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## Aims and Scope

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

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## Trump Releases Middle East Plan

By Arthur Tane  
CMER Executive Director



US President Donald Trump announces his Middle East peace plan in the White House in Washington, DC on January 28, 2020.

President Donald Trump just unveiled his long-awaited Middle East peace plan, "Peace to Prosperity", a strategy offering the Palestinians a state, US\$50 billion in international investment, and a US embassy in the newly-created state. This is a major step forward that the Palestinian Authority would be smart to accept as a starting point for discussions with Israel.

President Trump made an appeal to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas: "President Abbas, I want you to know that if you choose the path to peace, America and many other countries will be there. We will be there to help you in so many different ways... Your response to this historic opportunity will show the world to what extent you are ready to lead the Palestinian people to statehood... Today's agreement is a historic opportunity for the Palestinians to finally achieve an independent state of their very own. After 70 years of little progress, this could be the last opportunity they will ever have."

But it is Jared Kushner, Mr. Trump's son-in-law, who oversaw the plan, which probably best describes the Palestinian mood: "It's a big opportunity for the Palestinians... they have a perfect track record of blowing every opportunity they've had in their past." He urged Palestinian leaders to "stop posturing" and accept the plan.

Yet, most probably, the Palestinian leadership will prefer "posturing" and reject concrete steps forward in order to keep pursuing unrealistic demands such as the "right of return," which is at the heart of the failures of past plans. Everyone knows that the right of return for the descendants of Palestinians who left their homes in 1948 would mean the end of a Jewish state, which, of course, no Jewish party could ever accept.

Maintaining the fiction that the descendants of the 1948 exiles are refugees is at the heart of the Palestinian identity and struggle. No Palestinian leader wants to give it up even though they know that this argument is far from the reality on the ground.

Recognizing as "refugees" fourth-generation Palestinians living in crushing poverty in "refugee camps" that have since long become cities, while neither their parents nor often their grandparents have known the beaches of Jaffa or Haifa is pure nonsense. By supporting a specialized agency of the United Nations, UNRWA, which indirectly finances and legitimizes Hamas in Gaza, European countries and others have fostered the illusion of this right of return.

Let us reflect for a moment on the aberration of this situation. After all, no one is destined to remain a refugee indefinitely. Are the Jews who were expelled from a series of Arab countries after 1948 still refugees? What about the Germans from the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia, the Boat People of Vietnam, or the Bosnians during the Yugoslav Wars? Will Syrians and Afghans recently arrived in Europe still be regarded as "refugees" in 50 years? It will be argued that the Palestinians have no other state of which they can easily become citizens. Certainly, but are the UN, European, and Arab countries doing them a service by maintaining them in this illusion that has lasted for the last 70 years? And would we still be calling them "Palestinian refugees" without international recognition of this status, often, seemingly, to punish Israel for successfully bringing its land into the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

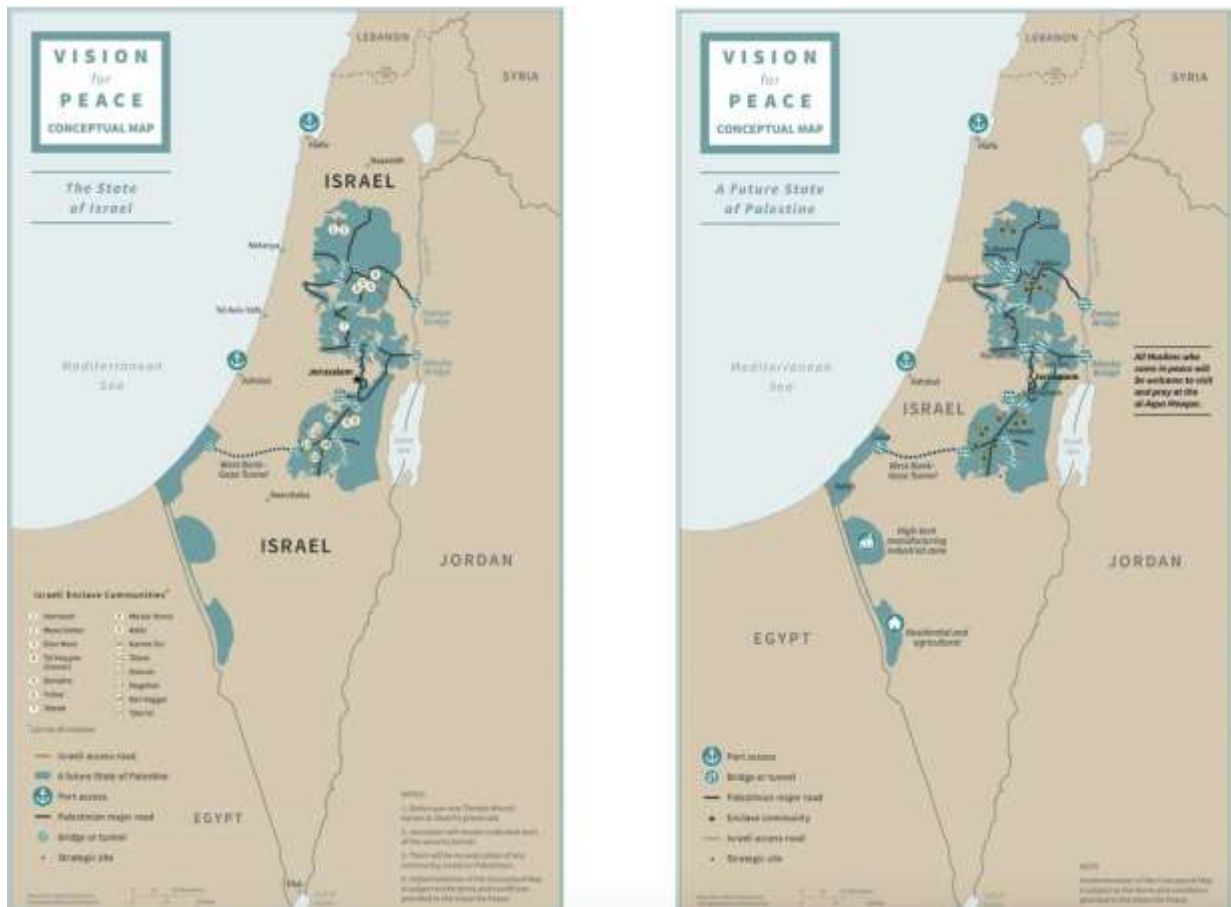
The 1993 Oslo Accord led to a boom in the Palestinian economy. Ramallah and Gaza have nothing to do with the cities this author had known when they were under Israeli rule. Still, their potential for economic development is greatly untapped, and the majority of Palestinians are still poor. Perhaps their leaders like it that way, the better to have absolute control over them? Gaza could become a Singapore on the Mediterranean.

After coming to power through elections in 2006, Hamas has systematically chosen war over economic prosperity. When he decided to withdraw from Gaza, the "hawk" Ariel Sharon had promised more security for the Israelis. The opposite happened. More than a million Israelis are regularly forced to hide in bomb shelters to avoid the deluge of fire that Hamas launches from Gaza. Hamas also murdered dozens of Fatah members when it ousted Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas from Gaza and took control. President Abbas has not been able to set foot in Gaza to see his house there for the past 12 years.

The Palestinians already enjoy broad autonomy. The Israeli economy is prosperous and could employ hundreds of thousands of Palestinians. If they renounce terrorism, the number of those authorized to work in Israel could increase significantly. The Palestinian leaders, if they actually cared about the welfare of people, should focus on development and prosperity rather than on fostering a perverse and morbid culture of "martyrs".

Israel and a future Palestinian state could sign bilateral agreements and cooperate for their mutual benefit in many areas where Israeli expertise is recognized: agriculture, water, scientific research, technology, medicine. Why should the Palestinians be the only people not benefiting from it? The Trump deal could provide a dazzling future for those Palestinians who prioritize their economic situation over ideology. President

Trump is offering money and investments, and it will be in Israel's interest to open its doors to broader economic cooperation.



Last but not least, it is also highly unlikely that any potential Democrat administration would come up with a more Palestinian-friendly plan that could also be accepted by Israel. And in the current global situation, there is little chance that the Palestinian cause will return to the centre of the international agenda and find new allies, except on European and American university campuses.

Instead of openly supporting the Trump Plan, the European Union has already reacted in its usual way: by saying nothing substantial - which is tantamount to preferring the current impasse and encouraging the Palestinians in their rejection of the Trump Plan and Israel. Cynicism will continue to prevail in European diplomatic circles.

Let us be realistic. There is no other plan on the table, and there will probably be no new - better - plan in the coming years. Israel can never give in on the security of its territory or agree on the "right" of Palestinians to "return."

If the Palestinian leaders are sensible, and if they care at all about a peaceful, prosperous future for their people, as well as for the future leaders of a Palestinian state, they will join the negotiation table to deal with Israel on the basis of President Trump's plan. Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority may remain self-righteous and draped in their claims, but it would unmask their real role as corrupt and autocratic leaders, intent on keeping their people as destitute and disempowered as possible.

## Arab League rejects Trump's Peace Plan

By Lina Zaidi  
CMER Board Member



The Arab League said Trump's Middle East plan does not meet the Minimum rights and aspirations of Palestinian people.

The Arab League in early February rejected US President Donald Trump's Middle East plan, saying it did not meet the "minimum rights" of the Palestinians.

The pan-Arab bloc convened in Cairo days after the US unveiled its plan, which is seen as favouring Israel

The meeting brought together Arab senior officials, including Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, Saudi Arabia's foreign minister and the United Arab Emirates' minister of state for foreign affairs.

In a statement released afterwards, the League said it "rejects the US-Israeli 'deal of the century' considering that it does not meet the minimum rights and aspirations of Palestinian people."

Arab states also vowed "not to ... cooperate with the US administration to implement this plan."

They insisted on a two-state solution that includes a Palestinian state based on borders before the 1967 Six-Day War – when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza – and with east Jerusalem as its capital.

The US plan suggests that Israel would retain control of the contested city of Jerusalem as its "undivided capital" and annex settlements on Palestinian lands.

The only Arab ambassadors present at the plan's unveiling were from Bahrain, Oman and the UAE – three of Washington's closest allies in a region where many nations host US forces. Other Arab states gave carefully worded initial responses to the plan, which was strongly rejected by Palestinian leaders.

## **Abbas Chooses Hamas Over Peace with Israel**

By Khaled Abu Toameh



Instead of welcoming the peace plan, designed to give the Palestinians a future, President Mahmoud Abbas has rejected and denounced it as the "deal of shame."

US President Donald Trump's "Peace to Prosperity" plan for peace between Israel and the Palestinians offers hope to the two million Palestinians of the Gaza Strip, which has been ruled by Hamas for more than a decade.

Instead of welcoming the plan, designed to give the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip a prosperous future, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has rejected and denounced it as the "deal of shame" and "slap of the century."

Worse, Abbas has chosen to renew his ties with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the two Iranian-backed groups that are opposed to his policies and have regularly condemned his policies and decisions.

Abbas, in other words, is acting not only against the interests of his people in the Gaza Strip, but also against himself by engaging the same groups that have long been seeking to undermine his rule.

By rejecting Abbas Trump's plan, Abbas is denying the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip the chance of improving their living conditions.

Hamas and Iran have no plans to boost the economy in the Gaza Strip. They also have no intention of creating jobs for thousands of unemployed Palestinians. The only plan Hamas, PIJ and their patrons in Tehran have is one that will bring more suffering and bloodshed to the Palestinians. That, however, does not seem to bother Abbas, who is now seeking to appease Hamas and PIJ.

As the Peace to Prosperity plan accurately points out:



"The people of Gaza have suffered for too long under the repressive rule of Hamas. They have been exploited as hostages and human shields, and bullied into submission. Hamas has failed the people of Gaza and has diverted money belonging to the Palestinians of Gaza, including funds provided by international donors, to attack the State of Israel, instead of using these funds to improve the lives of the people of Gaza. Under the leadership of Hamas, the residents of Gaza have suffered extreme poverty and deprivation. After years of no progress, the donor community is fatigued and reluctant to make additional investments so long as the governance structure in Gaza is run by terrorists who provoke confrontations that lead to more destruction and suffering."

The plan further requires Hamas and PIJ to disarm and calls for the return of Abbas's PA to rule the Gaza Strip. In fact, the wording of Trump's plan is quite compatible with the position of Abbas and his PA officials in the West Bank.

In 2014, Abbas held Hamas responsible for the failure of the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of Israel's Operation Protective Edge, which was in response to the launching of rockets towards Israel.

In 2018, Abbas held Hamas responsible for the bombing of the convoy of former PA Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah in the northern Gaza Strip and threatened to take punitive measures against the terror group. He also repeated his demand that Hamas allow the PA to assume its full responsibilities over the Gaza Strip - exactly as Trump's plan envisages.

Last year, Abbas stepped up his attacks against Hamas by accusing it of working for Israel, and not the Palestinians. He also accused Hamas of obstructing Egyptian efforts to achieve reconciliation with his ruling Fatah faction and end the split between the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Abbas's animosity to Hamas has even prompted him to oppose Israeli gestures to help the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip by initiating various projects to improve the infrastructure there and create job opportunities.

Senior Abbas advisers such as Azzam al-Ahmed have also been launching scathing attacks on Hamas. Ahmed even used the same words as the Trump plan when he accused Hamas of "kidnapping" the Gaza Strip and holding its people hostage.

Abbas evidently shares the same views of the Trump plan regarding the Gaza Strip and Hamas. He too has endorsed an Egyptian proposal to disarm Hamas and other Palestinian terror groups in the Gaza Strip to pave the way for the return of his PA there.

Yet, Abbas now seems to be moving in the opposite direction of his declared policy. On the day Trump released his peace vision, Abbas invited Hamas representatives to an "emergency" meeting of the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah to discuss ways of thwarting the plan.

The Hamas representatives invited by Abbas included Ayman Daraghmeh, Nasser Eddin al-Shaer, Samir Abu Eisheh, Ahmed Atoun, Omar Abdel Razek and Ali al-Sartawi. Hamas leaders have welcomed Abbas's move and invited him to visit the Gaza Strip as soon as possible to discuss ways of working together to foil Trump's "plot."

Khalil al-Hayya, a senior Hamas official in the Gaza Strip, said in response to Abbas's initiative that the Palestinians are "united in confronting Israel with one rifle and one revolution."

Shortly before the unveiling of the Trump vision, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh phoned Abbas and offered to cooperate in efforts to foil the plan.

Abbas has also decided to dispatch a delegation of his Fatah faction to the Gaza Strip next week to hold talks with Hamas and other Palestinian groups about devising a joint strategy to thwart the Trump plan.

Abbas has threatened to renounce all signed agreements with Israel in response to the Trump plan, which he claims is aimed at "liquidating the Palestinian cause."

By forging an alliance with Hamas, a terror group that does not recognize Israel's right to exist, Abbas is already signalling his readiness to join forces with those who oppose any peace process with Israel. Such an alliance effectively places Abbas on the side of Iran and its Hamas and PIJ proxies.

In addition, Abbas's repeated threats to halt security coordination with Israel is tantamount to committing suicide. The security coordination benefits Abbas much more than it benefits Israel. Abbas knows that without Israel's presence in the West Bank, he and his government would be eaten alive by Hamas.

Abbas and Hamas may renew their relations in the near future, but it will be the Palestinians of the Gaza Strip who will suffer, condemned by their leaders to poverty and misery.

Remarkably, without showing a trace of irony, Abbas is rejecting a plan to disarm his own enemies who expelled his government from the Gaza Strip in 2007 and have since been killing, arresting and persecuting his loyalists.

In their response to the "Peace to Prosperity" plan, Palestinian leaders have once again succeeded in what they do best: taking any hope for the wellbeing of their people and driving it straight into the ground.

## The Ever-Elusive Idea of Freedom in the Middle East

By Sam Sweeney



Demonstrators shout slogans during ongoing anti-government protests in Baghdad, Iraq, January 10, 2020.

The past decade of conflict in the Middle East has exposed a gap in the understanding of freedom and of what the idea means in the varying communities, societies, and countries of the region. This misunderstanding has been between the Middle East and the rest of the world (primarily the West), between countries within the region, and within countries themselves, as the concept of freedom has continued to develop over the past century in the region. As layers of “non-freedom” have been peeled back, new barriers to freedom emerge. While this misunderstanding of an idea is not uniquely the cause of the region’s turmoil, it is indeed in the background of most conflicts there, particularly those defined as an oppressed people against a dictatorial regime or aggressive enemy.

Early in the 20th century, freedom in the Middle East was primarily thought of as freedom from colonization — e.g. the freedom of the Turkish people from being divided up by Greece, Russia, France, etc., and the freedom of the Arabs from the Turkish Ottoman Empire, and then from European colonialism, and so on and so forth. The success in gaining freedom from colonialism led directly to the nationalist era in Middle Eastern politics, which in many ways has lasted to today, though it is arguably weaker than it has been since its inception, at least in the Arab countries of the region. Nationalism in its modern form is mostly a foreign concept to the Middle East, existing seriously only since the mid-19th century or so. It is an attempt to import a model that worked in Europe — the nation-state — into a region with a fundamentally different national and social history.

More so than Europe, the Middle East is a patchwork of ethnicities (nations) living on top of, rather than next to, one another? While the European nation-state often subjected those at the periphery to adopt the national identity of the centre — as the culture and language of Paris and Madrid, for example, were imposed on Basques and Catalans — in the Middle East such various groups often live within the same city and overlap in ways that make it impossible to draw a map separating people along ethnic lines. The creation of the nation-state in the Middle East led to a zero-sum game of winners and losers, with competing groups fighting for absolute control over the same territory. After a successful military campaign against Greece, France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, Turkey won its independence and created a state of, by, and for the Turkish people. Through genocide, they eliminated other populations living in the same geographical space — the Armenian, Greek, Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christian communities that formed a demographic threat to the Turkishness of Turkey. The Kurdish population, which became demographically dominant over areas once mixed with Christians, has been suffering the same fate as Turkey's attempt to Turkify every corner of the country continues.

Since the de facto elimination of Turkey's Christian population, the Turkish state has made token gestures of outreach to the remaining minuscule communities, because they no longer represent a serious threat to the Turkishness of Turkey. Promoting the small remaining minorities allows Turkey to maintain its standing in the international community, even as it continues its campaign to Turkify public and private life. Last year, for example, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a big show of announcing the construction of a new Syriac Orthodox church in Istanbul. Erdogan is unlikely to make the same gesture to the Kurdish community in the near future, although Kurds had a lot of hope in Erdogan and his AKP (Justice and Development Party) when they first took power. As the situation stands today, however, Kurdish nationalism and Turkish nationalism are competing forces that cannot exist side by side, and Turkish nationalism is one and the same as the state of Turkey. And so the Kurdish struggle for freedom in Turkey, as in Iraq, Syria, and Iran, remains a national (ethnic) struggle for collective freedom.

In the Arab-majority countries of the Middle East, the postcolonial trajectory went strongly in the direction of pan-Arab nationalism. Arabs in the 19th century had come to resent Ottoman (Turkish) rule over Arabs. The *nahda*, or renaissance, the intellectual reawakening of the Arab world in the 19th century, started as a cultural movement but by the turn of the 20th century had taken on a political tone as well. In *Le Réveil de la Nation Arabe* (1905), one of the founding texts of the political Arab nationalist project, Negib Azoury (writing in French, probably showing that his primary audience was foreign governments, soon to become colonial rulers over the region) laid out the vision: "The Arab countries to the Arabs, Kurdistan to the Kurds, Armenia to the Armenians, the Turkish countries to the Turks, Albania to the Albanians, the Islands of the Archipelago to Greece, and Macedonia split between the Greeks, the Serbs, and the Bulgarians." In World War I, this idea of (collective) Arab freedom culminated in the support of Hussein bin Ali, the sharif of Mecca, for the British side against the Ottoman Empire, in exchange for the promise of (collective) Arab freedom after the war, in the form of a unified Arab nation with Hussein as monarch. The Brits, however, abandoned the promise, and the Arab world, split between French and British colonization and influence, was divided into the countries we know today. Freedom meant Arab freedom from the Ottomans first, then from the British and French.

As the countries won independence from the European colonial powers, the powerful appeal of pan-Arab nationalism grew across the region, whose people felt that the contemporary map represented an arbitrary division of Arab people (nation). The most potent manifestation of this sentiment as a political project was the United Arab Republic, in which Syria and Egypt joined to form one country from 1958 to 1961. While the project was supposed to be the first step toward the unity of the Arab world, the reality was that Syria became an Egyptian colony under Gamal Abdul Nasser. The unity project was undone by a coup of Syrian officers who restored Syria's independence.

Although Syrian governments continued to proclaim Arab unity as their stated objective, particularly after the Baath party came to power in 1963, pan-Arabism was essentially dead as a practical political project, living on only as a sentiment to rally the masses. Syria's situation was similar to that of many other Arab countries. The ideological struggle that characterized the first several decades after independence from European colonization was replaced by authoritarian dictatorships still espousing Arab unity, but focusing inward on the project of subjugating non-Arab peoples to Arab domination, and of subjecting all dissenters — Arab or otherwise — to the authority of state (often one and the same as the ruling party).

Ethnic struggles (such as that of the Kurds) for collective freedom remained potent, but now the majority-Arab populations of countries such as Syria and Iraq identified a new barrier to freedom: dictatorial regimes and their leaders. Dissent was suppressed to terrifying degrees, resulting in various forms of resistance emerging from different corners: liberal democrats, Islamists, ethnic and religious minorities, majorities not in power, etc. Also contributing to this new understanding was the importation of liberalism with its emphasis on individual rights. Again, people sought to bring to the Middle East a model that worked in Europe, where governments treated citizens as individuals and guaranteed their rights regardless of their religious or ethnic identity. The first barrier to freedom was removed, that of foreign domination, but, peeled away, it only exposed further layers of oppression. The principle of individual rights has a powerful appeal, however, and won't be written off by people in the region even as the Middle East descends further into chaos, and, viewed from the outside, events seem to be driven more by ethnic and sectarian divisions than by struggles for liberal democracy.

In Syria, for example, where the struggle for collective Arab freedom from Turkish and European colonization had succeeded, those dissatisfied with Baathist rule transitioned to a struggle for different freedoms. For some, the struggle was for individual freedom, such as political freedoms and freedom of expression. For others, the struggle for religious freedom was paramount. In practice, that latter struggle often meant the replacement of authoritarian pseudo-secularism with authoritarian and majoritarian religious rule. In 2011, those two struggles — for individual freedoms and for religious freedoms, causes often integrated in the minds of those who fought for them — moved against their common enemy: the oppressive Baathist state. Their proponents did not, however, have a shared vision for the post-Baathist Syria, and, of course, the lines between the two strains of thought were blurry. Did freedom mean individual rights, particularly in the political realm? Or an increased role for the majority-Sunni religion in the public realm? In working against Baathist repression, what the liberal intellectual elite sought was very different from what, say, the Muslim Brotherhood sought.

Meanwhile, in a parallel development, non-Arab ethnic groups continued to pursue the collective freedom that Arabs had already gained. In Iraq, the Kurds had fought a long, on-again, off-again battle for collective rights against the Iraqi state. Working to secure the rights of their people to be recognized as non-Arab populations, Kurds and Syriacs in northeastern Syria founded several new political parties. In 2003, the PYD (Democratic Union Party) was founded to represent Kurdish political rights, though Kurdish political parties had long existed. Likewise, the Syriac Union Party was founded in 2005, seeking recognition for the Syriac (Christian) minority to be recognized as non-Arabs.

For these movements, the struggle for freedom was primarily a struggle for the recognition of the existence of non-Arab peoples within the Syrian *Arab* Republic, as the country is officially known. From 2012 onward, these parties came to power in Syria's northeast and eventually formed the Autonomous Administration, which governs the areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces, an alliance representing multiple ethnicities. The most fundamental principle of the Autonomous Administration has been that each ethnic or religious community has the right to exist within a common polity. Critics see it as a Kurdish nationalist project disguised as pluralism and simply replacing the existing "Arabistan" with a Kurdistan, but its defenders say it is the only system to recognize the equality of the Kurdish, Syriac, and Arab communities (alongside smaller minorities including Armenians, Turkmen, and Circassians). More so than the Syrian opposition, it has also recognized that Syrians see themselves first as members of a group and then as individuals, at least on a political level. And individual rights can be guaranteed only when the rights of the various collectives within Syria have been firmly established.

This project was protected by the Western military presence in Syria's northeast but now faces an existential threat from both Turkey and the Syrian government. Following President Trump's decision — now again reversed — to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, Turkey invaded the area (or, more accurately, Turkish threats of an invasion prompted the U.S. withdrawal). Turkey's opposition to the Autonomous Administration comes primarily from the fear that this model could embolden the Kurdish community, whose collective rights continue to be denied by the Turkish government. The majorities in Turkey (Turkish) and Syria (Arab) have little sympathy for Kurdish aspirations and demand minority submission to the larger nationalist project. It is no surprise, then, that the largely Kurdish political party in Turkey, the HDP (People's Democratic Party), quickly denounced the attempted military coup of July 2016 in Turkey, despite their strong opposition to Erdogan's AKP government. Had the coup succeeded, they would merely have been switching one Turkish nationalist oppressor for another. Likewise, the Kurdish community of Syria's northeast was slower to call for the fall of the regime in 2011, as a simple switch from the Baathist regime to the opposition would have been trading one Arab nationalist entity for another, so deeply is pan-Arabism engrained in the Syrian national psyche, regime and opposition alike.

The conundrum, then, for those calling for and seeking "freedom" in the Middle East is that, as layers of "non-freedom" are peeled back, new layers of non-freedom appear. Sometimes the layers remain unpeeled and their contradictions unexposed. For Palestinians, for example, the struggle for freedom remains a collective one, and the barrier to that freedom remains Israel and Zionism. But if those barriers were removed, perhaps in the form of an independent Palestinian state, would the Palestinian people be free? Maybe yes, maybe no. They would find themselves in the

same situation as that of their Arab neighbours who have long had freedom from a colonial power. Still, they can hardly be considered free, if the last decade of unrest in the region is any indication that the people have not considered the status quo to be “freedom,” however defined.

Each country in the Arab world has its own distinct history and unique political structure, so generalizations across the region are difficult. However, it is striking to note that, *almost* without exception, the Arab countries with a monarchical system have not experienced serious threats to the state’s power since the start of the Arab spring: Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait. Bahrain is a tricky example, but it can be included as well for now.

In contrast, the republics of the region have all seen either governmental collapse or serious threats to the state’s hold on power: Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Iraq. Here, Lebanon presents a tricky example, but ongoing protests there against the government show that the system in Lebanon is vulnerable as well; it can be included here, despite its unique demographics and history, which set it apart from other countries in the region.

This contrast between the monarchies and the republics (a couple of anomalies notwithstanding) opens up the question of legitimacy and power and of how they relate to freedom: Is it possible to create a legitimate system that guarantees the rights both of the individual and of the various collectives in these diverse countries? The monarchies have created legitimacy but are mostly not free. Some of the republics, including Iraq and Lebanon, are “free” to a point of anarchy. Finding the right system, one that can provide both freedom and legitimacy, is the primary task facing the Arab world today, and is relevant to non-Arab countries of the region as well.

A legitimate political system that can guarantee freedom remains elusive in the Middle East. Identifying such a system, and figuring out how to implement it, should be the primary task of serious thinkers in the region. Can protesters in Beirut and Baghdad provide an answer to the problem? It is probably not on the front of their minds as they dodge bullets from their elected governments. However, the success or failure at creating a legitimate, free political system will determine the future of the region more than anything else as the Middle East enters the third decade of the 21st century, stumbling along, bloodily.

## Blame Iran for its own Problems

By Peter Rawlings  
CMER Board Member



There have been many untruths spoken about the American role in Iran since the rise of the revolutionary Islamist government in 1979. As Hassan Rouhani, the current president of Iran, famously audiences at a campaign rally: “The beautiful cry of ‘Death to America!’ unites our people.” (Rouhani, mind you, is supposedly a moderate.) In fact, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism have been foundational pillars of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Whereas the “Blame America First” crowd throughout the world largely assumes that the Americans brought the threat of the Islamic Republic of Iran on themselves, the Americans are not responsible in any way for the abiding radicalism of the regime.

Let us first divide the events which led to the rise of the current Islamist regime in 1979 from the events of August 1953, when an Anglo-American plot to remove Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh went into action. Too often, critics of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran conflate these two seminal events, using Washington’s role in the 1953 so-called coup to excuse the various provocations of the Iranian regime since 1979.

Much like today (and in 1979), the Iran of 1953 was a hotbed of political uncertainty. The British and Soviets had divided the country between themselves during the Second World War when the Iranian king, known as the Shah, was rumoured to be sympathetic to the Nazis. The British and Soviets forced the Shah to abdicate and hand power to his oldest son, Reza Pahlavi. The shahs had ruled Iran (previously known as Persia) since Cyrus the Great was coronated more than 2,000 years before the Second World War. Iran was a constitutional monarchy and in 1951 the Shah appointed Mohammad Mossadegh, a democratic firebrand who was both stringently anti-monarchical as well as fiercely anti-imperialist, to become prime minister. (The Iranian parliament had already nominated Mossadegh as such.)



**Iran in 1953: Cauldron of Chaos**

After the Second World War, the Soviets withdrew from Iran, leaving only the British Empire. Britain was Iran's primary trading partner. Through the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (now British Petroleum), Britain developed and enjoyed most of the fruits of Iranian oil and natural gas. Mossadegh was unhappy with this arrangement. He understandably wanted Iran to have a greater stake in the British mining operation. The British refused and cut off trade with Iran.

Soon, the fledgling Iran was isolated economically and diplomatically. These actions drastically harmed Iran's economy and caused political instability in the country. As the instability increased, the Shah sought to remove Mossadegh and restore good relations with the West. Meanwhile, Mossadegh became politically reliant on the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party.

The closer that Mossadegh got to the Tudeh Party, the more worried the Americans became. At that time, the United States had successfully contained the Soviet Union. If, however, a pro-Soviet regime arose in Iran, then Moscow would have broken its containment and would have gained access to one of the world's most bountiful oil and natural-gas hubs, as well as Iran's vital warm-water ports for the Soviet Navy. With the British, the Americans acted to oust Mossadegh. Yet, as Darioush Bayandor outlined in his 2010 book on the matter, the Anglo-American plot to overthrow Mossadegh was not the reason why the democratic prime minister was overthrown. In fact, the British and American intelligence operation was largely on the periphery of the movement against Mossadegh. The Anglo-American mission was but one of many attempts by various parties within Iran to push Mossadegh out from his position.

Further, Iran's clerical class—the same people who ultimately founded the Islamic Republic in 1979 and today wage a little Cold War against the United States and its allies—opposed Mossadegh as much as the British and Americans did. Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Borujerdi, one of Ruhollah Khomeini's mentors, was the supreme leader of the Shiite faith in Iran. He was fond of telling followers, *mamlekat shah mikhahad*, or "the country needs the king." Yet, Borujerdi represented the old guard. His students, like Ruhollah Khomeini, who would go on to found the Islamic Republic in 1979, did not share Borujerdi's traditionalism.

These young, avant-garde Islamists hated the Shah, because he was a vestige of Iran's history of unbelief. What's more, the Shah's close relationship with the West meant he was a conduit for Christian and Zionist influence. Mossadegh, however, was no better, according to the revolutionary Islamists in Iran. After all, Mossadegh's close associations with the Tudeh Party implied that his continuation in power would inevitably lead Iran into the bosom of the Soviets. This, in turn, would be a disaster for the Islamists, as the only thing more revolting than Western democracy was Soviet Communism. Besides, Mossadegh and the Tudeh Party supported women's rights in Iran, which was a non-starter for the Islamists. (The matter of women's rights in Iran would ultimately be one of the motivations for the Islamic revolution in 1979.)

**The Islamists of Iran are demagogues**

Generally, the Islamists chose to sit the 1953 coup out. Some Islamists did involve themselves in the coup, but it was to assist the Anglo-American plotters in removing Mossadegh. So why do critics of U.S. actions continue to argue that if the United States had not involved itself in the internal affairs of Iran in 1953, hostilities between the Washington and Tehran would not exist today?

The clerics who toppled the Shah in 1979 did not behave as they did to avenge Mohammad Mossadegh's ouster in 1953. What's more, the Islamic Republic today does not engage in international terrorism and nuclear brinkmanship with the West because of America's ancillary role in the Mossadegh affair in 1953. The Iranian regime behaves as it does because it adheres to an ideology that is inherently violent and expansionistic. Such a regime will brook little compromise with the unbelieving West and will make good on its threat to see that Israel is "removed and eradicated."

So, when Iranian leaders blame America for their malicious actions, know that the Islamists of Iran are demagogues unworthy of being taken seriously. And as the Iranian people continue marching in protest against the regime—while refusing to engage in the time-honoured Iranian practice of stomping on American and Israeli flags—understand that the United States did not cause any of the events in Iran over the last 40 years. Only the Islamists have brought Iran to its present state. More importantly, only the Iranian people can remedy this sad state of affairs.

## **Iran Military Modernization Clipped by Sanctions**

By Simon Veazey



Iranian Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets perform during a parade on the occasion of the country's Army Day

Iran's military ambitions will continue to rely on proxies, "hybrid warfare," naval power, and missile defence according to an unclassified Pentagon report, but will be clipped by financial constraints and sanctions.

When a UN arms embargo on Iran is lifted next October, Russia and China are expected to supply tanks and fighter jets, according to the Nov. 19, 2019 intelligence report.

The report is a snapshot of how the Pentagon sees the 40-year-old Islamic regime's current military strengths, strategies, and ambitions, following the publication of similar unclassified documents by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) on Russia and China in the last couple of years.

"Iran employs a hybrid approach to warfare using both conventional and unconventional elements," said Christian Saunders, the DIA senior analyst on Iran, in a statement.

"On the conventional side, Iran's military strategy is primarily based on deterrence and the ability to retaliate against an attacker," he added. "Iran also uses unconventional warfare operations and a network of militant partners and proxies to enable Tehran to advance its interests in the region, as well as attain strategic depth."

Echoing the DIA report, Saunders said that Iran relies on three core capabilities: ballistic missiles, naval forces capable of threatening navigation in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and unconventional capabilities including the use of partners and proxies abroad.

When Iran is unleashed from a UN ban on buying many conventional weapons from abroad next October, it will have access to “advanced capabilities that have been beyond its reach for decades,” notes the report.



An Iranian woman looks at Taer-2 missile during a street exhibition

Iran’s military spending rose after the implementation of the Iran nuclear deal in 2014 but dropped this year for the first time after the Trump administration pulled out and imposed oil sanctions.

“Ongoing financial constraints and sanctions will challenge Iran’s military modernization efforts,” according to the report.

Iran already has the largest fleet of missiles in the Middle East, which is expected to continue growing in number and accuracy, according to the report.

Developments of its space launch vehicle program could also serve as the test bed for the development of intercontinental ballistic missile technologies, according to the report.

### **‘Limited’ Offensive Capacity**

But while Iran fields impressive missile Defence, its ability to flex its military muscle outside its borders are “limited.”

“Iran has embraced ballistic missiles as a long-range strike capability to dissuade its adversaries from attacking Iran,” said Saunders, noting that the arsenal includes long-range ballistic missiles with a range of 2,000 kilometres (1,243 miles).

“Iran’s naval capabilities emphasize an anti-access, aerial-denial strategy,” Saunders said. “Iran’s layered maritime capabilities emphasize asymmetric tactics using numerous platforms and wagons intended to overwhelm an adversary’s naval force.”

The use of proxies and partners is also central to Iran’s strategy, according to the report.

Iran relies on countries such as Russia and China for the procurement of advanced conventional capabilities, according to the report, and has also bought military equipment from North Korea, Belarus, and Ukraine.

“The IRGC [The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] Qods Force, Iran’s primary tool for unconventional operations, maintains a wide network of non-state partners, proxies and affiliates throughout the region,” said Saunders. “Iran provides a range of financial, political, training and material support to groups which would include Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militant groups, the Houthis in Yemen, some Palestinian groups, the Taliban, and Bahraini Shia militants.”

Tehran seeks to establish itself as a dominant middle-east power, according to the DIA report, and has a long-standing opposition to the United States.

“Throughout its 40-year history, the Islamic Republic of Iran has remained implacably opposed to the United States, our presence in the Middle East, and our support to Israel,” says the DIA report. “Tehran has committed itself to becoming the dominant power in the turbulent and strategic Middle East. Its ambitions and identity as a largely Persian Shia power in a region composed of primarily Arab Sunni states often put it at odds with its neighbours, most of which look to the United States and the West to guarantee their security.”

“Distrust of the United States predates the regime’s founding,” according to the report.

“Many regime elites view regional dynamics through the lens of perceived U.S. aggression, leading some to adopt the extreme view that the United States created ISIS in part to weaken Iran and its allies.

Under United Nations Security Council 2231, Iran is banned from procuring “most types of conventional weapon systems from abroad” according to the report. “However, these restrictions are set to expire by October 2020, providing Tehran with the opportunity to acquire some advanced capabilities that have been beyond its reach for decades.”

“Iran will be permitted to purchase conventional systems it is unable to produce domestically, such as advanced fighter aircraft and main battle tanks. Iran is already evaluating and discussing military hardware for purchase primarily from Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.”

## Iranian Women Defy the Mullahs; Western Feminists Nowhere in Sight

By Giulio Meotti



Veiled women appear in a propaganda show on Iranian state television

In October 1979, in a rare interview with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the late Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci charged that the veil was symbolic of the segregation into which the Islamic revolution women had cast women. "Our customs," Khomeini answered, "are none of your business. If you do not like Islamic dress, you're not obliged to wear it because Islamic dress is for good and proper young women."

"That's very kind of you," Fallaci replied. "And since you said so, I'm going to take off this stupid, medieval rag right now." Fallaci removed her veil and left the room without saying another word. Iranian women, emulating Fallaci, are now leading protests against the regime.

Soon after Iran's regime admitted having shot down a Ukrainian passenger aircraft on January 8, Iranian women outside Tehran began tearing down posters of the assassinated terrorist, General Qasem Soleimani. A few hours earlier, the ayatollahs had attacked the Ain al-Assad base in Iraq, which houses U.S. troops. Before *that*, a picture was circulated on social media of an Iranian referee at the Women's World Chess Championship, Shohreh Bayat, overseeing a game without wearing a headscarf. "People should have the right to choose the way they want to dress, it should not be forced," Bayat said, challenging Iran's rule that mandates a strict Islamic dress code for women.

"Should I start with hello, goodbye or condolences? Hello oppressed people of Iran, goodbye noble people of Iran, my condolences to you people who are always mourning," Kimia Alizadeh, Iran's Taekwondo bronze medal champion, at the 2016 Rio Olympics, wrote after moving to Europe. She, too, protested the "obligatory veil."

On January 13, three Iranian female television presenters resigned from the regime's broadcaster, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). "Forgive me for the 13 years

I told you lies", Gelare Jabbari apologized in an Instagram post after state officials had denied for days that a Ukrainian passenger jet had been shot down by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, killing 176 passengers and crew.

These self-exiling Iranian women are similar to the dissidents behind the Soviet Iron Curtain, who eventually found refuge in the West. Their role in defeating the Soviet Union was fundamental: they opened the eyes of the Western public opinion to the reality in their country.

The Iranian women now openly challenging the mullahs remind one the era before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when the veil was not mandatory. Pictures from that time show women wearing no veils. Overnight, clothing then went "from miniskirt to hijab."

"I'm sorry to say that the chador was forced on women", said Zahra Eshraghi, a granddaughter of Ayatollah Khomeini. "Forced - in government buildings, in the school my daughter attends. This garment that was traditional Iranian dress was turned into a symbol of revolution."

The last empress of Iran, Farah Diba, noted that "in our time, women were active in all sorts of different areas. At one point, the number of Iranian women going to university was more than the men." But they "are now abused and disrespected and have had their rights taken away and yet they're so incredibly brave."

You can see in a photograph from 1979, how women took the streets to protest the veil. "This was taken on 8 March 1979, the day after the hijab law was brought in, decreeing that women in Iran would have to wear scarves to leave the house," said the photographer, Hengameh Golestan. "Many people in Tehran went on strike and took to the streets. It was a huge demonstration with women - and men... We were fighting for freedom". Since then, women have not gone out uncovered.

At the time, 100,000 women protested Islamist rule. Today, courageous Iranian women are leading the uprising against the Iranian regime. They know the price: many who have taken part in anti-regime protests have been raped and tortured in prison. The mullahs, too, know that 40 million Iranian women are under their surveillance and that if these women as a group rebel against sharia, the Islamic revolution will implode. This fear may be part of the reason the regime is scapegoating the West.

When Iran's current supreme "guide", Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, gave a speech about the veil, he blamed Iran's "enemies" for trying to "deceive a handful of girls to remove their hijabs on the street." In 2009, the symbol of the Iranian protests was Neda Agha-Soltan, a young woman murdered by the regime. The case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, an Iranian woman sentenced to death by stoning supposedly for "adultery", spurred rallies in France, which may have had a role her eventual release. Two years ago, another Iranian woman, Vida Movahedi, became a symbol of defiance in Tehran after she waved a white scarf.

Books on Iranian dissent - such as *Persepolis* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* - have been written by women. Women are fighting the ayatollahs. The 1,500 people killed by Iran's regime in the recent crackdown on protesters, as reported to Reuters by Iranian interior ministry officials, included about 400 women.

According to the Iranian-French novelist Chahla Chafiq:

"Their act challenges us, above all, about the infernal order that the Islamic Republic establishes by making discrimination and violence against women sacred in the name of God... The demonization of women's bodies as places of sin, symbolized by the obligation to wear the veil, implies a series of prohibitions that alter the lives of women, who are subjected to constant humiliation and suffering."

A human rights lawyer, Nasrin Sotoudeh, who has represented women protesting the veil, was sentenced in March to 38.5 years in prison, of which she must serve 12. Activists Yasaman Aryani, her mother Monireh Arabshahi and Mojgan Keshavarz, were arrested after posting a video showing themselves without headscarves while distributing flowers to passengers. Three women charged with "disrespecting the compulsory hijab" have been sentenced to a total of 55 years. Shaparak Shajarizadeh, a 43-year-old woman from Tehran, has been sentenced to two years in prison for removing her veil. Azam Jangravi, who held her headscarf in the air and waved it above her head in a busy street of Tehran, said she did it for her eight-year-old daughter. "I was telling myself: 'Viana should not grow up in the same conditions in this country that you grew up in'", she said.

Iran's mullahs seem to be willing to do everything in their power to destroy this women's movement. They have sentenced women, who shared videos of removing their veils, to 10 years in prison, and have introduced 2,000 new "morality police" units to break up the women's movement. The Iranian regime is also producing propaganda videos about the hijab. One girl, who had attempted to enter a football stadium in Tehran disguised as a man, set herself on fire after her trial. Iranian women have "the highest rate of suicide among women and girls in the Middle East."

The veil, however, is not their only problem. Behind the veil, there are more activities that are risky for women in Iran: dancing, singing, playing music or shaking hands with men. Before 1979, Iranian women had freedom. They want it back.

"The flame of feminism is alive in Iran", *Foreign Policy* reported. If Iranian feminists who refuse to wear the hijab are brave, their Western counterparts, who wear pink hats, have wretchedly abandoned them. Federica Mogherini, the EU's former foreign policy chief who, while wearing a chador on official visits to Iran, took selfies with Iranian lawmakers, has said not one word about these extraordinary women.

Masih Alinejad, who helped spearhead the Iranian women's campaign against the forced wearing of headscarves, addressed female Western politicians who were covering themselves while visiting Iran: "Let me be clear with you: calling a discriminatory law a part of our culture - this is an insult to a nation", she said. The Iranian regime promptly arrested members of her family.

Iran's 1979 revolution created the first modern state based on Islamic principles. The ayatollahs proved that governance based on sharia was possible with the first modern effort to establish a Muslim theocracy. The centre of their system was the subjugation of women.

Thirty years ago, the Berlin Wall was torn down by ordinary citizens who wanted to reclaim their freedom of movement. Today, the wall of the Iranian regime could be torn down by these ordinary women who want to reclaim the freedom to wear what they like. They are bravely refusing to walk on flags of Israel and the U.S. - and enjoying the wind in their hair again.



## Change the Regime in Tehran

By Susan Yao  
CMER Board Member



Iran's "Supreme Leader" Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (left), and President Hassan Rouhani.

The goal of US policy on Iran, really to exert "maximum pressure," should be the change of the mullah-led regime in Tehran before it is armed with nuclear weapons, becomes the hegemon of the Persian Gulf and commands much of the world's oil and gas. Iran is already seeking to take over Iraq, OPEC's second-largest crude oil producer, with the fifth-largest oil reserves, in the world.

But helping to spur the end of the Iranian empire - or, at least, keeping its power in check - cannot be accomplished without a clear knowledge and understanding of the nature of the regime.

As much of the mainstream the media and members of the political class revealed in their comments about the January 3 targeted killing of the mass murderer, Qasem Soleimani - commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) - there is a grave misunderstanding, particularly among Democrats, about the ideology and terrorist threat that the regime poses to the United States and the rest of the world.

Take Representative Earl Blumenauer (D-Or), for example. The 22-year veteran of the US Congress recently seemed to justify Iranian aggression against the US. In a newsletter on his website on January 7 - in which he criticized the killing of Soleimani, Blumenauer wrote, in part:

"...Most Iranians have an affinity for the United States, dating back to the constitutional revolution of 1905. America was respected, revered, and appreciated. But it was the United States that chose to side with the British in overthrowing a popularly elected government in Iran in 1953 in order to restore British control over Iranian oil. We were partners in restoring the Shah to the throne, replacing their democracy and ushering

in an era of repression. The United States helped foster the Iranian revolution where we were perceived as being their enemy. There was a reason Iranian crowds chanted 'death to America.'

To set the record straight: The so-called "coup" in Iran in 1953 was more complicated than is reported. The Iranian Constitution at the time - prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution that ousted Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and replaced him with the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini - gave the Shah the power, which he exercised, to dismiss then-Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh. The reason the Shah dismissed his prime minister was that Mosaddegh was turning over Iran's British-managed oil fields to the Soviet Union and negotiating with the Kremlin to establish a military base in the Persian Gulf - both of which the Shah's British and American allies viewed with alarm.

The real root of Iran's current global terror campaign, which it carries out through the IRGC, is religious, ideological and hegemonic.

According to the section of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran titled "An Ideological Army":

"In establishing and equipping the defence forces of the country, the focus shall be on maintaining ideology and faith as the foundation and the measure. Consequently, the Army of the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Pasdaran Revolutionary Corps are formed in accordance with the aforementioned objective. They will undertake the responsibility of not only guarding and protecting the borders, but also the weight of ideological mission, i.e. striving (jehād) on the path of God and struggle on the path of expanding the sovereignty of the law of God in the world; in accordance with the Qur'anic verse: 'Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies' (8: 60)."

In other words, Tehran seeks to "expand sovereignty of the law of God in the world" in accordance with the Quran. To achieve this, the ayatollahs need to take control of the Persian Gulf - and the trillions of dollars of oil wealth that it contains - as well as nuclear weapons.

Killing Soleimani, a key figure in accomplishing the above goal, triggered a debate about US foreign policy in relation to Iran that makes no sense. To argue that an enemy combatant with the blood of hundreds of Americans on his hands should not have been targeted, critics of the Trump administration would have to claim that Soleimani had no role in terrorist attacks against America, or that whatever role he played was justified in some way.

Even though a number of critics of the Trump administration acknowledge that Soleimani was key to Iran's hydra-headed terror state, in a new twist, some are claiming that the New Year's attack on the US Embassy compound in Baghdad and the January 7 attack on American troops were acts of retribution over Trump's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear deal reached between Iran and world powers in 2015, which incidentally the Iranians never signed.

Susan Rice, former National Security Advisor to President Barack Obama, seems to think that those missile attacks, and other terrorist activities perpetrated by Iran or its

proxies, would not have taken place had the US administration upheld the JCPOA – which, by the way, Obama had effectively bribed Tehran into accepting by awarding it US\$150 billion. In an interview with MSNBC on January 8, Rice said:

"In the years since the signing of the deal in 2015, up until President Trump's unilateral withdrawal abandoning our allies against the advice of his advisers, there were no proxy attacks by Iranian proxies on US personnel in Iraq. There were no efforts by Iran to attack our drones in the Persian Gulf or attack shipping... President Trump decided recklessly to withdraw unilaterally from the nuclear deal and to impose so-called 'maximum pressure' – crippling sanctions – and it was in the wake of that that we found ourselves in this escalatory cycle that's led to where we are today."

Rice failed to mention something that Obama, Trump, Israel and other observers has known all along: Iran never actually upheld its side of the JCPOA – which in any event was a bad deal: it did not prevent the development of long-range ballistic missiles, and merely postponed the time at which Tehran could continue enriching uranium for building an unlimited number of nuclear bombs.

Aiding the Iranian people to oust the regime does not, however, require the US to launch a full-fledged war with the Islamic Republic. On the contrary, a four-pronged strategy of maximum pressure- involving continued financial pressure on the mullahs; helping local forces expel Iranian proxy groups from Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen; supporting the Iranian protesters through a robust social-media campaign promising a future without repression and terror, and using appropriate military force to deter and protect our interests - would get the job done without troops on the ground.

Meanwhile, Washington should work on building European consensus on negotiating a new nuclear agreement that ends Iran's uranium enrichment and dismantles its nuclear and ballistic-missile programs.

# Tehran's Chinese Dream Can't Replace its Nightmare

By Amir Taheri



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping on January 23, 2016 in Tehran.

Could General Qassem Soleimani's dramatic demise provide the shock therapy to persuade those who wield real power in Tehran to admit the failure of a strategy that has led Iran into an impasse? This was the question discussed in a zoom conference with a number of academics from one of Iran's leading universities.

The fact itself that the issue could be debated must be regarded as significant. It indicates the readiness of more and more Iranians to defy the rules of silence imposed by the regime and raise taboo issues more or less openly.

In the course of the discussion one participant drew a parallel between Soleimani's death and that of Marshal Lin Biao, the Chinese Communist defence minister whose demise in an air crash in 1971 opened the way for a radical change of course by Maoist China.

Lin's elimination enabled Chinese reformists, then led by Prime Minister Chou En-lai, to isolate the so-called "Gang of Four" hardliners, led by Mao's wife Jian Qing, and bring the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to a close as prelude to a historic change of course designed to transform the People's Republic from a vehicle for a revolutionary cause into a normal nation-state. Within a few years, the People's Republic under Deng Xiaoping's leadership was building a capitalist economy with a totalitarian political frame, discarding dreams of "exporting revolution".

Having lost its revolutionary legitimacy, the Chinese Communist regime started building a new source of legitimacy through economic success and the dramatic rise in living standards for hundreds of millions across the country. The Chinese found out that producing and exporting goods that people wanted across the globe was easier

and more profitable than trying to export a revolution that no one, perhaps apart from a few students in London and Paris, thirsted for.

However, the parallel isn't exact. Lin was accused of having secret ties with "Imperialism" and plotting a coup against Chairman Mao while Soleimani was regarded as "Supreme Guide" Ali Khamenei's most faithful aide. Lin had a glittering biography, having led the People's Liberation Army in numerous battles to victory with his conquest of Beijing as the final bouquet.

In contrast, even Soleimani's most ardent admirers are unable to name a single battle which he fought, let alone won. Even now his adulators only claim political successes for him, including his supposed success in preventing the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and seizing control of the Lebanese state apparatus through surrogates.

Nevertheless, Soleimani's demise does provide an opportunity for a serious review of Khamenei's policy of "exporting revolution" which has cost Iran astronomical sums and countless lives with not a single country adopting the Khomeinist ideology and system of government.

The idea of imitating the Chinese model isn't new in Iran. It was first raised in 1990 by then President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who went as far as asserting, only half-jokingly, that he would even be prepared to discard the clerical garb to adapt to the modern world. The Shah had promised that he would turn Iran into "a second Japan". Rafsanjani promised a "second China."

The Shah could not fulfil his promise because he was hit by the Islamic Revolution on the road and had to go into exile. Rafsanjani's "second China" also remained a dead dream with the would-be Iranian version of Deng Xiaoping just managing to stay alive and out of jail, barely tolerated by the real "deciders" as an embarrassing uncle.

Some of Rafsanjani's close associates now tell me that he was "a bit of a coward" and lost his opportunity to do a Deng Xiaoping by being sucked into corrupt business deals. According to them, Rafsanjani didn't realize that one starts making money for himself, his family and his entourage after one has done a Deng Xiaoping, and not before. Deng's family, including his daughter, son-in-law and hangers-on made their millions after China had been de-Maoized. In Rafsanjani's case, the millions were made without any attempt at de-Khomeinization.

At the time Rafsanjani played his "China" tune. I argued in several articles that the Deng model was not applicable to the Islamic Republic. In China, Maoism, is quirkiness notwithstanding, was a potent ideology, mixing nationalism, xenophobic resentment, and crude egalitarianism symbolized by the imposition of uniforms and collective production units. In contrast, the Khomeinist ideology was never developed into a coherent narrative while its open hostility to Iranian nationalism gave it an alien aura. Moreover, the Chinese revolution had triumphed after decades of struggle including a huge civil war involving tens of millions on opposite sides.

In contrast, the Khomeinist revolution succeeded in around four months because the Shah, unwilling to order mass repression, decided to abandon power and leave.

There are other differences between Iran today and China in the 1980s. The People's Republic was firmly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party which had at least five million trained and disciplined cadres capable of passing its message to society as a

whole and mobilizing support for any change of strategy. The Khomeinist republic has no such structure and its support base, mired in corruption, finds it increasingly hard to communicate with society at large. The mass gatherings that the regime organizes should deceive no one.

Today, the Tehran "deciders" constitute a small, increasingly isolated minority caught in an imagined past and fearful of the future. Worse still, many "deciders" have already put part of their money abroad, having sent their children to Europe and America. Going through a who-is-who of these "deciders" one is amazed by how many are behaving as carpetbaggers, treating Iran as a land to plunder, sending the proceeds to the West. They cannot produce an Iranian "Deng" because they don't want to create a productive economy; all they are interested in is to get the money and run. Nor are they able to build the state institutions needed for a modern economy capable of seeking a credible place in the global market.

The machinery that Deng and his team inherited was certainly repressive and outmoded by the higher international standards. However, within its own paradigms, it worked. In contrast, the Khomeinist republic, though as outmoded and repressive as the Maoist regime, simply doesn't work. Lacking any mechanism for self-reform it resembles the blindfolded horse in ancient mills going round and round, grinding the seeds of a bitter harvest.

## Free Kylie Moore-Gilbert

By Peter Rawlings  
CMER Board Member



A British-Australian woman jailed in Tehran has said she rejected an offer from Iran to become a spy. Kylie Moore-Gilbert, a lecturer at Melbourne University, has been in jail since September 2018, serving 10 years for espionage.

In letters smuggled out of Tehran's Evin prison, she says she has "never been a spy" and fears for her mental health. She says she has been denied visits and phone calls and has been held in an "extremely restrictive detention ward".

### What has Dr Moore-Gilbert said in her letters?

The letters were written by the Middle East expert to Iranian officials and span the period from June to December 2019. One to her "case manager" indignantly turns down the offer to become a spy for Iran.

"Please accept this letter as an official and definitive rejection of your offer to me to work with the intelligence branch of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)," she writes. "I am not a spy. I have never been a spy and I have no interest to work for a spying organisation in any country."

In other letters she says "my health has deteriorated significantly", having been taken to Baghiatallah Hospital twice and the jail's infirmary six times.

"I think I am in the midst of a serious psychological problem," she says, worsened by "the ban on having any phone calls with my family".

Dr Moore-Gilbert remains adamant that she is "an innocent woman... imprisoned for a crime I have not committed".

### What led to her imprisonment?

The Cambridge-educated academic was travelling on an Australian passport and was detained at Tehran airport in 2018 as she tried to leave following a conference.

She was tried in secret last year for espionage and is being held in an isolated IRGC-run wing of Evin.

It says she has spent months in solitary confinement in a small cell. Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne says she has pressed for Dr Moore-Gilbert's release but Iran has not moved.

In October 2019, British-Australian woman Jolie King and her Australian boyfriend Mark Firkin were released after being jailed in Tehran earlier in 2019, reportedly for flying a drone without a permit. Australia returned a jailed Iranian student, Reza Dehbashi Kivi, at roughly the same time.



## Changing Perceptions in the Gulf

By Arthur Tane  
CMER Executive Director



Arab Gulf societies often differ from other Arab and Muslim societies on their views about Israel.

Since General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was killed by an American airstrike, it has become even clearer that the Middle East is divided. We find some here were supportive of the strike that rescued the world from a most dangerous terrorist; others were completely outraged. Is the Middle East, then, on the verge of new alliances and further fragmentation?

The reactions of the Arab Gulf countries, including their citizens - especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain - are the same as Israel's. Other Arab countries and the Palestinian territories - mainly Hamas, which is a client of Iran - have responded quite differently.

Arab Gulf societies often differ from other Arab and Muslim societies on their views about Israel. Lately, however, the most hostile rhetoric has disappeared, especially among the younger generations. It has, in fact, been largely replaced by a more moderate tone and a desire better to understand Israeli society.

Many writers and political analysts from the Arab Gulf have written about the different political doctrines and perceived enemies among Arab Gulf countries and other Muslim countries, mainly from the Levant. A recent article by Kuwait's former minister of information, Saad Al-Ajmi, explains these differences. Arabs, he states, particularly the Palestinians, have been attributing all the problems in the region to Israel.

As the Iranian regime has formally declared their occupation of four Arab capitals - Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa - many of its members see only the supposed Israeli "occupation" and do not think about all the Arab and Muslim blood spilled by Iran and its proxies. To many Arabs and Muslims, only the Palestinian people seem to

have been important. Sadly, this concern has often appeared to be less about the Palestinians' well-being, over which they do not seem unduly distressed - having preferred to let them languish as second class citizens in Jordan, Lebanon or Kuwait. Rather, expressions of concern often appear to have been a way of deflecting attention from the problems of governance at home.

In the eyes of some Arabs, Al-Ajmi writes, especially the Palestinians, Arab Gulf leaders are regarded as traitors and US agents because they are affiliated with an ally of Israel: America. In the view of these Arabs, Al-Ajmi continues, the US has invented an imaginary enemy in Iran in order to steal the riches of the Arab Gulf. To many Arabs, he posits, Iran is just a peaceful Muslim neighbour that supports the "resistance" and works towards "liberating Palestine," and the Arab Gulf countries are nothing but stupid and cowardly traitors.

The traditional media in the Arab Gulf countries are often controlled by a Palestinian-Lebanese-Egyptian triangle. Al Arabiyya, Al Jazeera and many other outlets in the region espouse Nasserist, Islamist, or pan-Arab nationalist ideologies that claim to see Israel as the primary threat. Frequently, the executive managers and news editors who run the Arab Gulf media use the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to skew the news and portray the Palestinian issue as the main preoccupation in the region; they then set about embarrassing anyone who might not see the situation the same way as they do.

The result is that many people in the Gulf, especially the younger generations, complain that their media does not speak for them and is controlled by the Levant. Saudis who have read that "the traditional media in the Arab Gulf countries are often controlled by the Palestinian-Lebanese-Egyptian triangle" have remarked, often in person, that the traditional media, whether broadcast news or the press, must probably be controlled and run by Saudi professionals because the Arabs' views do not represent their views.

Disappointingly, the Western mainstream media is no different from the Arab Gulf media in weakening the position of pro-peace advocates in the Arab Gulf countries. Members of the mainstream media seem, in fact, to have a greater interest in perpetuating conflict, perhaps as more newsworthy, telegenic or captivating to advertisers. Members of the mainstream media also seem, wrongly, to regard anti-Semitic advocates of political Islam as representative of "moderate" Islam. Worse, they actually appear to be against anyone who is promoting peace.

The American mainstream media not only supports anti-Semitic political Islamists, but, ironically, sometimes even gives them a platform as columnists with which to spread their views. The late Jamal Khashoggi, for instance, with whom the media seemed infatuated, was actually a strong advocate of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are openly dedicated to "eliminating and destroying Western civilization from within."

The worldwide lack of support for those who advocate peace or the reform of Islam has brought about exactly what the extremists want: a fear of speaking up. Many of us Muslims do not want to be viewed as traitors, labelled "enemies of the nation" - not to mention the region - and have our lives put under threat. One need only look at how even Westerners who have spoken out have been treated - from the trial of the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci to the murder in 2004 of the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, or the unrelenting death threats and court cases against the outspoken member of the

Netherlands' Parliament, Geert Wilders. For the past 15 years, Wilders has had to live in safe houses with round-the-clock police protection. "The people who threaten us are walking around free," he has said, "and we are the captives."

Just imagine, then, how public support for Israel by Muslims might also cause embarrassment, to say the least, for some countries, such as the guardian of the Two Holy mosques, Saudi Arabia - a country viewed as the defender of all Muslims. For Egypt's former president, Anwar Sadat, speaking out led his murder. Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, delivered a historic address at a Coptic church on January 15, 2015, for which he was mentioned as a possible candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize:

"Yes, a humanistic and civilizing message should once more emanate from Egypt. That is why we must not call ourselves anything other than 'Egyptians.' This is what we must be - Egyptians, just Egyptians, Egyptians indeed! I just want to tell you that - Allah willing - we shall build our nation together, accommodate make room for each other, and we shall like each other, love each other, love each other in earnest so that people may see."

Soon after, one never heard any of that from him again.

The media that are hostile to Saudi Arabia, such as the Qatari and the Iranian media, exploit pro-Israel Saudi journalists and writers to attack Saudi Arabia. They describe calls for peace by Saudi intellectuals as a green light from the Saudi government to sue for peace with Israel, thereby distorting the image of Saudi Arabia in the Muslim world.

Almost all of the hostile Qatari media are blocked in UAE, to prevent them from inciting more hatred and chaos. Whenever there is any hope of good relations with Israel, Qatar tries to embarrass Saudi Arabia by mentioning that the kingdom is the keeper of the Two Holy Mosques. Conversely, when Saudi Arabia says something negative about Israel, such as that Israelis may not visit the kingdom, Qatar quickly publishes it in English to show Westerners how intolerant Saudi Arabia is.

Such pro-Qatari media propaganda videos - such as those on the Lens Post website - are blocked in the UAE, and can only be seen through the twitter account. These videos are often highly critical of Saudi Arabian King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS), and Abdul Hameed al-Ghobein, a Saudi journalist. Al-Ghobein, a supporter of MBS, ended up having his citizenship revoked. Headings in the video about Al-Ghobein say that he became Zionist to please MBS and his father, and that Al-Ghobein is not a great supporter of the Palestinian issue. He calls, on air, for the recognition of the right of the Israel to its land and to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Without any embarrassment, he also thanks Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for his efforts at "normalization," and goes on to announce many times that Jerusalem and its rulers are no longer important to Saudi Arabia. He is called a Zionist trumpet in an Arab suit by orders from the Saudi intelligence, but surprisingly for everyone, after he was regarded as exceeding a limit, his citizenship was revoked. Again, the video was made by pro-Qatari media.

In the past, the focus of the media was on the official views of Arab countries about Israel; now there is more of a focus on the people's views. One of the episodes of a talk show, "Ayn Ala AlKahleej" ("Eye on the Arabian Gulf") on Israel's i24 News, embodied most of the differences between the Arab Gulf countries and Israel.

The main difference, in general, based Arab Gulf intellectuals in the local press and the general public on social media and on talk shows such as "Eye on the Arabian Gulf" is that most of the Arabian Gulf citizens do not see Israel as their primary enemy; to them, the primary enemy is Iran. Many seem to think there is no problem between Israel and Arabian Gulf countries and that the only reason for boycotting Israel had been the Palestinians.

The reason for the moderate tone among Gulf Arabs and many Saudis can be seen on "Eye on the Arabian Gulf" in Souad Al-Shammari's response. Saudi people, she said, have changed because of the Palestinians' rhetoric, which is full of envy, hatred and malice towards Saudi Arabia. The Saudis have experienced hostility not from Israel but from the Palestinians.

Mohammed Saud, a Saudi blogger and social media activist, then described a visit of some Jewish friends with dual citizenship in Israel and another country, who live in Israel, and who came to see him in the Saudi capital, Riyadh, after he had visited Israel. He described their visit to the kingdom as a dream come true, because it demonstrated to the world that the Saudi people are peaceful.

It was also, he said, an opportunity, to clarify the facts away from an apparently biased and politicized media. Saud said that he wanted his real view of Israel, after his visit, to replace the views of the traditional media. He described his visit to Israel as successful because it assured him that what is in the media was incorrect. He said that in Israel he had witnessed cultural and religious diversity, and had received from Israelis a warm and peaceful welcome. He said he found that Israel is actually a model for peaceful coexistence.

In response, he received a flood of insults from Palestinians. They had apparently thought that, because of his traditional Saudi clothing, he would automatically be sympathetic to their cause. He also said that he had witnessed Palestinian children being raised on stories of hatred and malice.

One Palestinian Middle East expert, Hassan Merhej, who appeared in the same episode, described Saud's comments as embarrassing. He asked how there could be peace when Palestinians have been living in the diaspora for 70 years because they were not able to achieve their independence. He failed, however, to mention that they had been offered a state seven times, but each time had rejected it.

Merhej went on to say that Saudis may visit Jerusalem *after* the Palestinian territories get their independence. Then he asked how Saudis would feel if their country were occupied by Iraq or another country.

The question was a repetition of the false hypothesis that Jews, who have lived in the area for more than 3,000 years, are presumed not to belong there. He also failed to mention that the Arabs had been offered a sizeable amount of land by the United Nations in 1947, but had refused then offer, and that Arabs and Muslims had then initiated wars, terrorist attacks, uprisings [*intifadas*], rocket barrages, stabbings, arson-kites and other hostile activities against Israel to the present day.

Merhej went on to emphasize that, to him, social normalization among people is far more dangerous than diplomatic and political normalization. Reciprocal visits between leaders, he continued, as happens between Jordan and Egypt, he views as acceptable, as these relations might be beneficial for resolving the Palestinian issue, but that

normalization between people should exist only if there is an independent Palestinian state. To him, the greatest danger to the Palestinian issue begins with normalization among people, such as that of Mohammed Saud, because it is the people who will determine if there will be peace or if the situation will remain the same.

Souad Al-Shammari, a female Saudi human rights activist on the same show, said that she recognized what Merhej was trying to hint at when he challenged Saudis to imagine their country occupied by Iraq. She reminded him that many Palestinians as well as the Palestinian Authority had supported Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and had encouraged Saddam to occupy Saudi Arabia. She added that in the past 30 years, Israel had not been a direct or real enemy of Saudi Arabia or even of the Gulf states; on the contrary, the real hostility had come from Arab and Muslim countries such as Iran and Turkey. She affirmed that what she was saying represented the views of the majority of the Saudi public. It is a view, she said, that differs from the country's official political position, which is that boycotting Israel will continue "for the Palestinian cause".

Al-Shammari also said that the Saudi people have changed, not because of a change in the Saudi government's rhetoric towards the Jews and Israel, but because of the Palestinians' rhetoric, which is full of envy, hatred and malice towards Saudi Arabia. The Saudis, she said, have experienced hostility not from Israel but from the Palestinians. She went on to say that as many Palestinians hold Israeli passports and live and work peacefully in Israel, why should Saudis be in conflict with it? Palestinians do not occupy Jerusalem, controlling who comes in and who goes out; Saudis (and anyone else) can enter whenever they want.

She also noted that Saudi Arabia gives billions of dollars to Palestinians and expects nothing in return. The Saudi money that flows to the United States, however, is for investments and weapons: both mutually beneficial. The Palestinians have nevertheless always been ungrateful and their rhetoric has always been abusive and inflammatory towards the Saudi people and the government.

Al-Shammari's comments apparently drove Merhej to express anger towards Saudi Arabia. He repeated several times that the Palestinians do not need money from Saudi Arabia, a country that has also paid millions of dollars towards destroying Syria, Yemen and Iraq. He proudly said that he is not ashamed to support Hassan Nasrallah and Hezbollah, but that he is ashamed to call for peace with those whom he claimed occupy the Palestinian land. He then attacked Al-Shammari with a flood of insults: "You are a liar". "You do not respect yourself". "You are an agitator". "You are a degenerate".

So, differences do exist between Arab Gulf citizens and other Arabs and Muslims, including those from the Levant. Currently, many Arab Gulf citizens seem to see as their main enemy the Iranian regime, while other Arabs and Muslims still seem to see their main enemy as Israel and consider any opposing view as treasonous.

Regrettably, the positive views of Gulf Arabs towards Israel have been marginalized by a lack of support from the media, both in Arab countries and in the West. There is therefore an urgent need for greater emphasis on "digital diplomacy" from the public, as well as for more social gatherings and "normalization" - especially in Western countries - to strengthen the relationship between the Israeli people and the citizens of the Arab Gulf.

## **Is the Sahel Region Becoming a New "Islamic State"?**

By Alain Destexhe



On January 13, French President Emmanuel Macron convened a summit of the G5 Sahel, a group of five Sahelian countries that are affected by Islamist terrorism.

On January 13, French President Emmanuel Macron convened a summit of the G5 Sahel, a group of five Sahelian countries (Chad, Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali and Mauritania) that are affected by Islamist terrorism. The location of the summit, the small city of Pau in the south of France, was not chosen at random: it hosts the base of France's 5th Combat Helicopter Regiment. Seven of the thirteen who died in a November 25, 2019 helicopter accident in Mali belonged to this unit. Since 2013, France has lost 44 soldiers in the Sahel.

According to the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies:

"The Sahel has experienced the most rapid increase in militant Islamist group activity of any region in Africa in recent years. Violent events involving extremist groups in the region have doubled every year since 2015. In 2019, there have been more than 700 such violent episodes. Fatalities linked to these events have increased from 225 to 2,000 during the same period. This surge in violence has uprooted more than 900,000 people, including 500,000 in Burkina Faso in 2019 alone."

Large parts of the territories are slipping out of the authorities' control.

At the beginning of this year, Mohamed Ibn Chambers, UN Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, told the UN Security Council: "The region has experienced a devastating surge in terrorist attacks against civilian and military targets."

"The UNOWAS chief elaborated on terrorist-attack casualties in Burkina Faso Mali and Niger, which have leapt five-fold since 2016 – with more than 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 alone as compared to some 770 three years earlier."

In Burkina Faso, a country that was still considered stable two years ago, the death toll has risen even more dramatically, from about 80 in 2016 to more than 1,800 in 2019. The focus of terrorist attacks is predating eastwards and is increasingly threatening West African coastal States, such as the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin.

The causes of the destabilization of the Sahelian countries are many and complex. Local factors - ethnic, religious or the feeling of abandonment by the state - seem to play a predominant role. These states, which inherited their borders from colonization, are weak and their populations often have no strong feeling of belonging to a state worth defending. The Tuaregs in Mali, for example, former nomads who have recently settled down, are faced with economic and political marginalization and problems of assimilation into the Malian state. Terrorists groups have often exploited these deep-seated local grievances.

Among the many causes of these conflicts, one might highlight three.

The first, which is rarely mentioned, is the demographic explosion experienced by countries that have no access to the sea and few resources of their own. In Niger, the annual population growth rate is almost 4%. At the time of its independence in 1960, the country had a population of 3.4 million, which is now estimated at 24.2 million - a seven-fold increase in 60 years. According to the World Bank, real GDP per capita in Niger stands at only about US\$400 per capita.

Unlike most countries in the world, which have undergone a demographic transition, the birth rate in Niger has hardly changed over time: seven births per woman, and half of the population is under 15 years of age. The situation is similar in neighboring countries. This young population, which has few economic prospects and little to lose, is increasingly escaping the traditional authority of local elders and chiefs, and constitutes an abundant workforce for terrorist groups.

A second factor, which would require a comprehensive study in each country, is the evolution of Islam in the region. The tolerant local Islam that was prevalent in West Africa has been subjected to Salafist influence coming from the Gulf Arab states. This is reflected in an explosion in the number of Salafist mosques and the emergence of radical discourse, in some instances advocating violence.

A third factor is the destabilization of the region following the Western intervention in Libya in 2011, which overthrew the Gaddafi regime. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi played an important role in the Sahel, both economically and as a "mediator" in various local conflicts. The most visible consequence was the more than 20 million weapons made available by the civil war and the demise of a centralized state in Libya - weapons that now available for purchase by rebel or terrorist groups.

Even if violent attacks are now mostly concentrated around the borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, the unstable area subject to terrorism covers a huge area - equivalent to half of Europe or the United States - and is spread over five countries.

In Niger, the Islamic State is strong enough to launch attacks on army bases. On December 13, 2019, in a spectacular assault involving dozens of vehicles and motorcycles, hundreds of terrorists tried to take over the military base of Chinagoder, and managed to kill 89 soldiers. In December of 2019 alone, Niger lost at least 174 soldiers in three different attacks on military installations.

The armies of the countries that face this formidable threat are weak, often poorly trained and equipped, and at risk of low morale after the losses already suffered fighting terrorism. Since 2013, French army units have been deployed in the region. In that year, with Operation Serval, the French military prevented insurgent groups from taking the capital of Mali, Bamako. Since 2014, with Operation, the headquarters of which is located in N'djamena, the capital of Chad, the French military has extended its field of action to the five countries of the Sahel. 4,500 French troops are currently in the region, and President Macron has promised 220 more.

Because it involves such a huge territory, and because Europeans simply do not have the air support and intelligence capabilities of the United States, American support in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel is critical. Last December, US Defence Secretary Mark T. Esper announced that the United States was considering a drastic reduction - or even a complete withdrawal - of US forces from West Africa, a position anxiously criticized, with good reason, by European Allies.

US President Donald J. Trump would understandably like the Europeans to do more to fight the Islamic State in the Middle East and Africa. He is right. Europe is more directly concerned by the destabilization of these regions than the United States. The continent is still dependent on the Persian Gulf for its energy supply, and a destabilization of the Sahel countries would lead to vast new migratory pressures on Europe.

Most European Union countries, however, starting with Germany, refuse to draw conclusions about the consequences of the situation and increase their military spending and involvement in operations abroad. Germany relies on NATO and the United States and, when it comes to fighting abroad, on France and the United Kingdom, the only two European countries capable of deploying combat-trained forces.

France's military presence in the Sahel faces strong opposition. As a former colonial power of the five countries concerned, it is not, in theory, the best candidate to intervene: it will always come up against the accusation of neo-colonialism, even if in practice it is the only country ready to send in seasoned fighting forces - at the request, it must be stressed, of the five governments under threat.

Even though there are no perfect solutions in this complex conflict involving several militant Islamist groups, the confrontation does not look likely to disappear in the near future. On the contrary, it is spreading. In the short term, an American withdrawal would have disastrous consequences. US air support is absolutely crucial in the fight against terrorism.

If the United States decides to withdraw anyway, which would be an incalculable mistake, President Trump should announce a two-year deadline, in the form of an ultimatum, for the Europeans to take over the just completed US\$110 million US base in Niger and make it operational with drones and aircraft under the European flag. Another option would be to involve NATO, but this could only be done at the call of the countries concerned and with the clear support of the African Union as a whole.

In the medium term, the ideal would be for these five African countries to be able to fend for themselves in the fight against terrorism with Western material and logistical support, but without deploying troops from outside the African continent. In the immediate future, other European countries should respond to the call for help made by France and the G5 Sahel countries and become far more involved in this region whose potential implosion would inevitably impact most of Africa and Europe.



## Turkey Muscles-In on the Israel-Greece-Cyprus EastMed Gas Pipeline Deal

By Soeren Kern



Cypriot President Nikos Anastasiadis (left), Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis (centre) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shake hands in Athens on January 2, ahead of signing the pipeline agreement.

Israel, Greece and Cyprus have signed an agreement for a pipeline project to ship natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean region to Europe. The deal comes amid increasing tensions with Turkey as Ankara seeks to expand its claims over gas-rich areas of the Mediterranean Sea.

The 6-billion-euro (US\$6.6 billion) project envisages the construction of a 1,900-kilometer (1,180-mile) undersea pipeline that would carry up to 20 billion cubic meters of gas a year from Israeli and Cypriot waters to Crete and then on to the Greek mainland. From there, the gas would be transported to Italy and other countries in south-eastern Europe.

Israel, Greece and Cyprus hope to reach a final investment decision by 2022 and have the pipeline completed by 2025. The EastMed project, which would bypass Turkey, could eventually supply up to 10% of Europe's natural gas needs.

The signing of the EastMed pipeline project came a month after Turkey and Libya reached a bilateral agreement on maritime boundaries in the south-eastern Mediterranean Sea. The deal, signed on November 27 by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the UN-backed leader of Libya, Fayeze al Sarraj, attempts to redraw existing sea boundaries so that Libya ostensibly can claim exclusive rights over 39,000 square kilometres of maritime waters that belong to Greece.

The bilateral agreement — which establishes a new Turkey-Libya economic zone that the EastMed pipeline would now have to cross — appears aimed at giving Turkey more leverage over the project. Referring to the Turkey-Libya deal, Erdoğan said:

"Other international actors cannot conduct exploration activities in the areas marked in the Turkish-Libyan memorandum. Greek Cypriots, Egypt, Greece and Israel cannot establish a natural gas transmission line without Turkey's consent."

In mid-December, the Turkish Foreign Ministry reportedly summoned Israel's top diplomat in Ankara to inform him that Israel's plan to lay down a natural gas pipeline to Europe would require Turkey's approval.

Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesman Hami Aksoy said there was no need to build the EastMed pipeline because the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline already exists. "The most economical and secure route to utilize the natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean and deliver them to consumption markets in Europe, including our country, is Turkey," he said in a statement.

The European Union dismissed the Turkey-Libya deal was inconsistent with international law. In a statement issued on January 8, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, said: "The recent Turkey-Libya Memorandum of Understanding on the delimitation of maritime jurisdictions in the Mediterranean Sea infringes upon the sovereign rights of third States and does not comply with the Law of the Sea and cannot produce any legal consequences for third States."

Egypt condemned the Turkey-Libya deal as "illegal and not binding or affecting the interests and the rights of any third parties."

Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias noted: "Any maritime accord between Libya and Turkey ignores something that is blatantly obvious, which is that between those two countries there is the large geographical land mass of Crete. Consequently, such an attempt borders on the absurd."

On December 11, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu hinted that Ankara could use its military to prevent gas drilling in waters off Cyprus that it claims as its own. "No one can do this kind of work without our permission," he said in an interview with the newspaper *Habertürk*. "We will, of course, prevent any unauthorized work."

Cyprus has been divided since 1974, when Turkey invaded and occupied the northern third of the island. Turkey, which does not have diplomatic relations with the southern Republic of Cyprus, an EU member, claims that more than 40% Cyprus's offshore maritime zone, known as the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), is located on Turkey's continental shelf and therefore belongs to Ankara or to Turkish Cypriots.

Cyprus is perched on the maritime edge of several large gas finds in the Levant Basin, including Leviathan off Israel and Zohr off Egypt. In the past, Turkey has used military force to obstruct progress on drilling activities waters it claims as its own.

In December 2019, for instance, the Turkish navy intercepted an Israeli ship in Cypriot waters and forced it to move out of the area. The ship, *Bat Galim*, of the Israeli Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institution, was conducting research in Cyprus's territorial waters in coordination with Cypriot officials, according to Israel's Ministry of National Infrastructure, Energy and Water.

In February 2018, two weeks after the Italian energy giant Eni announced that it had found "a promising gas discovery" in Cyprus's EEZ, Turkish military ships stopped a ship hired by Eni to drill for gas off the Cyprus coast.

In October 2018, the Turkish navy interdicted a Greek frigate that was monitoring the Turkish seismic vessel "*Barbaros Hayreddin Pasa*," which Greek authorities said was operating in waters claimed by Cyprus. A few days later, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Dönmez announced that the drilling ship "*Fatih*" would begin drilling for oil and gas off the coast of Cyprus.

In May 2019, Turkey announced that it would begin drilling for gas in waters claimed by Cyprus. "The legitimate rights of Turkey and the Northern Cypriot Turks over energy resources in the eastern Mediterranean are not open for argument," Erdoğan said. "Our country is determined to defend its rights and those of Cypriot Turks," he added.

The United States subsequently warned Turkey against offshore drilling operations in waters claimed by the Republic of Cyprus. "This step is highly provocative and risks raising tensions in the region," said State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus. "We urge Turkish authorities to halt these operations and encourage all parties to act with restraint."

In July 2019, EU foreign ministers formally linked progress on Turkish-EU accession talks to Cyprus. A measure adopted by the European Council on July 15 stated: "The Council deplores that, despite the European Union's repeated calls to cease its illegal activities in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey continued its drilling operations west of Cyprus and launched a second drilling operation northeast of Cyprus within Cypriot territorial waters. The Council reiterates the serious immediate negative impact that such illegal actions have across the range of EU-Turkey relations. The Council calls again on Turkey to refrain from such actions, act in a spirit of good neighbourliness and respect the sovereignty and sovereign rights of Cyprus in accordance with international law...."

"In light of Turkey's continued and new illegal drilling activities, the Council decides to suspend ... further meetings of the EU-Turkey high-level dialogues for the time being. The Council endorses the Commission's proposal to reduce the pre-accession assistance to Turkey for 2020."

In October 2019, Turkey defied the European Union by sending another drilling ship, the *Yavuz*, to operate inside waters claimed by Cyprus. Cyprus accused Turkey of a "severe escalation" of violations of its sovereign rights. Eni CEO Claudio Descalzi subsequently said that his company will not drill wells off the coast of Cyprus if Turkey sends warships to the area: "If someone shows up with warships I won't drill wells. I certainly don't want to provoke a war over drilling wells."

On November 11, European Union foreign ministers agreed to a package of economic sanctions over Turkey's drilling off the coast of Cyprus. In a statement, the Council of the EU said: "The framework will make it possible to sanction individuals or entities responsible for or involved in unauthorized drilling activities of hydrocarbons in the Eastern Mediterranean."

"The sanctions will consist of a travel ban to the EU and an asset freeze for persons, and an asset freeze for entities. In addition, EU persons and entities will be forbidden from making funds available to those listed."

On November 15, Turkish authorities again defied the EU by announcing that the Turkish oil-and-gas drilling ship *Fatih* had started operating off the coast of north-eastern Cyprus.

Despite the tensions with Turkey, supporters of the EastMed pipeline project remain upbeat. At the project's signing ceremony in Athens, Prime Minister Netanyahu said: "This is a historic day for Israel, because Israel is rapidly becoming an energy superpower, a country that exports energy.

"This is a tremendous change. Israel was always a 'fringe' country, a country that did not have any connections, literally and figuratively. Now, in addition to our foreign relations, which are flourishing beyond all imagination and everything we have known, we have a specific alliance towards these important goals in the Eastern Mediterranean.

"This is a true alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean that is economic and political, and it adds to the security and stability of the region. Again, not against anyone, but rather for the values and to the benefit of our citizens."

Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis said that the pipeline was of "geostrategic importance" and would contribute to regional peace. Greek Energy Minister Kostis Hatzidakis called it "a project of peace and cooperation" despite "Turkish threats." Cypriot President Anastasiades said that his aim was "cooperation and not rivalry in the Middle East."

Meanwhile, Israel's US\$3.6 billion offshore Leviathan field, the largest natural gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean, commenced production on December 31, 2019, paving the way for multi-billion-dollar gas export deals with Egypt and Jordan.

Natural gas from the Leviathan field began flowing to Jordan on January 2, 2020, in accordance with a US\$10 billion deal signed in 2016. Egypt will begin importing Israeli gas by the middle of January.

The amount of gas extracted from Leviathan, located 130 kilometres west of the port city of Haifa, is expected to reach 105 billion cubic meters (bcm) over 15 years, while the nearby Tamar field will export nearly 30 bcm in the same period. The value of the exports is estimated at US\$19.5 billion, with US\$14 billion coming from Leviathan and US\$5.5 billion from Tamar.

"For the first time since its establishment, Israel is now an energy powerhouse, able to supply all its energy needs and gaining energy independence," said Yossi Abu, the CEO of Israel's Delek Drilling, one of the partners in the Leviathan project. "At the same time, we will be exporting natural gas to Israel's neighbours, thus strengthening Israel's position in the region."

The President of the Texas-based Noble Energy, Brent Smolik, summed it up this way: "We think it's a huge day for Israel and the region."