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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.

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

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Australia Recognizes West Jerusalem

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director



View of the Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock

On December 15, 2018 Australia's new Prime Minister Scott Morrison reversed decades of Middle East policy by officially proposing that the Australian Embassy be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. However, the move will not be acted upon until peace is achieved.

The United States in May 2018 opened its embassy in Jerusalem amid fervent opposition from the region as well as from the European Union.

Prime Minister Morrison also committed to recognizing the aspirations for a future state of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital when the city's status is determined in a peace deal. While the embassy move is delayed, Morrison said his government will establish a defence and trade office in Jerusalem and will also start looking for an appropriate site for the embassy.

"We look forward to moving our embassy to West Jerusalem when practical, in support of and after final status of determination," he said, adding that work on a new site for the embassy was under way.

The prime minister said it was in Australia's interests to support "liberal democracy" in the Middle East, and took aim at the United Nations, which he said was a place where Israel is "bullied."

Morrison's statement has been seen by many Australians at that time as a political stunt. Critics called it a cynical attempt to win votes in a by-election in October for a Sydney seat with a high Jewish population.

Both Israel and the Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital. Israel captured Arab East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six Day War and later annexed it in a move never recognized by the international community. It sees the entire city as its capital.

For decades the international community maintained that the city's status should be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians. Critics say declaring Jerusalem the capital of either inflames tensions and prejudices the outcome of final status peace talks.



Bahrain's Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa

Meanwhile Bahrain's foreign minister Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa defended Australia's decision to recognize West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, contradicting the official position of the Arab League.

The Arab League had issued a statement criticizing the Australian decision as "blatantly biased towards the positions and policies of the Israeli occupation".

But Bahraini Minister Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed al-Khalifa described the statement as "mere rhetoric and irresponsible".

"Australia's stance does not impact the legitimate Palestinian demands, first among them being East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and it does not contradict the Arab Peace Initiative," he tweeted.

Bahrain's stance contradicts that of other Muslim nations. Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad denounced Australia's move, saying that "they have no rights" to do so.

In November 2018 the Indonesian government also reacted angrily, when Prime Minister Scott Morrison initially hinted at the idea of both recognizing the occupied city and moving the Australian embassy there. This is while Saudi Arabia which is moving closer towards normalization with Israel has refrained from making comments on the Australian decision.

Morrison's announcement drew warnings from the main Australia's spy agency that the move could provoke further violent unrest in Israel, while opposition lawmakers accused the Prime Minister of cynically pandering to Conservative voters ahead.

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat also harshly criticized the planned move, and called on Arab and Muslim countries to sever all diplomatic ties with Australia if it changed its policy on Jerusalem. In a tweet Erekat said that various Arab and Muslim summits have adopted resolutions committing to ending diplomatic ties with any country that recognizes Jerusalem as belonging to Israel.

Recognizing Jerusalem is expected to help the embattled Liberal National coalition who faces a May election. A returned Morrison Government is anticipated to follow more closely the USA on Middle East policies.

To Minimize the Mullahs

By James Mirchick
Resident Fellow
American Enterprise Institute.



Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Over the past ten years, the balance of power in the Middle East has been upended, and not in America's favour. Under both Obama and Trump, the U.S. has increasingly disengaged from the region, stubbornly trying to ignore the Middle East's problems. Of course, it hasn't worked. We just keep getting pulled back in, like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part III*. Obama got pulled back into Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. The same is happening to Trump, who was forced to escalate in Syria barely a week after announcing he was getting out.

America's disengagement has left a power vacuum in the Middle East at a time when the region is going through an epochal upheaval. Arabs, Kurds, and Iranians are all trying to come to grips with the failure of their traditional political, economic, and social systems and their inability to build a new model. This has led to unrest, revolts, state failure, insurgencies, and civil wars across the region.

Nature may abhor a vacuum, but the Iranian regime loves one. And so, with the United States abandoning the floundering nations of the Middle East, the Iranians have moved in to fill the void. In some cases, they have done so defensively, to shore up key allies such as Assad's Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon. In most, they have done so opportunistically, seeking to weaken or destroy American allies and replace them with regimes dependent on Tehran. And while Iran is hardly a superpower and faces real limits on its ability to project power and wield influence, it has played its hand well, helped by Uncle Sam's refusal even to ante up.

The resulting geostrategic shift has been terrifying to our regional allies, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. In late 2008, Iran had a loose alliance with Syria; its staunch Hezbollah allies were first among equals in Lebanon; and it was an important backer of Hamas and other terrorist groups in the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, and a few other spots. That was it. (Iranian influence in Iraq was at its post-Saddam nadir at that time, the Iraqis and Americans having driven the last of Iran's Shiite militia allies from southern

Iraq in the spring of 2008.) Iran looked jealously and fearfully on the dominant position of the United States, which counted Israel, Turkey, every other Arab state, and a variety of important non-state actors, such as the Kurds, as allies.

Today, Hezbollah is firmly in charge in Lebanon. The Assad regime is regaining control of Syria and has become so dependent on Iran for its survival that it is a virtual vassal of Tehran. Most Iraqi leaders are trying valiantly to maintain their independence, but with dwindling American assistance, Iran's allies are slowly gaining the upper hand. In northern Iraq, it was Iran that crushed the Kurdish bid for eventual independence. Yemen's Houthi's control roughly half the country and have also thrown in their lot with Tehran, if only because they cannot find support anywhere else. An Iranian-led Shiite power bloc is emerging from Beirut to Basra, with Sana'a thrown in for good measure. Our allies tremble wondering whether Iran will be able to use this new position in the heart of the Arab world to expand its influence further and destabilize Jordan, Kuwait, the UAE, Bahrain, or even Saudi Arabia.

Iran's gains come at a time when the Middle East is changing in other, equally dramatic ways. The political, economic, and social systems that governed the predominantly Muslim states of the region during the late 20th century are falling apart. The uprisings of the 2011 Arab Spring were only the most obvious manifestation of frustration with the old order and demand for something different. And while a few states, such as Egypt, Algeria, and Bahrain, try to cling to the old, dysfunctional order, most know that they must change or perish, although they do not know the way.

Although the Middle East is transforming itself, it is not clear what it is turning into. The fall of governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen illustrate that the dominant trend is still the end of the old order and not yet the emergence of the new. There are many possible futures for the Middle East, some good for the United States, others harmful.

One of the most profound threats Iran poses is that it is actively struggling to push the transformation of the region in directions that best suit its interests, most of which do not suit the United States or the people of the Middle East. At home and abroad, the Iranian regime favors autocracy, outdated economic policies, and backward social systems. It backs virtually anyone willing to employ violence to subvert the status quo or fight the United States and its allies. It sees opportunity in chaos and seeks to weaken the Arab states so that they can be dominated. The more that Tehran is allowed to shape the transformation of the Middle East over the coming generation, the more likely it is that the Middle East will emerge even more impoverished and unstable than it is today.

For all of these reasons, it has become imperative that the United States lead its regional and international allies in a comprehensive effort to push back on Iran, to prevent it from expanding its influence farther into the Middle East and stop it from hijacking the transformation of the region.

Pushing back on Iran would be an inherently offensive, confrontational strategy. So the first step is to recognize where and how the United States should seek to confront Iran to hurt it and reduce its influence.

Bleed Iran in Syria. If the United States is going to push back on Iran, Syria is the best example of the first category. Mostly to protect Hezbollah's control of Lebanon, Iran has tied itself to the unpopular, corrupt, and incompetent Assad regime; it has invested huge amounts of blood and treasure in Syria (making its Syrian commitment very unpopular

with the Iranian people), and it has tied its regional prestige to Syrian fortunes. Although the coalition between Iran, Assad, Russia, and Hezbollah has made major gains in Syria because of the mistakes and neglect of the Obama and Trump administrations, Iran's commitment and exposure render it highly vulnerable there. It can't leave, but it has no good, cheap, or quick solution to the problem. The United States should exploit that predicament by ramping up American covert assistance to the Syrian opposition to try to bleed the Assad regime and its Iranian backers over time, exactly the way that the United States backed the Afghan mujahedeen as they bled the Soviets in Afghanistan — or as the Russians and Chinese did to the United States in Vietnam. Iran has created the conditions for Syria to become its Vietnam, and it would be a tragic mistake if the United States did not leap at the chance to make it so.

Challenge Iran in Iraq. Iraq is another country of great importance to Iran, which also makes it a significant potential vulnerability. Of course, Iraq is also more important to the United States than is Syria, and it is a very different state, so confronting Iran will look different there. Ultimately, Iran has made sizable gains in Iraq, but its dominance is far from complete, and there are still many Iraqis — including Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi — who don't want to live under Iranian hegemony. That reality was underscored by the recent Iraqi parliamentary elections, in which nationalist parties trounced those closely identified with Tehran. The more independent Iraq is, the weaker Iran's grip on the "Shia crescent" and the less able it will be to use Iraq (and Syria) as conduits to the rest of the Arab world. If the U.S. is willing to make a long-term commitment to Iraq, including a residual American military force and significant economic and technical assistance to empower those who would champion Iraqi nationalism, there is good reason to believe that we could help Iraq become strong and independent, which would greatly reduce (but not eliminate) Iran's influence there.

Get Iran out of Yemen. Yemen is even tougher than Iraq, but it is another place where Iranian influence needs to be reduced. The problem is that the civil war has given Iran an entrée that it has used to try to hurt Saudi Arabia, and this strategy has worked. The right answer for Yemen starts with ending the Yemeni civil war. That has been tough so far, in part because America's allies have taken a hard line with the Houthi-led (and Iranian-backed) opposition, and in part because the Houthis still hold too much territory and too many cards at the bargaining table. It may well be possible to get a diplomatic solution to the fighting if our allies can make some additional gains on the ground — such as securing the last Houthi-held port, Al Hudaydah. They will also need to compromise on key issues — such as Yemen's internal boundaries, to give the Houthis access to the sea — and a new power-sharing arrangement that would exclude some of their key proxies. Even if that works, it may require a peacekeeping force to help enforce the agreement and considerable inducements, positive and negative, to the Houthis to convince them to cut ties with Iran.

Stand up to Iran in the Gulf. In the Persian Gulf itself, it would be useful and important for the U.S. Navy to assert its freedom of navigation and the Law of the Sea more aggressively. In the past, the United States allowed the Iranian navies, particularly the Revolutionary Guard Navy, to get away with frequent, dangerous transgressions of both. While that avoided crises in the Gulf, it also convinced our allies that the United States was uninterested in standing up to Tehran, which fed their fears and encouraged their overreactions. That should change. The Iranian navies have already pulled in their horns in the Gulf as of last summer, but if they resume their aggression, the U.S. Navy should make painfully clear to Tehran that reckless actions will not be tolerated. If that results in

a clash, so be it. And the United States needs to ensure that when such an incident is over, the Iranians come away convinced that it was a mistake ever to have provoked us.

Pushing back on Iran does not mean aggressively attacking it everywhere across the board. That isn't necessary and probably won't be possible given the limited resources the American public seems willing to commit. Just taking on the tasks I outlined above will be enough of a challenge for the administration at this time. Consequently, pretty much everywhere else, the U.S. should stay mostly on the defensive. That does not mean we should be passive, especially with regard to our defence of America and Americans, which could well become targets of Iranian retaliation. But it does mean that there are areas where provoking Iran can do us more harm than good.

Don't make the split over the nuclear deal any worse. It would have been better for the United States to have left the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action alone. I was deeply disappointed by the Iran deal, believing that the Obama administration could and should have gotten a much more stringent agreement. I also think that the Trump administration is right about the deal's most important weaknesses: the sunset clauses that allow Iran to revive its nuclear program in seven to twelve years and a complex inspections process that creates lots of room for uncertainty. (I am less concerned about Iranian ballistic missiles, which I suspect will become less and less militarily relevant in the future as drone technology progresses.) Nevertheless, its flaws notwithstanding, the deal significantly constrained Iran's nuclear activities — and the rest of the world still strongly favors it and may break with the United States now that we have chosen to walk away from it for no good reason. Having taken that fateful step, we should work assiduously to minimize the damage to our trade and alliance relationships. To do any of the things we would need to do to push back on Iran, we will need considerable economic, diplomatic, and potentially military support from a wide range of allies in Europe, East Asia, and elsewhere, and we need to work to make sure that the president's decision does not preclude their help.

Treat Lebanon with care. Lebanon is another place where we should not take on the Iranians, at least not now and not until success in other areas has greatly reduced Tehran's hold. Hezbollah is like a parasite on Lebanon; the country's long-term health necessitates removing that parasite, but only when it can be done without killing the patient. At present, Lebanon is too fragile and too much under Hezbollah's thumb. Challenging Iran there is likely to produce one of three bad outcomes: We lose, we break Lebanon, or both.

Hold regime change in reserve. Finally, the U.S. should actively develop its capabilities to wage both cyber and unconventional warfare in Iran, but hold off on actively doing so. These would be seen as existential threats to the Iranian regime, which has a long history of completely misreading the United States and has sometimes gone overboard in retaliating. Such a reaction might do real harm to Americans, demanding a bigger American response than the United States is ready to give.

But the U.S. will want to have those capabilities at our disposal in case we need them. If the Iranian regime knows that the United States has a strong capability to threaten its grip on power through covert means, which is likely to restrain it from becoming too aggressive in fighting back against a new American pushback strategy.

Meet NIAC, Iran's Lobby in America

By Trevor Loudon



The Trump administration has been taking a long overdue hardline stance against Iranian terrorism and subversion. However, a shadowy Washington-based, pro-Iranian lobbying group is working under the radar with leftist Democrats to undermine the president's policies.

The National Iranian American Council (NIAC) is working to elect sympathetic congressional candidates and seeking to influence presidential candidates to benefit the Iranian regime.

While NIAC maintains that it works independently of the Iranian government, many credible commentators beg to differ.

Former CIA officer and Iran specialist Clare Lopez of the Center for Security Policy wrote in 2009 that NIAC is part of a U.S.-based pro-Islamic jihad alliance:

“Spearheaded by a de facto partnership between the National Iranian-American Council, the Council on American Islamic Relations and other organizations serving as mouthpieces for the mullahs’ party line, the network includes well-known American diplomats, congressional representatives, figures from academia and the think tank world.”

Founded in 2002, NIAC has been described in the Iranian state-run media as “Iran’s lobby” in the United States since at least 2006.

Documents released during a defamation lawsuit filed by NIAC against Seid Hassan Daiouleslam, editor of the Iranian American Forum and one of the regime’s most public critics, were found to include correspondence between NIAC and Mohammed Javad Zaif, then Iran’s permanent representative to the United Nations, according to The Daily Caller.

Political Influence

While the 400,000 to 1 million Americans of Iranian birth and descent are among the richest and best-educated immigrant groups in the country, their political footprint has been comparatively light until recently.

Most Iranian immigrants are nominally Shia Muslim but tend to have a high secularization and conversion rate compared to other Muslim-American groups. There are also significant Jewish, Christian, Ba'hai, and Zoroastrian minorities in the Iranian-American diaspora. Many older-generation Iranian immigrants supported the late Shah of Iran and are opposed to the hardcore Islamist regime now running their former country.

However, as can be observed in the Cuban, Chinese, and Vietnamese communities that fled communism, the second and third generations tend to be less ideologically opposed to the regimes in their ancestral countries. Third-generation Cubans, Chinese, and Vietnamese are far less anti-communist and more likely to vote Democrat than their anti-communist, Republican-voting elders. They are also far more susceptible to ethnic, cultural, economic, and, in the case of Iran, religious pressures to support their ancestral home's current rulers.

Iranian-Americans are now settled in Southern California, New York, New Jersey, Northern Virginia, and Texas in sufficient numbers to form significant voting blocs. Almost half of Iranian-American voters identify as Democrats and 15 percent as Republicans, according to the Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans. That number is probably moving even further in the Democrats favour as the Iranian-American population gets even younger and more college-educated.

NIAC is working with the Democratic Party to exploit these trends to Tehran's advantage.

Political Wins

In June 2015, NIAC launched a new 501(c)4 called NIAC Action, which "aims to direct money from the Iranian-American community, which is relatively well-off compared to other immigrant groups, toward more concerted political activism," according to Politico.

"We've got all this money on the table, all this political influence that's not being utilized," NIAC Action Executive Director Jamal Abdi said. "Now, we can actually start playing the full political game."

In 2015, NIAC claimed some 5,000 dues-paying members and about 45,000 Iranian-Americans on its mailing list, and the group was aiming to establish 30 chapters nationwide. At the time, it was estimated that NIAC supporters gave about \$1.4 million each election cycle to political candidates.

Abdi told Politico, "While we may not be able to match the largesse of [pro-Israel donors] Sheldon Adelson and Paul Singer, our side is for the first time bringing serious resources to the playing on the field."

At the end of 2018, NIAC listed a series of accomplishments for the year, which included "[organizing a] letter with over 100 organizations calling for the next Congress to investigate Muslim Ban."

The organizations listed in the letter named above included Council on American Islamic Relations—which grew out of support networks for the officially designated terrorist group Hamas; and Jobs with Justice—which is dominated by Democratic Socialists of America

and two pro-Beijing organizations, the Communist Party USA and Freedom Road Socialist Organization.

Another accomplishment was “[helping to] elect four new champions of our community to the new Congress.”

Four out of five NIAC-backed congressional candidates won their races in 2018—all Democrats taking formerly Republican-held seats NIAC Action endorsed and financed three winning congressional candidates in Southern California: Mike Levin (49th District), Katie Porter (45th District), and Harley Rouda (48th District), along with Jennifer Wexton in Virginia (10th District).

All four serve districts with significant Iranian-American populations. All have supported to some degree former President Barack Obama’s disastrous “Iran nuclear deal,” and all worked to overturn President Donald Trump’s travel ban imposed on certain Islamic majority countries, as well as North Korea and Venezuela.

Presidential Candidates

A third accomplishment was listed as “[launching a] campaign to return US to the JCPOA and begin briefing 2020 Presidential candidates.” (JCPOA is the acronym for the Iran nuclear deal from which Trump withdrew the United States.)

NIAC’s campaign to “brief” presidential candidates on the need for a return to the Iran nuclear deal is also apparently working.

In January 2015, current Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts was one of only four Democrats on the Senate Banking Committee to vote against legislation intensifying U.S. sanctions on Iran.

On March 19, 2019, reports emerged that 2020 presidential contenders Sens. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) and Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) had joined Warren in backing the United States’ return to the Iran nuclear deal.

In response, NIAC Action’s Abdi issued the following statement:

“We commend Senators Sanders, Harris, and Warren for committing to reversing Trump’s failed Iran policy, and for recognizing the urgent need to return to the JCPOA and the successes resulting from the diplomatic playbook first written under the Obama administration.

“Returning the U.S. to compliance with the JCPOA is a logical first step for the next U.S. president—and candidates like Harris, Sanders, and Warren know this. Their commitment to a policy centered on engagement with Iran advances the Obama administration’s multilateral diplomacy that successfully yielded real security gains.

“This starkly contrasts with Trump’s impetuous decision to withdraw from the accord and impose sanctions that do nothing more than devastate the Iranian people, increase the risk of a nuclear-armed Iran, and bolster the chance of a disastrous war.”

While Trump and his administration are working hard to end the Iranian-backed terrorism problem once and for all, pro-Tehran elements in this country are clearly buying political influence in the U.S. Congress, maybe even with the next president.

The Trump administration would be wise to turn its attention to that branch of the “deep state” that’s headquartered in Tehran.

THE INSTANT *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

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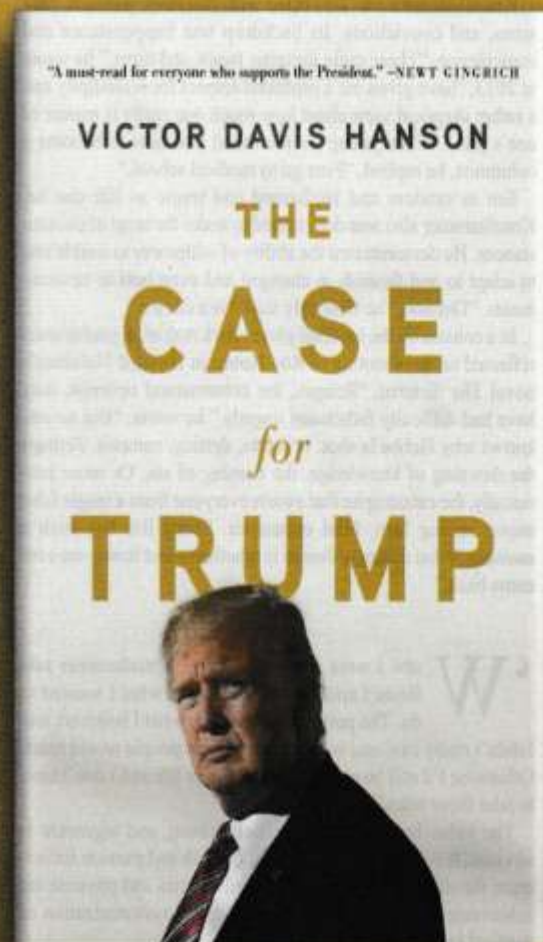
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A Review of the Yemen Civil War in 2018

Stratforshare Worldwide

For much of 2018, Yemen's civil war ground on, with the Saudi Arabian-led coalition backing the country's internationally recognized government on one side and rebels from the northern Houthi movement, who have received support and arms from Iran, on the other. The United States, through military support and funding, continues to back the Saudi coalition's efforts to dislodge the Houthis, a traditional Saudi adversary, from Sanaa, the country's ostensible capital. But support for the Saudi war effort in the U.S. Congress has been eroding in the wake of the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, putting pressure on the coalition to cease hostilities.

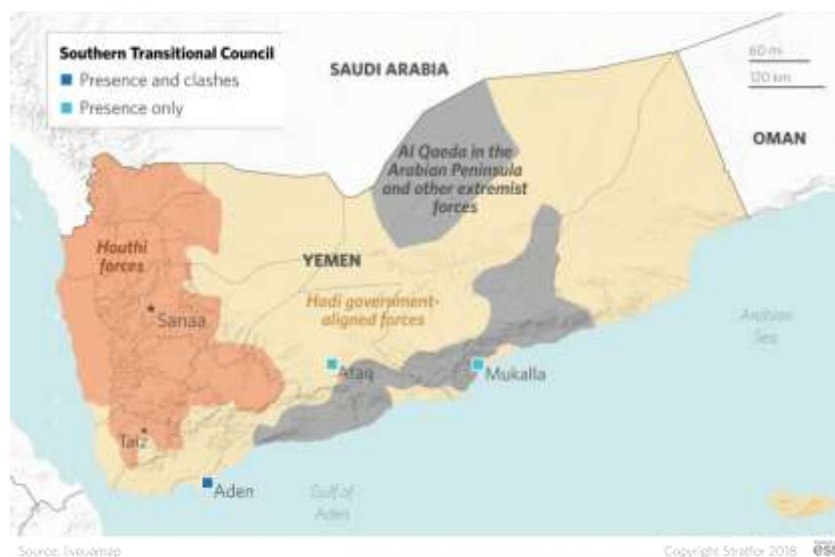
As the year wraps up, the combatants in Yemen have been engaging in the first meaningful peace talks over the civil war in two years. Whether or not the country can find a political solution to the disputes that spawned the conflict, the pause in hostilities is opening space to address the humanitarian crisis spawned by the fighting. Stratfor's coverage of the Yemen civil war follows the ebbs and flows of the fighting and the political and strategic forces shaping the conflict.

In January, the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a group pushing for an independent state in southern Yemen and aligned with the United Arab Emirates, seized the southern city of Aden from the Hadi government. The actions of the STC, a member of the anti-Houthi coalition, demonstrate the chimeric nature of the country's groups and alliances.

The Saudi-led coalition does not need to retake Aden to ensure its military position. The STC has already made clear that it will continue to support the anti-Houthi struggle. Instead, the coalition must mitigate the damage from the clash and negotiate a truce as quickly as possible. In December 2017, the Houthis split with (former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah) Saleh, who was subsequently assassinated. The move divided and weakened the rebel alliance, providing an opening for opposition forces — to change the course of the stalled civil war in the coalition's favor.

The Southern Transitional Council

The Southern Transitional Council (STC) has had a presence alongside the government of Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi in cities such as Aden, Azzan and Mukalla. Recent clashes between the STC and the Hadi government have been limited thus far to Aden.



Houthi rebels are still recovering strength following Saleh's departure. On Jan. 28, the Houthis held their first parliament session with former Saleh allies in Sanaa, hoping to bury the hatchet. With an accord in place, the Houthis can worry less about guerilla Saleh loyalists attacking them from behind and are better positioned to take advantage of any break in coalition forces. The STC's unexpected bid for control of Aden threatened to interrupt coalition supplies just as the Taiz offensive got underway. The official Yemeni government recognizes the danger. Hadi himself called for a cease-fire in Aden, reminding the STC that the "real and main battle is against the Iranian Houthi militias."

In March, the Houthis targeted the Saudi capital, Riyadh, with a battery of missiles, resulting in a death. The launch reaffirmed suspicions that Iran was supplying the rebels with weapons.

On the third anniversary of the first Saudi airstrikes on Houthi rebels in Yemen, Saudi Arabia is grappling with continued conflict. Saudi air defense forces claimed that the country's Patriot surface-to-air missile systems intercepted three missiles from Yemen above Riyadh late March 25. Four other missiles, also launched from Yemen, were intercepted earlier that day and were aimed at Najran, Jizan and Khamis Mushait. Eyewitness reports, images and videos from across Riyadh show the missile interception as well as pieces of debris falling in populated areas. Video also showed what appeared to be several failed Patriot missiles, some of which may have caused damage on the ground.



U.N.-sponsored peace talks in September failed before they could get off the ground. The failure was seen as a by-product of the posturing both sides engaged in as they tried to position themselves as the aggrieved party in the war.

Coalition leaders will have to carefully weigh their military strategy in Yemen against the attitudes of their Western allies, namely the United States. The approach of congressional midterm elections, in particular, could rally lawmakers to move to change the U.S. stance on the Yemeni conflict, an issue that has drawn bipartisan support in Washington.

Although the United States will continue to back the Saudi-led coalition mission to restore Hadi's authority, Congress may push the Yemeni government and its foreign allies to compromise with the Houthis to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.

At home, too, Saudi and Emirati leaders may find support for their campaign in Yemen waning. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's military and diplomatic prowess could come into question among the royal family if he fails to bring a decisive end to Yemen's war – and to the kingdom's costly involvement in it.

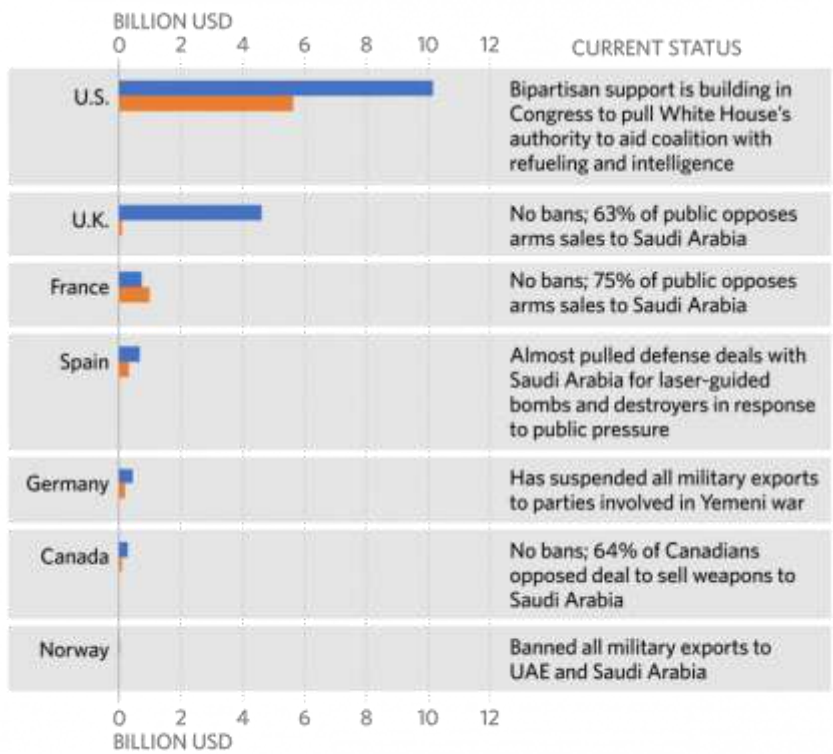
The Houthis, meanwhile, could imperil the legitimacy they have gained in northern Yemen if supporters perceive that they are responsible for prolonging the conflict. So long as they manage to portray the Saudi-led coalition as the aggressors, they can keep up their recruitment numbers and preserve their standing with the many tribes of north Yemen. But maintaining that buy-in will require the Houthis to deliver results, like food security and an improved economic situation that may be beyond their reach.

Saudi and Emirati Defense Ties Are Threatened by Anti-War Sentiment

Saudi Arabia and the UAE do not want popular disapproval in the West with their Yemen intervention to result in policy changes.

Military exports to:

- Saudi Arabia
- U.A.E.



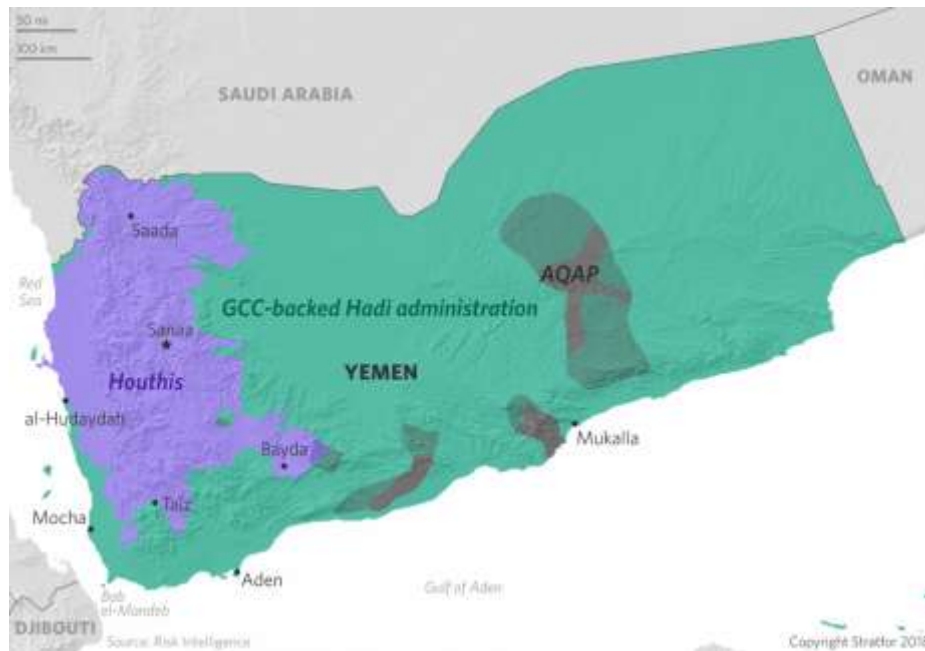
Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

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As the humanitarian costs of the Yemen war have risen, and the murder of dissident Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi turned public sentiment against Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, pressure for a nonmilitary solution to the conflict has increased. Even in the face of growing U.S. and global opposition, however, Riyadh will not easily shift its stance in Yemen. The Saudi involvement there is driven not only by its desire to

deny Iran a foothold on the Arabian Peninsula through its Houthi allies, but also by the historical animosity between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.

The finger-pointing that undermined the last round of peace talks stands a high chance of repeating itself. A previous effort to broker a cease-fire in September failed when representatives for the Houthis never made the trip to Geneva, where talks were to be held. The no-shows were, in part, prompted by Houthi fears that the coalition would prevent the envoys from returning to their Sanaa base.



The pressure on the Saudi coalition opened the way for meaningful peace talks, which unfolded in December in Sweden. A resulting cease-fire in the embattled strategic port city of al-Hudaydah is holding for now, and both sides have agreed to sit down again after the New Year.

At long last, there might finally be light at the end of Yemen's dark tunnel. In the final session of weeklong peace talks in Sweden between the country's warring parties, the two sides agreed to a future cease-fire in the critical port city of al-Hudaydah and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor in Taiz. This follows a tentative agreement earlier in the week to exchange prisoners and reopen Sanaa's rebel-controlled airport to flights, so long as the planes are inspected in a coalition-controlled airport first.

In terms of al-Hudaydah, implementation will be the true test of the feuding parties' resolve, but the announcement of the confidence-building measures at the conclusion of the talks underlines just how fruitful the negotiations were. Despite the years of war, both sides displayed a willingness to talk, offering each other warm handshakes and dispensing with shuttle diplomacy in favor of face-to-face negotiations.

The Swedish negotiations have ended for now, but both the Yemeni forces and the Houthis have agreed to a new round of talks next month. And although the military conflict is continuing apace, the opening of humanitarian corridors for the first time in years could actually provide Yemenis with some much-needed relief. If a partial cease-fire actually holds in al-Hudaydah — even temporarily — it would provide a more solid foundation for other tentative agreements, as well as further peace talks in 2019.

Trends in Middle East Military Expenditure, 2018

By Colin Petterson

According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute the combined total military expenditure for the Middle East countries for which data is available in 2018 was \$145 billion.⁽¹⁾

The spending totals for these countries increased every year between 2009 and 2015 followed by a significant decrease in 2016. Spending increased again in 2017 but fell by 1.9 per cent in 2018. Two of the top 15 global spenders in 2018 are in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia (rank 3) and Turkey (rank 15). Saudi Arabia is by far the largest military spender in the region, with an estimated total of \$67.6 billion in 2018. After an increase of 72 per cent between 2009 and 2015, when Saudi Arabia's military expenditure reached its peak, spending dropped by 28 per cent in 2016 as falling oil prices caused a decline in government revenue.

Military spending increased by 11 per cent in 2017 but decreased by 6.5 per cent in 2018. The fall in 2018 occurred despite Saudi Arabia's high levels of arms imports and the continuation of its military intervention in Yemen. Between 2009 and 2018, Turkish military expenditure increased by 65 per cent to reach \$19.0 billion. In 2018 alone spending grew by 24 per cent, the highest increase in military expenditure among the top 15 military spenders. Funding for arms procurement increased rapidly in 2018 and Turkey also expanded its military operation against Kurdish armed groups in Syria. The most recent available estimate for military spending by the UAE is \$22.8 billion (current US dollars) in 2014. Considering its ongoing military operations abroad and large arms procurement projects, it can be assumed that its spending remains at or above the 2014 level. Iran's military expenditure was \$13.2 billion in 2018. It decreased by 9.5 per cent between 2017 and 2018 as the Iranian economy went into recession and inflation increased from 10 per cent in 2017 to 30 per cent in 2018. Israel's military spending was \$15.9 billion in 2018, a marginal increase of 0.7 per cent compared with 2017. After a peak in 2015—related to military operations in 2014 in the Gaza Strip—Israeli military expenditure decreased by 13 per cent in 2016 and by 1.0 per cent in 2017. At \$3.1 billion, Egyptian military expenditure in 2018 was 7.3 per cent lower than in 2017 and 20 per cent lower than in 2009. However, it remains unclear how Egyptian military spending can be declining while the country is involved in major military operations in the Sinai Peninsula and is implementing major arms procurement programmes.

(1) Countries included in the estimate are Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

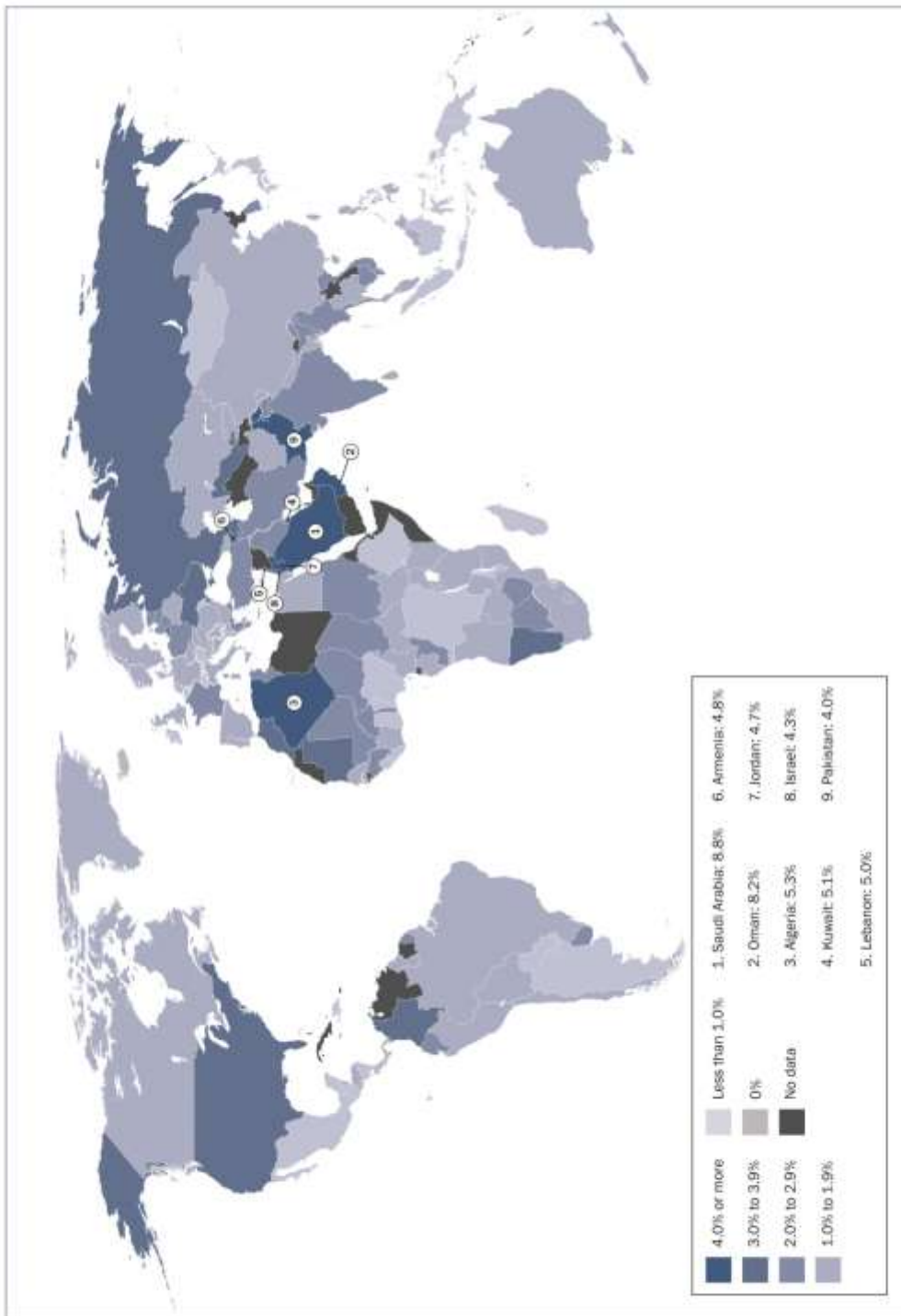


Figure 4. Military spending as a share of gross domestic product, by country, 2018

Note: The countries with military spending as a share of gross domestic product of 4.0% or more are listed.

Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Apr. 2019.

THE 15 MOST POWERFUL MILITARIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East is undoubtedly one of the world's least predictable regions. To make sense of the ongoing conflicts, we have compiled key elements that comprise the 15 strongest militaries in the Middle East according to a ranking published by Global Firepower. Quality of equipment, training, and professionalism of each military is not taken into account.



■ = Middle East leader

COUNTRY	OVERALL RANKING	ACTIVE PERSONNEL	TANKS	AIRCRAFT	NUCLEAR WARHEADS	SUBMARINES	BUDGET
TURKEY	1	410,500	3,657	989	0	14	\$18,185,000,000
ISRAEL	2	176,500	3,870	680	80-200	14	\$15,000,000,000
EGYPT	3	468,500	4,767	1,100	0	4	\$4,400,000,000
IRAN	4	545,000	2,409	481	0	31	\$6,300,000,000
SAUDI ARABIA	5	233,500	1,095	652	0	0	\$56,725,000,000
SYRIA	6	178,000	4,950	473	0	0	\$1,872,000,000
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	7	65,000	545	444	0	0	\$14,375,000,000
YEMEN	8	66,700	1,260	181	0	0	\$1,440,000,000
JORDAN	9	110,700	1,321	246	0	0	\$1,500,000,000
IRAQ	10	271,500	357	212	0	0	\$6,055,000,000
OMAN	11	72,000	215	101	0	0	\$6,715,000,000
KUWAIT	12	15,500	368	101	0	0	\$5,200,000,000
BAHRAIN	13	13,000	180	105	0	0	\$730,000,000
QATAR	14	11,800	90	72	0	0	\$1,930,000,000
LEBANON	15	131,100	318	57	0	0	\$1,735,000,000

Sources: Global Firepower, The Center For Arms Control And Non-Proliferation

BUSINESS INSIDER

Persecution and Hope: Christians in the Middle East Today

By Ronald J. Rychlak
Jamie L. Whitten Chair in Law and Government
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With the terrorist group ISIS having lost its caliphate, Western Christians may believe that things are back to normal for their co-religionists in the Middle East. Unfortunately, that is far from the case.

The Vatican's prefect for the Congregation for Eastern Churches recently sent a letter to bishops around the world as part of an Easter appeal. In it, he explained, "greater cooperation and a generous commitment by Christians all over the world to their brothers and sisters of the Holy Land and the Middle East is needed."

In addition to routine annual needs, this year, his congregation is helping Iraqi and Syrian Christians who are returning to their homelands after having been driven away, as well as those who are still living as refugees and facing daily persecution for their faith.

The organization Open Doors USA prepares an annual World Watch List (WWL), based on comprehensive research in 150 countries where Christians are persecuted for their faith. The 2019 reporting period (covering Oct. 31, 2017, to Nov. 1, 2018) shows that in the list's top 50 nations, 245 million Christians experience high levels of persecution.

For reasons of faith, 4,136 Christians were killed in those 50 WWL countries last year. That is roughly 11 each day.

In those countries, 2,625 Christians were detained without trial, arrested, sentenced, and imprisoned, while 1,266 churches or Christian buildings were attacked—that's about 105 each month.

Eleven countries are identified as "extreme" in their level of persecution of Christians; five years ago, there was only one (North Korea).

This means that last year, Christians were persecuted more than ever before in the modern era, an increase of about 14 percent from the year earlier. That represents 30 million more people abused for their faith.



A picture taken on Nov. 2, 2018, shows the remains of a car, reportedly used by the gunmen who attacked a bus carrying Coptic Christians, on the side of a road Minya province. Getty Images

One of the most upsetting trends noted by Open Doors USA concerns the cruel persecution of women. According to the report, “in many places, they experience a ‘double persecution’—one for being a Christian and one for being a woman. Even in the most restricted circumstances, gender-specific persecution is a key means of destroying the minority Christian community.”

This is particularly true in Islamic nations, where “at least six women every day are raped, sexually harassed or forced into marriage to a Muslim man under the threat of death for their Christian faith.”

In North Korea, where the highest level of persecution has been identified, communism and post-communism oppression are listed as the primary drivers of persecution. For several decades, the nation has idolized the Kim family. Christians are viewed as hostile to that vision, and, for that reason, they need to be eliminated.

Islam, however, is the main reason for the persecution of Christians in seven of the top 10 WWL countries; 34 of the top 50 have majority Muslim populations. In those nations, millions of Christians are treated as second-class citizens, discriminated against, and even subjected to physical violence. Specific issues vary from one nation to another, but the worst persecution takes place in those nations that rule according to Sharia.

After North Korea (and in a virtual tie with it), Afghanistan is the most dangerous country in which to be a Christian. As an Islamic state by constitution, Afghanistan doesn’t tolerate any faith other than Islam. Conversion from Islam is a betrayal not just of faith, but of family, tribe, and country. The common result is a death sentence. Some converts, however, are considered insane (why else would they convert?). They end up in a psychiatric hospital and their property is confiscated or destroyed. With about half of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces ruled or contested by the Taliban, most Afghan Christians are forced into hiding.

Somalia, which ranks third on the WWL, has Sharia law enshrined in the nation's constitution, and persecution of Christians is particularly violent.

No. 4 on the list, Libya, fell into anarchy after the ouster of dictator Muammar Gaddafi. That left a void that was filled by Islamic militant groups. The persecution of Christians is severe, and they are subjected to violent and degrading treatment.

Pakistan, at No. 5, has strict blasphemy laws that carry the death penalty. Christians live in daily fear over that.

Reasons for Hope

Earlier this year, Pope Francis took a trip to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), becoming the first pontiff to visit an Arab Gulf state. The UAE ranked 45th on the WWL. However, the UAE used the occasion of the papal visit to declare 2019 "the Year of Tolerance," announce a Festival of Tolerance, establish a new cabinet post for a minister of tolerance, and open a state internet portal on tolerance. Christians have reason for optimism.

Egypt ranks 16th on the WWL, but President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, at great personal risk, is trying to protect the nation's Coptic Christians. Copts make up about 10 percent of the Egyptian population. Before al-Sisi, jihadists groups regularly attacked Christians and their churches. Since becoming president in 2014, however, al-Sisi has taken measures such as changing school textbooks to remove content glorifying hatred and violence and limiting such teachings elsewhere. He was the first Egyptian president to attend a Christmas Mass, and he gave a speech at the Coptic Orthodox Christmas service in 2015, in which he called for unity and wished Christians a merry Christmas.



Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (R) speaks, as Coptic Pope Tawadros II listen on, during the inauguration of the massive Cathedral of the Nativity of Christ in Egypt's New Administrative Capital on January 6, 2019. Getty Images

In Jordan, No. 31 on the list, King Abdullah allows Christians to worship freely. He also protects the right of Jordan's Christians to build and operate churches, teach the Scriptures, run tours of important Christian holy sites, and operate a seminary. Because of his support, a national park was established on the site where tradition says John the Baptist baptized Jesus. Thirteen different Christian denominations have built churches in the park. Most of them regularly conduct baptisms in the Jordan River.

Even Saudi Arabia has taken significant strides toward religious tolerance. The country has reformed its religious police, responsible for enforcing Sharia law in public and private settings. It also introduced new programs to end extremism.

So, Christians are slowly returning to communities in which their ancestors have worshipped since the first century after Christ. Many of their church buildings are gone, and many threats remain. The return of these Christians to their homeland is based on their determination to live out their beliefs, lives, and traditions in the locations where they feel a deep connection to their roots.

Genocide

With military strength and conviction of success came the ability and the inclination to abuse those who opposed their movement. ISIS leaders used brutality to spread confidence among their followers and terror among all others. Too often, non-Muslims were abused, forcibly converted, evicted, and sometimes beheaded or crucified.

Some women and girls were kidnapped into sexual slavery (and occasionally killed). Due to a combination of their expulsion and being converted or killed, the number of Christians in Iraq is now below 200,000, down from about 1.4 million in 2002.

In 2015, Pope Francis referred to the genocide of Christians under ISIS. In 2016, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution calling the atrocities perpetrated by ISIS against religious and ethnic minorities “war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide.” That same year, Secretary of State John Kerry used the term genocide to describe what was happening to non-Muslims under ISIS.

That designation was important, because groups designated as victims of genocide are more likely to receive military protection and preferential treatment as refugees under U.N. protocols. Unfortunately, the Obama administration—like most other governments around the world—disavowed the genocide label.

The explanation given by the State Department for rejecting the genocide designation was that ISIS gave Christians the option of paying a religious tax (*jizya*) to avoid facing forced conversion, eviction, or execution. In reality, however, the tax escalated until the non-Muslims were out of money; then the persecution accelerated. The *jizya* option was never a viable long-term solution.

Donald Trump spoke of ISIS’s genocide of Christians when he was a candidate. As president, he used military force to beat ISIS into submission. The caliphate eventually disappeared. Moreover, in December 2018, he signed the “Iraq and Syria Genocide Relief and Accountability Act” into law. Republican and Democratic Party members supported the legislation unanimously in both the Senate and the House.

The new law guarantees U.S. financial and technical assistance to Christians and other religious minority residents of Iraq and Syria who are persecuted by Islamic terrorists. In addition, the law enables the U.S. Department of State—in conjunction with other agencies—to conduct criminal investigations related to suspected terror plots, to apprehend alleged members of terror groups, and to identify warning signs of genocide and persecution in order to prevent future atrocities.

The End of ISIS?

With ISIS in retreat and the caliphate no longer in place, one might wonder about the need for this new legislation and the reason for the statement by the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The unfortunate truth is that ISIS is not gone. It has retreated from the major cities, but it's believed to be regrouping in small towns along the Syrian-Iraqi border, where ISIS is still evicting, persecuting, and even executing Christians.

When al-Qaeda in Iraq was declared defeated by U.S. officials in 2007, its membership was believed to be in the hundreds. It grew back and became the terror group we now know as ISIS. According to United Nations estimates, ISIS today has 20,000 to 30,000 members. It's entirely possible that there are as many fighters loyal to ISIS today as there ever were. They have just lost their geographic centre. They obviously could grow back into a significant threat.

The question that must be asked relates to the impact of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. The United States doesn't need to act as a world police force, and we are glad to have our soldiers come home, but withdrawal from Syria might make it easier for ISIS to regroup and rebuild. Fortunately, lawmakers seem intent on keeping a close eye on the situation.

President Trump visited Al Asad air base in Iraq on the day after Christmas to meet with U.S. troops. While there, he said he has "no plans at all" to remove the approximately 5,200 U.S. troops that are currently serving in Iraq. Hopefully, they (and the significant Russian presence that remains in Syria) will provide a sufficient deterrent to ISIS.

The U.S. government also seems serious about the promise to provide support to the victims of ISIS persecution. That will likely include both humanitarian aid and the arming and training of militias for self-defence. Let's hope the militias don't become necessary and that 2019 brings Christians and other minority religions in the Middle East a brighter future.

Fleeing Saudi women puncture image of progress

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member

Going to such elaborate ends to track down runaway women contradicts the image of cultural progress often projected by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom's de facto ruler.

The perception that women will be given more rights is a key part of the crown prince's formal plan, dubbed Saudi Vision 2030, to modernize the nation. Among the widely publicized gestures were women getting the right to drive in June 2018 and a new law that meant men could no longer divorce their wives without their knowledge.

After two high-profile escapes in early 2019, Saudi Arabia's Presidency of State Security produced a video in February likening women who run away to jihadist terrorist operatives working for the likes of the Islamic State.



An image from a Saudi government video warning that women who run away (depicted in the right panel) are as big a threat to Saudi national security as terrorists.

2019 has seen a sharp increase in the number of women escaping Saudi Arabia in high-profile circumstances, a phenomenon enabled by social media.

In January this year, an 18-year-old named Rahaf Mohammed live streamed her efforts to flee her family and secure asylum, gaining 114,000 followers and sparking large amounts of media interest in the process. She said she feared she would be killed if she was forced back to Saudi Arabia.

After barricading herself in a hotel room at a Bangkok airport, she ultimately received asylum in Canada. Her new prominence led the Saudi chargé d'affaires in Bangkok, Abdulelah Al-Shuaibi, to joke that he wished the Thai police "would've taken her phone instead of her passport."

The Rashaf Mohammed case was a public relations disaster for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Moreover the insensitive nature of Saudi diplomats in Bangkok compounded the perception that Saudi women faced the same number of hurdles leaving as do North Koreans have.

Many female refugees believe they will either be killed by their families, or imprisoned, if they are captured. One, Dina Ali Lasloom, was captured in Manila in April 2017, has not been seen since she was repatriated against her will.



The Saudi teenager Rahaf Mohammed at Toronto Pearson International Airport. She called herself "one of the lucky ones" on January 12 after fleeing to Canada. Reuters

Meanwhile new reporting from Australia sheds light on the risks Saudi women face fleeing abuse, discrimination, or repression to seek safety in another country. According to ABC's Four Corners, Australian authorities blocked entry to two Saudi women with valid visas at Sydney Airport over the past two years, presumably over concerns they would claim asylum. The report quoted a Saudi activist stating the Australian Border Force asked Saudi women why they are travelling without their male guardians, even though some Saudi women are fleeing them.

While many women fleeing Saudi Arabia expect to face difficulties on their journey, particularly attempts by Saudi authorities to interdict and return them against their will, they do not expect supposedly safe countries with developed asylum systems to stop and return them back over suspicions they will make an asylum claim.

The risks of forced return for Saudi women are grave, as they can face family and government retaliation for their escape attempts, including physical harm, forced isolation, imprisonment, and, in the most serious cases, murder at the hands of family members. All Saudi women face systematic discrimination under the male guardianship system and are left exposed to domestic violence with few places to turn for help.

Rather than stopping Saudi women seeking to make asylum claims, Australian authorities should recognize their unique plight and consider the case to grant them immediate refuge from the many dangers they face. It is bad enough that these Saudi women have nowhere to turn for help in their own country. Australia should never again turn its back on them too. Moreover a special office in the Department of Immigration needs to be urgently established to handle only these specific cases.

*“Don’t Label Me should be labeled as genius.
It’s an amazing book.” —Chris Rock*

Don’t Label Me

An Incredible Conversation
for Divided Times



New York Times Bestselling Author

Irshad Manji

No Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement In 2019

By Abraham Cooper



For Israel, 2019 will bring great achievements but also great disappointments. The achievements will include: continued growth of Israel's innovation economy; increased tourism; and development of a broad range of new inventions, along with drugs and devices to help people deal with many severe health issues.

The disappointments will include: continued Iranian-induced terrorist attacks; endless hostility from the halls of the United Nations and the European Parliament; and the continued boycott, divestment and sanctions movement that wages asymmetrical economic and cultural warfare on Israel and seeks to demonize, isolate and ultimately eliminate the Jewish state.

President Trump and his senior adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner are working hard to come up with a peace plan acceptable to the Palestinians and Israelis. But unfortunately, they are taking on an impossible task.

Israel is readying for new elections at a time of political upheaval. The Palestinian Authority is run by an aging, corrupt, unrepresentative leadership unwilling to make any compromises to achieve peace and more interested in holding onto power than the welfare of the Palestinian people.

Make no mistake. Israelis yearn for the day when their 18-year-olds no longer have to devote two years of their lives to military service in harm's way. They want to live in peace with their Arab neighbours.

In fact, Israel today provides its Arab citizens – who comprise nearly 20 percent of the nation's population – with more rights and a higher living standard than are enjoyed in Arab nations.

But continuing terrorism at Israel's southern and northern borders and on the West Bank forces Israel to take significant security precautions, as any nation must when faced with serious threats.

President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority is holding out for impossible demands in any peace treaty, including the "right of return" for all Palestinians who left Israel when the Jewish state was created in 1948 – plus all their millions of descendants.

No Israeli government will ever accept the "right of return" poison pill that would create an Arab majority overnight. This would spell the end of the lone Jewish state in the world and the lone true democracy in the Middle East – where it is surrounded by 22 Arab states many times its size and with far larger populations.

Israel, about the size of New Jersey, has a population of only 8.9 million – about the same number of people as New York City. The U.N. reports the population of Arab nations is 359 million – larger than the population of the United States.

The Palestinian Authority demands the return of every square inch of territory Israel captured in the 1967 Six-Day War. That would leave Israel with what the late Foreign Minister Abba Eban called indefensible "Auschwitz borders" and without much of its historic 3,000-year-old capital of Jerusalem and its holiest sites in the eastern part of the city.

The Hamas and Islamic Jihad Palestinian terrorist groups and their patron state Iran go even further, calling for Israel's destruction through violence and terrorism.

The Palestinian Authority and Hamas operate with a school curriculum that won't even use the word Israel and teaches children to venerate terrorists and hate Jews. The goal is clear: infect Palestinian children from the earliest age with virulent anti-Semitism so they will grow up to hate Israel and Jews for the rest of their lives.

As a result, there will be no peace breakthrough with the Palestinians in 2019 or likely during the rest of President Trump's time in the White House, no matter how innovative the president's peace plan may be.

The central issue preventing Palestinians from making peace is not about money. It's not even so much about borders. It's about psychology.

Palestinians – even those who claim to want to live in peace side-by-side with Israel – are opposed to the very concept of a Jewish state. But Jews, inspired by a vision of a return to Zion, founded Israel specifically to be a Jewish state.

Israel was created as a refuge for Jews fleeing anti-Semitism and genocide, and designed as a modern democracy – protecting the rights of all – in the ancient homeland of the Jewish people.

In the year ahead, expect that the continuous Iranian threats to drive greater cooperation between Gulf Arab States and Israel. This could lead one or more of the Gulf nations to finally recognize Israel 70 years after its creation.

Other Arab states will follow and so eventually will a new generation of Palestinian leaders – but don't look for that to happen anytime soon.

Not only does peace seem to be a distant dream. Israel's raucous political battles have yielded a December surprise that's not a happy one: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced the end of his coalition government and said snap elections will be held in April.

So is the Jewish state, a failing state? Quite the contrary. Indeed, there must be other aspects of Israel's 2018 that help explain why 89 percent of its 8.9 million citizens have reported that they are happy with their lives.

Here's some good news about Israel you rarely hear or read about in the international media:

First, Israel actually experienced a huge increase in global tourism this year, led by Asia. More than 4 million tourists have visited Israel this year, an increase of 38 percent in the past two years.

Whatever tourists may have been hearing from biased media, there is nothing like experiencing the only Middle East democracy and its holy sites firsthand to debunk the Big Lie that Israel is an "apartheid state."

Nowhere was the tourist boom more in evidence than Jerusalem, Israel's eternal capital. This came as President Trump was true to his word and announced that the United States was recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Secondly, the "I" in Israel really does stand for innovation. Despite the fact that young Israelis have to serve in the Israel Defence Forces and can be called up for duty in the military reserves for decades – and despite the barbs, hatred, and violence flung their way – Israelis are committed to making a difference in ways that are impacting lives of friends and enemies the world over.

And we can only hope and pray that someday, when the aging Palestinian leaders are no longer in power, a new generation of Palestinian leaders will realize their people are better off cooperating with Israel and living in peace.

Palestinians should stop entrusting their children to corrupt leaders who reward young people not for innovation and education, but for murdering Jews – ensuring a never-ending conflict.

To hasten real change on the ground in the New Year, nations like Germany, France, and Japan should follow President Trump's lead by snapping shut their check books to the Palestinians unless the Palestinians can prove that "humanitarian aid" doesn't go to build terror tunnels or financially reward families whose sons murder and maim Jews.

The challenges of 2018 will carry over to 2019 for Israel, but the achievements of the Jewish state will carry over as well. Whatever happens, the strong ties between Israel and the United States are sure to survive, benefiting both nations.

Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: The Disinformation Campaign Against the White Helmets

By Bellingcat Investigation Team

The Syrian Civil Defence (SCD), also known as the White Helmets, is a search-and-rescue organisation based in opposition-held areas. They have recorded some of the worst atrocities carried out in Syria and provided vital evidence of gross human rights abuses by the Syrian government and the Russian military. This has made them the target of a significant disinformation campaign attempting to smear them as “terrorists,” with some pro-government supporters claiming they are “legitimate targets.”

During mid-2018 this disinformation campaign appears to have focused on attempting to associate the SCD with chemical attacks in Idlib. From August to November of this year, the Russian and Syrian governments and state-controlled media continually repeated narratives involving the SCD and movement, or use of, chemical weapons around rebel-held areas of north-western Syria, primarily Idlib. This article will examine the accusations made against the SCD in Idlib and assess the evidence provided. The information we collected can be found [here](#).

It should be noted that no reputable body has ever found that SCD was involved in any chemical incidents in Syria in any capacity other than as first responders to attacks. However, the Syrian government has been identified as the perpetrator in 23 Chlorine and Sarin attacks and has likely been involved in many more. Both Russia and Syria have a dubious reputation for factual reporting on the issue of chemical weapons due to their accusations of vast international conspiracies, use of doctored satellite images and tendency to present videos and images from computer games as evidence.

Accusations

Bellingcat has identified 22 separate accusations relating to the use or transportation of chemical weapons in Idlib and the surrounding area in 2018. Where the same accusation has been repeated in multiple articles, we have only included the earliest example. We chose to stop the chart on the 23rd of November due to the alleged chemical attack in Aleppo, which resulted in a large number of speculative accusations not based on a specific source.

After two isolated accusations in February and June, there appears to have been a surge of accusations during and after the negotiations for the Sochi agreement, which established a truce and buffer zone in Idlib from the 17th September. The rate of these accusations dropped dramatically over the month of November leading up to the Aleppo chemical attack.

Accusations associating the SCD with chemical weapons cover a wide geographic area, including Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo. The largest cluster of accusations relates to the north Hama towns of al Lataminah and Kafr Zita, areas which have been repeatedly targeted by chemical weapons deployed by the Syrian government.

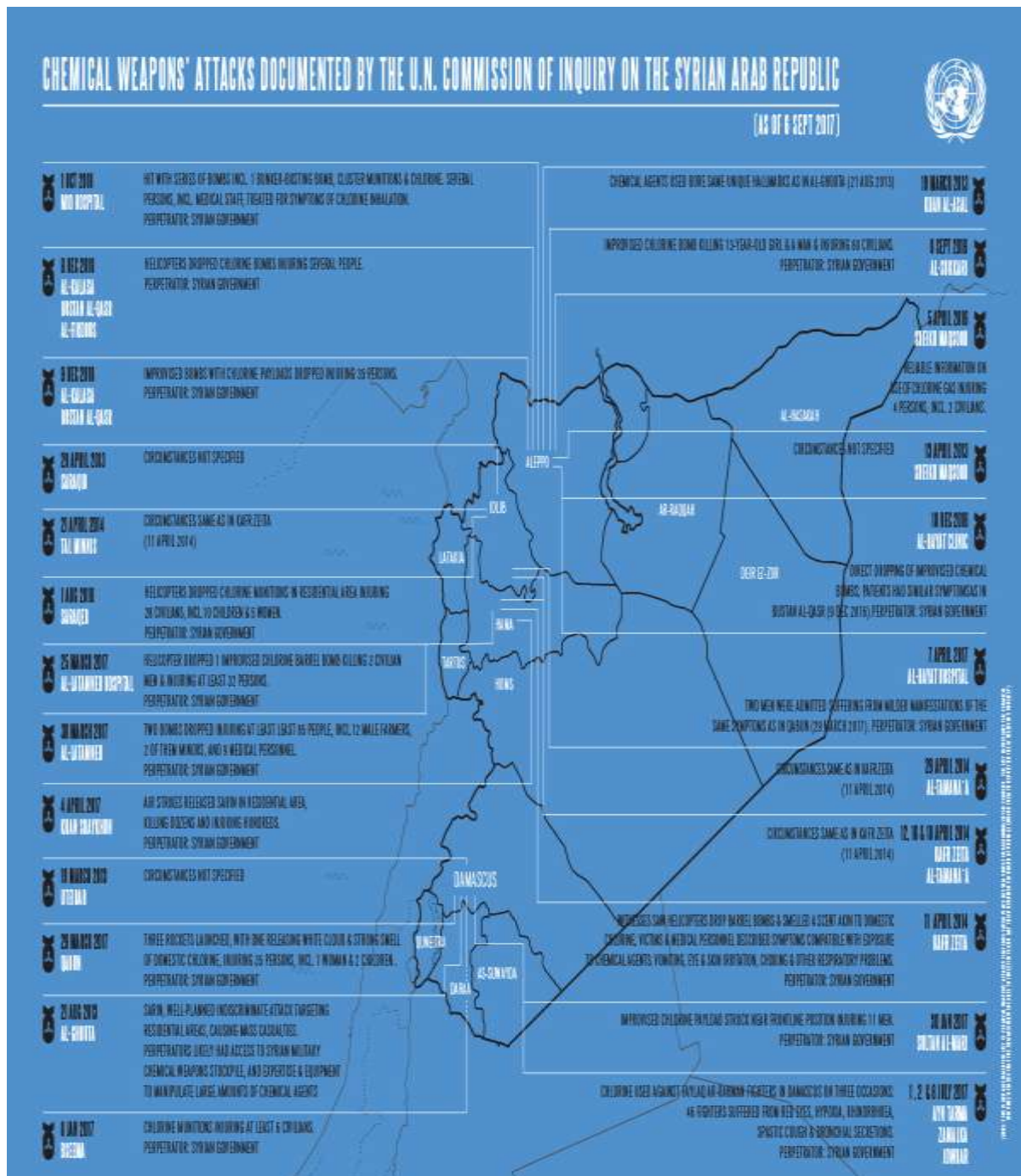


Image 1: Chemical Attacks in Syria, along with perpetrators, according to the UN Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic

Accusations associating the SCD with chemical weapons cover a wide geographic area, including Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo. The largest cluster of accusations relates to the north Hama towns of al Lataminah and Kafr Zita, areas which have been repeatedly targeted by chemical weapons deployed by the Syrian government.

Despite continual claims that chemical attacks were imminent or had already taken place, no chemical attacks were accurately predicted. Considering the Syrian government’s continual use of chemical weapons throughout the conflict, as well as the obfuscation of this issue by the Syrian and Russian governments, this is unsurprising. It is similar to the manner in which the Russian government attempted to obscure its role in the chemical attack in Salisbury, or provided false evidence to the Dutch Safety Board investigating MH17.

A significant proportion, eight out of 22, of these accusations came from the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria (RCROSS). As the name suggests, this is a body set up by the Russian MoD, theoretically in order to track violence in Syria and attempt the reconciliation of opposing sides. This investigation indicates that it plays an important role in disseminating what is likely disinformation against civilian first responders, calling into question its stated purpose.

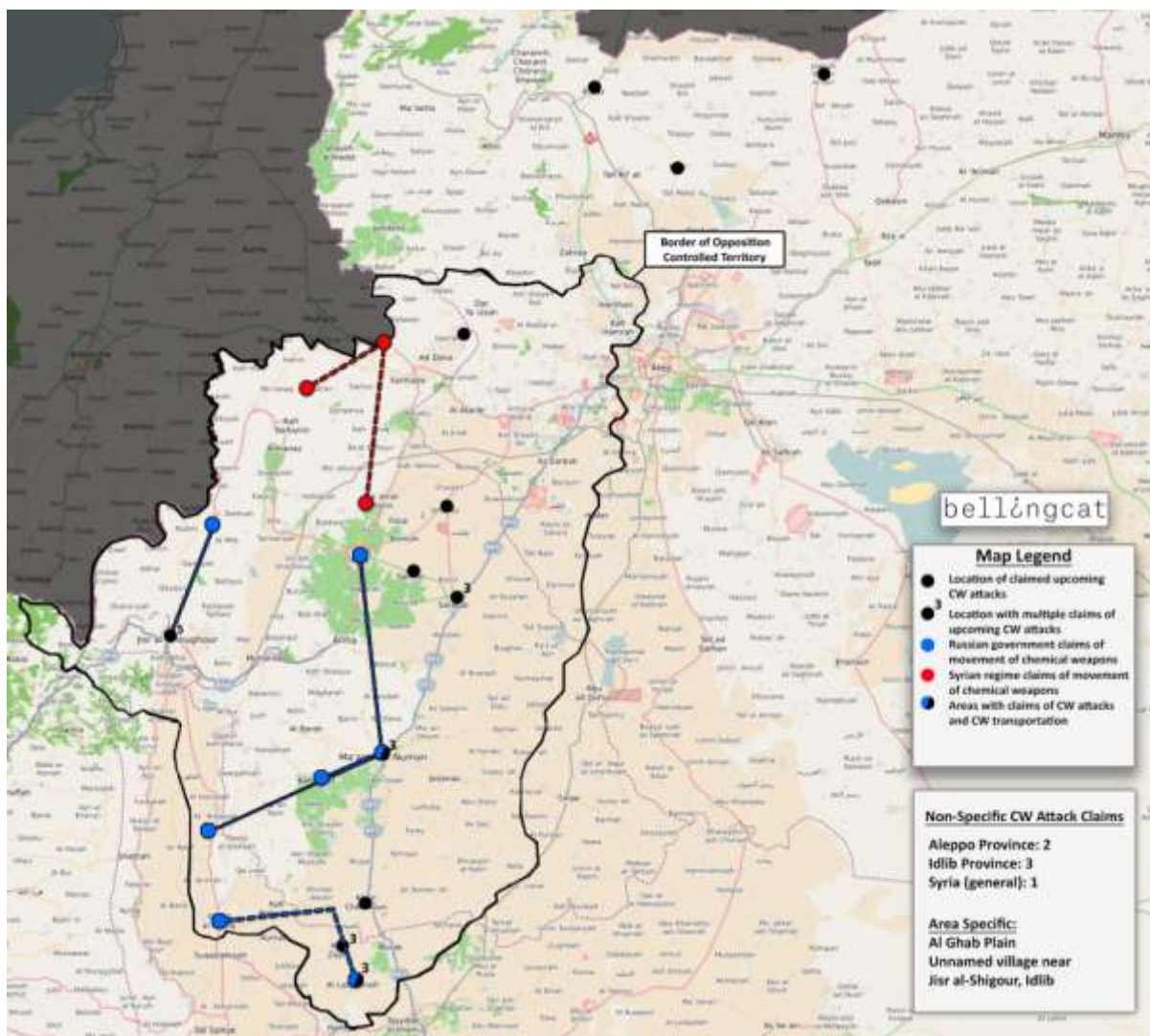


Image 1: Map showing locations allegedly connected to use or movement of chemical weapons by the SCD

11 of the remaining accusations originate from Russian government controlled sources, such as Sputnik, the Russian Ministry of Defence, or representatives of the Russian government.

Of the 22 claims, all except four explicitly state that future chemical attacks will be some form of “false flag” designed to provoke the West into attacking the Syrian government, targeting civilians in rebel held areas. None of the other four state that the SCD would use chemical weapons to attack civilians in government-held territory. Despite attempting to imply that the SCD was associated with the apparent chemical attack in Aleppo on 24th November, that implication does not match the narrative that is built by the accusations we examined. It should also be noted that we believe the open source evidence from the Aleppo attack is inconclusive, while the British and American governments claim it was carried out by the Syrian government using some form of tear gas.

The accusations occasionally veer into the bizarre. On September 11 and 12 of this year, RCROSS stated that SCD had worked with HTS to create a fake chemical attack. RCROSS claimed this was filmed by “Middle Eastern TV channels” and the “regional branch of the American news channel.” This footage was supposedly to be submitted to the UN and OPCW. Leaving aside the absurdity of the accusation itself, the RCROSS never produced a single piece of evidence to support this claim, and no such footage has been released.

“False Flag Groups” Alleged To Be Involved

If one were to take the word of the Russian or Syrian governments, there is a vast network of different groups, many of whom are currently fighting against each other, working together to carry out these attacks which didn’t actually happen. Bellingcat has already explored the absurdity of what a “false flag” chemical attack at Khan Sheikhoun would mean. The Russian and Syrian claims would add several layers of complexity to this scenario, as they have variously accused the following groups of being involved:

1. The Syrian Civil Defence
2. British Intelligence
3. British Special Forces
4. A British Security Company named Olive Group
5. British foreign experts
6. United States Intelligence
7. United States Special Forces
8. The French Government
9. “Middle Eastern TV channels”
10. “The regional branch of the American news channel”
11. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its previous iterations
12. “Foreign specialists”
13. “Foreign friends”
14. Turkish foreign experts
15. Chechen foreign experts
16. Ahrar al-Sham
17. The Islamic Party of Turkmenistan
18. Jaish al Izza
19. Unnamed “militants”

For those familiar with the Syrian conflict, the idea that these groups are working together is incredibly unlikely. The idea that a huge campaign to create “false flag” attacks would go unchallenged by other groups, local civilians, civil society or foreign press pushes the boundary of absurdity.

Evidence Provided

Due to the low level of evidence provided with the accusations, it is difficult to debunk each one individually, as there is no real material to disprove. Of the 22 allegations that we identified, the sum of all verifiable evidence provided was a single 9-second video clip and a single image. Both were presented in support of the claim that IS had attacked HTS, taking two chlorine cylinders and killing two employees of SCD. The video depicted plant machinery operating next to a series of caves which can be geolocated to the center of al Lataminah, while the image showed a truck with a possibly cylindrical container on the back. No exact location data was provided, while the picture and video appear to have been cropped or zoomed in, making geolocation difficult.

The video from al Lataminah does show a location associated with the SCD, and it does seem the figure in the video is wearing a white hat or helmet. However, nothing within the image or video supports the claim that there was an IS attack in this area during this time, or that any movement of chemical weapons took place. In both the video and image there appear to be possibly cylindrical objects, but without better quality imagery it is impossible to say with any certainty if they are cylindrical, let alone what they are.

Despite this dearth of verifiable evidence, sources such as the Russian MoD and its monitoring organisation, RCROSS, have continually stated accusations as if they were established facts. The language they use leaves no room for doubt or uncertainty. Indeed, for a cluster of claims in mid-September which appear to be linked, RCROSS stated they had “irrefutable information.” about an imminent attack. This information has not been published. Previous Russian MoD claims of having “irrefutable” evidence turned out to be footage from a computer game.

Time and again the Russian government has provided evidence which has either been faked, doctored or plagiarized from bloggers. To have any credibility when making these accusations the Russian MoD must be transparent and release its “irrefutable” evidence. Until then, based on previous experience, its claims cannot be taken seriously.

Conclusion

The Syrian Civil Defence is an organisation working under extraordinary circumstances, willingly risking their own lives to save others. As with any organisation operating in such a complex conflict, they sometimes make decisions which others would disagree with. However, one only has to watch a fraction of the hundreds of videos of them pulling victims from under the rubble of bombed buildings to understand that they are genuine first responders who have helped to save many thousands of lives across opposition-held Syria.

The disinformation campaign waged against the SCD has been brutal and unrelenting. It has attempted to cast doubt on their ability to provide evidence, painted them as “terrorists” and ultimately tried to transform them into “legitimate targets.” It is clear that Russia and Syria believe that associating the SCD with chemical weapons is a key part of this narrative. Despite claiming to have “irrefutable information” neither the Russian nor Syrian governments appear to have produced any verifiable evidence that actually supports their accusations.

The extraordinarily low level of evidence supporting these accusations, the absurdity of some of the claims and the continual failure to predict a chemical attack exposes these accusations for what they are: a continuation of a deliberate and planned disinformation campaign against a humanitarian organisation operating in the most difficult of circumstances.

Saudi Vision 2030

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director



In April 2016, Saudi Arabia's then Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, announced Saudi Vision 2030, an ambitious set of initiatives whose stated aim is to diversify the country's economy while also implementing significant social and cultural reforms. If fully actualized, Vision 2030 would lead to a major transformation of the Kingdom.

Saudi Vision 2030

The main ideological and political force behind Vision 2030 was and is Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman (widely referred to as "MBS"). Soon after assuming his duties as the Kingdom's new ruler in January 2015, King Salman launched a major restructuring of the government, appointing his then 29-year-old son Mohammed as minister of defence and chairman of two high-ranking new councils that were established to coordinate the Kingdom's domestic and foreign policies. The Council of Economic and Development Affairs was given supervisory and monitoring responsibility over all government ministries dealing with domestic social, economic, and development matters. The Council of Political and Security Affairs is responsible for coordination of all government organizations dealing with defence, foreign policy, and security. As chairman of both organizations, MBS had near-total control over the domestic and foreign affairs of the Kingdom on behalf of his father.

Mohammed's political power grew even more in April 2015, when King Salman appointed him deputy prime minister, which is the highest-ranking political position in Saudi Arabia after the King. (The King is the Kingdom's prime minister.) Finally, in January 2017, the King appointed him Crown Prince.

Vision 2030 is not the Kingdom's first attempt at long-term economic planning. Since 1970, when a sharp rise in the price of crude oil led to an increase in the Kingdom's oil revenues and fiscal resources, the government of Saudi Arabia has outlined its long-term economic development strategy in successive five-year economic plans. Saudi Arabia launched nine consecutive development plans from 1970 to 2014, and a common objective of all of them was to reduce the economy's dependence on oil export revenues. This objective was pursued primarily through focusing on government-led policies to strengthen non-oil sectors of the economy.

One of the main motivations behind Vision 2030 was the performance of these economic plans. They were successful in building a modern infrastructure and developing modern industrial units, but they did not generate a significant amount of non-oil fiscal revenue and so reduce the country's dependence on oil. As of 2014, the Kingdom was still highly dependent on crude oil exports as the main source of fiscal revenues, and many non-oil economic activities were dependent on government spending, which was itself primarily funded by oil revenues.

The tenth development plan began in 2015, but a year later it was scrapped in favour of Vision 2030. Vision 2030 shares the same objective of economic diversification with the ten five-year plans, but it also includes a package of social and cultural reforms. The Saudi government hired several international consulting firms to develop Vision 2030; the lead contractor was McKinsey Consultants, which has a long history of consulting work in the Kingdom. Some aspects of Vision 2030 are similar to the long-term urban development plan for Riyadh. This similarity is not coincidental: Before becoming the Kingdom's ruler in 2015, King Salman served as the governor of Riyadh for fifty years, and supervised its long-term development strategy, the Metropolitan Development Strategy for Ar-Riyadh (MEDSTAR).

What Is Vision 2030?

For each of the three pillars of Vision 2030 – a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation – the Kingdom has charted 18 measurable goals to be achieved by the year 2030.

Goals to Produce a Vibrant Society: -

- To double the number of Saudi heritage sites registered with UNESCO.
- To increase the capacity to welcome Umrah visitors from 8 million to 30 million per year
- To increase household spending on cultural and entertainment activities from 2.9 percent to 6 percent
- To increase the share of individuals exercising at least once a week from 13 percent to 40 percent
- To increase the number of Saudi cities be recognized among the Top 100 cities in the world
- To increase Saudi Arabia's ranking on the Social Capital Index from 26th to 10th
- To increase the average life expectancy from 74 to 80 years

Vision 2030 Goals to Produce a Thriving Economy: -

- To increase the private sector contributions to Gross Domestic Product from 40 percent to 65 percent

- To increase Saudi's Arabia ranking on the Global Competitiveness Index from 25th to among the Top 10 nations
- To increase foreign-direct investment from 3.8 percent of GDP to the international average of 5.7 percent of GDP
- To rank Saudi Arabia among the Top 15 largest economies in the world from its current position of 19th
- To increase the assets of the Public Investment Fund from SAR 600 billion to over SAR 7 trillion (\$160 billion to over \$2 trillion)
- To increase localization of oil and gas sectors from 40 percent to 75 percent
- To increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 percent to 30 percent
- To reduce the rate of unemployment from 11.6 percent to 7 percent
- To increase the contributions of small and medium enterprises from 20 percent to 35 percent of GDP
- To increase the share of non-oil exports from 16 percent to 50 percent of non-oil GDP
- To increase Saudi Arabia's global ranking in the Logistics Performance Index from 49th to 25th place

Vision 2030 Goals to Empower an Ambitious Nation: -

- To increase Saudi Arabia's ranking on the E-Government Survey Index to among the Top 5 nations from its current ranking of 36th
- To increase non-oil government revenue from SAR 163 billion to SAR 1 trillion
- To increase Saudi Arabia's ranking in the Government Effectiveness Index from 80th to 20th
- To increase real non-profit sector's contribution from less than 1 percent of GDP to 5 percent of GDP

National Transformation

The first set of interim objectives and associated government policies constitutes the first core program: The National Transformation Program (NTP). The NTP enumerates in detail, under eight themes, specific objectives and initiatives that must be adopted and undertaken by various government agencies in order to realize a set of interim targets. In line with Vision 2030's objectives, NTP calls for the creation of 450,000 jobs for Saudi nationals in the non-government sector by 2020. Non-oil exports are to increase from 185 billion (\$49 billion) Saudi Riyals (SR) in 2015 to 300 billion (\$80 billion) in 2020. The duties and responsibilities of all government organizations with respect to Vision 2030 are defined in the NTP.

Strategic Transformation

The second core program of Vision 2030 is the Saudi Aramco Strategic Transformation Program. The national oil company, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company manages the Kingdom's energy assets and oil production. The Strategic Transformation Program calls for the partial privatization of Aramco by offering percent of its shares, with a projected value of \$100 billion, to the private sector and allocating the proceeds of this sale to financing the large-scale investment projects needed to boost the country's non-oil sector.

Public Investment Fund and “giga projects”

The third core program of Vision 2030 is the Public Investment Fund (PIF) Restructuring Program. The PIF was established in 1971 as a sovereign wealth fund with a diverse portfolio of domestic and foreign assets, but the PIF’s role and mission have expanded significantly since 2016 to include procuring financing and qualified foreign partners for Vision 2030 projects. It is designated to play an important role in funding and managing the Vision’s large-scale investment projects and global investments. Assets under PIF control have increased from \$154 billion in 2015 to \$228 billion in 2017 and are projected to reach \$450 billion by 2020. Yet these amounts are only a fraction of the financial resources needed for the ambitious projects outlined in the Vision; the rest will come from private sector and foreign investments that the PIF will be trying to attract. The Fund is also making selective strategic investments in high-tech firms in Western countries so as to facilitate their investments in the Kingdom. This strong interest in partnerships with U.S.-based firms was the main motive for MBS’s intended visit to Silicon Valley.

The Public Investment Fund is expected to finance many Vision 2030 projects, and the three largest projects in its portfolio are labeled “giga projects” on account of their unprecedentedly large scale. The largest one is the NEOM Project for constructing an economic city in the northwest corner of the Kingdom’s Red Sea coast, near the Gulf of Aqaba. It will comprise large residential areas, space for commercial activities, and industrial units. Plans are for it to adopt state-of-the-art technology in urban design, automation, and sustainable technology. Once developed, it will have cross-border linkages to related projects in nearby areas of Jordan and Egypt, and it will be linked to Egypt by a bridge. At a projected cost of \$500 billion dollars, the NEOM futuristic city is the most expensive component of Vision 2030 and its crown jewel.

The second “giga project” is also located on the Red Sea coast and is appropriately called the Red Sea Project. This is a large-scale tourism resort located on an area of approximately 34,000 square kilometers centred around the Al-Hawra Archipelago. It is situated approximately 500 kilometers north of the Kingdom’s commercial capital, Jeddah. If successfully implemented, the NEOM and Red Sea projects will result in a transformation of Saudi Arabia’s Red Sea coastal region and encourage a significant relocation of population and economic activity to this area.

Vision 2030’s third “giga project” is a large multifunctional cultural and entertainment zone known as the Qiddiya Project, covering a 340-square-kilometer area southwest of Riyadh. Plans call for this large area to include theme parks, shopping malls, sports centers, facilities for cultural events such as music festivals and conventions, and up to 11,000 vacation homes. One of the stated objectives of this project is to create an appealing domestic destination for Saudi nationals who currently spend billions of dollars annually on foreign travel because of the shortage of attractive domestic destinations. If successfully implemented, the Qiddiya is projected to generate 57,000 jobs by 2030.

Entertainment and Culture

Qiddiya will serve as the primary construction project for the fourth core program of Vision 2030: the “da’im” Entertainment and Culture Program. This program aims to significantly enhance the quality and range of entertainment and cultural activities available to Saudi citizens. For this purpose, the government has created two new government organizations: the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) and the General

Culture Authority (GCA). The GCA is responsible for promoting all types of art and cultural activities and for safeguarding the Kingdom's cultural heritage.

As with its other initiatives, the Saudi government is trying to attract private investment to entertainment projects like movie theatres and amusement parks. The Saudi government lifted a thirty-five-year ban on movie theatres in December 2017, and the GEA director, Ahmad bin Aqeel al-Khatib, has claimed that \$64 billion will be invested in entertainment facilities and related projects in the Kingdom between 2018 and 2028. The Crown Prince (MBS) demonstrated his commitment to the country's entertainment sector after consolidating his hold over the interior ministry by reducing the ministry's regional development budget and redirecting the savings to the GEA.

Progress Report

As the main force behind Vision 2030, Mohammed bin Salman has aggressively pushed to implement its programs. He has served as the Director of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs since its establishment in 2016 and exerts full control over all economic reforms and development plans associated with Vision 2030. Three years into its implementation substantial progress in achieving its goals has been made: Targets with respect to most projects have been achieved, but some other initiatives are behind schedule.

Governance and Fiscal Reforms

Some of the most visible progress has been in improved governance, including the increased efficiency of government agencies. These advances have come about not only because of bureaucratic reforms but also as a result of the removal of nepotism. Key government positions in Saudi Arabia were traditionally distributed among leading members of the extended Saudi royal family, so as to ensure internal harmony. This tradition, however, was often vulnerable to excessive interference on the part of royal princes, resulting in diminished cooperation and coordination among government agencies. The late King Abdullah (r. 2005–15) initiated some reforms to address these issues, with only partial success.

Since the launch of Vision 2030, annual comparative governance indicators issued by various international organizations show that the level of discipline and accountability in Saudi government institutions has increased since 2016. The World Economic Forum's 2018 Global Competitiveness Report, for example, shows an improvement in the Kingdom's scores in all indicators of governance during 2017.

In implementing Vision 2030's fiscal reforms, there has been both progress and setbacks. In order to reduce the fiscal deficit (which reached a record \$98 billion in 2015), in September 2016 King Salman announced a series of cutbacks in public sector wages and benefits. Since the salaries and benefits of public sector workers account, on average, for 40 to 50 percent of the Saudi government's annual budget, this could have resulted in sizable fiscal savings. Nearly two-thirds of Saudi nationals work for the public sector.

The subsidy cuts and price increases that went into effect in 2017 caused some resentment. To address these grievances, the government offered income support to targeted low-income and poor families. In addition, a major anti-corruption campaign against high-wealth family businesses began soon after these austerity measures. In November 2017, the King ordered several hundred wealthy Saudi businessmen to be detained. Most of these high-wealth individuals were released after agreeing to turn

over large amounts of cash and physical assets to the government. Saudi officials claimed that \$35 billion had been collected and that eventually a total of \$100 billion worth of cash and property would be obtained from these individuals. The Saudi finance minister pledged that a portion of the revenues from the campaign would be used to pay bonuses and income supports to government employees.

In order to increase non-oil revenues, the government also introduced a 5% value added tax, effective January 2018. This was accompanied by a per capita tax on expatriate workers, with an initial monthly rate of \$81 per person in 2018 that is scheduled to increase over time to \$216 per person by 2020. In addition to raising revenue, this levy was also intended to encourage employers to hire more Saudi nationals.

Commitments for a Thriving Economy

Under Vision 2030 a sophisticated digital infrastructure is integral to today's advanced industrial activities. It attracts investors and enhances the fundamental competitiveness of the Saudi economy. We will partner with the private sector to develop telecommunications and information technology infrastructure, especially high-speed broadband, expanding its coverage and capacity within and around cities and improving its quality. Our specific goal is to exceed 90 percent housing coverage in densely populated cities and 66 percent in other urban zones.

Flourishing Retail Sector

Vision 2030 also aims to provide job opportunities for an additional 1 million Saudis by 2020 in a growing retail sector that attracts modern, local, regional, and international brands across all regions of the country. We also aim to increase the contribution of modern trade and e-commerce to 80 percent of the retail sector by 2020. This will be achieved by attracting both regional and international retail investors and by easing restrictions on ownership and foreign investment. To this end, we will facilitate local and regional flow of goods, and develop necessary sectoral regulations. We will also increase financing of small retail enterprises to stimulate their growth and development.

Restructured King Abdullah Financial District

The Kingdom also seeks to transform the district into a special zone that has competitive regulations and procedures, visa exemptions, and direct connections to the King Khalid International Airport. We will also seek to repurpose some of the built-up areas and change the real estate mix, increasing the allocation for residential accommodation, services and hospitality areas. We will seek to build and create an integrated and attractive living and working environment. The district will be the headquarters of the Public Investment Fund, the largest sovereign wealth fund, which will contribute to creating an environment attractive to financial services and other corporations.

Renewable Energy

Saudi Arabia possesses an impressive natural potential for solar and wind power, and local energy consumption will increase threefold by 2030. The Kingdom has set an initial target of generating 9.5 gigawatts of renewable energy. We will seek to localize a significant portion of the renewable energy value chain in the Saudi economy, including research & development, and manufacturing. From inputs such as silica and petrochemicals, to the extensive expertise of our leading Saudi companies in the production of different forms of energy, the Kingdom has all the raw ingredients for success. We will put this into practice with the forthcoming launch of the King Salman

Renewable Energy Initiative. We will review the legal and regulatory framework that allows the private sector to buy and invest in the renewable energy sector.

Localized Defence Industries

Although the Kingdom is the world's third biggest military spender, only 2 percent of this spending is within our Kingdom. The national defence industrial sector is limited to only seven companies and two research centres. Our aim is to localize over 50 percent of military equipment spending by 2030. We have already begun developing less complex industries such as those providing spare parts, armored vehicles, and basic ammunition. We will expand this initiative to higher value and more complex equipment such as military aircraft. We will build an integrated national network of services and supporting industries that will improve our self-sufficiency and strengthen our defence exports, both regionally and internationally. These moves will transfer knowledge and technology, and build national expertise in the fields of manufacturing, maintenance, repair, research and development.

Education that Contributes to Economic Growth

Saudi Arabia will also close the gap between the outputs of higher education and the requirements of the job market. By the year 2030, the Kingdom intends to have at least five Saudi universities among the top 200 universities in international rankings. We shall help our students achieve results above international averages in global education indicators. To this end, we will prepare a modern curriculum focused on rigorous standards in literacy, numeracy, and character development. We will track progress and publish a sophisticated range of education outcomes, showing year-on-year improvements. We will work closely with the private sector to ensure higher education outcomes are in line with the requirements of the job market.

Integrating Regionally and Internationally

With a GDP of SAR 2.4 trillion, the Saudi economy is already the largest in the Middle East. We enjoy close economic ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council and other Arab countries, as well as constructive relations with Islamic and foreign countries. We will seek to establish new business partnerships and facilitate a smoother flow of goods, people and capital. Among our top priorities is to fortify and extend our interconnectivity and economic integration with other Gulf Cooperation Council countries. We will strive to complete the process of implementing the GCC common market, unifying customs, economic and legal policies, and constructing shared road and railway networks. We will seek to effectively link with other countries in the region, through enhanced logistics services and new cross-border infrastructure projects, including land transport projects with Africa through Egypt. Logistical and trade exchanges will be streamlined, further cementing our pre-eminent position as a major trade hub.

Commitments for an Ambitious Nation

Saudi 2030 is committed to making public spending radically more efficient, using our resources more effectively, and limiting waste. The Kingdom will launch the "Qawam" program as a reflection of the Qur'anic verse that calls for moderation in spending between excess and parsimony. This program will comprehensively review financial regulations in all government agencies. The program is intended to move away from a narrow reliance on process auditing, and move towards a more integrated approach with effective and efficient spending controls. Government agencies will reward a culture of

efficient spending throughout all administrative levels. Specialized training for employees and other key stakeholders will be provided as required, boosting the performance of finance departments and internal auditing.

Effective E-Government

Saudi Arabia is also making remarkable progress in e-government. The scope of online services has already been expanded over the last decade to include employment programs, online job searches, e-learning services, traffic, passports and civil affairs, online payment services, and online issuance of commercial registers. This has improved Saudi Arabia's ranking on several global indicators. In the UN E-Government Index, for instance, Saudi Arabia ranked 36th in 2014, up from 90th in 2004.

Saudi Arabia will expand the scope of current online services further to include areas such as geographic information, health care and education. Quality will be improved by streamlining processes, and diversifying communication channels. The Kingdom will also support the wider use of online applications in government agencies, such as cloud applications, data sharing platforms and HR management systems.

Social and Cultural Reforms

Conservative norms and religious restrictions on Saudi social life have been traditionally enforced by the Kingdom's "religious police." In a first step toward cultural change, King Salman in April 2016—almost at the same time that Vision 2030 was formally inaugurated—reduced the authority of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (called simply "al-hey'a"—The Committee—by Saudis) to report individuals to the police for violating Islamic lifestyle restrictions. Reducing the authority of al-hey'a came as a major relief for more liberal Saudis unhappy with such restrictions. The King also has had the Council of Senior Islamic Scholars, which is the highest official religious authority in the Kingdom; condone the social and cultural changes that MBS has introduced.

In a significant social reform, the Saudi government issued a decree in September 2017 that permitted women to drive, effective June 2018. Other steps taken in the past two years to reduce gender discrimination include an informal relaxation in enforcing bans on women traveling without the consent of a male guardian (although the formal ban is still in effect), allowing men and women to participate in mixed-gender events, and permitting women to enter stadiums for sports events. The male guardianship laws, which restrict women's social and economic rights, have not been reformed yet.

Saudi 2030 is a very ambitious development plan which surpasses previous development plans. There has been notable success in achieving governance reforms and public sector efficiency improvements. The Saudi government is aware of a wide range of opposition to their social and cultural reforms and has tried to control dissent from both the conservative and liberal sides.

Yet Saudi Arabia has enormous untapped opportunities and a rich blend of natural resources. Its real wealth lies in our people and our society. The happiness and fulfillment of Saudi citizens and residents are important. This can only be achieved through promoting physical, psychological, and social well-being. At the heart of the Saudi 2030 is a society in which all enjoy a good quality of life, a healthy lifestyle, and an attractive living environment. The central goal is to promote and reinvigorate social development in order to build a strong a productive society.

What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East?

By Dmitri Trenin

In December 2017, Vladimir Putin, on a flying visit to the Russian air base in Hmeimim, Syria, famously proclaimed victory in the military campaign against Daesh militants and the opponents of Bashar al-Assad's regime. The aftermath of that victory, of course, has demonstrated the many difficulties of making peace among Syrians, and of managing the diverging interests of the regional players involved in the Syrian conflict. In April 2018, the US-led missile strikes in Syria, provoked by the alleged use of chemical weapons in the town of Douma, brought the US and Russian armed forces closer to a direct military collision than at any time since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. In May 2018, the Trump Administration's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) raised the prospect of a war between the United States and Iran. Suddenly, the Europeans found themselves closer to the Russian position on an important issue than to that of their US allies. Shortly before that, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu conferred with Vladimir Putin in Moscow on Russia's sacred Victory Day, just before launching a massive attack against Iranian targets in Syria, both countries being Russian allies.

The Middle Eastern conundrum seems tortuous and intractable. Yet, there are ways of negotiating its difficult geopolitical terrain, and at the time of writing Russia is continuing its politico-military adventure. As it proceeds, there are valuable takeaways at each turn of events that help inform Moscow's policy in the region and beyond. To identify the 'lessons learned', several key issues will be examined in this chapter: the management of a Syria where the war has ebbed, but peace remains elusive; the emerging rules of engagement between Russian and US military forces in the Middle East; and the careful balancing between sets of regional antagonists who are all valuable partners for Russia.

There was little doubt in serious observers' minds that the victory announced by President Putin at Khmeimim was a victory in a military campaign, that confirmed Damascus as the main winner, rather than an event that ushered in peace in the war-ravaged land. Militarily victorious, Moscow immediately faced the wrath of the defeated parties and their sponsors. The 'peace congress' in Sochi, which Russian diplomacy had painstakingly sought to prepare within the so-called Astana process as the diplomatic platform for political negotiations between the Syrian government and the armed opposition, proved a failure. In Moscow's view the Syrian opposition, its Arab sponsors and Western countries were united in their determination not to let Moscow convert the fruits of its success on the battlefield into a lasting political dividend.

The setback in the peace process must have disappointed Russian diplomats, but only boosted the resolve of the Russian military and eventually the Kremlin to press the 23 2 What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East? opposition even harder. Russian forces helped Bashar al-Assad to eliminate a major pocket of resistance in the Eastern Ghouta province in April 2018. This enclave so near to the Syrian capital had been a major irritant and a source of real danger for Damascus. Even the Russian embassy there had been repeatedly targeted by Islamist rebels from positions as close as only 10 km away. Thus, the Russian response to the diplomatic blockade was to do 'another Aleppo': help the Syrian government forces to clear out a rebel stronghold. As in Aleppo in late 2016, they succeeded in winning back control over a strategically vital area, evacuating the surviving

rebel fighters to the biggest remaining enclave, Idlib on the Turkish border. Having accomplished this, the Russians went on to help Assad win control over the rebel-held areas in south-western Syria, close to the Golan Heights.



With the peace process stalled and the political settlement as originally anticipated by Moscow in doubt, Russia had been preparing to replace Plan A (power-sharing among the parties in some new all-Syrian arrangement) with Plan B (helping consolidate Damascus's control over the most important parts of the country). The main political problem it now faced was no longer the opposition's recalcitrance, which was taken as a provisional 'no' answer to a negotiated settlement, but rather Bashar al-Assad's now greatly enhanced ambition to restore his regime's rule over all of Syria. An emboldened Bashar was clearly playing the Russians off against the Iranians, his other major ally and sponsor. Moscow was not amused.

Indeed, Moscow had entered into a situational alliance with both Tehran and Ankara, but right from the start that alliance was very different from either the NATO model or the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact. Russia acknowledged and de facto accepted what it considered the legitimate national security interests of its notional allies. Thus, it agreed with Turkey that allowing PKK bases and training camps in the Kurdish-held Syrian

territory along the Turkish border would constitute a threat to Turkey's security and stability. Putin, who hosted Tayyip Recep Erdogan in Sochi in January 2018 and made a point of travelling to Ankara on his first foreign trip after his re-election as president in March 2018, must have privately given the nod to Erdogan's military invasion of northern Syria. Yet Putin must have also extracted a pledge from Erdogan that the invasion would remain limited, and that Turkey would refrain from attempting to undermine the regime in Damascus. As for the Kurds, while taking the risk of facing a Kurdish outcry over the Turkish operation, Russia continued to support Kurdish autonomy within Syria – against the preferences of its ally in Damascus.

With regard to Iran, Russia understood Tehran's need to maintain a land link to its Lebanese ally Hizbullah, which Moscow regards as a legitimate politico-military actor in the region rather than a terrorist organisation, but looked askance at Iranian attempts to threaten Israel from within Syria. While Russia acknowledged Iran's and Hizbullah's role in achieving the very victory announced by Putin – the Russian military has never believed that any war could be won by air campaigns alone – it never supported Tehran's ambition to control Syria via the Assad regime and the Alawites.

US-Russian rules of engagement In February 2018, Moscow was confronted with an embarrassing situation when a number of Russian mercenaries, recruited by Wagner, a private Russian military company operating in Syria, got into trouble as they tried to wrestle control of an oil well from a Kurdish group supported by the United States. The Russians, acting on behalf of pro-Damascus business interests, reportedly ignored US warnings and were attacked by the US forces, resulting in substantial casualties. It is not clear why the US warnings had been ignored, or what kind of a relationship actually existed between the private company, still illegal under Russian law, and the Russian forces in Syria. In any event, Moscow replaced its top military commander in Syria, but abstained from retaliating against the US, probably recognising that Wagner had gone too far. This recognition must have contributed to establishing the rules of engagement between Russia and the United States in Syria.

A much more serious episode happened exactly two months later, as the United States launched missile strikes in notional retaliation for a spurious incident billed by the media as a chemical weapons attack by the Syrian government against civilians. Weeks before the incident, General Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff, warned about a coming 'provocation' in the form of a fabricated chemical weapons attack near Damascus, which would then be used as a pretext for massive US strikes against the Syrian government and military assets. Should that happen, Gerasimov warned, and if Russian personnel or assets were affected, Russia would not only intercept the incoming US missiles, but would launch its own strikes – against the platforms from which the US missiles were fired.

This was, in a nutshell, the scenario of the first US-Russian military showdown since the Cold War era. When the incident accepted by Washington as a chemical attack launched by the Syrian regime happened in April 2018, and President Trump vowed to retaliate, the United States and Russia found themselves closer to a direct military confrontation than they had been for over half a century. However, despite all the bombast coming from Trump, the actual strikes turned out to be very limited. The US, supported by Britain and France, destroyed just three structures described as Syrian chemical weapons facilities, and incurred no casualties – either Syrian or Russian, military or civilian. In the run-up to these strikes, James Mattis, the US Secretary of Defense, and General Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, expressly pleaded for the utmost restraint.

Deterrence has worked. The United States and Russia, despite their highly adversarial relationship, have de facto agreed to refrain from action which would result in a head-on clash between their militaries. The de-confliction mechanism, first established between Russian and US forces in Syria in 2015, has been tested and found effective. There are still no confirmed numbers of dead and wounded. Estimates range from a few fatalities, which is probably too low, to several hundred, which appears exaggerated. However, the fact that casualties occurred, and the way in which they were inflicted, is more important than their actual number.

What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East? It has also expanded beyond the regional commanders in the Middle East to include the defence ministers and defence chiefs of the two countries, as well as the supreme commander of NATO forces in Europe. The 'hot line' between the Kremlin and the White House has also been regularly used. In early 2018, the three Russian intelligence chiefs, heads of the FSB (the Federal Security Service), the SVR (the Foreign Intelligence Service), and the GRU (the Military Intelligence Directorate), made an unprecedented joint visit to the United States. This is a far cry from the situation in 1962 when there was a sole channel of communication between the KGB station chief in Washington and Robert Kennedy, the US president's brother. Unlike in 1962, however, de-confliction these days does not necessarily lead to de-escalation of the wider US-Russian conflict.

On 9 May 2018, the million-strong Victory Day procession in Moscow, with people carrying portraits of relatives who fought (and in many cases died) in the Great Patriotic War, the so-called march of the 'Immortal Regiment', included a rare participant, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. The Israeli leader carried a photo of a Jewish Soviet colonel, a hero of the Soviet Union. Netanyahu, however, had come not only to mark the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany. Having just revealed documents describing Iran's nuclear programme, he meant to engage Putin in a discussion of what to do over both Iran's nuclear programme and its growing – and, from Israel's perspective, menacing – presence in Syria.

The details of the conversation will remain unavailable to the general public. However, within hours of the Moscow dialogue, the Israeli Defence Forces hit scores of Iranian targets in Syria. Moscow issued only a pro forma statement calling on all sides to show restraint and avoid escalation. The Russians have long been trying to straddle one of the most serious lines of fracture in the Middle East, that between Israel and Iran. They were probably unimpressed by Netanyahu's Iranian documents, which the Israeli prime minister had revealed in order to give Donald Trump a fresh argument for leading the United States out of the JCPOA. At the same time, they took Israeli concerns about the Iranian presence on the ground in Syria much more seriously. As noted already, Moscow and Tehran do share some important interests in Syria, but certainly not all. When the Iranians launched their missiles into the Israeli-held Golan Heights, they, in the Russian analysis, went too far. Occasionally, the Russians believe, the Israelis also take things a step too far. The Iranian missile launches were in retaliation for an Israeli attack against an Iranian base in Syria, code-named T-4. By publicly revealing the identity of the attacker, Russia probably sent a signal to Israel. The ensuing missile exchange between Iran and Israel, which did not escalate further, might have led to a sort of mutual deterrence between the two antagonists in Syria. As for Moscow, it will continue looking for a balance between what it regards as the legitimate security interests of its situational ally Tehran and its valuable partner Israel.

Russia's return to the Middle East | building sandcastles? With regard to the issue of the JCPOA itself, after President Trump's decision in May 2018 to withdraw from the international nuclear agreement with Iran, Russia vowed to support the accord even without US participation. As a result of that US move the leading EU member states found themselves closer to Russia than to the Trump Administration. From Moscow's perspective, this opens a window for productive cooperation with US European allies which it does not see as Russia's actual opponents – unlike the United States, again the main adversary.

Russia engages militarily and diplomatically abroad in support of its claim to great power status. It continues to use its newly revived and rebuilt military power, still very modest by Pentagon standards, judiciously and overall quite effectively. It is guided by a realpolitik approach to international relations, which works well in the Middle East. It has been able to deter the United States and has accepted the need to exercise its own restraint. It has been ruthless to its opponents on the battlefield, but has found managing its own allies every bit as challenging. It has also been able to work across the many treacherous divides in the Middle East while promoting its own interests.

It is unclear whether this situation is sustainable in the long run. Russia is not the region's dominant power and its recognised security overlord. If push comes to shove, and Israel and Iran do engage in a real war, which would probably mean Israeli airstrikes against Iran itself, and Iranian retaliation, which might include missile attacks from Lebanon's Hizbullah, Russia would probably have to step aside, at a cost to its relations with both Jerusalem and Tehran. Moscow's current efforts, however, are aimed precisely at preventing such a situation from arising and helping establish a crude mutual deterrence between the two antagonists. On important, though less conflictual issues, such as the future of the agreement among the OPEC+ group on oil production, Russia has to pick sides bearing in mind its own national interest: it takes a position closer to Saudi Arabia rather than Iran.

Of course, Russia has to contend with a number of limitations. The economic and financial base of its foreign policy overall, and in the Middle East specifically, is still inadequate for a country that projects itself as a great power. Currently, Russia obviously punches above its nominal weight, measured in GDP terms, but skilfully compensates this with diplomatic activism and military successes, as well as its strong position as a major oil producer. However, its rather weak standing in the region's foreign trade landscape – where it does not feature prominently except as the exporter of a few key items, such as weapons, grain, and nuclear technology – limits its influence in the region. Its information resources – including the RT Arabic television channel – fall far short of those of Western countries, and thus Moscow is virtually unable to correct the highly negative view of its policies in the Middle East that is prevalent in the Western media. And lastly the extremely pragmatic,

What drives Russia's policy in the Middle East? 'piecemeal' approach that has characterised the Russian handling of the region's issues has so far impeded a more strategic approach to the Middle East. Such an approach would require developing a long-term view of the region's place and role in Russia's twenty-first century global foreign policy; devising a set of sub-strategies towards various countries, ranging from an eventual settlement in Syria to a future management of Iran's nuclear programme to stable partnerships with Turkey, Israel, and Egypt; and harmonising those policies within a broader region-wide approach. With luck, Russia may manage to develop such a strategy in the future.

The Siege of Qatar

By Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member

The siege on Qatar is almost two years old. On June 5, 2017, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt cut off diplomatic ties with the state of Qatar. Accusing it of funding terrorism and fermenting regional instability, all land, air and sea links to the country were severed.

National carriers declared they would be suspending flights to and from Qatar the following day, and those from Qatar were banned from even transiting through their countries. With the exception of Egypt, the blockading states recalled their own citizens and gave the Qataris residing and working in their countries 14 days to leave their territories.

In less than 24 hours, Qatar was effectively cut off.

The coordinated move by the four countries has caused the greatest rift in years, between some of the most powerful Arab states. And the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was unable to de-escalate the situation.

To date Qatar did not concede its sovereignty nor did the other Gulf countries benefit anything considerable from the siege on Qatar. The accusation directed at Qatar of funding and sponsoring terrorism has not been substantiated. This in turn has only brought several criticisms from various countries and international organisations.



Skyline of Doha City, Qatar

The blockade triggered Qatar to rethink its sustainability and independence and to set itself up for the future. It built farms and was transforming its deserts into fertile land. A dairy farm was set up, flying in thousands of cows and producing its own line of products. Just days before the one-year anniversary of the blockade, Qatar's government issued a directive banning all products from the blockading quartet.

The new trade links and self-reliance it had developed over the past year meant Qatar's decades-long dependence on its neighbours for produce and goods had been swept away. Ignoring the calls for the blockade to end, there has been no softening of the position from the blockading nations.

Doha has adopted a strategy to confront the siege that consists of two components. Firstly, to show willingness to hold dialogue, while emphasising its sovereignty. The countries that agreed with the four GCC countries were very few. Secondly, Doha launched a diplomatic attack on an international level, which contributed to undermining the statements made against Qatar.

Neither USA, Russia or EU adopted the GCC position of the four GCC countries. This is partly due to the fact that these nations wish to see a quiet resolution to the conflict. Additionally Doha has begun a focused campaign on Washington. After months of hard work, Qatar succeeded in changing the position of President Trump.

Indeed has also Qatar won a solid US commitment towards its security. Following the first US-Qatar annual strategic dialogue in Washington, on January 30, 2018, the US Department of State issued a statement, expressing its desire "to work jointly with Qatar to deter and confront any external threat to Qatar's territorial integrity that is inconsistent with the United Nations Charter".

The whole crisis has hence ended up producing the exact opposite result of the one intended by the blockading countries. Instead of reducing Qatar's diplomatic ties it led to strengthening them, while Turkey has, for the first time, become part of Gulf security, through its military presence in Qatar.

Even a multi-million-dollar PR campaign to tarnish the image of Qatar and link it to activities related to financing terrorism has failed to produce the intended effects. They hired PR firms, lobbying groups, and paid think tanks to hold anti-Qatar public events. These efforts produced little impact, however. Qatar circumvented them by signing an agreement with the US in July 2017 aimed at combating the financing of terrorism.

The four CGG countries failure to get Qatar to concede or make considerate concessions, their failure to get European, Muslim, Asian and Middle Eastern actors to side with them over Qatar has actually highlighted the their limitations.

Qatar's economy is growing at a fast pace compared to the other GCC countries and its people are enjoying living standards that are far higher than its neighbours. Qatar still has the highest per capita income in the world and this does not seem to be changing anytime soon. This does not mean that Qatar is comfortable with the boycott.

Indeed, Qatar may have incurred heavy financial costs as a result of the blockade - estimated at \$43bn by Bloomberg - but it has become more independent than ever. In fact, many Qataris believe today that they have achieved their real independence.

Military Situation in Libya

March 2019

South Front

The 2019 Western Libya offensive, code-named "Operation Flood of Dignity" is a military campaign by the Libyan National Army under Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, which represents the Libyan House of Representatives, to capture the western region of Libya and eventually the capital Tripoli held by the UN Security Council-recognised Government of National Accord. The offensive resulted in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries. It began in late March 2019, just two weeks before the Libyan National Conference for organising presidential and parliamentary elections in Libya had been planned to take place, and five days after the first session of the 2019 Libyan local elections were held successfully. War crimes and crimes against humanity that take place during the conflict are covered by the mandate of the International Criminal Court investigation in Libya under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970.



At the moment Libya has three centres of power. The first is the Presidency Council (PC), which has been based in Tripoli since 30 March 2016. The PC is headed by Fayez al-Sarraj – a former member of the Tobruk Parliament, where he represented a Tripoli constituency – and it was born out of the signing of the UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) in December 2015. According to this agreement, the PC presides over

the Government of National Accord (GNA), also based in Tripoli. The GNA should be endorsed by the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) according to the agreement, but on two occasions the HoR has voted down the list of ministers.

The second centre of power is the rival, but ever weakening Government of National Salvation headed by Prime Minister Khalifa Ghwell – resting on the authority of a rump of the General National Congress (GNC), the resurrected parliament originally elected in 2012. The Government of National Salvation was also based in Tripoli, although it no longer controls any relevant institutions. In October 2016, Ghwell tried to reassert himself but failed to gain wider support and his forces were kicked out from Tripoli in the spring of 2017. The vast majority of the members of the GNC (also known as the “Tripoli Parliament”) have been moved across to the State Council, a consultative body created under the LPA which convenes in Tripoli and is headed by Abdul Rahman Swehli, a Misratan politician (and HoR member) who had previously been threatened with EU individual sanctions.

The third centre of power is made up of the authorities based in Tobruk and Bayda, which were also supposed to work under the LPA. The House of Representatives (HoR) in Tobruk would become the legitimate legislative authority under the LPA but it has so far failed to pass a valid constitutional amendment to enshrine itself as an authoritative institution. Instead the HoR endorsed the rival government of Abdullah al-Thinni which operates from the eastern Libyan city of Bayda. The Tobruk and Bayda authorities have been aligned with the Egypt-aligned, self-described anti-Islamist general Khalifa Haftar, who leads the Libyan National Army (LNA).

In Libya there are very few truly national actors. The vast majority are local players, some of whom are relevant at the national level while representing the interests of their region, or in most cases, their city.

Abusahmain, Ghwell and The “Tripoli Government”

The speaker of the General National Congress Nouri Abusahmain and the prime minister of the “Government of National Salvation”, Khalifa Ghwell, come from the cities of Zwara and Misrata respectively. Their military support base is the Steadfastness Front (Jabhat al-Samud) of Salah Badi. Initially they represented the Libya Dawn coalition which included Islamists, the city-state of Misrata, and several other western cities (including parts of the Amazigh minority).

Haftar, Aguila Saleh, and the Tobruk Power Centre

The relationship between Haftar and the Speaker of the Tobruk parliament, Aguila Saleh Issa, has ebbed and flowed since 2015. Over the past year, it has become increasingly strained. Haftar oversees his forces from his headquarters in Marj (in eastern Libya) and has exerted pressure on both the Bayda government and the HoR in Tobruk. In July 2017, Haftar declared that his forces had “liberated” Benghazi from both the Islamist-dominated Benghazi Revolutionary Shura Council and ISIS, but fighting continues in pockets of the city. Haftar’s camp has faced several challenges from within and without, not least from erstwhile ally Faraj Ghaim, who was appointed deputy interior minister of the Government of National Accord in 2017.

The Islamic State Group in Libya

Also called Tandhim ad-Dawla (the Organisation of the State) by Libyans, ISIS controlled the central Mediterranean coast of Libya around the city of Sirte until a Misratan-led operation to uproot it began in May. ISIS has carried out attacks in all major Libyan cities, including the capital Tripoli. ISIS has also had a presence in other parts of Libya, including

Benghazi, where it was largely defeated by Haftar's LNA. Its affiliates have mostly been driven out from the towns of Derna and Sabratha by anti-

Haftar and the Libyan National Army

While Khalifa Haftar is recognised as general commander of the armed forces by the HoR in eastern Libya, his self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) is a mix of military units and tribal or regional-based armed groups, and is not recognised as a proper army by all military personnel across the east or west of Libya. A number of senior military figures refused to join Haftar's Operation Dignity against Islamists when it launched in May 2014. Some of these have since joined forces with his adversaries, whether cooperating with militias that comprised the now defunct anti-Haftar Libya Dawn coalition in western Libya, or joining with local jihadist-led groups to drive ISIS out from the eastern town of Derna. Haftar's opponents claim his irregular forces include Sudanese mercenaries, particularly from the Darfuri rebel group JEM.

Haftar's LNA has different degrees of control in the area of central and eastern Libya that stretches from Ben Jawad to the border with Egypt. In this part of the country, LNA's colonel Nadhuri is the military governor and he has replaced elected officials with military figures to head most municipalities across the east.

Drawing its strength from a web of tribal alliances, Haftar's LNA has expanded its presence across the area of central and eastern Libya that stretches from Ben Jawad to the border with Egypt, with the exception of the town of Derna which has been besieged by LNA-aligned forces for over a year.

Zintan and the Tribal Army

The small mountain town of Zintan enjoyed outsized influence in western Libya from 2011 until summer 2014 when its militias were driven from Tripoli by Libya Dawn. As a result, Zintani forces lost control of key strategic sites, including Tripoli's international airport which was destroyed in the fighting. Some later joined with the so-called Tribal Army – comprising fighters from the Warshefana region on Tripoli's hinterland and other tribal elements from western Libya – to confront Libya Dawn-allied factions. Fighting later subsided due to local ceasefires.

A number of Zintani forces have distanced themselves from Haftar – particularly those close to former defence minister Osama Jweili – while others remain supportive. As commander of the GNA's western region military zone, Jweili led an offensive in the Warshefana territory on Tripoli's hinterland in November 2017 with a coalition that included forces from Zintan, Tripoli – among them Haithem Tajouri's TRB – and Tarhouna. While ostensibly "anti-crime", the operation also served to undermine LNA-affiliated groups in the area.

Militiamen from Zintan have been responsible for the shutting of vital pipelines linking the Sharara and El Feel oilfields in south-western Libya to coastal terminals since late 2014, costing over \$20 billion in lost revenue, according to the National Oil Corporation.