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Aims and Scope

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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.

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Australia with Trump on Iran

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

Australia is likely to join the United States, Japan and other Allies in keeping the Arabian Gulf, especially the Strait of Hormuz, open to international shipping. So far Australia is taking a watch and wait approach on ratcheting tensions between the US and Iran. Yet Prime Minister Scott Morrison was briefed by President Trump in Osaka at the G20 meeting about a possible Australian commitment.

President Trump is pressing allies to join the United States in creating a fleet of warships to protect commercial oil tankers from attack by Iran in the Persian Gulf and nearby waters.

Mark T. Esper, the acting Defence Secretary, is casting the effort, called Sentinel, as something far less than a military offensive against Iran, but one that could bring allies together to safeguard one of the world's vital trade routes.

The Royal Australian Navy on patrol in the Gulf 2001-3

Some European allies, who have routinely been chastised by Mr. Trump for not doing enough for their collective defence, do appear ready to join his initiative, while others appear open to discussing the proposal.

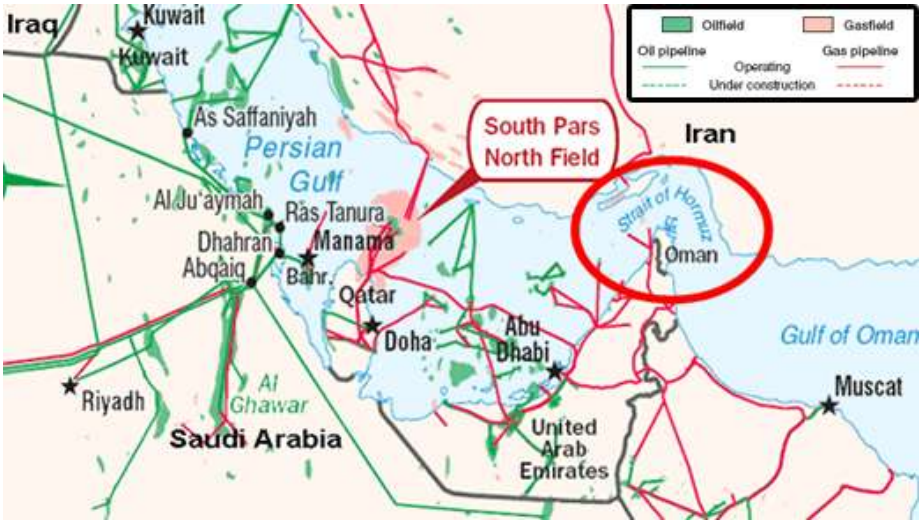
It remains unclear how the proposal would incorporate contributions from partners in the region. Australia, Japan, Britain and other NATO allies have not yet received details of the American plan, and are withholding public comment until they can review it.

Officials said that escorting individual tankers — there were about 50 a day in June — is not in the plans, as that would require dozens, if not hundreds, of ships. But the increased maritime and surveillance presence now advocated by the Trump administration would put the Iranians on notice that the United States and its allies are monitoring the shipping lanes much more closely, and would be close by if commercial shipping is threatened.

State Department officials said the program would seek to get allies to help put cameras on oil tankers and other ships moving through the Arabian Gulf. But it would also seek to enlist other countries to send their own ships.

Until a significant number of countries join the plan, or the Trump administration makes a decision to drastically increase the number of Navy warships assigned to the region, the flow of commercial tankers could be watched over by drones that could quickly relay details of a ship in danger, officials said.

The proposal for persuading allies to assign their warships to protect tankers is a specific, if still initial, step by the President who has made clear that he would like to avoid direct military confrontation. Donald Trump has veered between offering negotiations and threatening "obliteration," and he pulled back from strikes on Iran in retaliation for the shooting down of a drone, instead imposing additional sanctions against the country's supreme leader this week. But history has shown that guarding tankers in the gulf can bring the United States and Iran into the exact, direct confrontation that Mr. Trump is seeking to avoid.



Thirty years ago, during the Iran-Iraq conflict, both countries attacked hundreds of vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz in and out of the Arabian Gulf, putting a stranglehold on the key transit point for most of the world's crude oil at the time. Then, as now, the crisis began with assurances from American officials that the Navy was in the gulf to assure safe passage for oil tankers.

If Iran is looking for ways to hit back at the West for crippling American sanctions that have put a chokehold on the Iranian economy, an obvious pathway is to mine the Strait of Hormuz, as Tehran did during the Tanker War.

The navies of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates do maintain frigates, corvettes, and missile boats with Riyadh possessing the largest fleet. Their vessels and naval bases will be of critical importance to disrupt Iran's aggressive payback attacks.

Strait of Hormuz and the Risk of Uncontrolled Escalation

By John Kemp

The Strait of Hormuz, the narrow shipping lane between Iran and Oman named after the fabulously wealthy ancient kingdom of Ormus, has fascinated oil traders since the Iranian revolution in 1979.

Iran has periodically threatened to close the strait to enemy shipping, while the United States and its allies have pledged to keep it open and maintain freedom of navigation, by force if necessary.

The strait has become a symbolic flashpoint in the region-wide confrontation and indirect conflict between Iran on one side and the United States and Saudi Arabia on the other.

"The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important chokepoint" for oil, according to the Energy Information Administration (EIA), the independent statistical and analysis arm of the US Department of Energy.

Roughly 30% of all the world's seaborne flow of crude and products passes through the strait each year, so closure could result in a major disruption of global oil supplies.

During the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), both countries targeted tankers – with Iraq attacking vessels loading around Iran's Kharg Island in the northern Gulf, and Iran targeting ships further south and in the strait itself.

In the tanker war, the United States, the United Kingdom and several other countries responded by pledging to protect shipping in the central and southern parts of the area and arranging naval convoys.

The strait itself is only 21 miles wide at its narrowest point, and tankers are confined to an even narrower shipping lane just two miles broad in each direction, with a traffic separation scheme to reduce the risk of collision.

The limited room for manoeuvre substantially increases the vulnerability of slow-moving tanker traffic to attacks from either the shore or hostile vessels within the strait itself.
In practice, as the tanker war illustrated, the theatre of operations is much wider, including the entire Gulf, the strait and the neighbouring Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea and the southern Red Sea.

Iran has several options for targeting enemy shipping, including mines, coastal missile batteries, submarines, navy vessels, and a fleet of small fast and highly manoeuvrable boats operated by the country's revolutionary guard.

In the tanker war, most of the damage was done by mines, shore-based Silkworm missiles and speedboat attacks employing rocket-propelled grenades and gunfire.

Despite Iran's threats, and thousands of pages of analysis published on the country's capability to close the strait, it is unlikely the country could block the strait to shipping for more than a few days or a couple of weeks.

Efforts to close the strait would be interpreted by the United States and its allies as an act of aggression and draw an overwhelming military response. Given US aerial and maritime superiority in the area, the United States would probably be able to suppress onshore missile batteries as well surface and submarine naval activity and speedboats.

Assuming the United States and allied naval forces are willing to provide convoy protection again, Iran would not be able to attack escorted tankers without coming into direct conflict with US warships.

The real problem is that armed conflict in the strait could escalate into a broader conflict between the United States and Iran across multiple sub-theatres. Possible sub-theatres include Yemen, eastern Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and further afield, as well as the interior of Iran itself (a repeat of the war of the cities in the 1980s).

Concern about armed conflict in the strait is really concern about uncontrolled escalation between the United States and its allies and Iran.

For the moment, the United States is publicly committed to a policy of controlled escalation, employing progressively tighter economic sanctions to force Iran to negotiate on nuclear and other issues. Senior US officials have reassured their counterparts in Europe, Russia and China that controlled economic escalation is a viable alternative to military confrontation.

US diplomats tend to refer to this approach as "coercive diplomacy" and present it to sometimes sceptical foreign audiences as an alternative to inevitable war. But coercive diplomacy requires exquisite calibration of the degree of pressure to ensure controlled escalation does not spiral into uncontrolled escalation.

The United States has sharply increased economic pressure on Iran by eliminating all waivers for buyers of Iran's crude oil from the start of May and is now threatening the country's petrochemical exports.

Dramatic economic escalation has been followed by a series of attacks on shipping that have been blamed by some on Iran; a missile attack in Baghdad; intelligence reports of hostile activity aimed at US forces; and the deployment of additional US troops to the region.

As sanctions relief promised to Iran under the 2015 nuclear agreement has evaporated, Tehran has stepped up nuclear activities and threatened to stop complying with some of the accord's other terms.

The abrupt escalation of tensions seems to have caught at least some policymakers on all sides unprepared and led to a recent scramble to de-escalate. The United States has publicly disavowed regime change as an objective, offered negotiations without preconditions, and highlighted the small number of additional troops being sent to the region.

Iran has stated it does not want war and has released a previously detained US resident, both of which appear to be confidence-building measures. Diplomats and top policymakers from Switzerland, Germany and Japan all appear to be involved in efforts to mediate between the two sides.

Top US policymakers appear convinced they have achieved "escalation dominance", allowing them to dial-up and dial-down pressure on Iran at will and precisely without too much risk. In this scenario, Iran's best option is always to accept the degree of pressure applied by the United States, however unpleasant, rather than risk escalating even further.

Right now, the United States is committed to keeping economic pressure in place, while avoiding an outbreak of direct armed conflict.

That means convincing allies to maintain sanctions while calculating that Iran will continue to abide by most of the provisions of the nuclear agreement and avoid military provocations. De-escalating the military confrontation while leaving the economic pressure campaign in place. But in such a tense environment, there is always the risk that a minor incident or accident will escalate in ways not planned by top policymakers.

Top leaders may not have full control over subordinates, proxies and allies, and could find themselves pushed towards a conflict they insist they do not want.

Iran may not have full control over the militias it has armed in Yemen. The United States may not have full control over hawkish elements in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel that want war with Iran.

In the current state of high tension, hawkish elements in both the US administration and the Iranian government may exploit any incident to push their respective leaders to escalate. The vulnerability of tankers in the Strait of Hormuz is precisely the sort of incident that could spark an unplanned and uncontrolled escalation.

Hormuz is not important because of the volume of oil that flows through the strait daily, but because it is an ultra-tense flashpoint that could spark a much broader conflict both sides insist they do not want.

Iran has increased enriched uranium

By Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member

Iran said last month that it would quadruple its production of low-enriched uranium

The head of the global nuclear watchdog has confirmed Iran is increasing its production of enriched uranium. But the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Chief Yukiya Amano says it was not clear when they will reach a limit set under a 2015 international deal.

Iran announced last month that it would suspend some commitments in retaliation for sanctions reinstated by the US. Mr Amano also said he was worried about the current tensions over the Iranian nuclear issue and called for dialogue.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif later said reducing tensions was only possible by stopping what he called the "economic war by America". "Those who wage such wars cannot expect to remain safe," he told a news conference during a visit to Tehran by his German counterpart, Heiko Maas. Mr Maas warned that the situation in the region was "highly explosive and extremely serious" and could lead to a military escalation between the US and Iran.

How have tensions risen?
US President Donald Trump abandoned the nuclear deal last year and reinstated sanctions that had been lifted in return for Iran limiting its nuclear activities. Then last month, he ended exemptions from US secondary sanctions for countries that continued buying oil from Iran. This decision was intended to bring Iranian oil exports to zero, denying their government its main source of revenue.

Days later, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said his country was rolling back some restrictions under the deal. This included no longer complying with caps on its stockpiles of enriched uranium and heavy water - set at 300kg and 130 tonnes respectively - and halting sales of surplus supplies overseas.

Enriched uranium is used to make reactor fuel but also nuclear weapons, while spent fuel from a heavy-water reactor contains plutonium that would be suitable for a bomb.

Mr Rouhani also gave the other five states still party to the nuclear deal - Germany, the UK, France, China and Russia - until 7 July to protect Iranian oil sales from US sanctions. Otherwise Iran will suspend its restrictions on the purity of enriched uranium.

At the same time, the White House sent an aircraft carrier strike group, B-52 bombers, and a Patriot missile defence battery to the Gulf because of "troubling and escalatory indications" related to Iran.

Source: New Scientist/ Global Security

Iran was subsequently accused by the US of being behind attacks on four oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates; two oil pumping stations in Saudi Arabia; and the Green Zone in the Iraqi capital Baghdad, where many foreign embassies are located. Iran denied the allegations.

Then, on 20 May, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran announced that it would quadruple its production of low-enriched uranium and had informed the IAEA, which is tasked with monitoring Iranian compliance with the nuclear deal.

What have the IAEA said?
The nuclear watchdog's chief confirmed that Iran had increased its production rate. But Mr Amano declined to specify by how much and said it was not clear when the stockpile limit would be exceeded.

He told the IAEA's Board of Governors it was essential that Iran fully implemented its commitments under the nuclear deal. "As I have constantly emphasised, the nuclear-related commitments entered into by Iran under the [deal] represent a significant gain for nuclear verification," he said. "I therefore hope that ways can be found to reduce current tensions through dialogue."

Germany's Foreign Minister stressed that the European Union wanted to fulfil their obligations under the deal and were attempting to provide Iran with alternative ways to trade.

The EU have set up a "special purpose vehicle" that would essentially allow goods to be bartered between Iranian and foreign companies without direct financial transactions. But the mechanism - known as Instex - is not yet operational.

The End of the Syrian Civil War

By E. Zisser

Syria's President Bashar al-Assad with Russia's President Vladimir Putin

The civil war that raged in Syria over the past eight years seems to be drawing to a close. In July 2018, the Syrian regime regained control of the southern part of the country, including the town of Dar'a where the revolt began in March 2011. Five months later in December 2018, U.S. president Donald Trump announced a tentative decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, driving the final nail in the coffin of the rebellion.

Although the return of stability and security to the war-torn country is still a far-off goal, the military campaign is effectively over. The efforts of the rebel groups—supported by large segments of the Syrian population—to overthrow the Assad regime, which has ruled the country since 1970, have failed. President Bashar Assad emerged as the undisputed winner though he did so only thanks to the massive military aid rendered by Moscow, Tehran, and Iran's Hezbollah Lebanese proxy. How will the end of the war affect Syria's relations with its patrons, and what will be its implications for wider Middle Eastern stability?

The Ongoing Struggle for Syria

Viewed from a broad historical perspective, the end of the civil war concludes yet another chapter in "the struggle for Syria" that has plagued the country since gaining independence in April 1946, or indeed, since its designation as a distinct political entity under French mandate at the end of the 1920s

For the first one-third of this time, the Syrian state was a weak entity, lacking in stability, subject to frequent military coups and regime changes with no effective ruling centre, a punching bag for regional and great power interference alike. Hafez Assad's rise to power in November 1970 seemed to have brought this struggle to an end by ushering in a prolonged spell of domestic stability and regional pre-eminence that continued into the reign of Bashar, who in June 2000 succeeded his father. This was due in no small part to the broad social base underpinning the regime, comprising a diverse coalition of minority

communities and groups led by the Alawites, on the one hand, and the Sunni peasantry on the other.

With the outbreak of the civil war, the struggle for Syria was renewed. For most belligerents—whether Bashar and his supporters or the various opposition factions, including some Islamist groups not connected to the Islamic State (ISIS)—the struggle revolved around keeping or gaining control of the Syrian state and determining its future character and governance (i.e., Baathist secularism vs. Islamist rule) as none of them wished its demise or incorporation into a wider entity.

In this respect, the role played by ISIS in the Syrian civil war, with its avowed goal of incorporating the Levant into the newly proclaimed caliphate, was the exception. If anything, ISIS is more a product of the Iraqi rather than the Syrian political scene: It is there where its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged, operated, and proclaimed himself caliph. By contrast, ISIS's Syrian branch, Jabhat an-Nusra, led by the Syrian Abu Muhammad Julani, has always been considered an integral part of Greater Syria (*ash-Sham*): hence, Jabhat an-Nusra's conflict with its parent organization and hence its later conflict with al-Qaeda, with which it subsequently came to be affiliated.

Debunking the "Arab Spring" Illusion

In an address at Damascus University on June 20, 2011, three months after the outbreak of the anti-regime uprising, Assad assured his audience that these "intrigues and acts of murder do not have it in their power to prevent the blossoming in Syria," vowing to turn this decisive moment into a … day, in which the hope will throb that our homeland will return to being the place of quiet and calm we have become accustomed to.

It took the Syrian president nearly eight years to restore (a semblance of) the promised "quiet and calm," albeit at the horrendous cost of more than half-a-million fatalities, two million wounded, some five to eight million refugees who fled the country, and untold mayhem and destruction. What made this bloodbath particularly ironic is that on his ascendance a decade earlier, the young Bashar tried to introduce certain changes, and even some limited reform, in the socioeconomic realm. Yet, having realized that these winds of change were turning into a storm, he backed down and brought the short-lived "Damascus Spring" to an abrupt end. Those who had raised their voices in favour of reform and change, in no small measure at the encouragement of Bashar himself, were imprisoned, and severe restrictions on the freedom of expression were reintroduced.

Bashar Assad

But in 2011, Assad was confronted with a fresh and much less controllable "spring" not of his own making, comprised of large numbers of disgruntled peasants and periphery residents yearning for improvement in their socioeconomic lot rather than Damascene

intellectuals and thinkers. Now, Assad was forced to use harsher measures to repress the rapidly spreading rebellion. His predicament was substantially aggravated by the fact that the Syrian upheaval was the local manifestation of a tidal wave of regional uprisings that ensued in December 2010 and led to the fall of the long-reigning dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. More worryingly, with the uprisings lauded in the West as "the Arab Spring" and actively supported by Western powers—whether tacitly as in the Obama administration's pressure on Egyptian president Mubarak to step down or directly through the military intervention that overthrew Libya's dictator Mu'ammar Qaddafi—the Assad regime seemed to be next in line on the Western hit list. As President Obama put it in a May 2011 speech, "The Syrian people have shown their courage in demanding a transition to democracy. President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition, or get out of the way."

The Assad regime weathered the storm through massive military support from Tehran and Moscow, which also shielded it from repeated U.S. intervention threats—most notably in August 2012 when Obama announced his intention to launch a punitive strike in response to the deadly gassing of more than a thousand Syrian civilians.

In doing so, the Assad regime not only defeated a lethal threat to its existence but also spelled the end of Western delusions of regional democratization and openness that would allow ordinary Middle Easterners to determine their own fate and the fate of their respective societies and states. Eight years after it was triggered by the self-immolation of a disgruntled Tunisian peddler, the "Arab Spring" had not only failed to bring the region closer to these cherished ideals but made their attainment ever more remote and nowhere more so than in Syria. Apart from the horrendous loss of life and disastrous destruction of properties and infrastructures, the civil war dealt a mortal blow to the yearning for change and the readiness to fight for it. Even more, it undermined the faith in the ability of the individual and society to bring about the desired changes.

Most Western observers of the Middle East should have paid greater heed to their regional counterparts who had long argued that, given the historical legacy and socioeconomic conditions attending decades of rule by authoritarian monarchies and military dictatorships, the Arab world was not ripe for a change, certainly not for democracy. Local analysts were, therefore, much more cautious and circumscribed in defining the regional turbulence, using the term *harak*—a movement or a shift that might not necessarily lead anywhere—rather than euphoric terms signifying a sharp change of direction or break from past practices. Indeed, careful examination of the circumstances in each state affected by the "Arab Spring," especially the dynamics of the events and the actors involved in them, reveals that nowhere were these upheavals initiated by forces seeking liberal-type freedoms and democratization. Rather, they were in many instances a corollary of socioeconomic protests by youths seeking status and a more meaningful role for their generation. They were a far cry from the Western notion of an "Arab Spring."

Denting the Pan-ideologies

Just as the Syrian civil war exposed the hollowness of the euphoric Western depiction of the Arab uprisings, so it dealt a devastating blow to the related ideal of pan-Arabism, which had dominated inter-Arab politics for much of the twentieth century.

To be sure, the notion of the "Arab Nation" (or the "Arab World") underpinning the pan-Arab ideal had been in steady decline since Syria dissolved its unification with Egypt in 1961 followed by the astounding Israeli victory over an all-Arab coalition in the June 1967 war. So much so, that American academic Fouad Ajami pronounced the "end of Pan-

Arabism" upon the signing of the September 1978 Israel-Egypt Camp David agreements, which culminated six months later in a full-fledged peace accord. Thus, when the Arab uprisings broke out, they were widely seen as a resurgence of Arabism (and Sunni identity) that would uplift the "Arab Nation" from the depths to which it had sunk and cut non-Arab Turkey and Iran down to size.

In fact, the opposite happened. Not only did the uprisings not lead to greater Arab unity and solidarity, but they allowed Tehran and Ankara to extend their power and influence across the region. In this respect, the Syrian civil war, too, played a key role. Within this framework, Ankara exploited the civil war to gain a foot-hold in Syria's northern part—a longstanding goal dating back to the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the post-World War I redrawing of the Middle East's borders. For its part, Tehran used its support for the Assad regime to establish a firm military foothold in Syria, both directly via its Islamic Revolutionary Guards and indirectly through Hezbollah and other proxy Shiite militias. Tehran has thus come closer than ever to creating a land corridor from the Iranian border all the way to the Mediterranean Sea.

It is indeed doubly ironic that Syria, which has long cast itself as "the beating heart of Arabism," has been forced to rely on non-Arab Iran for survival while confronting some of its most prominent Arab sisters (notably Riyadh and the Gulf monarchies), and that its avowedly secularist Baathist government has been saved by an Islamist regime. And while this dependence has been mitigated by Russia's military presence, it has, nevertheless, drawn Damascus into the maelstrom of international politics and reduced its control over its own destiny as when in January 2018 and February 2019, Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara held summit meetings to discuss Syria's future. This reliance on Iran has also put the Assadregime on a collision course with Israel, which has sought to prevent the entrenchment of Tehran's military presence through sustained air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria.

Islamism's Moderate Revival

Not surprisingly, the steady decline in pan-Arabism was matched by a corresponding rise in Islamist power and influence given the zero-sum relationship between the two rival ideologies. For a while, it seemed that the post-World War I Middle Eastern system, based on the territorial nation state and largely ruled by predominantly secularist, authoritarian regimes, would provide a lasting substitute to this order. But the powerful religious undercurrents among the region's deeply devout societies continued to bedevil the regimes (e.g., the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's decades-long violent resistance), gaining strong momentum from the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the attendant surge of Islamist terror groups (e.g., Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaeda). These currents then culminated in the "Arab Spring" with the replacement of autocratic rulers in Tunisia and (temporarily) in Egypt by Islamist regimes.

Islamization played an important role in the Syrian civil war as well, with Islamic slogans and terminology becoming a unifying factor and force multiplier for the various rebel groups while those loyal to pan-Arabism or Syrian territorial nationalism fell behind. Nor was this the first time for the regime to be endangered by violent Islamism. Hafez Assad was confronted with a nationwide Muslim Brotherhood revolt in the early 1980s, which he suppressed with great difficulty and the utmost brutality. The revolt culminated in the notorious February 1982 Hama massacre where thousands of civilians were slaughtered and large parts of the city were razed. The Syrian Brotherhood never recovered from this setback, and the Islamist banner during the 2011-18 uprising was raised by Salafist and jihadist groups whose following in the country's rural and peripheral areas was wider

than the Brotherhood's mainly urban support base. The result has been a far heavier human toll attending the suppression of the recent revolt and the preservation of the Baathist-type of "political secularism," in which the ruling elites and significant parts of the population refuse to grant clerics political control over their lives.

Changing the Great-power Game

Apart from its far-reaching domestic and regional implications, the Syrian civil war played a key role in expediting the end of the Pax Americana that began with the 1991 Kuwait war and reached its peak following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the East European bloc. Yet this dominance was rapidly undone by President Obama's hasty disengagement from Afghanistan and Iraq, which created a power vacuum that allowed the Taliban to intensify their fight against the Kabul government and laid the groundwork for the advent of ISIS and the establishment of the Islamic State in vast tracts of Iraq and Syria.

The Syrian civil war accelerated the process of U.S. regional retrenchment. With Obama's repeated calls for Assad's abdication and warnings of harsh retribution ignored by the Syrian dictator, and Moscow and Tehran throwing their weight behind their prized protégé, Washington looked a pale shadow of the omnipotent superpower it seemed two decades earlier—an exhausted and disillusioned power, lacking the will and the power to engage in the region's volatile affairs.

This image was reinforced by President Trump's America-First policy. To be sure, in April 2017 and again in April 2018, the administration bombed Syrian regime targets in retribution for its use of chemical weapons against civilians (something repeatedly threatened but never done by Obama) thus restoring a semblance of U.S. deterrence—but this was the exception. Following in its predecessor's footsteps, the Trump administration continued to prosecute the "small war" of fighting ISIS, which played a secondary role in the Syrian civil war, while leaving Moscow a free hand to suppress the anti-regime rebels (some of whom were armed and trained by Washington). Then Washington announced in December 2018 its intention to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. Little wonder that as Assad emerged victorious from his eight-year struggle for survival, Russian president Vladimir Putin has come to be seen as the real winner of the conflict, having put his political prestige on the line to ensure his protégé's survival against the widespread warnings of a replay of Russia's Afghanistan debacle. Standing in stark contrast to Washington's passivity and inaction, this determined risk-taking allowed Moscow to regain its long-lost position as the Middle East's preeminent foreign power.

It is, nevertheless, far too premature to pronounce the end of U.S. Middle East pre-eminence, let alone abdication of its regional duties and interests. It is true that U.S. administrations have experienced repeated setbacks since entering the region in strength in the post-World War II era, including the 1950s loss of the Egyptian foothold and the 1979 loss of Iran as an ally. But Washington has always found the determination and sense of purpose to rebound as it did when detaching Egypt from Moscow in the 1970s, reversing Iraq's 1990 annexation of Kuwait, and presiding over Israel's growing reconciliation with its Arab neighbours.

Moreover, to the credit of the Obama and the Trump administrations, it should be noted that Syria has never featured prominently in U.S. interests. When, in the 1950s, the country came under Soviet patronage, Washington focused on preventing Damascus from disrupting its regional interests rather than turning Syria into a full-fledged U.S. ally. At times, Washington tried to rally Damascus behind its interests, for example, through

participation in the 1991 anti-Iraq war coalition and the U.S.-sponsored negotiations with Israel in the 1990s.

In this respect, the looming withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria is not out of line with Washington's post-WWII policy or without its own logic, namely, disengaging from the Syrian marsh after attaining the desired goal, however modest and local, rather than sinking deeper into this treacherous water. It nevertheless, remains an open question whether greater support for the rebels at the early stages of the conflict and enforcement of Obama's threatened retribution for Bashar's use of chemical weapons would have entailed real gains for Washington, perhaps even sparing the need for later military intervention.

Conclusion

With the anti-regime revolt all but suppressed, President Assad will likely focus more on reasserting his authority and rebuilding the security forces than reconstructing the Syrian state and society—beyond providing the population with the basic necessities of life. He is unlikely to be concerned about absorbing the millions of refugees who fled the country. In fact, the regime seems to view the mass exodus as a blessing in disguise that rid the country of a large, hostile population and helped reduce the economic burden created by Syria's rapid prewar natural population growth—one of the highest in the world and an important impetus for the rebellion. In Bashar's words: In this war we lost our best sons. The country's economic infrastructure has been destroyed almost completely. We spent a lot of money, and the war cost us in blood and sweat. All this is true, but in return we have gained a healthier and more harmonious society in the true and deepest sense of the term harmony.

This in turn means that the end of the civil war does not portend a new departure for Syria. Domestically, it promises a return to the pre-war reality of underdevelopment and backwardness under a dictatorial regime. Internationally, it will likely mean continued hostility and suspicion toward the West, especially the United States and Israel, and continued deference to Russia and Iran coupled with an attempt to widen the regime's room for manoeuvring and freedom of action vis-à-vis these patrons. Damascus will also endeavour to limit Israel's military operations against Iranian targets on Syrian soil while seeking to avoid an all-out confrontation.

More importantly, post-war Syria can be viewed as a microcosm of regional processes and undercurrents in the post-Arab uprisings era—a region pointed to the past rather than the future, whose inhabitants live in misery and hopelessness, lacking basic freedoms and human rights, and ravaged by endemic violence, radicalism, and terrorism. With the local dictatorial regimes that ruled the region for most of the twentieth century proving their ability to retain power in the face of the challenges posed by militant Islam and (to a far lesser extent) liberal democracy, the Middle East will continue in the foreseeable future to hover on the abyss while narrowly avoiding falling into it.

July 31 Deadline for Turkey

By Don Gibbons
CMER Board Member

The Pentagon has warned Turkey that it will suspend training of its pilots on the advanced F-35 fighter jet at the end of July and terminate Turkey's participation in the fighter jet programme if it buys Russia's S-400 missile defence system. Acting Defence Secretary Patrick Shanahan, in a letter sent on Thursday to Turkey's Minister of Defence Hulusi Akar, said Turkish pilots at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona would have time to complete their flight training by July 31, but no new students would be accepted.

Russian S-400 missile air defence systems

In addition, Turkey's participation in the programme, such as producing hundreds of parts that make up the F-35s fuselage and engines, would be phased out. The Pentagon said the phase-out would occur over time so as not to disrupt the F-35 production line, but would end early next year. "All actions taken on the F-35 are based on risks the S-400 presence in Turkey would have," Shanahan wrote to his Turkish counterpart.

Four F-35's Turkey bought are still in US custody at Luke AFB and will not be transferred to Turkey at this time, a defence official said. The Pentagon is considering whether Turkey could be reimbursed for the jets, which now cost roughly US$90 million each.

"We are under discussions internally as to how to deal with the four aircraft they have already taken delivery on," said Ellen Lord, undersecretary of defence for acquisition and sustainment.

There are 42 Turkish pilots taking part in F-35 flight training at Luke, the Pentagon said. Thirty-four of them may be able to complete their training by the July deadline, but if not, their access will be cut off.

"All Turkish personnel, including two instructor pilots, in the US related to the F-35 programme will be required to depart the country July 31, 2019. At this point, all Invitational Travel Orders (ITOs) and/or Common Access Cards (CACs) will be cancelled, and Turkish Air Force personnel will be prohibited from entering Luke AFB or Eglin AFB and applicable buildings," the Pentagon said.

A Lockheed Martin F-35 aircraft at an air show in Berlin in April 2018

The US has warned Turkey repeatedly that it would not allow the transfer of the advanced fighter jet, which is produced by Fort Worth, Texas-based Lockheed Martin Aeronautics, to Turkey if it bought Russia's missile defence system. US officials worry that if Turkey uses the Russian system in conjunction with the F-35, it could result in some of the fighter jet's classified capabilities or vulnerabilities being revealed to potential US adversaries.

"We do not want to have the F-35 in close proximity to the S-400 for a length of time, because of the ability to understand the profile of the F-35," Lord said.

The Pentagon also said the suspension of sending any F-35 support equipment to Turkey would continue and the US would look at alternative sources to supply the components Turkey has been producing.

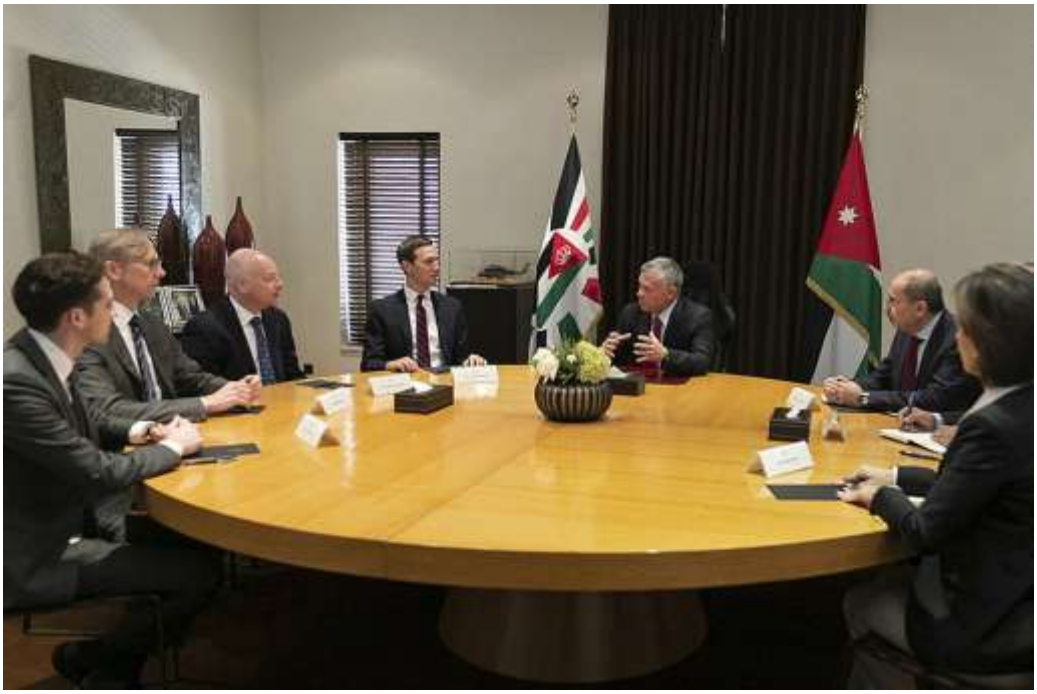
Lord said Turkey provides 937 parts for the jet. The Pentagon is now working with Lockheed to find replacement sources for the parts and Pratt & Whitney for substitute supply lines for the engines.

The US said it will continue to conduct military training exercises with Turkey. The extended time frame for when the Turkish pilots would have to leave the United States was intended to leave the door open for the Turkish government to cancel its order from Russia.

However it was unclear whether US F-35 jets would join exercises with Turkey if it completes its acquisition of the Russian missile defence system.

Trump's Middle East Peace Conference

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director



Presidential advisers Jared Kushner (centre l.) and Jason Greenblatt (third from l.) meet with Jordan's King Abdullah II (centre r.) and his advisers, in Amman, Jordan, May 29.

As the Trump administration prepares for its the first leg of its Middle East peace plan, it is exerting immense pressure on two of America's closest Arab allies to take part in a process seen as toxic by their own publics.

Rather than advocates for the administration's undisclosed "ultimate deal," Jordan and Egypt have become reluctant guests at the conference. They must walk a political tightrope to appease Washington while not angering Palestinian allies and their own people who fear the Trump plan will be the death-knell of Palestinian statehood.

For their part, Palestinians are also applying pressure to Arab states to boycott the economic workshop, which many Arabs fear will offer investment projects to Palestinians in return for recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem and the West Bank – a "selling off" of Palestinian statehood.

So Jordan, torn between its allies abroad and stability at home, is trying to forge a third way: using the meetings to put the Palestinian statehood issue e workshop as a platform to promote the two-state solution.

When the White House stated in early June that Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco had agreed to take part in the June 25 economic conference in Bahrain – it unleashed a media firestorm. Arab and Palestinian media expressed "shock and anger," as the three countries sought to downplay their involvement. Jordanian Foreign Minister Safadi stressed that Jordan "has not officially declared its position," Morocco's prime minister denied any knowledge, and Egypt was notably silent.

With Lebanon and Iraq boycotting, Palestinian Authority spokesman Ibrahim Melhem warned that Jordan and Egypt's participation "would carry wrong messages about the unity of the Arab position." Yet in private the Palestinian leadership acknowledges the "immense pressure" Arab states are facing and are urging participants to instead drag their feet over U.S. plans, which is precisely what some officials privately say they will do.
Saudi Arabia as enforcer

When crafting the "deal of the century," the Trump administration viewed the support of Jordan and Egypt – which border either side of Israel and the Palestinian territories and are the only two Arab states with peace treaties with Israel – as automatic. Jordan and Egypt are the second and third biggest recipients of U.S. aid in the world after Israel; Jordan received $1.52 billion in financial and military assistance in 2018, while Egypt received $1.3 billion.

With Jordan facing record 19% unemployment and Egypt battling inflation, and both weathering debt crises, the administration believed neither was in a position to say no to Washington. So rather than involve Jordan and Egypt, President Donald Trump and his son-in-law and envoy Jared Kushner have overridden Amman and Cairo and arranged the peace plan directly with Saudi Arabia, as the political force they thought could deliver much of the Arab world.

To Saudi Arabia and other U.S. allies in the Gulf, the Palestinian issue increasingly has been seen as a stumbling block to forging a closer alliance with Israel in order to counter perceived Iranian aggression in the region.

Jordan was already the object of substantial Saudi financial pressure. Aid was temporarily cut off over Amman's criticism of the relocation of the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem and the Trump administration's heavy-handed tactics with the Palestinians. How quickly the aid is being restored appears now to be linked to Jordan's support for the Bahrain conference.

Palestinian Territories (in Maroon)

Roughly half of Jordan's citizens, some 3 million people, are of Palestinian origin. The vast majority of them – some 2.2 million – are card-carrying U.N.-recognized refugees, including descendants of those who fled or were pushed into the kingdom during the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli conflicts. The other 3 million-plus Jordanians hail from indigenous

East Bank tribes who make up the army, the security services, and much of the political elite in the kingdom.

Both sides fear the stripping of the Palestinian refugees' right to return to their ancestral lands, as well as the dismantling of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, which provides services to millions of Palestinians in the region, including in Jordan.

More concerning are rumoured attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without a Palestinian state, leaving Jordan to administer the West Bank or grant residents Jordanian citizenship – the so-called "alternative homeland" project promoted by the Israeli far-right. Jordanian tribes are concerned the move would make them a minority in their own country and threaten their political and economic status. Palestinian-Jordanians believe it would sever ties to their homeland.

Feeding into these fears is the Trump administration's relocation of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, refusal to endorse a two-state solution, recognition of Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights, and most recently, the U.S. ambassador to Israel's comments accepting Israeli annexation of some West Bank territory.

It is difficult to overstate the Jordanian public's rejection of the Trump administration's approach to peace. When Mr. Kushner met with King Abdullah in Amman in late May to urge Jordan to attend the Bahrain conference, multiple protests erupted outside the U.S. Embassy in Amman. Protests at the heavily guarded fortress-like embassy are rare.

Meanwhile neither Russia nor China lose any sleep over the Palestinians' situation. Both, however, are taking the opportunity to discredit Trump and the United States by not attending the conference and condemning the peace plan. Furthermore, Russia hopes to expand Palestinian resistance against Israel, just as Iran and China do as well.

As for China, it's on record as supporting a two-state solution in Israel, based on 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. This arrangement is unacceptable to Israel because it would make it virtually impossible for it to defend itself. Such a position, however, does align with both Russia and China's interests in expanding their influence in the region.

Even in Egypt, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is concerned any deal could be seen as having sold-out the Palestinian statehood cause among Egyptians and this in turn would see a potential backlash. While Egypt has remained largely quiet on the U.S. plan, Jordan has left itself with less political room to navigate.

In multiple speeches over the past three months, Jordan's King Abdullah has given rare public rebukes to the U.S. in which he rejected "pressures from outside," the surrendering of Jerusalem, and the idea of an alternative Palestinian homeland.

Torn between its allies abroad and stability at home, Jordan is crafting a finely-tuned position: participate to advocate. Jordan's participation in Bahrain would not mean Amman endorses any Trump plan, officials argue. On the contrary, they say Jordan would go to Bahrain to fight to prevent an "economic proposal replacing a lasting political solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But it remains to be seen if the deft diplomacy will sway Jordanians as well as Egyptians.

2020 G20 Summit in Riyadh

Saudi Gazette

Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman
Deputy Premier and Minister of Defence

On behalf of Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman, Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman, Deputy Premier and Minister of Defence, delivered a speech at the closing session of the 14th G20 Summit held in Osaka, Japan.

The Crown Prince praised the G20 work program during the Japanese presidency this year, which focused on building a human-centred economic future and facing the demographic and technical challenges.

He stressed that the Kingdom will continue its support for the Japanese presidency to implement the work program during the rest of the year.

The Crown Prince explained that the need to enhance international cooperation and coordination is more pressing than ever before, considering the complex and interrelated challenges facing the world today.

Crown Prince Muhammad said that effectiveness in achieving this depends on the ability to strengthen international consensus by establishing the principle of expanded dialogue, and building on the international system based on common principles and interests.

The Crown Prince pointed out that enhancing confidence in the multilateral trading system depends fundamentally on reforming the Word Trade Organization (WTO) and working under its umbrella.

The Crown Prince said the Kingdom will assume the chairmanship of the G20 in December 2019. He stressed that it is determined to continue working toward achieving progress on the group's agenda and to work with all member states, especially Troika members Japan and Italy to discuss the pressing issues of the 21st century, promote innovation and preserve land and human well-being.

The Crown Prince praised the progress achieved over the past years on the economic level, explaining the need to strive hard to reach inclusiveness and justice, and achieve the greatest level of prosperity.

He also emphasized that empowering women and youth remain two key pillars to achieving sustainable growth, and encouraging entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

He added that in order to ensure sustainability, the agenda under the Kingdom's G20 presidency will include climate change, the pursuit of practical and feasible solutions to reduce emissions from all sources and to adjust to their impacts, and to ensure environmental balance in the world.

The Crown Prince said that providing adequate funding to implement the Sustainable Development Goals is one of the most important challenges facing the world, and he explained the urgent need for cooperation with low income countries in many domains, such as food security, infrastructure, access to energy and water sources, and investment in human capital. These issues, he stressed, will be the focus of attention during the Kingdom's G20 presidency next year.

The Crown Prince affirmed that water security and sustainability, as well as environmental and political challenges related to this issue, are one of the most important issues facing the world in general and the Middle East in particular, and he noted that that work will be done with member states to find consensus and meaningful policies for these challenges.

He said the world lives today in an era of unprecedented technological and scientific innovations with unlimited growth prospects, pointing out that the new technologies, like “Artificial Intelligence” and the “Internet of Things”, can provide the world with abundance of benefits, if utilized optimally.

At the same time, he said, these new innovations may produce new challenges such as changing the patterns of work and skills needed to adapt to the future of work, as well as increasing the risks of cybersecurity and information flow. This requires us to address these challenges as soon as possible to avoid them turning into economic and social crises.

The Crown Prince said the G20 members bear the responsibility to work together and cooperate with all partners to create an environment in which science flourishes, and to enhance the level and effectiveness of investment in future skills and jobs.

He expressed more optimism than ever before with the determination of G20 and its members' joint ability to do so. At the end of his speech, the Crown Prince welcomed the leaders of the G20 members and expressed his hope to host them next year in Riyadh.

Did Obama know about Hezbollah's Bomb Plot?

By B. Gates

Hezbollah's Military Chiefs

President Donald Trump's long-anticipated visit to Europe during the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion has now come and gone. He arrived in the United Kingdom on June 3 and departed for Ireland on June 5 before hopping across the channel for the official D-Day ceremonies in France on June 6.

What I would like to draw attention to is what occurred immediately prior to Trump's arrival in the UK, and what subsequently happened immediately after his departure.

Just prior to Trump's visit, UK Prime Minister Theresa May announced that she would be resigning. She made this announcement on May 24 and stated that June 7 would be her last day in office. Literally one of the last things she would do as Prime Minister would be meeting with Trump.

Following Trump's departure from Europe, it was suddenly revealed in the UK press that a massive terrorist bomb plot in London by the Iran-linked terror group, Hezbollah, had been foiled several years ago and that authorities had deliberately hidden this plot from the public.

It was in the fall of 2015 that British intelligence agency MI5 discovered a cell of Hezbollah terrorists operating in Northwest London. According to reporting by The Telegraph, the group had amassed a stockpile of more than three metric tons of ammonium nitrate, a fertilizer compound that is a popular key component in homemade bombs.

The Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 by domestic terrorist Timothy McVeigh, in which he killed 168 people while causing extensive damage to the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, involved two tons of ammonium nitrate. This Hezbollah terror cell had compiled three tons at the time they were caught. So let's make this crystal clear: this was not going to be any kind of small-scale attack on London.

Hezbollah is not an independent terror organization. It is a fully owned and organized tool of the Iranian regime, which means Iran had a direct hand in fomenting a plot to set off a massive bomb in London.

David Reboi, an analyst at the Security Studies Group, was one of the first people to grasp the import of the revelation of the Hezbollah London Bomb Plot.

Soon after the The Telegraph broke the story, Reaboi wrote on Twitter: "This is actually a **huge** intel scandal. I'm assuming the US IC and Obama knew that, while they were pushing the Iran Deal, THERE WAS AN IRANIAN BOMB STOCKPILE IN LONDON. Politicians were NOT informed, lest they'd oppose the Deal."

I suspect this is a big reason why UK Prime Minister Theresa May is really resigning. She very well could have agreed to continue the David Cameron policy of hiding this planned massive terrorist attack from British lawmakers and the public in order to save the Iran Nuclear Deal.

Cameron was the UK's prime minister in the fall of 2015. May wasn't elected prime minister until July 2016. Notably, May was the UK's home secretary when the plot was uncovered. "The discovery was so serious that David Cameron and Theresa May, then the prime minister and home secretary, were personally briefed on what had been found," The Telegraph wrote in its June 10, 2019 article.

Like Reboi, I have a hard time believing that both the Cameron and May governments hid this Hezbollah bomb plot from the Obama administration. However, since they were hiding the information from their own lawmakers, it's a question that needs to be asked: Was then-President Barack Obama ever informed that the regime in Tehran he was about to sign a nuclear deal with had just been caught engaging in blatant terrorist activity in London? And if Obama was informed, what action, if any, did he take?

It is exceedingly strange for the United States and governments in Europe to still be assiduously seeking a nuclear deal with a regime that is not only fomenting terrorism and instability all over the Middle East, but is also planning large-scale terror attacks in Western Europe.

The Iran Deal itself was a hard sell to begin with. Obama never even put it in front of Congress because he knew there was zero chance of it passing. But coupled with the fact that Western intelligence and law enforcement agencies were catching Iran-backed terrorists hatching a bomb plot right in the heart of London, it's outright bizarre.

How many government leaders and which countries were involved in covering up Iran's involvement in this UK terror plot so they could keep the Iran Deal going?
In case you've been waiting for the next big international scandal to drop, well you're looking at it right now, folks. I don't think it was the bungling of Brexit alone that forced May out, it was the knowledge that this cover-up was about to be exposed as well as the involvement of UK intelligence officials in the ongoing and ever-expanding Spygate scandal.

This stinks to high heaven and if we had a real media, reporters would be asking serious questions right now.

Where are they?

Sudan in the Grip of Violence

By Hatim Salih

RSF soldiers secure a site where Lieutenant General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemeti), the deputy head of the military council, is to attend a meeting in Khartoum on June 18, 2019

On a hot May evening, I was stuck at a traffic light in a small rickshaw on my way to the sit-in in front of the army headquarters in Khartoum, when the call to prayer rang loud, marking the time to breakfast.

I saw a member of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF - a rebranded version of the notorious Janjaweed militia) approach with dates and water. As he moved from car to car, I hoped the traffic lights would turn green, or his supply would run out before reaching us, as I didn't see myself breaking my fast that day, or any other day, with a member of a militia responsible for many horrors in Darfur and Yemen.

To my disappointment, he reached us and so I picked up a date. After a short hesitation, I chewed on it, finding it hardly palatable.

Just a few weeks earlier, right after Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir had been ousted, I had watched dozens of his colleagues taking positions around the same army headquarters where the sit-in was staged. They were well-armed and unsociable, with such ghostly looks as if arriving from another dimension. The RSF have since tried, with little success, to mix dates with bullets.

This brought to mind the start of the sit-in on April 6, before the RSF appeared, when I saw army soldiers handing drinking water to protesters braving the heat. I remember feeling somewhat suspicious - how else, given that the army had been the bedrock of the Sudanese dictatorship for decades? But as is now clear, the army was far from unified that day, and neither is it today.

Disobedience spread from the bottom up when the order to crush peaceful protesters was issued, and when some soldiers and officers, such as colonel Hamid Othman Hamid,

sided with protesters, leaving the top ranks little choice in the end but to sacrifice al-Bashir, their commander-in-chief, to save their own skin. After all, once it starts, insubordination can quickly turn, out of fear of regime retribution, into outright mutiny.

There are a number of reasons why the RSF, whose core fighters come from the violent war zone in Darfur, were handed control of Khartoum. First, the ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) stopped trusting the army ranks. Second, being largely from outside the capital, the RSF would likely show no hesitation cracking down on strangers. Third, having already engaged in atrocities in Darfur and elsewhere, they could be more willing to obey orders no matter how ghastly.

Credible reports, based on video evidence and eyewitness accounts by survivors of the sit-in massacre, have painted a horrific picture of killings, beatings, burning of tents, and widespread rape - tools previously used by the genocidal Janjaweed against defenceless Darfuri villages. Inexplicably, even the University of Khartoum next door was ransacked.

Yet, the RSF retain regional, if not international support. Crucially, they are backed by both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, who want to ensure their continued participation in the catastrophic war in Yemen. Egypt, too, has shown its support, hoping the militia would be used to purge Islamists of the "former" Sudanese regime.

Add to that an often overlooked but valuable service that the RSF provide - namely controlling undocumented migration through Sudan to Europe. This might in part explain how Janjaweed leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (also known as Hemedti), a former camel trader accused of crimes against humanity, recently received top Western diplomats in his new lavish Khartoum office.

Yet, things have quickly turned sour for the RSF and the TMC in the aftermath of their bloody crackdown on the sit-ins in Khartoum and other cities. They were ill-advised by their allies in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo, who likely wanted to send a clear warning to their own and other Arab populations, but underestimated the international backlash. Over several months, Sudan's nonviolent revolution had captured the world’s attention through mass mobilisation, poetry, song, and art.

Today, the Sudanese capital, under the RSF, feels eerily like a city under occupation. A few days after the massacre, I talked to two of their soldiers deployed near my home. One of them, a Darfuri, looked disturbingly young and against all logic harboured dreams of policing the 2022 World Cup. Both seemed unsure as to what purpose they served exactly, but when asked about the killing of protesters at the sit-in, they said it was punishment from the heavens.
While RSF fighters have engaged in dreadful crimes in Darfur and lately in Khartoum and elsewhere, it is vitally important that our approach to them is different from the one we take up towards their leadership.

Many of them are victims of a harsh reality, where widespread impoverishment and deliberate underdevelopment, the absence of the rule of law, and empowered tribalism have left little choice to young men but to join militias and armed groups.

This also means that within a future transitional justice process, the victimisation of the young men serving within the ranks of RSF will have to be recognised. While accountability is essential, not least as a deterrent, so is reconciliation as a step towards either disarmament or possible integration into the army. Sudan can look to a number of

other countries, including Colombia and its peace process with the FARC, for models to follow.

The RSF leadership, on the other hand, must be prevented from usurping power and held accountable for its numerous crimes no matter what. If the TMC continues to push for holding highly questionable early elections, which could possibly bring Hemedti himself to power, the Sudanese people must fully mobilise once again, the way they did to oust Bashir, and put maximum pressure on the military.

If the TMC accepts the proposals made by the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, tasked by the African Union with mediating between the military and civilians, and joins a wider transitional government, where civilians exercise actual legislative and executive powers, then protest leaders need to insist that Hemedti does not play any political role. We must work towards bringing him and the others responsible for atrocities across the country to swift justice.

Currently, the Freedom and Change alliance, the de facto leadership of the nonviolent Sudanese revolution, seem on the right track. After the massacre, it called for total civil disobedience in a bid to pile pressure on the generals to agree to a civilian-led transition. Popular support has been overwhelming, bringing the country to a complete halt for three days. The TMC in their desperation might have unwittingly "played themselves" by pulling the plug on the internet.

Meanwhile, nonviolent protests throughout Sudan are building up towards the 30th anniversary of al-Bashir's ascent to power on June 30. Unless a deal is sealed by then, the alliance could be under huge pressure from the public to unilaterally form a civilian government - particularly the executive and legislative branches that the generals had in principle agreed to.

International support at this juncture could be key. The African Union has suspended Sudan and initiated a mediation process. The EU has promised economic assistance conditional on power being handed to civilians. But these measures barely scratch the surface.

The financial empire underpinning Hemedti's rise to power - including his exports of gold from Jebel Amir in Darfur, as well as his direct profiteering from the war in Yemen - needs to be targeted by global sanctions.

The international community must back a genuine civilian government, even if it is formed without an agreement with the TMC. This would not only boost the legitimacy to a civilian-led transition in a country long ruled by generals, but also facilitate the prosecution of those responsible for grave crimes.

Is a military solution the only option left in Libya?

By Guma El-Gamaty

Fighters loyal to Libya's UN-recognised government (GNA) fire guns during clashes with forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar on the outskirts of Tripoli on May 25

Fighters loyal to Libya's UN-recognised government (GNA) fire guns during clashes with forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar on the outskirts of Tripoli on May 25

War has been raging on in Libya for more than two months. What was supposed to be a quick operation for renegade general Khalifa Haftar's forces to take over the Libyan capital Tripoli has now turned into a battle of attrition!

Over 600 people have been killed, more than 3,000 injured and some 90,000 displaced from their homes. Thousands of residential buildings have been damaged or destroyed due to the indiscriminate shelling. Nearly three million people remain besieged in the capital, forced to spend the holy month of Ramadan in fear and shortages of basic goods.

So far there has been no clear winner. Factions aligned with the Government of National Accord (GNA) have managed to stop the advance of Haftar's forces and killed his hopes for a quick victory in Tripoli.

The United Nations has issued a number of statements calling on the two sides to halt hostilities, but they have all fallen on deaf ears. Neither the GNA, nor Haftar are willing to back down or agree to a ceasefire. The UN Security Council has also been unable to reach consensus on any resolution that would end the fighting and restart the negations process. This is because the international community remains divided on Libya, with regional and world powers backing each of the two sides and further fuelling the conflict.

Is a political solution still possible?

Over the past four years, the UN has put a lot of effort in trying to bring the ongoing civil war in Libya to a peaceful resolution. Even as Haftar moved his forces towards Tripoli, UN representatives still insisted that a political solution must be pursued.

Haftar's forces launched their offensive just days before the National Conference was scheduled to be held the Libyan city of Ghadames. As a result of the attack, the conference, which had been in the making for months, was cancelled and the UN mediation efforts severely undermined. Now two months later, it seems quite clear that the peace process the UN had worked so hard to kick-start is dead.

Meanwhile, positions on both sides of the war have hardened significantly. Fayez Serraj, head of the GNA, has gone as far as saying that he had been "stabbed in the back" and that it was a mistake to have trusted Haftar's intentions in all the meetings he had with him previously. He now insists that the renegade general can no longer be a partner in any peace talks.

Haftar, on the other hand, is also adamant in his stance and says that he is not ready to commit to any ceasefire or political process, whether backed by the UN or any other political actor. He seems bound on continuing his assault on Tripoli. "Of course, the political solution is still the goal. But to get back to politics, we must first finish with militias," he told a French newspaper late last month.

By now, it appears that a political solution to the conflict is very much unlikely. The only way the fighting can come to an end is if one of the sides achieves a conclusive military victory.

What does a military solution mean?

It is not only the two sides to the conflict which seem to be betting on a military solution. Various regional and international players are intervening in Libya with the hope of securing a victory for the side they favour.

Fresh deliveries of advanced weapons and ammunition have been made to both camps, which in effect is only prolonging the war. Despite the fact that the supply of arms is in clear violation of the UN arms embargo, there has been little public condemnation of these actions.

There are two possible outcomes of the ongoing war: Either Haftar would eventually succeed in taking over Tripoli and removing the GNA from power or the GNA would be able to push his forces out of the capital and launch a counteroffensive.

In the first case, Libya would be doomed to a one-man military rule. If Haftar takes the capital, he would effectively have control over Libya's three most important strategic assets: the political centre of the country, its key institutions, and most of its oil. These would help him solidify his grip on power and impose a Gaddafi-style regime backed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

In the second case, the country would still have a chance to pursue a political solution. If the forces loyal to the GNA manage to overrun Haftar's positions in the west and south, this would significantly weaken him, both politically and militarily. A defeat would most likely mean his exclusion from any future political dialogue. Given that he has been one of the biggest obstacles to achieving permanent peace and stability in Libya, his elimination as a political factor would bode well for the future of the country.

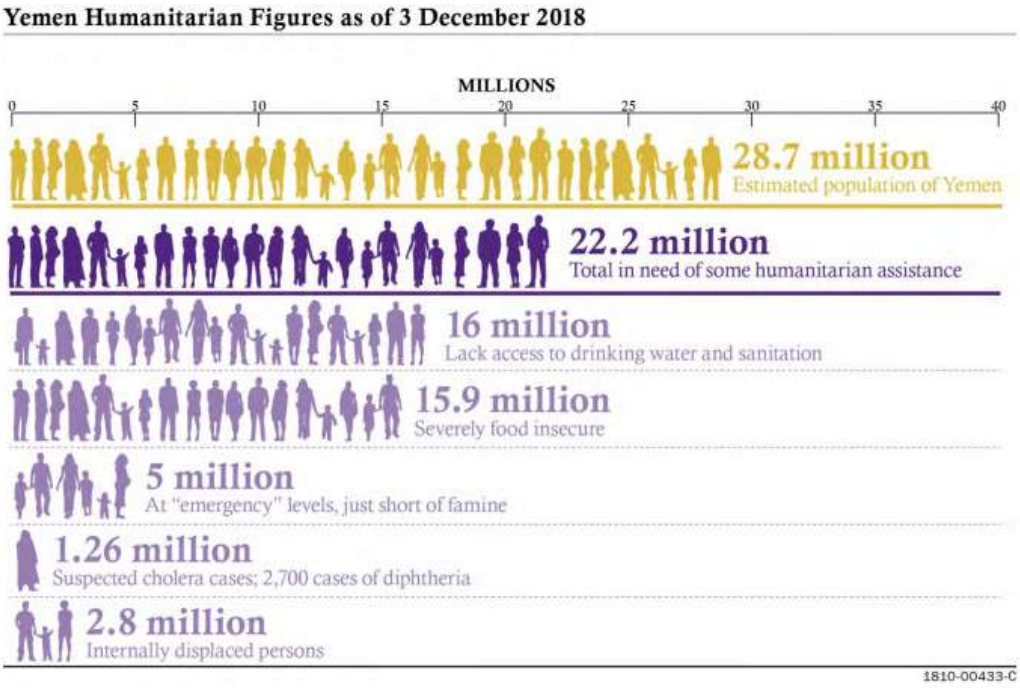
The problem with "waiting" for a military solution to the conflict in Libya is that it will cost the country and its civilian population dearly. As UN special envoy Ghassan Salame pointed out recently, the fighting around Tripoli is "just the start of a long and bloody war".

The death and suffering of Libyan civilians is very much preventable, if only the international community would find the political will to act.

Bring the war in Yemen to an end!

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member

A degree of normalcy has returned to Yemen's biggest seaport, Hodeidah, thanks to a cease-fire among the country's warring factions that has held since December 2018. But beyond the port's outskirts, a vicious fight between Houthi insurgents and a Saudi-led military coalition rages on. The death toll keeps climbing; malnutrition and hunger are rampant. Yemen's humanitarian crisis, the United Nations warned in February, is the worst in the world today.



In Washington, a growing chorus of analysts and politicians has called on the United States to step up, withdraw U.S. support for the Saudi war effort, and turn the UN-brokered cease-fire into a lasting peace. Doing so, they argue, is the only morally and strategically defensible course of action. But of all the options before the United States, this one is the least likely to stop the killing, the dying, and the complications for U.S. interests.

Multiple factions are entangled in Yemen's war. However, the conflict divides into two main categories: pro-government forces led by President Hadi and anti-government forces led by the Houthis, who are backed by former President Saleh and Iran.

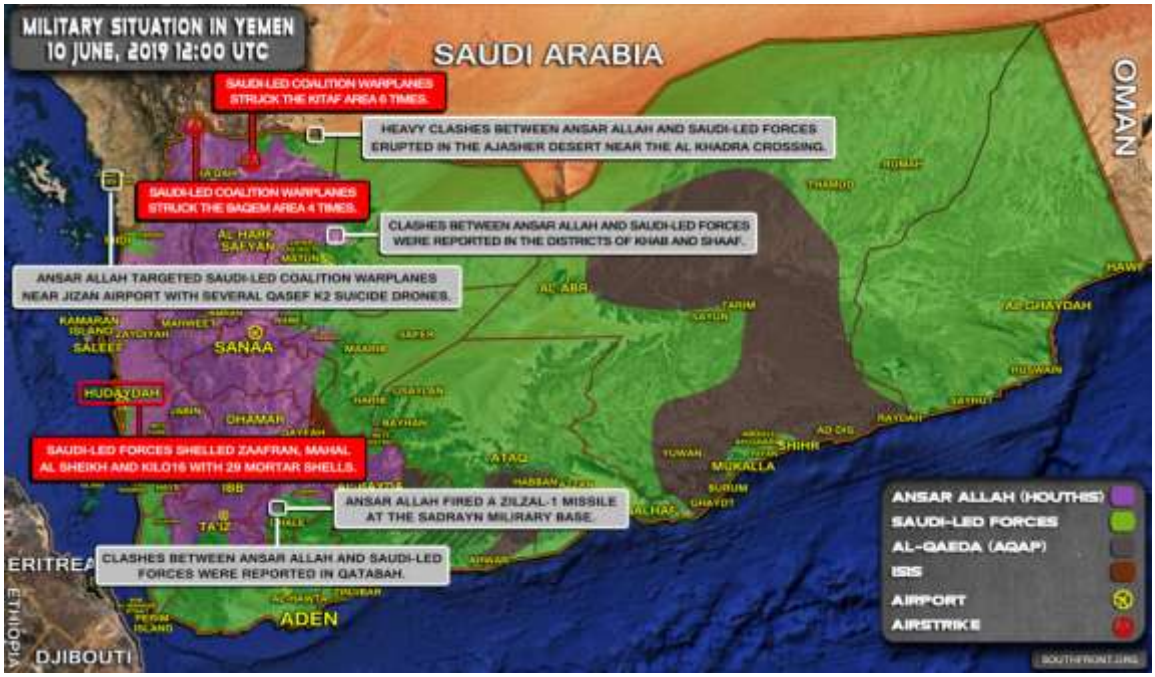
The Houthis hail from Yemen's north and belong to a small branch of Shiite Muslims known as Zaydis. Until summer 2015, the insurgents had infiltrated much of the country's south. They currently maintain control over key central provinces in the north. Hadi's government is aware that Iran is smuggling them military arms, an accusation which Tehran cannot deny.

President Hadi's government is headquartered in Aden and is the internationally-recognized government of Yemen.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia launched an international coalition in a bid to reinstate Hadi.

Along with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates has conducted airstrikes on Yemeni soil. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Morocco, Sudan, Jordan and Egypt have also contributed to the operations. The United States and the United Kingdom have both provided logistical support and intelligence to the Saudi-led coalition.

The Saudi-led intervention may have exacerbated the situation in Yemen, but it did not start the war. Getting the Saudis to pull out will no more end the bloodshed in Yemen than getting the United States to abstain from the civil war in Syria halted the violence there. Nor will a Saudi withdrawal lead to a negotiated settlement. Instead, the fighting will go on, and innocent Yemenis will continue to die until one side—most likely the Houthis—have won.



True peace in Yemen will remain elusive unless both sides accept that they have nothing to gain from more fighting. We are not there yet. To get there will require not cutting off U.S. support for Saudi Arabia but threatening to double down on it unless the Houthis honour their commitments to the UN and are ready to disgorge most of their initial conquests. If Washington is serious about ending the war, it must come to terms with this uncomfortable fact.

US States Move Billions in Weapons to Saudi, UAE

By Bellingcat Investigation Team

Individual U.S. states such as Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Arizona, and others have exported hundreds of millions of dollars in weapons to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates since the Saudi-led war in Yemen began. Altogether, per publicly available data released by the U.S. government, 11 states plus the District of Columbia have each exported over $100 million in weapons for Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Altogether, up to $6.8 billion in bombs, rocket launchers, machine guns and other weapons are mapped below using open source data provided by the U.S. government.

The top five states for these goods (excluding the District of Columbia's $737 million in exports) are North Carolina, Arizona, Alabama, Pennsylvania and Arkansas. Rounding out the remaining spots are New Mexico, Maryland, Florida, Massachusetts, Virginia, and New Hampshire.

Some of these exports may be linked to alleged war crimes. Building on previous reporting by Bellingcat, identifying marks on U.S. bombs used in the Dahyan bus bombing which killed at least 40 children and 11 adults, revealed that they were partially produced in Pennsylvania, the fifth largest exporter of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Parts found at incidents lead to manufacturers in Texas, showing that even small exporters can have an outsized role in possible human rights violations.

Methodology

The Census Bureau organizes the data using a six digit international standard for goods known as the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS). These HS codes cover everything from agricultural goods to parts for military firearms. Using these codes, all other exported goods to Saudi Arabia and the UAE from 2015-March 2019 were filtered out from the dataset.

The data can be viewed from point of origin, or point of departure. Unless otherwise specified (as is done in the Wilmington and Tucson examples), all data used was point of origin data.

While not visualized, census information on which U.S. ports weapons are being exported from is included in the written portion of the analysis.

Shotguns, pistols and parts were not included in the data set due to the fact of Saudi Arabia's relatively high level of private firearm ownership, which could skew the data. Included in the total export amounts are $48,222,682 in bombs, mines and guided missiles to the UAE that the Census data classifies as of "unknown" origin.

Six codes that were used for this particular dataset follow definitions included in the 2018 U.S. tariff schedule. The six codes, and the goods they cover, are:

930110 = Military Artillery Weapons (eg, Mortar, Howitzer)
930111 = Self Propelled Artillery Weapons
930120 = Rocket Launchers, Grenade Launchers, Torpedo Tubes and Flamethrowers
930190 = Machine Guns, Military Rifles, and Military Shotguns

930591 = Parts & Accessories of Military Weapons
930690 = Bombs, Guided Missiles, Grenades, Mines, Ammunition and Parts thereof

Census data has its limits, however, and should not be mistaken for a full accounting of U.S. weapons sales. For example, code 930111 (self-propelled artillery weapons) shows no sale of a M142 HIMARS system to the UAE. But information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute shows a HIMARS delivery worth $143 million to the UAE in the time span covered by the Census data. HIMARS systems have been seen used by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

The Major Players
By far the largest exporter is North Carolina. From 2015 to March 2019, North Carolina moved over $1.9 billion in arms primarily to Saudi Arabia. Only $15 million of goods from North Carolina went to the United Arab Emirates.

The largest category of goods both produced in and exported from North Carolina are code 930690 goods — an umbrella category for bombs, guided missiles, grenades and mines. While not a party to the Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty, the U.S. has committed since 2014 to destroy landmine stockpiles not destined for use in South Korea. Despite "mines" being part of the 930690 umbrella it is likely the majority of goods leaving North Carolina are high-value aerospace goods. Home to the largest U.S. military base in the world, North Carolina has a robust and growing defence industry. This is supported by a variety of public relations endeavours advertising the state as a cheap option for aerospace and defence manufacturing.

Port-specific data shows a majority of shipments to Saudi Arabia left via the North Carolina maritime port of Wilmington, making it the largest point of departure for military goods to Saudi Arabia in the U.S. A representative of the North Carolina Port Authority did not respond to questions about whether the port was facilitating foreign military sales to Saudi Arabia.

Arizona is the second largest source of weapons, with $1.2 billion to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates since 2015. In 2017 alone Arizona exported $328 million in bombs, guided missiles and related goods to the UAE, and almost $478 million to Saudi Arabia. These massive numbers can be accounted for by the large presence of the aerospace industry in Tucson. Raytheon's Missile Systems arms is based in Tucson and is the highest revenue generating business manufacturing guided missiles in North America.

Raytheon's Tucson arm produces the Paveway II guided bomb kit alongside Lockheed Martin's Pennsylvania branch. A device used in some of the most high-profile bombings in Yemen. Raytheon is one of the largest employers in Arizona with 12,000 employees, slightly less than the number of people in Arizona employed by McDonald's.

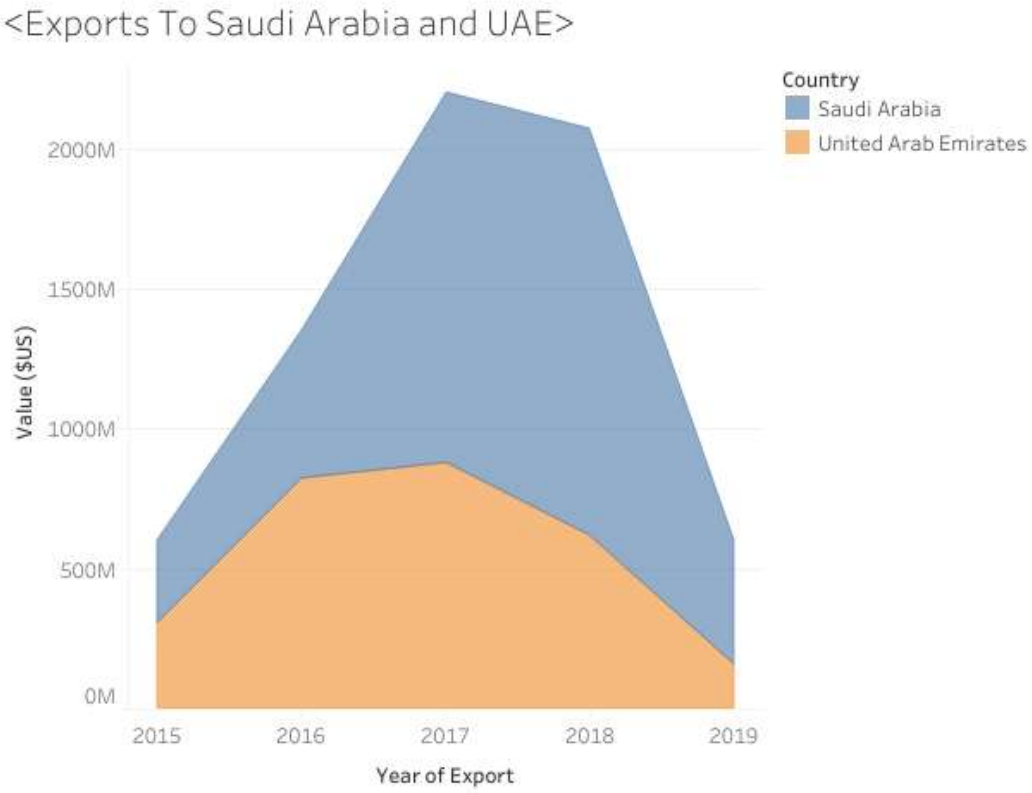
Arizona's exports are not limited to high-value aerospace goods. Over $41 million in artillery and nearly $27 million in machine guns and other military firearms went to Saudi Arabia since the Saudi intervention in Yemen began. In contrast to North Carolina, port data from the Census Bureau shows these goods are both produced in Arizona and flown out of the country via Tucson rather than through maritime ports in California.

Alabama comes in third place with $789 million. Of this, $719 million are bombs, guided missiles, and related goods to the UAE. Alabama exports more goods to the UAE than any location other than the District of Columbia. Lockheed, Raytheon, BAE Systems, and Boeing all have a major presence in Alabama.

The Northern Gun Belt

Massachusetts was the largest exporter of machine guns and military rifles to Saudi Arabia and the UAE with $55 million. Pennsylvania came in second with $45 million, and Nevada a distant third with $35 million since the war in Yemen began. This presents a conservative estimate of overall U.S. gun sales to the two nations as the dataset excluded pistols and any other firearms exports possibly going to Saudi Arabia's large civilian gun market.

New Hampshire was the largest exporter of rocket launchers and grenade launchers with exports of $61 million. Massachusetts came second with $49 million, and Pennsylvania third with $45 million. At least some of these goods left through the port of Baltimore as first reported by New Hampshire Public Radio.



Conclusion

Utilizing open source government data allows us to shed more light on the opaque world of U.S. arms sales. Each year billions of dollars in weapons are produced as part of Foreign Military Assistance and direct sales between defence contractors and unnamed countries. The data here is a small snapshot of the billions in weapons sales.

Those sales are due to rise. The Trump administration has made 2019 a banner year for undoing arms control measures. The first is push to stop classifying semi-automatic rifles and sniper rifles as weapons and take control of their export away from the State Department. The second is to "unsign" the U.S. from the Arms Trade Treaty. The third is to use a loophole in the law to push forward arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE without congressional approval.

Since the intervention in Yemen began in 2015, Saudi and Emirati aircraft have conducted over 18,500 air raids. By March 2019 Saudi and Emirati forces conducted over 200 air raids against weapons caches. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have continued strikes in order to bring the war to a faster satisfactory conclusion.

Saying No to Danger

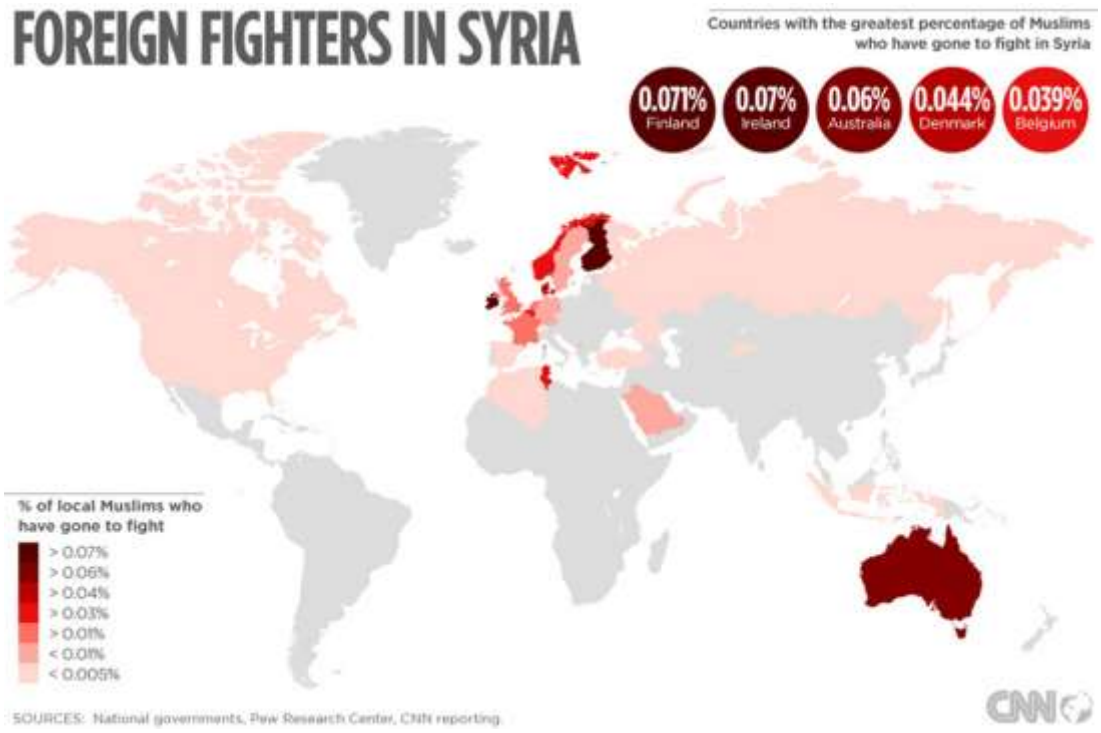
By Susan Yao
CMER Board Member

Australia, Britain, the United States, France and other countries around the world are dealing with the same question: Should their citizens who joined and fought for ISIS be allowed to return to their home country?

For the vast majority of Australians the answer is no!

Many of the men and women who left their homes in the West to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq as fighters or supporters now want to come home. Their desire to return has coincided with the defeat of the murderously evil ISIS sect in the diminishing territory under its control.

The US government argues that countries should take back their foreign fighters and prosecute them rather than allow them to be free to act on the world stage. But other countries, like Australia, are more concerned with the threat of returnees committing domestic terrorism. And, despite its arguments, the US has recently moved to keep at least one American-born ISIS member from returning. Determining which approach makes Western countries safest requires examining the facts about foreign fighters.



Inconsistent US stance

Only about 250 to 300 Americans are said to have left the country to join ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The numbers who left Europe are much greater, 5,000 to 6,000, according to a 2018 report from the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. For Australia the numbers are close to 130. The United States and its allies recently split over the Trump administration's insistence that other governments bring home their citizens who joined the Islamic State.

Syrian rebel groups have detained hundreds of ISIS-affiliated Westerners, but have threatened to release over 3,000 them if the United States withdraws its forces from the region. The Free Syrian Army has already released at least one British foreign fighter, and his whereabouts are now unknown.

But American officials have undercut their position by declaring that Hoda Muthana, a young mother who left the United States to join ISIS, should not be permitted to return either, illustrating the inconsistency of the American approach to this issue.

Range of national policies

Australia long ago banned Australians joining foreign wars but the USA was actually the first country in the world to outlaw foreign fighting. Congress passed the initial legislation while George Washington was still president, despite the role of foreign volunteers in the American Revolution.

Under US law, individuals can lose their citizenship for joining a foreign army or armed group as an officer, or for joining forces hostile to the United States.

However, prosecutions have been rare. American foreign fighters through history have been charged instead with violations that are easier to demonstrate in court than fighting on foreign soil (which would require witnesses and testimony from abroad), such as handling weapons of mass destruction and providing material support for terrorist organizations. Unlike some allies, the US has not attempted to prevent foreign fighters from returning by removing their citizenship.

Part of the disagreement between the US and its allies over foreign fighters stems from the fact that every country has different policies concerning such returnees.

France and Russia are among the countries in the process of taking some or all of their citizens back to face charges at home. Canada, which has been divided by internal partisan debates, has switched approaches, from stripping citizenship to allowing foreign fighters to return and potentially face criminal charges. In Australia the ruling Liberal National Coalition have striped foreign fighters of their citizenship at every opportunity. For most Australians a dead ISIS fighter is a national blessing.

Meanwhile The UK has passed laws stripping citizenship from individuals who travel to join terror groups. In its own case of a young mother being held by rebels, it has argued that because her father was an immigrant from Bangladesh, she is eligible for citizenship from that country and her UK citizenship can be removed.

The US has taken this approach in the Muthana case as well. Its argument is that her father's employment as a foreign diplomat means that she is not a citizen, despite having been born in America.

The Fears are real!
The normal Australian and American response to the rise of ISIS was to push for passage of two United Nations Security Council resolutions that require every country in the world to try to stop their citizens from becoming "foreign terrorist fighters" and to track and prosecute them.

These resolutions are why Australia was and remains eager to remove their foreign fighters' citizenship status: If a foreign fighter can be stripped of citizenship retroactively, it is no longer an obligation for that country to return or prosecute them. Moreover if that foreign fighter was to die for his or her demonic ideology, the happier Australians would be.

National responses have varied and are driven by domestic homeland security politics. Denmark has a disastrous reintegration program that has provided social services to help some returnees in an attempt to deradicalize these traitors. Concerned Danes rightly opposed this policy mounted challenges and won court rulings ensuring that Denmark can strip citizenship as well.

Since relatively few Americans have gone to Syria and only a handful has returned, there has not been a national debate about returnees until the recent Muthana case.

The UK relied upon one 2013 study indicating that, in theory, as many as 10 percent of returnees could become terrorists. However, the same researcher found in 2017 that the rate was actually 85 percent.

The local ISIS network behind the Paris and Brussels attacks were all returnees.

My own studies indicate that many domestic terror plots by returnees occur within weeks of their arrival and there is much evidence of long-term terrorist planning by returnee sleeper cells.

Foreign fighters who have been barred from their home countries need to be location in camps throughout Syria and Iraq and neutralized.

Osama bin Laden was the most prominent of thousands of such returned militants from the Afghan war who created unbelievable havoc. And in the social media era, Australian, Americans and Europeans are only too aware of the risk. All Western governments should weigh this evidence carefully as they move to rid humanity of the last of ISIS.