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# CMER Middle East Report

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## 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.

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Editor-in-Chief: Arthur Tane

Email: [info@thecmer.org](mailto:info@thecmer.org)

Website: [www.thecmer.org](http://www.thecmer.org)

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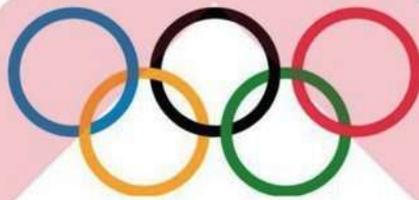
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STAND WITH HONG KONG

STAND WITH UYGHURS



***BEIJING 2022***



**BOYCOTT BEIJING  
WINTER OLYMPICS**

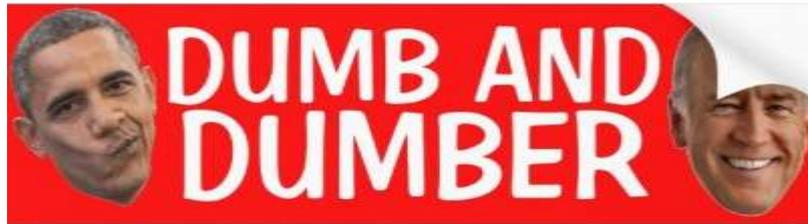
*Say no to concentration camps in China*

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

# **Editorial:**

## **Biden is Blind on Middle East Policy!**

**By Arthur Tane**  
**TCMER Executive Director**



Far from the memory of the too numerous wars that have marked the Middle East, the temptation is strong to think that diplomacy should replace force, and that a good negotiation, even if it means coming out a loser, is better than a conflict. This is more or less the philosophy that seems to inspire the "not so new" American administration, such as that for former US President Barack Obama.

Former President Donald J. Trump, for his part, had no doubt learned some lessons from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and more from the miserable double-cross offered by Hitler to British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the French Prime Minister Édouard Daladier, which would lead, a year later, to the Second World War. Daladier and Chamberlain were so opposed to the use of force that they preferred to sacrifice Czechoslovakia to Nazi appetites rather than stand firm while there was still time. The rest, unfortunately, is well known.

Other have been inspired by the Roman general, Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus: "Si vis pacem, para bellum" - If you want peace, prepare for war.

President Trump, after seeing decades of stagnation in the seemingly hopeless Israeli-Palestinian conflict, adopted a similar philosophy by deciding to turn the problem upside down and listen to an alternate version of the facts. He saw that Israel had made diplomatic concessions, by withdrawing from every inch of Egypt that had been overrun in the 1967 War, and Gaza in 2005, only to win in exchange, three wars, tens of thousands of rockets aimed at its civilian population, and a terrorist group, Hamas, elected by a landslide to Gaza. It did not take long for members of Hamas to throw Palestinian Authority loyalists from the top floors of tall buildings, and expel the rest.

Previous administrations, such as that of President Obama, were clinging to the idea that the conflicts can only be resolved through negotiation. Trump and his advisers preferred to turn to the Arab world, worried about Iranian hegemonic expansion, and to try to reach a comprehensive agreement, that would ultimately include the Palestinians.

These consultations swiftly led to the Abraham Accords - a peace between Israel and four countries, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. It was a spectacular breakthrough never before seen in the region.

For four years, it looked as if President Trump were rewarding only one side, Israel. Although his administration's decisions provoked an outcry from Mahmoud Abbas, his

entourage, European governments and the United Nations, curiously enough, there was hardly any objection from the Arab world. Instead, they stated they were weary of the unproductive Palestinian "cause" and alarmed by the Iranian threat. It was also a period during which Palestinian terrorism reached one of its lowest levels.

The international media were on fire to warn Trump of the catastrophic outcome that would result from recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and relocating the US embassy there.

The European Union and the United Nations rose to the brink of panic when the American president recognized the Golan Heights - taken in 1967 after years of being attacked from there by Syria- as part of Israel.

Other gestures, as important, punctuated Trump's vision: stopping financial aid to the Palestinian Authority as long as it continued to incite terrorism and distribute salaries to criminals imprisoned in Israel; reducing American funding to UNRWA, a United Nations organization seemingly designed to perpetuate the refugee status - as well as the conflict - for descendants of Palestinian Arabs who fled during wars to destroy Israel in 1948 and again 1967; closing the PLO office in Washington; but, above all, establishing a realistic peace plan, taking into account the interests of two peoples and not their leaders. Trump's plan offered the Palestinians a state in the areas populated by them, an administrative capital to be defined, and \$50 billion in aid to develop their economy. The plan was rejected by the Palestinian Authority before it was even drawn up.

All this in no way prevented the Abraham Accords from seeing the light of day. According to Jared Kushner, Saudi Arabia was also considering recognizing Israel if the Trump administration had been elected to a second term.

The same Saudis are now worrying about a possible return to the JCPOA, the "Iran nuclear deal" promoted by members of the Obama administration - John Kerry, Wendy Sherman and then-Vice President Joe Biden - that would enable the Ayatollahs to obtain nuclear bombs. The JCPOA agreement, sometimes compared to "Swiss cheese" for its many flaws, among which were a "sunset clause" authorizing the Iranian government to enrich uranium and obtain nuclear bombs after a few years, as well as that it has no obligation to submit to "anywhere and anytime" inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Unfortunately, Biden's initial announcements concerning Iran and Saudi Arabia are not likely to reassure the Saudis or America's other allies in the Gulf. In spite of Iran's malign activity abroad - aid to terrorist movements such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen; its accelerated enrichment of uranium; developing intercontinental ballistic missiles to carry nuclear warheads, and the difficulties encountered by IAEA inspectors in trying to inspect Iran's nuclear sites - Biden said of the JCPOA: "It was working. It was being held tightly. There was no movement on the part of the Iranian government to get closer to a nuclear weapon."

Unfortunately, that is not true. In 2017, a team of Israelis broke into an Iranian warehouse and left with "tens of thousands of secret files" that document significant cheating.

Confronted with President Trump's decision to withdraw from the agreement as long as Iran did not behave less aggressively, Biden replied, again incorrectly:

"The historic Iran nuclear deal we negotiated blocked Iran from gaining nuclear weapons... Yet Trump cast it aside, prompting Iran to restart its nuclear program..."

Unfortunately, on the contrary, the JCPOA permits Iran to make as many nuclear bombs as it wishes in a few years.

If appointing Antony Blinken as Secretary of State was enough to reassure Israelis and Saudis, the designation of Robert Malley as special representative for Iran only rekindled their concerns. Malley was not only involved in the conception of JCPOA, he was "kicked off of Obama's first presidential campaign after reports emerged he had met with members of the Hamas terror group," and has reportedly asked that Hamas be included in talks in the future. Senator Tom Cotton tweeted:

"It's deeply troubling that Biden would consider appointing Rob Malley to direct Iran policy. Malley has a long track record of sympathy for the Iranian regime & animus towards Israel. The ayatollahs wouldn't believe their luck if he is selected."

Biden's statements about peace with the Palestinians are also not likely to reassure America's allies in the Middle East. His vision seems not far from that of Obama and Kerry.

Biden summarized his position last fall:

"A two-state solution is the only way to ensure Israel's long-term security while sustaining its Jewish and democratic identity. I don't know how they do it without a two-state solution. And it's also the only way to ensure Palestinian rights to a state of their own."

What he seems to be forgetting is that these attempts at engagement never led to any result, apart from refuelling the conflict.

The question is, what will Biden do if it turns out that once again the Palestinian Authority decides that it must obtain all possible concessions before it even begins negotiations?

# Biden's Betrayal of Afghanistan

By Con Coughlin



As the Taliban's attitude has revealed, the terror group has no serious interest in concluding a peace deal with Kabul, preferring to resort to its previous tactic of seizing control of the country through violence and intimidation

The only logical conclusion to be drawn from Biden's ill-judged decision to withdraw the last remaining US troops from Afghanistan is that it will lead to the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies once more seizing control of the country.

That is certainly how the Taliban leadership is viewing Biden's decision, as within hours of his televised appearance to announce the withdrawal, the Taliban was claiming victory in the country's long-running civil war.

More than that, the Taliban even had the nerve to claim that, by completing the withdrawal of US forces by September 11, Washington was reneging on the peace deal negotiated with the previous Trump administration last year, which stipulated that all American troops, together with other Nato forces, would be withdrawn by the end of next month.

In fact, under the terms of the Doha deal former US President Donald Trump negotiated with the Taliban in the Gulf state of Qatar last February, the withdrawal of US forces was contingent on the Taliban renouncing violence, as well as ending its long-standing support for Islamist terror groups like al-Qaeda.

The reality is that the Taliban has made no serious attempt to fulfil either of these conditions, even though the US began reducing its troop strengths immediately after the agreement was signed in February last year.

Instead, the terror group has continued with its nationwide campaign of violence against the Afghan people, enabling it to seize large swathes of the country as forces loyal to the democratically-elected government of President Ashraf Ghani have proved incapable of mounting a credible defence.

In addition, as a recent US Treasury report has concluded, the Taliban has maintained its links with al-Qaeda, as well as other Islamist terrorist organisations. The report stated that al-Qaeda is "gaining strength in Afghanistan while continuing to operate with the Taliban under the Taliban's protection." It adds that the group "capitalizes on its relationship with the Taliban through its network of mentors and

advisers who are embedded with the Taliban, providing advice, guidance, and financial support."

Now the Taliban has responded to Mr Biden's overly generous offer to withdraw all US forces by September - in spite of the Taliban's abject failure to honour their side of the bargain - by threatening to launch a fresh offensive against the US and its Nato allies.

Speaking shortly after the President made his announcement, a senior Taliban commander warned:

"We are prepared and already present in the battlefield; our fighters are ready to target Nato troops as the trust deficit widens after Biden delayed US troops' withdrawal.

"The Taliban are a true political entity in the Islamic emirate and we are already victorious in the war and our victory compelled the US to sign a deal with the Taliban."

The Taliban's refusal to cut its ties with Osama bin Laden's terrorist organisation was the initial reason for the US-led invasion of Afghanistan back in 2001 after al-Qaeda took advantage of the protection it received from the Taliban to plan and execute the devastating September 11 attacks - the worst terrorist atrocity ever carried out on American soil.

The invasion resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban and the end of its barbaric rule, and destroyed al-Qaeda's terrorist infrastructure, while bin Laden was forced to flee to neighbouring Pakistan, where he was eventually hunted down and killed by an elite team of US Special Forces in 2011.

Even after it suffered these devastating defeats, the Taliban still refused to renounce its ties with al-Qaeda, to the extent that it has spent the past two decades involved in a brutal conflict with US coalition forces, costing the lives of tens of thousands of Taliban fighters.

Despite these devastating setbacks, the Taliban has been quietly confident that it would ultimately prevail ever since former US President Barack Obama made his disastrous U-turn in Washington's Afghan policy in 2009, and made his unilateral announcement that he was withdrawing all remaining American combat troops by the end of 2014.

Taliban leaders have always argued that, in keeping with previous generations of foreign invaders, Washington would eventually lose interest in the conflict and withdraw. As the old Taliban saying goes, "you may have all the watches, but we have all the time."

And so, thanks to Mr Biden's capitulation, it has come to pass, with the Taliban and its al-Qaeda allies set to reclaim the control of the country after 20 years in the wilderness.

Mr Biden has attempted to defend what amounts to his administration's abject surrender to the Taliban on the grounds that the time has come to end America's longest war, while arguing that the announcement will increase the pressure on both the Taliban and the beleaguered Afghan government to conclude the peace deal which was supposed to be the most important outcome of the Doha process.

Yet, as the Taliban's attitude has revealed, the terror group has no serious interest in concluding a peace deal with Kabul, preferring to resort to its previous tactic of seizing control of the country through violence and intimidation.

Certainly, as a recent Pentagon report has highlighted, without the support of US and other Nato allies, the Afghan government has little chance of prevailing against the Taliban once the withdrawal has completed.

John Sopko, the Pentagon's special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, last month warned that, without US support, the Afghan government "probably would face collapse."

The US intelligence community's 2021 Threat Assessment published last week reached a similar conclusion, stating that "the Afghan Government will struggle to hold the Taliban at bay if the coalition withdraws support."

These are damning assessments of both the ability of the Afghan government to defend itself without Western support, as well as the Biden's decision to abandon the country in its hour of need.

The only realistic outcome is that, once the Taliban have retaken control of the country and implemented its brand of medieval religious authoritarianism, al-Qaeda will re-establish its terror bases in the country and use them as a base to launch a fresh wave of attacks against the West.

*Con Coughlin is the Telegraph's Defence and Foreign Affairs Editor.*

# Anti-Semitic Tiktok Trend Fuels Violence in Jerusalem

By Peter Rawlings  
TCMER Board Member



The popular social network has ties to the Chinese Communist Party

Videos depicting anti-Semitic violence are trending on TikTok in Israel, encouraging Arab assaults on Jews amid ongoing violent protests in Jerusalem. The videos, which show Arab teens assaulting unsuspecting Jews, have stoked violent conflicts in the Old City of Jerusalem. Tensions came to a head in late April as the group Lehava organized a street march in protest, chanting "death to Arabs."

TikTok has begun removing these anti-Semitic videos. The popular social media company has come under fire for censoring content critical of the Chinese Communist Party. TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, is a Chinese tech giant.

Fights broke out in Jerusalem during April after Israeli police blocked Palestinians from congregating at Damascus Gate, a popular spot for evening prayers during Ramadan. The brawls intensified after the release of a TikTok showing Arab teens assaulting an Orthodox Jewish man on the Jerusalem light rail.

During late April clashes between Jewish and Arab protesters roiled the Old City of Jerusalem, injuring over 100 people. Police arrested more than 50 people for throwing rocks and assaulting police. According to police, protesters on both sides set trash cans on fire. Videos showed beatings of unarmed Jews as well as police breaking up groups from Lehava with riot grenades.

This is not TikTok's first brush with anti-Semitism. Users with symbols of Judaism in their bios report being inundated with anti-Semitic comments. In July 2020, a song mocking Holocaust victims went viral on the app, and videos with the song were viewed millions of times. TikTok eventually removed the video and reiterated its commitment to user safety.

While anti-Semitic content proliferates on the app, TikTok also frequently censors criticism of the Chinese government. Documents leaked to the Guardian in 2019

revealed TikTok maintained internal policies of banning videos that advocate greater freedom for Tibet or that reference Tiananmen Square or the pro-independence group Falun Gong. Observers believe TikTok censored videos supportive of protests against the regime in Hong Kong.

The platform similarly censors videos that mention the oppression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Many Uyghurs who have used TikTok to share their plight found their accounts shuttered soon after.

Users also suspect the app's algorithm promotes pro-China content. In the summer of 2020, many users with low follower counts saw their views skyrocket after creating tongue-in-cheek "ilovechina" videos with the Chinese flag prominently featured.

TikTok's ties to the Chinese Communist Party are well-known. The Justice Department alleged that ByteDance's founder has shown he is "committed to promoting" the agenda of the Communist Party, and that the company employs 130 party members in its Beijing office. The Trump Administration attempted to ban TikTok from app stores in the United States in 2020, citing the app's ties to the Chinese government.

## Biden's SBA Pick Serves on Board of Anti-Israel Group

By Zara Dawoud  
TCMER Board Member



Dilawar Syed's affiliation with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement could hurt his confirmation Biden's nominee for a top Small Business Administration job sits on the board of a group that lobbies in favour of the anti-Israel boycott movement and describes Israel as an "apartheid" state.

Dilawar Syed, Biden's pick for deputy administrator of the SBA, has served on the board of the Muslim-American advocacy group Emgage Action since 2017, according to his public financial disclosure form submitted as part of his nomination process. Emgage Action is a staunch defender of the global Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement (BDS) that seeks to hurt Israel with economic pressure.

The stance could be an obstacle for Syed ahead of his confirmation vote by the Senate Small Business Committee, which is chaired by Sen. Ben Cardin (D., Md.), one of the Democratic Party's most vocal opponents of BDS. Emgage Action denounced Cardin's 2017 anti-BDS legislation as "unconstitutional."

Emgage Action has described the BDS movement as a "constitutionally protected nonviolent response that seeks to end the occupation" and says it "support[s] the right to boycott, divest, and sanction, as well as the Right of Return of Palestinians." The organization also describes Israel as an "apartheid" state, stating on its website that Palestinians "continue to suffer under racist, undemocratic Israeli apartheid rule that steals their land and destroys their homes to make way for illegal Jewish settlements."

Syed is CEO at the health care company Lumiata. He served on the White House Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders under President Obama and as a liaison with the SBA and the Department of Commerce, according to the White House.

Christians United for Israel Action Fund, a pro-Israel advocacy group, denounced Syed's nomination, calling Engage's positions "fringe" and "contrary to Biden's own policies."

"Dilawar Syed is the wrong choice for Deputy Administrator of the Small Business Administration (SBA). His association with Engage Action, which lobbies against anti-BDS legislation and has taken a range of other positions that are both outside the American mainstream and contrary to Biden's own policies, indicates poor judgment on Syed's part," said CUFI Action Fund chairwoman Sandra Parker.

"The SBA is vital to the health of our nation and seeking to have a misguided, fringe ideologue serve in such an important role is a bad decision."

The BDS movement has been criticized as an effort to delegitimize and isolate Israel. Some groups, such as the American Jewish Committee, have described it as anti-Semitic. Many of the BDS movement's leaders have called for the elimination of Israel.

In 2017, Cardin introduced the Israel Anti-Boycott Act, which sought to prohibit organizational boycotts of Israel and other U.S. allies. On his website, Cardin said the BDS movement was "designed to delegitimize Israel" and "circumvent direct negotiations."

Engage Action slammed Cardin's legislation, saying that it "failed in the 115th Congress due to its unconstitutional nature and unpopularity by both Congress and the American people." "It clearly infringed on Americans' First Amendment right to free speech; any similar legislation proceeding will continue to have the same problems," the group wrote on its website.

During the 2020 presidential campaign, Engage came to the defence of prominent BDS activist Linda Sarsour after the Biden campaign criticized her views on Israel. Sarsour has described herself as "an unapologetic pro-BDS, one-state solution supporting resistance supporter." She once publicly embraced and shared a stage with Rasmia Odeh, a Palestinian terrorist convicted of killing two Israeli students in a grocery store bombing.

# The Armenian Genocide Continues

By Raymond Ibrahi



Armenian churches have been desecrated after coming under Azerbaijani control during and since the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute erupted into armed conflict in late 2020

The 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2021 is Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, marking 106 years since the start of the Armenian Genocide, when the Ottoman Turks massacred approximately 1.5 million Armenians during World War I.

Most objective historians who have examined the topic unequivocally agree that it was a deliberate, calculated genocide. According to the Genocide Education Project:

"More than one million Armenians perished as the result of execution, starvation, disease, the harsh environment, and physical abuse. A people who lived in eastern Turkey for nearly 3,000 years [more than double the amount of time the invading Islamic Turks had occupied Anatolia, now known as "Turkey"] lost its homeland and was profoundly decimated in the first large-scale genocide of the twentieth century. At the beginning of 1915 there were some two million Armenians within Turkey; today there are fewer than 60,000.

"Despite the vast amount of evidence that points to the historical reality of the Armenian Genocide, eyewitness accounts, official archives, photographic evidence, the reports of diplomats, and the testimony of survivors, denial of the Armenian Genocide by successive regimes in Turkey has gone on from 1915 to the present."

Not only has Turkey repeatedly denied culpability for the Armenian Genocide; it appears intent on reigniting it, most recently by helping Azerbaijan wage war on Armenia in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, which again erupted into armed conflict in late 2020.

As Nikol Pashinyan, Armenia's prime minister, observed in October 2020: "Why has Turkey returned to the South Caucasus 100 years [after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire]? To continue the Armenian Genocide."

During this recent conflict, which did not concern it, Turkey sent sharia-enforcing "jihadist groups." According to French President Emmanuel Macron, they - including the pro-Muslim Brotherhood Hamza Division were sent from Syria and Libya

to terrorize and slaughter Armenians. The Hamza Division reportedly kept naked women in prison while operating in Syria.

These mercenaries and their Azerbaijani partners, among other ISIS-like behaviour, "tortured beyond recognition" an intellectually disabled 58-year-old Armenian woman by hacking off her ears, hands, and feet - *before* murdering her. Her family was only able to identify her by her clothes.

"Armenians," according to a December 2020 report, "are being brutalized" and have "lost territory to their jihadist neighbours before agreeing to a cease-fire enforced by Russia.... Prior to violating the so-called peace agreement, the Turkish Muslims of Azerbaijan did as Muhammad commanded in beheading Christians."

The report linked to a video of soldiers in camouflage overpowering a struggling, elderly Armenian man to the ground, before casually carving at his throat with a knife.

"Azerbaijan has accused Armenia of violating the peace deal first," the report continues, "but observers note the only provocation Muslims need to attack Armenians is their continued existence."

Anti-infidel rhetoric underscores this view. A captured terrorist confessed that he was "promised a monthly 2000 dollar payment for fighting against 'kafirs' in Artsakh, and an extra 100 dollar for each beheaded 'kafir.'" (Kafir, often translated as "infidel," is Arabic for non-Muslims who fail to submit to Islamic authority, which by default makes them enemies worthy of slavery or death.)

Armenian churches that came under Azerbaijani control have been desecrated - despite promises from the Azerbaijani authorities to protect them. In one instance, a soldier - it is unclear whether he was an Azeri or a jihadi mercenary from Syria or Iraq - was videotaped standing on top of a church chapel, where the cross had been broken off, and triumphantly shouting "Allahu Akbar!" Azerbaijani forces also shelled and destroyed Holy Savior, an iconic Armenian cathedral which was "consecrated in 1888 but was damaged during the March 1920 massacre of Armenians of the city by Azerbaijanis and experienced a decades-long decline."

More recently, according to a March 29, 2021 report, during just two weeks, at least three Armenian churches in the Nagorno-Karabakh region were recently vandalized or destroyed by Azerbaijani forces - even though a ceasefire had been declared in November. Video footage of the desecration of one of these churches shows Azerbaijani troops entering the Christian place of worship, and then laughing, mocking, kicking, and defacing Christian items inside it, including a fresco of the Last Supper. Turkey's flag appears on the Azerbaijani servicemen's uniforms, further implicating the Erdogan government of involvement. As they approach, one of the Muslim soldiers says, "Let's now enter their church, where I will perform *namaz*" - a reference to Muslim prayers; when Muslims pray inside a non-Muslim temple, it immediately becomes a mosque.

In response to this video, Arman Tatoyan, an Armenian human rights activist, issued a statement:

"The President of Azerbaijan, and the country's authorities have been implementing a policy of hatred, enmity, ethnic cleansing and genocide against Armenia, citizens of Armenia and the Armenian people for years. The Turkish authorities have done the same or have openly encouraged the same policy."

As an example, he said that Azerbaijan's President Aliyev had proudly stated in early March that "the younger generation has grown up with hatred toward the enemy " - meaning Armenians.

Such hate, a precursor to genocide, seems evident everywhere. One need only listen to a Turkish man rant in a video about how all Armenians are "dogs," and that any Armenians found in Turkey should be slaughtered:

"What is an Armenian doing in my country? Either the state expels them or we kill them. Why do we let them live?... We will slaughter them when the time comes.... This is Turkish soil. How are we Ottoman grandchildren?... The people of Turkey... have honor, dignity, and Allah must cut the heads of the Armenians in Turkey. It is dishonourable for anyone to meet and not kill an Armenian... If we are human, let us do this—let us do it for Allah.... Everyone listening, if you love Allah, please spread this video of me to everyone..."

Answering the question, "If you could get away with one thing, what would you do?" - asked to random passersby on the streets of Turkey - a woman recently replied on video: "What would I do? Behead 20 Armenians." She then looked directly at the camera and smiled while nodding her head.

Much of this genocide hatred should be unsurprising: Turkish public school textbooks, as a recent study found, continue demonizing Armenians - as well as Jews and Christians.

If Turks, who are not affected by the Armenian/Azerbaijani conflict, feel this way, why it should be a shock that any number of Azerbaijanis do, too? "We [Azerbaijanis]," noted Nurlan Ibrahimov, head of the press service of Qarabag football club of Azerbaijan, "must kill all Armenians—children, women, the elderly. [We] need to kill [them] without [making a] distinction. No regrets, no compassion."

Today, therefore, marking the anniversary of the start of the Armenian Genocide, we would do well to remember not only what happened *then*, but what is clearly being primed to happen again.

*Raymond Ibrahim, author of Sword and Scimitar, The Al Qaeda Reader, and Crucified Again.*

# Biden Recognizing the Armenian Genocide Shows How Far Erdogan Has Fallen

By Soner Cagaptay



It took President Joe Biden more than three months in office to call Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. That alone was a sign of the fall in status of a country that was once one of America's closest strategic allies across the Middle East, South-eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean. But much worse for Ankara was the message Biden delivered when he finally picked up the phone Friday, as first reported by Bloomberg: The U.S. government was finally recognizing the 1915 Ottoman killing of Armenians as genocide.

Why is Biden treating Erdogan with such apparent political condescension? And more importantly, why is Biden keeping his campaign promise to recognize the Armenian genocide when none of his predecessors in the White House did so once they assumed the presidency?

Biden, of course, is not being mean. He is simply aware that for the first time in many years, Erdogan needs the U.S. more than Washington needs him. Biden is, accordingly, using this window as a lever, hoping to correct some of Erdogan's behaviour, including his anti-democratic actions and close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

For years, the U.S. has seen Turkey as too important to alienate by designating its massacre of 1.5 million Armenians during World War I genocide, despite nearly universal recognition of that description by academics and the larger American society, as well as tremendous domestic pressure for recognition from the politically engaged American Armenian community and others.

The crux of the issue now isn't that Biden is mad at Erdogan, but rather that almost the entire U.S. government is. Many inside and outside the administration see Erdogan as an autocrat who poses a threat to U.S. interests regionally.

Where Turkey was once a beacon of democracy among Muslim-majority nations, Erdogan's clampdown on fair elections, freedom of speech and judicial independence

have repulsed Americans. Where Turkey was once a pillar of hope for an open and modern Muslim-majority society, Erdogan's social conservatism and nativist-populist tactics have shifted the country toward intolerance and societal polarization.

Where Turkey was once so strategically aligned with the West that it became the easternmost member of NATO, under Erdogan it has routinely sparred with the organization and even thwarted it on occasion. And where Turkey was once close friends with important Middle East players like Israel, Erdogan's reorientation toward political Islamist groups such as Hamas has burned important regional bridges.

I have tracked U.S.-Turkey ties since 2002. In the past, when a new president was elected after promising to recognize the Armenian genocide, he would immediately face a "dam" of U.S. departments and agencies explaining why the move would be a mistake, given Turkish objections.

Turkey opposes this designation because it's concerned about its practical implications—chief among them, opening the government up to calls for reparations—as well as its symbolism. It doesn't want to be seen as a pariah country, and at the same time it wants the large number of Turks, Kurds and other Muslims killed by Armenian-allied Russia during World War I to be acknowledged as well.

Turkey has devoted considerable funds to lobbying at the U.S. Capitol, organized academic conferences and published books on the issue to keep Washington from changing its language. (Interestingly, and reflective of Turkey's still-robust civil society and democratic vibrancy, the once-taboo genocide characterization is also gaining some traction in Turkey itself, much to Erdogan's ire.)

In the past, the Department of Defence considered Turkey a precious ally and frequently served as the key building block of the U.S. government dam, making a case that ties with Ankara superseded campaign promises about the Armenian genocide. Not anymore. Today the Pentagon, which is angry at Ankara for a bevy of issues, most notably Turkey's 2017 purchase of a Russian-made S-400 missile defence system, is no longer interested in carrying Ankara's water in Washington.

What's more, Congress is positioned much more hawkishly than even the Pentagon and Biden on Turkey. Many members of Congress represent Armenian constituents who have pushed strongly for recognition of the genocide. And the legislature, which has already imposed sanctions targeting Ankara's purchase of the Russian missile defence system, wants to punish Turkey harshly for Erdogan's many other transgressions, confusing the president with the country in my view.

Even at the State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, which has traditionally dealt with Ankara, Turkeyphilia is fast going out of fashion. The overall sentiment inside the U.S. government is that Erdogan responds better to Putin-style toughness than to a warm embrace.

At the same time, Erdogan is out of options that would help accommodate Biden. With his disapproval rate sinking at home Erdogan is unlikely to agree to relax his autocratic control of Turkish society, lest the already vigilant opposition surges and votes him out.

And abroad, Erdogan is simply in too deep with Putin to get out. If Erdogan were to return the S-400s to Russia, Putin could immediately impose trade and tourism

sanctions, targeting Turkey's ailing economy and further eroding Erdogan's support base.

On the military front, Putin can greenlight an attack by close ally Bashar al-Assad on Idlib, the last rebel-held territory in Syria, sending hundreds of thousands of refugees across the border to Turkey. Ankara already hosts 3.6 million Syrian refugees. With Turkey's economy slowing down and anti-refugee sentiment rising, even Erdogan wouldn't be able to withstand the social and political forces unleashed by a vast and sudden increase in refugees.

Putin can also spoil tenuous cease fire deals between his allies and Turkey and its allies in Libya and the South Caucasus, further undermining Ankara's interests, as well as creating troubles for Erdogan personally—since he thrives on his global strongman image domestically. I've always thought that stuck between Biden and Putin, Erdogan would pick Putin. That point of reckoning might be around the corner.

All of this leaves Erdogan in a weak position to push back against the genocide designation, which is also part of why Biden has chosen this moment to act. Erdogan faces a brittle Turkish economy. If his relations with Washington are in freefall, that can cause the Turkish economy to tank.

Erdogan now needs to reverse this dynamic by creating a narrative that he is getting along just fine with Biden. Accordingly, he has been patient even as Biden has ignored him and then drastically shifted American policy on the genocide. I have written Erdogan's political biography and know that he can be very pragmatic, but also quite Machiavellian. I am certain that whichever disconsolate and evasive words he chooses in his response to Biden's designation, he will be looking for an opportunity to get back at the U.S. president—once the Turkish economy bounces back.

*Soner Cagaptay is the author of its Transition 2021.*

## **Announcement on the creation of the Asia Pacific Union for Saudi Arabia**



The Asia Pacific Union for Saudi Arabia (APUSA) is a non-profit organization drawn from organizations, individuals, academics and activists from Australia, Brunei, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand. Promoting closer friendship and understanding between the peoples of Saudi Arabia and the Asia Pacific, the goal of the Union is to build an active and lasting friendship.

Saudi Arabia is a country of Islam and Oil. Saudi Arabia has great potential for further development based on abundant natural resources and sufficient man power in young generation. With Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is now transforming into a new nation under the theme of 'a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation'. Saudi Arabia has a promising future with its thoroughly planned preparation, leveraging country's unique strengths and capabilities.

To promote such a amicable relationship, the National Chapters of the Union will seek to implement various collaboration activities, such as sponsored conferences, art exhibition hosting, business forum, tour program, exchange student program, research in history/culture/art/academic fields and many other programs.

We sincerely appreciate your attention and support toward the Union to develop a solid relationship between the Asia Pacific region and Saudi Arabia. Everyone is invited to participate in our activities and anyone who agrees with the Statement of Principles is welcome to join a National Chapter.

The Australian National Chapter of APUSA will be established in Sydney in coming weeks.

# Why France is Stuck in Chad

By Nandini Mahajan



The former French colony is now prime outpost of the West in fighting Islamist militants across the Sahel – the vast region between the Sahara and the Sudanian savanna. In mid April Chad's longest serving president Idriss Déby died of injuries sustained during clashes with the rebel group FACT (Front for Change and Concord in Chad) on the frontlines.

Soon after, Chad's government and parliament were dissolved so that a military council led by Déby's son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, can govern for the next 18 months. The move has been widely criticised, but the army is promising "free and democratic" elections once the transition period is over.

The former French colony is now prime outpost of the West in fighting Islamamist militants across the Sahel – the vast region between the Sahara and the Sudanian savanna. France still has a strong military presence in the region and had provided support to Déby in fighting political opponents and allies. France, however, has been looking to disengage from the region ever since the 2013 rebellion in the Central African Republic. With Déby's death, this might not be an easy exit.

During Déby's state funeral, French President Emmanuel Macron, the only Western head of state in attendance, sat next to the new head of state Mahamat Idriss Déby. France has defended the Chadian army's takeover, and Macron called upon the military government to foster, "stability, inclusion, dialogue and democratic transition." France's motive is not to establish democracy, but just enough stability for it to pull out its troops in the region.

What is France's military presence in the region?

The motive behind military operations in the Sahel countries is to fight Islamist groups, monitor political ambitions, and train future African leaders. Chad has been France's most effective and stable Sahel ally in achieving these goals.

At the moment, France has nearly 5,100 French soldiers and sophisticated military equipment in the Sahel region for France's Operation Barkhane which began in 2014 to

lead counter-terrorism operations in the Sahel region. The troops are permanently stationed in Chad. In 2020 alone, France spent \$1.1 Billion on Operation Barkhane.

France says its objective is to help Sahel nations maintain territorial integrity and prevent rise of Islamist groups that threaten France and the West. France has provided tremendous military and intelligence support to Chad over the years, including when it deployed troops and fighter jets to push back a Libyan and Sudanese offensive. It continues to maintain military bases in Chad's border cities as well.

Why does France want a way out?

France's military presence in the region is quite high. Most Western nations who provide military support to France in the Sahel region are looking to cut back on their troops and military arsenal. This year Germany refused to send more troops for additional operations in the region. The United States, which have most of its troops in Africa stationed in Sahel, are looking to reduce numbers as well.

Since its inception, Operation Barkhane has become infamous for civilian deaths and regular armed attacks and mine explosions. Civilians in the Sahel region are growing hostile towards foreign troops who have failed to protect them. Macron's own popularity has taken a hit in France due to dozens of deaths of French soldiers and extremely high costs. An estimated 2 million people have been displaced and most are now coming to Europe to seek refuge.

Why has France been unable to exit?

France is aware that if it pulls out its troops, it would create a security vacuum and domestic troops and UN peacekeeping missions won't be able to sustain operations and fight by themselves. Whatever France and its allies have achieved would be lost.

Fighting terrorism is becoming harder as the high levels of poverty, unemployment and population growth is making it easier for jihadists and Islamist groups to recruit more cadres.

Sahel nations, especially Chad, have been largely unwilling to invest in human development and solving the cross-border issues through diplomatic means. According to the International Crisis Group, Chad's defence spending is at least 30% of its annual budget. During his 30 years of rule, Déby didn't invest enough in building Chad's society or economy and the nation currently stands at 187 out of 189 nations in the United Nations Human Development Index.

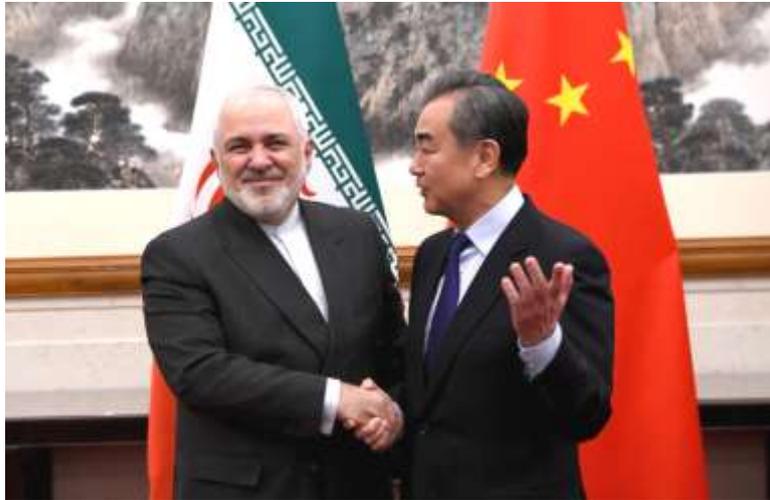
Déby remained autocratic throughout and severely curtailed personal freedom, cracked down on opponents and suppressed dissent. The new government led by his own son is likely to not be very different.

The strongest dissent Chad faces domestically is FACT, which has been rallying against the military handover and has vowed to continue hostilities. A FACT spokesperson told Reuters said they are planning to head to the capital, N'Djamena and have sent nearly 400-450 vehicles into Chad carrying thousands of soldiers.

The spokesperson added that FACT was not looking to take power, but establish democracy and improve social services. There are rising concerns about violence and destabilisation in Chad which can lead to potential humanitarian and refugee crises. Macaron has said he will not tolerate any attack on Chad.

# China's Foreign Minister tours the Middle East

By Ilari Papa



The trip echoed Beijing's strategy of stringing together initiatives that seem insubstantial on their own but cumulatively threaten to undermine U.S. and regional interests.

In the last week of March, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi embarked on a weeklong visit to six Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iran, Bahrain, and Oman. The trip aimed to highlight the region's growing importance in China's foreign policy and bolster Beijing's local appeal—not coincidentally, at a time when the United States is seeking to pivot away from the Middle East and focus on strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific.

## Key Outcomes

Wang started his trip in Saudi Arabia, where he proposed a “Five-Point Initiative on Achieving Security and Stability in the Middle East.” The plan touched on pertinent issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iran's nuclear program, wider proliferation concerns, maritime security, counterterrorism, economic development, vaccine cooperation, and post-conflict reconstruction. China has emphasized these same issues for the past several years, so the plan does not offer any fresh information about its regional intentions. It does, however, seek to portray Beijing as a responsible great power that understands key local issues.

When Wang reached the UAE, a deal was signed allowing the Emirati firm G42 to begin domestically producing about 200 million doses of the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine. Beijing has already distributed vaccine doses to seventeen countries in the Middle East, but this venture marks the first agreement for overseas production, fulfilling what Wang called China's “commitment to make vaccines a global public good.” The deal also signifies Beijing's trust in the UAE as a potential access point for incremental Chinese expansion in the region's development and strategic sectors.

In addition, Wang agreed to establish a data security cooperation initiative with the Arab League in order to boost joint efforts on 5G, artificial intelligence, and big data. Details remain nebulous, but the deal is reminiscent of Beijing's “Global Data Security

Initiative,” a counter to the U.S.-led “Clean Network” program that has raised concerns about the security implications of Huawei’s 5G infrastructure and other Chinese tech services.

More broadly, Wang emphasized the goal of synergizing Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with local development projects. He also raised the prospect of a potential Chinese free trade agreement with the Middle East.

While in Iran, Wang signed an oft-announced “Comprehensive Cooperation Plan” that serves as a roadmap for bilateral cooperation on security, economics, and cultural exchange. According to an Iranian Foreign Ministry fact sheet, specific areas of collaboration may include infrastructure, petrochemicals, energy, counterterrorism, the BRI, and technology.

### Key Themes

Three main themes dominated the trip. First, Wang consistently hailed China’s role as a champion of developing nations and a partner in times of need. According to this view, Beijing understands the needs of Middle Eastern countries better than other partners do because it belongs to the same “Global South” background.

Second, Wang reinforced Beijing’s opposition to foreign intervention. Implicitly referring to the United States, he stated, “China encourages countries in the region to stay impervious to external pressure and interference, to independently explore development paths suited to their regional realities.” He also implored them to “break free from the shadows of big-power geopolitical rivalry and resolve regional conflicts and differences as masters of the region

Third, Wang asserted Beijing’s expectation that Middle Eastern countries show respect for China’s core interests, avoid interfering with its domestic politics, and support the Chinese Communist Party when it faces Western criticism. In this vein, he expressed gratitude for regional backing of the “One China” policy and Beijing’s “counterterrorism measures” against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. “The situation of a country’s human rights shall be judged by its people rather than other countries based on their own preferences,” he declared, then claimed that “the views of human rights held by some Western countries are not representative of the international perspective.” This statement came on the heels of Western sanctions targeting Beijing’s suppression of the Uyghurs, which the U.S. government regards as genocide. For their part, Arab officials generally applauded China’s actions as pushback against extremism, while Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu expressed “sensitivity and thoughts on Uyghur Turks.”

### Implications for China’s Middle East Strategy

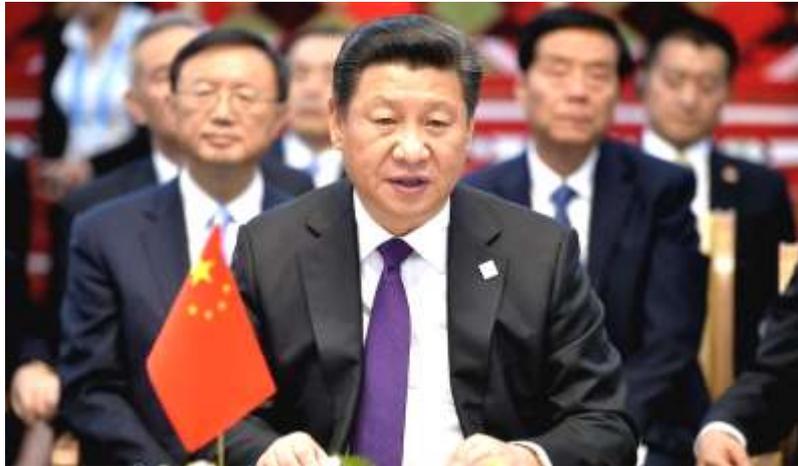
Although the outcomes of Wang’s tour may not appear groundbreaking, they meticulously reiterated China’s regional strategy at an important moment in U.S. foreign policy. Beijing systematically uses economic benefits to boost its ties with the Middle East in what it calls a “new style of cooperation”—namely, one that does not infringe on domestic politics. Wang’s emphasis on vaccines, energy, trade, investment, infrastructure, and technology was aimed at bolstering his government’s image and credibility in the region while at the same time distinguishing China from other great powers that interfere in their domestic affairs, meaning the United States. Yet the unspoken reality is that such investments allow Beijing to project power, reap financial benefits, secure energy supplies, and expand its export markets, regardless of each regional partner’s domestic interests.

Wang's trip also demonstrated how China balances its regional relationships as it strives for strategic gains. For example, he visited both Iran and Saudi Arabia despite their animosity toward one another. And the five-point initiative he rolled out in Riyadh expressed support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the Iran nuclear deal that the Saudis opposed when it was reached in 2015. Elsewhere, he offered to facilitate talks between Israel and the Palestinians while encouraging implementation of a two-state solution—commitments China has expressed in the past whenever it seeks to cast its regional role in a positive light without actually getting involved in regional disputes.

Thus, rather than dismissing Wang's new Middle East initiatives as old hat, Washington should view them as cumulative "salami tactics"—a strategy in which each "slice" helps foster a favourable environment for Chinese power projection in the region without any single move being enough to provoke a U.S. response. The "Comprehensive Cooperation Plan" with Iran puts this point into sharp relief, since its language echoes previous Chinese cooperation agreements with Middle Eastern states. In short, Beijing is incrementally boosting its presence and strength in the region just as the United States attempts to counter Chinese hostilities in the Indo-Pacific.

# Communist China seeks to Dominate the Middle East?

By Chan Ling  
TCMER Board Member



China's influence in the Middle East has been growing for years, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a gigantic global infrastructure and economic development project that Chinese President Xi Jinping launched in 2013. Its aim is, it appears, to build an economic and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe, Africa and beyond. This mega development and investment initiative seeks dramatically to enhance China's global influence from East Asia to Europe by making countries worldwide increasingly dependent on China.

"Strategically, the BRI is how China is seeking to collapse Western-American dominance in the [Middle East] region peacefully" according to Dr. Mordechai Chaziz, author of the book *China's Middle East Diplomacy: The Belt and Road Strategic Partnership*.

"The connection between the BRI and the strategic partnerships it creates in the region... allows it to gradually take over the region without creating tensions with the U.S. or the West. In other words, the BRI is a sophisticated Chinese plan to transfer hegemony from the West and the U.S. to China without war or conflict".

"China has signed documents on Belt and Road cooperation with 19 Middle East countries," Wang told *Al Arabiya* during his visit to Saudi Arabia, one of the six countries he visited on his tour, "and carried out distinctive collaboration with each of them."

"As it fosters a new development paradigm, China is ready to share with Middle East countries its market opportunities, work with Arab countries to actively prepare for the China-Arab states summit, promote high-quality Belt and Road cooperation, and expand new areas of growth such as high and new technologies."

The other countries Wang visited were Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman and Bahrain.

China is already the largest trading partner for most countries in the region, including some of its principal partners: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates. Saudi

Arabia was China's top crude oil supplier in 2020, beating Russia. China has made "comprehensive strategic partnerships" with Saudi Arabia and UAE, as well as now Iran, through signing a 25-year comprehensive strategic agreement on economic and security cooperation with Tehran. The agreement also reportedly includes an expansion of military assistance, training and intelligence-sharing.

Through the Belt and Road Initiative, China is also the biggest foreign investor in the region, building infrastructure to the tune of billions of dollars. Although Egypt was not part of Wang's travel itinerary, it, too, forms an important part of the BRI for China. According to Jon B. Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies:

"In the last five years, as China has grown increasingly concerned with transit through the Suez Canal, China has invested billions of dollars in Egypt. Chinese firms are helping construct Egypt's new administrative capital in the desert outside of Cairo, and they are developing a Red Sea port and industrial zone in Ain Sukhna. President Sisi has made at least six trips to Beijing since taking office in 2014, compared to just two trips to Washington."

At first glance, some leaders in the Middle East might regard China as well-suited to dominate their region, which, apart from Israel, consists of more-or-less authoritarian states that share China's views on state sovereignty, non-interference and human rights, and that seem to reject an international order based on democratic values, as led by the US.

"China and the countries agreed that the sovereign independence and national dignity of all countries should be respected, and independent and diverse ways of development should be promoted," Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in summing up his trip. According to China's state-run Xinhua News Agency:

"They agreed to oppose interfering in other countries' internal affairs and slandering other countries under the guise of human rights, safeguard the international system with the United Nations as the core and the international order based on international law, multilateralism, and international equity and justice, Wang said."

Meanwhile Wang overlooked the fact that China had originally offered the world similar assurances in 1984 regarding the retention of Hong Kong's political and economic system for 50 years after the 1997 return of the territory to Mainland China's sovereignty, only to renege on this commitment 27 years ahead of the scheduled end of the "one country, two systems" arrangement in 2047.

Wang also managed to overlook that China broke its 2015 commitment not to "militarize" artificial islands that Beijing had been building in the Spratly Islands chain in the South China Sea and which it is now surrounding with "fishing boats", threatening the nearby Philippines. The foreign minister also apparently forgot that China has never honoured at least nine of the commitments it made when it joined the World Trade Organization, its nuclear testing commitments and its commitment to the Vatican in appointing bishops.

"China's communist leaders have repeatedly promised major reforms or policy shifts to gain entrance into international agreements only to roll back those reforms as soon as they get what they want," noted business columnist Chris Tomlinson presciently in 2016.

China's deepening ties with Middle Eastern countries beyond trade should concern the US, especially as Biden has recently taken steps to deprioritize the region, thereby opening the door to Chinese domination. "If you are going to list the regions Biden sees as a priority, the Middle East is not in the top three," said a former senior national security official and close Biden adviser to Politico.

"It's Asia-Pacific, then Europe, and then the Western Hemisphere. And that reflects a bipartisan consensus that the issues demanding our attention have changed as great power competition [with China and Russia] is resurgent."

Apparently not satisfied with strategic and economic cooperation, China also suggested taking on a greater role in mediating between Israel and the Palestinians. "Nothing represents equity and justice in the Middle East more than a sound solution to the question of Palestine and earnest implementation of the two-state solution," said Wang in an interview with the Saudi newspaper *Al Arabiya*.

"We support active mediation by the international community toward this objective and holding an authoritative international meeting on this matter when conditions are ripe. In its presidency of the UN Security Council this May, China will encourage the Security Council to fully deliberate on the question of Palestine to reaffirm the two-state solution. We will continue to invite peace advocates from Palestine and Israel to China for dialogue. We also welcome Palestinian and Israeli representatives to China for direct negotiations".

As China vies for more international influence to become the world's greatest power by 2049 - militarily, economically, technologically and politically - the Middle East is likely to become crucial, whether the West prioritizes it or not.

# Growing Calls for Moving or Boycotting the Beijing Olympics

By Soeren Kern



A growing number of Western lawmakers and human rights groups are calling for a boycott of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, in response to burgeoning evidence of human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

A growing number of Western lawmakers and human rights groups are calling for a boycott of the next Winter Olympics, set to take place in Beijing in February 2022.

The calls for a boycott have come in response to burgeoning evidence of human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, a remote autonomous region in north-western China. Human rights experts say that at least one million Muslims are being detained in hundreds of internment camps, where they are subject to torture, mass rapes, forced labour and sterilizations.

Anger is also simmering over China's political repression in Hong Kong, Tibet and Inner Mongolia; its increased intimidation of Taiwan; its threats to its other neighbours; as well as its continued lack of transparency over the origins of the Coronavirus pandemic, which has resulted in the deaths of more than three million people around the world, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Boycott options include: 1) moving the Winter Olympics to another country; 2) an athletic boycott — prohibiting athletes from participating in the Games; 3) a diplomatic boycott — barring senior political representatives from travelling to Beijing to attend the opening ceremony; 4) an economic boycott — pressuring multinational corporations to cancel multi-million dollar Olympic sponsorship deals; or 5) a media boycott — limiting television coverage of the Games, thus depriving China of an important propaganda tool in the West.

Regardless of what transpires, China's human rights record is sure to be the focus of increased scrutiny during the months leading up to the Games.

The global boycott campaign is being led by the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), an international cross-party group of more than 100 legislators from 13 countries who are working towards reform on how democratic countries approach China. IPAC's co-chair, British MP Sir Ian Duncan Smith, has repeatedly called on

governments around the world to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics as punishment for China's human rights abuses. He said:

"We're dealing with a government of intolerance, dictatorial, brooks no dissent, arrests people at a drop of a hat. I think there's a very strong case to be made that China should not be rewarded for its astonishingly bad behaviour."

In August 2020, the Germany-based World Uyghur Congress (WUC), the world's largest group of exiled ethnic Uyghurs, called on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to reconsider holding the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, citing what it said is evidence of crimes against humanity committed in China's Xinjiang region.

In a formal complaint to the IOC's Ethics Commission, the WUC said that the IOC had "acted in breach of the Olympic Charter by failing to reconsider holding the 2022 Olympics in Beijing following verifiable evidence of genocide and crimes against humanity taking place against the Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims by the People's Republic of China."

In September 2020, a coalition of more than 160 human rights groups demanded that the IOC "reverse its mistake in awarding Beijing the honour of hosting the Winter Olympic Games in 2022." In a letter, the coalition said:

"The IOC must recognize that the Olympic spirit and the reputation of the Olympic Games will suffer further damage if the worsening human rights crisis, across all areas under China's control, is simply ignored....

"The IOC's reputation was indelibly tarnished by its mistaken belief that the 2008 Olympics would work to improve China's human rights record. In reality the prestige of hosting the Olympic Games merely emboldened the Chinese government's actions and, since then, we have witnessed a gross increase on the assault on communities living under its rule: the construction of an Orwellian surveillance state in occupied Tibet, the incarceration of between 1.8 to 3 million Uyghurs, the recent demolition of 'One Country Two Systems' in Hong Kong that breach multiple international laws and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the erasure of Southern Mongolian culture and language, the ongoing military intimidation and geopolitical bullying of Taiwan, and the detention, disappearance and death of countless Chinese lawyers, feminists, democracy activists, and anyone else deemed a threat by the Chinese Communist Party....

"Despite appeals from frontline communities and human rights groups, the IOC has repeated the same mistakes as the past and remained unresponsive to evidence of the sharp decline in human rights protections before and after the 2008 Games in Beijing; evidence that illustrates that the 2022 Games will also have no positive impact on China's adherence to human rights standards, and could even contribute to more repression."

In February 2021, in the largest coordinated boycott effort to date, a coalition of more than 180 human rights groups called on world leaders to boycott the Winter Games in Beijing. In a letter, the coalition said:

"At the end of July 2015, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) selected Beijing as the host city for the 2022 Winter Games. Since then — and despite claims by the IOC and Beijing Olympic Committee that the Games will serve as a catalyst for progress —

President Xi Jinping has unleashed an unrelenting crackdown on basic freedom and human rights....

"The IOC refused to listen in 2008, defending its decision with claims that they would prove to be a catalyst for improved human rights. As human rights experts predicted, this decision proved to be hugely misplaced; not only did China's human rights record not improve but violations increased substantially without rebuke.

"Now, in 2021, we find ourselves back in the same position with the IOC who are refusing to act despite the clear evidence of genocide and widespread and worsening human rights failures.

"It now falls on governments to take a stand and demonstrate that they have the political will to push back against China's reprehensible human rights abuses.

"We therefore call on governments to boycott the Beijing 2022 Games — anything less will be seen as an endorsement of the Chinese Communist Party's authoritarian rule and blatant disregard for civil and human rights."

The IOC, which derives more than 70% of its income from broadcasting rights, has resisted pressure to relocate or boycott the Games. IOC President Thomas Bach has said that a boycott would not work:

"We can only repeat and give advice to learn from history — a boycott of the Olympic Games has never achieved anything.

"Be mindful of the boycott in Moscow in 1980 because of the intervention of the Soviet army in Afghanistan. The Soviet army withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 — nine years after.

"So, it really served nothing but punishing the athletes and then led to the counter-boycott in Los Angeles. It also has no logic, why would you punish the athletes from your own country if you have a dispute with athletes from another country? This just makes no real sense. The athletes would be the ones who are suffering."

German Greens MEP Reinhard Bütikofer, a vocal proponent of a boycott, countered:

"I think the IOC is not a sports organization, but a business that uses athletes. I think we have to remind the IOC that it has a social responsibility like any company. The starting point for me would be that before 2008, when Beijing was allowed to host the Summer Games, efforts were still made to obtain certain concessions from [Chinese] authorities, for example with regard to the unrestricted freedom of movement of journalists throughout the country.

"I do not know that the IOC would insist on at least the same commitments today as it did twelve years ago. I would also like to start a critical debate with many top politicians about this: Do you absolutely have to stage a beautiful sports event against the background of totalitarian oppression? And I would also like to talk to the sponsors: Do you really think you have to earn your money by closing your eyes to these unbearable conditions? Do you have to sully your own name by complicity with it?"

Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, added:

"The IOC knows the Chinese authorities are arbitrarily detaining Uyghurs and other Muslims, expanding state surveillance, and silencing numerous peaceful critics. Its failure to publicly confront Beijing's serious human rights violations makes a mockery of its own commitments and claims that the Olympics are a 'force for good.'"

#### Growing Calls for a Boycott

- United Kingdom, April 23. The House of Commons unanimously passed a non-binding motion declaring that the Chinese government is perpetrating genocide against Uyghurs and others in Xinjiang. The motion is intended, among other aims, to increase pressure on the UK government to clarify its stance on the Beijing Olympics.
- United Kingdom, April 23. MP Layla Moran tweeted: "A diplomatic boycott of next year's Beijing Winter Olympics would send a clear message. We've had enough hand-wringing and prevaricating. We cannot repeat the mistakes of the past. The genocide against the Uyghurs cannot be ignored."
- United States, April 21. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the "Strategic Competition Act of 2021" by 21-1. If approved by the 100-member Senate, the bipartisan bill, aimed at counting China, would force a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics by U.S. officials, but not athletes.
- United States, April 21. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in its 2021 annual report, recommended that the U.S. government "publicly express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and state that U.S. government officials will not attend the games if the Chinese government's crackdown on religious freedom continues."
- Germany, April 18. Free Democratic Party MP Gyde Jensen, in an interview with the newspaper *Die Welt*, said: "Anyone who remains silent about the most serious human rights violations, such as those in Xinjiang, is also making a political statement. It would be a fatal sign if top German politicians would do the Communist Party a favour and allow themselves to be turned into part of a propaganda story through their public appearance at the Olympics."
- Germany, April 18. Greens MP Margarete Bause said: "The Chinese state has been perpetrating systematic crimes against Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang for years. In Hong Kong, in front of the world's eyes, international law is being broken and opposition members are sentenced to arbitrary prison terms. The world must not overlook these crimes. The Olympic Games must be politically ostracized. I expect the sponsors not to make themselves complicit with a totalitarian regime that tramples on human rights."
- United States, March 15. Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted: "The Olympics are an expression of freedom and athletic talent. To hold them in Beijing, while the CCP is committing crimes against democracies around the world, is completely inappropriate."
- Finland, March 8. Green MEP Alviina Alametsa said: "I hope that all the EU countries could get together to decide to boycott the Beijing Winter Olympics. It is positive that the EU has condemned China's human rights violations. We now have to choose what are the lines that China cannot cross without consequences."
- United States, March 4. A group of seven U.S. senators, led by Rick Scott (R-FL), introduced a resolution calling on the IOC to move the 2022 Winter Olympics out of China and rebid it to another country unless Beijing addresses its violation of human rights.

- United States, February 28. Former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, tweeted: "We must boycott the 2022 Winter Olympics in China. It would be a terrible loss for our athletes, but that must be weighed against the genocide occurring in China and the prospect that empowering China will lead to even greater horrors down the road."
- The Netherlands, February 25. The Dutch parliament passed a non-binding motion saying the treatment of the Uyghur Muslim minority in China amounts to genocide. It was the first such move by a European country. The author of the motion, lawmaker Sjoerd Sjoerdsma of the centre-left D-66 Party, separately called on the IOC to move the 2022 Winter Olympics from Beijing.
- Canada, February 22. Canada's House of Commons voted 266-0 to declare China's treatment of its Uyghur minority population a genocide. Lawmakers also passed an amendment asking Canada to call on the IOC to move the 2022 Winter Olympics from Beijing "if the Chinese government continues this genocide."
- Canada, February 16. Conservative Leader Erin O'Toole called for the relocation of the 2022 Winter Olympics out of Beijing: "I think Canadians would agree that it would violate universal fundamental ethical principles to participate in an Olympic Games hosted by a country that is committing a genocide against part of its population. Canada must take a stand."
- United Kingdom, February 8. Iain Duncan Smith, former leader of the Conservative Party, in an interview with LBC radio, said: "I think that the Government should boycott the Olympics. Given the nature of all that is going on, the appalling behaviour of China across a whole range of issues. Sadly it's not just what I believe to be the genocide of the Uyghurs. It's also the fact they have got half a million Tibetans in forced labour camps, and they have been attacking Christians, killed some Indian soldiers on their border the other day and have taken over south China sees and are now beginning to decree that those from Inner Mongolia, which is part of China, cannot speak their own language and of course Hong Kong, where they just simply decided to trash their agreement with us."
- Canada, February 7, 2020. An open letter signed by 13 MPs, a half-dozen Quebec politicians and others called for the 2022 Winter Olympics to be moved outside China. The letter demanded that the IOC relocate the global competition to avoid having athletes "tainted" by an event that legislators said would be comparable to the 1936 Berlin games under the Nazi regime, rendering it "The Games of Shame."
- Australia, November 9, 2020. Senators Jacqui Lambie and Rex Patrick proposed a boycott of the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics on human rights grounds. The motion was voted down.
- United Kingdom, October 6, 2020. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said that a UK boycott of Beijing Winter Olympics was possible due to Uyghur abuses: "Generally speaking, my instinct is to separate sport from diplomacy and politics, but there comes a point when it is not possible."
- United States, September 3, 2020. The *Washington Post* Editorial Board wrote: "The world must ask whether China, slowly strangling an entire people, has the moral standing to host the 2022 Winter Olympic Games. We think not."
- Canada, June 9, 2020. Canada's former top diplomat to Hong Kong, John Higginbotham, called on the Canadian government to boycott the Beijing Olympics: "Winter Games are in February, 2022, not long from now. China wants them badly as the latest pageant of national power and prestige. Canada should

organize a boycott of those Games unless China lays off Hong Kong. Winter Olympics are easier to organize a boycott than Summer. Medals are concentrated in a few friendly, cold, democratic countries."

- United States, October 10, 2018. The bipartisan Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC), in a letter to IOC President Thomas Bach, urged him "to take steps to reassign" the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing given "credible reports of the mass, arbitrary internment of one million or more Uyghurs and other predominately Muslim ethnic minorities" and other gross violations of universally recognized rights, "which may constitute crimes against humanity."

#### United States Remains Divided

On April 6, U.S. State Department Spokesman Ned Price said that the United States was considering joining with allies to boycott 2022 Winter Games in Beijing. "A coordinated approach will not only be in our interest but also in the interest of our allies and partners," he said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian threatened retaliation:

"I stress once again that the allegation of 'forced labour' in Xinjiang is the most outrageous lie of the century.... The wheels will come off for the U.S. if it continues to turn a blind eye to facts and truth, and attack and malign China based on deliberate lies. This will ... meet with the resolute opposition of the Chinese people and the forceful responses from the Chinese side."

Biden quickly backtracked: "Our position on the 2022 Olympics has not changed," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki. "We have not discussed and are not discussing any joint boycott with allies and partners."

The apparent contradiction is eliciting a response by lawmakers who are demanding that the United States boycott the Games. The issue of human rights in China is emerging as a key foreign policy issue ahead of the American midterm elections set for November 2022.

On April 21, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the "Strategic Competition Act of 2021" by a vote of 21-1. If approved by the 100-member Senate, the bipartisan bill, aimed at counting China, would mandate a diplomatic boycott of the 2022 Beijing Olympics by U.S. officials. Under the legislation, Secretary of State Antony Blinken could waive the boycott if the situation warrants.

On April 15, a bipartisan group of American lawmakers called for the United States to boycott the 2022 Winter Games. In a roundtable — sponsored by U.S. Congressman Michael Waltz (R-FL), co-hosted with Congressmen Guy Reschenthaler (R-PA) and Tom Malinowski (D- NJ), and joined by former U.S. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley, and various human rights organizations — participants discussed human rights abuses being carried out by the Chinese Communist Party against the Uyghurs, Tibetans, Hong Kong, and other groups.

U.S. Senator Rick Scott (R-FL) has argued that a boycott is insufficient; he has called for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games to be moved out of Beijing altogether. In a February 25 letter to the White House, he wrote:

"I write to you today to make clear that the horrific human rights abuses perpetrated by China's communist government against its own people cannot be ignored. Under no

circumstance should the global community give Communist China an international platform to whitewash its crimes, which is what will happen if they are allowed to host the 2022 Olympic Games in Beijing."

In a subsequent letter addressed to German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Scott wrote:

"I encourage you to join me in calling on the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to move the 2022 Olympics Games out of Beijing. Governments and international organizations have the ability and responsibility to address human rights concerns, and calling on the IOC to move the 2022 Olympics Games out of Beijing is the right course of action.

"To be clear, I do not support a boycott. Boycotting these games will only hurt athletes who have spent their lives training to represent their country on the international stage. Instead, it should be the position of all democratic nations that the IOC can and should move the 2022 Games to a nation that respects human rights."

Scott has made similar requests of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and French President Emmanuel Macron.

U.S. Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX), in an opinion article, "Don't Boycott China Olympics," added:

"To be clear, I and many others hope that the International Olympic Committee comes to its senses and moves the 2022 Olympic Winter Games out of Beijing. As someone who was sanctioned twice by the government of China, I am flabbergasted that the IOC would ever give this human rights-abusing, free speech-repressing, trade-and-currency manipulating set of totalitarians who make up the Chinese Communist Party the honour of hosting the Olympic Games in the first place. Here's hoping that reason prevails and the Games are sent to any place but China.

"That said, we have tried this boycott business before, and it utterly failed....

"The worst thing we can do to stand up to China is to keep our athletes home. As anyone who has ever faced down a bully knows, when you decide to hide and not to fight, the bully wins.

"Our athletes should go to Beijing next year proudly, bring home medal after medal, and show the world what it means to compete on behalf of a free society. We shouldn't give China an easy way to run up its medal count by preventing Americans from going to the Olympics."

Glacier Kwong, a human rights activist from Hong Kong who is currently residing in Germany, in an article, "Beijing Genocide Olympics," published by *Die Welt*, concluded:

"This is not about 'opposing views' between countries. There is no room for a middle ground. Either you make yourself an accomplice by closing your eyes, or you stand up for the values that are close to your heart — such as freedom and democracy."

*Soeren Kern is a Senior Fellow at the New York-based Gatestone Institute.*

## Outrage in Kuwait after Harassed Woman is stabbed to Death!

By Miriam Berger



Kuwaiti women carry a banner during a rally to denounce Violence against women in Kuwait City

Farah Hamza Akbar filed two police complaints against a man she said harassed and threatened her for more than a year. But that wasn't enough to keep her safe. He was detained, according to media reports, but released on bail. A few days later her bleeding body, with a stab wound to the heart, was found dumped in front of a hospital south of Kuwait City.

The man, whose name authorities have not yet released, is once again in custody. Authorities say he confessed to stabbing Akbar after crashing his car into hers and kidnapped her and her two children. He left her body at the hospital and fled the scene. Local media reported Akbar and her family had refused the man's marriage proposal.

After the slaying, a video of Akbar's angry, grieving sister wailing at the hospital and railing against authorities began to circulate online, sparking outrage over the killing in the conservative, oil-rich gulf country.

"That is what we got, exactly what we said, that he is going to kill her, and he killed my sister," the sister says in the video. "Where is the government? We told the judge. I told you many times he would kill her, and now she's dead."

Authorities did not say whether the children sustained any injuries.

The man, who is still walking free, also crashed his car into the car of the lawyer whose sister he murdered and child he kidnapped. [pic.twitter.com/k1Di8hlhxm](https://pic.twitter.com/k1Di8hlhxm)

— Ahmed Eldin | شهاب أحمد (@ASE) April 20, 2021

In a video later shared by Kuwaiti media and on social media, Akbar's sister and lawyer, Dana Akbar, described in detail her repeated efforts to warn police and file court cases against the man. Despite reporting that he was threatening both her and her sister's life, she said that authorities did not take her seriously. Instead, she said, they twice detained and then released the man.

On social media, users shared outrage at the gruesomeness of Akbar's death and accused Kuwait's deeply patriarchal society of ignoring women when they speak up. Many women in Kuwait do not feel comfortable reporting cases of harassment to police. In Akbar's situation, she even had a lawyer, her sister, advocating for her.

Among those publicizing Akbar's killing has been Kuwaiti-American fashion blogger Ascia al-Faraj, who has used her large social media following to highlight the harassment women in Kuwait face.

Meanwhile a group of women also held a small protest outside the National Assembly in Kuwait City in Akbar's honour and against gender-based violence. Several lawmakers in Kuwait's all-male National Assembly this week demanded a probe into why the Interior Ministry did not provide Akbar better protection, Kuwaiti media outlets reported.

Akbar's is not the first killing to recently spark outrage in Kuwait. In December 2020, a woman, Shaikha al-Ajmi, was allegedly killed by her brother, who reportedly disapproved of her working as a guard at Kuwait's parliament.

In part spurred by similar cases, this year women in Kuwait founded a movement, called "Lan Askat," Arabic for "I will not be silent," to publicize the prevalence of gender-based violence and sexual harassment they faced.

Kuwaiti lawmakers passed the country's first domestic violence law in August 2020. But activists say it has been poorly implemented and that the legal code still provides men who kill women far greater protections. Under Kuwaiti law, a man who catches his wife or sister committing adultery and kills her would be charged with a misdemeanour and face a maximum of three years in jail.

## **Aussie Women's Rights Heroine Zara Kay Released**

**By Arthur Tane  
TCMER Executive Director**



Zara Kay is the founder of Faithless Hijabi, an international non-profit organisation that seeks to support the rights of Muslim-raised women, especially those who are in the process of leaving or have left Islam.

Zara Kay was born in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and raised as a Khoja Twelver Shia Muslim. Aged fourteen, Kay began to question her religion, wanting to know why she couldn't be friends with non-Muslims, listen to music, loosen her hijab or not want to get married at eighteen (like some of her friends). After finishing high school at age fifteen, she moved to Malaysia to attend Sunway University and then Monash University's Malaysian campus in Bandar Sunway at age sixteen. She stopped wearing the hijab at age eighteen before she moved to Australia.

Ms Kay founded Faithless Hijabi (FH) in 2018 in Sydney. Faithless Hijabi is a storytelling platform that enables ex-Muslim and questioning Muslim women to share their stories of apostasy, doubt and freedom. While being a platform that creates safe spaces for women to express their dissent, Faithless Hijabi strives to take an active role in advocating for women's rights. FH is active on numerous social media in order to enable people to reach out for help. At present, the organisation primarily publishes stories and blogs in English, but has recently launched their Arabic social media pages. FH's mission is "Educate through stories," and "to empower an underrepresented group of women."

Faithless Hijabi was involved with the case of Rahaf Mohammed, the 18-year-old Saudi Arabian woman who managed to escape from her family in January 2019, but was held by Thai authorities at Bangkok Airport, after which she was able to raise international pressure via social media to allow her continue to Canada. The Saudi authorities handling of the Rahaf Mohammed's case at Bangkok International Airport was particularly bad.

Many of the women Faithless Hijabi help are abused, harassed, or worse, if they defy forced veiling. FH helps them find local support and mentors them to maintain

boundaries and achieve financial independence. In 2020, Faithless Hijabi started sponsoring free mental health sessions for women in need.

In recent weeks Zara was arrested in Dar es Salaam on 28 December 2020 and taken into police custody for 32 hours before being released on bail. She was advised to appear back before police authorities in the first week of January 2021. Zara was charged with not returning her Tanzanian passport after acquiring Australian citizenship, using the SIM card of a family member without registering it in her own name, and writing a satirical social media message about the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania.

Ex-Muslim activists associated with The International Coalition of Ex-Muslims believed that Ms Kay was questioned about the work of the organisation and why she left Islam during her interrogation, and they expressed concern for her welfare. Kay was also investigated for failing to declare her acquisition of Australian citizenship. While being held in detention Zara says she was sexually harassed and her initial pleas for help from the Australian consulate were dismissed. She believes she was detained in Tanzania for renouncing her Muslim faith.

On March 4 2021 Tanzanian police did not formally charge her but helped delay her travel back to Australia by reportedly misplacing her Australian passport. Traumatized by her ordeal, Zara is back in Australia recovering from her experiences.

Much loved by the Australian people, Ms Kay's work with Faithless Hijabi continues works to support Muslim women who are questioning their faith or those who have chosen to leave Islam by providing for them a safe space to explore their new freedom and build new understandings.

Your donations will be spread across helping us run Faithless Hijabi and support individual cases that we work on along side other organisations that support ex Muslims at risk. Go to <https://www.faithlesshijabi.org/support-us/>

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# Indian Defence Outreach with The Gulf

**By Anastasia Kravtsov**  
**TCMER Board Member**



The Gulf States and India are a perfect match!

As India seeks to grow in its self-reliance, developing more balanced relations with the Gulf will strengthen ties while helping to balance against Chinese influence in the region.

In May 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that India would pursue Atmanirbhar Bharat, or the 'self reliant India' initiative—a call for India to boost its independence in meeting its national security requirements and defence manufacturing. In exploring this new initiative, India should extend the tenants of the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative to its relations with the Gulf. Initial steps such as the Indian army chief's unprecedented visit to Saudi Arabia and the UAE are necessary and important in this regard, but Indian-Gulf relations must be further developed and balanced. This development should focus on establishing greater Indian independence while deepening regional ties, all while remaining mindful of concurrent Chinese efforts in the region.

The Gulf already plays a crucial role in India's economic development, social progress, and political ascendance. In particular, the recent secret peace plan between India and Pakistan brokered by the UAE signifies the new role that Gulf states are likely to play in assertive mediation and involvement in Indian national security issues.

Yet a future of self-reliance will be hampered by India's continued emphasis on the 3Es (economy, energy, and expatriates) approach when it comes to its relations with Gulf states. The consequences of the dependence engendered by this strategy have become particularly clear in the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the country struggled to return Indian expats who had been working in the Gulf, pouring considerable resources and time into their evacuation. So long as the kinds of Permanent Residency (PR) policies available in the West are not extended to Indian expatriates in the Gulf, such complexities cannot be avoided.

Instead, India needs to strike a more balanced relationship with Gulf countries that is not so reliant on large and vulnerable populations of expat labourers. By showcasing its capabilities in financial investment and technological innovation to the region, India should work to diversify its relationship with the Gulf, thereby developing a stronger presence.

Notwithstanding India's role in Gulf's food security and newly developed vaccine diplomacy, New Delhi needs to develop military, technology, and financial relations with Gulf states that give it a real foothold in the region. This kind of outreach is likely to involve investment, development projects, and military cooperation. In this sense, India not only needs to invest actively in the region, but also convince the regional players to invest in India and engage more in other non-conventional areas.

This question is particularly urgent given the substantive Chinese investments in and military cooperation with the Gulf as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). More recently, China's 'Health Silk Road,' an initiative used to market its medical and vaccine diplomacy in the region, is a notable counter to India's own similar diplomatic outreach efforts. Likewise, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's recent visit to four Middle Eastern countries demonstrates a persistent Chinese diplomatic effort in the region.

China has approached the Middle East with caution and subtlety; Eyck Freymann has noted that China's policy towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has avoided excessive publicity around its regional initiatives in the Middle East, in contrast to the publicity it has afforded its other movements.

With these efforts in mind, it is important to realize that competing with Chinese investments may never lead to India outweighing Chinese influence in the Gulf. Even so, India should invest further in building its relations with the Gulf to allow for a counterweight to Chinese investments.

China began to actively engage the region by signing 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' with major Gulf economies after its BRI project took off in 2013. China's \$400 billion strategic deal last year with Iran is particularly significant because of its distinct military cooperation angle. Similarly, with Saudi Arabia, China has cooperated on joint military/counter-terrorism exercises. Reports also suggest that following the Saudi Aramco attack, China supplied Saudi Arabia with CH-4 UAV drones, which are similar to U.S.-manufactured US MQ-1 drones that the regime already possesses. The UAE, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have likewise purchased Wing Loong Model drones from China. And in August last year, China and Saudi Arabia also notably cooperated in constructing a nuclear facility to extract uranium yellowcake from uranium ore. And while these investments are seen as an attempt to counter U.S. influence in the region, India will still hold concerns about a growing Chinese presence in the Gulf.

In contrast, India is the second largest arms importer in the world, buying its arms mostly from Russia, France, and Israel. To make matters worse, India is also the third largest country in terms of defence spending. Thus, given the changing geopolitical landscape, not only does India need to diversify its defence trading partners, but it also needs to invest heavily in indigenization. In this regard, the Gulf not only provides a potentially vibrant market for Indian defence equipment, arms, and ammunitions that can be provided at a competitive and reasonable rate, but also provides an opportunity for joint ventures and investments in the defence field. This is the reason for the Middle East being selected as the second most preferred region in the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative after South Asia.

Based on an interview with a defence official involved in formulating the Atmanirbhar Bharat initiative, there are a number of avenues India can explore in the Gulf. For one, India can invest in shipbuilding factories in coastal countries like Oman. It can also supply Indian short-range drones such as Idea Forge drones with high to middle altitude range, which can be utilized for situational awareness at ground levels, and loiter munitions such as MIDAS, used by ground troops on a tactical level. Similarly, India could boost its aviation industry by producing Indian helicopters like the Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) and its weaponized version, the ALH-WSI (weapon system integration). For weather forecasting, Weather Service International (WSI) and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) have also produced single engine, fourth generation, multirole light fighter aircraft, such as the TEJAS. Battle and manoeuvre tanks such as Arjun MK1 and its variants may likewise find a good market in the Gulf. Moreover, Indian private industry giants such as ONGC Videsh Limited, which have already acquired 10 percent stakes in UAE offshore oilfields, could also be persuaded to venture into the defence sector. As these private players are already trusted partners in the region in oil extractions, their mandate can be extended to the defence sector as well.

Moreover, India can also look to establish an exclusive Defence Strategic Partnership with major Gulf countries. This is important as it not only provides impetus to its defence services in these countries and vice versa, but can also help the countries to work closely on securing the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) from any potential Chinese blockades in the future. In this regard, the Duqm port, which was offered to India by Oman, may be used as the first Indian base in the region to closely monitor Chinese activities and facilitate India's work plan in the region.

The growing influence of a rival state in a region vital to India's economy and, increasingly, its national security should be a powerful motivator for New Delhi. Indeed, as India builds on its policy of Indian self-reliance, developing a long-term policy that bolsters Indian engagement in the Gulf through investment, technology, and military cooperation is a proactive way to support these goals, especially given the interest China is already demonstrating.

## **Biden Needs to Halt Talks with Iran's Mullahs**

**By Dr. Majid Rafizadeh**



Amid talks - between the Iranian regime and France, the United Kingdom, China, Russia, plus Germany as well as indirect talks between the US and Iran - the ruling mullahs of Iran continue to ratchet up their threats and nuclear defiance.

Last week, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Ali Akbar Salehi, announced that Iran would be enriching uranium to 60 percent - a level of enrichment that has no civilian purpose. Now the Iranian regime has begun enriching uranium to its highest level ever, 60 percent, close to weapons-grade level.

Iranian leaders also began boasting about this development. Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, the speaker of the Iranian parliament wrote:

"The young and God-believing Iranian scientists managed to achieve a 60% enriched uranium product... I congratulate the brave nation of Islamic Iran on this success. The Iranian nation's willpower is miraculous and can defuse any conspiracy."

The Iranian regime also announced that it will be activating more centrifuges at the Natanz nuclear site. Abbas Araqchi, Iran's chief negotiator at the talks, said that Iran would activate 1,000 advanced centrifuge machines.

Now, instead of halting talks amid Iran's defiance, Biden appears happy that Iran is engaged in discussions. President Joe Biden told reporters in Washington during a joint news conference with Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga:

"We are, though, nonetheless pleased that Iran has continued to agree to engage in discussions - indirect discussions - with us and with our partners on how we move forward and what is needed to allow us to move back into the [nuclear deal]..."

Biden seems more determined than ever, however, to "reward" Iran's dangerous and predatory regime by returning to a deal that has sunset clauses, as well as an expiration date after which the mullahs can enrich uranium, spin centrifuges at any level they desire, and make as many nuclear weapons as they like.

A return to the 2025 deal would help to lift all major sanctions against Iran - sanctions it took years to put in place. The deal would enable Iran's military sites to be exempt from inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency. The deal would allow Iran to rejoin the global financial system with full legitimacy, so that billions of dollars could begin flowing into the treasury of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its expanding militias across the Middle East.

The deal also disregards that the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) has placed the Iranian regime on the terrorism financing blacklist. The FATF pointed out in its report:

"Given Iran's failure to enact the Palermo and Terrorist Financing Conventions in line with the FATF Standards, the FATF fully lifts the suspension of counter-measures and calls on its members and urges all jurisdictions to apply effective counter-measures..."

Ever since Biden declared that he wanted to resurrect the nuclear deal- which, incidentally, Iran never signed - the Iranian regime has been ratcheting up its threats and nuclear defiance in order to get more "rewards" - evidently for non-compliance.

First, Iran began increasing uranium enrichment to 20% in January 2021. Then on January 4, in a move that apparently alarmed the US State Department, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) seized a South Korean-flagged ship carrying thousands of tons of ethanol in the Persian Gulf, according to Fars News. A US State Department spokesperson noted at the time:

"The (Iranian) regime continues to threaten navigational rights and freedoms in the Persian Gulf as part of a clear attempt to extort the international community into relieving the pressure of sanctions. We join the Republic of Korea's call for Iran to immediately release the tanker."

Last September, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif told a forum organized by New York's Council on Foreign Relations that Iran wants more money. "A sign of good faith is not to try to renegotiate what has already been negotiated," he said, adding in the same speech that the US must "compensate us for our losses." Iran's top judicial body had already demanded that the US pay \$130 billion in "damages." And now the regime is enriching uranium at its highest level ever.

Unnamed Israeli diplomats unofficially expressed disappointment over the nuclear negotiations and characterized the talks as "complete American capitulation" to Iran's leaders. Israeli leaders are apparently seriously concerned that Biden wants to revive the Iran nuclear deal "at all costs".

Finally, amid the talks to revive the "nuclear deal," Iran's leaders signed a 25-year strategic deal with China. In addition, the Iranian authorities are also engaged in high-level talks with Russia, "in order to help establish stability and combat American interventions."

Biden's silence in the wake of Iran's increasing threats and nuclear defiance will only embolden and empower this predatory regime. The Iranian regime clearly believes it can get away with its violations. Instead of "rewarding" this dangerous Islamist regime, Biden needs to take a firm stance and hold the ruling mullahs accountable.

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

# Israel Has No Choice but to Act on its Own To Stop Iran

By Jonathan S. Tobin



The head of Israel's Mossad intelligence agency and the government's national security adviser is in Washington this week on an important mission that has failed even before it began.

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki made it clear last week that the Israelis are wasting their time. When asked if Israeli pleas about the danger to the region if the United States rejoins the 2015 nuclear deal would have any impact on President Joe Biden's plans, Psaki answered "no." She went on to say that the Israelis are free to keep "challenging" the administration's goal of returning to a weak pact that gives Tehran a legal path to a nuclear weapon by the end of the decade, but the best they could hope for is to be "kept abreast" of America's plans.

That contemptuous attitude was of particular significance because the day before the Israeli security officials arrived, news broke about how former Secretary of State John Kerry had shared intelligence with Iran about Israeli covert operations seeking to stop their nuclear program. According to an audiotape of comments made by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Zarif that were obtained by The New York Times, he said, "It was former U.S. Foreign Secretary [sic] John Kerry who told me Israel had launched more than 200 attacks on Iranian forces in Syria."

There is a lot to unwrap in that one sentence and not just because the Times buried this revelation at the bottom of its story.

Kerry, for whom Psaki served as spokesperson during the nuclear negotiations from 2013 to 2015, currently acts as Biden's special presidential envoy of climate. We already knew that in 2018, Kerry consulted with Zarif advising his former negotiating partner not to work with the Trump administration, which withdrew from the nuclear deal as part of a "maximum pressure" campaign to force the Iranians to agree to a new tougher agreement that would eliminate sunset clauses, as well as include bans on Tehran's role as the world's leading state sponsor of international terrorism and its illegal missile-building. Kerry told Zarif to simply wait out Trump and then deal with a more pliant Democrat that he hoped would be elected in 2020.

That's exactly what happened, and now the Iranians are reaping the benefits. Biden's foreign-policy team, composed almost entirely of veterans of the administration of former President Barack Obama, are again resuming their past practice of appeasing the Iranians with concessions in the works in order to entice Tehran to return to a deal with little hope of improving upon it.

Kerry's collusion with Iran is important because it comes in the context of the growing tension with Israel over its efforts to sabotage the Iranian nuclear program. Unlike in the past, when it was clear that the United States and Israel were cooperating in a joint effort to derail the Islamist regime's nuclear ambitions, the administration went out of its way to disavow any role in Israel's recent successful attack on Iran's Natanz nuclear facility.

The implication of these off-the-record comments from "senior administration officials" is that the administration regarded Israel's efforts as seeking to forestall an American push to re-engage with Iran. A news analysis published in *The Washington Post* filled with quotes from anonymous American and European sources, as well as some on-the-record pot-shots from former Obama administration figures, said the Jewish state was trying to play "the spoiler" in order to undermine Biden's diplomacy. The liberal magazine *Slate* labelled the attack as an act of a "sneaky saboteur," as if there was something inherently illegitimate about actions that sought to prevent a terrorist theocracy from acquiring a nuclear weapon that could fulfil the ayatollah's genocidal threats against Israel.

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) fulminated about the attack, saying he would demand a full security briefing on it while sending a message to the Israelis that he—and other members of his party—take it as a matter of faith that diplomacy is the "only" acceptable path for relations with Iran and that Israel's efforts were bound to fail.

As Martin Peretz pointed out in *Tablet*, while Secretary of State Antony Blinken's messaging on Iran has sounded a moderate tone, he has essentially outsourced the nuclear issue to Robert Malley, Biden's special envoy on Iran. Malley was not only one of the chief architects of the disastrous nuclear deal with Iran; he is a veteran appeaser and critic of Israel.

In essence, right now the United States is asking Israel to back off on its efforts to stop Iran and to trust Biden's team to deliver a diplomatic solution to the problem. But given that Malley has demonstrated no interest in strengthening the nuclear pact so as to forestall an Iranian bomb or stop the regime's terrorism, that's a leap of faith that no responsible Israeli government can make.

More to the point, Zarif's revelation about Kerry's sharing of Intel about their anti-Iran operations makes it clear to the Israelis that the administration isn't merely wrongheaded in its approach but may actively be seeking to undermine their country's security and that of its regional allies.

Not only did Psaki refuse to answer a question about Kerry's astonishing betrayal during her regular press conference on Monday, she didn't even make an attempt to say something that might reassure the Israelis that the administration regarded this as an issue of concern, let alone something about which an apology should be forthcoming. An investigation into this scandal is imperative. So is Kerry's resignation from his current post.

The implication here is something that advocates for Obama's signature foreign-policy accomplishment have always been at pains to contradict. Democratic apologists for the deal have spent the last six years trying to claim that the agreement was the best way to safeguard Israel against an Iranian nuclear weapon. However, critics pointed to the way the deal empowered and enriched a rogue regime, and asked whether the goal was very different from the one Obama had discussed.

Obama said it was a chance to give Iran the opportunity to "get right with the world" by giving up its nuclear ambitions. Instead, the deal may have been part of an effort to shift American policy in the region from one of an alliance with Israel and the Gulf states to one in which Iran would supplant them as America's best friend in the region. Few would have believed this claim in 2015. And yet, the impact of the agreement on the region, coupled with Kerry's actions and the efforts of Obama alumni to return to the deal on Biden's watch, lend some credibility to this theory.

Whatever Obama intended or what Biden may want now, the inescapable conclusion from these events is that the Israelis should be in no doubt about the fact that they are being abandoned by the United States with respect to Iran. This leaves Israel with no good options. Nevertheless, the Jewish state has no choice but to proceed as if its future safety lies solely in its own hands. If Biden or the Democratic Party don't like that, they can reverse course and start acting as if they take the Iranian nuclear threat seriously. Otherwise, they should pipe down and let the Israelis do what they must to stop an existential threat to their existence.

*Jonathan S. Tobin is editor in chief of JNS—Jewish News Syndicate.*

# Kerry's History of Conflict with Israel lends weight to Iranian Accusation

By Peter Rawlings  
TCMER Board Member



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Jerusalem on Nov. 6, 2013.

John Kerry, who serves as Biden's special presidential envoy for climate was secretary of state during the Obama administration, continues to face a backlash over allegations that he may have provided Iranian foreign minister and nuclear negotiator Mohammad Javad Zarif inside information on Israeli military operations.

Three Republican members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee wrote a joint letter the U.S. State Department inspector general to demand an investigation into whether Kerry did indeed provide information, as Zarif claimed in a recording provided to *The New York Times*.

In what was reported to be a conversation with an Iranian economist, Zarif claimed that Kerry told him that Israel had attacked 200 Iranian targets in Syria.

"If this report is true, Secretary Kerry severely undermined the American-Israeli alliance to provide intelligence about one of our most trusted allies to the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism," Rep. Andy Barr (R-Ky.) said in a news release.

"John Kerry and Joe Biden have proven to be pro-Iranian before by championing the failed Iran nuclear deal, but this type of betrayal of a staunch ally is simply unconscionable. We need the inspector general to launch an immediate, impartial investigation to determine the validity of these claims," according to Barr.

He was joined in the letter by Reps. Ann Wagner (R-Mo.) and Lee Zeldin (R-N.Y.), with both questioning whether Kerry should remain in his current position.

"The State Department must investigate the massively alarming allegations that John Kerry, in his capacity as Secretary of State, leaked information to Iran on covert Israeli military operations," Zeldin said in the release. "If it's proven that Kerry actively undermined one of America's staunchest allies, he needs to resign immediately and have his security clearance revoked."

Other prominent Republicans calling an investigation—or for Kerry’s resignation—include Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, among a growing list.

Former Israeli Ambassador to the United States and former Knesset member Michael Oren said that while he had a good working relationship with Kerry during his tenure from 2009 to 2013, Kerry seemed to have an “unhealthy obsession” with Israel during his time in office.

Oren cited Kerry’s speech in 2016 after failed Israel-Palestine peace negotiations, where he spent more than an hour lecturing Israel on its settlements while war was raging out of control in neighbouring Syria.

“At the same time when Syrian [President] Bashar Assad was killing a half million of his own countrymen and the U.S. government refused to intervene, Kerry found time to give an hour-long speech condemning Israeli settlements,” said Oren. “What was going on north of [Israel] was the largest massacre in post-World War II history.”

The speech was especially puzzling, Oren pointed out since Kerry blamed Israel alone for the failure of the peace talks.

Oren said that he didn’t know whether Zarif was telling the truth in the recording, but it was well known during the negotiations for the Iran nuclear deal Kerry and Zarif had a close relationship, something that troubled Israel.

“He made no attempts to disguise that,” said Oren. “And for Israelis, this was very disturbing. This was the representative of a government that was sworn to destroy us—actively seeking to destroy us. It wasn’t passive. It wasn’t just rhetoric.

“That’s disturbing to the Israelis and should have been disturbing for Americans because this is a regime that oppresses gay people and free speech, and imprisons people and tortures people. I mean, it should have been more disturbing for a person, I think, of a liberal outlook such as John Kerry.”



‘You have two leaders, and one of them is lying’

Former Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon said that he listened to the recording of Zarif and it sounded authentic, but one has to take into consideration the sophisticated propaganda of Iran.

“I think it is a very serious allegation. It involves the closest ally of Israel and the worst enemy of Israel,” he said. “I really hope that it’s not true. But, you know, you have two leaders and one of them is lying. It’s either Zarif or Kerry.”

While it remains unclear from the recording whether Kerry told Zarif the information before or after the details were already public knowledge, Oren said it wouldn't matter, as Israel's policy at the time was not to comment on its operations to prevent a situation where Assad would be obliged to respond militarily to Israel.

What really upset Oren, he said, and Israeli officials during the Iran nuclear deal negotiations was the existence of secret backchannel negotiations between the United States and Iran through Oman.

"These negotiations were conducted under the auspices of Kerry. ... Israel was being assured repeatedly, every week, that no backchannel, no secret negotiation was going on with Iran when, in fact, there were," he said.

The existence of these negotiations became public in November 2013, a month after Oren was no longer ambassador. Oren said that the seriousness of what he called a "betrayal" was such that had he still been the ambassador, he would have seriously considered resigning.

"The point is that Kerry presided over negotiations that were conducted behind Israel's back on an issue vital to Israel's security, if not its survival. And deliberately misled us about them," he said.

"We took it very seriously," emphasized Oren.

After all, he said, the United States is "our No. 1 ally," and it was "negotiating behind our back with our No. 1 enemy." Israeli settlements may be an issue, he said, but Iran is "a matter of national survival for this country."

## Iran's Zarif criticises Revolutionary Guards' influence in leaked tape

By Kasra Naji



Iran's foreign ministry says Mohammad Javad Zarif's comments were taken out of context

A leaked audio tape in which Iran's Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, bemoans that the Revolutionary Guards dominate the country's foreign policy and took it into Syria's civil war at the behest of Russia is making the rounds, with many on social media expressing shock and bewilderment.

Some of the revelations confirm what many Iranians have suspected all along. What is surprising is that they came from Mr Zarif, an experienced diplomat who is normally very guarded and is a moderate by Iranian standards.

It is not clear who has leaked the tape, though it comes as Iran prepares to hold a presidential election and internal power struggles reach new heights. Mr Zarif has said he is not a candidate to succeed President Hassan Rouhani, but hardliners do not trust him and want to eliminate any chance of that happening.

What is clear is that the tape will land Iran's top diplomat in big trouble with hardliners and the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say over all government matters and controls the Revolutionary Guards, the country's most powerful security force.

It appears that the three-hour audio tape, which has reached the BBC and other news outlets abroad, is taken from a video of a seven-hour interview that was conducted more than two months ago as part of an oral history project covering President Rouhani's two terms in office.

In the tape, Mr Zarif is twice heard saying he believes that his comments will not be heard or published for many years.

The minister repeatedly complains that the Revolutionary Guards have made diplomacy and Iran's foreign policy subservient to their battlefield needs in the region.

He specifically mentions how General Qasem Soleimani - the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force, who was killed in a US drone strike in Iraq in January 2020 - often went to see him with requirements.

He recalls how Soleimani wanted him to take particular positions in meetings with the Russian foreign minister, and says the general effectively took Iran into the war in Syria because Russian President Vladimir Putin wanted Iranian forces on the ground to complement the Russian air campaign in support of the Syrian government.

He also complains that Soleimani used Iran's national carrier, Iran Air, for military flights to Syria at great risk and reputational cost to the country, confirming reports that civilian aircraft were used for gun-running and troop transportation.

Mr Zarif also says Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov did everything he could to stop Iran from agreeing to a nuclear deal with six world powers - including Russia - in 2015. He alleges that Russia never wanted to see Iran mend fences with the West.

His words are surprising, as it is generally understood that he has good relations with Mr Lavrov and that Russia is a close ally of Iran. The leak also comes at a time when Iran is engaged in indirect talks with the US in Vienna with the aim of reviving the nuclear deal, which has been close to collapse since then President Donald Trump reinstated sanctions in 2018 and Iran began breaching its commitments in response.

Mr Zarif says the Revolutionary Guards never wanted the agreement and did everything they could to stop it. He mentions the testing of a missile on which they had written "Israel should be wiped off the Earth" in Hebrew and the detention of 10 US sailors on board two patrol boats in the Gulf in early 2016 as examples of their efforts to scupper the deal.

Mr Zarif complains that the Revolutionary Guards sidelined him on many occasions.

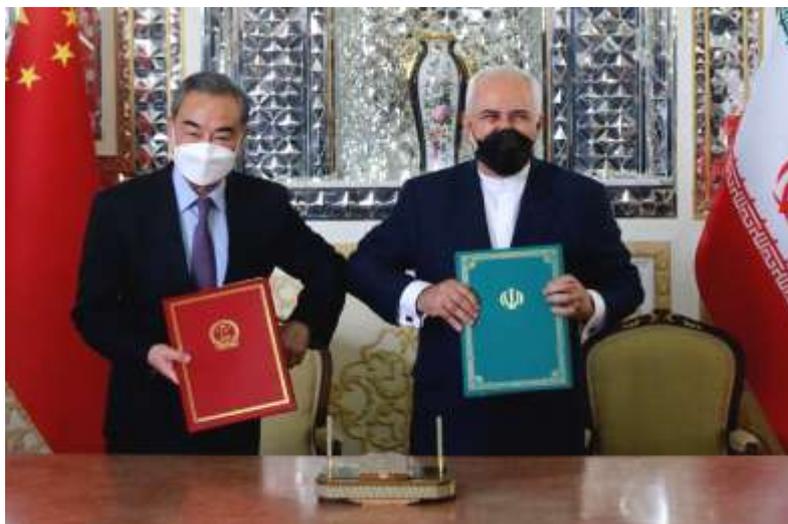
He mentions the early hours of 8 January 2020, when Iran attacked an Iraqi military base housing US forces with more than a dozen ballistic missiles in retaliation for the killing of Qasem Soleimani. He says he only found out about the missile attack two hours after it happened.

Later that day, he adds, when a Revolutionary Guards air defence unit shot down, apparently by mistake, a Ukrainian passenger airliner that had just taken off from Tehran, killing all 176 people on board, commanders only wanted him to deny Iranian culpability.

The Iranian foreign ministry's spokesman has said Mr Zarif's comments in the audio tape have been taken out of context and that, if necessary, it will publish the whole interview. According to the spokesman, the foreign ministry does not have the recording in its possession and that its safekeeping is not the ministry's responsibility.

## China Challenges the US on Iran

By Judith Bergman



Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (right) and China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi at the signing of the China-Iran comprehensive strategic 25-year partnership agreement on economic and security cooperation, in Tehran, Iran on March 27, 2021.

On March 27, China and Iran signed a comprehensive strategic 25-year partnership agreement on economic and security cooperation. The agreement was signed in Tehran, where China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi was visiting as part of his tour of the Middle East.

Details of the agreement were not immediately published. The Iranian Foreign Ministry communicated that it was a "roadmap for cooperation" and that no "contracts" were included in it. "Prospects for cooperation, whether economic, political, cultural or strategic, have not been quantified, therefore it does not include numbers on investment or financial and monetary resources," a statement of the Iranian Foreign Ministry reported.

The agreement has been underway for five years, ever since Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Iran in January 2016, when establishing a "comprehensive strategic partnership" was agreed. At that meeting, according to China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Xi Jinping stressed that China will enhance all-round practical cooperation with Iran within the 'Belt and Road' framework". At the time, the two countries also signed a Memorandum of Understanding "on jointly advancing construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" as well as "multiple bilateral cooperation documents covering energy, production capacity, finance, investment, communications, culture, justice, science, technology, news, customs, climate change and human resources". China and Iran also agreed then to "strengthen exchanges between think-tanks, colleges and universities and youths, [and] jointly ensure the successful operation of the Confucius Institutes" to "tell China's story well" and shape the narrative about China in Iran.

According to a leaked draft of the comprehensive strategic partnership agreement, circulated last year, Iran will receive \$400 billion dollars in Chinese investments over the next 25 years in key Iranian economic sectors, including energy, telecommunications, defence, infrastructure, banking, petrochemicals, railways and ports. According to the leaked draft, there will be also an expansion of military

assistance, training and intelligence-sharing. Nearly 100 projects are cited in the draft. In return, Iran will commit to providing regular and heavily discounted oil, gas and possibly other natural resources to China. China, as the world's top importer of both oil and gas, is obsessive about energy security for its growing economy.

The agreement reportedly also formalizes the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Iran. Iran participates in China's so-called Digital Silk Road, the Silk Road of Innovation and the "Green" Silk Road. The Digital Silk Road represents the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) ambition, among other things, to shape the course of 5G technology in the world, whereas the Silk Road of Innovation is about technology transfers. The "Green" Silk Road is about transitioning to renewable energy sources. "China is the largest foreign investor in the... Middle East region", according to Dr. Mordechai Chaziz, author of *China's Middle East Diplomacy: The Belt and Road Strategic Partnership*.

"Strategically, the BRI is how China is seeking to collapse Western-American dominance in the region peacefully. The connection between the BRI and the strategic partnerships it creates in the region... allows it to gradually take over the region without creating tensions with the U.S. or the West. In other words, the BRI is a sophisticated Chinese plan to transfer hegemony from the West and the U.S. to China without war or conflict".

The question is why, after five years, the two countries decided to sign the agreement now. Last year, Iran rejected media reports that talks about the recently signed comprehensive agreement were suspended until the outcome of the US presidential election. However, the timing seems hardly a coincidence, but rather an outcome Biden's appeasing overtures to Iran with its formal offer of restarting nuclear talks. The signing of the agreement itself can be seen as a Chinese-Iranian act of defiance against the US, undercutting sanctions against Iran by supplying the regime with an economic lifeline, while showing China off as an active global power that is able and willing to stand up to the US. The more so, as the signing came just one week after the Chinese foreign minister's unprecedented lecturing of his US counterpart at their March 19 meeting in Alaska.

The signing of the agreement comes at a time when China is already defying US sanctions on Iran in other ways - such as by reportedly importing record volumes of crude oil. "Iran moved about 17.8 million tonnes (306,000 barrels per day) of crude into China during the past 14 months, with volumes reaching record levels in January and February" Reuters reported. In March, according to some estimates, China has been taking in some 856,000 barrels per day of Iranian crude oil, a 129% surge compared to February.

"If it sells 1 million barrels a day at current prices, Iran has no incentive to negotiate," said Sara Vakhshouri, an expert on Iran's oil industry. "The informal Chinese purchases" one U.S. official said, "have reduced the need [for Tehran] to negotiate on oil sanctions", the *Wall Street Journal* noted.

As China is Iran's largest trading partner, the agreement, in addition to providing Iran with modern technology, would help its economy to grow. China, among other countries, helped Iran with its nuclear development several decades ago and has been regularly championing a return to the Iran nuclear deal or the JCPOA. For China, Iran is a welcome counterbalance to US influence in the region, as the only large regional power that is not aligned with the US, in addition to having enormous oil and natural gas resources and providing a large market of more than 80 million citizens for

Chinese goods. The two countries, despite their marked ideological differences, share an authoritarian, anti-Western outlook, making each attractive to the other. According to a recent report by risk consultancy firm Verisk Maplecroft:

"China is pivoting towards more autocratic regimes that represent greater stability for its supply lines than democracies that are, or may become, hostile to Beijing". China has even helped Iran crack down on dissidents by exporting its digital authoritarianism in the form of surveillance equipment.

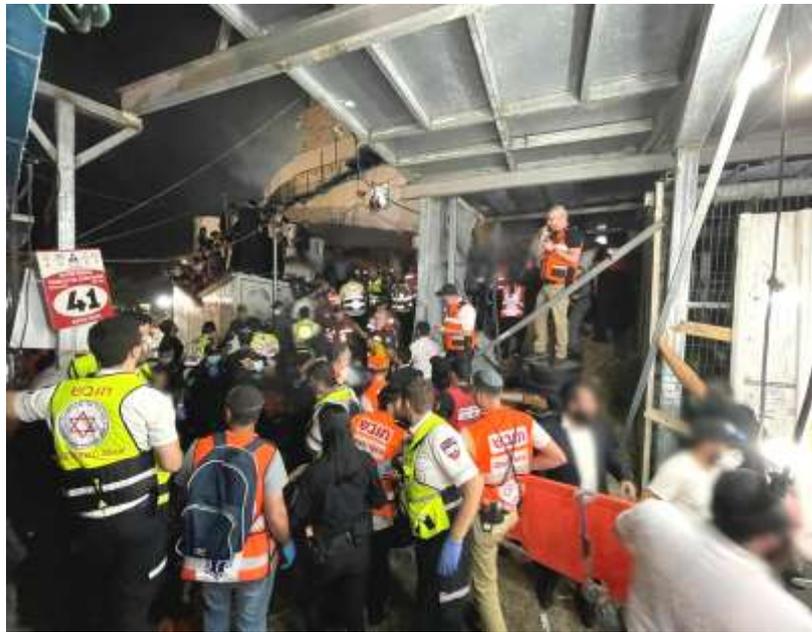
How much of a lifeline the Chinese will ultimately be able to give the Iranians - and the extent to which they will be able to chip away at US leverage over Iran in the process - now depends on how the US responds to the comprehensive agreement. Biden still seems intent on pursuing a strategy of accommodating Iran. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "A senior Biden official said the U.S. is open to taking a step that would relax sanctions even before meeting Iranian officials".

"We've made clear that withdrawing from the JCPOA was a mistake, that maximum pressure was a failure," the official said. "But this needs to be part of a process in which Iran also takes steps to reverse its nuclear decisions."

*Judith Bergman, a columnist, lawyer and political analyst.*

## Dozens Killed in Crush at Lag B'omer Religious Festival

By TCMER Staff



A stampede on April 30 at a mountainside religious celebration in Israel that drew tens of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews left at least 45 people dead and scores more injured. By some estimates, about 100,000 people were crammed together to celebrate a holiday on Mount Meron in northern Israel, despite warnings from the authorities about the risk of Covid-19 transmission.

The deadly crush began around 1 a.m., as celebrants began to pour out of a section of a compound where festivities were being held. The death toll of 45, released later by the Health Ministry, made it one of the worst civilian disasters in Israeli history.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews traditionally gather at Mount Meron for the holiday, Lag b'Omer, to dance and make bonfires around the tomb of a prominent rabbi from antiquity. Critics have warned for years that the site's patchy infrastructure cannot safely handle large crowds.

A video said to have been taken right before the stampede showed a mass of people in ecstatic celebration, moving in unison to the music.

Some rescue workers attributed the tragedy to the sheer volume of people who had gathered at Mount Meron. Television images from the scene showed shoes, hats, plastic bottles and other debris littering the passageway after it was evacuated. A metal hand rail, meant to help people steady themselves as they walked down the slippery slope, had collapsed.

The site around the rabbi's tomb had been divided into separate sections in an apparent effort to contain and control the crowds. But as the death toll climbed, questions arose about poor planning and possible negligence.

Footage shot as the disaster unfolded showed police officers trying to stop people from fleeing the scene. That could have been because the officers did not immediately realize the extent of the danger, or because they wanted to prevent the stampede from spilling into other areas of the compound.

Eli Levy, a spokesman for the police, said an investigation was underway but that it was too early to apportion blame or speak of negligence. He also cautioned against drawing conclusions from isolated video clips. Mr. Levy added that despite calls to evacuate the mountain, some celebrants had refused to leave or tried to make their way back.

Before the stampede, the Israeli police said they had arrested two people for disrupting officers' efforts to keep order at the site. But the crowd was so vast, the police said, that they could not make people obey coronavirus restrictions. However it unfolded, by the time the stampede was over, a scene of joy had transformed into one of horror.

The annual gathering on Mount Meron, which is in the Galilee, takes place near the mystical city of Safed. The Lag b'Omer holiday is linked in Jewish tradition to the Bar Kokhba revolt against the Romans in the second century A.D.

Each year, large numbers of ultra-Orthodox and traditional Jews make the pilgrimage to the mountain for days of festivities. They light bonfires around the grave site of a second-century sage, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, in the hope that they will receive his blessings on the anniversary of his death.

The pilgrimage was held this year despite warnings from Israeli health officials that it could become a Covid-19 super-spreader event. That is what appears to have happened in India this month when a vast Hindu celebration was permitted to take place.

Last year, the Israeli authorities arrested over 300 people at the Lag b'Omer celebration after large crowds gathered in defiance of coronavirus restrictions, ignoring police checkpoints on roads. Some were reported to have thrown stones and other objects at police officers who tried to control the crowd.

# Israeli Elections

**By Don Gibbons**  
**TCMER Board Member**



Israeli president Reuven Rivlin will decide which candidate receives the mandate to form the next government following the inconclusive March 23 parliamentary election. At the center of the drama are two potential kingmakers at opposite sides of the political spectrum: Naftali Bennett, head of the right-wing party Yamina, and Arab Israeli politician Mansour Abbas, head of the breakaway United Arab List (UAL). This could be the first time in Israel's history that an Arab party holds the balance of power in the 120-seat Knesset, as each side needs help to reach a bare majority of 61 seats. Although Bennett and Abbas could end Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's long grip on power by enabling a heterodox coalition, the politically savvy incumbent cannot be counted out given his record of outmanoeuvring rivals.

At the moment, pro-Netanyahu forces can muster 52 seats while anti-Netanyahu forces have 57—a situation that may spur Bennett (7 seats) to ally with centrist politician Yair Lapid (17 seats) and move to the front of the anti-Netanyahu "Change Bloc." Earlier today, the prime minister's most far-right allies reaffirmed that they would not join a coalition linked to the UAL, further complicating his prospects.

Despite entering this campaign with many strengths, Netanyahu lost close to 300,000 votes compared to the previous election, and his Likud Party dropped from 36 seats a year ago to 30 at present. Some of these losses occurred in traditional Likud bastions; the party also dropped three seats to former Likud member Gideon Saar and two more to Bennett by narrow margins. In addition, Netanyahu was forced to steer some votes toward the hard-right faction led by Bezael Smotrich (6 seats) out of fear that it might not pass the electoral threshold.

Netanyahu may regret how he handled two proteges-turned-rivals, since Bennett's 7 seats and Saar's 6 would be enough to keep him in power. Poor personal relationships could spell the difference in determining if his election gamble was worth it.

In any case, his actions since the results became clear suggest he would not mind going to a fifth round of elections. For example, in the days leading up to the vote, he publicly disavowed relying on the UAL as either a coalition partner or safety net against parliamentary no-confidence votes, but his tone has now changed. His

advisors have been quietly telling reporters that he would like to have a relationship with the UAL, and he forbade Likud members from doing any further interviews when some publicly squabbled over whether the Arab party should be included. For now, he still holds cards in any coalition negotiation, and if another election proves inevitable, he will remain the prime minister in a caretaker capacity for at least several more months. He has also rejected the argument that Benny Gantz should remain the interim justice minister during any caretaker period—a crucial issue as Netanyahu's corruption trial enters its most substantive phase starting April 5.

Under pressure from Netanyahu's campaign, Bennett initially pledged not to serve in a coalition with Lapid's Yesh Atid faction for ideological reasons. As soon as the election concluded, however, Bennett delivered a speech that emphasized phrases such as "ending the chaos," "no fifth elections," and "national healing," leading many to believe he would not sit with Netanyahu. Indeed, he seems willing to join the Change Bloc—so long as he is named prime minister.

This may look awkward given how few seats he won. Yet Lapid has shown signs of agreeing with him so long as they rotate the premiership at the midpoint of the next government, with Bennett going first. Rivlin announced this week that his decision will be guided by whoever has the best chance to form a government, implying that he may not necessarily choose the party leader with the most seats. Yet the level of trust between the Lapid and Bennett camps remains low. Those close to Lapid insist that he be given the formal mandate, partly because they want him to play the conductor in the subsequent coalition negotiations, but also because they fear Bennett might engage in flirtations with Netanyahu that take the political dynamic in the opposite direction.

In his only public remarks since the election, Netanyahu called on Bennett and Saar to "come home" to the right. Saar immediately spurned this solicitation, but Netanyahu has continued to woo Bennett by reportedly offering Yamina one-sixth of all seats in Likud's party institutions—a degree of integration that Bennett has long sought. The prime minister failed to honor his promised rotation with Gantz in the current government, so Bennett may have little inclination to believe such promises. At the same time, however, Bennett still hopes to become leader of the right someday—a difficult task if he angers much of the right by deposing Netanyahu.

In a primetime speech delivered in Hebrew on April 1, Mansour Abbas made a pragmatic appeal while essentially introducing himself to the wider Israeli public. Seeking to dispel the conventional domestic perception of Islamist parties, he emphasized the importance of an Israeli "common life" and stated that he "despised" all forms of violence. "That which unites us all is greater than what divides us," he declared, arguing that failure to cooperate will create an "impossible future" for the next generation. He also noted his intent to secure more basic services for Arab Israelis, a proposal that has broad support across the country.

Abbas was careful not to tip his hand regarding coalition partners, but some of his advisors have told reporters that supporting a right-wing government could have lasting implications for mainstream Arab Israeli parties in broader national politics. Whichever side he chooses, he has indicated he would prefer not to be a formal member of a coalition, instead supporting it from the outside so it can withstand parliamentary no-confidence votes.

This potential arrangement brings to mind past governments headed by Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Ehud Barak during the 1990s, when disagreements over negotiations with the Palestinians broke the governing majorities and resulted in coalitions that ruled as “minority governments”. Although these shrunken coalitions held fewer than 61 seats, they were able to stay in power thanks to parliamentary safety nets extended by Arab parties that likewise eschewed formal coalition membership.

No matter who forms the next government, U.S. officials should understand that the resultant coalition will likely be quite fragile and politically heterogeneous, especially regarding policy toward the Palestinians. For decisions on West Bank settlement activity and other highly charged issues, the “Change Bloc” would need to manage disputes between right-wing parties (led by Bennett, Saar, and Avigdor Liberman) and left-wing members (Labor and Meretz). Potential Prime Minister Bennett has long been pro-settler and pro-annexation, while other members sharply oppose such views.

If Netanyahu prevails, he would need to convince the small but vocal far-right faction led by Smotrich—which includes a neo-Kahanist—to accept outside parliamentary support from the UAL. Smotrich has refused to sit with Abbas, and he excoriated the Arab leader’s April 1 speech as a “cute teddy bear” aimed at covering up the UAL’s Islamist views.

Although these and other factors make it even more unlikely that Biden will pursue a major Palestinian initiative, other foreign policy issues are more politically manageable. Further normalization with Arab states is a consensus issue in Israel, as is preventing Iran from reaching nuclear weapons threshold status. Netanyahu is often personally associated with the “maximum pressure” approach, but all other Israeli candidates would likewise urge Washington to maintain strong economic leverage against Tehran in any nuclear negotiations. Biden was careful to stay out of the Israeli election campaign, yet it would undoubtedly feel more comfortable with a government that does not embrace neo-Kahanists or denigrate respected judicial institutions.

## **UAE Wealth Fund to buy Share of Israeli Gas Field**

**By Simon Henderson**



On April 26, Israeli company Delek announced that it had signed a memorandum of understanding with the energy arm of Mubadala, the sovereign wealth fund of the United Arab Emirates, which tentatively agreed to take over the firm's 22 percent ownership stake in the Tamar offshore natural gas field. Delek has been trying to sell its stake for some time in order to meet government anti-monopoly requirements, since the company is also invested in Israel's larger Leviathan gas field. Earlier this month, media reports speculated that Cairn Energy of the United Kingdom was interested in the share, but now Abu Dhabi will become the partner if the deal goes through.

In March, the UAE announced it was setting up a \$10 billion fund to invest in Israeli energy and other strategic sectors, and the Delek deal represents the biggest commercial agreement since the two countries normalized their relations last September via the historic Abraham Accords. Arguably, though, the gas deal's greater significance is its potential role in advancing the UAE's diplomatic profile in the Mediterranean.

Until recently, Abu Dhabi appeared to be scaling back certain aspects of its involvement in that region, such as reducing its military role in countering Turkish support for Libyan authorities in Tripoli. Last week, however, Greece hosted a multinational exercise in which Emirati aircraft flew alongside Israeli fighter jets. At the same time, the foreign minister of Cyprus hosted top diplomats from the UAE, Israel, and Greece to discuss regional cooperation.

On the energy front, the Emirati firm Dana Gas had previously obtained the "North al-Arish" concession off Egypt's Sinai coast abutting the Palestinian maritime zone. Exploratory drilling in 2019 failed to find hydrocarbons, and up until a few weeks before the Abraham Accords, observers were speculating that the company would give up its license. Yet Dana now claims the block may hold substantial gas reserves.

The UAE's Mediterranean push has met some resistance, however. When Abu Dhabi tried to join the Cairo-based East Mediterranean Gas Forum as an observer in March, its application was vetoed by the Palestinian Authority, which was upset by the Abraham Accords. And Israel has been careful not to appear complicit with the anti-Turkish sentiment that seems to drive much of the UAE's policy in the Mediterranean. At least some of this caution stems from the fact that Israeli oil supplies from Azerbaijan are transported via tankers loaded at a Turkish port.

Despite a global environmental preference to move away from hydrocarbons, the emirate of Abu Dhabi, which holds the vast majority of the UAE's huge reserves, is increasing production of oil and gas. Media reports suggest the Emiratis might even leave the OPEC cartel so as not to be limited by production quotas. The increase in gas production is also aimed at reducing the country's dependence on its rival Qatar, whose supplies have long helped the Emirati metropolis of Dubai generate electricity, even during the long Gulf embargo against Doha. Notably, the Qataris have become a minor player in the Mediterranean as well, obtaining a 40 percent interest in a field that Exxon Mobil discovered in Cyprus's maritime zone.

Any Emirati investment in the Tamar field comes with potential political and security risks. Although the field itself lies fifty miles off Israel's northern coast, its gas is brought ashore at the southern port of Ashdod, a few miles from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, while initial processing takes place on a platform thirteen miles out to sea, visible from high buildings in Gaza and within a mile or two of Palestinian waters.

A commercial problem is that Israeli fields already generate so much gas that additional export markets must be found to maximize revenues. Last week, industry newsletter MEES reported that Leviathan had produced record volumes in the first quarter of 2021, while production from Tamar slumped by nearly a quarter. Surplus Leviathan gas is currently pumped to Jordan for power generation and to Egypt for domestic use and conversion into liquefied natural gas that is exported via tankers. Plans are being considered for a floating LNG facility in Israeli waters, but experts regard a proposed scheme for a seabed pipeline to Europe as fanciful.

The overall growth in East Mediterranean energy production is partly attributable to years of quiet U.S. diplomacy and, more recently, the arrival of oil major Chevron, which purchased Houston-based Noble Energy after the smaller firm made many of the initial discoveries in the area. Washington needs to continue its proactive role so that exploration and development are not imperilled by festering geopolitical issues, from the maritime border dispute between Israel and Lebanon to Greek/Cypriot tensions with Turkey.

*Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute.*

# Islamic State Reactivates under Biden!

By Lina Zaidi  
TCMER Board Member



Since losing its territorial base, the group has shown troubling signs of recovery amid a deteriorating situation at al-Hawl refugee camp.

On March 28, the U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sent 5,000 fighters into al-Hawl refugee camp to apprehend over thirty people suspected of links to the Islamic State (IS). Housing 61,000 people—mostly women and children, and also a significant portion of IS supporters—al-Hawl first gained notoriety for absorbing thousands of foreigners and families who stayed with the IS “caliphate” until its last stand at Baghuz two years ago. Marking the anniversary of the March 23, 2019, liberation of Baghuz, SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Abdi tweeted, “The war isn’t over, reconstruction efforts are vital to prevent ISIS resurgence”—a statement that rings true as the situation at al-Hawl deteriorates, echoing Abdi’s warning last month that the jihadist group “is trying to revive itself” in Syria.

## The IS Role in East Syria

IS has been operating mostly in the vast Badia desert region spanning central and east Syria, waging an insurgent campaign against the SDF and forces loyal to dictator Bashar al-Assad. About 900 American Special Forces personnel remain in Syria to support the SDF, while Russia has carried out a heavy air campaign to support Assad against IS and various rebel groups. Iran, another Assad ally, has sent proxy militias such as Liwa Fatemiyoun and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba to the regime’s aid. In the north, Turkey makes periodic incursions into SDF territory, and although its aggressive posture has stoked tensions with the United States, it also hampers IS recruitment through improved policing of the border.

IS has nonetheless persevered in Syria, a testament to its ability to preserve itself in the mountains and caves of the Badia and evade superior firepower. Historically, many of the group’s best foreign fighters have operated in Syria, with members from North Africa and post-Soviet republics participating in major battles against the regime and SDF in Manbij, Aleppo, Deir al-Zour, Palmyra, Kobane, and Baghuz. Since then, these hardened foreign veterans and their local counterparts have gained two more years of valuable experience as insurgents.

The fact that more IS attacks are occurring in Iraq and West/Central Africa suggests that the group's main focus is currently on other theatres, but it has maintained its interest in Syria and the threat is rising. Following a successful operation last summer to break IS inmates out of prison in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, the August 6 edition of the group's official al-Naba newsletter urged other "provinces" to follow suit. Syria is a prime objective here because of the high concentration of IS supporters in both al-Hawl camp and Hasaka Central Prison (containing 5,000 inmates).

#### Indicators of Rising Threat

Three factors suggest that the risk of an IS resurgence in Syria is growing:

**Robust attack capability.** The number of IS-claimed attacks in Syria did not change significantly over the past several months—this year, 106 have occurred as of March 17, compared to 101 in the last quarter of 2020. Yet the numbers by themselves can be misleading because the group's attack capability remains quite strong, forcing regime military units and their allies to stay on their toes by inflicting heavy casualties.

On December 30, IS attacked a bus convoy in Deir al-Zour province carrying pro-regime forces, killing up to thirty-nine according to U.S. Defence Department estimates. On February 2, it attacked several regime positions, killing nineteen soldiers and militiamen. In response, Russia conducted further heavy bombing of IS positions in the Badia, including 100 airstrikes on February 4-5. Yet the group was unperturbed, killing twenty-six fighters from the pro-regime militia Liwa al-Quds during operations in Deir al-Zour three days later. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, IS launched another series of deadly attacks on February 19-20. This time, fifteen soldiers went missing (likely captured or executed) after the group torched a troop bus, and fifteen militiamen were killed in separate operations.

**Demoralized adversaries.** In both regime and SDF territories, security forces have been spooked by the string of IS attacks, even abandoning certain towns in the middle of the night for fear of being unable to protect them—essentially ceding them to at least partial IS control. This demonstrates that neither party is willing to sustain significant casualties in order to retain areas where IS operates. In contrast, IS fighters in Syria and their supporters in detention centres remain highly committed to their cause, making for a precarious situation.

**Increasing control over local populations.** When infiltrating regime and SDF territories, IS employs various tactics to increase its influence over as many residents as possible. In rural areas of the Badia, it often imposes mafia-like governance by extorting businesses, shepherds, and other locals. Those who do not comply face death, abduction, or confiscation of their property, and neither the regime nor the SDF has done much to prevent these abuses. Assad's forces are barely keeping control in some areas (Sukhna, Salamiya), while SDF control has been eroded by IS attacks on local "collaborators." Among the many tribal and community leaders who have been targeted for working with the SDF, an elder of the Ougaidat tribe was killed in January. And on March 13, IS released a list of inhabitants in the Deir al-Zour village of Jadid Ougaidat, threatening to kill them and destroy their homes if they did not "repent."

IS tactics are particularly worrisome in al-Hawl and Hasaka Prison. Beheadings, point-blank executions with silenced pistols, and other killings have become increasingly common in al-Hawl (forty-one murders this year alone, compared to thirty-three documented incidents in all of 2020). Connections to the outside are growing as well—camp residents now have easier access to weapons and smugglers to move people in and out, and some Hasaka inmates can readily obtain cell phones.

### How the United States Can Mitigate the Threat

IS has been laying the groundwork for a full resurgence by weakening regime and SDF units, exerting greater influence in their territories, and improving its position in al-Hawl and Hasaka Prison. With the Assad regime in survival mode and the SDF more worried about Turkish aggression than an IS surge, the United States needs to pay greater attention to this issue before it explodes into something even more dangerous.

For starters, Washington should reassure the SDF—its only partner in Syria—by addressing its areas of concern in order to free up more manpower for fighting IS. Moving U.S. troops to the SDF's northern territories would help deter major Turkish incursions, further reassuring local commanders. Meanwhile, U.S. officials can try to build confidence between Ankara and the SDF by mediating their disputes and setting up mechanisms to improve transparency. As mentioned previously, the March 28 raid in al-Hawl involved 5,000 personnel, but sustaining this kind of manpower and proactive operational footing in the long term will require American assurances about other major SDF concerns.

In particular, the SDF needs substantial air and intelligence support if it is to sustain effective counter-IS operations and bring a semblance of security to its territories—all of which requires a continued U.S. presence on the ground. Financial support is also needed to improve conditions at al-Hawl and manage inmates at Hasaka. The SDF cannot manage these tasks alone while still concentrating sufficiently on security. In addition, U.S. forces should continue helping the SDF establish local civil councils and develop closer relationships with communities that are under threat of IS extortion. Given the precarious positions of the regime and SDF alike, a U.S. force reduction now would be tantamount to ceding Deir al-Zour province to IS.

## The Hamzah Affair

By Ghaith al-Omari



The news emerging out of Amman—with former crown prince Hamzah bin Hussein ultimately vowing allegiance to his half-brother King Abdullah II after being placed at the centre of coup rumours, and other former senior officials being arrested—is highly unusual in the traditionally quiet Middle Eastern kingdom that is approaching its centennial in a few weeks. While the full picture is unlikely to emerge soon, if ever, these developments focus attention on the country's internal situation and highlight the need to bolster the stability of a key U.S. ally after a period of relative uninterest from Washington.

### Potential Royal Showdown Amid Public Unrest

The visible security actions against Prince Hamzah—stripping him of his security detail and restricting his movement and access to communication—differ sharply from the kingdom's typical means of handling its internal business. News of tensions within the Hashemite royal family occasionally surface, yet they tend to be resolved quickly and quietly away from the public eye.

For example, in 2017, King Abdullah relieved two of his siblings—full-brother Faisal and half-brother Hashim—of their military commands, fuelling rumours of family discord. Yet both princes fell in line, quashing further rumours. A similar dynamic occurred in 1999 when King Hussein reshuffled the line of succession just weeks before his death from cancer, replacing his brother Hassan, who had served as crown prince since 1965, with his eldest son Abdullah, a military officer. Despite the shock and deep, personal blow, Hassan did not protest the shift and has always expressed public support for his nephew as king. Indeed, one needs to go back to the tense days following the 1951 assassination of the kingdom's founder, Abdullah I, to find any precedent for Jordanian princes taking their feuds public—and even then, there was no talk of coup plotting.

Prince Hamzah is half-brother to the current monarch and the eldest son from King Hussein's marriage to his fourth wife, Queen Noor. Upon ascending to the throne in 1999, Abdullah appointed Hamzah as crown prince pursuant to their father's dying wish; Hussein was said to dote on Hamzah, who has a reputation for piety, modesty, and connection with Jordan's tribes. Five years later, Abdullah relieved Hamzah of this title in favour of his own eldest son, Hussein—not an unusual act given that the late

King Hussein named three different crown princes during his reign. Hamzah did not publicly object to the decision at the time, yet he subsequently positioned himself as a sympathetic figure and avatar of reform among Jordanians discontented with the country's socioeconomic situation, especially disaffected tribal elements.

Initially, officials sought to play down Hamzah's latest actions, which from afar seemed to fall somewhere in the grey zone between open criticism and operational moves to execute a coup. But this changed when he issued two video messages on April 3, one in Arabic, one in English. The videos described restrictions placed on his movement and communications by the chief of the Jordanian general staff, then criticized corruption and poor governance in the kingdom, which he claimed have gone on for "fifteen to twenty years"—around the duration of Abdullah's reign and the decision to remove him as crown prince. Following these messages, the government adopted a harsher tone toward Hamzah, with Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi accusing him of "activities...targeting the country's security and stability" during an April 4 press conference. Hamzah then further escalated by publicly vowing to "disobey" orders that he refrain from communication with the outside world.

To avoid a head-on clash that could have tarnished the monarchy, the king offered Hamzah an alternative path of reconciliation in the Bedouin tradition of *sulha*, entrusting his well-respected uncle Hassan to handle the sensitive discussions. This resulted in a meeting of senior princes at Hassan's home, where Hamzah signed an extraordinary letter vowing fealty to Abdullah and current crown prince Hussein, stating, "In light of the developments of the past two days, I place myself in the hands of His Majesty the King." This climb-down appears to mark the end of the current episode, though it is unlikely to be the final chapter of the conflict between the half-brothers. An eventual faceoff is not out of the question, but even that is more likely to end with Hamzah leaving the country rather than being jailed and turned into a martyr for the opposition.

Officials also announced the arrest of Bassem Awadallah and Hassan bin Zaid along with "sixteen to eighteen" other individuals, mainly Hamzah's aides and security detail. Awadallah, a former minister and chief of the Royal Court, is a controversial figure whom many Jordanians identify with corruption. He and bin Zaid—great-grandson of the first King Abdullah and grandson to a former prime minister—have extensive regional ties and served at various times as the current king's private envoys to Saudi Arabia. These connections, coupled with repeated official assertions about contacts with "external quarters," have fuelled rumours that other regional states may be involved in the crisis.

These events come at a tense time for the kingdom domestically. COVID-19 is running rampant there with 633,000 infections and 7,201 deaths among a total population of 10 million, making the government's initial successes in containment a distant memory. The economy, already suffering, has been hit, with record unemployment at the end of 2020 and poverty rates increasing by 39 percent over the past year. Trust in public institutions—with the notable exceptions of the monarchy and the military/security sector—is very low due to widespread perceptions of inefficiency and corruption. These views have been amplified by a series of tragic accidents attributable to dereliction of public duty in recent years, especially after several COVID-19 patients died in a new government hospital last month because of failures in supplying oxygen. Calls for demonstrations over the past few weeks did not garner wide participation—due in no small part to pre-emptive security measures—but they nevertheless raised

concerns about simmering. Throughout, Hamzah was perceived to have positioned himself as sympathetic to these concerns and a foil to the king.

#### Domestic and Regional Implications

Although it is too early to reach definitive conclusions, some familiar patterns are starting to take shape. Traditionally, serious domestic threats in the kingdom have tended to produce a “rally round the flag” dynamic. Similar to the 2005 al-Qaeda hotel bombings in Amman and the more recent Islamic State attacks against Jordanians, the Hamzah affair is being used to draw a sharp contrast between two realities: the less-than-ideal yet stable circumstances that currently characterize life in the kingdom, and the chaos that has defined neighbouring countries since the Arab Spring. Official messaging also highlighted Hamzah’s alleged links with Jordanian dissidents abroad, many of whom are publicly discredited.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that these messages are resonating with many in the public; indeed, virtually no prominent, mainstream public figures have spoken out in support of Hamzah apart from his mother. And despite laying bare a long-simmering Hashemite feud, the situation may wind up easing domestic pressure on the palace in the short term by shifting attention away from COVID and other socioeconomic challenges.

Yet the underlying sources of dissatisfaction that Hamzah tapped into are real and will inevitably manifest themselves again in the future if Amman does not address them. These include emergency issues like the pandemic, as well as more structural issues like broader economic, political, and governance reform. As in the past, the immediate aftermath of the Hamzah affair will probably see a strengthening of the security sector at the expense of reform, as suggested by the central role that top military officer Maj. Gen. Yousef al-Huneiti played in isolating the prince. The situation could even reverse the impact of the king’s highly publicized February 17 letter to the head of the General Intelligence Directorate about curtailing the powerful institution’s role in certain economic and political arenas. Even before this weekend’s crisis, the government had already shut down the popular chat platform Clubhouse to prevent unwelcome online criticism.

Externally, Jordanian officials have often complained about being taken for granted by neighbouring states and Washington. This feeling turned to dread during the Trump administration, which maintained substantial aid to the kingdom but was perceived as being uninterested in Amman’s views on regional policies, especially regarding the Palestinian issue. This weekend’s events seem to have reminded many capitals that domestic developments in Jordan can play a central role in regional security. Saudi Arabia quickly expressed support for the king and commitment to the kingdom’s stability, followed by other Arab states. Similarly, State Department spokesman Ned Price described King Abdullah as a “key partner” who has Biden’s “full support.” If the past is any guide, this political backing will be a prelude to renewed and even expanded financial support from Jordan’s friends, especially in the Gulf—a major potential lifeline amid the country’s COVID-induced recession.

In this context, Amman needs to tread delicately with its so-far-unsubstantiated accusations of significant foreign connections to the alleged conspiracy. Among the countries whose names have been bandied about—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel—none have an interest in stoking instability in Jordan or could have believed that an amateurish plot built around a disaffected prince and a handful of acolytes might possibly have overthrown the well-entrenched Abdullah. If the specific

allegations about Awadallah and bin Zaid lead to compelling evidence that Saudi officials are complicit in such plotting, that could be damning for U.S. relations with Riyadh. Yet short of such proof, Jordan needs to avoid turning a chequered relationship between the Saudi and Hashemite royal houses into a full-blown diplomatic blow-up, particularly given Riyadh's crucial financial and political support to its much poorer neighbour.

#### Policy Implications

Jordan's stability has always been a valuable asset in advancing American regional interests, from expanding Arab-Israeli peace to countering the Islamic State. In the immediate term, then, the United States needs to continue expressing its firm support for Jordan and urging its allies—Arab states, Israel, and others—to give tangible expression to that support. A phone call between Biden and King Abdullah would send a powerful message toward that end. Washington should also work with Amman on ascertaining any substantive foreign dimensions to the crisis, either clarifying them or laying to rest potentially damaging rumours. In this regard, CIA director William Burns—a former ambassador to Jordan—could play a helpful role.

For now, the priority should be helping Amman navigate this episode so as to ensure stability. But parallel to this—and even more so once initial anxiety over the Hamzah affair subsides—Washington should quietly engage Amman on accelerating its pursuit of economic, political, and governance reform, while still keeping substantive change at an incremental, digestible pace. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen reportedly conveyed such advice in a conversation with Finance Minister Mohamad Al-Ississ on April 1, and other U.S. officials should do the same. Only with high-level attention from Washington and proper support from other friends does Amman stand a chance of undertaking the deeper reforms needed to protect the kingdom from recurring bouts of instability, which could negatively impact U.S. interests throughout the region over time.

# The Economic Future of Kurdish Syria

By Hamia Nair  
TCMER Board Member



Syria will remain a war zone for the near future because no one has the strength to win outright, and because the Assad regime has spoiled the diplomatic process. As a result, there is no straightforward way to resolve the conflict, leaving the region with great uncertainty about its economic future.

For Washington, the question of which partners to work with is key. Some have suggested offloading certain responsibilities to Russia, but that would be a mistake. Moscow is in Syria to exert leverage over NATO. In addition to obstructing stabilization, its presence has helped the Assad regime seize aid intended for the northeast.

The roughly 900 U.S. military personnel in Syria have achieved remarkable things in the territory where they work, including sustained pressure on Islamic State remnants in the east. In contrast, Russian areas of responsibility have seen a much worse IS resurgence. Even so, a low-level IS assassination campaign is driving social tensions and degrading governance in territory held by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), creating opportunities for Russia and Assad to expand their reach and, perhaps, make the U.S. military position untenable over the long term.

The SDF have an impossible task under the present circumstances. Spread thin and facing heavy pressure, they will not be able to sustain what they are doing if the U.S. presence is removed. Despite being Kurdish-led, their coalition has been resilient against ethnic fractures. They do tend to prioritize aid toward Kurdish areas in the north, but their overall work to meet local needs has been impressive. They have a genuine commitment to Arab communities in Deir al-Zour province, and their coalition is viable in the long term, at least in some sense. Yet U.S. and international support is crucial, otherwise the SDF can do little more than limp along. In particular, more civilian U.S. presence is needed, not just military.

The Trump Administration wanted to cut and run from northeast Syria, yet the consequences of that would be severe. If IS gains territory again, the situation will become even messier than last time. The United States should have learned its lesson

about leaving too early given what happened with the 2011 Iraq withdrawal, but it appears to be repeating that mistake in Afghanistan and potentially again in Syria.

Regarding aid, U.S. officials should fight to preserve the international cross-border mechanism. But if they lose that vote, they should work with Turkey to maintain aid to northeast Syria. Keeping Idlib from being choked off is important, but cross-border aid needs to be expanded beyond that area.

For its part, Turkey still has many unresolved issues with the SDF—the withdrawal of foreign personnel affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is a particular sticking point for Ankara. Turkish officials have asked for numerous concessions, and Washington has to find a middle ground. The Turks are flexible, however, and U.S. leverage has been known to change their behaviour—for instance, the threat of sanctions spurred Ankara to call off an offensive in 2019.

The question of internally displaced persons is also increasingly urgent, from both a humanitarian and counter-IS standpoint. The flow of IDPs back to the Euphrates River Valley is a problem given that area's poor conditions and dire economic prospects. They are being forced back into their communities before they are ready.

The economic situation in SDF territory varies. Some areas were liberated much earlier than others, creating a gradient of recovery. In addition, the war has greatly diminished traditional connections between local economic hubs. Cross-river trade used to thrive in Deir al-Zour but now is minimal. Such activity has instead been redirected toward the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), forcing the SDF to grapple with new economic mechanisms while dealing with security issues at the same time.

For example, the roads available for trade tend to run through sparsely populated rural areas, where IS and Assad regime forces can take advantage of travellers. Such interference often impedes service provision, which in turn creates discontent. Moreover, while the United States is focused on Deir al-Zour, the humanitarian sector is focused on Hasaka province, highlighting the gaps and lack of coordination between international donors.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has undergone deep structural change, moving from cantons to provincial-style organization. Authorities have been incorporating territory selectively, basing their decisions on varying circumstances. Substantial connective tissue has been formed between Raqqa, Kobane, and Hasaka, but political compromises have resulted in much more autonomy for Deir al-Zour.

In other words, the bureaucracy is complicated, and getting work done requires talking to lots of different people. But each province has something the others want, so none of them can go it alone. Hasaka has wheat, but it lacks water because the Khabur River is dry or otherwise unusable. Deir al-Zour has both water and oil, so Hasaka has been pumping water from there for irrigation. Raqqa, meanwhile, is a key trading centre.

On the UN side, lots of partners have emerged to address the acute humanitarian crisis, but COVID-19 continues to cause major problems. Rolling lockdowns have been instituted recently because communities lack the healthcare infrastructure to confront the pandemic in any other way.

Cross-border trade is therefore a key lifeline. The KRI has significant social, cultural, political, and economic connections to northeast Syria—for better or worse, the two areas will always be linked. Cross-border aid is substantial, but the KRI's semi-autonomous status is not the best setup for such assistance from a legal standpoint. If the Iraqi federal government wants to get involved, it will need to get al-Yarubiya crossing reopened.

For wider stabilization and reconstruction to take place, U.S. force protection is essential. Washington therefore has leverage over the timing of those processes. For instance, if it commits to keeping military forces in place for five years, then all actors would be compelled to work within that calculus—with some presumably committing to tangible investments in response. Similarly, U.S. agencies could internally commit to certain types of programs that operate on a five-year basis.

Although northeast Syria has enough natural resources to sustain itself, at some point it will need a tax base, which it cannot cultivate without local buy-in. That is the route authorities should take, including more concrete import/export duties. Cross-border aid must be expanded as well; relying entirely on the Peshkhabur crossing will be insufficient.

# Libyan Parliament approves Unity Government

By Zara Dawoud  
TCMER Board Member



In Libya's new interim government, voted in on 10 March, Khalifa Haftar and the Muslim Brotherhood are poorly represented, while Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba has managed to strengthen his position.

This marks a turning point in the Libyan political landscape. Torn apart since 2015 between the western camp, dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, and the eastern camp, under Khalifa Haftar's control, Libya is finally regaining a semblance of unity in the composition of its new government.

On 10 March in Sirte, Prime Minister Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba managed to win the vote of confidence held in the House of Representatives. This trial by fire was passed successfully before the 19 March deadline, of which only two government ministers voted against and 36 were absent.

Obtaining the approval of the elected representatives from the east was not easy, but the Prime Minister's plan worked. "The composition of the government illustrates that it is the product of a broad coalition of interests. In this sense it very much represents a power sharing formula," says Tim Eaton, a researcher for the think-tank Chatham House. "It also directly advocates a form of what is known as muhassasa, or quotas, i.e. Dabaiba's government has sought to distribute positions among interest groups and locales."

With Libya's surprise vote result, a defeated Haftar is back in the Composed of two deputy prime ministers, 35 ministers and six ministers of state, this new government offers a balanced representation of the three Libyan regions: Tripolitania in the west, Cyrenaica in the east and Fezzan in the south. "This is one of the keys to Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba's success in convincing government ministers to validate his list," says Mohamed Eljarh, a Libyan affairs specialist and co-founder of Libya Outlook for Research and Consulting. "But it also seems clear that Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba has managed to rally support from key players, including Aguila Saleh and Khalifa Haftar," he says.

### Aguila Saleh overrules Haftar

Even though pro-Haftar deputies approved the government list, Haftar has nonetheless lost big time. The strong man of the east did not succeed in placing his men in strategic government positions. He fought hard behind the scenes to obtain the role of minister of defence, but this job remained – in the end – in Dabaiba's hands. This decision allows the prime minister to avoid alienating one of the Libyan camps, as this position was also requested by the various Islamist factions.

However, according to Jalel Harchaoui, a senior fellow at the Global Initiative against Transnational Organised Crime, Dabaiba will probably leave the field open to Haftar. "The absence of a Minister of Defence will allow Haftar to maintain his military supremacy in the East, even if it is increasingly challenged by internal actors in Cyrenaica," he says.

Haftar suffered another setback. His candidate for deputy Prime Minister, Saqr Bujwari, the mayor of Benghazi, lost at the last minute. Initially included in the government list drawn up by Dabaiba, Bujwari was dropped in favour of Hussein Al Qatrani, who is close to Aguila Saleh. Dabaiba granted this favour to the speaker of the House of Representatives in order to facilitate the validation of his government by Parliament.

Pillars of former Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj's government, the Muslim Brotherhood is less represented in this new formation. "From 2011 to 2016, Dabaiba was mainly associated with the Misrata revolutionaries and the Muslim Brotherhood," says Harchaoui.

"But this year, in order to come to power, he ignored his usual friends, focusing instead on seducing their enemies: the eastern factions, the Qaddafiists, the Zintanis, the Fezzazna of the south, etc.," he says. According to Harchaoui, "Dabaiba has especially made efforts to reassure, please and seduce the anti-Muslim Brotherhood camp in eastern Libya and in a part of Tripolitania."

The Prime Minister has thus undoubtedly been strengthened by this first test. Perceived as ingenious and calculating by connoisseurs of Libyan political circles, Dabaiba has formed a weak government composed of ineffective government ministers. As a result, he will have the upper hand when it comes to introducing his policies. His main objective, according to Harchaoui, will be "to focus on reconstruction efforts in general, as this is his primary job. And Abdulhamid al-Dabaiba believes that it is the Libyan population's top priority."

However, there is a shadow over the prime minister's head. He has been accused of bribing several members of the Forum de Dialogue Politique Libyen (LPDF), in order to secure their votes on 5 February. The UN Panel of Experts is due to publish a report on this subject within the next few days, which may call into question al-Dabaiba's legitimacy.

### Honeymoon with Ankara, Moscow and Cairo

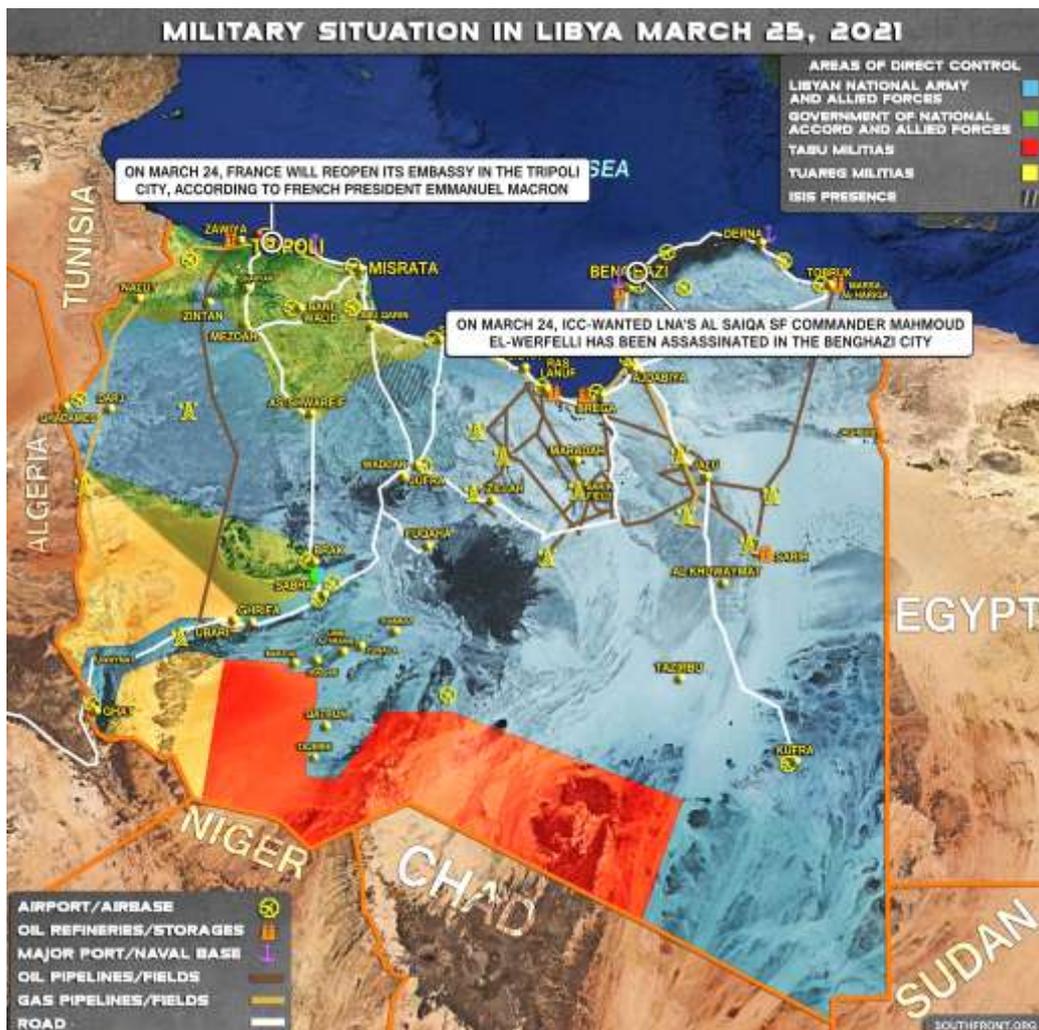
Beyond Libya's borders, Dabaiba's political strategy has seduced foreign countries intervening in Libya. "Egypt, Turkey and Russia are satisfied with Dabaiba," says Eljarh. He cultivated his relationship with Russia, which he had already visited several times. But he was especially quick to spare Egypt, which had supported Haftar. The prime minister made his first trip abroad to Cairo on 18 February, for a very symbolic visit.

This reconciliation does not prevent Dabaiba from guaranteeing Turkey's interests. An influential businessperson from Misrata, Dabaiba is very close to Ankara, an ally of the former Government of National Accord (GNA). According to Harchaoui, the Prime Minister will moreover “ensure three things that Turkey considers sacrosanct: accepting the permanent nature of its military presence; signing many contracts; preserving the November 2019 maritime memorandum.

The government has just nine months before the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for December. Dabaiba's priority will be to manage the withdrawal of foreign troops.

In Tripoli, the euphoria felt upon the formation of this reunified government is already being counterbalanced by the fear of a resurgence of militias. The latter had welcomed Dabaiba's seizure of power against Bachagha, who had instigated a policy to dismantle the katibas.

Eaton sees a risk in the composition of this government, “the power sharing simply serves to underpin greater expenditure by the state to placate warring parties and sustain a status quo. This makes the negotiation of the budget, and the conditions attached to any new budget over access to resources to actors like Haftar, critical.” For now, the reunification of the Libyan government provides a window of opportunity to unify the country. The next major undertaking will be to unite the two rival central banks.



# Why Abbas does not want Elections!

By Bassam Tawil



Media reports and other sources indicate that when Palestinian Authority (PA) president and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas meets with top officials from various factions on April 29, he will call for the postponement of the parliamentary elections set for May 22. This would effectively cancel the elections. Whether he actually formally postpones the elections during the meeting is uncertain. On the one hand, opposition to this move has emerged from significant quarters and may cause him to delay the announcement. On the other hand, the ill-advised election gambit has exposed deep dysfunctions within the Palestinian political system, turning what Abbas may have considered to be a risk-free way for him to renew his legitimacy into something that may threaten the eighty-five-year-old leader's grip on power.

Thus, whether it happens this week or not, a postponement seems extremely likely.

A decision to postpone elections has implications. In the short term, priority must be given to preventing any deterioration in security that may be triggered by postponement. In the longer term, however, failure to hold elections highlights structural challenges facing the PA and Fatah, as well as the chimerical nature of trying to achieve Palestinian unity under the current circumstances.

Those who claim that the recent violence in Jerusalem erupted because the Israel Police did not allow Arab Muslims to hold nightly celebrations during the fasting month of Ramadan have no idea what they are talking about.

Those who say that the violence erupted because Israel did not allow the Arab residents of Jerusalem (who hold Israeli-issued ID cards in their capacity as residents, and are not citizens of Israel) to participate in the Palestinian Authority elections also have no idea what they are talking about. What they all seem to have no idea about is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The violence erupted for one single reason: hatred for Israel and Jews. It erupted because many Muslims do not want to see Jews in Jerusalem or any part of Israel. Attacks on Israeli security forces and Jews in Jerusalem have been taking place for decades - with or without a "reason".

When a young Jewish man riding the light train in Jerusalem is slapped on the face for no reason, or when a Jewish man walking his dog is severely beaten by a Muslim mob,

it is only because of his outward appearance and religion. Welcome to modern-day Palestinian Jew-hate.

All one has to do is listen to what the Palestinians themselves are saying to understand that they see the violence in the context of their decades-old "battle to liberate Jerusalem and Palestine from the Zionist enemy."

The Jerusalem Arabs who took to the streets to attack Israeli police officers and Jewish civilians are saying that violence is very much part of the Arab-Palestinian-Muslim fight against Israel.

The Arabs did not say that they are throwing rocks and petrol bombs at policemen because of Israeli security restrictions during Ramadan, or that they are beating, stabbing, slapping and lynching Jewish civilians on the streets of Jerusalem because Israel was not allowing the Arabs to participate in the PA elections.

The message coming from the Arab rioters was clear: Muslims refuse to accept any Jewish control over Israel, over the Old City of Jerusalem or even Jewish holy sites, including the Western Wall. The wall - a retaining wall, and all that remains of the Jewish Second Temple, destroyed by Roman legions under the Emperor Titus in 70 CE - is, for the Jewish people, their holiest, most religious site.

If the violence was about Israeli security restrictions and Palestinian elections, why were the Arab demonstrators at the Damascus Gate (the main pedestrian entrance to the Old City of Jerusalem) chanting long-time battle cries such as "Khaybar, Khaybar ya yahood, jaish Mohammed saya'ud!" ("Oh Jews, remember Khaybar; the army of [prophet] Mohammed is returning!")? The chant refers to the battle of Khaybar in 628, when, after the death of Mohammad, the Jews, who had been banished to the oasis of Khaybar, about 160 kilometers north of Medina, were massacred or expelled.

The call to murder Jews is a reminder that today, for many, this war from the seventh century is not over.

If the "protests" were about the right to celebrate Ramadan, why did the Jerusalem Arabs continue to attack police officers and Jewish civilians - and Hamas continued to fire rockets at Israel from Gaza - after the restrictions were lifted?

The violence actually began long before the Israel Police placed barricades at the Old City's Damascus Gate to prevent Arab youths from gathering and harassing Jews who live in the area or were on their way to pray at the Western Wall. The barricades were placed there solely for security reasons, not to stop Muslims from celebrating Ramadan.

The violence also has nothing to do with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's announcement, in January 2021, that he intended to hold elections for the Palestinian Authority parliament and presidency. The violence also has nothing to do with the controversy surrounding the inclusion of Jerusalem Arabs in these elections.

First, Israel never said it would prevent PA elections from taking place in Jerusalem, even if it did not enthusiastically endorse the idea. Israel foresaw, as with the last PA elections in 2006, that winner would most likely be Hamas, a terrorist group dedicated to Israel's country destruction. Israel said nothing.

Second, the vast majority of Jerusalem Arabs did not even participate in previous PA parliamentary and presidential elections (in 1996, 2005 and 2006), although again Israel

did not object to their participation. The Arabs stayed away from the PA elections because they did not want to be part of the Palestinian political system.

By boycotting the elections, the Arabs were signalling that they had no faith in the PA and its leaders, and that they were happier living under Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem than under the control of former PLO leader Yasser Arafat and his successor, PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

The overwhelming majority of Jerusalem Arabs have not shown the slightest interest in, or eagerness for, the upcoming Palestinian elections. They did not take to the streets to demand that Israel allow them to vote or run as candidates in the PA elections. They did not even sign petitions calling on Israel to allow them to participate in the elections. They never declared a general strike in the Arab neighbourhoods of Jerusalem to be able to participate in the PA elections.

It seems, in fact, that the United Nations and European Union officials were more interested in Abbas's planned elections than most of the Arab residents of Jerusalem.

Abbas, according to many Palestinians, was never serious about holding the elections in the first place. Abbas announced the elections only because he had come under pressure from a number of European Union member states and other international parties that fund his government.

If Abbas was really serious about holding the elections, he would have worked to find a solution to including the Arabs of Jerusalem in them. Abbas in reality rejected a number of ideas presented to him by international parties, including the possibility that the Jerusalem Arabs would vote online or through voting centres located in PA-controlled areas that are located a few minutes' drive away, not far from their homes, and not under Israeli sovereignty.

Abbas evidently announced the elections only to appease his Western donors, specifically the Europeans. Since 2006, Abbas had many opportunities to hold elections; he did not do so because this was never a priority for him. He always managed to find an excuse for not holding elections.

On April 29, Abbas finally called off the elections, proving that he was never serious about holding the vote. As expected, Abbas used the Jerusalem dispute as an excuse to delay the elections indefinitely.

Abbas does not want elections: he knows that Hamas has an extremely strong chance of winning. Moreover, his own Fatah faction is highly fragmented and was running in the parliamentary elections under three rival lists.

To be clear: Abbas's attempt to hold the Israeli government responsible for not holding Palestinian elections is simply the result of his and the PA leadership's ongoing, vicious incitement to violence against Israel and the demonization of Jews. Day after day, Abbas feeds his people poisonous lies, such as that Jews are "storming" the al-Aqsa Mosque and working to turn Jerusalem into a Jewish city. It is this type of deliberate and constant race-baiting that is driving young Arabs in Jerusalem to take to the streets to attack policemen and Jewish civilians, and to whip up Jew-hate among the Palestinians.

*Bassam Tawil is a Muslim Arab based in the Middle East.*

# Biden Support's Palestinian Dictatorship

By Khaled Abu Toameh



Joe Biden is reportedly planning to "reset" US relations with the Palestinians. An internal memo presented to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on March 1 states: "As we reset US relations with the Palestinians, the Palestinian body politic is at an inflection point as it moves towards its first elections in 15 years."

The memo reintroduces some of the issues that the George W. Bush and the Barack Obama administrations pushed forward, such as the strengthening of Palestinian institutions, including civil society and media watchdogs. The document, in addition, mentions the resumption of US financial aid to the Palestinians and "means to advance the prospects of a negotiated two-state solution."

Sadly, Biden is talking about the "need to protect [Palestinian] civil society through the reduction of arrests of bloggers and dissidents," the Palestinian leadership is evidently moving in precisely the opposite direction.

Instead of enhancing the role of civil society organizations, the Palestinian leadership is hampering their work by imposing severe restrictions on them. Instead of boosting public freedoms and bringing democracy to its people, the Palestinian leadership is harshly punishing those who speak out against its policies.

While Biden says it wants to strengthen Palestinian civil society organizations, the Palestinian leadership is working to tighten its grip on these organizations.

Recently, Palestinian civil society organizations expressed their absolute rejection of attempts by the Palestinian Authority (PA) leadership to impose severe restrictions on their work. The organizations were responding to a recent decree issued by PA President Mahmoud Abbas that effectively turns Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) into government-controlled institutions.

Abbas's decree requires the organizations to present to the PA government an "annual action plan and estimated budget." This means that the organizations will be working for the PA government and not in accordance with their vision, mission, goals or programs.

"This [decree] undermines the professionalism, independence and freedom of civic activity, including its monitoring role over the performance of the executive authority

and its objective to hold this authority accountable for its violations," several Palestinian civil society organizations said in a joint statement.

"This law by decree was issued within the framework of several ongoing laws by decree that are drafted in full secrecy and behind closed doors... the law hinders the right of assembly and organization and the right to exercise activities independent of ministries and the executive authority...

"The aforementioned law by decree violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 20) and The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 22), which confirms the basic right of freedom of association, independence of activities and financial sources. It also violates several resolutions issued by the UN Human Rights Council, including Resolution (22/6) of 21/03/2013, which calls on states not to impede the functional independence of associations and not to impose restrictions on potential sources of funding in a discriminatory manner."

Abbas's crackdown on Palestinian NGOs came as Palestinians prepare to hold their first general elections since 2006. The elections are part of Abbas's attempt to curry favour with Biden and present himself as a leader who cares about democracy and fair elections. The fact is that Abbas is desperate for US funding to preserve his regime and remain in power until his last day.

The Palestinian parliamentary election has been set for May 22, while the vote for the PA presidency is scheduled to take place on July 31. The timing of Abbas's move against the Palestinian civil society organizations is hardly coincidental. The 85-year-old Abbas wants to make sure that there is no criticism of him and his regime ahead of the elections.

Abbas is worried that Palestinian civil society organizations, which are not directly under the control of his government, would criticize him or his government on the eve of the planned elections. Such criticism, Abbas fears, will hurt his (and his ruling Fatah faction's) chances of winning the vote.

It is worth stressing that Biden memo completely ignores Abbas's clampdown on the civil society organizations. Abbas thus now feels free to crack down on any Palestinian who dares to differ with him or challenge his policies. The latest victim of Abbas's effort to intimidate his critics ahead of the elections is Nasser al-Kidwa, a former PA foreign minister and a nephew of former PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

Earlier this month, Abbas expelled Kidwa from Fatah and suspended PA funding to the organization he heads: the Yasser Arafat Foundation. He later fired Kidwa from his job as chairman of the foundation and ordered the arrest of his bodyguard, Qadri Ataya. Hassan Asfour, a former Palestinian cabinet minister and editor of the Palestinian news website Amad, denounced Abbas's measures against Kidwa as "political bullying."

Abbas's vengeance came in response to Kidwa's decision to form his own list to run in the parliamentary election. Kidwa is a member of the Fatah Central Committee, the highest decision-making body of Abbas's faction. Abbas was enraged because Kidwa said he wants to run on a separate list, and not as part of the Abbas-led Fatah slate.

In addition to Kidwa, a number of Fatah officials are also planning to run on separate lists in the parliamentary election. The officials are calling for a "radical change" of the Palestinian political system, a reference to the need to end Abbas's dictatorship.

Abbas's punitive measures against Kidwa are aimed at sending a warning to these officials that they would meet the same fate should they run outside the Abbas-led list. Abbas is essentially announcing that anyone who challenges him will be expelled from Fatah and deprived of money and employment.

Abbas is telling Biden: Fund me to the tune of millions, my autocratic rule, assault on public freedoms and intimidation of critics and political rivals be damned. Instead of holding Abbas to account for his repressive measures, Biden seems to be headed toward financially supporting his totalitarian regime.

According to the internal memo, the US is planning to resume unconditional financial aid to the Palestinians in late March or early April. This means propping up Abbas and his associates ahead of the elections and allowing them to step up their campaign of intimidation against any candidate who dares to demand reforms and an end to rampant corruption.

Biden is about to pump millions of dollars into Abbas's coffers to help him cut off the emergence of new and young leaders and to help him maintain his authoritarian rule over the Palestinians. Once the bounty is paid, Abbas shows all signs of stepping up his repressive measures against his rivals and critics to ensure that he and his Fatah faction triumph in the elections.

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

# Erdoganistan: The New Islamic Superpower?

By Giulio Meotti



"It was a very special day, July 24 [2020]," said France's leading expert on Islam, Gilles Kepel. "It was pilgrimage time to Mecca and, due to the pandemic, no one was there! It was the anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne, the origin of modern Turkey within its current borders. Erdogan was about to twist the arm of the secular Ataturk, who had turned the old Hagia Sophia basilica into a museum that he had donated 'to humanity'. Erdogan... turned it back into a mosque".

This was the moment, remarked Kepel – who just published a new book, "Le Prophète et la Pandémie" [*The Prophet and the Pandemic*] – that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan became the new leader of the *umma*, or global Islamic community. "Erdogan is trying to appear as the champion of Islam, just like Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989".

Both Khomeini and Erdogan seem to have been committed to erasing secularism and ties with Western culture from their respective countries; to heading a battle against Saudi Arabia for supremacy of the Islamic world and to re-Islamizing their societies. Veiled women, for instance was rarely seen in Tehran before Khomeini, and Erdogan reintroduced it into Turkish society.

The Iranian mullahs were also able to impose on the international arena the use of the word "Islamophobia", but now it is Turkey that is leading the ideological persecution of the "Islamophobes". Under the auspices of Turkish diplomat Volkan Bozkir, President of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, the UN just celebrated the "International Day against Islamophobia" and Secretary General Antonio Guterres himself strongly denounced an "epidemic of Islamophobia". Erdogan was promoting his global campaign of victimization by "Islamophobia", while in fact it is the *critics* of extremist Islam who are in danger and frequently killed.

This grotesque and shameful conference was organized by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an entity made up of 56 mainly Muslim countries, plus "Palestine". In the OIC, states such as Pakistan punish "blasphemy" with death; Saudi Arabia flogs

and jails liberal bloggers such as Raif Badawi, and Turkey fills its jails with writers and journalists, to mention just a few of members.

On that July 24, in 2020, Erdogan challenged Europe and the West by re-appropriating what had been, for a thousand years, the largest church in Eastern Christianity. The lack of response on the part of the West most likely convinced him that the moment was right. No one paid attention or countered the act.

Unlike Iran and Saudi Arabia, Turkey is a democracy. It is in talks with the European Union about its possible membership; it is pampered in Washington; it is the second-largest army in NATO, and stands as Asia's gateway to Europe.

The *Financial Times* (FT) has dedicated a series of analyses to Erdogan's grand plan for hegemony. In Africa, for the past 15 years, for instance, the Turkish president has spearheaded a mega-relaunch of his alliances. Since 2009, Turkey has increased the number of embassies there from 12 to 42. Erdogan has even been a frequent visitor, making trips to more than 20 capitals. The government has set itself the goal over the next few years of doubling Turkey's trade volume with Africa to \$50 billion, about a third of its current trade with the European Union.

Turkey has also chosen the Balkans as a battlefield - "the region," according to the FT, "is symbolically very important, since much of it was ruled by Istanbul during the Ottoman Empire". Then, there is Europe:

"Several European countries have voiced concern over activity by Turkey's intelligence service on their soil and the use of state-trained Turkish imams to spy on the diaspora".

Erdogan's goal in Europe seems to be to use the Turkish diaspora as a political instrument of pressure on states (in particular Germany, France, Austria, Belgium and Holland) and as the base for his hegemony.

In the Caucasus, Turkey supported Azerbaijan's war against Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh presumably to create a Turkic-Islamic corridor between Azerbaijan, Turkey and other Muslim countries. Erdogan also apparently makes use of mercenaries. The Indian media reported a contingent sent to Kashmir to support Pakistan. Turkey has also previously used "Sadat" mercenaries against the Armenians, as well as in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars.

In the latest issue of the *Revue des deux mondes*, the French philosopher Michel Onfray remarked that there is a clash of civilizations and that Erdogan now leads the Islamist side. "It began in 1989 with the fatwa against Salman Rushdie," he wrote.

"No Western country reacted except with words - as if they thought a verbal spell might work! With the beheading of Professor Samuel Paty it is this Judeo-Christianity that is being attacked - in Armenia, Islam is attacking the oldest Christianity in Europe ... Europe is afraid of Erdogan and his ability to cause damage. This Tamerlane in the making threatens, insults, attacks, [and] supports those who threaten us, insult us and attack us".

That, Onfray continues, was the meaning of the Turkish aggression against Karabakh:

"Armenia is being attacked by Azeris and Muslim Turks who want its total disappearance. It is the result of a war of civilizations. What is happening in this country, which is the cradle of Christian civilization, is what awaits us here, in the

tomb of the Judeo-Christian civilization itself. The battle lost in Armenia is the first of a war waged in the West against the Judeo-Christian civilization".

Erdogan has not even tried to hide his ideological vision. "The crescent and star embellish the skies of Karabakh now thanks to the efforts of our Azerbaijani brothers and sisters", the Turkish president proclaimed after the war. "The Azerbaijani flag flies proudly over Nagorno-Karabakh as a symbol of our martyrs' valor".

One of Erdogan's advisors, the retired Turkish general Adnan Tanrıverdi, who founded the mercenary agency "Sadat", articulated the vision of a unified Islamic superpower. His Justice Defenders Strategic Studies Center called it "Asrica", the union of Africa and Asia, 61 countries whose capital is Istanbul and under the aegis of this "Erdoganistan". They include 12 countries of the Middle East, namely Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Palestine, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan and Yemen.

Turkey evidently wants to be a great neo-Ottoman Empire and the only one capable of leading the Muslim world. The conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque seems to have been intended as a watershed in Islamic history that heralds the establishment of a powerful league of Muslim nations to face the West under the Turkish leadership.

Three seas surround Turkey: the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. Turkey recently launched a large naval exercise. The Turkish Ministry of Defence announced that 82 warships, 17 naval aviation craft, amphibious forces, air force units and special operations teams engaged in exercises that ended on March 8. "Blue Homeland" - *Mavi Vatan* in Turkish - is the geopolitical concept that marks Erdogan's agenda for the coming years. Conceived by nationalist Admiral Cem Gurdeniz, it is the "diplomacy of drills and warships" that pursues "the return of Turkey to the sea, the union between Anatolia and the eastern Mediterranean". The goal is clear: to control the sea, to control energy resources and to impose its influence. Erdogan announced that it will no longer be called "Aegean", but the "sea of islands".

Ankara is on a collision course with Greece and Cyprus over who has the right to exploit the eastern Mediterranean's oil and gas deposits. "They will understand that Turkey has the political, economic and military power to tear up immoral maps and imposed documents," Erdogan said.

Turkey has problems with Cyprus, which, unlike the Turks, belongs to the European Union but not to NATO. Turkey, which invaded the island in 1974, remains the only country to recognize Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus as a state. The Republic of Cyprus, which is majority-Greek Cypriot, wants to make deals with foreign energy companies, while Turkey, to the island's north, wants economic rights in the waters that Cyprus considers its own.

While the new sultan extends his influence to Syria, Libya and the Caucasus, he also extends it within the Mediterranean. For pacifist Europe, that sea only exists when it comes to bringing in migrants.

President Erdogan, in an official visit to Paris on January 5, 2018, proceeded to launch this provocative phrase to the leaders of the French Council for Muslim worship: "The Muslims of France are under my protection". Those were the first lines of an inquiry by the France's *Journal du Dimanche*. Several reports sent to the Elysée Palace by the Directorate General for Internal Security (DGSI), which the newspaper was able to

consult, reveal the scope, forms and objectives of a "real infiltration strategy" through networks managed by the Turkish embassy and the Turkish spy agency, the MIT. "They act mainly within the Turkish immigrant population, but also through Muslim organizations and also recently in local political life, through the support given to elected officials".

"These actions have different objectives," commented the journalist Mohamed Sifaoui.

"First, to improve the image of the Turkish regime in the diaspora and in French society. Then, to defend Erdogan's image at all costs. And finally, of course, the spread of an Islamist vision of Islam".

Sifaoui cites as an example the latest charter wanted by French President Emmanuel Macron, the charter of principles present in the law that strengthens "republican principles," and is currently being examined by Parliament:

"It was not signed by the two Turkish federations, at the request of Ankara, because it is a charter that recalls the fundamental principles important for the Republic and which the Turkish regime clearly opposes... What the Turkish regime is doing is using its diaspora as a Trojan horse."

Just as Turkey controls 400 mosques out of 2,500 in France. It is Ahmet Ogras, apparently close to Erdogan, who for two years occupied the symbolic position of president of the French Council for Muslim Worship - as Turkish voters in France are generally more pro-Erdogan than in Turkey. During the presidential elections of 2014, Erdogan won 66% of the votes cast by Turkish citizens in France, compared to only 51.79% in Turkey. First- and second-generation Turkish immigrants in France continue to watch Turkish television, which is extremely submissive to Erdogan's power. In French public schools, 180 teachers, directly appointed by Ankara, are responsible for teaching the Turkish language.

Erdogan recently withdrew Turkey from an international treaty on preventing violence against women. With this decision, it seems that the president is determined to increase impunity around murder of women and "honour killings", which common in Turkey.

In Erdogan's Turkey, school textbooks have been rewritten to refer to Jews and Christians as *gavur*, "infidels," according to a new study published by the Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se). Earlier Turkish textbooks referred to the members of the two religions as the "peoples of the Book". "School books have been used as a weapon in Erdogan's attempts to Islamise Turkish society and to trace back to a nostalgic era of Turkish domination," wrote IMPACT-se's CEO, Marcus Sheff.

These are some of the findings of the study: Jihad was introduced in textbooks and transformed into the "new normal", with martyrdom in battle glorified. Ethno-nationalist religious goals of neo-Ottomanism and pan-Turkism are taught. Therefore, Islam is described as a political issue, with science and technology used to further its goals. There is an emphasis on concepts such as "Turkish world domination" and "Turkish or Ottoman ideal of world order". According to the curriculum, the "Turkish basin" extends from the Adriatic Sea to Central Asia. The curriculum adopts an anti-American stance, and shows sympathy for the motives of ISIS and al-Qaeda. Turkey takes anti-Armenian and pro-Azerbaijani positions. The identity and cultural needs of

the Kurdish minority continue to be largely neglected. The pogroms of 1955 against the Greek community in Istanbul are ignored.

At schools, during the term of Erdogan, maps showing Turkish power have appeared. Reference is made to the "Turkish heritage from the Adriatic Sea to the Great Wall of China": "Turkish cultural artifacts can be seen in a vast region, starting with the countries of Central and East Asia, such as China and Mongolia, and extends to Herzegovina and Hungary..."

Europe, the US, NATO and the Free World might start worrying. Erdogan seems aiming to be the new Islamist wolf in sheep's clothing.

*Giulio Meotti, Cultural Editor for Il Foglio, is an Italian journalist and author.*

# Turkey: How Erdogan's Reforms Collapse in only Five Months

By Burak Bekdil



His critics often joke that when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan pledges democratic reforms, one should run away immediately. His latest charm offensive in November, aimed at repairing Turkey's badly-strained ties with the West and Western institutions, has proven that the joke still holds value.

"We don't see ourselves elsewhere but in Europe," Erdoğan said on November 21. "We envisage building our future together with Europe." Two days later, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar described NATO as the "cornerstone of our defence and security policy" and said that Turkey was looking forward to cooperating with the incoming administration under Joe Biden in the United States. Erdoğan also promised a bold package of democratic reforms.

Less than five months later, Italy's Prime Minister Mario Draghi had to call Erdoğan a "dictator." That was not because an experienced European politician wanted to insult a Muslim head of state.

According to Turkish news site *Gazete Duvar*, a total of 128,872 people have been indicted in the past six years for insulting Erdoğan. Of those, 27,824 had to stand trial and 9,556 were convicted. By comparison, only 11 Turks had been convicted for insulting Ahmet Necdet Sezer, president between 2000 and 2007.

After Erdoğan's latest reform pledge, on March 21, Turkish authorities arrested pro-Kurdish opposition MP who had refused to leave parliament for several days after his seat was revoked. Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu "was brought out by force while he was in pyjamas and slippers" by "nearly 100 police officers," the leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) said in a statement.

On March 17, the Supreme Court Chief Public Prosecutor's Office filed a lawsuit against HDP for its closure on the grounds that it has links with "terror acts." On April 14, state prosecutors asked for the removal of the parliamentary immunity of main opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and nine MPs from his Republican People's Party (CHP). Apparently, Erdoğan wants a democratic system without opposition.

This month, Europe's top human rights court ruled that the right to liberty and freedom of expression of Turkish journalist and author Ahmet Altan had been violated due to his detention and imprisonment on charges related to a 2016 coup attempt. Altan, 71, has been in prison since September 2016, when he was detained over allegations that, during a TV program, he disseminated "subliminal messages" related to the coup attempt, as well as for articles he had written criticizing the government. Shortly after that ruling, the Turkish Court of Appeals released Altan. In other words, Altan had been unlawfully imprisoned for 55 months, nearly five years.

That was "normal" in a country where an army of pro-government judges has the habit of announcing rulings in defiance of rulings from superior Turkish courts, including the Constitutional Court, and from the European Court of Human Rights. Those judges who dare make "undesirable verdicts" are probed and often get disciplinary punishments. Erdoğan's coalition partner and staunchest political ally, ultra-nationalist leader Devlet Bahçeli, has called for the closure of the country's top judicial institution, the Constitutional Court.

On April 5, Turkish prosecutors detained 10 retired admirals over their public criticism of Erdoğan's multi billion-dollar Istanbul canal project, which will create a new artificial waterway from the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea, to complement the Bosphorus Strait. The arrest warrants came a day after a group of 104 former senior navy officials signed an open letter warning that the proposed canal could harm Turkish security by invalidating an 85-year-old international treaty (the Montreux Convention) designed to prevent militarization of the Black Sea. Pro-Erdoğan officials and prosecutors interpreted the statement as a direct challenge from the military to the civilian government, "echoing coup times."

The prosecutors' move is in direct breach of the Article 26 of the Turkish Constitution: "Everyone has the right to express and disseminate his/her thoughts and opinions by speech, in writing or in pictures or through other media, individually or collectively. This freedom includes the liberty of receiving or imparting information or ideas without interference by official authorities. This provision shall not preclude subjecting transmission by radio, television, cinema, or similar means to a system of licensing."

But who cares about the Constitution in a country where the governing bloc is proposing to close down even the Constitutional Court, in addition to banning opposition parties?

All these autocratic measures occurred in the less than half-year since Erdoğan pledged democratic reforms. But no story would be completely Turkish without an element of black humour: Where is the \$128 billion?

That sum refers to the US dollars sold by state banks to support the Turkish lira in foreign exchange markets. The policy began around the time of the March 2019 municipal elections and was ramped up in 2020, when the pandemic laid bare the lira's vulnerability and Turkey's reliance on external funding. Bankers have calculated that the sales totalled \$128.3 billion in 2019-20.

As government officials remain mute on the question, the main opposition CHP recently launched a campaign to embarrass Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) by hanging huge posters on CHP party buildings across the country with the simple question: Where is the \$128 billion? Not one more word. Not one single

comment or insult. Just a question, though annoying especially at a time of economic crisis.

Turkish police started to rip down those posters without court orders. As one prosecutor confessed in a letter to a governor, "We cannot find a legal pretext to declare the posters illegal. You must rip them down citing administrative reasons."

In protest, a CHP MP hung the same poster outside his office window in the parliament building. Parliament's administrative directors had to send a fire truck to rip down the poster. The MP said he would hang it again.

Erdoğan's effort to hang onto power is taking uglier shapes every new day. A few years ago, then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had vehemently denied claims that Turkey was a second-class democracy. He was right. Turkey has since remained a third-class democracy.

*Burak Bekdil is one of Turkey's leading journalists.*

## How to foil Turkish Politico-Religious Interference in France?

By Constantin Pikramenos



On March 20, 2021, Ibrahim Munir, General Guide of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) gave an interview on the Qatari Al-Jazeera TV channel based in Doha. He wanted to reassure his supporters that no agreement had been reached at their expense between the Turkish and Egyptian governments. He thus claimed that Erdogan would never expel members of the Sunni brotherhood from his territory and called on his supporters to trust the Sultan of Ankara.

In mid-March, Turkish authorities urged three Egyptian opposition channels broadcasting from Turkey to quell their criticism of Egyptian leader Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. The three channels in question, El-Sharq, Watan TV and Mekameleen, all affiliated with the Brotherhood, were threatened with sanctions if they did not respect this order. Prominent Brotherhood member Ayman Nour, who runs El-Sharq TV, revealed that the Turkish authorities have politely ordered them to change their editorial policy towards Egypt.

Erdogan has built his entire foreign policy towards the Arab world on the support of non-state actors like the Muslim Brotherhood. He uses them as a means of pressure to destabilize the governments there and to advance his own political ambitions. Without them, he would lose his influence in Egyptian, Palestinian and Syrian affairs. In fact, the Sultan is counting heavily on Hamas' victory in the upcoming Palestinian elections. He wants to show Europeans who treat him as a dictator (like the Italian Mario Draghi recently) that democracy works to legitimize... political Islam.

Let us now return to France, to Albertville (Savoie) more specifically, where the Islamic Confederation Millî Görüş, which is organically linked to Ankara, is fighting to build a private denominational school. Why on earth does a modest Muslim family prefer to enroll their children in such an establishment than to place them in a public, free and secular school? Is it simply linked to the prohibition of ostentatious religious symbols or to the desire to build a cultural, identity and religious counter-model? The answer is in the question.

The proliferation of private schools should not, in principle, pose problems of social integration. But there are cases where the priority of the management of the private establishment does not only concern the quality of teaching. The long-term strategy of raising a "new generation" in total rupture with national cohesion is part of all religious

movements in Turkey. The Gulen community and the Milli Gorus have always pursued this logic.

The question now arises on what grounds the prefect and the rectorate authorize the opening of such an establishment. The story of Milli Gorus shows that it is a movement close to the Muslim Brotherhood that follows a strategy over several decades.

Its goal is the same: to safeguard Turkish-Islamic culture to avoid the integration of Turkish-Muslim communities into European societies. In Germany, where the Milli Gorus has been established since the 1970s, there are already “little Turkeys” on the outskirts of the big cities.

In summary, candidates for the 2022 presidential election still have almost a year to come up with effective and anti-interference measures. It is a question of guaranteeing the freedom to live one's faith and culture fully by avoiding the creation of parallel societies. Without stigmatizing, without despising, without isolating anyone, we must be severe with the followers of communitarianism and creative with those who really want social integration in a multi-cultural society like ours.

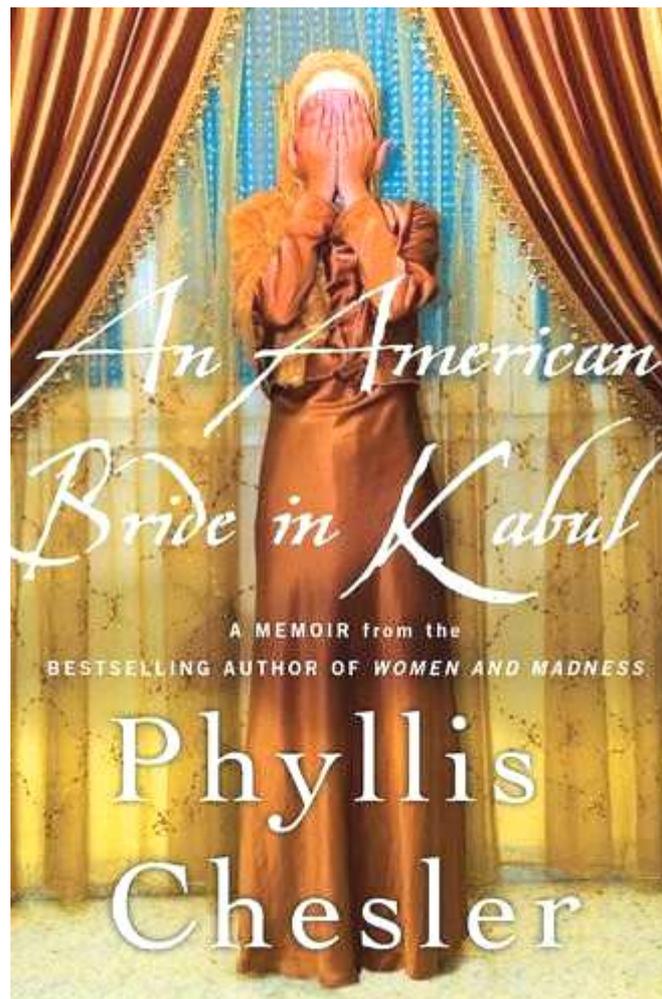


# Yasmine's Book Club

MAY

Join us on May 16th at 10am PDT to discuss Phyllis Chesler's book *An American Bride in Kabul*

Few westerners will ever be able to understand Muslim or Afghan society unless they are part of a Muslim family. Twenty years old and in love, Phyllis Chesler, a Jewish-American girl from Brooklyn, embarked on an adventure that has lasted for more than a half-century.



AN AMERICAN BRIDE IN KABUL