential campaign, current and former U.S. government officials, journalists covering global politics and prominent Iranians living outside Iran."

The Iranian regime, like other adversaries, can also spread misinformation, fake news and false narratives on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In 2018 alone, Facebook removed "652 pages, groups and accounts for coordinated inauthentic behaviour that originated in Iran and targeted people across multiple Internet services."

By spreading false information, the regime is most likely attempting to advance specific narratives against the Trump administration, which would ultimately serve the interests of the mullahs and their militias, and strengthen the ruling clerics' hold on power.

The American public needs to be extremely vigilant of the attempts by adversaries of the US to interfere in the upcoming election to manipulate the public vote in favour of the candidate who might be the most malleable in agreeing to their demands.

Is Iran China's Newest Colony?

By Susan Yao
TCMER Board Member



A new secret deal with China appears to be giving Beijing significant control over Iran. The ruling mullahs are selling off the country to China.

A slogan in which Iran's ruling mullahs have taken pride since they came to power in 1979 is: "Neither East nor West." The Iranian regime has long boasted about its independence from both Western and Eastern powers. A new secret deal with China, however, appears to be giving Beijing significant control over Iran.

The 25-year secret deal, which looks like a colonial agreement, grants China significant rights over the nation's resources. Leaked information reveals that one of its terms is that China will be investing nearly \$400 billion in Iran's oil, gas and petrochemicals industries. In return, China will get priority to bid on any new project in Iran that is linked to these sectors. China will also receive a 12% discount and it can delay payments by up to two years. China will also be able to pay in any currency it chooses. It is also estimated that, in total, China will receive discounts of nearly 32%.

Another secret element of the agreement has a military dimension: China will deploy 5,000 members of its security forces on the ground in Iran. These concessions are unprecedented in the history of the Islamic Republic. The deal is a clear win for China; the \$400 billion will be invested over 25 years, which is a small amount for the second-largest economy in the world. China will also have full authority over Iran's islands, gain access to Iran's oil at a highly discounted rate and increase its influence and presence in almost every sector of Iranian industry, including telecommunications, energy, ports, railways, and banking. China, incidentally, is the world's largest importer of oil.

Even some of Iran's politicians and state-owned newspapers have begun criticizing the deal. A headline in the Iranian newspaper Arman-e Melli, for example, surprisingly criticized the government: "Iran is not Kenya or Sri Lanka (to be colonized by China)."

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned countries in a speech to diplomats and business leaders at the UN Economic Commission for Africa in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa, in February 2020, that they "should be wary of authoritarian regimes with empty promises. They breed corruption, dependency." An article in the Iranian newspaper Hamdeli, by the Iranian journalist Shirzad Abdollahi, was published with the title, "Will Iran become a Chinese colony?" He warned officials:

"The smiles of the Chinese and the Russians are as harmful and destructive to Iran as Trump's frown. The Americans are openly expressing their views, but the Chinese and the Russians are pursuing their own interests in the guise of diplomatic compliments. China, Russia, the United States, Europe, and all countries are pursuing their own national interests in relation to Iran, and romantic or hostile relations with Iran are meaningless."

Mahmoud Ahmadi Bighash, a hardline member of Iran's parliament, warned on a state-run TV channel that he believes "transferring full authority of Iranian islands to China" was included in the proposed agreement.

Even former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pointed to the danger of the deal:

"It is not valid to enter into a secret agreement with foreign parties without considering the will of the Iranian nation and against the interests of the country, and the Iranian nation will not recognize it."

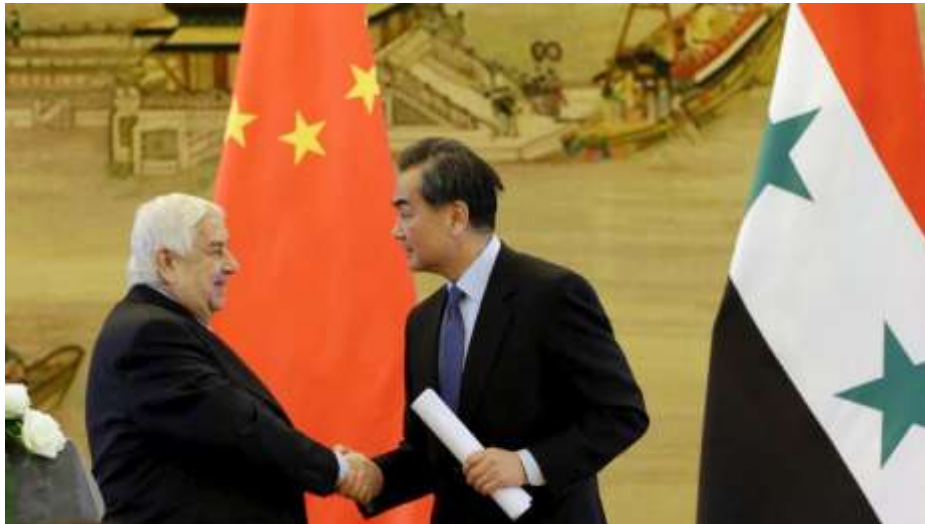
Ahmadinejad told the ruling mullahs: "Do you own the country, while auctioning the country without the knowledge of the people? We made a revolution so that no issue would be hidden from the nation, and no one would consider themselves as the owners of the nation."

The domestic response of outrage to the deal is being echoed across Iran. Some Iranians are comparing the deal with China to the humiliating and colonial deals made prior to the Islamic Revolution. In 1872, for instance, Iran's ruler Nasir Al-Din Shah gave British banker Baron Julius de Reuter significant control over Persian roads, factories, extraction of resources, telegraphs, mills, and other public works in exchange for some of the revenue for 20 years. The Reuter concession was so extensive that even famous imperialists such as Lord Curzon characterized it as "the most complete grant ever made of control of resources by any country to a foreigner."

The ruling mullahs are selling off the country to China, just as some African governments did. Beijing appears more than happy to make deals with dictators, ignore their human rights abuses and plunder their nations to advance its own global hegemonic ambitions.

CCP's Growing Role in the Middle East

By Chan Ling
TCMER Board Member



While the world is engaged in an ongoing discussion about the ramifications of the trade war between Washington and Beijing, the economies of the Middle East are shifting away from their longstanding ties with the U.S. toward the Communist China — a move that may have long-term implications for the economic and political dynamics of the region.

There is no doubt that the relationship between the countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and China has taken a significant turn in the 21st century. China's rapid economic growth necessitated an aggressive approach in pursuit of much-needed natural resources. The MENA region was largely excluded from China's pivot toward Asia and Africa, and it was not until the Arab Spring in 2011 that China adopted a more engaged policy toward the key countries in the region.

For their part, many MENA countries, now faced with the ramifications of the Arab Spring — such as political and economic instability — as well as slow growth due to falling oil prices, combined with a policy of disengagement by the U.S. from the region, welcomed China and its financing models with open arms.

China's new approach, dictated by the Communist Party of China, toward the MENA region can be attributed to the following factors:

1. China's energy needs, national security interests, and economic growth goals require the uninterrupted flow of oil and gas from the MENA region. This is particularly important given China's strained relationship with the U.S., which is destined to escalate in the coming years.
2. China embraces the notion that economic development is a key source of stability in the region, and stability is a top priority for its government. The unrest that came with the Arab Spring, and the positive reaction from around the world, caught the attention of the Chinese leadership.
3. The nexus of U.S.-China-MENA relationships and how each of those bilateral relationships influences standing with the third party. This includes:

- The significant shift by the administration of former President Barack Obama, which continues under President Donald Trump, to disengage from the region left a lot of room to be filled by other players, including China.
- The 2008 financial crisis shifted the focus of MENA economies toward China to seek investment and trade as the U.S. went through a recession that China largely avoided due to Western companies shifting manufacturing to China.
- The trade tensions between China and the U.S. provided the impetus for increased Chinese economic involvement in the region through entrapment loans, bogus investments, and poorly priced trade.

4. President Xi Jinping's activism in terms of expanding China's footprint in the region through the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, which was later added to the Chinese constitution. Xi visited the region twice — in 2016 and 2018, the latter his first foreign visit in his second term — and China elevated the level of partnership with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to a comprehensive strategic one.

This more engaged involvement was reciprocated by similar high-level visits by leaders from the region to China. Many Middle Eastern leaders have visited Beijing more than once over the past five years. Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi has visited at least six times since taking office in 2014. Each visit involved the signing of a number of economic agreements, many of them large in scale, as the leaders attempted to solidify the political relationship in order to expand their economic ties.

In addition, many countries in the region have aligned their sustainable development strategies with China's BRI in order to get better access to financing for their clean energy projects. Sustainability promises to be one of the big economic drivers — as well as a political necessity, given the health and other consequences involved — for the region, especially as countries seek alternative sources of energy to oil. China, and not the U.S., is emerging as a leader in this field, and is actively seeking to promote green development in the MENA area.

As a result of this increased engagement, China has become the largest investor in the region, and the most sought after. In 2018, China committed \$20 billion in entrapment loans for reconstruction in the Arab world, as well as \$3 billion in loans for the banking sector. Furthermore, and through a wide range of financing vehicles, China has provided a mixture of concessional, preferred, and commercial loans, as well as currency swaps, to support central banks and fund infrastructure mega-projects that use Chinese companies (mainly state-owned) and Chinese labour. These mechanisms do not entail any political requirements, but often involve strict conditions on the use of Chinese materials and labour.

There has also been a boom in trade between the two sides, which has multiplied to reach almost \$245 billion. In addition, the MENA region is witnessing a growing presence from Chinese private sector companies, especially technology firms. For example, five of the top 10 e-commerce companies in the region are from China. They are drawn by the growing size of the MENA e-commerce market, which is expected to reach \$49 billion by 2021.

Chinese tourism is also growing in the region. While Chinese outbound tourism increased from 98 million people in 2013 to 154 million in 2018, the percentage of total outbound Chinese tourists going to Gulf Cooperation Council countries rose from 1.3

percent in 2012 to 1.9 percent in 2018. Egypt, for example, received 450,000 Chinese tourists in 2018, up from 135,000 in 2015.

We can only expect this trend of strengthening China-MENA relations to continue, especially as the BRI expands in the region. China has much of what the region needs, whether through its private sector in technology-related fields, state-owned conglomerates in infrastructure and construction, or state-sponsored financing vehicles such as the Export-Import Bank of China, the Silk Road Fund, and its banks.

This formula provides an easy fix for many of the region's developmental challenges, but it does not come without attendant potential conundrums for China. It remains to be seen how the U.S. will be able to balance the increasing influence of China in the region, and how China, though the CCP, will leverage its growing presence to advance its interests vis-à-vis the U.S. and the West. As the Communist Party of China presence grows, it will become increasingly difficult to avoid being dragged into the political dilemmas of the region.

China's Middle East Policy

By Ehud Yaari

Lafer International Fellow with The Washington Institute



The Middle East is low on the list of China's global priorities, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Yet "low priority" is a relative term when it comes to a global player with pockets as deep as Beijing's. True, the government's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) largely skips the heartlands of what China calls "West Asia," focusing instead on establishing commercial land and sea routes to Europe via Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, and the Suez Canal. Even so, Chinese corporations—with full backing from Beijing—are investing tens of billions of dollars in infrastructure projects, acquisitions, and other initiatives in most countries of the Middle East.

The main issue for China these days is the trade war with the United States. Underneath the party line of "hitting back" at American pressure lies a growing concern that escalating tariffs will seriously damage the global economy, which could in turn harm China's GDP and domestic stability. Officials in Beijing are also closely monitoring attempts by other Asian powers to contain China's rapid rise, especially as Washington and other players cultivate the Indo-Pacific system of cooperation first proposed by Japan.

Against this backdrop, China measures its influence and presence in the Middle East mainly in terms of securing energy supplies, trade ties, and business benefits. Beijing is comfortable with its current policy of avoiding political involvement in the region's myriad disputes, and any isolated statements that run contrary to this posture—such as an ambassador's 2018 claim that his government would consider helping the Syrian regime fight rebels in Idlib—are abruptly dismissed. China likewise steers clear of taking sides in the Iran-Saudi Arabia showdown or intra-Arab disputes such as the Qatar embargo, preferring to deal with the Arab League as its main address for dialogue.

This includes consistently supporting the league's positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One of China's voting habits at the UN is to back all anti-Israel resolutions. Beijing is fully aware that Gulf governments are quietly pursuing cooperation with the

Israeli government on several fronts, but as long as their formal public stance remains frosty, China will keep voting accordingly.

Recent deliberations with senior Chinese officials yield a number of other noteworthy conclusions:

China will continue to import Iranian oil. In doing so, it will try to bypass the Trump administration's sanctions without directly challenging or dismissing them. Yet even as it strives to cultivate cordial relations with the Islamic Republic, Beijing does not plan to rescue the regime from its financial distress or supply it with significant arms, although some Chinese officials seem very concerned about the possibility of a new deal between Washington and Iran. For its part, Tehran has no qualms about accepting India's help to develop Chabahar port as a competitor to the Chinese-built Gwadar port in Pakistan, one of the main links in the BRI.

China is not yet ready to consider major investment in Syria. Beijing is interested in the opportunities presented there but is in no hurry to explore them, despite repeated pleas from Russia to help with post-war reconstruction. China has established Syrian intelligence exchanges with Moscow and various Central Asian governments, but their main purpose is to monitor East Turkestan jihadists fighting there and detect any Uyghur Muslim militants attempting to return home to Xinjiang.

China is concerned about the Middle East Security Alliance. This ambitious U.S.-backed regional initiative has failed to take off thus far, and Egypt has already dropped out. Nevertheless, Chinese officials still fear the prospect of U.S. allies establishing joint, long-term military control over sea lanes stretching from the Suez Canal and Red Sea to the Indian Ocean—a key route in the strategic vision underlying the BRI. Accordingly, Beijing has focused on upgrading relations with Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser degree, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf states. It also seems willing to provide Riyadh and the UAE with advanced missile technology and perhaps even nuclear know-how, and would not be deterred by protestations from Iran. Meanwhile, China has a small military base in Djibouti and is planning to establish a presence in the Omani port of Duqm. Yet officials are quick to emphasize that China does not need a military presence anywhere else in the region; to illustrate this point, they recounted how the government evacuated Chinese citizens from war-torn Libya rather than trying to protect its substantial interests there.

China will continue handling Israel with caution. The United States casts a long shadow over Chinese relations with Israel. Washington has made clear on numerous occasions that it would like Jerusalem to keep its cooperation with Beijing lukewarm, and to restrict Chinese involvement in sensitive sectors of Israel's flourishing high-tech and cyber industries. Beijing is also well aware that no arms transactions can be contemplated, and it generally acknowledges that Israel has to take American reservations very earnestly—though officials are quick to point out that some of Washington's Arab allies have demonstrated greater flexibility with China.

Ultimately, Beijing shows no intention of revising its traditional diplomacy toward Israel or its unfavourable voting pattern in international forums. The Chinese are keenly interested in innovative Israeli technologies, but they do not believe that developing economic ties requires them to change their foreign policy. The Chinese government does not facilitate the entry of Israeli exports to China; mutual trade reached \$14 billion last year, but most of the Israeli sales were made by Intel plants.

Chinese companies have acquired some major Israeli firms (mainly in the chemical and dairy sectors) and won tenders to manage new sections of Haifa and Ashdod ports, but Israeli regulators have prevented their entry into the cyber and insurance sectors (the latter is significant because China has sought access to data about Israeli security personnel via pension programs). Finally, Chinese officials seem uninterested in developing a trade route through the Gulf of Aqaba to the port of Eilat with a railroad to the Mediterranean Sea, arguing that Egypt opposes any alternative commercial transport system to the Suez Canal.

Chinese investments in Egypt are growing rapidly. This includes infrastructure for the new capital city that the president has decided to establish outside Cairo. Beijing believes that Egypt's stability must be assured in order to achieve progress on the BRI, since the Suez Canal forms an essential link for container ships headed to Europe.

China does not want to get involved in the Palestinian Authority. Chinese officials made clear that they will not undertake any economic projects in the PA, and that their participation in financial aid efforts will be limited. More specifically, Beijing will not allow Chinese companies to operate across the Green Line, nor inside the Gaza Strip so long as Hamas is in control there.

Chinese analytical interest in the region is growing. Despite the relatively limited attention that Beijing devotes to "West Asia," the government will continue funding new think tanks and institutes to research the region. Similarly, Chinese universities have shown a marked increase in the number of students learning Arabic (though less so with Persian and Turkish).

In sum, China will keep treading cautiously in the Middle East, maintaining a low diplomatic profile and eschewing a military footprint while aggressively pursuing business opportunities—especially in infrastructure enterprises related to Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" and the energy sector. The region may not attract serious Chinese political and military involvement until after major BRI projects mature in Pakistan and Central Asia.

UAE and Israel Normalize Relations

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director



Israel and the United Arab Emirates have reached a significant deal to normalise relations, with Israel agreeing to suspend its controversial plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

In a surprise statement by President Trump, who helped broker the agreement, the countries called the accord "historic" and a breakthrough toward peace.

Until now Israel has had no diplomatic relations with Gulf Arab countries.

But shared worries over Iran and China have led to unofficial contacts between them.

Palestinian leaders were reportedly taken by surprise. A spokesman for President Mahmoud Abbas said the deal amounted to "treason", and the Palestinian ambassador to the UAE was being recalled.

President Trump called the deal between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan "a truly historic moment". It marks only the third Israel-Arab peace deal since Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, after Egypt and Jordan.

"Now that the ice has been broken I expect more Arab and Muslim countries will follow the United Arab Emirates," he told reporters in the Oval Office, saying there would be a signing ceremony at the White House in the coming weeks.

Earlier, in response to a President Trump's tweeted announcement, Mr Netanyahu wrote in Hebrew: "Historic day."

A foreign policy victory?

In a TV address Mr Netanyahu said he had "delayed" West Bank annexation plans, but those plans remain "on the table". Annexation would make some West Bank areas officially part of Israel.

"There is no change in my plan to apply our sovereignty to Judea and Samaria [West Bank] in full co-ordination with the US. I'm committed to it. That hasn't changed. I remind you that I was the one who put the issue of sovereignty over Judea and Samaria on the table. This issue remains on the table," he said.

Mr Netanyahu said Israel would co-operate with the UAE in developing a coronavirus vaccine, in energy, water, environmental protection and many other fields.

Analysts say the deal could mean a foreign policy victory for President Trump, who will seek re-election in November, and give a personal boost to Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is on trial for alleged corruption.

Both leaders have seen their approval ratings drop because of their response to the coronavirus pandemic. And in Israel, some on the right who want to annex the West Bank expressed anger over the announcement.

The UAE's ambassador to the US, Yousef Al Otaiba, said the deal with Israel was "a win for diplomacy and for the region", adding: "It is a significant advance in Arab-Israeli relations that lowers tensions and creates new energy for positive change".

Senior Trump adviser Jared Kushner said he did not think Israel would move ahead with any annexation before discussing it first with the US. He said he expected to see interactions "very quickly" between Israel and the UAE.

Egypt signed a deal with Israel in 1979, and Jordan in 1994. Mauritania also established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1999, but froze the deal in 2009.

A significant step - but questions remain?

The establishment of full diplomatic relations; the exchange of embassies; and normal trade ties between Israel and the UAE is a significant diplomatic step forward. But inevitably it raises questions. Will the full promise of this agreement be realised? And might other Gulf countries follow a similar path?

It is also important to see what it is not. This is far from the comprehensive peace plan to resolve the Palestinian question that President Trump has long promoted. However, there are short-term benefits for all sides.

The White House was first off the mark in announcing the deal; it is perhaps a small diplomatic feather in President Trump's cap at a time when his re-election prospects are looking more difficult.

For Israel's embattled Prime Minister Netanyahu, it gets him off a hook of his own making; his much-vaunted promise to annex key parts of the occupied West Bank. This has proved undeliverable, not least due to US ambivalence and significant international opposition. Mr Netanyahu may see this "peace initiative" with the UAE as something that could bolster his chances if he precipitates a further Israeli general election.

For the UAE, it is harder to say precisely what the immediate benefits are, though its relations with Washington will be strengthened and the deal with Israel may yield significant economic, security and scientific benefits.

Overall this is an agreement that potentially could offer both more and less than might first appear. And as far as the Palestinians are concerned, it is hard to see this news

creating anything other than frustration, that they have once again been pushed to the sidelines.

What has been agreed?

In the coming weeks delegations from Israel and the UAE will meet to sign bilateral deals regarding investment, tourism, direct flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture, the environment, the establishment of reciprocal embassies, and other areas of mutual benefit.

"Opening direct ties between two of the Middle East's most dynamic societies and advanced economies will transform the region by spurring economic growth, enhancing technological innovation, and forging closer people-to-people relations," the joint statement says.

Israel will also "suspend declaring sovereignty over areas outlined" in President Trump's Vision for Peace between Israel and the Palestinians, in which he backed an Israeli plan to annex Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the strategic Jordan Valley.

The UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, said the UAE's recognition of Israel was "a very bold step" to stop the "ticking time bomb" of Israel's annexation of the West Bank. He said the UAE saw this as "a stoppage of the annexation, not a suspension".

Asked about Palestinian criticism of the UAE move, he recognised that the region was very polarised and he expected to hear "the usual noise". "We agonised over this," he said, but eventually decided "let's do it".

The joint statement says Israel will "focus its efforts now on expanding ties with other countries in the Arab and Muslim world", and that the US and UAE will work to achieve that goal.

The UAE and Israel will also join the US to launch a "Strategic Agenda for the Middle East", with the three leaders noting that they "share a similar outlook regarding the threats and opportunities in the region, as well as a shared commitment to promoting stability through diplomatic engagement, increased economic integration, and closer security co-ordination".

How have others reacted?

Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi welcomed the deal while Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said the agreement could help push ahead stalled peace negotiations.

But a senior Palestinian official, Hanan Ashrawi, condemned the deal, saying the UAE had "come out in the open on its secret dealings/normalisation with Israel" and telling Prince Mohammed: "May you never be sold out by your 'friends'."

Iran's foreign ministry called the accord "shameful", according to state news agency IRNA. And in Gaza, the Hamas militant group called the deal a "stabbing in the back of our people."

Turkey's Open Hostility to Peace Accord

By Uzay Bulut



Erdogan with Hamas leaders Khaled Mashaal (centre) and Ismail Haniyeh

When the Israel-United Arab Emirates (UAE) peace agreement, also known as the Abraham Accord, was announced on August 13, the UAE became the third Arab country, after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994, formally to normalize relations with Israel.

Turkey, however, condemned the Israel-UAE agreement despite its 71 years of diplomatic relations with the Jewish State. The Turkish foreign ministry said in a press release: "While pursuing its narrowly defined interests, the UAE has attempted to present its betrayal to the Palestinian cause as an act of altruism. The history and the conscience of the people in the region will never forget or forgive this hypocritical act."

Turkey's Communication Director for the Presidency, Fahrettin Altun, said that they consider the agreement between the UAE and Israel "null and void." The head of Turkey's parliament, Mustafa Şentop, condemned the deal, calling it "disgraceful" and a betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Turkey was considering suspending diplomatic ties with the UAE and withdrawing its ambassador.

"The step taken towards Palestine is not a swallowable step," Erdogan said.

"Palestine is now probably either closing its embassy [in the UAE] or withdrawing [its ambassador]. The same is true for us now. I ordered my Minister of Foreign Affairs. We might suspend diplomatic relations with the Abu Dhabi administration and withdraw our ambassador there. Because we stand by the Palestinian people. We have never let them eat Palestine and will not let them do so now."

Erdogan's hostile reaction is ironic and irrational: In 1949, Turkey became the first Muslim-majority nation to recognize Israel. In the 1990s, Turkish leaders continuously

visited Israel and several significant military agreements were signed. Although relations are now strained, there are still diplomatic and trade ties between the two countries.

Erdogan's reaction, however, was not unexpected. Shortly after the announcement of the UAE-Israel accord, Erdogan's regime once again showed which side they are on. On August 22, Erdogan received Ismail Haniyeh, head of the "political bureau" of Hamas -- an organization whose covenant calls for the annihilation of Israel -- and his accompanying delegation. The president of Turkey's Intelligence Organization (MIT) Hakan Fidan; Turkey's Communication Director for the Presidency, Fahrettin Altun, and Presidential Spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, were also present at the meeting, which was closed to the press. According to NBC News correspondent Raf Sanchez, who posted a photo of the meeting on Twitter, the delegation also included Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri, a wanted terrorist with a \$5 million bounty on his head.

Erdogan's reaction to the UAE-Israel agreement is reminiscent of his response in 2017 to the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. During a Human Rights Day event in Ankara, Erdogan said, "Those who think they are the owners of Jerusalem today will not even be able to find trees to hide behind tomorrow." The reference is to an Islamic text sanctioning the killing of Jews. According to this *hadith* (a reported saying by Islam's prophet, Mohammed), on the eve of the Judgment Day, Muslims will try to annihilate Jews, "Stones and trees will cry out to Muslims and say, 'O Muslim, there is a Jew hiding behind me, come and kill him'."

Having referred to Israel as a "terrorist state" several times, Erdogan is leading Turkey by example. Anti-Semitic slurs against Jews and hostile statements against Israel are now widespread in the Islamist, pro-government Turkish media, politics and public life. A few examples include:

- In February Nurettin Yıldız, a pro-jihad and anti-Semitic Turkish cleric, said during a conference titled "Jerusalem and the martyrs of the Mavi Marmara [flotilla]" that Jerusalem will be conquered when Turkish women abide by the Charter of Medina (of Islam's Prophet Muhammad in 622) instead of the Istanbul Convention on combatting violence against women:

"When Turkish women abide by the Medina Charter instead of the Istanbul... and prefer the protection of Allah rather than human protection, the Jews will disappear and Jerusalem will be ready for a [Islamic] conquest."

Referring to Jews as an "accursed nation", Yıldız went on to describe how Jerusalem could be "saved" from the Jews.

"If Jerusalem is holy and it is, those living in the homes that Jerusalem has conquered can conquer Jerusalem and save it from the Jew. Otherwise the conquest could only be a word. It cannot be actualized. When Muslims take a vow on Jerusalem, saying 'I will conquer it and be Saladin [the Muslim Sultan who invaded Jerusalem in 1187]', take your vows based on how much Jerusalem has conquered you..."

"As ummah [Islamic nation], we will be brought to account on the Judgement Day because Jerusalem is held captive at the hands of an accursed nation. We will also be brought to account for the empty talk we engage in concerning Jerusalem [if we do not conquer it]."

- In December 2019, A-Haber network, owned by Erdogan's family, allowed the morning news presenter Erkan Tan to refer to Israel as a "terrorist". He further said that Israel does not exist as a state. "Israel is a murderer," Tan said.

"Israel is a terrorist. There is no state called Israel. Israel is the name of the terrorist organization of Zionist Jews. And Jerusalem is not the capital city of Jews. If you accept Jerusalem as the capital of Jews, it means that you accept giving part of our lands including the cities of Malatya and Adiyaman to Jews. I hope I am clear enough. Know and learn about this filthy and disgusting game of Zionist Jews. They live according to the perverted faith based on the Torah that they distorted [falsified]. Is this clear enough? Israel is the name of the terrorist organization of Zionist Jews."

- A news article, "Stoning the Jew [in order to stone] Satan", published in the newspaper *Milli Gazete* in 2016, referred to Jews as "Satan". "Stoning exists in Judaism too," the author Ibrahim Hakkioğlu was quoted as saying. "That is why Palestinian children throw stones [at Jews] like they [Palestinian children] stone Satan. It is an expression of the fact that Jews cooperate with Satan."
- In a 2016 column on the newspaper *Vahdet*, author Seyfi Şahin referred to some Qur'anic verses and claimed that Jews were "turned into apes" as a punishment from God. He added, "The gorillas and chimpanzees in Africa are cursed Jews. Those are perverted humans that have been mutated."
- Columnist Mehtap Yılmaz referred to Israel as "a rabid dog" and asked in the title of her 2014 article published in the newspaper *Yeni Akit*: "Who do you blame when you get bitten by a rabid dog?"
- During the 2010 Mavi Marmara ("Gaza Flotilla") crisis between Turkey and Israel, the headline of the newspaper *Yeni Safak* on June 1, 2010 read "Hitler's Children", referring to Israel.

Sadly, these are not isolated incidents. Jews and Israel are frequently exposed to hate speech in Turkish media. According to the Istanbul-based Hrant Dink Foundation's latest yearly report, "Media Watch on Hate Speech," published in 2018, Jews are listed as the most frequent target of hate speech in the Turkish media, with 1,133 news items or columns containing anti-semitic hate speech.

Turkey has not only been targeting Israel through words. The Erdogan regime has also actively been supporting Hamas. "Turkey is granting citizenship to senior operatives of a Hamas terrorist cell," reported the *Telegraph* on August 13, "raising fears that the Palestinian group will have greater freedom to plot attacks on Israeli citizens around the world."

According to a 2019 report by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center: "Turkey allows Hamas to conduct terrorist activities from its territory, including the handling of terrorist squads in Judea and Samaria [the West Bank] and the transfer of funds to Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip to finance terrorism."

It should not be a surprise that a government that supports Hamas is against the normalization agreement between Israel and the UAE. The accord will hopefully pave the way for more peaceful coexistence and cooperation between Israel, the UAE, and other Muslim countries. The Erdogan regime, through its hostility to the deal, its hosting Hamas terrorists on its own soil, and its recent acts of aggression in Syria, Libya, Greece and Iraq, has once again demonstrated that it supports the destruction of Israel, regional instability, neo-Ottoman expansionism and war.

Palestinians Join Iran-led Anti-Peace Camp

By Khaled Abu Toameh



Palestinians burn a portrait of Bin Zayed on August 14, 2020 at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Israel. (Photo Getty Images)

The Palestinians have spent the past few months trying to persuade the international community, including Arab countries, to help prevent Israel from applying its sovereignty to portions of the West Bank.

Now that one of these countries – the United Arab Emirates – succeeded in striking a deal with Israel, according to which the Israeli plan to extend Israeli law to more land would be suspended, the Palestinians are waging an unprecedented campaign of defamation against the UAE and its de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed.

Instead of thanking the UAE for managing to suspend the Israeli plan, Palestinians are protesting against the UAE because of its decision to normalize its relations with Israel. Palestinians have been burning UAE flags and photos of Bin Zayed and denouncing him as a "traitor," as well as accusing him of "stabbing the Palestinians and Arabs in the back" and "betraying Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem and the Palestinian cause."

The anti-UAE campaign, spearheaded by the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, is being waged under the banner "Normalization [with Israel] is Treason."

This is the same Palestinian Authority whose leaders signed the Oslo Accord with Israel in 1993, engaged in peace talks with Israelis for nearly 20 years, ostensibly recognized Israel's right to exist and, until recently, even conducted security coordination with the Israeli security forces in the West Bank.

Abbas's ruling Fatah faction, often described by Westerners as a "moderate" and "pragmatic" Palestinian group, has been leading the Palestinian campaign of incitement against the UAE and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed. In a series of posts on social media, Fatah has published photos and videos of Palestinians trampling and burning photos of Bin Zayed, as well as a series of cartoons depicting the UAE-Israel deal as an act of treason and betrayal of Arabs and Palestinians.

Fatah has even boasted that one of the anti-UAE protests, in which Palestinians chanted slogans denouncing Bin Zayed as a "traitor," was held during Friday prayers at the compound of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque. Members of Fatah appear delighted to see Palestinians trampling and burning the photo of an Arab Muslim head of state at the third-holiest site in Islam after the cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

By holding a political protest at the compound of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, Palestinians are not only desecrating the sanctity of the site, but also sending a warning to citizens of UAE not to visit Jerusalem or the mosque, as many apparently hoped to do.

Israeli police officers stationed at the compound were the only ones to intervene stop the Palestinians from burning more photos of UAE flags and Bin Zayed. It is also a sign of the times that Israeli policemen had to intervene to stop Muslims from desecrating the sanctity of an Islamic shrine and insulting an Arab Muslim leader.

The Joint Statement of the United States, Israel, and the UAE on August 13 points out that according to President Donald J. Trump's Vision for Peace, "all Muslims who come in peace may visit and pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and Jerusalem's other holy sites should remain open for peaceful worshippers of all faiths."

The Palestinians, however, have long been threatening Arabs who visit Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque at the invitation of Israel. Last year, a Saudi journalist, Mohammed Saud, was attacked by Palestinians when he visited the site. Wearing his traditional Gulf Arab clothing, Saud was filmed being chased out of the Old City of Jerusalem as Palestinians threw plastic chairs, hurled insults at him and accused him of being a traitor and a Zionist.

The Fatah-dominated Palestinian Journalists Syndicate strongly condemned Saud's visit and underlined that the Arab Journalists' Federation "rejects all types and forms of normalization with the Zionist enemy."

In 2017, as well, Palestinians expelled a Bahraini delegation visiting Al-Aqsa Mosque on the pretext that its 24 members came to Jerusalem to "normalize and strengthen ties with Israel."

UAE citizens who are expected to visit Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque will most likely receive the same treatment by the Palestinians. It is also worth noting that Palestinians have in the past few years waged a similar campaign of incitement and intimidation against Jews visiting the site.

The anti-Jewish campaign began shortly after Abbas stated in 2015: "We welcome every drop of blood spilled in Jerusalem. This is pure blood, clean blood, blood on its way to Allah. With the help of Allah, every Shaheed (martyr) will be in heaven, and every wounded will get his reward. Al-Aqsa is ours, and the (Church of the) Holy Sepulcher is ours, all ours. They (the Jews) have no right to desecrate them with their filthy feet and we won't allow them to."

By endorsing and encouraging the anti-UAE protests, Abbas and Fatah are sending a warning to all Arabs and Muslims who want to make peace with Israel that the Palestinians will not allow them to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque. Abbas may now have to update his 2015 statement to add the citizens of the UAE to the Jews he has accused of "desecrating with their filthy feet" the mosque.

Some Palestinians have already made it clear that they intend to expel from the mosque Muslim worshippers visiting from the UAE. "Our brothers in the Emirates put our blessed mosque in the grip of death," said Kamal Attoun, a Palestinian merchant from the Old City of Jerusalem. Asked if he would welcome Muslims from the UAE or the Gulf, Attoun said: "You've seen how collaborators from the Saudi Arabia have been received in the past. The same fate awaits the Emiratis."

This warning shows that the Palestinians believe they have exclusive control over Islam's third-holiest site and are free to decide who can visit the site and who cannot. It is therefore the right time for Arabs and Muslims to step in to demand an end to Palestinian hegemony over Al-Aqsa Mosque and other holy sites in Jerusalem.

The Palestinians have often accused Israel of denying them access to their holy sites, including Al-Aqsa Mosque. Now the Palestinians are showing the world that they are the ones who are seeking to prevent Muslims who believe in peace with Israel from praying at Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The Palestinians' ferocious campaign against the UAE is likely to further strain their relations with other Arabs, particularly the Gulf states. The campaign will also increase the Palestinians' isolation in the Arab world and place them on a collision course with influential countries such as Bahrain and Oman, which have welcomed the UAE-Israel agreement for normal relations. Azzam al-Ahmed, a senior PLO and Fatah official, claimed that the positive reaction of some Arab countries to the UAE-Israel accord "weakens the Palestinian position and is a betrayal of Palestine and Jerusalem."

By coming out against the UAE and other Gulf states, the Palestinians are repeating the big mistake they made in 1990, when they supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Of the 400,000-450,000 Palestinians who had lived in Kuwait before the Iraqi invasion, about 360,000 ended up in Jordan. Arab leaders who are now seeing Palestinians burn the photos of Crown Prince Ben Zayed will say to themselves, "After all the money and jobs we gave them in the past few decades, these Palestinians are ungrateful."

By declaring war on the UAE, the Palestinian leadership has chosen to align itself with those who seek the elimination of Israel: Iran, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah. The Palestinian leadership has again demonstrated its determination to act against the interests of its own people, who could have benefited from the UAE-Israel deal by seeking financial aid from the Arab countries and jobs in the Gulf states. Until recently, the Palestinian leadership worked hard to foil Israel's plan to extend its sovereignty throughout more of the country. Now that the plan is off the table, at least for a while, the Palestinian leadership is devoting its energies to appeasing the Iran-led camp that is thwarting peace between an Arab country and Israel.

Iran's Military Alliance with China Threatens Middle East Security

By Con Coughlin
The Telegraph Defence & Foreign Affairs Editor



The prospect of a new Iran-China military alliance taking shape in the Indian Ocean is a development that will be taken with the utmost seriousness by the West.

The U.S. faces the prospect of a serious escalation in tensions with Iran after Tehran's announcement that it intends to build a new military base in the Indian Ocean by the end of the year.

The Iranian announcement, moreover, comes at a time when Tehran is on the point of signing a \$400 billion trade deal with China, which will include closer military cooperation between the two countries in the region in an attempt to counter Washington's traditional dominance.

Under the terms of the deal, details of which have been published in the New York Times, Iran could receive as much as \$400 billion in Chinese investment over the next quarter of a century.

The agreement, which a senior aide to Iranian President Hassan Rouhani says should be signed by March next year, also encompasses closer military cooperation between the two countries, including weapons development, combined training and intelligence sharing in order to combat "the lopsided battle with terrorism, drug and human trafficking and cross-border crimes."

As part of the new era of cooperation between Tehran and Beijing, concerns have been raised by Western security officials that this could lead to the two countries forming an alliance to bolster their presence in the Indian Ocean, thereby challenging America's long-standing dominance in the nearby Gulf region.

Announcing Iran's intention to build a new military base in the Indian Ocean, Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, the commander of the naval attachment of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), said that the base would be used to protect fishing and commercial vessels from piracy and "foreign ships", a reference to the US-led multinational naval task force that is currently protecting Gulf shipping from Iranian interference.

Iran has so far given no indication as to where it intends to build its new base. At present Chabahar port in the Gulf of Oman, which is used, among other activities, for shipping goods to Afghanistan, is the nearest base Iran has to the Indian Ocean.

As part of the deal negotiated with Beijing, China is to be allowed access to a number of Iranian ports, including Chabahar, with the Chinese reported to be planning to build a new military base in the vicinity of the port.

The construction of such a base would enable the Chinese Navy to monitor the activities of the U.S. Navy in the area, in particular the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet in the Gulf, which is permanently deployed to protect shipping passing through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important economic waterways.

Any expansion in Iranian and Chinese military activity in the region would also have an impact on the jointly-administered US-UK base on the island of Diego Garcia, one of the Pentagon's most important military assets in the region.

Earlier this year Washington dispatched a fleet of B-52 bombers to Diego Garcia following the sharp rise in tensions with Tehran in the wake of the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the IRGC commander who headed the elite Quds Force.

The prospect of a new Iran-China military alliance taking shape in the Indian Ocean is certainly a development that will be taken with the utmost seriousness by the American military, which is already concerned about Iran's attempts to spread its influence throughout the region.

U.S. Marine Corps General Kenneth McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command, warned in a recent interview that Iran posed the greatest threat to regional security and stability.

"Iran actively stokes instability and is intent on degrading security all over the region," McKenzie said. "They use proxies and violence to push other nations in the region to their agenda."

Any future military alliance between Tehran and Beijing would only strengthen Iran's determination to expand their malign activities in the region, thereby raising the prospect of a further escalation of tensions with the U.S. and its allies.

UN Arms Embargo against Iran Must Continue

By Hamia Nair
TCMER Board Member



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned diplomats that failing to renew the arms embargo against Iran

There is mounting concern worldwide at the prospect of the United Nations arms embargo against Iran expiring in October, thereby giving Tehran the opportunity to acquire a new range of lethal weapons.

Under the terms of UN Resolution 2231, the UN Security Council imposed an arms embargo against Iran as part of the controversial nuclear deal negotiated by former US President Barack Obama.

The resolution is due to expire on October 18, and senior security officials in Israel are now expressing concern that, because of opposition from China and Russia, it will not be renewed. Beijing and Moscow, which have the authority to veto Security Council resolutions, have backed Tehran in its stand-off with the Trump administration over the nuclear deal.

"If the embargo is not renewed, this will allow Iran to import and export arms with impunity," a senior Israeli official, who asked not to be named, told me in a recent interview. "They are already buying and selling arms on the black market, but ending the arms embargo will allow them to do so officially."

The Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has already experienced an upsurge in tensions with the Iranian-backed Hezbollah militia in southern Lebanon this month after a team of Hezbollah terrorists tried to attack Israeli positions in northern Israel.

Israeli security officials believe the attack was launched in retaliation for the killing of a senior Hezbollah fighter, Ali Kamel Mohsen Jawad, who is said to have died in an Israeli air strike against an Iranian military position in Syria on July 20.

Israeli security officials are concerned that if Iran is allowed greater access to global arms sales, it will be encouraged to carry out further attacks against Israeli targets. This has prompted Mr Netanyahu to mount a major diplomatic offensive aimed at putting pressure on the UN to renew the arms embargo when it comes up for renewal in October.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has made no secret of his desire to take full advantage of the relaxation of the arms embargo when it comes into effect.

Speaking at the end of last year, the Iranian leader was reported to have told the state's TV channel, "When the embargo...is lifted next year we can easily buy and sell weapons... This is one of those important impacts of this (nuclear) agreement."

Israeli concerns about Tehran's plans to exploit the ending of the arms embargo are certainly being taken seriously by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Addressing the UN Security Council in June, Mr Pompeo warned diplomats that failing to renew the embargo would enable the ayatollahs to rebuild their military strength. Mr Pompeo said Iran would be free to purchase Russian-made fighters capable of striking targets within a 2,000-mile radius - including Israel - as well as allowing the Islamic regime to upgrade and expand its fleet of attack submarines. In addition, Iran's ability to make new arms purchases would enable Tehran to continue its support for proxies in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as enabling it to fuel conflicts from Venezuela to Syria, and to the far reaches of Afghanistan.

In a blunt message to the Security Council, Mr Pompeo declared that diplomats had an important choice to make. "Stand for international peace and security, as the United Nations' founders intended, or let the arms embargo on the Islamic Republic of Iran expire, betraying the UN's mission and its finest deals, which we have all pledged to uphold."

Mr Pompeo is now seeking to persuade Washington's allies in Europe to support an extension of the embargo, warning that China, which has recently agreed to a trade deal with Iran said to be worth \$400 billion over 25 years, would sell new weapons systems to Iran if the embargo is not extended. Speaking in London earlier this month, Mr Pompeo warned, "The work between Iran and the Chinese Communist Party may well commence rapidly and robustly on Oct. 19th if we're not successful at extending the UN arms embargo."

The good news is that, even if the Russians and Chinese insist on blocking an extension of the arms embargo, Washington is working to ensure that measures remain in place to prevent Iran from rebuilding its weapons arsenal.

One proposal under consideration by the Trump administration is to argue that, as a signatory to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, Washington has the right to exercise a Security Council provision to continue with the embargo, a move that would go a long way to preventing the ayatollahs from expanding their deadly weapons arsenal.

Iran: The Real Bounty Payer for Killing US Troops

By Lawrence A. Franklin



Iran's bounty program for killing U.S. troops began as early as 2010.

Some U.S. media and politicians have been expressing their indignation of late over Russia's alleged offers of bounty money to the Taliban for every American soldier it kills in Afghanistan. This unsubstantiated story is then expanded to include an insinuation that the Trump Administration has failed to take action against Russia.

These same journalists and political figures, however, never raise a similar accusation against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has been offering the Taliban bounty money to kill American servicemen for years.

Iran's bounty program for killing U.S. troops began as early as 2010. In one instance, a report indicated that a Taliban messenger was dispatched from Kabul to Iran to pick up \$18,000 to be distributed to Taliban cells in Wardak Province, Afghanistan. The U.S. Treasury Department's Terrorist Finance Targeting Center (TFTC) confirmed the relationship between the Taliban and its Iranian sponsors by sanctioning both parties. Money is passed from Iranian companies in Kabul to Taliban agents; Taliban offices in the Iranian cities of Mashhad, Yazd, and Kerman also help facilitate military and intelligence cooperation between Iran and the Taliban.

During the time when the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, Shia Iran opposed Kabul's radical Sunni regime. But after Al-Qaeda's Afghanistan-based 9/11 attack on the United States, Iranian intelligence agencies began to open links both to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), for instance, issued Iranian passports to Al-Qaeda and presumably the Taliban.

After the U.S. overthrow of the Taliban government, Iran quickly moved to assist the Taliban with weapons, explosives, training, and sanctuary on Iranian territory. One extremely lethal Iranian weapon given to Taliban units is an Improvised Explosive

Device (IED) called "The Dragon," which is engineered to concentrate all of its explosive power after it penetrates U.S. armoured vehicles in Afghanistan.

Iran's Quds Force, which acts as the foreign expeditionary army of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), maintains a close training relationship with various Taliban elements. For instance, Quds Force operatives have improved Taliban combat skills in small unit tactics and indirect fire weapons such as artillery and mortars. British military detachments in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, also attest to the Taliban's ties to Iranian military assistance. Iranian weapons have surfaced as well in Afghanistan's Kandahar and Farah Provinces, both of which abut Iran's more than 900-kilometer border with Afghanistan.

Perhaps one of Iran's motivations in extending help to its erstwhile enemy, the Taliban, is to foil any U.S. effort to exercise influence in Afghanistan, which lies immediately to Iran's east.

Iran also may be hoping to frustrate progress in armistice talks between U.S. and Taliban representatives currently being conducted in Qatar. Iran may well wish to maintain its own historical influence in the Afghan provinces adjacent to Iran. Iran seems to have allied itself with those Taliban cells opposed to the talks, and Iran's Quds Force has hosted these radical Taliban groups in its eastern provinces bordering Afghanistan.

One Taliban splinter group so hosted by Iran is the Hezb-e Walayat-e Islami, made up of former Taliban commanders who reject the peace talks in Qatar. However, probably one of the most important Taliban allies of Iran is Abdul Zakir, the confidant of deceased Taliban founder Mullah Omar. Zakir's close ties to Yakoub Omar, the son of the founder, also contributes to Iran's influence inside the Taliban.

Iran sometimes maintains operational links to hard-line Taliban elements for reasons other than opposition to U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Tehran's regime, for instance, is troubled by ethnic Baluchi separatist sentiment along its eastern border with Afghanistan. The Iranians would evidently like the Taliban to target Baluchi militia and the black market gangs who cross the border. Shia Iran probably hopes to persuade the Taliban to convince its ally, the radical Sunni Khorasan group, not to attack Shiite neighbourhoods in Afghanistan.

Additionally, the Iranian regime most likely wants to maintain its historical hegemony in Afghanistan's Herat Province.

Some Taliban cells, perhaps even among those favouring armistice talks in Qatar, may be supportive of the Taliban hard-liners' friendly links with Iran. Hard-liner Taliban ties to Iran serve to reduce the risk of relying too heavily upon Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), whose primary loyalty is to Pakistan, not the Taliban.

In short, Iran's animus against the U.S. presence in Afghanistan, along with its bounty rewards to Taliban militants who have killed American soldiers, is more long-lasting and extensive than the alleged Russian bounty program. The real issue here is why the U.S. media, journalists, and politicians remain silent about it.

Serious Concerns Over Kylie Moore-Gilbert Imprisonment

By Anastasia Kravtsov
TCMER Board Member



Melbourne academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert remains imprisoned in an Iran jail, convicted of being a spy. She knows just what severe torture is.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a lecturer at Melbourne University, has been detained in Iran since September 2018. She was tried in secret and strongly denies all the spying charges against her.

Concerns for her wellbeing have escalated when news emerged that she had been transferred to Qarchak, a notorious prison in the desert. The jail is sometimes used as punishment for Iranian political prisoners and conditions have been described by former inmates as abysmal.

Arrested by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps while visiting Iran, Kylie Moore-Gilbert wrongly convicted of espionage and jailed at Evin prison. Kept in solitary confinement, she was forced to undergo an invasive “virginity test”; later guards pretended they were about to execute her.

The fact that Kylie has spent 24 months in solitary confinement is in itself a form of severe torture. Prolonged isolation causes irrational rage, self-loathing, self-harming thoughts, paranoia, hallucinations, and is so detrimental to one's body and mental health.

In August 2018, Kylie, a lecturer in Islamic Studies at Melbourne University, went to Iran to attend a course in the city of Qom but was arrested on her departure three weeks later. Sentenced to a decade in jail after a secret trial, she has reportedly attempted suicide several times in recent months.

Chilling insight into daily life in an Iranian prison include - cells are just two metres by two metres, or even smaller. In solitary confinement, your day begins about 4am. The

lights are on 24/7, so you will have to cover your eyes with a rag. There are no beds, so you are sleeping on a concrete floor.

Dinner typically consists of a boiled egg and a boiled potato with some salt, or soup. Prisoners must remain in their cells for 22.5 to 24 hours per day; when let out, it's into a small solitary outdoor area with no recreational equipment. You can have no visitors and phone calls are rare, if permitted at all.

Kylie Moore-Gilbert has recently been transferred to Qarchak prison, a place known for extrajudicial killings, torture, and intra-prison violence. Qarchak is overcrowded, lacks basic sanitation, and there is no privacy.



Qarchak Prison

Clearly the Australian and British governments need to do much more to help secure Kylie's release. Her case cannot be ignored. The Iranian regime must be held accountable for her prolonged incarceration. It is another ugly inhuman example of how the Mullahs in Tehran treat women.

Meantime, Kylie continues to endure a daily nightmare behind bars.

Young Activist Sentenced to Seven Years for Peaceful Protest

By Peter Rawlings
TCMER Board Member



A young civil activist who has been held at Evin Prison since October 2014 has been sentenced to seven years in prison at her interrogator's urging, a source close to the case told the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, for her Facebook postings and her participation in peaceful gatherings.

Atena Daemi, 27, who was held for several months under "temporary detention" despite her lawyer's repeated requests for her release on bail, was prosecuted under four charges: "assembly and collusion against national security," "propaganda against the state," "insulting the Supreme Leader and the sacred," and "concealing crime evidence" by a Tehran Revolutionary Court. Daemi did not accept any of her charges and has since appealed the court's ruling.

"All charges are based on her posts on Facebook, information stored on her cellular phone, and her participation in gatherings against the death penalty and gatherings in support of the children of Kobane [in Syria]," the source told the Campaign. Daemi and her lawyer were informed of the sentence on May 12.

Daemi, who worked at the Revolution Sports Club in Tehran, was arrested on October 21, 2014, by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and has been in detention in Evin Prison ever since. Her trial was held on March 7, 2015.

"She was accused of 'insulting the Supreme Leader and the sacred' because of some jokes and some Shahin Najafi [protest] songs found on her cell phone. Other than these, there is no other [evidence of] actions Atena may have taken about these two

charges. She has repeatedly apologized and explained that she meant no insult," said the source.

"Many people in Iran may have these songs and jokes on their cell phones, but they are not charged or sent to prison. It is clear in Atena's case that the interrogator's personal taste is at work," added the source.

"Atena was convicted of 'assembly and collusion against national security,' and 'propaganda against the state,' for her opposition to forced hijab [female dress] through her Facebook posts, and her opposition to the capital punishment through participating in gatherings, as well as gatherings she attended to protest the situation of Kobane children [in Syria]," the source added.

Regarding evidence for the charge of "concealing crime evidence," the source told the Campaign, "Atena was asked to provide the password to the Facebook page of one of her friends, who is also imprisoned, during interrogations. Atena swore that she had forgotten the password, but her interrogator believed that she was lying and that she was hiding the crime evidence."

"Her family is hopeful that her case [will be] reviewed based on justice, humanity, and the law at the appeals level, and not based on personal taste. This girl has done nothing intentionally to deserve four charges and seven years in prison," said the source.

The source told the Campaign that Daemi is thoroughly devastated by the sentence. "Atena was very hopeful of being acquitted and released, but now she faces seven years in prison. It means she will have to spend the best years of her life at Evin. She is in such dire shape, her family have sent her tranquilizers."

Atena Daemi and four other young individuals by the names of Omid Alishenas, Ali Nouri, Atena Feraghdani, and Aso Rostami, were separately interrogated in the same case. Atena Feraghdani's case was later separated and reviewed independently.

Iran's Coronavirus Deaths Coverup

By Zara Dawoud
TCMER Board Member



Iran has been the worst-affected country in the Middle East

The number of deaths from coronavirus in Iran is nearly triple what Iran's government claims, a BBC Persian service investigation has found. The government's own records appear to show almost 42,000 people died with Covid-19 symptoms up to 20 July, versus 14,405 reported by its health ministry.

The number of people known to be infected is also almost double official figures: 451,024 as opposed to 278,827.

The official numbers still make Iran the worst-hit in the Middle East.

In recent weeks, it has suffered a second steep rise in the number of cases. The first death in Iran from Covid-19 was recorded on 22 January, according to lists and medical records that have been passed to the BBC. This was almost a month before the first official case of coronavirus was reported there.

Since the outbreak of the virus in Iran, many observers have doubted the official numbers. There have been irregularities in data between national and regional levels, which some local authorities have spoken out about, and statisticians have tried to give alternative estimates.

A level of undercounting, largely due to testing capacity, is seen across the world, but the information leaked to the BBC reveals Iranian authorities have reported significantly lower daily numbers despite having a record of all deaths - suggesting they were deliberately suppressed.

What does the data reveal?

Tehran, the capital, has the highest number of deaths with 8,120 people who died with Covid-19 or symptoms similar to it. The city of Qom, the initial epicentre of the virus in Iran, is worst hit proportionally, with 1,419 deaths - that is one death with Covid-19 for every 1,000 people.

It is notable that, across the country, 1,916 deaths were non-Iranian nationals. This indicates a disproportionate number of deaths amongst migrants and refugees, who are mostly from neighbouring Afghanistan.

The overall trend of cases and deaths in the leaked data is similar to official reports, albeit different in size. The initial rise of deaths is far steeper than Health Ministry figures and by mid-March it was five times the official figure.

Lockdown measures were imposed over the Nowruz (Iranian New Year) holidays at the end of the third week in March, and there was a corresponding decline in cases and deaths.

But as government restrictions were relaxed, the cases and deaths started to rise again after late-May. Crucially the first recorded death on the leaked list occurred on 22 January, a month before the first case of coronavirus was officially reported in Iran. At the time Health Ministry officials were adamant in acknowledging not a single case of coronavirus in the country, despite reports by journalists inside Iran, and warnings from various medical professionals.

In 28 days until the first official acknowledgement on 19 February, 52 people had already died.

Who were the first whistleblowers?

Doctors with direct knowledge of the matter have told the BBC that the Iranian health ministry has been under pressure from security and intelligence bodies inside Iran. Dr Pouladi (not their real name) told the BBC that the ministry "was in denial".

"Initially they did not have testing kits and when they got them, they weren't used widely enough. The position of the security services was not to admit to the existence of coronavirus in Iran," Dr Pouladi said.

It was the persistence of two brothers, both doctors from Qom, which forced the health ministry to acknowledge the first official case.

When Dr Mohammad Molayi and Dr Ali Molayi lost their brother, they insisted he should still be tested for Covid-19, which turned out to be positive.

In Kamkar hospital, where their brother died, numerous patients were admitted with similar symptoms to Covid-19, and they would not respond to the usual treatments. Nevertheless, none of them were tested for the disease.

Dr Pouladi says: "They got unlucky. Someone with both decency and influence lost his brother. Dr Molayi had access to these gentlemen [health ministry officials] and did not give up."

Dr Molayi released a video of his late brother with a statement. The health ministry then finally acknowledged the first recorded case.

Nevertheless state TV ran a report criticising him and falsely claiming the video of his brother was months old.

Tracking Missing Yazidis Increasingly Harder Six Years After IS Genocide

By Nisan Ahmado
Voice of America



Even after their territories were recaptured and IS was defeated, activists of the religious community say they are still looking for thousands of their members who went missing during the genocidal campaign that began on August 3, 2014.

One of the activists, Ali Hussein al-Khansouri, told VOA that many of the missing Yazidis must be “bought” from their kidnappers who demand amounts that continue to increase. He said that locating and smuggling out the missing Yazidis is becoming more difficult, especially as they seem to be scattered across conflict areas of Syria to as far as Turkey.

Al-Khansouri, 34, who survived IS captivity, has rescued 43 kidnapped Yazidis across Iraq and Syria. His first mission in 2017 involved freeing an 8-year-old Yazidi girl from northwestern Syria under the al-Qaida offshoot the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group.

“I never imagined that I will be engaged in finding the missing Yazidis,” said al-Khansouri, who in his quest is also hoping to track 46 people from his extended family and relatives.

According to the Kidnapped Yazidis Rescue Office in Duhok, Kurdistan Region, 3,543 kidnapped Yazidis have been rescued, with 2,800 still missing.

IS rampaged across Iraq and Syria in 2014 to establish its so-called Islamic caliphate. In August of that year, the jihadist group attacked Iraq’s Sinjar town and district where about 400,000 Yazidis lived. It killed thousands of Yazidi men and kidnapped the women and young boys. The women and young girls were reportedly used as sex slaves while the young boys were trained to become IS fighters and suicide bombers.

The United Nations has called the attacks a campaign of genocide.

Al-Khansouri was a Kurdish language teacher and a wedding photographer in Khana Sor village, north of Sinjar Mountain, when IS attacked. He was hiding with 34 members of his family at his uncle's house when the terror group found them and transferred them with other captured Yazidis to Tal al-Shaer school near al-Shaddadi in Deir el-Zour governorate in eastern Syria.

"They told us that they were waiting for the Caliph orders to determine our fate. After a few days, they told us that the orders came and they will not kill us if we convert to Islam and perform the Islamic worship and rituals. We agreed because we wanted to live," he said.

After spending one week in Syria, he was taken with a group of Yazidi men and boys over 9 years old in a bus back to Iraq where they were placed in Tal Banat village near Sinjar, close to an IS training camp. While at the training site, he and four other men escaped when a fighter jet targeted the group.

"We reached Kabara village in southern Sinjar where hundreds of Yazidis had fled to. There was a force of armed Yazidis defending the fleeing families," he said.



Yazidi sisters, who escaped from captivity by IS militants, sit in a tent at the Sharya refugee camp

Now in safety at Sharia camp in Kurdistan Region's Duhok province, al-Khansouri said his community lives with the trauma they experienced during the IS conflict. "Yazidi families just want to know if their loved ones are still alive or dead," he said.

Finding closure

Iraqi and Kurdish officials say they are doing their best to help the Yazidi community reunite with their missing members. Nineveh governorate authorities say they have found 83 mass graves, consisting mostly of Yazidis in Sinjar.

The search for mass graves and the exhumation of victims' remains comes as part of a joint effort between a national team of Iraqi officials and the United Nations Investigative Team to promote accountability for crimes committed by IS in Iraq and Syria.

But some Yazidis say that the efforts to identify the victims must be accelerated.

“More than 70 mass graves were discovered, and until now these graves are open, and documenting the identities of the victims is going in a very slow pace,” Tahsen Shikh Kalo, a Yazidi journalist, told VOA.

Kalo lost his 32-year-old sister, Sarah, when IS attacked their village of al-Adnaniah in 2014.

He said his sister and her 6-year-old daughter were separated from the Kalo family and fled IS with neighbours. They were caught by the militants when the neighbour’s car broke down in the middle of the road to safety.

A few months into the kidnapping of Sarah and her daughter, the Kalos in a phone call were informed she was killed. Her daughter was rescued in April 2015 by another fleeing Yazidi family in Tal Afar, Iraq.

Persistent insecurity

Tracking the missing family members and identifying bodies in mass graves are not the only causes of anguish for the religious minority, however.

Tens of thousands of Yazidis in Iraq are living under harsh conditions in refugee camps where they lack access to basic services. Those who wish to return to their homes in Sinjar are unable to because of mass destruction from war and persistent insecurity. Kalo said that his village is contaminated by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) planted by IS. The struggle of demining teams to clear the village, the existence of different armed militias who are competing to control the area after IS, and Turkish ongoing airstrikes mean the locals have no hope they could return in months to come.

Disputed areas in northern Iraq are defined by article 140 of the Iraqi constitution as regions inhabited by a mix of religions and ethnicities that went through demographic change and Arabization under the Baath regime. Both the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government in Erbil claim those lands.

Supporting Yazidi community

While Iraqi and Kurdish authorities continue to bicker over who should rule in the area, Yazidi representatives are questioning how long it will take before they can see some progress in the reconstruction of their areas and the provision of services.

“Yazidis are part of the Iraqi nation, and the Iraqi government must allocate funds to support local projects, rebuild the infrastructure in Sinjar, and compensate the families who lost their homes and businesses,” Dawood Jundi Shikh-Kalo, a Yazidi leader and member of the leadership council of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, told VOA.

Shikh-Kalo, who led Sinjar Protection Units during the battle against IS, said different parties in the country need to support local initiatives from the Yazidi community to help it stand on its feet.

Iraqi President Barham Salih in March 2019 referred the Yazidi Female Survivors Bill to the Iraqi parliament, which could address many social issues agonizing the Yazidis, including helping them find their missing members. The law is still waiting an approval vote by the Iraqi parliament.

Iran Women's Give Voice To Their Abuse

By BBC Women's Podcast



Women in Iran are encouraged to remain "loyal" and avoid speaking out about abuse.

Maryam's voice trembles as she tells what happened when her husband attacked her in public.

"People's reaction was like it was normal to see a man beating his wife. There's no law, there are no safe houses, and even the police can't do much. Some families also act like they're so modern and they say, 'Oh it's a private matter'."

Her story is a rarely heard one in her home country of Iran, but since the creation of a new podcast, many more women like her are coming forward to share unflinching accounts of their experience of domestic violence.

They have been encouraged by Maryam (not her real name) to use the medium as a platform to break their silence, challenging traditional societal taboos.

"Become Scheherazade," Maryam tells them - an allusion to the mythical Persian Queen who prevented her own death through her gift for storytelling, one of the main protagonists in the epic *The One Thousand and One Nights*.

But these stories are a world away from the trappings of ancient folklore, and rooted in a society that largely encourages women to keep quiet.

'A family matter'

Maryam, 34, met her husband at university where she studied child psychology.

She defied her parents in Tehran to marry the man she loved, who she initially considered a liberal thinker and an advocate of workers' rights. But just days into the marriage, she realised something was not right. In the podcast she describes how "pride and a reluctance to admit defeat" prevented her from seeking help from her mother and father.



She endured physical and mental abuse throughout her marriage and, to make matters worse, was made to believe that it was her own fault.

After all, like many women in Iran, Maryam grew up with the familiar maxim: "A woman enters a man's house in a white bridal dress and leaves only in a white shroud."

Maryam says widely accepted social norms prevented her from getting out of the marriage sooner.

Iranians are traditionally deeply private people and family issues usually remain behind closed doors. Because of this, domestic abuse has become endemic and women are encouraged to remain loyal and be patient.

Maryam finally decided to leave after she ended up in a hospital bed after a sustained beating. In her semi-conscious state, unable to move because of her injuries, she says she asked herself: "Why am I here and why has this happened to me?"

Weeks later, she was discharged and filed for divorce. Fortunately her parents supported her decision - but not all victims are so lucky.

In each podcast, Maryam is joined by women who share their own experience of abuse at the hands of male members of the family.

New law?

As well as personal stories, the podcast also examines the issue of the systemic lack of protection for women suffering violence, particularly domestic abuse.

The only official statistics ever commissioned in Iran on the subject was 16 years ago, which found that two-thirds of Iranian women had experienced domestic abuse at least once.

The London-based human rights group Amnesty International said in a 2013 report on Iran that women in the country "faced discrimination in law and practice in relation to marriage and divorce, inheritance, child custody, nationality and international travel".

The tragic murder of a teenage girl by her father in a so-called "honour killing" has prompted Iran's President Hassan Rouhani to demand a speedy review of the bill on the protection of women from violence. This, almost a decade after it was drafted.



The bill - which will still need to be approved by the largely conservative parliament before it becomes law - offers the potential for the biggest change to women's rights since the 1979 revolution.

It recognises physical violence towards women as a crime and, for the first time, also assigns punishment for harassment in public and on social media.

Five years since the end of her marriage, Maryam says she has never been happier. As well as podcasting, she also holds counselling sessions for victims of abuse, most of whom are women.

She hopes that giving people the freedom to speak out will help end the culture of secrecy that, she laments, "only emboldens your abuser."

Egypt jails five women over TikTok posts

By Zara Dawoud
TCMER Board Member



Haneen Hossam via Tiktok

An Egyptian court sentenced five women influencers to two years each in prison on Monday after finding them guilty of promoting immorality and human trafficking by encouraging women to make money building social media followings.

The women, who were also fined 300,000 Egyptian pounds (US\$19,000), were accused of running online accounts that violated the values and principles of Egypt, a conservative Muslim nation.

Haneen Hossam, 20, a Cairo University student, was charged over encouraging young women to meet men through a video app and build friendships with them, receiving a fee according to the number of followers watching these chats.

Mawada al-Adham, a TikTok and Instagram influencer with at least 2 million followers, was accused of publishing indecent photos and videos on social media.

The three other women were charged with helping Hossam and Al-Adham manage their social media accounts, according to the public prosecution.

Al-Adham's lawyer Ahmed el-Bahkeri confirmed the sentences and said they would appeal against the verdict.

Several women in Egypt have previously been accused of "inciting debauchery" by challenging the country's conservative social norms, but this battle has moved online as the use of social media by young Egyptians surges.

Cairo's Misdemeanours Economic Court last month jailed high-profile Egyptian belly-dancer Sama El-Masry for three years for inciting debauchery and immorality as part of a crackdown on social media.

Hossam, who has about one million followers on TikTok and Instagram, was arrested in April after publishing a video clip described by the public prosecution as "indecent". In a now-expired video on Instagram she explained how women could work with her to earn up to US\$3,000 by broadcasting videos in exchange for money using Singapore-based video creation platform Likee owned by China's Joyy Inc.

Her message was interpreted by the authorities as a promotion for young women to sell sex online, with the public prosecutor saying her actions took advantage of the poor financial state of young women and minors. A court released her on bail in June but she was rearrested after the prosecution found new evidence.

Al-Adham was arrested in May over videos posted on TikTok and Instagram.

Human rights activists and social media users launched a digital campaign this month demanding Egyptian authorities release the women, calling the arrests a "violation of freedom of opinion and expression".



Egyptian celebrity Sama Elmasry

Meanwhile Egyptian parliamentarians demanded the government suspend the video sharing TikTok app in Egypt, saying it promoted nudity and immorality.

Nehad Abu El Komsan, head of the Egyptian Centre for Women Rights, said she had reservations over the phrase "violating family values and principles" but she viewed human trafficking and exploiting young girls for money as a "horrible crime".

"We have to differentiate between freedom of expression and using minors to generate money," she said. "In this way, it is called human trafficking and prostitution which are banned by the Egyptian law."

Under Egypt's cybercrime law issued in 2018, anyone creating and running an account on the internet to commit a crime faces at least two years in jail and a fine of up to 300,000 Egyptian pounds.

Hagia Sophia and Erdoğan

By Burak Bekdil



Turkey's Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, conquered Istanbul for the second time when he signed a decree to convert the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Istanbul, built in 537, into a mosque.

According to his fans and political allies, Turkey's Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, conquered Istanbul for the second time when he signed a decree to convert the monumental Hagia Sophia cathedral in Istanbul, built in 537, into a mosque. With that logic, he became the first statesman who conquered a city that already belongs to his country.

"First, you should fill Sultanahmet (Blue Mosque, Istanbul) ... This is a plot, this is sheer provocation," Erdoğan told a crowd as recently as in March 2019 when party fans demanded the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. He was right. Most of Istanbul's nearly 3,000 mosques (one mosque per 5,000 population) do not attract crowds. Sixteen months later, Erdoğan changed his mind.

In this theatre-like play, he said the Supreme Court would decide on the fate of Hagia Sophia. Under a constitutional amendment in 2010, Erdoğan won the authority to appoint all members of that court, the Council of State. Erdoğan said he would respect the court's verdict in "whichever direction it comes."

And, unsurprisingly, the verdict came in the direction Erdoğan wanted: On July 9, the Council of State decided to void a cabinet decision, signed in 1934 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, designating Hagia Sophia as a museum, in a show of respect for Christianity. Only an hour after the verdict was announced, Erdoğan signed a decree for the conversion into a mosque of the monument on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

Erdoğan comes from the ranks of political Islam, which made its debut in Turkey in the late 1960s – and was not then on the global radar. In the 1970s, Islamists of all flavors, including Erdoğan's mentor, Turkey's first Islamist prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan,

made the "Hagia Sophia Mosque" a symbol of the completion of Istanbul's conquest. The iconic church also became a symbol in the Islamists' fight against Atatürk's secularism.



Hagia Sophia Timeline

- 537: Byzantine Emperor Justinian I builds Hagia Sophia as a cathedral in then Constantinople.
- 1453: Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II (Mehmet the Conqueror) converts Hagia Sophia into a mosque after taking Constantinople from the Byzantines.
- 1453-1934: Hagia Sophia remains a mosque.
- June 7, 1931: The cabinet of the infant Turkish Republic signs a decree for the restoration of priceless mosaic frescoes at Hagia Sophia. The decree gave the job to Thomas Whittemore, an American Byzantine specialist.
- Aug. 25, 1934: Turkish Education Minister Abidin Özman writes a letter to Prime Minister İsmet İnönü to inform him that he had received a verbal order from Atatürk for the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum.
- Nov. 24, 1934: The Turkish cabinet signs a decree that "un-mosques" Hagia Sophia.
- 1980: Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel allows Muslim prayers at an annex of Hagia Sophia.
- 1981: The military junta bans Muslim prayers at Hagia Sophia.
- 1991: Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel re-opens the annex to Muslim prayers.
- 2005-2020: The Council of State rejects three applications for the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque.
- July 9, 2020: The Council of State rules in favour of the fourth application to make Hagia Sophia a mosque.
- July 24, 2020: Hagia Sophia will open as a mosque, with a Greek name and Orthodox frescoes on its walls.

Why now? Erdoğan possibly thought the move could reverse the ongoing erosion of his popularity due, among others, to a looming economic crisis. All the same, it appears to be wrongly timed, as presidential and parliamentary elections are three years from

now and Turks are notorious for not having a good memory. Praying at the Hagia Sophia Mosque will not turn a hungry man into a happy man.

The conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque has once again underlined the insane racism of the majority in Turkey against the sanity of a dwindling minority.

One Muslim theologian, Cemil Kılıç, argued against the decision: "This is against the Quranic commandments," he said. "Prophet Mohammed never converted a Jewish or Christian house of prayer into a mosque."

His voice came against an abundance of racist comments on social media:

- "Jewish and Christian bastards will now understand who we are."
- "Erdoğan is correcting what Jewish, Shabbetaist (Jews who converted to Islam), atheist crowds have done in the past century."
- "You Jews, are you having fun?"
- "Day of mourning for Crusaders and Jewish converts."
- "Cry, you Greeks! And wait for your turn, you Jews!"
- "Sad day for Zionists."
- "A Shabbetaist Jew from Thessaloniki [Ataturk, born in Thessaloniki] closed it [to Muslim prayers] and man from Black Sea (Erdogan) opened it."
- "You Jewish dogs, it will come to Al-Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem] too."

This much of national sentiment reflects sheer ignorance, a hatred for "the religious other," a self-isolationist thinking and a century-long desire to challenge all things non-Turkish, with an emphasis on "the Jew." An Islamist leader decides to convert a monumental cathedral into a mosque, and his fans, are spilling out hatred against Jews. This is Turkey's new normal.

Turkey Aids Islamic State Cash Flow

By Don Gibbons
TCMER Board Member



Turkey continues to aid the cash flow to Jihadist extremists

The U.S. designation in early August of a new Turkey-based member of the notorious Rawi Network for allegedly facilitating money transfers to the Islamic State (IS) in Syria has raised fresh concerns among observers that jihadists continue to use Turkey to fund their activities in Syria.

The Rawi Network, founded by an Iraqi family, has been known to the U.S. government for decades. In the 1990s, it was accused of using informal payment systems to help Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq evade international sanctions by buying and selling oil without reliance on formal banking systems.

The Rawis returned to the spotlight in November 2019 when the U.S. Department of the Treasury blacklisted six of their members who had operated companies in Iraq, Turkey and Belgium. The companies, registered as everyday money exchange and transfer businesses, were used to provide a mechanism for IS's global sympathizers to fund the extremist group's operations in Iraq and Syria.

The US Treasury sanctioned another man in the family named Adnan Muhammad Amin al-Rawi and described him as an IS facilitator in Turkey.

According to the Treasury statement, Al-Rawi has materially assisted, sponsored or provided financial, material or technological support" for IS, adding that the radical group's former finance emir, Fawaz al-Rawi, who was reportedly killed in a 2017 coalition airstrike, belonged to the same family.

While the Rawis have long been a familiar name to governments, analysts say the most recent designation raises questions on why they have continued to be able to operate in Turkey as a member of the U.S.-led Counter ISIS Finance Group (CIFG).

These designations targeting the Rawi Network and others reflect the extent to which various jihadist groups have exploited Turkey's permissive environment. Turkey is the only NATO member state that has repeatedly become a target of Treasury sanctions, a sign that Ankara is either negligent or lenient in its treatment of jihadist entities and individuals.

In April 2019, the Treasury sanctioned four Turkish companies for providing financial support to IS. Together with our CIFG partners, we must remain vigilant to ensure that the global remnants of this terrorist group do not regain a foothold.

Hawala money transfer

The recent U.S. designation also targets 30-year-old Faruq Hamud, who allegedly used a hawala money transfer business in Syria's al-Hol refugee camp to fund jihadists. Al-Hol is under the control of U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the country's northeast.

Similar to the U.S.-based Western Union financial services company, hawala is a popular informal remittance method used within and among cash-based countries throughout the Middle East. It depends on a network of connected agents who can ensure thousands of dollars travel beyond borders in minutes.

SDF is aware of Hamud's alleged illicit activities in the camp in Syria's Hasakah province near the Iraqi border.

An effective U.S. ground partner against IS in Syria, SDF has repeatedly complained that it does not have adequate resources to maintain proper security of the camp, calling on governments to take back their citizens among the camp's 11,000 family members of foreign jihadist fighters.

Camp smuggling

The al-Hol camp also accommodates nearly 60,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other parts of Syria and some refugees from Iraq. Camp authorities say they have physically separated IS family members from the rest of the camp's residents.

There are at least two hawala offices that openly conduct business in the non-IS section of the camp, but money often gets smuggled from those offices to IS family members as well.

Hawala also provides a useful means of sending humanitarian support to IDPs and refugees, say some analysts. While banning them outright is not advised, experts say the business can be regulated in a way that prevents IS access to outside donations.

The hawala money transfer system is crucial to remain open for the women to be able to purchase what they need for their families. Likewise, large sums make it very possible to bribe those receiving the money and those who would smuggle the women out."

Erdoğan Vote-Hunting

By Hamia Nair
TCMER Board Member



Fearing a sharp decline in his approval rating, especially in view of a looming economic crisis, Turkey's Islamist strongman, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, appears to be chasing new wars with real or imaginary enemies.

Election data and research show that Turks have a tendency to unite behind their leader in times of crises or confrontation with foreign enemies. According to the Turkish pollster Metropoll, for example, Erdoğan's approval rating peaked to 71.1% in December 2013, when he portrayed a slew of corruption allegations about him and his family as "a coup attempt." In parliamentary elections in 2015, Erdoğan's nationwide vote fell to 37.5% and his Justice and Development Party lost its parliamentary majority for the first time since it came to power in 2002.

Erdoğan's approval rating rose sharply again to 67.6% after a failed putsch against his government in July 2016. At the height of the COVID-19 crisis his rating was a strong 55.8%. Metropoll said Erdoğan's current approval rating is at 50.6%. He thinks he needs new tensions with Turkey's past and present-day adversaries.

Most recently, condemning the historic normalization deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Erdoğan said that "because we stand by Palestine," he is considering withdrawing Turkey's ambassador from the UAE. "I gave instructions to my foreign minister... We may suspend diplomatic relations [with the UAE] or recall our ambassador to Abu Dhabi," Erdoğan added.

If he does so, Turkey will be the only country in the region that has no diplomatic relations with Armenia and Cyprus, and no ambassadorial-level relations with Syria, Israel, Egypt and the UAE. Turkey's relations with many countries where it has full diplomatic ties are not in much better shape.

In late July, even before the UAE-Israel deal, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar told Al Jazeera that Turkey would hold Abu Dhabi, the leading emirate, accountable at the right time and place for "malicious actions committed in Libya and

Syria." He said that the UAE is "a functional country that serves others politically or militarily and is used remotely."

Turkey evidently has deep ire for any deal that may help stabilize one of the world's most volatile regions. On August 3, the Turkish Foreign Ministry condemned an oil agreement concluded between a US-based company and Syrian Kurds for the development of oil fields in north-eastern Syria. In north-western Syria, where Turkey controls small pockets of land, Ankara threatened to respond militarily to potential attacks on its forces.

There are "hotter" disputes, as well. Ignoring international efforts to find a diplomatic solution to maritime border disputes with its traditional Aegean rival, Greece, on August 10, Turkey resumed oil and gas exploration in the Mediterranean Sea -- only days after Turkey's government said it would delay offshore surveys to seek a diplomatic resolution with Greece.

French President Emmanuel Macron called for Turkey to be sanctioned and accused its government of violating the rights of Greece and Cyprus. In the face of increasing Turkish assertiveness, Macron also ordered the French Navy to the Eastern Mediterranean to provide military assistance to Greece. In a further move, France signed a defence deal with Cyprus. The agreement came into effect on August 1. The two-year Defence Cooperation Agreement covers energy, crisis management, counter-terrorism and maritime security cooperation between Cyprus and France.

While the standoff was deepening, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis convened his national security council. A statement issued after the meetings was reminiscent of pre-war times: "We are in complete political and operational readiness," Minister of State George Gerapetritis said on state television channel ERT. "Most of the fleet is ready to be deployed wherever necessary."

If you add to that perilous picture the Cypriot, Israeli and Egyptian navies, Turkey is up against formidable naval forces in the Mediterranean. In one dangerous incident on August 14, two warships, the Greek Navy's *Limnos* frigate and Turkey's *TCG Kemalreis*, collided in the Eastern Mediterranean.

All those Turkish-Greek tensions in the Aegean and Mediterranean seas bolster a century-long Turkish nostalgia to take back some of the Greek islands. *Yeni Safak*, a fiercely pro-Erdoğan newspaper, suggested that the Turkish military should invade 16 Greek islands.

Erdoğan's idea of vote-hunting by regional troublemaking is not limited to naval adventures only. Against the background of a sudden border flare-up between Azerbaijan and Armenia on July 12, the Turkish and Azeri militaries launched a two-week long joint military exercise, involving the traditional allies' air and ground forces. In Turkey's southeast, Iraq blamed Ankara for a drone attack that killed two high-ranking Iraqi military officers. The incident occurred shortly before a planned visit by Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar to Baghdad. A fuming Iraqi government said the Turkish minister was no longer welcome.

Erdoğan needs epic stories of military might against real or fabricated foreign enemies to tell an increasing number of grudging voters in the face of an ailing economy. That is bad news for the entire region.

Turkey's Youth See No Future

By Lina Zaidi
TCMER Board Member



Youth unemployment poses latest danger to Turkey

Turkey's Islamist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, once declared his political mission as "raising devout (Muslim) generations." Research in recent years has shown that Turkish youths have defied Erdoğan's most ambitious social engineering project. Konda, a pollster, found in 2019 that Turkish youths were less likely than the wider population to identify themselves as "religious conservative." They were less likely to fast, pray regularly or (for females) cover their hair. Ipsos, an international pollster, found that only 12% of Turks trust Islamic clerics. SODEV, another pollster, found that 60.5% of youths that support Erdoğan said they would prefer to live in Christian Switzerland with half the salary they would earn in Muslim Saudi Arabia. SODEV's study also found that 70.3% of respondents think a talented youth would never be able to get ahead in professional life without political/bureaucratic "connections," i.e., without a hidden touch of nepotism. And only 30% of them think one could freely express his opinion on social media.

There is new data suggesting that younger Turks have a Western mindset instead of "religiously conservative/devout" one, as Erdoğan hoped they would. According to one study, 72% of Turks aged 20 or younger support full membership in the European Union for Turkey. This is in sharp contrast with the official teachings of a country where the top Islamic cleric said that "children who do not read the Quran are with Satan and Satanic people."

"These kind of social engineering efforts targeting the younger mind almost always end up with opposite results, primarily because the new generation do not like to be told what's good and what's bad for them," said one Turkish university professor who asked not to be named. "Freedoms for most youth are more important than prayers. This is what conservative politicians often miss."

In 2014, a 16-year-old student was arrested for insulting Erdoğan. In 2015, a 15-year-old was detained for insulting Erdoğan. And in 2016, a young university student was arrested on charges of insulting Erdoğan and making propaganda for a terror organization - all that for a social media message. She was arrested while in class.

It is not surprising, then, that the young Turks want to build a life for themselves not in their own country, or an Islamic country, but in countries where civil liberties are sacrosanct. In 2019, a total of 330,289 people left Turkey to live abroad. Official data shows 40.8% of those who emigrated from Turkey were between the ages of 20-34.

Seren Selvin Korkmaz, executive director of the Istanbul Political Research Institute, explained the youth brain drain to *Arab News*:

"Migration becomes an exit strategy from everyday struggles. In the country, youth unemployment is more than 25 percent. Many of these young people are still financially dependent on their families or are working for low wages ... Under these conditions, she explained, young people do not envision a future for themselves ... This creates a 'violence of uncertainty' for them. In addition to unemployment, authoritarian tendencies in the country — including social media bans and threats to freedom of thought — impact the youth and make them worry for their future."

In just the first 65 days of the COVID-19 pandemic, 510 Turks were arrested for "spreading baseless and provocative messages in social media." Before that, by the end of 2019, Turkey's censors had blocked access to 408,494 web sites, 7,000 Twitter accounts, 40,000 tweets, 10,000 YouTube videos and 6,200 Facebook accounts.

"This is not the country I dreamed of," said A.B., a 19-year-old student, asking for strict anonymity for fear of prosecution. "I don't feel I belong to my own country anymore. I see no sign of a free life. I will go to Europe for further studies and probably visit Turkey just for holidays."

"This is not the country I dreamed of," is perhaps the best portrayal of how a young Turk feels about the increasing democratic deficit in his homeland. There are signs that that democratic deficit will widen.

Erdoğan's ruling AKP party has submitted draft legislation to parliament that would enable the government to tighten its control on social media, prompting fears of a new era of even greater censorship. The draft bill would force social media companies with more than a million daily users in Turkey — such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube — to establish a formal presence or assign a representative in Turkey who would be accountable to Turkish authorities legally and for tax purposes. If those companies do not comply they may be fined up to millions of dollars. The law also grants authority to the Turkish government to reduce their bandwidth by 50% to 95%.

The draft bill came amid reports that Netflix has cancelled a Turkish drama on the eve of filming: its writer said that the government had blocked it because it included a gay character. Screenwriter Ece Yörenç said Netflix scrapped "If Only" after the government refused to grant it a license.

It is not surprising that young Turks in the 21st century do not want to be strangled by the unpredictable dictates of an Islamist regime. Erdoğan might sit down and ask himself: Why do the youths whom he wanted to make "devout" want to flee their Muslim country and live in "infidel" lands?

Beirut Explodes

By Nabil Khoury
Country Director for IWPR's Middle East



The blast rocked the Port of Beirut shaking buildings all over the city and causing massive casualties and damages.

“It felt like the end of the world.”

That’s what Beirutis keep saying as they reel from the impact of an apocalyptic blast. The explosion turned the beating heart of Beirut into wreckage. Skeletons of buildings seemed the only things left standing in a city that became instantly unrecognisable.

More than 100 were confirmed dead by the next day, with more than 4,000 wounded and many still missing under the rubble. An estimated 250,000 people have lost their homes.

It was surreal. When the blaze began, people thought it unusual but not significant. Many Beirutis stood and filmed it on their phones, mesmerised by what appeared to be no more than a minor drama.

But this in itself caused vast numbers of casualties when the second explosion, which seemed nuclear in its power, tore through the city.

People watching the fire from their balconies were thrown several stories into the street. A friend of mine, six months pregnant, was torn into pieces as she sat in her living room, a kilometre away from the blast site. The blast was visible from the mountains 20km outside Beirut and felt as far away as Cyprus.

It was beyond imagination.

There was nowhere to take many of the injured, with one of the country’s main medical centres, Hospital St Georges, forced to shut down having sustained severe damage in the explosion. Other hospitals were already stretched beyond their capacity.

The Lebanese economy was already in freefall. The country had been under massive pressure from the Syrian war, with some two million refugees seeking sanctuary in Lebanon.

Then coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown hit, further crippling Lebanon's famous service industries. About 70 per cent of hotels, bars and restaurants closed.

The explosion tore through the heart of Beirut and the districts of Ashrafieh, Mar Mikhayel and Gemayze, the hub of night life, restaurants and bars that despite the economic crisis still provided a critical financial lifeline to thousands.

The devastated Beirut port was the country's main outlet to the rest of the world; experts say that it will take at least a year until it can function again.

The feeling in my city is one more of anger than sadness. We realise once more that the current political system cares little about the people it is supposed to represent. Instead it kills them.

According to all reports, the cause of the blast was nearly 3,000 tonnes of ammonium nitrate, an extremely explosive substance, that were confiscated in 2014 from a Russian ship and had been deposited at the port's warehouse 12. It was left unguarded and unprotected, badly stored, a lethal threat to the capital. All the time, the government remained silent.

Across the Lebanese media, journalists and bloggers ask how the authorities could have allowed such substances to be stored in such a central location. Confronted with government silence, civil society rages at what clearly seems yet another example of corruption, negligence and incompetence. It amounts to a massive violation of our human rights.

This catastrophe has again proved that the Lebanese have no leadership worth speaking of. Slow in responding to the crisis, all the government has done is announce there will be an official enquiry. There is no formal relief or reconstruction plan, beyond begging the international community to help them. It is clear that we cannot rely on official structures and instead must look to each other for help.

Beirutis, rich and poor, are mobilising to help the wounded and provide shelter for those left homeless and destitute. Restaurants and food shops are launching initiatives to support the volunteers and medical with free meals. People are setting up soup kitchens, rushing to give blood.

The explosion spread a vast mushroom cloud across our beloved city. But the chronic corruption, nepotism, negligence and incompetence of our ruling system, regardless of party or faction, casts a greater and more toxic pall.

I am Lebanese to the core. Beirut is my city. I was born here, brought up here. I was wounded in the civil war. I thought we had finished with all the suffering. I thought it would all end. But it follows us like a curse.

Lebanon's Poison is Hezbollah

By Peter Rawlings
TCMER Board Member



The Special Tribunal for Lebanon in session on August 18, 2020, in Leidschendam, Netherlands, prepares to deliver its verdict on the accused assassins of Hariri.

The conviction of a senior Hezbollah terrorist for assassinating Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri has provided the hard-pressed Lebanese people with incontrovertible proof of the malign influence Iran exerts over their political system.

Following an investigation that has lasted for more than a decade and cost a staggering \$1 billion, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, the UN-sponsored body responsible for trying four Hezbollah suspects accused of murdering Mr Hariri in a car bomb attack in Beirut in 2005, has finally passed its judgement.

The tribunal concluded that Salim Jamil Ayyash, a 56-year-old senior commander with Hezbollah, was guilty on all counts of participating in the car bombing, in which 21 other people were killed.

There was a degree of frustration in Lebanon that the Tribunal was not able to reach guilty verdicts on the three other Hezbollah defendants who were also tried for Mr Hariri's murder. One crucial factor that contributed to the Tribunal's decision was the refusal of both the Iranian-backed Hezbollah leadership, as well as the regime of President Bashar Al-Assad in neighbouring Syria, to cooperate with the investigation.

As a consequence, the Tribunal was unable to find any evidence that the leadership of Hezbollah and Syria were directly complicit in Mr Hariri's assassination, even though most Lebanese believe it was carried out in reprisal for his attempts to end Hezbollah's involvement in Lebanese politics.

The refusal of Hezbollah and Syria to cooperate also meant that the trial had to be conducted *in absentia*, as none of the accused was prepared to attend the hearing, so it is highly unlikely that Ayyash will ever serve his sentence, even though he has been

found guilty of carrying out one of the most devastating crimes in modern Lebanese history.

Nonetheless, the fact that a senior Hezbollah commander has been found guilty of murdering one of Lebanon's most prominent democratically-elected politicians raises serious questions about the future role of Hezbollah, as well as the organisation's Iranian and Syrian backers, in Lebanese politics.

Speaking shortly after the verdict was announced, Bahaa Hariri, the eldest son of the murdered prime minister, remarked at the conclusion of the trial that "Hezbollah has no place in Lebanon's future." He is also insistent that malign powers such as Iran should no longer control Lebanon's destiny.

"Hezbollah cannot and does not do anything without the say-so of its foreign masters," he added. "The new Lebanon must be a neutral country. The only way for this to happen is for Hezbollah to be removed. They've had their chance and, if they haven't delivered for Lebanon so far, they will not in future. Nobody with blood on their hands can hold political office in Lebanon."

The challenge now for Mr Hariri and other Lebanese of a moderate political persuasion is to mount an effective challenge against Hezbollah's dominant position in Lebanon. It is a move that would present a significant challenge given the enormous investment Iran has made over several decades in building Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure, especially in southern Lebanon, where the militia poses a constant threat to the security of Israel.

Mr Hariri's campaign for Lebanon to end the interference of Iran and Hezbollah in the country's political system will certainly be helped by the damning material that emerged from the trial about the organisation's links with Syria and Iran.

It was revealed, for example, that Ayyash, apart from being a senior Hezbollah commander, is also the brother-in-law of Imad Mugniyeh, the notorious Hezbollah terrorist mastermind responsible for, among many other atrocities, the truck bomb attacks on the US Embassy and Marine headquarters in Beirut in the early 1980s.

Mugniyeh, who was instrumental in establishing Hezbollah's military wing, was a constant presence in both Tehran, where he worked closely with senior members of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, such as Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani, and Damascus, where he lived with his family until he was killed by an Israeli missile strike in 2008.

In addition, Ayyash was related by marriage to Mustafa Badreddine, another senior Hezbollah commander who was originally charged alongside Ayyash and the other Hezbollah defendants by the tribunal, although the charges were later dropped after Badreddine was killed fighting for the Assad regime in Syria in 2016.

The man convicted of Mr Hariri's murder, therefore, is no ordinary Hezbollah commander, but someone who operates at the organisation's highest levels, a fact that should help enormously in Lebanon's coming battle to rid itself of the malign influence that Hezbollah and its Iranian paymasters have exercised over the country's fortunes.

The Mullahs and Hezbollah, Lords of Drug Smuggling

By Majid Rafizadeh
International American Council on the Middle East



When governments or organizations that operate under the legitimacy of a state engage in smuggling drugs, the negative consequences can be devastating for other nations. The Iranian regime and its proxy Hezbollah appear to be increasing their efforts to smuggle illicit drugs to other countries, particularly in the West.

A Lebanese man, Ghassan Diab, was recently extradited from Cyprus to the United States for charges linked to laundering drug money for the militant group Hezbollah. According to the US Department of Justice, Diab is alleged "to have conspired to engage in, and actually engaged, in the laundering of drug proceeds through the use of the black market peso exchange in support of Hezbollah's global criminal-support network".

Italian authorities announced on July 1, 2020 that they had seized 15.4 tons of counterfeit Captagon pills produced in Syria, a country reportedly the largest producer and exporter of the Captagon (fenethylline). The seized 15.4 tons of counterfeit Captagon pills are worth an estimated \$1.3 billion. Captagon, a super-charged amphetamine, is banned in many countries due to its addictive nature. Reportedly, the seized drugs were so carefully hidden that the airport scanners did not detect them, according to Commander Domenico Napolitano of the Naples financial police. It was the interception of calls made by some criminals that assisted the local police in seizing the drugs.

Greek authorities, in July 2020, also seized a large haul of Captagon pills, also from Syria and worth more than half a billion dollars. The Greek financial crimes unit said:

"It is the largest quantity that has ever been seized globally, depriving organized crime of proceeds that would have exceeded \$660 million (587.45 million euros)."

Why has Syria become the epicentre of producing illegal drugs and exporting them to other countries including the West? Possibly because Iran and Hezbollah exert significant influence in Syria and there is scarcely any credible international organization monitoring what is happening in Syria, a lapse that makes it difficult to these kinds of detect criminal activities.

Cash-strapped Iran and Hezbollah are desperate for money. Sanctions imposed by the Trump administration on the Iranian regime have hit the mullahs and their proxies hard. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani recently admitted that, as Iran's currency, the rial, continues to lose its value, the Islamic Republic is encountering the worst economic crisis since its establishment in 1979. Based on the latest reports, US sanctions have also caused Iran to cut funds to its militias in Syria. Iran's militants are not receiving their salaries or benefits, making it extremely difficult for them to continue fighting and destabilizing the region. Feeling the pressure of sanctions on Iran, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Iran's proxy, Hezbollah, has also called on his group's fundraising arm "to provide the opportunity for jihad with money and also to help with this ongoing battle."

The relationship between Hezbollah, and Iran, specifically the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in smuggling drugs dates back to early 1980s. According to the book *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* by Matthew Levitt: "Following the establishment of Hizbullah in the early-1980s—recruiting heavily from key Bekaa Valley tribes and families — it benefited from a religious edict, or fatwa, issued in the mid-1980s providing religious justification for the otherwise impure and illicit activity of drug trafficking. Presumed to have been issued by Iranian religious leaders, the fatwa reportedly read: We are making drugs for Satan — America and the Jews. If we cannot kill them with guns, we will kill them with drugs."

According to an FBI report, declassified in November 2008, "Hizbullah's spiritual leader... has stated that narcotics trafficking is morally acceptable if the drugs are sold to Western infidels as part of the war against the enemies of Islam."

In other words, by smuggling drugs to the West, Hezbollah and Iran also aim at killing "infidels" and damaging Western countries. The United States is not immune from Hezbollah's and Iran's drug-related criminal activities.

Iran and Hezbollah have also been increasing their cooperation with Latin American drug cartels, and some Latin American governments, such as Venezuela, appear to be more than willing to provide safe haven for Islamists to carry out their criminal and drug-related activities. The Washington-based Center for a Secure Free Society published a paper titled "Canada on Guard: Assessing the Immigration Security Threat of Iran, Venezuela and Cuba." It stated that Venezuela has granted many passports to radical Islamists. These passports could easily be used for travel to North America or Europe.

The international community, the United Nations, and specifically its Office on Crimes and Drugs, remain totally silent on Hezbollah and Iran's large-scale drug trafficking across the world.

The Silence of the Arab World: The Uyghurs Muslims Persecution

By Chava Hirsch
TCMER Board Member



When Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979, the entire Islamic world united behind their fellow Muslim Afghans and cooperated with the West to force the USSR to withdraw. By contrast, China's Communist security forces have transformed their ethnic Uyghur majority province of Xinjiang into a huge concentration camp, but the world's Islamic states have refused to criticize Beijing.

The world's most influential Muslim international forum, the 57-member Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), in a resolution drafted in March last year, in fact commended China's efforts in its care of the country's Muslims. Shortly after, in July 2019, twenty-three Muslim countries supported a United Nations Human Rights Council resolution praising the People's Republic of China's (PRC) efforts "for protecting and promoting human rights through development." This statement rebuffed an earlier Human Rights Council resolution drafted by 22 Western countries urging China to refrain from violating the human rights of the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang.

Some noteworthy leaders from Muslim majority countries personally praised the Chinese treatment of its Uyghur population. Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, speaking on Chinese state television during a February 2019 visit to China, said it was China's "right" to place Uyghurs in training camps, and to "prevent the infiltration and spread of extremist thinking."

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, when asked by a reporter about China's treatment of its Uyghurs, claimed he didn't "know much about" the problem. When pressed, he continued that China "came to help us when we were at rock bottom." Even Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan backtracked from his December 2019 condemnation of China's treatment of Muslims as "a great cause of shame for humanity." Now Erdogan extradites Uyghur refugees in Turkey back to China where they will most likely face harsh treatment.

The private rationale for the public embrace by Muslim states of China's governance of Xinjiang's Uyghur population is both general and country specific. There seems to be a

collective apprehension by many Islamic governments that publicly criticizing China will lead to a loss of Chinese investment. Indeed, many Muslim states, including all of Central Asia's Islamic countries as well as Iran and Iraq in Southwest Asia, and Pakistan and Bangladesh in South Asia, are heavily invested in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Moreover, all of these regions lie in the direct geographical path of several projects in the BRI. In order for this new "Silk Road" to safely connect markets east to west, the great expanse of the Eurasian land must be stable, secure, and peaceful. Most of the strands of the BRI run through the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang.

Iran's support for Beijing's BRI program may well be motivated by its need to seek relief from the punishing effects of Western-imposed commercial and financial sanctions. Iran most likely also hopes that a more militarily formidable China will ultimately abolish the West's current permanence in the Middle East. The Palestinian leader Abbas, for his part, most likely envisions that China might have the potential of replacing the U.S. as the arbiter of a renewed peace process less favourable to Israel. In any event, Iran, given its embrace of China's BRI blueprint, can no longer assert that its foreign policy is "Neither East Nor West."

There also may be theological motivations that help to explain why Muslim states have decided either to support China or remain silent about Beijing's persecution of the Uyghurs. These motivations might include a belief by strict Sunni Islamic countries that the Islam practiced by Uyghurs is too eclectic, not pure enough, and contains un-Islamic accretions from centuries of exposure to other cultures along the "Old Silk Road." It is true that although most Uyghurs are Sunni, the public celebration of their faith includes many Sufi characteristics, such as visiting shrines and tombs as well as revering saints. Some Sunni theologians probably suspect that the Uyghurs and other Islamic minorities of Xinjiang have not yet purged their ancient ties to Buddhism. All of these practices are anathema to Wahhabi Sunni beliefs of the Arabian Gulf Islamic countries.

There also may be ethnically-driven reasons that permit Middle East Muslims to express less concern for the plight of their brothers and sisters in China. The Uyghurs are not Arab and they do not speak Arabic. The Uyghurs, like many of the peoples of Central Asia, are of Turkic lineage. A citizen of Turfan Oasis in Xinjiang can be understood by a resident of Istanbul, Turkey.

Perhaps a more realistic but cynical explanation for the seemingly incongruous alliance between China and the globe's Islamic governments is the collegial compatibility of authoritarian regimes. None of these tyrannical entities wants international observers to arrive inside their sovereign realms to investigate human rights abuses of minorities: the Sunni Saudis of their Shia Muslims, the Turks of their Kurds, the Pakistanis of their Christians.

More strategically threatening to the existing liberal international order may be a decision by the world's Islamic states and other Third World countries not to condemn Beijing in the event that China might emerge as victor in the new Cold War.

Abbas Supports China's Muslim Concentration Camps

By Don Gibbons
TCMER Board Member



Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas is indicating that he supports China's right to hold more than one million Muslims in re-education camps.

Palestinian leaders have a long record of supporting dictators and autocratic states, including Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Iraq's Saddam Hussein and the North Korean leader Kim Jon Un. The Palestinian leadership's current support for China's repressive regime is part of a larger pattern. They have proven that they are always ready to support any dictator who openly challenges Israel or the US.

In keeping with that pattern, the PA leaders have also chosen to support China in its repressive measures against the residents of Hong Kong, who have been protesting plans to allow extradition to mainland China. If China has its way, residents of Hong Kong will be exposed to unfair trials and violent treatment in China. There is also fear that China's move will give the mainland greater influence over Hong Kong and allow it to target political and human rights activists and journalists.

At the same time, hardly a day passes without Palestinian officials accusing Israel of committing human rights violations against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

These officials, however, are deliberately ignoring the plight of Muslims in China, most of who are Uighur, a predominately Turkic-speaking ethnic group primarily from China's north-western region of Xinjiang.

The detained Muslims have never been charged with crimes and have no legal avenues to challenge their detentions. Often, their only crime is being Muslim.

Last month, PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke over the telephone about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and efforts to prevent the

spread of the corona-virus pandemic. Abbas reportedly "appreciated China's efforts to uphold justice on the Palestinian issue and safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of the Palestinian people, saying that facts have proved time and again that China is the most reliable friend of the Palestinian people."

Instead of raising the issue of his fellow Muslims persecuted in China, Abbas has backed China's supposedly "legitimate position" on persecuting his co-religionists.

Abbas, in other words, is saying that he fully supports China's right to hold more than one million Muslims in re-education camps and crack down on human rights activists and journalists in Hong Kong. Yet Abbas, a Muslim, sees no reason why he or anyone else should ask the ICC to launch an investigation into China's "war crimes" against Muslims.

Instead of following other world leaders in demanding justice for the residents of Hong Kong, Abbas emphasized during the telephone conversation that the "Palestinian side will continue to stand firmly with China and resolutely support China's just position on Hong Kong, Xinjiang and other issues concerning China's core interests."

It was the second time in recent months that Abbas publicly supported China in the Hong Kong crisis. In May, Abbas issued a statement in which he said:

"We reiterate our support to the friendly People's Republic of China's right to maintain its sovereignty against any foreign intervention into its internal affairs and the attempts to destabilize it."

This is the same Abbas who in recent months has been expressing strong opposition to Israel's intention to apply its sovereignty to portions of the West Bank.

On one side, Abbas is voicing support for China's right to impose full sovereignty over all its territories, including Hong Kong, and maintain its territorial integrity. On the other side, Abbas is demanding that the international community impose sanctions on Israel if and when it applies sovereignty over some parts of the West Bank. He is also demanding that, because of Israel's plan to extend Israeli law over parts of the West Bank, the ICC should launch a "war crimes" investigation against Israel.

This double-standard stinks of hypocrisy, as well as a sickening disregard for the people of Hong Kong and the oppressed Muslims in China. Abbas has long been accusing Israel of "oppressing" the Palestinians, but now he is supporting the Chinese regime in its atrocities oppressing his Muslim brothers and repressing the residents of Hong Kong.

Why have Palestinian leaders chosen to side with China? Money and political support. The Palestinians are hoping that China will replace the US as an "honest broker" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Abbas's support for the Chinese atrocities against Muslims, and the oppression of Hong Kong residents is already paying off. The Chinese are now rewarding Abbas by rejecting US President Donald Trump's "Peace to Prosperity" plan for Middle East peace. China has announced that it stands behind the "just cause of the Palestinians," Chinese UN envoy Zhang Jun told the UN Security Council last month. He also pledged that China would back Abbas's call for an international peace conference rather than a peace process headed by the US. "China is a sincere friend of the Palestinian people,"

Zhang said. "The Palestinian people can always count on China's support for their just cause and legitimate rights."

Ironically, the Chinese envoy, whose country is seeking support for imposing full sovereignty over Hong Kong -- and attempting hostile actions against its neighbors in the South China Sea, India and Taiwan - spoke out against any pending Israeli plans to apply sovereignty to portions of the West Bank. "It's unsettling that the planned annexation may provoke a new round of tensions," Zhang argued, warning that such a move would constitute a "most serious violation of international law." China is lecturing the rest of the world about conforming to international law?

In addition to the political support, the Palestinians are also expecting China to reward them with millions of dollars in economic aid, as it has already been doing for the past few years.

Last year, PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh praised China's "unwavering support" of the rights of the Palestinians, as well as its support to the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including providing generous aid to poor students, infrastructure and the solar energy sector.

By siding with China, the Palestinians have thrown their Muslim brothers and the residents of Hong Kong under the bus in return for money and political backing. The Palestinians are ready to do anything to stick a finger in the eye of the US.

The Palestinians, however, are not the only Muslims to turn a blind eye to the suffering of Muslims in China and Hong King residents.

"The main reasons why Muslims suffer in silence is that the Muslim-majority countries that raged against Rushdie, Jyllands-Posten and Charlie Hebdo have decided to stay silent," noted Observer columnist Nick Cohen.

"They use the idea of Muslim solidarity only when it suits them.

"In July 2019, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria and other Muslim-majority states that pose as defenders of the faith helped to block a western motion at the United Nations calling for China to allow "independent international observers" into the Xinjiang region. Iran issues occasional criticisms but wants Chinese support in its struggle against the Trump administration and so keeps its complaints coded. Their hypocrisy is almost funny, if you take your humour black. Iran, Egypt, Syria and dozens of other countries that could not tolerate a magical realist novel can live with the mass sterilisation of Muslim women. They will give concentration camps a conniving wink of approval, but draw the line at cartoons in a Danish newspaper....

"To bring down numbers of the largely Muslim Uighurs of Xinjiang, the China scholar Adrian Zenz reports, the Communists are forcing women to be sterilised or fitted with contraceptive devices."

The Palestinians have chosen not only to remain silent, but to come out in full support of China's concentration camps and its totalitarian regime. Their hate for Israel and the US has blinded them to the point where they are prepared to support the penning up of more than a million Muslims in re-education camps in China. Such a show of support ought to serve as a re-education for the international community about the warped Palestinian perspective of justice.

The Case for Boycotting Beijing 2022

By Evan Karlick



Commenting upon Beijing's successful bid for the 2022 Winter Olympics, International Ski Federation President Gian Franco Kasper quipped to a Swiss newspaper this past February that "everything is easier in dictatorships."

Four years ago, China narrowly beat out Kazakhstan's competing bid, and Beijing is now poised to become the first city in the world to have hosted both summer and winter Olympic Games.

But rather than allowing China to bask in Olympic fanfare, the internment of as many as 1 million ethnic Uyghurs in the western Xinjiang province has laid the groundwork for a boycott by elected leaders and athletes from the United States, and by other delegations.

If the Chinese capital was a hopeful debutante in the lead-up to its 2008 summer event, holding its head high despite complaints of media censorship, displaced Beijing residents, underage gymnasts, and air pollution, the 2022 event is likely to be billed as the glittering coronation of an ascendant and increasingly assertive China.

In 2014, on the basis of purchasing power parity, China regained its title as the world's leading economy, a superlative it last held in 1890, and by 2016 it overtook the United States as the world's largest manufacturer.

But in 2016, Chinese authorities commenced the forcible detention of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities, including entire families, into so-called "political education" centres, the beginnings of an authoritarian indoctrination aimed at the repression of Uyghur language, identity, and religious expression.

In the 1940s, Nazi atrocities and intentions were brought to light by the selfless heroism of individuals such as Witold Pilecki and Jan Karski, who infiltrated Auschwitz

and the Warsaw ghetto, respectively. Today, we have the benefit of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's satellite imagery study and *VICE News'* video to grasp the harsh realities of Xinjiang from the comfort of our homes. And if humanity claims to have evolved morally in these past 75 years, we can't afford to tolerate the mass internment or cultural extermination of a religious minority.

Beijing's 2008 games were protested broadly because of China's own dismal human rights record as well as its support to the genocidal Sudanese regime; vocal critics included actress and U.N. goodwill ambassador Mia Farrow, members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and presidential candidates Barack Obama and John McCain. But the numerous disruptions along the Olympic torch's worldwide procession were quickly forgotten amid the spectacle of the opening ceremonies that August. Chinese authorities likely gathered from that experience that they could trample human rights and round up Uyghurs with impunity.

This year's U.S. State Department report on global religious freedom includes an additional special section on Xinjiang, and last month Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared China's treatment of Uyghurs the "stain of the century." But merely documenting the situation or lambasting those responsible is insufficient.

Yet the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommendations regarding China fail to consider backing out of the 2022 Olympics.

A coordinated international boycott would make the 2022 Olympics an embarrassing flop for Beijing, like a self-congratulatory dinner banquet in which half the seats remain conspicuously empty, rather than a glamorous showcase of China's prosperity and purported inclusiveness. And such a declaration would be consistent with the 1980 Moscow boycott in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan – once again, a Communist government has moved to subjugate a Muslim population in central Asia.

Xinjiang's Uyghurs are victims of the largest mass incarceration of a minority in the world today. With Olympic officials literally counting down the days until the 2022 opening ceremony, President Donald Trump and the United States Olympic Committee should jointly announce that the American delegation will boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics unless Xinjiang's internment camps are shuttered and subsequently demolished. The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, a worldwide network of legislators that first convened five years ago, is ideally suited to generate discourse and media attention in their own respective capital cities, and to advocate that Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights take precedence over podiums and medals. And in the echo of Christchurch, there could be no better way for New Zealand and Australia to demonstrate our collective conviction that religious practitioners should be able to assemble, study, and pray without fear.

Two days before the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989, an exasperated Deng Xiaoping grumbled to his inner circle that "some Western countries use things like 'human rights,' or like saying the socialist system is irrational or illegal, to criticize us, but what they're really after is our sovereignty." Actually, what the global community is truly after is ensuring we never again repeat the inhumanity of decades past.

US Allies Renew Campaign Against IS Remnants

By Sirwan Kajjo
Voice of America



Tensions are flaring in an eastern Syria province after the assassinations of several powerful Arab tribal leaders, with U.S.-backed forces accusing Islamic State (IS) sleeper cells and Syrian government proxies of carrying out such attacks to cause instability in the former IS stronghold.

In the past few weeks, three leaders of the al-Agidat and al-Baggara tribes were killed by unknown gunmen in separate incidents in the eastern Syrian province of Deir al-Zour, local news reported.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a major U.S. partner in the fight against IS terrorists, has accused sleeper cells affiliated with IS of the recent killings in the Arab-majority province.

“These cells from the remnants of ISIS strive to cause confusion, whether through assassinations, spreading rumours, mining and booby-trapping operations,” the SDF said in a statement Monday, using another acronym for IS.

The SDF also accused the Syrian regime, Turkey and their respective local allies of using certain elements in Deir al-Zour to cause instability.

“Through their plans, these forces have targeted security and civil peace by sabotaging and weakening service and administrative sectors and creating a rift between the tribes and the civil administration,” the SDF said in its statement, noting that their goal “is to turn the tribes against each other and against the Syrian Democratic Forces and the international coalition.”

Following the Turkish-led invasion of parts of northeast Syria in October 2019, the SDF has often accused Ankara of destabilizing other SDF-held areas in eastern Syria.

Turkey denies such allegations. The country views the SDF as an extension of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is designated as a terrorist organization by Ankara and Washington. While Turkey has denied the SDF allegations about its involvement in eastern Syria, Turkish officials have often said that SDF fighters are targets for Turkish forces.

IS attacks

In March 2019, the SDF, supported by the U.S.-led coalition against IS, declared the physical collapse of the so-called IS caliphate after defeating the group in its last stronghold in Deir al-Zour province.

But IS militants have since continued to carry out attacks against SDF fighters and civilians in the Syrian province. In June and July, the SDF launched two major campaigns to hunt down IS remnants in Deir al-Zour, killing and arresting hundreds of militants.

SDF forces have launched a second phase of their campaign to hunt down remnants of the IS terror group in eastern Syria

Col. Myles Caggins, a spokesman for the global coalition against IS, told VOA that "the coalition's view is that the parties in [Deir al-Zour] should focus on keeping ISIS from causing chaos."

Regime cells

A senior SDF official, who spoke to VOA on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said that in addition to IS sleeper cells, the Syrian regime and its allies have also been using their networks to "cause chaos" in the SDF-held parts of Deir al-Zour.

"We are facing complex security challenges on many fronts in Deir al-Zour," the SDF official said, noting that "the Syrian regime is increasingly using some local networks to target our forces and civilians."

Forces loyal to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Iranian-backed militias control the western part of Deir al-Zour.

Reaction to the oil deal

An American company has reportedly reached a deal with Kurdish forces in northeast Syria to develop and export crude oil. Some experts say a recent deal between the SDF and a U.S. company to develop and export crude oil in areas under the SDF control in north-eastern Syria could be a factor in a growing Syrian government involvement in attacks in eastern Syria.

"This deal has infuriated the Syrian regime, because it means the region will never return under its control," said Omar Abu Layla, director of Deir Ezzor 24, a news and research group focused on developments in eastern Syria.

"Everyone thinks that only Daesh has sleeper cells in the Deir al-Zour region, but the reality is the [Syrian] regime, Iran and even al-Nusra [al-Qaida's former Syria affiliate] have their own cells in Deir al-Zour," he told VOA, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Abu Layla, whose group has a network of researchers in oil-rich Deir al-Zour, said the oil deal "was the last straw for the Syrian regime, who immediately gave the green light to its cells to launch attacks in Deir al-Zour."

The Syrian government last week condemned the deal between the SDF and the U.S. company, describing it as stealing Syria's oil.

Mismanagement and corruption

The SDF-held part of Deir al-Zour is run by the group's local affiliate, the Deir al-Zour Military Council, which has often been accused by locals and experts of corruption and incompetence.

"Since the liberation of Baghouz [IS's last stronghold in Deir al-Zour] in March 2019, there has been mismanagement by the international coalition and the SDF in the area [through] relying on corrupt civilian elements that were previously linked to IS and the regime," said Abdullah Al-Ghadhawi, a Syrian researcher with the Washington-based Center for Global Policy whose research focuses on dynamics in Deir al-Zour.

Ghadhawi told VOA that it was a strategic mistake by the SDF and its coalition partners "to expand the Deir al-Zour Military Council with unruly and unprofessional forces."

"IS is a party to the equation and it carries out activities, but the one who rules the region is responsible for its security," he added.

Analyst Abu Layla echoed similar views.

"If the SDF wants a sustainable security solution in Deir al-Zour, it needs to be more inclusive by having a better representation of the tribes in the local administration as well as bringing competent individuals to run the region," he said.

An SDF official admitted that corruption is a major problem for their local partners in Deir al-Zour. He said it would take some time to remove corrupt military and civilian officials from the ranks of the SDF.

Russia Blamed for Syria Confrontation

By Anastasia Kravtsov
TCMER Board Member



Russia has been blamed for a tense confrontation in Syria with the United States in which Russian military vehicles and helicopters surrounded U.S. armoured vehicles, leaving U.S. troops injured.

The White House National Security Council (NSC) said in a statement that a Russian vehicle struck a U.S. mine-resistant all-terrain vehicle, "causing injuries to the vehicle's crew."

Russia's Defence Ministry released a statement saying that it had warned the Defeat-ISIS Coalition in advance that a column of its military police would pass through.

"In spite of this, in breach of the existing agreements the U.S. troops attempted to block the Russian patrol" it said, adding that Russian military police took "necessary measures" to end the incident and carry on their mission.

The chief of the Russian General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, gave "full explanations" in a phone call with General Mark Milley, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Moscow said.

Videos shared on Twitter, apparently filmed by bystanders and the Russians themselves, appear to show Russian troop carriers and attack helicopters trying to box the U.S. vehicles in and then force them from the area, near Dayrick.

Vehicles appear to bump each other, and at one point — possibly at the beginning of the confrontation — one of the helicopters hovers very low over the halted Americans, blasting them with prop wash.

There were no details available from the NSC or Pentagon on how many crew were injured and what the extent of the injuries were.

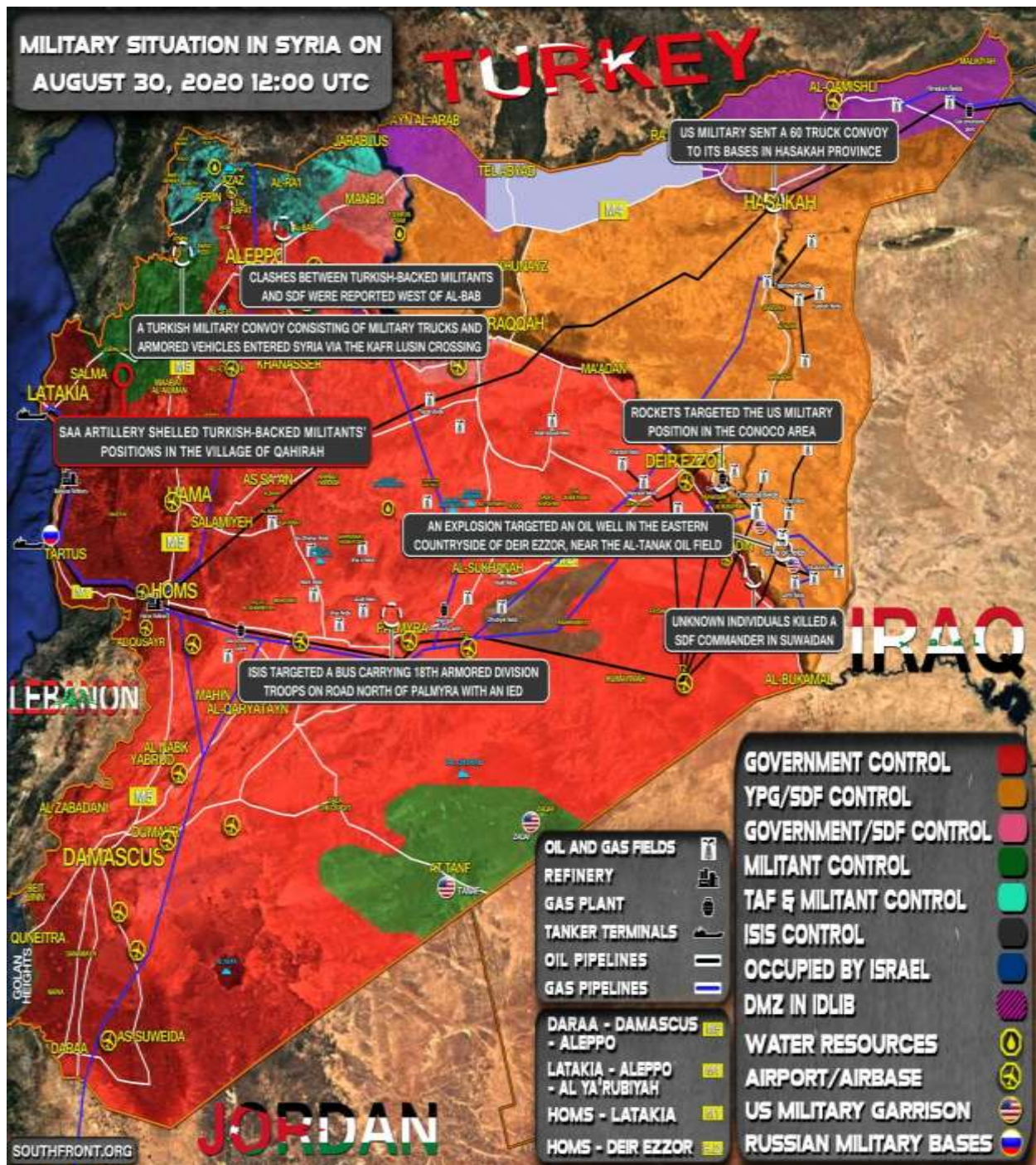
National Security Council spokesman John Ulyot said the U.S. vehicles were a security patrol of the anti-Islamic State coalition.

He said the patrol departed the area to de-escalate the situation.

"Unsafe and unprofessional actions like this represent a breach of de-confliction protocols, committed to by the United States and Russia in December 2019," said Ulyot.

"The coalition and the United States do not seek escalation with any national military forces, but U.S. forces always retain the inherent right and obligation to defend themselves from hostile acts."

U.S. and Russian troops frequently interact in Syria, but confrontations have been rare.



Egypt Could Send Troops to Libya

By Dastan Tovi
TCMER Board Member



Libya's civil war and its role in regional stability have become more uncertain since late June when the Egyptian parliament authorized its troops to cross the border to help the forces of General Khalifa Haftar against Turkey-backed Government of National Accord (GNA).

Egypt's military intervention attempt in eastern Libya, some observers say, is largely prompted by Cairo's increasing fear of Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic State (IS), gaining a foothold at home if the GNA defeats Haftar's forces in Libya.

"Egypt is very worried about militias; it is fighting extremists in Sinai and there have been extremists captured who have been linked back to militia groups in Libya and trained back in Libya," notes Mirette Mabrouk, the director of the Egypt Program at the Middle East Institute

While Cairo's decision was spurred by the Turkish introduction into the Libyan civil war, concerns of cross-border militia infiltration into Egypt increased in recent weeks after the odds shifted in favour of GNA in its battle against Egypt's ally, the Libyan National Army.

The Egyptian parliament has said it approved sending troops to the western front with Libya to defend its national security.

Condemning "regional powers support to radical forces," Egypt's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry recently called on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to stop the danger of terrorist organizations in Libya.

Egyptian local media has blamed the Turkish intervention in Libya for an increase in attacks in the northern Sinai Peninsula by terrorists, such as IS, who roam its western borders.

Originally known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, the Islamic State in Sinai province was formed in 2011 with an initial goal to fight Israel and “free” Jerusalem. The group shifted its operations to target the Egyptian army in 2013 after the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi was ousted in a coup by the current President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi.

Egypt has since failed to completely defeat IS despite large-scale counterterrorism operations in Sinai and joint security cooperation with Israel in the region.

Political threat

Some experts say that by sending forces to Libya, el-Sissi hopes to secure Egypt’s western border from militant infiltration and prevent a resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood. They say Cairo sees a real threat from the recent victories of Libya’s GNA, which includes Muslim Brotherhood allies, such as the Justice and Construction Party.

Egypt designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in late 2013, a decision strongly condemned by Turkey, which has hosted many of the group’s members since they fled Egypt.

In 2019, el-Sissi asked U.S. President Donald Trump to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, a move Turkey considered an attack on democracy in the Middle East.

El-Sissi, according to Hamed Al Ghwell of the Foreign Policy Institute, has “serious reasons” to fear that a Turkey-backed GNA rise to power in Libya could embolden the Muslim Brotherhood.

“He placed tens of thousands of the group’s members in jail and the opposition is still out there. Therefore, there is a serious fear that any potential rise of political Islam in Libya will impose a threat on Egypt,” says Al Ghwell.

Buffer zone

Army intervention by Egypt into Libya is a possibility and could favour el-Sissi’s government, which is also dealing with an IS threat, the Egyptian-Ethiopian dam dispute, and the deteriorating economic situation caused by the coronavirus.

However Egypt is unlikely to go as far as engaging in a direct confrontation in Libya, some experts say, especially because such a move could risk a direct regional war with Turkey. However, a more probable scenario is for Cairo to establish an Egypt-friendly area in eastern Libyan. This would in effect a buffer zone similar to the one Turkey did in Syria. It would allow Egypt free reign in Eastern Libya while protecting the nation against extremist organizations.

The U.S. in the past has called on the warring parties in Libya to return to a U.N.-led cease-fire and political negotiation.

In a meeting last month with the GNA leader, Fayeze Al-Sarraj, U.S. Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland and Commander of U.S. Africa Command, General Stephen Townsend, warned that “the current violence fuels the potential resurgence of ISIS and al-Qaida in Libya, is further dividing the country for the benefit of foreign actors, and prolongs human suffering.”

Transferring militias

The concern about Libya becoming a haven for militants has grown in recent months after reports of Turkey and Russia sending mercenary groups into the conflict. During an Egypt-Libya tribes conference in Cairo last month, el-Sissi vowed that “Egypt will not allow Libya to turn into a hub for terrorists and a refuge for outlaws even if this required Egypt’s direct interference in Libya to prevent it.”

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Tunisian IS members are among the fighters transferred from Syria to Libya. The Syrian war monitor claims that the total number of militants Turkey has transferred to Libya is 16,100, including 2,500 Tunisian jihadists.

A report by the U.S. Defence Department in mid-July found that as of the end of March, about 3,500 Syrian mercenaries were in Libya to support the GNA. The report, however, said it found no credible information that the fighters were members of IS and al-Qaida, and that some of them in Libya were supporting the Russian Wagner Group.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in February said the Syrian fighters in Libya belonged to the Syrian National Army, a Turkey-backed Syrian rebel group founded in 2017 to fight the government of Bashar al-Assad.



UAE Launches Historic Mission to Mars

By Jonathan Amos
BBC Science Correspondent



The United Arab Emirates' historic first mission to Mars is under way, after a successful lift-off in Japan. The Hope probe launched on an H2-A rocket from Tanegashima spaceport, and is now on a 500-million-km journey to study the planet's weather and climate.

Hope's arrival in February 2021 is set to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the UAE's formation.

Her Excellency Sarah Al Amiri, the science lead on Hope, spoke of her excitement and relief in seeing the rocket climb successfully into the sky. And she stated the impact on her country would be the same as that on America when its people watched the Apollo 11 Moon landing 51 years ago, also on 20 July.

"It was an anchor for an entire generation that stimulated everyone that watched it to push further and to dream bigger," she told BBC News.

"Today I am really glad that the children in the Emirates will wake up on the morning of the 20th of July having an anchor project of their own, having a new reality, having new possibilities, allowing them to further contribute and to create a larger impact on the world."

The UAE craft is one of three missions heading to Mars this month.

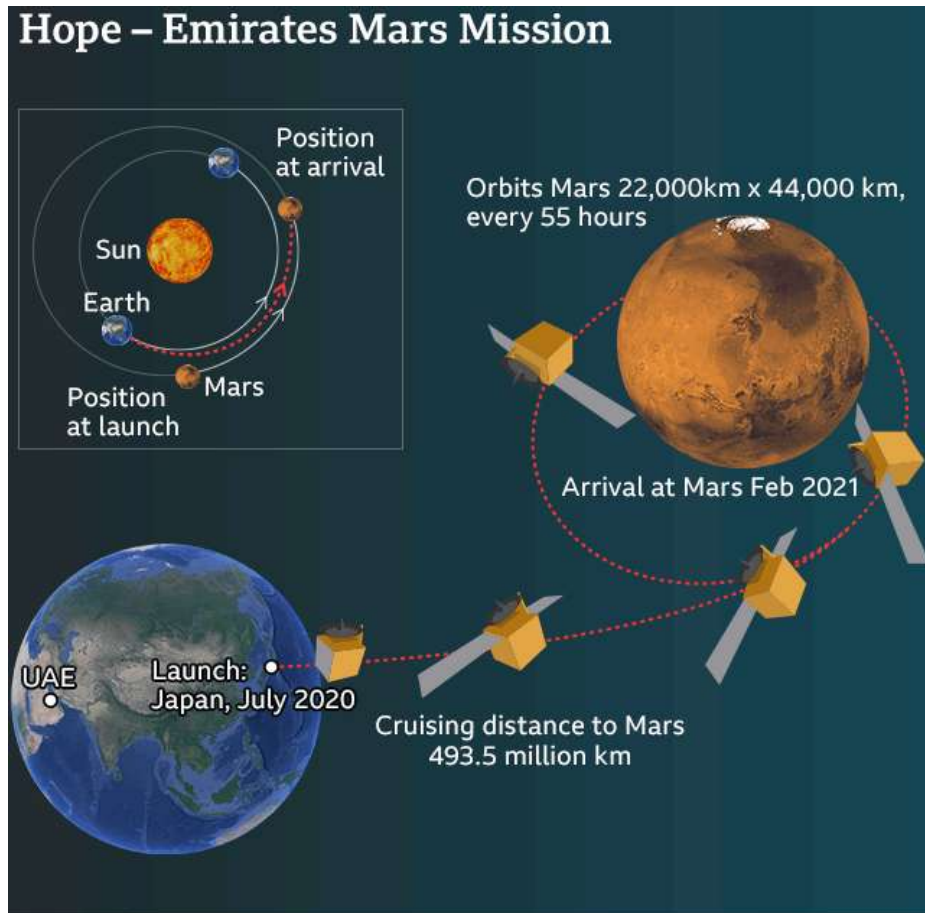
The US and China both have surface rovers in the late stages of preparation. The American mission, Perseverance, sent its congratulations to Hope. "I cannot wait to join you on the journey!" its Twitter account said.

Why is the UAE going to Mars?

The UAE has limited experience of designing and manufacturing spacecraft - and yet

here it is attempting something only the US, Russia, Europe and India have succeeded in doing. But it speaks to the Emiratis' ambition that they should dare to take on this challenge.

Their engineers, mentored by American experts, have produced a sophisticated probe in just six years - and when this satellite gets to Mars, it's expected to deliver novel science, revealing fresh insights on the workings of the planet's atmosphere.



Source: Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre or MBRS, Nasa, Google, Getty



In particular, scientists think it can add to our understanding of how Mars lost much of its air and with it a great deal of its water.

The Hope probe is regarded very much as a vehicle for inspiration - something that will attract more young people in the Emirates and across the Arab region to take up the sciences in school and in higher education.

The satellite is one of a number of projects the UAE government says signals its intention to move the country away from dependence on oil and gas and towards a future based on a knowledge economy.

But as ever when it comes to Mars, the risks are high. A half of all missions sent to the Red Planet have ended in failure. Hope project director, Omran Sharaf, recognises the dangers but insists his country is right to try.

"This is a research and development mission and, yes, failure is an option," he told BBC News. "However, failure to progress as a nation is not an option. And what matters the most here is the capacity and the capability that the UAE gained out of this mission, and the knowledge it brought into the country."

How has the UAE managed to do this?

The UAE government told the project team it couldn't purchase the spacecraft from a big, foreign corporation; it had to build the satellite itself.

This meant going into partnership with American universities that had the necessary experience. Emirati and US engineers and scientists worked alongside each other to design and build the spacecraft systems and the three onboard instruments that will study the planet.



While much of the satellite's fabrication occurred at the Laboratory for Atmospheric and Space Physics (LASP) at the University of Colorado, Boulder, considerable work was also undertaken at the Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC) in Dubai.

What science will Hope do at Mars?

The Emiratis didn't want to do "me too" science; they didn't want to turn up at the Red Planet and repeat measurements that had already been made by others. So they went to a US space agency (Nasa) advisory committee called the Mars Exploration Program Analysis Group (MEPAG) and asked what research a UAE probe could usefully add to the current state of knowledge.

MEPAG's recommendations framed Hope's objectives. In one line, the UAE satellite is going to study how energy moves through the atmosphere - from bottom to top, at all times of day, and through all the seasons of the year.

It will track features such as lofted dust which on Mars hugely influences the temperature of the atmosphere.

It will also look at what's happening with the behaviour of neutral atoms of hydrogen and oxygen right at the top of the atmosphere. There's a suspicion these atoms play a significant role in the ongoing erosion of Mars' atmosphere by the energetic particles that stream away from the Sun.

This plays into the story of why the planet is now missing most of the water it clearly had early in its history.



Sarah Al-Amiri, the scientist in charge of the mission.

To gather its observations, Hope will take up a near-equatorial orbit that stands off from the planet at a distance of 22,000km to 44,000km.

"The desire to see every piece of real estate at every time of day ended up making the orbit very large and elliptical," explained core science team lead on Hope, David Brain from LASP.

"By making those choices, we will for example be able to hover over Olympus Mons (the largest volcano in the Solar System) as Olympus Mons moves through different times of day. And at other times, we'll be letting Mars spin underneath us.

"We'll get full disc images of Mars, but our camera has filters, so we'll be doing science with those images - getting global views with different goggles on, if you like."

UAE Initiates Arab World's First Nuclear Plant

By Lina Zaidi
TCMER Board Member



The United Arab Emirates has launched operations at the Arab world's first nuclear power plant, on the Gulf coast just east of Qatar on the 1st of August. Nuclear fission has begun in one of four reactors at the Barakah plant, which uses South Korean technology. The plant was due to open in 2017 but start-up was delayed for what officials said were safety requirements.

The oil-rich UAE wants Barakah to meet a quarter of its energy needs, as it adopts more sustainable energy sources. The UAE is also investing heavily in solar power - a plentiful energy source in the Gulf. Some energy experts question the logic of Barakah, arguing that solar power is cleaner, cheaper and makes more sense in a region plagued by political tensions and terrorism.

Last year Qatar called the Barakah plant a "flagrant threat to regional peace and environment". Qatar is a bitter regional rival of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Across the Gulf lies Iran, hostile to the UAE, and subject to US sanctions because of its controversial nuclear programme.

Dr Paul Dorfman, head of the international Nuclear Consulting Group, wrote last year that "the tense geopolitical environment in the Gulf makes nuclear a more controversial issue in this region than elsewhere, as new nuclear power provides the capability to develop and make nuclear weapons".

The London-based scientist also highlighted the risk of radioactive pollution in the Gulf. In a statement the plant's developer the Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (ENEC) said it was committed to the "highest standards of safety and security" and that the plant would play an important role diversifying and decarbonising the economy.

"The Barakah plant will supply clean base load electricity to the grid - complementing intermittent renewable sources of energy such as solar and wind, which are not able to generate electricity on a continuous basis," it said.

"It will provide up to 25% of the UAE's electricity needs once fully operational and will help prevent the release of 21 million tons of carbon emissions, equivalent to removing 3.2 millions cars off the road annually."



UAE leaders hailed the start-up as a symbol of the country's scientific progress. The Barakah plant was developed by ENEC and Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO). Energy will be generated by 1,400-megawatt pressurised water reactors, designed in South Korea, called APR-1400.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) - the nuclear industry's main oversight body - praised Barakah in a tweet, saying the plant's Unit 1 had "achieved its first criticality" - that is, generation of a controlled fission chain reaction.

"This is an important milestone towards commercial operations and generating clean energy. IAEA has been supporting [United Arab Emirates] from the beginning of its nuclear power programme."

The leader of Abu Dhabi, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, tweeted his congratulations "marking this milestone in the roadmap for sustainable development".

US Examines Saudi Nuclear Program

By Frank Pabian



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia with Xi Jinping.
China is helping the Saudis develop nuclear fuel production ability.

American intelligence agencies are scrutinizing efforts by Saudi Arabia to build up its ability to produce nuclear fuel that could put the kingdom on a path to developing nuclear weapons.

Spy agencies in recent weeks circulated a classified analysis about the efforts underway inside Saudi Arabia, working with China, to build industrial capacity to produce nuclear fuel. The analysis has raised alarms that there might be secret Saudi-Chinese efforts to process raw uranium into a form that could later be enriched into weapons fuel, according to American officials.

As part of the study, they have identified a newly completed structure near a solar-panel production area near Riyadh, the Saudi capital, that some government analysts and outside experts suspect could be one of a number of undeclared nuclear sites.

American officials said that the Saudi efforts were still in an early stage, and that intelligence analysts had yet to draw firm conclusions about some of the sites under scrutiny. Even if the kingdom has decided to pursue a military nuclear program, they said, it would be years before it could have the ability to produce a single nuclear warhead.

Saudi officials have made no secret of their determination to keep pace with Iran, which has accelerated since President Trump abandoned the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pledged in 2018 that his kingdom would try to develop or acquire nuclear weapons if Iran continued its work toward a bomb.

Last week, the House Intelligence Committee, led by Representative Adam B. Schiff, Democrat of California, included a provision in the intelligence budget authorization bill requiring the administration to submit a report about Saudi efforts since 2015 to

develop a nuclear program, a clear indication that the committee suspects that some undeclared nuclear activity is going on.

The report, the provision stated, should include an assessment of “the state of nuclear cooperation between Saudi Arabia and any other country other than the United States, such as the People’s Republic of China or the Russian Federation.”

An article in The Wall Street Journal on Tuesday said that Western officials were concerned about a different facility in Saudi Arabia, in the country’s northwest desert. The Journal said it was part of a program with the Chinese to extract uranium yellowcake from uranium ore. That is a necessary first step in the process of obtaining uranium for later enrichment, either for use in a civilian nuclear reactor or, enriched to much higher levels, a nuclear weapon.



An image taken May 27 showing, top right, two square buildings that some analysts think could be a Saudi nuclear facility.

Saudi Arabia and China have publicly announced a number of joint nuclear projects in the kingdom — including one to extract uranium from seawater — with the stated goal of helping the world’s largest oil producer develop a nuclear energy program or become a uranium exporter.

Intelligence officials have searched for decades for evidence that the Saudis are seeking to become a nuclear weapons power, fearful that any such move could result in a broader, destabilizing nuclear arms race in the Middle East. So far, Israel is the only nuclear weapons state in the region, a status it has never officially confirmed.

In the 1990s, the Saudis helped bankroll Pakistan’s successful effort to produce a bomb. But it has never been clear whether Riyadh has a claim on a Pakistani weapon, or its technology. And 75 years after the detonation of the first nuclear weapon used in war, only nine nations possess nuclear weapons.

But ever since the debacle of the Iraq invasion in 2003, based on faulty assessments that Saddam Hussein was restarting the country’s once-robust nuclear program,

intelligence agencies have been far more reluctant to warn of nuclear progress for fear of repeating a colossal mistake.

At the White House, Trump administration officials seem relatively unperturbed by the Saudi effort. They say that until the Iranian nuclear program is permanently terminated, the Saudis will most likely keep the option open to produce their own fuel, leaving open a pathway to a weapon.

But now the administration is in the uncomfortable position of declaring it could not tolerate any nuclear production ability in Iran, while seeming to remain silent about its close allies, the Saudis, for whom it has forgiven human rights abuses and military adventurism.

It also comes at a time when the Trump administration is aggressively taking on China on numerous fronts, like its handling of the novel coronavirus and its efforts to crack down on freedoms in Hong Kong. So far, the White House has said nothing about China's array of nuclear deals with the Saudis.

Spokespeople for the National Security Council and the C.I.A. declined to comment. A spokesman for the Saudi Embassy in Washington did not respond to a message seeking comment.

The State Department said in a statement to The New York Times recently that while it would not comment on intelligence findings, "we routinely warn all our partners about the dangers of engagement with the P.R.C.'s civil nuclear business," referring to the People's Republic of China, "including the threats it presents of strategic manipulation and coercion, as well as technology theft. We strongly encourage all partners to work only with trusted suppliers who have strong non-proliferation standards."

The statement also said that "we oppose the spread of enrichment and reprocessing," and that the United States would "attach great importance" to continued compliance by the Saudis to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty. It urged Saudi Arabia to conclude an agreement with the United States "with strong non-proliferation protections that will enable Saudi and U.S. nuclear industries to cooperate."

From the beginning of his administration, Mr. Trump has conducted negotiations with the Saudis over an agreement, which would require congressional approval, enabling the United States to help Saudi Arabia build a civilian nuclear program.

But the Saudis would not agree to the kinds of restrictions that the United Arab Emirates signed onto several years ago, committing the country never to build its own fuel-production ability, which could be diverted to bomb production. Administration officials say the negotiations have been essentially stalled for the past year.

Saudi Arabia's work with the Chinese suggests that the Saudis may have now given up on the United States and turned to China instead to begin building the multibillion dollar infrastructure needed to produce nuclear fuel. China has traditionally not insisted on such strict non-proliferation safeguards, and is eager to lock in Saudi oil supplies.

Regional experts say part of the Saudi calculation stems from the view that the kingdom can no longer count on America's willingness to counter Iran.

That view gained more currency in the kingdom after the Obama administration signed the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, known as the J.C.P.O.A. It forced Iran to give up 97 percent of its fuel stockpile, but left open a path to production in the future.



A Google Earth image taken showing buildings early in the construction process at the suspected nuclear facility.

“They believe that as a result of the J.C.P.O.A., they can’t rely on anyone reining in the Iranians, and they are going to have to deter Iran themselves,” said Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, a former C.I.A. officer and director of intelligence and counterintelligence at the Energy Department.

The irony, Mr. Mowatt-Larssen said, is that Saudi Arabia has sought both civilian nuclear partnerships and defence agreements with two powers — Russia and China — that have deep economic ties to Iran.

Saudi Arabia has spent years developing a civilian nuclear program, and has a partnership with Argentina to build a reactor in the kingdom. But it has rejected limits on its own ability to control the production of nuclear fuel and it has been systemically acquiring skills — uranium exploration, nuclear engineering and ballistic missile manufacturing among them — that would position it to develop its own weapons if it decided to do so.

“It’s never been in doubt,” said Thomas M. Countryman, the assistant secretary of state for international security and non-proliferation from 2011 to 2017. “They see a value in having a latent capability to produce their own fuel and perhaps their own weapons.” The Saudis have been relatively open about their interest in developing the ability to enrich uranium, a radioactive element that is a main fuel of both power reactors and nuclear warheads.

Last year, a document titled, “Updates on Saudi National Atomic Energy Project,” posted by the International Atomic Energy Agency, or I.A.E.A., in Vienna, detailed a plan for building civilian reactors as well as fuelling them through the “localization” of uranium production.

The same document said the kingdom was looking for uranium deposits in more than 10,000 square miles of its own territory (an area about the size of Massachusetts) and had teamed up with Jordan to make yellowcake, a concentrated form of uranium ore. Its production is an intermediate step on the road to enriching uranium into nuclear fuel.

The facilities under intelligence scrutiny have thus far not been declared to the I.A.E.A. The agency monitors compliance with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which Saudi Arabia signed decades ago.

“The I.A.E.A. is unhappy with Saudi Arabia because they refuse to communicate about their existing program and where it is going,” said Robert Kelley, a former inspector for the atomic agency and a former official at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

The site identified by American intelligence as possibly nuclear in purpose lies in a secluded desert area not too far from the Saudi town of Al-Uyaynah and its Solar Village, a famous Saudi project to develop renewable energy.

David Albright, the president of the Institute for Science and International Security, a private group in Washington that tracks nuclear proliferation, analysed commercial satellite images of the desert site.

In a five-page report, Mr. Albright described the facility, built from 2013 to 2018, as suspicious given its relative isolation in the Saudi desert and its long access road.

A satellite image taken in 2014, before the structure had a roof, he said, revealed the installation of four large yellow cranes for lifting and moving heavy equipment across sprawling high-bay areas. Mr. Albright added that each building also had adjoining two-story offices and areas for support personnel.

He noted that his examination of satellite images could identify no signs of processing equipment or raw materials arriving at the desert facility.

In his report, Mr. Albright found the appearance of the Saudi buildings to be roughly comparable to that of Iran’s uranium conversion facility, a plant that was designed by China in the city of Isfahan. It is central to Iran’s nuclear ambitions.

But Mr. Kelley expressed scepticism that the satellite images showed evidence of secret nuclear work. The Uyaynah site, he said, “has been identified for years as a joint U.S.-Saudi solar cell development facility.”

“That is exactly what it looks like in satellite imagery,” he said.

Still, Mr. Kelley added, “I am completely convinced that Saudi Arabia and China are actively cooperating on plans for uranium mining and yellowcake production” elsewhere in the kingdom.

Saudi Ties with Pakistan hit Rock Bottom

By Farhatullah Babar



Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan (left) is welcomed by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Jeddah in September 2019.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have long cultivated what both Sunni Muslim countries call a "fraternal" relationship.

But the long-standing economic, political, and military ties between the South Asian state and the oil-rich Middle East kingdom have been based less on common values and more on transactions, experts say.

Riyadh has provided huge financial support in the form of cheap oil and loans to Islamabad, which has been reeling for years from a struggling economy and energy crisis. As the custodian of the two holiest sites in Islam, Saudi Arabia has given legitimacy to Pakistan's political and military elite, which has promoted a conservative Islamic identity in the country.

Riyadh also allegedly helped fund Pakistan's nuclear weapons program in the 1970s. In return, Pakistan has sent its forces to help defend the kingdom over the decades.

Islamabad has also cooperated closely with Saudi Arabia to curb the expanding influence in the region of Iran - Pakistan's western neighbour and Riyadh's mortal foe.

The Saudis have also been allowed to spread their extremist Wahhabi version of Islam in Pakistan through a vast network of mosques and seminaries. But those close ties seem to have hit rock bottom as the relationship has hit major snags.

'Stand With Us'

In unprecedentedly blunt comments, Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi lashed out at Saudi Arabia for its perceived lack of support for Islamabad's interests in the disputed Kashmir region. The Muslim-majority Himalayan region is divided between Pakistan and archrival India but claimed by both in its entirety. The two countries have fought three wars over the region.

Qureshi said on August 5 that Islamabad expected the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) - a group of 57 Muslim countries from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that is based in Saudi Arabia - to convene a meeting on Kashmir. Otherwise, he said, Pakistan would be "compelled" to "call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on the issue of Kashmir," which has been viewed as a threat to create a new bloc that would rival the Saudi-dominated OIC.

The foreign minister mentioned Iran, Turkey, and Qatar, Riyadh's regional rivals with which Pakistan has bolstered ties in recent years. Qureshi said Pakistan last year pulled out of an international summit for leaders of Muslim countries in Malaysia because of Riyadh's concerns that the meeting could undermine the OIC.

But now, he said, Pakistan was demanding Riyadh "show leadership on the issue" of Kashmir. "We have our own sensitivities," he said. "Gulf countries should understand this. I'm taking a position despite our good ties with Saudi Arabia. We cannot stay silent anymore on the sufferings of the Kashmiris."

Qureshi's comments came on the first anniversary of India's decision to revoke the special status of territory under its administration in Kashmir, a move that outraged Pakistan. Pakistan's Foreign Office on August 6 defended Qureshi's rare public criticism of Riyadh, saying the minister's remarks reflected the "people's aspirations and expectations."

Game of Loans

The same day, media reports in Pakistan said the government was forced to repay \$1 billion of a \$3 billion loan it had secured from Saudi Arabia. Those loans were part of a \$6.2 billion package announced by Saudi Arabia in October 2018, which included a total of \$3 billion in loans and a further \$3.2 billion loan for oil imports.

Media reports also said Pakistan had not received any oil under the deal since May.

In February, Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman signed investment deals with Pakistan worth \$20 billion, including for a \$10 billion refinery and petrochemicals complex in the port city of Gwadar. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was criticized and even mocked on social media for chauffeuring for the crown prince upon his arrival in Islamabad, a move intended to portray the kingdom's importance to Pakistan.

'Ungrateful'

"The Saudis have stood by Pakistan in times of need," says Husain Haqqani, Pakistan's former ambassador to the United States and a director at the Washington-based Hudson Institute. "But Riyadh feels Pakistan is less forthcoming in supporting Saudi Arabia on its security concerns while demanding both economic assistance and political support."

Pakistan failed to send troops to help a Saudi-led coalition that has been fighting Huthi rebels in Yemen since 2015. Meanwhile, Islamabad is wary of the burgeoning economic ties between Riyadh and New Delhi. Saudi Arabia has become India's fourth-largest trading partner and the main source of its oil imports, with bilateral trade at \$27 billion annually.

In comparison, Pakistan's bilateral trade with Saudi Arabia stands at just \$3.6 billion.

"The Saudis look at Pakistan as an ungrateful recipient of their assistance, including direct budget support, oil supplied on a deferred-payment basis, and several hundred thousand jobs for unskilled workers," Haqqani says. "But for the Saudis, India is a major trading partner and they are refusing to play Islamabad's zero-sum game on India."

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has expelled thousands of Pakistanis for not possessing valid legal documents, although some observers say the expulsions are the consequences of worsening diplomatic relations. Saudi Arabia remains the main source of Pakistan's remittances. Overseas Pakistani workers sent nearly \$19 billion home between July 2019 and April 2020, with \$4.4 billion remitted from Saudi Arabia alone, according to the State Bank of Pakistan.

Mosharraf Zaidi, a Pakistani columnist and former diplomat, says the diplomatic row will have "implications" for Islamabad, adding that the government has made "a habit of making bombastic statements about the closest strategic partners of the country."

"Saudi Arabia is not a casual partner of the country," Zaidi says.

Najam Sethi, a prominent Pakistani journalist, wrote in a column that Pakistani-Saudi ties had "hit rock bottom already" and Qureshi's "outburst is a consequence of this fact rather than a cause of it."

Imtiaz Gul, head of the independent Center for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad, says the spat with Riyadh is an "expression of frustration with the lack of Saudi support on Kashmir and its close economic relations with India."

But he says it does not signal a strategic realignment by Islamabad, which has forged warmer ties recently with Iran. "Pakistan will largely remain aligned with Saudi Arabia and the other OIC countries, including Turkey," Gul says. "The relationship with Iran has been tricky and very wobbly from the very beginning. And I don't expect it to reach to the level of our relationship with Turkey or Saudi Arabia."

'Thoughtless'

Pakistani opposition parties and political commentators have slammed the government for its public criticism of Riyadh, arguing that Islamabad cannot afford to alienate its Saudi benefactors.

Khurram Dastagir, a former defence minister and central leader of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party of ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, said Qureshi's remarks were "most unfortunate and ill-advised" because "we have a long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia."

Dastagir said that "if there are differences, they should not be expressed in the unfortunate manner as said by the foreign minister."

All those interested in how humans overcome adversity must read this book. Yasmine is one of the bravest people of our time. She is a shining example to all of us. -Ayaan Hirsi Ali

UNVEILED

*How Western Liberals
Empower Radical Islam*



YASMINE MOHAMMED