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Aims and Scope

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Editorial:

Arab States Shame!

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director



In the wake of Beijing's move to enact a draconian National Security Law in Hong Kong this week, China's state-owned media outlets and foreign ministry have gleefully highlighted a statement by Cuba's delegate to the U.N. on behalf of 52 other countries lauding the law. Curiously, none of these reports mentioned any of the other countries standing with China.

These countries include North Korea, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Eritrea. Of course, none of the governments in this group have particularly admirable human-rights records; most of the 53 countries are autocracies with one-party rule. That the U.N. Human Rights Council — which earlier that day was addressed by pro-Beijing Hong Kong executive Carrie Lam — would be the forum for the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda games is unsurprising, to say the least.

More interesting, as many have pointed out online, is the geographic dispersion of the group of 53, when compared with the 27 countries that condemned the National Security Law in their own statement. The CCP allies wrap around less-developed parts of the world, tracing the path of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Meanwhile, most of the 27 opponents of the law were liberal democracies located in Europe, in addition to Canada, Japan, and Australia.

Coordinated opposition to Beijing by Western democracies has percolated for years now. In the United States, it's conventional wisdom that the past three years have seen a dramatic shift in China policy, moving from an approach that prioritizes the management of a problem to one that mitigates a threat. The coronavirus marked another sharp shift — U.S.-China relations reached new heights of acrimony, and Europe, Canada, and Australia saw an acceleration of the deterioration of their relations with Beijing. As it turns out, spreading disinformation, sentencing prisoners on political grounds, and launching massive cyber attacks has not won the CCP many friends.

Meanwhile, an international coalition of legislators working on China-related issues formed in June. And political parties across the West are beginning to re-evaluate their attitudes toward China.

The events of the past month seem to mark a significant new rupture. In addition to the National Security Law, this stems from new concerns that the CCP's treatment of the Muslim Uighurs constitutes genocide. These are only the latest outrages. We can certainly expect many more.

In light of this ongoing genocide, which includes the sterilization of Uighur women and men, it is extraordinary that Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, UAE and Yemen should turn a blind eye of these atrocities.

Do the Arab States have such a low regard for their Chinese Coreligionists?

As the CCP rallies authoritarian regimes around its worldview at international organizations, the liberal democracies are catching a glimpse of how an emboldened CCP will wield its influence around the world. Fortunately, the West is getting its act together. Despite the usual concerns about America's treatment of its allies in the Trump era, U.S. partners have no choice but to stand with Washington against Beijing's assaults on fundamental human rights. What camp these Arab States choose will significantly determine the future of their own societies.

Breaking it down:

China's critics are concentrated in Europe and also include major democracies like Australia, Canada and Japan. All 27 are considered "free" in Freedom House's global ratings.

- China is backed by an assortment of "not free" and "partially free" countries, including many of the world's most brutal dictatorships — North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Syria.
- Three small "free" countries did back Beijing: Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and Suriname (combined pop. ~700,000).
- All three, and at least 40 of the other signatories, have signed onto China's Belt and Road infrastructure project.
- Many of the African signatories, meanwhile, are trying to renegotiate debt payments to China amid sharp COVID-related downturns.

The full lists:

- Supporting: China, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahrain, Belarus, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo-Brazzaville, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Laos, Lebanon, Lesotho, Mauritania, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Papua New Guinea, Saudi Arabia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Suriname, Syria, Tajikistan, Togo, UAE, Venezuela, Yemen, Zambia and Zimbabwe.
- Opposing: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Belize, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Germany, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Marshall Islands, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Palau, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.K.

Moscow's Next Front: Libya

By Brian Katz
CSIS Washington

New imagery analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) of Russian operations in Libya indicates the breadth and depth of Russian involvement, as well as its limits in altering the conflict's trajectory, as seen in recent setbacks for Moscow's primary partner, General Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA). Imagery released in late May by U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) displayed Russia's deployment of at least 14 combat aircraft, including Su-24 attack, MiG-29 fighter, and Su-35 interceptor escort aircraft, from bases in Russia and Syria to Libya's Al Khadim and Al Jufra air bases. A closer examination of Russia's deployment at Al Jufra Air Base reveals not only an expansion of Russian air activity but also of its ground forces, namely the Russian private military company (PMC) Wagner Group, the core component of Russia's intervention in Libya.

Russia's Deployment to Al Jufra in Context

Since 2015, Russia has provided military, diplomatic, and financial support to Libya's eastern-based government in Tobruk and the LNA in its war against the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. Since 2017, Russian support has centred on training, equipping, and advising the LNA and its commander, General Khalifa Haftar, for its push into central and western Libya, alongside Haftar's other backers, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. At the vanguard of Russian military efforts has been the Wagner Group, which by 2018 had deployed several hundred mercenaries to multiple training sites, airfields, forward bases, and key energy and infrastructure sites, thus supporting the LNA as well as securing Russian interests. Russian PMC activity surged in the summer of 2019 to bolster Haftar's flagging western Libya campaign and enable an LNA offensive against Tripoli. By early 2020, up to 1,200 Wagner mercenaries were on the ground in Libya, to then be supported from the air with the arrival of Russian combat aircraft.

Strategically located in central Libya, Al Jufra Air Base has served as the main air and logistics hub for LNA advances into western Libya and launching point for the Tripoli offensive. The airfield hosted multiple Libyan air force squadrons during the Gaddafi regime, and dozens of aircraft remain abandoned there. Russian aircraft and Wagner mercenaries reportedly began operating at Al Jufra in 2019, and that presence expanded in 2020. CSIS imagery analysis of Al Jufra from June 6, 2020 displays the breadth and depth of Russian support and activity.

Analysis of additional imagery beginning in mid-May suggests a buildup of Russian forces at Al Jufra and readying for an influx of aircraft. Russian Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile (SAM) and anti-aircraft artillery systems are deployed on the northern side of the base, most likely to deter and defend against Turkish airstrikes. New ground weapons, equipment, vehicles, and tents were observed across the facility, including at a MiG-29 hangar, probably in preparation for the aircrafts' arrival.

Image 1: Full air base shot, June 6, 2020.



The arrival of MiG-29 fighters and Su-24 attack aircraft at Al Jufra on May 19 was most likely intended to provide enhanced close air support and offensive firepower to LNA and Wagner Group ground forces operating to the north, on Tripoli's southern outskirts. There, by late May 2020, Wagner and LNA fighters were increasingly bogged down by Turkish-backed GNA forces after rapid gains earlier in the year, achieved in large part through growing Russian ground combat power.

Wagner Group Ground Activity in Tripoli and Al Jufra

While Russian PMC personnel have been training and equipping LNA forces in 2017 for a variety of ground, air, and air defence missions, in the fall of 2019 Wagner Group forces began to take on direct combat roles for the Tripoli offensive. Several hundred Wagner Group specialists have forward deployed with LNA units in and around Tripoli, employing Russian assets, including snipers, anti-tank guided missiles, electronic warfare, reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles, SAMs, and precision-guided artillery, to execute vital combat tasks.

Al Jufra Air Base has served as a critical transport and staging area for forward-deployed Wagner and LNA units operating in and around Tripoli. However, since April, as the Turkish-backed GNA counteroffensive has erased many of the LNA's gains, Al Jufra also appears to be serving as the fallback location for Wagner Group forces retreating from the Tripoli assault. In April, GNA forces seized Al Watiyah Air Base to the west of Tripoli, forcing Russian PMCs to withdraw, abandoning multiple Pantsir-S1 SAM systems and other equipment. In May, GNA and Turkish forces pressed south and, by May 24, compelled the withdrawal of hundreds of Wagner Group personnel. According to open-source reporting, Russian fighters retreated south with heavy weapons and equipment to the key junction town of Bani Walid, located 180 kilometres south of Tripoli, and on May 25 departed for Al Jufra.

The imagery below depicts the arrival of a large contingent of Russian forces and equipment at Al Jufra on May 28. Based on geospatial analysis and open-source reports, we assess this contingent was most likely the retreating Russian elements from Bani Walid.

Image 2: Arrival of artillery and PMC, May 28, 2020.



Image 2 indicates the arrival on May 28 of one-half of a Russian 130 mm towed artillery battery, accompanying equipment and vehicles, and numerous personnel as indicated by new tents on the base.

Outlook and Implications

Russia's intervention in Libya and deployment of PMCs achieved significant LNA territorial gains while strengthening Moscow's geostrategic position in the country but has also revealed the limits of its PMC-led proxy warfare approach. Haftar's Wagner-enabled assault on Tripoli triggered a large-scale escalation from Turkey, which itself deployed proxy forces, including thousands of Syrian fighters, to stall LNA advances in early 2020. With Moscow still denying Russia's presence and operations in Tripoli, Turkey and the GNA have pressed their counteroffensive and, as of mid-June 2020, have retaken most of the LNA's advances from earlier in the year, including critical positions in Tarhuna, Sirte, and Bani Walid.

While Moscow weighs the importance of LNA setbacks and heavy Wagner Group losses, including dozens of fighters killed and key weapons systems such as UAVs and Pantsir-S1s seized or destroyed, PMC forces and key assets such as combat aircraft are likely to remain deployed at Jufra and key sites in eastern Libya. While Russia's PMC-led intervention met its limit on the frontlines of Tripoli, it has ensured for Moscow a new strategic foothold in North Africa and on the Mediterranean.

Libya's Lawless Government

By Assem Mihirig



Libya is a complicated mess. With so many foreign footprints further obscuring an already confounding landscape, it is understandably difficult to make sense of the turmoil that has engulfed it since 2011. It certainly isn't helpful that one side – the 'internationally recognised' Government of National Accord (GNA) – has hired several lobbying and PR firms (Mercury, Gotham, and Prime Policy Group) to help obscure shocking details about *who* is fighting on the ground, and *why*.

Recent headlines characterising the current war in Tripoli as between General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), an alleged dictator-in-waiting, backed by Egypt, Jordan, Russia and the UAE, and the 'internationally recognised' Government of National Accord (GNA), backed by Italy, Qatar, and Turkey, are misleading. That's because they omit any mention of the sides' respective support among the Libyan populace.

Endorsed by Libya's only elected body – the House of Representatives (HOR) – the LNA was established in 2014. Its objective was to eradicate the alliance of armed groups that had been terrorising Benghazi residents since 2011, and who were also responsible for the assassination of US ambassador Chris Stevens in September 2012. This so-called Operation Dignity proved so popular with enough segments of Libyan society that the LNA has received tens of thousands of volunteers from across the country over the past six years, transforming it into the largest and most cohesive armed force in Libya.

The composition and motivations of the LNA's primary targets at the current stage of the conflict in 2020 – the fractious alliance of militias backing the GNA, and who now hold Tripoli and several surrounding areas – are significantly more complex. It is telling that the GNA's own politicians and media pundits have voiced frustrations about why the vast majority of fighters 'defending' Tripoli, a city of over two million people, are from other smaller towns and cities, or since January, from entirely different countries altogether. To the naked Libyan eye, the reasons for this are obvious: the bulk of those fighting for the survival of the GNA are criminals.

The capture of the coastal towns of Sabratha and Surman in western Libya on 13 April by militias supporting the GNA provides a grim picture of just who stands to benefit

from the survival of the internationally recognised government in Tripoli. Among those involved in the summary executions, abductions and looting that took place that day were elements of Libya's most notorious smuggling gangs, terrorist groups, kidnappers and other violent criminals – many of them condemned even by the very government they are fighting for.

Their decision to support the GNA is brutally rational. Faced with the prospect of a monopoly of force under Libya's National Army (LNA) or a weak GNA incapable of reining them in, the only rational choice for these criminal and terrorist groups is to ally with the latter.

The war crimes committed by these armed groups as they swept through the towns, between the city of Zawiya and the Tunisian border, were characteristic of the militia commanders leading them, each with résumés that should alarm decision-makers well beyond Libya's borders.

Among these was Mohamed Kashlaf (aka al-Qasseb), leader of the al-Nasr militia which controls Libya's largest refinery in the city of Zawiya. According to the UN Security Council, the al-Nasr militia is involved in both fuel smuggling and human trafficking. Kashlaf himself was photographed celebrating the capture of Sabratha among a group of other well-known belligerents, just weeks after appearing publicly alongside the president of the High Council of State (HCS), Khaled al-Mishri, in the city of Zawiya.

Another was Abdurahman Milad (aka al-Bidja), who gained international notoriety after news broke that he was among GNA figures meeting and cooperating with EU and Italian officials, while being simultaneously involved in systematic human-rights abuses and people smuggling. He was photographed alongside GNA spokesperson-cum-militia leader Abdulmalek al-Madani, as well as an incarcerated murderer and kidnapper, Fadhel Sweid, who was among 600 other indicted criminals (including members of the Islamic State (IS) who were freed that day).

Not to be outdone, the human smuggler Ahmed Dabbashi (aka Al-Ammu) – who the UN Security Council specifically sanctioned by name – also reappeared in his native Sabratha berating locals for not celebrating his return. In addition to Dabbashi's links to members of Ansar al-Sharia in Sabratha, he ran one of the largest people-smuggling operations in Libya until he was driven out in 2017 by locals aligned with the LNA.

With these criminal syndicates now controlling a 120-kilometre stretch of Mediterranean coastline on the border with Tunisia, it is not hard to imagine what perils await Libya's North African and European neighbours. The biggest victors of the Turkish-backed capture of these territories are the human-trafficking gangs, whose expulsion from these areas by the LNA in 2017 led to a drastic plunge in illegal migration to Europe, from 119,369 arrivals in 2017 to 23,370 in 2018, and just 11,471 in 2019.

Despite the fact that Kashlaf, Milad and Dabbashi have outstanding warrants for their arrest from the GNA's Ministry of Interior, there is nothing to suggest that anything or anyone will now stop them from resuming or even expanding their illicit operations. On the contrary, airstrikes carried out by Turkish unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) during this year's offensive demonstrate a high level of cooperation between these militias and the highest echelons of the GNA's military brass.

If anything, the ill-gotten earnings of these smuggling gangs – collected from both desperate migrants and anti-migration EU programmes – have earned the likes of Kashlaf and Milad seats at the highest tables in Libya, and sometimes Europe, mingling with government officials at all levels. As such, the EU should brace itself for the imminent arrival of new waves of migrants from Libya's shores, while Libya, Tunisia, and possibly Algeria will have to tackle the more immediate problem posed by the release of hundreds of criminals, including – perhaps worst of all – IS operatives.

The possibility of the re-emergence of IS or other similar militant groups in Libya's north-west is another serious matter that should not be overlooked. Ansar al-Sharia, the terrorist group best-known for the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi on 11 September 2012, was the predecessor to IS in Sabratha, where in addition to Dabbashi, other more unsavoury figures have also reappeared.

Among these was Faraj Shako, a member of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) that not only included Ansar al-Sharia's Benghazi branch, but eventually pledged its allegiance to IS before it was defeated by the LNA in 2017. Shako and other elements of the BRSC were joined by the Zawiya-based Libyan Revolutionaries Operations Room (LROR), an extremist group based in Zawiya that is led by Shaban Hadiya (aka Abu Obaidah al-Zawi). LROR was responsible for kidnapping Libya's prime minister, Ali Zidan, in October 2013; the kidnapping of six Egyptians, including two diplomats, in January 2014; the kidnapping of two Serbian embassy staff members in Sabratha in November 2015; and the attack on the UN convoy passing through western Zawiya in June 2017.

Together with the return of Al-Taher Al-Gharabli, a leading member of the Sabratha military council under whose watch Ansar al-Sharia flourished after 2011, and the release of hundreds of IS prisoners who had once terrorised the residents of Sabratha, conditions are now in place to re-establish militant training camps in the region. The proximity of this region to Tunisia made it a training hub for would-be Tunisian militants after 2011, thousands of whom would later join IS. Among those who received training in Sabratha, according to Tunisian authorities, was Seifeddine Rezgui, the terrorist who killed 38 people – most of them British tourists – in the city of Sousse in June 2015.

If the re-emergence of terrorist groups along Tunisia's border isn't enough of a concern to neighbouring states and foreign diplomats, the arrival of over 7,000 militant jihadists and mercenaries from Northern Syria to defend the GNA in Tripoli should be. In addition to Syrian militants – many of whom enjoy links to terrorist groups, including IS – Tunisian and Palestinian fighters have also appeared among these groups, which include Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra, Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, as well as the SNA's Ahrar al-Sharqiyah faction – a group that proudly posted a video of its members dragging Syrian Future Party leader Hervin Khalaf by her hair while beating her before shooting her dead. One of the more unsavoury characters among these foreign fighters, FSA (Free Syrian Army) Sham legion commander Abubakr Al-Buwaidani, was arrested by the LNA on 24 May. In addition to supporting IS on his social-media accounts, Al-Buwaidani stands accused of kidnapping, rape, torture and the looting of Kurdish homes.

There is no evidence that the Turkish military commanders in charge of these groups have kept them on their best behaviour since arriving in Libya, where in addition to harassing and bullying local residents they have also taken part in the looting of

homes at the frontlines, with the full cooperation of the Libyan militias fighting alongside them. More recently, Syrian mercenaries were reportedly responsible for the kidnapping of a 27-year-old woman, Wesal Miyeneh, during a home invasion in a south Tripoli suburb. While there are conflicting reports on whether she had escaped or was rescued after a gruelling two-week ordeal – the GNA's Ministry of Interior has vaguely tried to claim responsibility for her release – the abduction was only unique because of the video evidence that helped identify the dialects of the attackers.

Though the involvement of Libyan armed groups in organised crime is alarming, the greater concern is that these foreign fighters could bolster the presence of extremist groups already in the Libyan capital. The Libyan militias they have joined include elements of the Benghazi Revolutionaries Shura Council (BRSC) and Darna Mujahideen Shura Council (DMSC), both of which included Ansar al-Sharia and fought alongside IS. Even before the arrival of these groups from eastern Libya and Syria, Tripoli had been plagued by terrorism and high-profile kidnappings, at least one of which – the kidnapping of the Jordanian ambassador early in 2014 – directly involved BRSC leader Wisam bin Hamid, who negotiated the release of al-Qaeda operative Mohamed al-Dersi in exchange for the diplomat's freedom.

Irrespective of the constraints the current civil war might place on the GNA, there is nothing to suggest that it has the political will or ability to do anything to curb these threats. The GNA is no monolith, and even by the admission of its minister of the interior, Fathi Bashagha, who himself has been accused of gouging out a prisoner's eye with a spoon, the criminality of the militias supporting it has provided Haftar with the impetus to attack the capital. To the uninitiated, it might appear as though Bashagha is working to rectify this by issuing arrest warrants and condemnations of leading militia figures. His credibility, however, is undermined by the fact that he has directed no such attention to the militias of his native city of Misrata, some of which are at least as violent and criminal as any in the country.

In fact, one day after condemning Tripoli-based militias as operating outside of the law, Bashagha was seen touring the frontlines alongside Abdusalam Zubi (aka 'Serantiyat'), the commander of Misrata's 301 battalion, which has been running a racketeering operation in parts of Tripoli, charging businesses up to 5,000 Libyan dinars per month as a 'protection fee'. Despite Bashagha's public protestations that the GNA's fighting forces were legitimate (which he said on the same day that he toured the frontlines with Zubi), no militia has been more explicit in torpedoing attempts by the GNA to build a region-neutral, professional security force.

The Presidential Guard, a security force created by the GNA as part of the Tripoli Security measures stipulated by the Libyan Political Agreement, which received resources both from Libya and abroad, met its demise after being attacked and disarmed by the 301 battalion in May 2018. This abruptly ended the GNA's only ever attempt to create a professional security force to replace the militias.

It is worth remembering that Bashagha was a key architect of the Fajr Libya war, which overthrew the legitimate government in Tripoli in 2014. His plans to tackle corruption and criminal activity seriously have been made all the more unconvincing after it emerged on 5 May that he had ordered the kidnapping of an audit bureau official, Rida Gergab, who was in the midst of investigating the minister of interior's financial affairs. The irony of this abduction is that as recently as September 2019, Bashagha issued a warrant for the arrest of Tripoli-based militia leader Mohamed

Abudra'a (aka al-Sandoug) over an incident where he threatened the GNA minister of finance Faraj Buntari, and which has since led to tensions between militia factions from Tripoli and Misrata. The prospect of these militias dismantling the extremist groups in Tripoli with the same vigour as the Presidential Guard – even if they were not fighting for their lives against Haftar's LNA – is difficult to envisage.

Indeed, a similar scenario unfolded in the city of Sirte over the course of 2015-16. Instead of fighting against extremist elements from their hometown, Misrata's militias – led by Mohamed al-Hassan of the 166 battalion – left the city to the extremists, perhaps not expecting that they would later turn their guns on their former compatriots after having allied with IS in the city. This resulted in a costly, US-backed counterattack, which led to widespread destruction throughout Sirte in a war that lasted over seven months. That Mohamed al-Hassan has been seen around Tripoli's frontlines alongside Abdusalam Zubi is hardly reassuring for the GNA's future, even if it is able to survive the LNA's offensive.

Given that the unsavoury assortment of armed groups fighting for the survival of the GNA today have held successive governments at their mercy since 2011, it is difficult to believe they would ever allow a normal, functioning state to be established in Libya. Even as recently as 29 March, the office of the GNA's prime minister was surrounded and overrun by the very militias purporting to defend it.

This is hardly an image worthy of a government of national accord, especially not one that is internationally recognised. But then that is precisely the problem. The GNA lacks national support, and derives most of its authority from its international backers.

Why Is Turkey Involved in Libyan Conflict?

By Ezel Sahinkaya



Turkey and Libya further strengthened their bilateral ties in a meeting between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the Tripoli-based Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in early June.

During a press conference with al-Sarraj in Ankara, Erdogan said Turkey and Libya have agreed on expanding their ties, including in the Eastern Mediterranean region. In late May, forces of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), backed by Turkey, made several advances in Libya against rival forces led by Khalifa Haftar before both sides agreed this week to return to cease-fire talks.

“History will judge those who cause bloodshed and tears in Libya by supporting putschist Haftar,” Erdoğan told reporters at the press conference. For his part, al-Sarraj declared a final victory over Haftar forces, saying “you have been defeated in Tripoli; just accept it.” Some experts call the series of GNA victories a turning point in Libya’s six years of civil war, with Ankara emerging as the potential dominant external player in the North African country.

Experts say Erdogan hopes to shape a Libya that can preserve Turkey’s political and economic dominance in the region. “Turkey’s main motivation has been to prevent Libya from falling under the sway of Egypt and (the) UAE, which would have been a blow to Ankara’s geostrategic and economic interests not only in Libya itself but also in the East Mediterranean,” says Nigar Goksel, Turkey director at the International Crisis Group.

Since officially joining the war in January, Turkey has deployed its military forces and allegedly Syrian militias to Libya. Despite an arms embargo on Libya by the United Nations, Ankara has also supplied drones and air defence to the U.N.-recognized GNA.

Their involvement has been strongly condemned by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Greece, Cyprus and France. In a joint statement in May, the five countries asked Turkey “to fully respect the U.N. arms embargo, and to stop the influx of foreign fighters from Syria to Libya.” Haftar has vowed to launch the “largest aerial campaign

in Libyan history” against Turkish targets in the country. In response, Ankara has threatened “serious repercussions.”

“The rise of Ankara’s sense of urgency to secure a maritime boundary delimitation agreement with Libya coincided with the peak of Tripoli’s dire need to stave off Haftar’s forces,” said Goksel, adding that Ankara sees Libya as a gateway for influence over the Mediterranean Sea.

Geostrategic reasons

In November, Turkey signed a deal on the delimitation of the maritime jurisdiction areas in the Mediterranean with the GNA. The deal has further added to the frustration of its neighbours, primarily Greece and Cyprus, that contest Turkey’s drilling rights in the waters. Under the deal, Turkish energy minister Fatih Dönmez announced that Turkey may start oil exploration in the eastern Mediterranean within three or four months.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, the eastern Mediterranean contains natural gas worth approximately \$700 billion. Of that reserve, Turkey — despite protest from Europe — has been drilling for natural gas off the northern coast of the divided island of Cyprus.

Meanwhile, Cyprus, Greece, and Israel are working to develop a pipeline at an estimated \$7-\$9 billion to transport the eastern Mediterranean gas into Europe. Turkey’s deal with Tripoli, some experts say, could obstruct the plan since the pipeline would have to cross the Turkey-Libya jurisdiction.

Turkish construction in Libya

Securing opportunities for Turkish companies in the Libyan market is yet another motive behind Ankara’s intervention in Libya, some experts charge. Turkish businesses for decades have been involved in Libya, particularly in the construction sector, according to Kadir Ustun, the executive director of the SETA Foundation, a pro-government think-tank based in Washington.

“Turkey tried to broker a solution in the wake of the Arab Spring with the then leader of the country, Moammar Ghadafi, to secure its commercial interests as well as the safety of its more than 20,000 citizens living in Libya at the time,” says Ustun. Before Ghadafi’s fall, about a hundred Turkish construction companies reportedly signed contracts in Libya. However, due to the 2011 Arab Spring conflict, they had to leave their projects incomplete at a loss of \$19 billion.

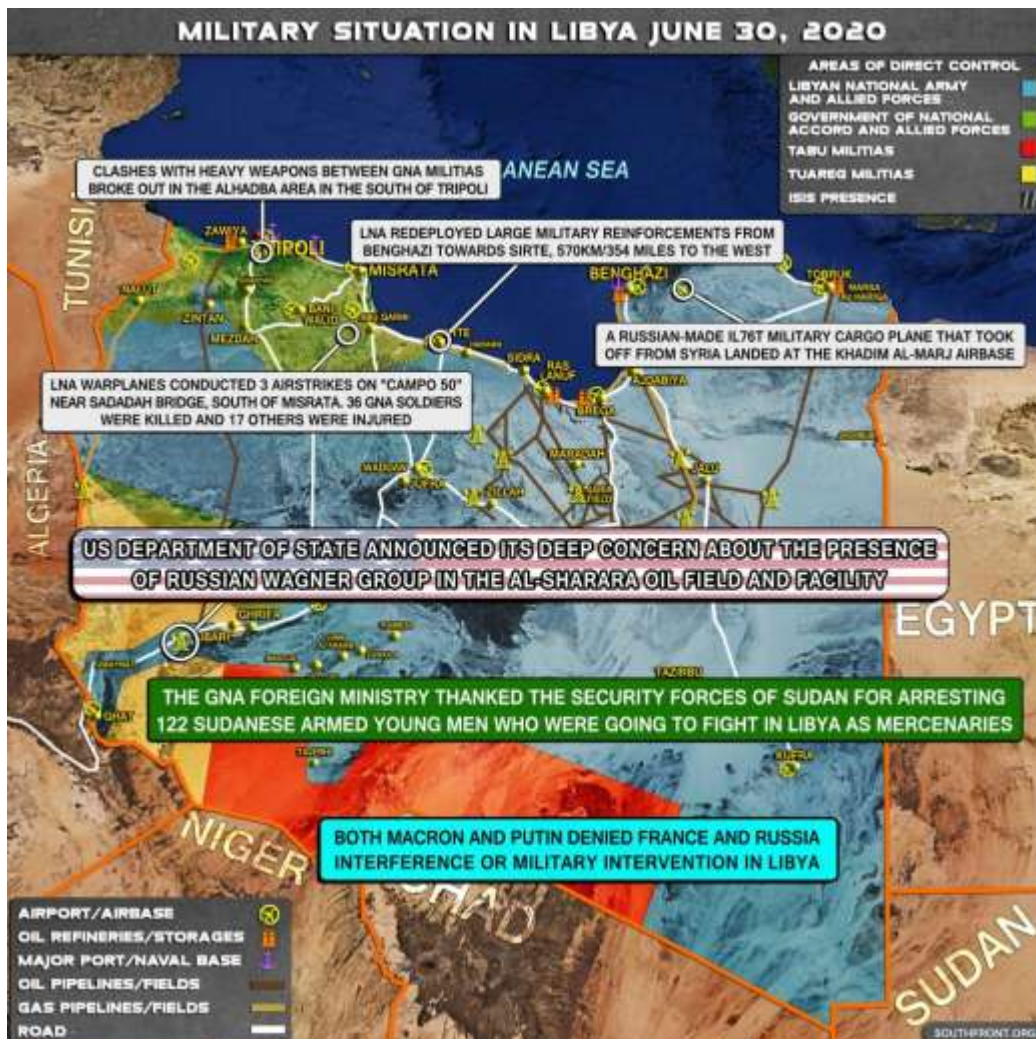
Economic and geostrategic interests are not solely to be accounted for in understanding Turkey’s extended support to GNA, however. According to some experts, officials in Ankara hope the triumph of GNA over Haftar could establish a government in Tripoli that is ideologically conservative and in line with Ankara’s ruling Justice and Development Party.

Ideological reasons

Turkey in the past has reportedly supported the Justice and Construction Party, a Libyan Islamist group with close ties to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, to gain a foothold in the GNA.

The ideological ambition, those experts say, has put Erdogan’s government at odds with the rulers of the Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who see the emergence of Islamist parties a threat to their power. “The GNA aligned forces contain some Islamist elements committed to defeating Haftar,” said Eaton of Chatham House.

Karim Mezran, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, emphasized that the ideological differences between Turkey and several Arab countries have for years triggered a foreign policy battle not only in Libya but also in other countries such as Egypt and Qatar. By challenging Turkey’s ideological vision, Mezran said, the Arab countries hope to prevent the establishment of Islamist regimes friendly with Ankara.



Iran's Economy in Desperate Straits

By Peter Rawlings
TCMER Board Member



A woman looks at an electronic board showing stock prices, following the outbreak of the coronavirus, at the Tehran Stock Exchange in Tehran, Iran, May 12, 2020.

Facing declining oil prices and rigid sanctions by the United States, the Iranian government needs to find new ways to fund its public spending. The solutions might prove unpopular both with the public and the powerful elites.

According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), Iran has the world's fourth-largest deposits of oil and the world's second-largest deposits of natural gas. These vast resources have prompted many Iranians to believe their country is wealthy, and its wealth will never end. Few point out that Iran's abundant oil and natural gas resources can translate into wealth only if there is a market for them. And these days, what Iran lacks for its vast oil and natural gas resources is a market. And even if Iran regains its market, few are optimistic about the oil market performance as long as the coronavirus pandemic ravages the global economy.

In May 2018, US President Donald Trump announced that the United States would leave the nuclear agreement with Iran. Since then, the United States has been pursuing a pressure campaign with sanctions on Iran's oil exports. By September 2018, Iran exports fell to 1.9 million barrels per day from a peak of 2.7 million per day in June 2018. By April 2019, Iran's oil exports dropped to 1 million barrels per day, and by October 2019, Iran's average oil exports hit just 260,000 barrels per day. The sanctions have cost Iran billions of dollars in revenues.

Iran's oil production reached 3.8 million barrels per day of crude oil in 2017, as well as 7.2 trillion cubic feet of dry natural gas, earning \$55 billion in net oil export revenues. Iran experienced an increase of 21.8% in its net oil export revenues in 2018, pocketing \$67 billion. Its war-ravaged neighbor Iraq, with the world's fifth-largest deposit of oil, earned \$91 billion in net oil export revenues in the same year marking a 38% increase compared to 2017. According to the EIA, Iran's net oil export revenues for the first six months of 2019 reached \$20 billion, while Iraq earned \$52 billion during the same time. As Iran's government oil revenues declines, its spending did not change. It continued to pay subsidies, directly and indirectly, accepting a widening budget deficit.

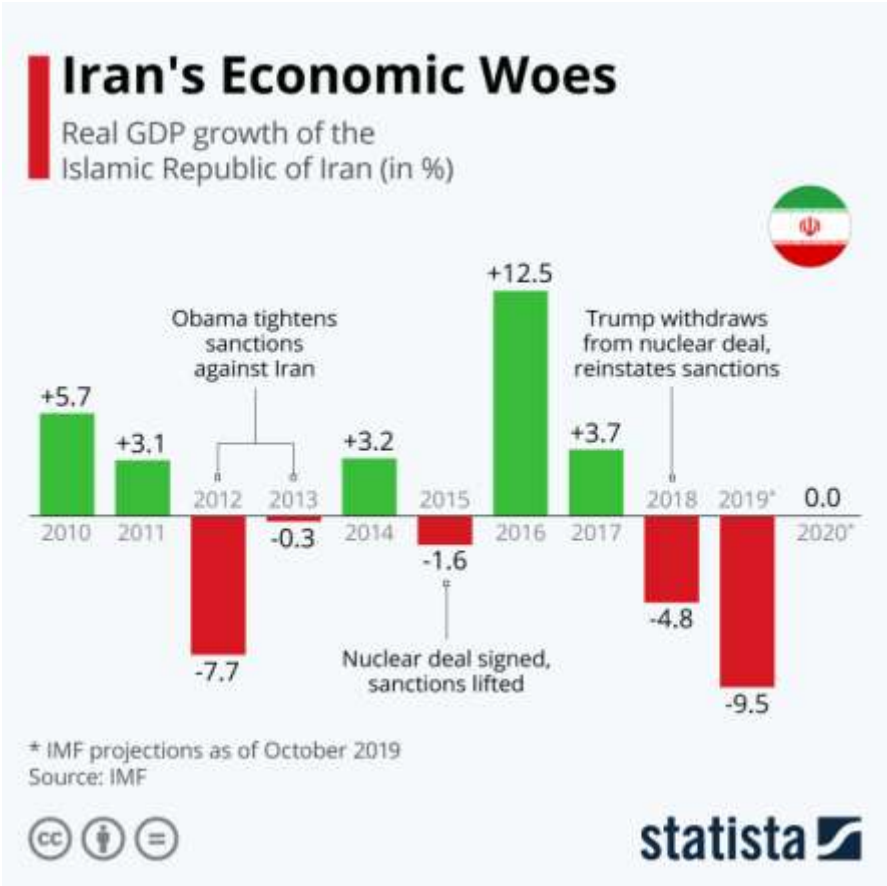
There is little wonder why Iranians are experiencing a very high inflation rate these days. According to the Central Bank of Iran, Iran's economy is experiencing an average inflation rate of 41.3%. According to the World Bank, inflation has been alarmingly high for food items, with the consumer price index for meat products rising by 116%. The Rouhani administration needs money, and it needs lots of it. Its step to increase gasoline prices in November 2019 was an act of desperation to mend its deficits. The decision brought to the streets scores of angry citizens and resulted in nationwide protests, which turned bloody quickly. The budget deficit was standing at two-thirds of the Iranian government's annual budget. And this was before the novel coronavirus spread to Iran. The pandemic has deepened Iran's economic recession, but it has not created it.

When the coronavirus outbreak hit Iran, it imposed a challenge on an economy already in crisis. The government mostly funds Iran's health-care system. As the cost of dealing with coronavirus cases increased, the government requested permission to withdraw 1 billion euros from the National Development Trust Fund to address the economic impact of the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. However, many found the number to be insufficient — the diminished effectiveness of any help from the government due to augmented inflation and condensed economic activities notwithstanding. Iran's chances of an economic recovery are dim. Even if the sanctions are lifted, the global demand for crude oil is drastically contracted due to the global economic recession. The EIA predicts that OPEC will continue to lose net oil export revenues for the rest of 2020. The demand for Iran's crude oil is further weakened by the fact that its major clients — India and China — have already found new suppliers. If President Hassan Rouhani and his Cabinet think an understanding with the United States will end Iran's economic problems, one must remind them of the realities of the global market. They are already looking for other sources of revenue.

Iranians are often heard saying, "We pay for this country either by giving up our wealth [oil] or our income [taxes]." As the oil revenues plummeted, the Iranian government and the parliament are planning to impose new taxes and to sell public holdings. The new parliament, dominated by hard-liners and conservatives who openly criticize Rouhani, is introducing new taxes on capital gains with a focus on real estate holdings. The new legislators admit that the infrastructure for the successful implementation of new taxes is lacking, but they cannot wait. Fearing that such fees would impact capital markets and saving patterns across Iran, pushing Iranians to invest in the highly volatile Tehran Stock Exchange, many economists are warning the parliament to study their potential consequences carefully. The government is searching for new ways of selling its holding in various companies via new privatization programs or directly via the Tehran Stock Exchange. Some officials propose to impose taxes on religious foundations and their associated conglomerates, something which has never happened in the past.

For Iranians, the outcome is increasing prices and decreasing real income — a combination that thrills no one. Facing sanctions as well as declining global demand for oil while using its traditional customers in Asia, the Iranian government needs a solution. Some might have hoped that the political establishment finally finds the courage to carry out structural reforms that are much required in the economy and long overdue. However, the government does not want to change its ways, and the new parliament does not want to change the government. Both are looking to increase revenues without reducing barriers to economic growth, combating corruption or

reforming public spending in the country. An increase in either prices or taxes will upset the general populace, and imposing taxes on foundations and economic entities associated with the regime will anger the political elite. Without new sources of revenues and new trade partners, prices will continue to rise, and the economy continues to contract. Iran's economy has been paying for the indecisiveness of successive administrations in reforming and increasing corruption. It seems that it has reached the end of its tether.



Russia Eyes Military Expansion in Northeast Syria

By Sirwan Kajjo



Russian troops in Syria are looking to expand their military presence in the north-eastern part of the war-ravaged country, local sources said. A Russian military convoy arrived last week in a village near Syria's border with Turkey and Iraq, where Russian officers reportedly met with local residents and discussed the possibility of building a military base in the vicinity.

A local reporter told VOA that the village Qasir Dib is located near the Kurdish-majority town of Malikiyah in Syria's north-easternmost region. "I spoke with people who were present at the meeting," said Nishan Mohammad, a freelance reporter based in northeast Syria. "They confirmed that the Russians had expressed a desire to build a military base in the village."

Increased presence

In recent months, Russia, a staunch backer of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, has increased its foothold the country's northeast, which is largely controlled by local Kurdish forces. After Turkish military and its allied Syrian militias launched an offensive against the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2019, Russian troops stepped into the region, following a partial U.S. troop withdrawal from the border area between Syria and Turkey.

The SDF, which is dominated by Kurdish fighters, says the U.S. drawdown and the subsequent Turkish invasion have created a vacuum in parts of the region, which has been filled by Russian forces and its allied Syrian government troops. "The Russians have been roaming almost freely in our region," a senior SDF official told VOA on the condition of anonymity. "Their ultimate goal is to push the Americans out of northeast Syria."

The U.S. currently has about 700 troops, mostly stationed in eastern Syria. U.S. officials say their mission is to continue the war against the remnants of the Islamic State (IS)

terror group and prevent the Syrian regime forces from accessing oil fields in the region.

Tensions and de-confliction

The presence of both U.S. and Russian forces in northeast Syria has caused tensions at times. In several recent incidents, U.S. and Russian military convoys came toe to toe, with tensions de-escalating after consultations between both sides. But local news outlets last week published a video, in which U.S. and Russian troops were seen together, describing it as a joint patrol mission. U.S. military officials, however, refuted such claims.

"There was no joint patrol between us and Russia," Col. Myles Caggins, spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition against IS, told VOA in a video interview last week. "We do not coordinate our missions in northeast Syria. What people saw in video and some nice photos was de-confliction," he added.

With the beginning of the U.S.-led campaign against IS and the official Russian involvement in Syria's civil war in 2015, both powers established a de-confliction protocol for their respective missions to avoid collision in the air and on the ground in Syria. "Each day there are conversations between leaders here in the coalition and Russian leaders in Syria, where we share and exchange information on where our patrols will go," Caggins said, adding that there have been encounters between the two sides at times. "Those encounters are normally resolved in a professional manner. And what we've seen in recent days was the United States escorting a Russian patrol out of an area that was not de-conflicted in eastern Syria," he told VOA.

The American official added that U.S.-led coalition "doesn't seek to have any escalations" with the Russians. "We certainly call on the Russians to not do anything to have an escalation or interfere with the SDF mission to defeat Daesh," he said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Influence on SDF

Nicholas Heras, a Syria expert at the Institute for the Study of War in Washington, says Russia wants to increase the footprint of its operations in northeast Syria to build greater influence on Kurdish SDF forces. "Russia is in the process of turning the Qamishli airport into its major base in eastern Syria, but a forward operating presence in Malikiyah would allow the Russians to put additional pressure on American lines of supply and reinforcement into and out of Syria from Iraqi Kurdistan," he told VOA.

Heras said "the SDF is in the American camp for now, but in the event of a U.S. pullout from Syria, the SDF will need another benefactor to protect it against Turkey." "An enlarged Russian presence along the length of the Syrian-Turkish border could keep Turkey out of additional areas of northeast Syria, shielding the SDF," he added.

EU Still Trying to Fund Palestinian Terror-linked NGOs

By Khaled Abu Toameh



For many years, Palestinians have received unconditional funding from Western donors. Here is how it worked: Palestinian organizations would submit an application for funding, and the donors would automatically sign the check or approve the wire transfer of millions of dollars or euros to the Palestinians' bank accounts.

In a nutshell, the Palestinian attitude regarding Western funding has always been along the following lines: "You Westerners *owe* us this money because you contributed to the establishment of Israel after World War II. Thus, you have no right to set any conditions for the funding. Just give us the money and shut up. Any refusal to comply with our demands will result in our rage, and possibly terrorism and other forms of violence, not only against Israel, but also against you [non-Muslim] 'infidels' in the West."

Against this backdrop, it is easy to understand why Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are now furious with the European Union (EU). Recently, the EU and its member countries have had the audacity to demand that EU taxpayer money not end up in the hands of terrorists or terrorist organizations. The donor countries, in other words, appear finally to have woken up to the fact that their money has been going into the coffers of Muslim terrorists and Arab extremists who continue to call and work for the elimination of Israel.

There are signs, however, that the EU is about to surrender to Palestinian pressure and threats. During a May 19, 2020 meeting of the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, Oliver Varhelyi, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, stated that he had instructed the heads of EU delegations to Israel and West Bank/Gaza to "look deep" into the allegations that some EU funds go to terror-linked or terror-supporting NGOs, declaring that such funding "will not be tolerated."

The announcement came in wake of concerns that the EU, under pressure from the Palestinian NGOs, has backtracked on its condition for providing funds to the Palestinians.

In a May 30, 2020 "clarification" letter to the Palestinian NGO Network, the head of the EU Representative Office to the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Sven Kuhn von Burgsdorff, explained that the EU "does not ask any civil society organization to change its political position towards any Palestinian faction or discriminate against any natural person based on his/her political affiliation."

Burgsdorff, however, also wrote: "While the entities and groups included in the EU restrictive lists cannot benefit from EU-funded activities, it is understood that a natural person affiliated to, sympathizing with, or supporting any of the groups or entities mentioned in the EU restrictive lists is not excluded from benefiting from EU-funded activities, unless his/her exact name and surname corresponds to any of the natural persons on the EU restrictive lists."

This opaque language means that even if a Palestinian NGO applying for EU grants is an affiliate of terrorist groups, or employs individuals from these groups, the EU *will*, after all, provide it with taxpayer funding - whether designated for emergency responses to COVID-19 or for regular programs, according to NGO Monitor, a globally recognized research institute that works to ensure that decision makers and civil society operate in accordance with the principles of accountability, transparency, and universal human rights.

Palestinians first noticed the apparent change in donors' position in 2019, when the EU introduced a new clause in its contracts with Palestinian NGOs, under "General conditions applicable to European Union-financed grant contracts for external actions" (Annex G.2, Annex II, Article 1.5 bis). The clause stipulates: "Grant beneficiaries and contractors must ensure that there is no detection of subcontractors, natural persons, including participants to workshops and/or trainings and recipients of financial support to third parties, in the lists of EU restrictive measures."

It is worth noting that these lists include terrorists and terrorist organizations designated as such by the EU, such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the PLO's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) among others. The three groups, together with several others, do not recognize Israel's right to exist and have long been engaging in terror activity against Israelis.

The EU "anti-terror" clause has drawn sharp criticism from Palestinians, including dozens of NGOs based in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The main complaint made by the Palestinians is that they cannot accept "politically conditioned funding" from any party, including EU donors. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, Western donors are not entitled to demand that their taxpayer money not go to EU-designated terrorist organizations such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the PFLP.

Here is how one Palestinian NGO, Badil, put it: "Politically conditioned funding is resolutely rejected in its entirety, regardless of the amount and whatever its justifications. The so-called screening and vetting procedures, which include subjecting members of the management bodies and staff of organizations, their contractors, service providers, and beneficiaries to examination under the guise of standard security measures are rejected and condemned. Palestinian political factions

and forces are not terrorist organizations, and their popular, national, and legal statuses are not determined by a European document."

The PFLP, whose members have been involved in many terror attacks against Israel in the past few decades, claimed that the EU "anti-terror" clause was "in the context of measures to liquidate the Palestinian cause." The PFLP is furious because many of the Palestinian NGOs operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip are affiliated with it.

This week, a group of Palestinian NGOs in east Jerusalem accused the EU of being in collusion with Israel and the US administration in order to "liquidate the Palestinian cause." This concocted accusation is based on the false claim that the Europeans are part of US President Donald J. Trump's plan for Middle East peace and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plan to extend Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank. Notably, many EU states and leaders hold explicit anti-Netanyahu and anti-Trump views.

The Palestinian opposition to the EU demand regarding funding for terrorists and terror organizations is also based on the argument that this request is "humiliating" for the Palestinians. The Palestinians see the request as a "humiliating" because they believe that no one has the right to tell them that Hamas and other Palestinian groups are engaged in terrorism.

The Palestinians are offended by the idea that their "cash cow" is now refusing to produce money for terrorist aims. Palestinian NGOs are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, they are desperate for Western cash - to the tune of tens of millions of dollars and euros. On the other hand, they are worried that the demand to ensure that the funds do not go to terrorists might "criminalize the Palestinian national struggle against Israel."

Clearly, the Europeans setting forth conditions fail to grasp that, for the Palestinians, rockets, suicide bombers, stabbings, drive-by shootings and other forms of violence are not considered terrorism but, rather, heroic acts against Israel and Jews.

Europeans have long funded dozens of NGOs that openly support and promote anti-Israel violence and incitement. In response to the apparent EU move to change the rules of the game, Palestinian groups are also turning the tables on the Western donors, by condemning, pressuring and threatening them.

It remains to be seen whether the Europeans will cave in to Palestinian threats of retaliation and drop their demand that EU money actually feed hungry people rather than feed the Palestinian terrorists' hunger for Israeli blood.

A Fresh Start for Iraq?

By Joyce Toledano



Iran is being hit hard by the triple threat of renewed US sanctions, a tenacious anti-government protest movement, and an uncontrollable coronavirus outbreak. And despite a collapsing economy, massive levels of social unrest, and one of the worst public-health crises in recent memory, the Iranian government has continued to invest resources into maintaining its political and economic stranglehold over Iraq.

A history of interference

Since the defeat of ISIS, Tehran has become increasingly brazen about its activities in Iraq, bankrolling major voting blocs in the Iraqi parliament, infiltrating Iraq's military establishment, and conducting a not-so-secret spying operation on its citizens. The true scale of Iran's influence-gaining campaign in Iraq was only revealed after a 700-page cache of intelligence cables was leaked to Western media outlets. The veritable haul of intelligence reports described a vast Iranian campaign to co-opt influential politicians and undermine core levers of government.

The leaked cables also detailed Iran's successful efforts to establish foreign intelligence networks – made up of intelligence officers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) – in Iraqi provinces with vital strategic or economic infrastructure. IRGC operatives, in an attempt to entrench existing nodes of Iranian influence, have also worked to boost coordination and communication channels between Iran's coalition of militia groups, corrupt public officials, and Shia-majority political organisations.

The rise of Hezbollah in Iraq

Hezbollah is an Iran-funded Shia political party and paramilitary group that has long acted as a proxy force for Iran's expansion in the Middle East. While Hezbollah has a long history of cultivating influence in Iraq, it has been expanding its hard and soft power positions in the country ever since a targeted US drone strike killed both Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the commander of the Shia-majority Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), and IRGC's Qasem Soleimani. Soleimani's death was a particularly severe blow to Iran's long-term capacity to dominate Iraqi affairs, given he led the notorious Quds Force and was the facilitator for cooperation between Iran's often fractious militia forces in Iraq.

The US Bureau of Counterterrorism has designated the entire organisation of Hezbollah, which maintains a formidable power base in Lebanon, as a terrorist organisation. Terror activity notwithstanding, Hezbollah also has a long and storied history of violating human rights. In Israel, Hezbollah was implicated in attacking civilians with surface-to-surface rockets. Elsewhere in the region, the Syrian National Council has blamed Hezbollah fighters for massacring non-combatants in three defenceless villages along the Syria-Lebanon border.

With Soleimani out of the picture, Tehran has encouraged Hezbollah's Sheikh Mohammad al-Kawtharani to fill the power vacuum and assume training and coordination leadership over Iraq's militia groups. In a meeting with Iran-backed paramilitary affiliates, al-Kawtharani allegedly rebuked the wider militia leadership structure, admonishing militia leaders for their failure swiftly to squash Iraq's grassroots anti-Iran protest movement. Make no mistake: Hezbollah's push to take a more active role in repressing Iraq's anti-government demonstrations is a very concerning prospect. Amid similar protests in Syria and Lebanon, Hezbollah was responsible for brutally attacking Sunni street protesters and violently dispersing demonstrator camps.

Bridging Iraq's sectarian divide

If the Iraqi government can't even protect its citizens from Hezbollah's proclivity for human-rights abuses, how can anyone expect it to engage with unprecedented threats to public health, economic security and national sovereignty? The only viable path forward for the Iraqi government is to repudiate repressive sectarian differences and honour the voice of protesters.

To be clear, Iraq's pro-sovereignty protesters are not only calling for the eradication of Iran and Hezbollah's debilitating influence — they are also demanding their right to basic public services, from long-delayed infrastructure improvements to desperately needed employment stimulus. Beyond these much-needed calls for action, Iraq's protest movement is also a model for patriotism and national pride, two elements of Iraqi identity that are sorely missed in these trying times.

The recent appointment of Iraq's intelligence director, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, as prime minister-designate may be an encouraging move in the right direction. Kadhimi seems to have garnered the support of Iraq's diverse and fractious ethnic spectrum — a difficult feat in Iraqi politics.

Shortly after being announced as prime minister-designate by President Barham Salih, Kadhimi received immediate backing by Kurdish, Sunni and the all-important Shia parliamentary groups. This marked a stark departure from his predecessor, Zurfi, whose appointment immediately attracted the opposition of many Shia parties as well as a throng of Iran-backed militias. Indeed, Kadhimi is in an unusual position in that he is supported by both the US and Iran. Striking such a balance, while highly unusual, may also put Iraq at greater risk of further Iranian and Hezbollah intrusion and a continuation that Iran-backed militias have already inflicted. Leaning too much to Iran could also torpedo the popular protest movement that calls for Iran's expulsion from Iraq. If Kadhimi can draw upon his country's Shia base without inviting further control from Iran, then he may succeed in attracting support from many of those who have up to now been taking to the streets. is an analyst specialising in US, Middle East and Asian political and economic developments.

ISIS Terrorists Cannot be Allowed to Reclaim Iraq

By Con Coughlin

The Telegraph's Defence and Foreign Affairs Editor



With the primary focus of the Trump administration understandably concentrated on a variety of pressing domestic issues, from the forthcoming presidential election campaign to tackling the Covid-19 pandemic, there is growing concern that ISIS fanatics are seeking to exploit the situation to rebuild their terrorist infrastructure throughout the Middle East.

In countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, there is mounting evidence that the ISIS leadership is seeking to move on from the catastrophic defeats it has suffered in recent years and rebuild its fighting strength.

In Afghanistan, the most deadly manifestation of the group's new-found strength was demonstrated when U.S. officials blamed ISIS for last month's brutal attack on a maternity ward in the country's capital Kabul in which 24 people died, including a number of mothers, children and new-born babies.

The deepening chaos in Libya caused by the country's bitter civil war has also raised fears that ISIS is seeking to exploit the situation to rebuild its operational strength in the pivotal North African country. Last year U.S. drones carried out a series of attacks against ISIS positions in the Libyan desert, and Western intelligence officials remain concerned that the group is placing sleeper cells in some of the country's major cities. By far the greatest concern among Western security officials, though, is the prospect of ISIS rebuilding its infrastructure in Iraq, the country where the country's former leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi famously proclaimed the establishment of his so-called caliphate in June 2014.

By the time Baghdadi met his death during a U.S. Special Forces operation in Syria's northwestern Idlib province last October, his organisation had been decimated as a result of the U.S.-led coalition's highly effective military campaign against ISIS, which resulted in the destruction of the caliphate.

Since that low point, Iraq security officials have identified a resurgence of ISIS-sponsored activity in Iraq in recent months, with most of the activity concentrated on provinces to the east and north of Baghdad. In April alone the organisation managed to carry out 108 attacks in Iraq, including an assault on an intelligence headquarters in Kirkuk. In early May ISIS militants killed at least 10 Iraqi militiamen in a coordinated assault on their base in the central city of Samarra.

Coalition officials believe there are similarities between the tactics ISIS is employing during its current activity in Iraq and those it used during the start of its campaign in northern Iraq in 2013, which ultimately resulted in the organisation controlling large swathes of the country.

The growing confidence of the ISIS leadership in Iraq is reflected in an online message posted by the organisation's new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Qurashi at the end of last month, which ominously read: "What you are witnessing these days are only signs of the big changes in the region that will offer greater opportunities than we had previously in the past decade."

Iraqi security officials say the number of ISIS fighters in Iraq is now between 2,000-3,000, which includes around 500 militants who have made their way to Iraq after escaping from prisons in Syria. Moreover the ability of the Iraqi security forces to deal with the ISIS threat has been hampered by the fact the Iraqi military has seen a 50 percent drop in the number of available military personnel as a result of the pandemic. This has enabled ISIS to shift the emphasis of its attacks from carrying out local acts of intimidation against government officials to carrying out more complex missions, including IED attacks, shootings and carrying out ambushes against the police and military.

The growing strength of ISIS in Iraq has prompted coalition forces to renew air strikes against ISIS targets in the country. Last month American and British warplanes carried out a series of strikes against a network of caves in northern Iraq that were being used as a base by Isis fighters, killing between 5-10 terrorists.

Western security sources believe a number of factors explain the resurgence of ISIS in Iraq. Apart from exploiting the recent loss of manpower in the Iraqi security forces because of the coronavirus pandemic, ISIS leaders have also taken advantage of the political paralysis the country has experienced following the recent waves of anti-government protests.

The upsurge in ISIS activity in Iraq should certainly act as a wake-up call for the Trump administration as it reviews America's military commitment to Iraq following the recent appointment of former Iraqi intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi as the country's new pro-Western prime minister.

The reason Iraq is able to have elections in the first place is because of the enormous sacrifices made by American and other coalition forces to rebuild the country after the overthrow of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, an achievement that the Trump administration cannot allow to be damaged by a resurgent ISIS.

Danger: Iran's Arms Embargo About to Expire

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



Image: Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping & Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on June 14, 2019

Among the many concessions that the Obama-Biden administration gave to the ruling mullahs of Iran, was one setting a date when Iran's arms embargo would be lifted. The Obama administration agreed to add a provision in the nuclear deal - which, by the way, Iran never got around to signing - allowing the lifting of an arms embargo. Now, again thanks to the Obama-Biden administration, the arms embargo is set to expire in October 2020.

It is important to point out that the Obama administration erased years of efforts and significant political capital that the international community had invested to impose the arms embargo in the first place.

From December 2006 to 2010, the five members of the United Nations Security Council finally agreed to pass series of resolutions (Resolution 1737, Resolution 1747, and Resolution 1929) imposing significant restrictions on Iran's arms activities.

The UN Security Council resolution 1929 stated: "Iran shall not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons, including launches using ballistic missile technology, and that States shall take all necessary measures to prevent the transfer of technology or technical assistance to Iran related to such activities".

The ban encompassed a wide range of weapons, including large-caliber artillery, combat aircraft, battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, attack helicopters, some missiles and missile launchers, and warships.

The mullahs, in addition, scored a major political victory when the US administration in 2015 added a section to the nuclear deal permitting the lifting of the arms embargo through two sunset clauses.

It was mind-boggling that the Obama-Biden administration decided to include such an appeasing and dangerous provision in the nuclear deal. Both Democrats and

Republicans were, in fact, stunned by the move. At the time, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and the leading Republican in Congress, John Boehner, pointed out : "It blows my mind that the administration would agree to lift the arms and missile bans."

If the arms embargo on the theocratic establishment of Iran were lifted, the Iranian regime would be allowed legally to export and import advanced weapons, which would subsequently strengthen the military apparatuses of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite branch, the Quds Force.

Who will benefit from lifting the arms embargo? Russia and China. They would most likely be the preferred arms exporters to Iran. With prospects for multi-billion dollar deals, Moscow and Beijing would doubtless be delighted to sell weapons to Iran.

That is probably why the Russian Foreign Ministry last month pointed out: "It has been said in Congress that the United States would try to convince Russia and China not to veto the draft UN Security Council resolution on extending the arms embargo on Iran. But it is no use raising this matter in the Security Council. There are no grounds for this. The timeframe and conditions coordinated in 2015 are not subject to revision."

Tehran will likely utilize the sophisticated weaponry to advance its hegemonic ambitions in the region, increase its military adventurism in the Middle East, and ship arms to its proxies and militia groups to destabilize the region and trigger an arms race across the Middle East.

Notably, the arms embargo is to be lifted against a regime that is the world's top state sponsor of terrorism. Iran has already been caught several times smuggling weapons to its militia and terror groups in violation of the UN Resolution 2231, which ostensibly prevents Iran from transferring arms directly or indirectly out of its territories without the approval of the UN Security Council. For example, it was revealed that Iran has been shipping weapons and military advisers to the Houthis either directly to Yemen or via Somalia.

If the arms embargo on the Iranian regime is removed, imagine how much more the "top state sponsor of terrorism" will ratchet up its delivery of weapons and ammunition to militia and terror groups.

In short, thanks to the Obama-Biden administration, Iran's arms embargo, set to expire in few months, would further assist the mullahs' predatory regime even more powerfully to pursue its destabilizing, militaristic and aggressive policies across the world.

Trump's Iran Policy is Hitting Tehran's Allies Hard!

By Zara Dawoud
TCMER Board Member



President Donald Trump reimposes sanctions on Iran June 8, 2018

Thanks to the re-imposition of sanctions against Tehran by the Trump administration, the Iranian regime seems to have suffered a significant loss of revenue. The Trump administration's (almost) "maximum pressure" policy against the Iranian regime is apparently forcing Tehran to rein in some of its forces in the region as well as cut funding to its allies.

According to the latest report, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has withdrawn some of its forces from Syria, and reduced its financial assistance to Syria's regime. The US special envoy for Syria policy and the fight against the Islamic State, James Jeffrey, recently pointed out: "We have seen the Iranians pulling in some of their outlying activities and such in Syria because of, frankly, financial problems... the Trump administration's sanctions policies against Iran [are] having a real effect in Syria." He added, "We do see some withdrawal of Iranian-commanded forces. Some of that is tactical because they are not fighting right now, but it also is a lack of money".

Iran's oil revenues and exports have been steadily declining since the US President Donald J. Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - also known as the Iran nuclear deal, and incidentally, never signed by Iran - and adopted a policy of (almost) "maximum pressure."

During the Obama-Biden administration, by comparison, when the White House was pursuing appeasement policies towards Iran, the regime increased its oil exports to a record high: more than 2.5 million barrels per day. Since Trump was elected, and the US administration took a tougher stance towards the mullahs, Iran's oil exports dropped to approximately 200,000 barrels per day - a number that represents

a decline of more than 90%. Iran has the world's second-largest natural gas reserves and the fourth-largest proven crude oil reserves; the sale of these resources account for more than 80% percent of its export revenues.

Consequently, the flow of funds to the Iranian regime has been cut off, thereby thwarting the Iranian leaders' efforts to fund and sponsor both Bashar Assad's regime in Syria and various terror groups. Even a Syrian-state controlled newspaper admitted that Tehran had scaled back its financial assistance to Damascus. *Al-Watan* also reported that Iran had halted its credit line to the Syrian government and that, as a result, the Iranian leaders have been having difficulty shipping oil to Syria, thereby creating a fuel shortage there.

For years, many Iranians have been frustrated with the regime's regional policy as well as its hemorrhaging billions of dollars and national resources on militias and terror groups in the region. In recent years, chants such as "Leave Syria alone, think about us instead", "Death to Hezbollah", "Never mind Palestine, think about us", and "Forget about Gaza and Lebanon; I'll sacrifice my life for Iran" became popular during protests.

Iran's Lebanese proxy, the terror group Hezbollah, also seems to be feeling the pressure of the Trump administration's tougher stance towards the mullahs. A senior Hezbollah official who spoke on the condition of anonymity reportedly told the *Washington Post* that the US sanctions against Iran has forced the group to cut expenses. "There is no doubt these sanctions have had a negative impact," he pointed out, and added, "But ultimately, sanctions are a component of war, and we are going to confront them in this context." In addition, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, has urged his group's fundraising arm "to provide the opportunity for jihad with money and also to help with this ongoing battle."

Even Iran's leaders are admitting that the Trump Administration's (almost) "maximum pressure" policy has hit Tehran quite hard. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, for instance, surprisingly admitted that his government is encountering the worst economic crisis since 1979. Iran's national currency, the rial, has dropped to historic lows - one US dollar, which could buy you approximately 35,000 rials in November of 2017, now will buy you nearly 170,000 rials.

Cash-strapped Iran also appears to be having difficulty paying the salaries some of the militants. As a member of an Iranian-backed militia in Syria told the *New York Times*, "The golden days are gone and will never return. Iran," he added "doesn't have enough money to give us."

Now it is incumbent on other governments - specifically the European Union - to join the US in pursuing its (almost) "maximum pressure" policy against the ruling mullahs. The policy may not be really "maximum" - everyone has carefully been tip-toeing around the words "regime change" - which, bluntly, would be a boon to (almost) everyone - but at least until then, sanctions are helping more than nothing, and definitely more than US pallets of cash.

Abbas's Precious Gift to Iran: Hamas

By Khaled Abu Toameh



The Iranian-backed Hamas movement has welcomed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's latest threat to renounce all agreements and understandings with Israel and the US, including security cooperation.

"We hope that this time Abu Mazen's (Abbas's) decision is a serious one," said Saleh Arouri, deputy head of the Hamas "political bureau." Arouri added that the return of the "armed resistance" to the West Bank was now possible "and even closer than some may think."

The Hamas official repeated his movement's rejection of any peace agreement with Israel, including the Oslo Accords, signed between the PLO and Israel in 1993. "Since day one, we have rejected the Oslo Accords," Arouri explained. "We have also strongly opposed all security agreements with the occupation, and therefore we welcome Abu Mazen's decision to halt the security coordination [with Israel]."

Iran's other Palestinian proxy, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), also seems to be satisfied with Abbas's recurring threat to renounce all agreements with Israel, including security coordination. "We take Abu Mazen's announcement seriously and look forward to its implementation," said PIJ Secretary-General Ziyad al-Nakhalah. "What is required of the Palestinian Authority is a big step towards unity."

Why are Hamas and PIJ so happy with the Palestinian leader?

Abbas's threat, which came in response to an Israeli plan to extend Israeli law to parts of the West Bank, is undoubtedly a precious gift not only to his Palestinian political rivals in Hamas, but also to Iran, whose leaders continue to talk about the need for "eliminating the Zionist regime."

On the same day Abbas made his announcement, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, wrote on Twitter: "Eliminating the Zionist regime doesn't mean eliminating Jews. We aren't against Jews. It means abolishing the imposed regime and Muslim, Christian and Jewish Palestinians choose their own government and expel thugs like [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu. This is 'eliminating Israel', and it will happen."

In another comment on Twitter on May 19, Khamenei said that the West Bank, where Abbas and the Palestinian Authority are based, "must be armed, just like Gaza."

The Iranian leader is actually saying that his country is seeking to turn the West Bank into a launching pad for terrorist attacks in order to achieve the goal of eliminating Israel. Bizarrely, he is promising to destroy Israel, but without killing Jews.

Khamenei evidently sees Abbas's decision to renounce all agreements and understandings with Israel and the US as a positive development that would facilitate the mission Iran and Hamas share to export anti-Israel terrorism to the West Bank. The Iranian leader wants the West Bank to become like the Gaza Strip, from where Hamas and its allies have been firing rockets at Israel for several years.

If Abbas goes through with his threat to halt security coordination with Israel, that would mean an end to his efforts to prevent Iran's Palestinian proxies, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, from proceeding with their ambition of extending their control to the West Bank. By halting the security crackdown on Hamas, Abbas would be paving the way for terrorists to kill him and his associates in the West Bank, as they already began to do in 2007 in the Gaza Strip, and possibly again in a coup in 2014.

In recent years Abbas's security forces have arrested hundreds of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad members in the West Bank as part of an effort to prevent these groups from undermining his regime. Israel, for its part, has been helping Abbas by routinely arresting Hamas members and officials who pose a threat to his government.

It is rare for a Hamas leader to praise Abbas. Hamas and Abbas have been engaged in a power struggle since 2007, when the Islamist movement, Hamas, staged a violent coup in the Gaza Strip, hurled members of the Palestinian Authority from high buildings and overthrew the Palestinian Authority regime, along with Abbas, who, since then, has not even been able to return to his house in the Gaza Strip. Like their masters in Tehran, however, the leaders of Hamas now apparently believe that Abbas may finally have decided to join the Iranian-led "axis of evil" by cutting Palestinian ties with Israel and the US.

Therefore the leaders of Hamas are now heaping praise on Abbas and urging him to "translate his words into deeds." The message Hamas is sending to Abbas is, "Thank you for finally realizing that the armed struggle is the only way to destroy Israel. Let us join forces in the Jihad to eliminate Israel."

Hamas does not recognize Israel's right to exist; its charter states that: "the land of Palestine has been an Islamic Waqf throughout the generations and until the Day of Resurrection, no one can renounce it or part of it, or abandon it or part of it. No Arab country and no Arab king or president have that right."

The charter also makes it clear that: "[peace] initiatives, the so-called peaceful solutions, and the international conferences to resolve the Palestinian problem, are all contrary to the beliefs of the Islamic Resistance Movement [Hamas]. For renouncing any part of Palestine means renouncing part of the religion; the movement educates its members to adhere to its principles and to raise the banner of Allah over their homeland as they fight their Jihad. There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by Jihad."

For several years now, Hamas has been strongly condemning Abbas because of his perceived support for the two-state solution and contacts with Israel, including security coordination between the Palestinian Authority security forces and the IDF in the West Bank. At one point, when Abbas was quoted assaying that he was not opposed to the establishment of a demilitarized Palestinian state, Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri responded by announcing that the Palestinian leader's statement did not represent the Palestinian people.

In 2014, Hamas went further by calling for removing Abbas from power and putting him on trial for "high treason." Yahya Abadseh, a senior Hamas official in the Gaza Strip, said that Abbas should be toppled and brought to trial for "betraying the Palestinian people and endangering their interests by imposing sanctions on the Gaza Strip and collaborating with foreign parties."

Three years later, another senior Hamas official, Marwan Abu Ras, called for "imposing [Islamic] sharia law against Abbas by hanging him in front of his people." Abu Ras too accused Abbas of "treason" and "collaboration" with Israel.

Additionally, paying verbal respects after a death constitutes high treason in the eyes of Hamas. A year ago, the terrorist organization accused Abbas of betraying the Palestinians by offering condolences to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin over the death of his wife in June 2019. Hamas spokesman Abdel Latif Qanou said: "Abbas's condolences to the President of the Zionist entity over the death of his wife is a betrayal of our Palestinian people, a stab [in the backs of] the families of the [Palestinian] martyrs, and a disregard for their noble feelings."

If and when Abbas does suspend security coordination with Israel, he will be sending a message to Iran and its Palestinian proxies that the time has come to turn the West Bank into a center for Jihad against Israel and the "infidels."

At the same time, Abbas will be signing his own death warrant: Hamas has apparently not relinquished its desire to "hang Abbas in front of the Palestinian people." It appears to be decision time: Will Abbas ally himself with those who are protecting him or with those who would execute him as a traitor?

BLM & Modern Slavery

By Don Gibbons
TCMER Board Member



BLM may not care much about Arab lives in the Middle East or North Africa - after all, they are all about black lives, so how about black slaves in Africa? There are currently an estimated 9.2 million men, women and children living in modern slavery in Africa, according to the Global Slavery Index, which includes forced labor, forced sexual exploitation and forced marriage.

"According to the U.N.'s International Labour Organization (ILO), there are more than three times as many people in forced servitude today as were captured and sold during the 350-year span of the transatlantic slave trade", *Time Magazine* reported in March 2019. According to the ILO, modern slavery has seen 25 million people in debt bondage and 15 million in forced marriage.

Modern slavery earns criminal networks an estimated \$150 billion a year, just slightly less than drug smuggling and weapons trafficking. "Modern slavery is far and away more profitable now than at any point in human history," Siddharth Kara, an economist at the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy, told *Time*. According to the 2018 Global Slavery Index, "G-20 countries import some \$354 billion worth of products at risk of being produced by modern slavery every year".

In 2017, shocking footage emerged from actual slave auctions in Libya: CNN documented an incident in which Arabic-speaking men sold off twelve Nigerians. In 2019, *Time Magazine* interviewed an African migrant, labarot, who had been sold into slavery on his way to Europe: "When labarot reached Libya's southern border, he met a seemingly friendly taxi driver who offered to drive him to the capital city, Tripoli, for free. Instead, he was sold to a 'white Libyan,' or Arab, for \$200. He was forced to work off his 'debt' on a construction site, a pattern that repeated each time he was sold and resold."

Sex trafficking forms a considerable part of modern slavery. The Nigerian mafia, for instance, according to a 2019 report by the *Washington Post*, is trafficking women by the tens of thousands: "Some experts say that as many as 20,000 Nigerian women, some of them minors, arrived in Sicily between 2016 and 2018, trafficked in cooperation with Nigerians in Italy and back home."

According to a July 2017 report by the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM): "Over the past three years, IOM Italy has seen an almost 600 per cent increase in the number of potential sex trafficking victims arriving in Italy by sea. This upward trend has continued during the first six months of 2017, with most victims arriving from Nigeria". In its report, IOM estimated that 80 per cent of girls, often minors, arriving from Nigeria - whose numbers soared dramatically from 1,454 in 2014 to 11,009 in 2016 - were "potential victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation".

In parts of the African continent, especially in the Sahel, slavery is still ingrained in traditional culture, even though, officially, slavery has been outlawed. In countries such as Mali and Mauritania, so-called descent-based slavery or "caste-based" slavery - in which slavery is passed down from generation to generation, so that slaves are born into their predicament - is still practiced by some.

In 2013, it was estimated that around 250,000 people were living in slave-like conditions in Mali, where slavery is not illegal. One Malian slave, Raichatou, told the *Guardian* in 2013 that she became a slave at the age of seven when her mother, also a slave, died. "My father could only watch on helplessly as my mother's master came to claim me and my brothers," she said. She worked as a servant for the family without pay for nearly 20 years, and was forced into a marriage with another slave whom she didn't know, so that she could supply her master with more slaves.



In Mauritania, it is estimated that up to 20% of the population is enslaved, even though slavery was officially outlawed in 1981. The slaves are mostly from the Haratine minority, who are black Africans, as opposed to the nearly half of the population who are Arabs or Berbers. According to a report by the *Guardian* from 2018: "Slavery has a long history in this north African desert nation. For centuries, Arabic-speaking Moors

raided African villages, resulting in a rigid caste system that still exists to this day, with darker-skinned inhabitants beholden to their lighter-skinned "masters". Slave status is passed down from mother to child, and anti-slavery activists are regularly. Yet the government routinely denies that slavery exists in Mauritania, instead praising itself for eradicating the practice."

The report also described a few of the horrific fates of the Haratine slaves: "Aichetou Mint M'barack was a slave by descent in the Rosso area. Like her sister, she was taken away from her mother and then given to a member of the master's family to be a servant. She got married in the home of her masters and had eight children, two of whom were taken away from her to be slaves in other families. In 2010, Aichetou's older sister was able to free her... after she herself fled her masters when they poured hot embers over her baby, killing it."

BLM and the many corporate executives, university professors, media, sports and cultural personalities who are bending their knees to the movement seem totally unconcerned by the fates of the likes of Aichetou. More likely than not, they have never heard of her or her many fellow sufferers. They are apparently black lives that *do not matter* - to anyone except the courageous people working in the local anti-slavery organizations.

Instead, BLM and its sycophants endlessly debate changing the names of streets and universities, and removing statues, all of which do not amount to anything more than infantile virtue signalling. They waste time debating whether people who were never themselves slaves, should receive reparations from people who never owned a slave. To engage in all this posturing, while ignoring the staggering 60 million current victims of actual slavery, not only represents the immeasurable depths of woke hypocrisy, but constitutes an extreme insult to those who are suffering their slavery in silence, while slowly dying from the physical, sexual and emotional abuse that they are being forced to endure. If anything is "offensive," it is that.

China in Africa: Embedded and Growing

By Bonnie Evans



The spread and depth of China's engagement in commerce, education, media, the military, security, and telecommunications in the 54 countries of Africa go far beyond the scope of mining interests on that continent that foreign powers have coveted for centuries.

"China has positioned itself to become a strategic partner to Africa," Paul Nantulya, of the African Center for Strategic Studies, told the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC) at a hearing held May 8.

For Africans, partnering with China comes with few conditions. "China doesn't have political strings attached, in terms of criteria that African countries must meet," said Yun Sun, director of the China Program at the Stimson Centre, a Washington think tank.

Indeed, China's inroads into Africa have been ideological as well as economic, Nantulya said. "China is enlisting Africa's support for the 'Community of Common Destiny,' China's alternative to the Western-led governments' model. Africa was the first region to commit itself to this community, an endeavour written in China's constitution," he said.

China's Military Embedded Throughout Africa

Nantulya illustrated his point with a review of recent events. "In the past six months," Nantulya said, "China has delivered tanks to Nigeria, helped Ethiopia and Sudan launch satellites, [and] conducted military exercises with the South African and Tanzanian military."

In Zimbabwe, Chinese representatives "attended a pass-out ceremony of junior officers trained by the PLA [the People's Liberation Army of China] at Zimbabwe's top college," while in Namibia, the PLA "inaugurated Namibia's new Command and Staff College.

Meanwhile, the PLA opened Africa's first integrated public security centre in Angola, Nantulya said. The close relationships between Africa's armed forces and China have historical roots, he says. African "liberation movements ... were trained by the PLA from inception," he said, and those ties "remain pivotal to China's strategic influence."

Nantulya is referring to the independence movements in Africa that sought, in conjunction with their military wings, to overthrow colonialism throughout the continent during the post-World War II era. He says many of those movements turned to the PLA “for basic army building, once in power,” and as a result, “many share fundamental traditions, ideology, and doctrine with the PLA.”

Chinese arms sales to African nations are easily facilitated by three key factors, Nantulya said. First, China turns a blind eye to a country’s “domestic dynamics, including sanctions.” Second, China offers “friendly pricing.” Third, “flexible financing” makes payment terms easy for purchasers.

Along with domestic training of African armed forces, “2,000 officers across 40 African countries train in China annually, with the numbers from French-speaking West African countries growing exponentially,” Nantulya said.

While Africans favor an education in the United States for “strategic and senior levels” of their armed forces, considering it a “key for career advancement,” Africans think highly of China as the source of training of NCOs and junior officers, and technical subjects, Nantulya said.

Practical training is backed up by ideological education in PLA political schools, which foster the idea that “the uniform serves the party before the state, a notion directly opposed to the Western principle of an apolitical military,” he continued.

Already, more than 2,000 party and military cadres from Africa train in Chinese political schools each year.

China's Presence

Yun Sun, a graduate of the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Foreign Affairs College in Beijing, testified that “the level of attention which China attaches to Africa is simply massive compared to the U.S.” And its model is supported by the fact that the Chinese “are there.”

The effects of the Chinese resident population throughout Africa are bolstered by numerous visits of Chinese government and military officials each year, Sun said. That Chinese presence includes a security component. China protects its interests, assets, and people in the nations of its closest diplomatic partners “through the use of China’s other armed forces, such as the People’s Armed Police,” Nantulya said.

The People’s Armed Police, or “wujing” in Chinese, is a paramilitary security force responsible throughout China for internal security, anti-terrorism, riot control, and other major threats to China’s stability. The force reports to the highest level of China’s military, the Central Military Commission, and, since the 2018 military reform in China, to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party.

Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Namibia, Mozambique, and South Africa are in the tier of countries to which China would, and does, send its paramilitary force, Nantulya added. Uganda, among their ranks, chooses to use its security forces to protect Chinese assets on its soil, he added.

In lower tiers of diplomatic relationships, “private security companies are more prominent,” he said.

Appealing to African Elites

Sun, when asked how the United States could counterbalance the Chinese influence in Africa, said that “a lot of African elites find the Chinese approach to be quite appealing.” “So, the strength of the U.S. side has to lie with society,” she continued, indicating that America has to win the hearts and minds of the African people in order to gain influence on the continent.

“We have to understand what is happening between Chinese elites and African elites, [who] find the Chinese approach to be convenient and expedient,” she said. When asked about how much of a role that corruption plays in the relationship, Ambassador David Shinn, a career foreign service officer with decades of experience in Africa, said China is “pushing on an open door.”

What China Wants

China’s overwhelming interest in Africa is, of course, its desire to control the rich and abundant natural resources of the continent, witnesses at the hearing agreed. To that end, China is mirroring the European exploitation of the continent, which began in the 15th century.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) states that Africa “holds a huge proportion of the world’s natural resources, both renewables and non-renewables.”

“Africa is home to some 30 percent of the world’s mineral reserves,” along with 12 percent of the world’s oil reserves, according to U.N. statistics. “It also has 40 percent of the world’s gold, up to 90 percent of its chromium and platinum, and holds the largest reserves of cobalt, diamonds, platinum, and uranium in the world.”

Critically, the U.N. figures show that those natural resources comprise 30 to 50 percent of the total wealth of most African countries.

Sun said that second to China’s desire to acquire the natural resources of Africa, the country has also “been looking for places to shift supply chains.” Along with Southeast Asia, China considers Africa as a destination for that relocation, which hasn’t yet occurred.

“The Chinese first need to have the infrastructure” to support the move of industrial capacity, as well as access to and movement of natural resources. In her discussions with Chinese officials, Sun said she’s been told, “that’s why they are investing in it.” Additionally, China wants Africa’s market for Chinese goods and services, as well as the political support that most African countries provide China in international institutions, the experts agreed.

A by-product of Chinese investment, military presence, ongoing infrastructure projects, mining, and other activity on the continent has been the influx of an estimated 1 million Chinese to Africa. That’s led to security risks for Chinese citizens, in countries where crime, kidnapping, civil conflict, and epidemics are common.

Media and Telecoms

China’s “vast media enterprise amplifies its message” in Africa, Nantulya told the commissioners. “In Nairobi, 500 journalists and staff generate 1,800 news items monthly from Xinhua’s Africa bureau,” he said.

China Global Television (CGT) and China Radio International both broadcast from Nairobi, Kenya. Viewers and listeners can access their content 19 hours each day in Chinese, English, and Swahili, Nantulya said.

The second-largest digital television provider on the continent is China's Star Times, which distributes Chinese content to 10 million subscribers in 30 countries, he said. Xinhua, China's state-owned and operated news agency, has an agreement with Kenya's Nation Media that gives it "access to 18 media brands, 28 million social media followers, 11 million multi-pay views, and 90,000 daily newspaper circulation in east and central Africa," he said.

Chinese telecommunications companies Huawei and ZTE, both of which have strong ties to the Beijing regime, dominate the infrastructure of telecommunications throughout China, according to Aubrey Hruby, a senior fellow at Atlantic Council. "Huawei has built roughly 70 percent of the continent's 4G network," she added.

Transsion, a Chinese mobile phone manufacturer, dominates the African smartphone market, Hruby testified. China, she said, has near-universal penetration in the continent's telecommunications markets, with 250 million people—nearly a third—owning a smartphone.

America's Opportunity

The United States needs to "really double-down in our areas of competitiveness," Hruby said. "We need to continue to be a world leader in media and entertainment. Hollywood, Nollywood [Nigeria's film industry]—those kinds of partnerships shape the world view, the frame of mind, of millions and millions of African young people. These kinds of things are our assets and we've been lazy about ... finding ways to collaborate."

America must figure out "how to mobilize financing of the creative industries. Why isn't there a Hollywood/Nollywood task force that's for looking for partnerships between the film industries in African markets and Hollywood?"

There are opportunities for the United States in Africa, and realizing them can counter Chinese influence, Hruby said. America should do "things that align with the aspirations of Africa's youth, which are going to be a billion young people—one in four workers globally—which is something that we've always done well," she said.

Covid-19 in the MENA

Situation report: week ending 30 June 2020

By Lina Zaidi
TCMER Board Member



REGIONAL OVERVIEW

In most countries of the Middle East and North Africa the initial wave of Covid-19 infections has passed its peak but so far only Jordan and Tunisia appear to have brought it under control. Most countries managed to reduce new infections through lockdowns and other measures but in many of them the reduction hasn't continued and some have since seen big increases.

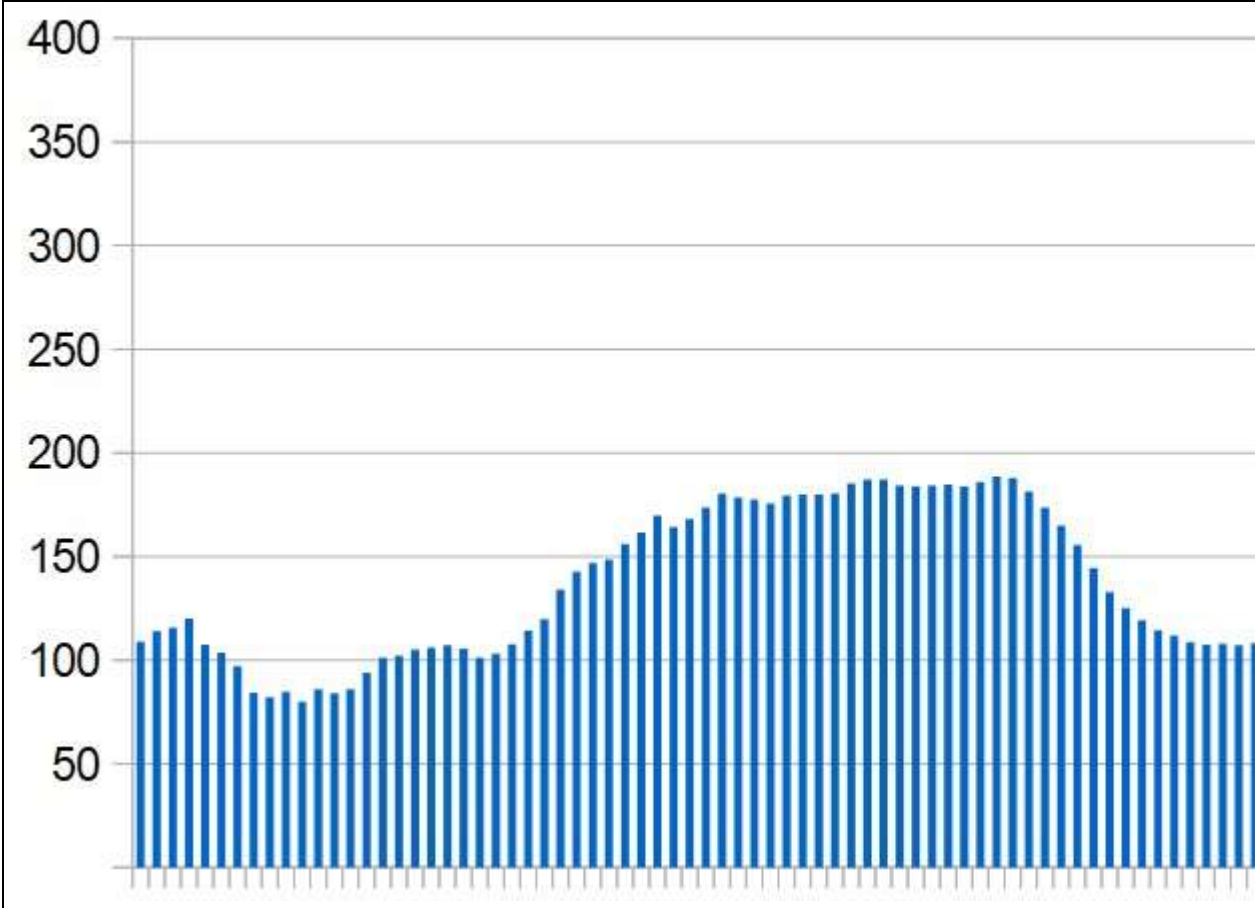
In 10 of the 20 countries monitored, new cases this week have been running at a higher level than in the previous week. The most dramatic examples are Israel and the West Bank of Palestine but Algeria and Iraq have also reported substantial rises.

Some of the increases can be attributed to easing of restrictions but there are repeated complaints from many part of the region that efforts to control the virus are hampered by non-compliance from the public, either by failing to observe precautions – holding social gatherings, not wearing face masks, etc – or by flouting the rules for quarantine and self-isolation. The countries least equipped to cope with the epidemic are Yemen, Sudan, Iraq and Libya.

Among countries reporting a decrease in new cases the reductions are mostly small, though Qatar's average of 838 new cases a day during the past week is more than 200 a day below the previous week's average.

The EU council has recommended that travellers from three Arab countries – Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia – can be allowed to enter the EU. The three are among a list of 15 countries worldwide which are considered epidemiologically "safe". It's unclear how the list was compiled and the inclusion of Algeria seems odd, especially when Jordan – which has been successful of the Arab countries in controlling the virus – is excluded. The list is not legally binding, so EU member countries are not obliged to follow it. Germany has already said it will not accept travellers from Algeria and Morocco.

ALGERIA



New Covid-19 cases in Algeria over the last three months. Seven-day rolling average, day by day.

Algeria has recorded a relatively low number of cases – 344 per million inhabitants – but testing capacity is also low. New infections began increasing in mid-June as lockdown restrictions were eased, and this has accelerated during the past week, with record numbers reported. New cases averaged 341 a day during the past week, compared with an average of 169 the previous week.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said on June 28 that land, air and sea borders remain closed "until the end" of the Covid-19 crisis.

- Confirmed cases: 15,070
- New cases in past week: 2,385
- Active cases: 3,301
- Deaths: 937

BAHRAIN

The level of new infections in Bahrain fluctuates but the past week has seen a modest improvement. New cases averaged 515 a day compared with 556 during the previous week. Migrant workers who often live in overcrowded conditions account for the majority of cases in Bahrain.

- Confirmed cases: 28,410
- New cases in past week: 3,605
- Active cases: 4,997
- Deaths: 95
- Tests carried out: 584,000

EGYPT

Egypt's strategy is to minimise economic damage by "coexisting" with the virus until a vaccine comes along. The official figures suggest new infections have reached a plateau, with an average of 1,422 a day during the past week – slightly below the previous week's average. Egypt's airports reopened for international flights on Wednesday after a break of almost three months and the railways resumed full service.

However, health services are under strain, with medical staff complaining of inadequate protection, and the death rate remains high. Relations between the Sisi regime and the medical profession continue at a low ebb (see previous report). More than 100 health workers have died from Covid-19 and almost a thousand have been infected, according to the doctors' syndicate. Several doctors have been imprisoned or arrested after making comments on social media criticising the regime's handling of the situation.

Confirmed cases: 72,711

New cases in past week: 9,956

Active cases: 49,820

Deaths: 3,201

Tests carried out: 135,000

IRAN

Iran was the first country in the region to be seriously affected by the virus and has since been hit by a second wave. Government figures show an initial wave of infections which peaked at the end of March. It subsided during April, briefly dipping below 1,000 new cases per day but then rose to a new peak in the first week of June.

New cases have dropped back a bit since then and the numbers have been relatively stable over the past two weeks – around 2,500 cases a day. There's a good deal of scepticism about Iran's official statistics, and it's widely assumed that they understate the scale of the problem.

Confirmed cases: 249,429

New cases in past week: 17,705

Active cases: 27,723

Deaths: 11,260

Tests carried out: 1.7 million

IRAQ

Iraq has seen steep rises since early June. New infections have been averaging more than 2,000 a day this week – the highest level since the outbreak began – and Iraq's official figures are widely believed to understate the scale of the epidemic. Many cases go unreported because of social stigma. Compliance with preventive measures appears to be low and health services are inadequate.

A report last week said Iraqi hospitals are spreading infection rather than helping to contain it, while test results arrive too late to be useful and are often unreliable

The World Health Organisation has issued some detailed statistics on Covid-19 in Iraq.

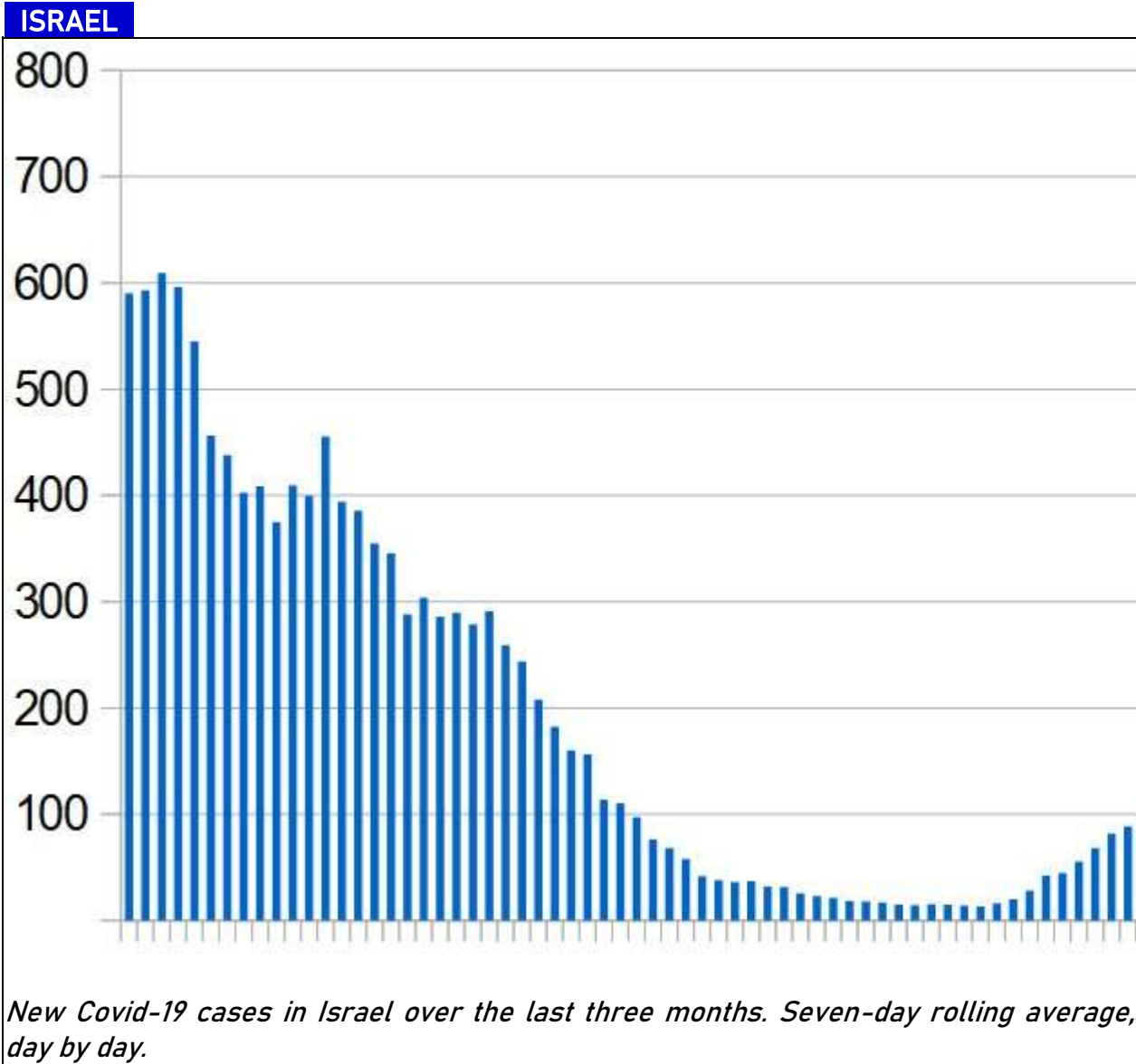
Confirmed cases: 56,020

New cases in past week: 14,827

Active cases: 24,158

Deaths: 2,262

Tests carried out: 579,000



The situation in Israel looks very alarming: gains made during the lockdown have been wiped out by a second wave of infections. The initial wave peaked at around 600 new cases a day in early April and by the second half of May they had dropped to 15-16 a day. However, they began increasing again when restrictions were lifted and the rise over the last few days has been especially steep. New cases have averaged 751 a day during the past week – more than during the April peak.

The government is reluctant to impose a second nationwide lockdown but may eventually be forced to do so in order to avoid overwhelming health services. Currently, it is trying to focus on declaring "restricted zones" in particular hotspots. On Friday it went a step further, limiting attendance at event halls, bars, clubs and prayer houses to 50 people. Any other gatherings in closed spaces are now limited to 20 people.

Analysis of health ministry data by an Israeli website suggests buses and supermarkets are the most common sources of infection. Israel's education ministry has been developing "flexible" plans for the next school year based on three alternative coronavirus scenarios (details here).

Confirmed cases: 28,055
New cases in past week: 5,255
Active cases: 10,060
Deaths: 326
Tests carried out: 1 million

JORDAN

Jordan has been one of the most successful Arab countries in controlling the virus, and the government has now reduced the official risk level from "medium" to "low". A few new cases are still being recorded but almost all of them are among people who were quarantined after arriving from other countries.

Confirmed cases: 1,147
New cases in past week: 43
Active cases: 240
Deaths: 10
Tests carried out: 408,000

KUWAIT

Kuwait appears to be over the worst. New infections peaked around May 25 and then dropped back substantially, though there has since been a modest rise. The level of new cases is currently stable, averaging 710 a day during the past week.

Migrant workers who often live in overcrowded conditions account for the majority of confirmed cases and many have now returned to their country of origin.

Confirmed cases: 48,672
New cases in past week: 4,969
Active cases: 9,036
Deaths: 360
Tests carried out: 399,000

LEBANON

In the midst of political and economic chaos Lebanon is fortunate in having a relatively small number of recorded cases so far. Many of the recent infections have been detected among people returning from abroad. On Tuesday the government extended its "general mobilisation" against the virus until August 2.

Beirut airport reopened on Wednesday but with only a small number of flights, mainly for travel between Lebanon and the Gulf. The government has said passengers will not be quarantined on arrival because they are "expected" to have been tested for the virus before departure.

Confirmed cases: 1,830
New cases in past week: 133
Active cases: 503
Deaths: 35
Tests carried out: 141,000

LIBYA

Libya is in its ninth year of internal conflict. The UN-backed Government of National Unity in Tripoli is challenged by Field Marshall Haftar's forces based in the east of the country. There are also numerous militias.

This leaves the country ill-equipped to cope with a major epidemic. Growing levels of insecurity, political fragmentation and weak governance have led to a deterioration of

basic services, particularly in the health system. At least 27 health facilities have been damaged or closed by fighting and some have been attacked directly. The number of confirmed infections is still small but testing is very limited. There are 870,000 people – refugees, asylum seekers and displaced persons – who the UN regards as especially vulnerable.

Confirmed cases: 918

New cases in past week: 205

Active cases: 661

Deaths: 27

Tests carried out: 29,000

MOROCCO

Morocco seemed to be making good progress until recently. A strict lockdown had kept the number of known Covid-19 cases below 10,000 and by early June new infections had fallen to around 40 a day. However, there was a major setback towards the end of June with the discovery of hundreds of new cases in the Kenitra area, most notably among women from rural villages employed to pack strawberries. Since then, new infections have not dropped back to previous levels. During the past week new cases have averaged 236 a day.

Following the disruption of air travel by the pandemic, Royal Air Maroc is reportedly preparing a recovery plan which involves dispensing with 20 aircraft (about a third of its fleet) and reducing its workforce by 30%.

Confirmed cases: 13,288

New cases in past week: 1,665

Active cases: 3,998

Deaths: 230

Tests carried out: 728,000

OMAN

Oman's outbreak grew slowly until the end of May but new cases have risen substantially since then. The health ministry says this has "nothing to do with" the reopening of activities. A ministry official blamed "continued indifference" by the public, saying that "most of the infections among citizens could have been easily avoided".

As in the other Gulf states, migrant workers in Oman have been disproportionately affected by the virus and almost 40,000 have left the country since March.

Confirmed cases: 43,929

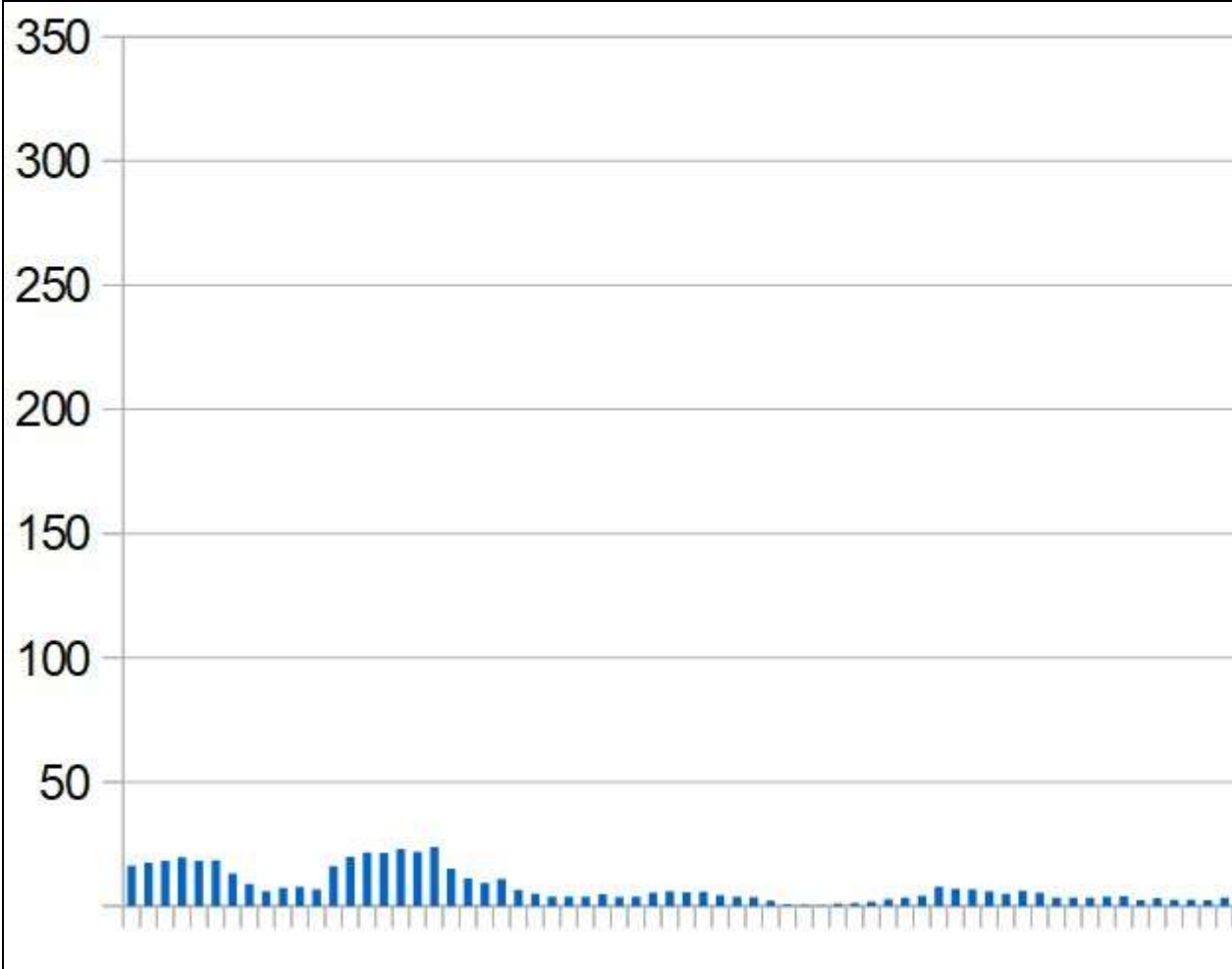
New cases in past week: 7,895

Active cases: 17,557

Deaths: 193

Tests carried out: 203,000

PALESTINE



New Covid-19 cases in Palestine over the last three months. Seven-day rolling average, day by day.

Until the fourth week of June Palestine's outbreak was still small, with fewer than 1,000 known cases. Since then, though, the number has more quadrupled, with the Hebron area of the West Bank particularly affected. On Friday the authorities imposed a "total lockdown" of the West Bank which is due to last five days but could be extended. Palestinians are being told to stay at home and businesses will be closed except for the sale of food and medicines.

Many of the recent infections are attributed to people ignoring the rules for social distancing, which the authorities have difficulty enforcing. The health ministry says more than 30% of cases are the result of Palestinians travelling to and from work in Israel where new cases are also increasing.

Fears of a major epidemic in Gaza have not materialised. Most of the known cases there are apparently due to contacts with Egypt.

Confirmed cases: 4,013 (West Bank 3,526, Gaza 72, East Jerusalem 415)

New cases in past week: 2,218

Active cases: 3,124

Deaths: 15

Tests carried out: 85,000

QATAR

In population terms Qatar has more known cases than any other country – 30,000 per million inhabitants. Migrant workers have been disproportionately affected. Qatar's epidemic reached a peak in the first week of June and new cases have fallen steadily since then. During the past week new cases averaged 838 a day, compared with more than 1,800 a day at the peak. The government has embarked on a four-stage plan for lifting restrictions.

Confirmed cases: 98,653

New cases in past week: 5,869

Active cases: 9,949

Deaths: 121

Tests carried out: 372,000

SAUDI ARABIA

Saudi Arabia has the largest number of recorded cases among the Arab countries. New infections reached an initial peak in the fourth week of May, then dropped back slightly before rising to a higher peak in the third week of June. The current seven-day average of new cases is 3,889 – about 500 a day below the June peak.

Migrant workers have been disproportionately affected but the authorities have also complained about non-compliance with precautionary measures by Saudi citizens.

This year's Hajj (the annual pilgrimage to Mecca) which is due to start on July 28 and normally attracts millions of Muslims from around the world will be restricted to people living in the kingdom – and may also be limited to around 1,000 participants who will be quarantined both before and after the event.

Confirmed cases: 201,801

New cases in past week: 27,224

Active cases: 59,385

Deaths: 1,820

Tests carried out: 1.8 million

SUDAN

The coronavirus struck Sudan in the midst of a political transition following a popular uprising against the regime of President Bashir and the country is ill-equipped to cope with a major epidemic. Testing is very limited and official figures don't reflect the full scale of the outbreak. Most cases are said to be in and around the capital, Khartoum.

In an update this week, the OCHA expressed concern about the future of health services for about 55,000 people – displaced people and residents – in Tawilla town, North Darfur. "The only health facility in the area providing in-patient services faces a lack of funding while confirmed cases of Covid-19 are on the rise in the state," it said.

The OCHA has previously reported on the deterioration in Sudan's health care system which was already "under extreme stress" before the arrival of Covid-19. It said 81% of the population have no access to a functional health centre within two hours' walk from their home. Some existing facilities have been closed due to virus outbreaks or lack of medical staff.

Confirmed cases: 9,663

New cases in past week: 406

Active cases: 4,435

Deaths: 604

Tests carried out: 45,401

SYRIA

Based on official figures (which some view with scepticism), Syria has very few confirmed cases. This may be because the Assad regime took preventive action before any infections had been officially recorded.

Over the last two weeks new cases have averaged nine a day, according to health ministry figures. In joint report this week the UN and WHO said: "It remains a priority to enhance laboratory and case investigation capacity across Syria, including laboratory technicians and rapid response teams training."

Confirmed cases: 328

New cases in past week: 73

Active cases: 195

Deaths: 10

TUNISIA

There is currently little or no transmission of the virus inside Tunisia. The daily average of new cases has been in single figures since early May.

On June 27 Tunisia reopened its land, sea and air borders after a closure of more than three months. It is seeking to revive the economically important tourism industry and has begun promoting the country as a "safe" holiday destination. The health ministry is urging the public to continue with preventive measures such as wearing masks, social distancing and hand washing.

Confirmed cases: 1,181

New cases in past week: 17

Active cases: 86

Deaths: 50

Tests carried out: 71,000

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The UAE's epidemic peaked in the last week of May when new cases were running at more than 900 a day. Numbers have fallen steadily since then but are no longer decreasing. During the last 10 days they have hovered around 400 a day. Migrant workers have been disproportionately affected in the UAE.

Confirmed cases: 50,141

New cases in past week: 3,168

Active cases: 10,670

Deaths: 318

Tests carried out: 3.5 million

YEMEN

Because of the ongoing war, Yemen already faced a humanitarian crisis before the coronavirus arrived. Millions are malnourished and vulnerable to disease, and health services are inadequate. Official figures do not reflect the severity of the epidemic. Unusually large numbers of deaths are reported, many of them from symptoms resembling Covid-19 and hospitals often refuse treatment if coronavirus is suspected.

Confirmed cases: 1,244

New cases in past week: 151

Active cases: 369

Deaths: 336

Tests carried out: 120

Netanyahu Comes Out on Top Again

By Anastasia Kravtsov
TCMER Board Member



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu arrives for a speech at his Jerusalem Office on March 14, 2020, regarding the new measures that will be taken to fight the Corona virus in Israel.

It wasn't long ago that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had Israel's High Court firmly in his crosshairs. His bloc of right-wing and religious allies, too, would consistently hammer away at the court. One minister accused it of "impertinence" and "contempt." A deputy minister said it was trying to establish a "judicial dictatorship." There were frequent calls to simply ignore court rulings.

Now, though, it is the High Court that has cemented Netanyahu's election victory and paved the way for him to hold on to the leadership of the country. In a unanimous decision, an expanded panel of 11 justices ruled this week that an indicted member of Knesset could be given the mandate to form a government. And that's exactly what happened late Thursday afternoon, when President Reuven Rivlin gave Netanyahu two weeks to put the finishing touches to his planned government with one-time opponent Benny Gantz.

No longer will Netanyahu be the leader of a transitional government plowing its way through three consecutive elections. Barring any frankly unforeseen obstacles, he will once again be Israel's sitting prime minister, this time with the backing of at least 72 members of the 120-seat parliament, making this the widest, strongest coalition he has ever led - at least on paper.

The High Court did not downplay at all the weight of the charges against Netanyahu - bribery, fraud and breach of trust in three separate cases - but concluded that the law does not specifically prevent an indicted member of Knesset from leading the country. An indicted prime minister only has to step down when he is convicted, and only after that conviction is upheld through the appeals process.

"The judicial conclusion that we reached does not diminish the severity of the pending charges against Member of Knesset Netanyahu for criminal violations, nor from the difficulties arising from having a Prime Minister accused of crimes," Chief Justice Esther Hayut wrote in the ruling.

Netanyahu, who failed to secure a clear majority for his preferred right-wing religious bloc in all three elections, has nevertheless emerged from this stronger, once again silencing those critics who predicted his imminent demise. In the coalition agreement signed with Gantz's Blue and White party, Netanyahu held to most of his campaign promises. He can pursue annexation of parts of the West Bank from the beginning of July. He has control over the judge's selection committee, giving him tremendous influence over the justice system. And crucially, he remains in power.

By contrast, Gantz folded on virtually all of his campaign promises. He had promised not to serve under an indicted prime minister, swore he would change controversial legislation about the character of the state of Israel, as well as fix the draft law, so long a pressure point between the secular and ultra-religious parts of the country. He also vowed he would not pursue unilateral annexation and made it his goal to fix the healthcare system. None of that is still standing now.

Not even his Blue and White party survived intact, fracturing as soon as Gantz announced he would serve under Netanyahu. The country's longest serving PM got nearly everything he wanted, while Gantz just got a line from his campaign jingle: Israel before everything - which was also his explanation for abandoning his campaign promises and core principles.

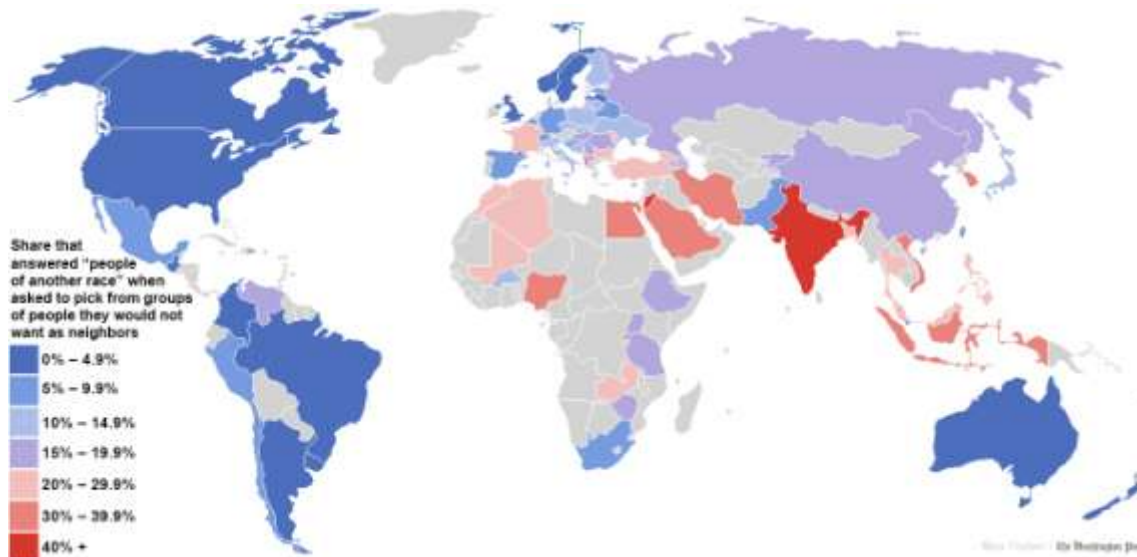
Realistically, by the time April turned into May, all realistic outcomes seemed to serve Netanyahu in one way or another. If the High Court ruled in his favor as it did, then he could continue as Israel's longest-serving prime minister. If the High Court ruled against him, he could take the country to a fourth round of elections where he was heavily favored for an outright victory against a crumbling opposition. In that scenario, Netanyahu could well have held enough seats to pass an override clause against the High Court, effectively allowing the government to push aside any rulings against it.

According to the coalition agreement, Gantz is supposed to become prime minister in 18 months. But many political analysts are skeptical that Netanyahu will ever willingly vacate the seat he has held for more than a decade. The agreement itself tries to anchor the rotation in Israeli law. Many observers argue that the complexity of the arrangement - and the penalties should either side break it - shows the depth of distrust that exists between Netanyahu and Gantz. As Yair Lapid, Gantz's former political partner in Blue and White, said Thursday evening, "They call it an emergency government when the emergency is over. They talk about unity, but don't trust one another."

The expected swearing in of Netanyahu's government next week does not mean the legal fight is over. On Thursday, the Knesset finished passing the necessary changes to Israel's laws to allow for the coalition agreement. In its decision Wednesday evening, the High Court said it would not yet rule on the legality of the agreement itself until the relevant laws were passed. Already, opponents of the new government have filed petitions asking the court to disqualify parts of the agreement approved by lawmakers on Thursday. Although it seems unlikely at this stage, the coalition could yet collapse before it has properly begun, sending the country back to the ballot boxes.

Most Racist Countries 2020

By Susan Yao
TCMER Board Member



Determining the most racist countries in the world can be difficult, and the results might not be consistent from one study to the next. The problem with racism is that it is a hard variable to measure. Although there is no complexity within the trait of racism, it can be quite difficult to determine if someone is racist or not based on a questionnaire, which is how the majority of research into racism is conducted.

Two different articles published about three years apart by separate entities showed common finds in regard to the most racist countries in the world. In 2013, an article written by was posted on the official Washington Post website. In discussing the racism factor around the world, the article dubbed India as being the most racist country in the world. Three years later, a 2016 article on the topic of most racist countries in the world was released by Business Tech.

Though the articles were independently written and not produced under a collaborative effort between the two news sources, both articles discussed similar approaches to determining if the participants in the studies were or were not racist. This procedure is a way of highlighting why it is difficult to definitively say that a country is racist overall. The main question posed to each of the participants of every country was asking if said participants would be comfortable being neighbours with people of a race that was not the same as the participants' race.

While the answer that someone provides when presented with this question can allude to potential racism, it is not a bulletproof way of identifying racist people. Not even the act of hooking people up to lie detectors and directly asking them if they are racist can pinpoint racist people without fail. And yet this example is far more likely to produce more accurate results than just asking people how they feel about the race of their neighbours.

The subjective nature of racism was highlighted and considered when designing the study. Another question was asked alongside the question regarding the nature of the skin colour of neighbours. Participants were asked to share whether or not they have ever witnessed racist behaviour being extended by someone in their country or if they were ever victims of racism.

Though there are a few faults to be found within this research-based systematic procedure, we will use the results of the study that made use of a question-and-answer system to figure out which countries were most racist. According to the findings of this research-based inquiry, the most racist country on Earth is India, but elsewhere it is Lebanon, Bahrain, Libya, and Egypt.

Lebanon

The demographic of Lebanon is primarily Arab people. Again, just like India, Lebanon is a country comprised of people who share a similar ethnic background. The population is split nearly fifty-fifty between Christians and Muslims, with about 40.5% of Lebanese people identifying as Christian, roughly 54% following Muslim doctrine, and the other 5.5% of the population believing in other religions.

The point to be made here is that Lebanon does not have a high level of diversity within the country's borders, meaning the people are well-acquainted with people of similar races and therefore would be averse to mingling with other races for the sole reason that they are not used to doing so in a day-by-day setting.

Bahrain

Third on the list of most racist countries is Bahrain, which is a country in the Persian Gulf and just off the coast of Saudi Arabia. Bahrain has a population that is predominately Middle Eastern individuals, but the country is home to a decent percentage of South Asian people as well. A little under 50% of people in Bahrain are Bahrainis, too. Of the people who live in Bahrain without having been born in the country, Indians make up the highest percentile of immigrants. Bahrain scored a 31.1% and 85.7% as part of the study in discussion.

Libya

The majority of people in Libya are Arabic. Other ethnic groups included in Libya's population are Tunisians, Egyptians, Dawada, Italians, Maltese, Greeks, Pakistanis, Turks, and Indians. As part of the study, it was found that about 54% of people in Libya's group would not be fine with living next door to people of another race, whereas 39.7% of the population said that they've either been the victim or the witness of discriminatory behaviour in Libya.

Egypt

Egypt's population is comprised of mostly Egyptians, born and raised in Egypt. They account for 91% of the population, with the remaining 9% made up of Bedouin Arabs, Abazas, Turks, and Greeks. As you can see, the concluding remarks regarding the findings of this study for Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, and Lebanon are very much in alignment with the ones regarding India. It is difficult to determine whether someone is racist or not on the basis of the two questions posed by the researchers.

Sarah Hegazi Stood Up to Homophobia!

By Sarah El Sirgany



Sarah Hegazi was both an icon for Egypt's gay community and a target of homophobic violence.

In 2017, Sarah Hegazi was arrested and said she was tortured for waving a rainbow gay pride flag at a concert in Cairo. On June 13 this year, the 30-year-old died by suicide in Canada.

Hegazi's friends reported her death, circulated a suicide note and shared an outpouring of messages of solidarity, grief and anger. Their mourning was soon hijacked by hateful messages. On social media, posts about Hegazi that ended with the traditional condolences, "May God Have Mercy on her," were followed by comments saying "she is not worthy of His Mercy," and a torrent of expletives targeting her sexuality.

These bitter exchanges echoed a long-running clash between Egyptian progressives and conservatives that haunted Hegazi's life. She was a software developer, a "feminist, interested in politics and a queer activist," says fellow LGBTQ activist and friend Malak Elkashif from Cairo.

By waving the flag, Hegazi became an icon for the gay community and a target for state violence. Analysts say that Egypt's government often enforces conservative values by imprisoning, torturing and silencing women, members of the LGBTQ community and other citizens who don't conform to its social norms.

Earlier this year, Egypt told the UN Human Rights Council it has "vowed to safeguard human rights, ensuring equal rights and opportunities to all citizens without discrimination," and it has "thoroughly" investigated all "individual" cases of torture.

After conservatives criticized and filed complaints against two women for posting dancing and lip synching videos on TikTok that got hundreds of thousands of views,

authorities last week charged them with the vaguely worded crime of "violating family principles and values."

"The regime uses its tools - such as the media, and mosques - to tell Egyptian society, which is understood to be 'religious by nature': We too protect religion and social morality, so there is no need for Islamists to compete with us!" Hegazi wrote in an article published by local independent platform Mada Masr in 2018.

The Egyptian state and the proponents of political Islam had put aside their long-running animosity, agreeing on using hate and prejudice to curb individual freedoms, she argued. Her writings weaved political critique into her struggle as an openly gay woman.

Defiance

When Hegazi and her friends raised the rainbow flag at the September 2017 concert by Mashrou' Leila, a Lebanese band with an openly gay frontman, she was hailed by allies for "breaking many barriers of silence," said her friend Tarek Salama. "To see someone who publicly say they are leftist, that they are against state violence and that they are queer, made me worried about her. But I was also fascinated and humbled."



Photos of the colorful flag fluttering under the spotlights enraged talk show hosts and newspaper columnists. Days later, Hegazi and her friends were arrested. Police ultimately detained at least 75 people in the month following the concert in what one Egyptian rights group called an "unprecedented upsurge in security crackdown targeting gay and transgender citizens or those believed to be so."

Sixteen years prior, in 2001, a similar crackdown took place. In what was known as the Queen Boat case, police arrested dozens of men in Cairo and charged them with "habitual debauchery" -- a legal term used to prosecute LGBTQ people. The men hid their faces during the public trial in fear of recognition, and reported a life ruined by the torture, shame and stigma.

What set Hegazi's experience apart was her willingness to show her face despite the backlash. "It was a day to mark in history as the start of the liberation of the LGBTQ community in Egypt," Elkashif said.

Hegazi remained in detention for three months. She said she was tortured by electrocution and subjected to sexual harassment by female prisoners acting on the orders of officers "who believed she had to be punished," she wrote on Daaarb.com, an electronic publication of the Socialist Popular Alliance Party.



Egyptian authorities have repeatedly denied claims of systematic torture in prisons and did not respond to Hegazi's claims.

During interrogation at the state security prosecution, which usually handles terrorism and high profile political cases, Hegazi would clutch her lawyers' arms and beg them not to let her go back to detention. In hours of questioning, police probed into the details of her life, she later wrote. They asked her why she took off the Islamic headscarf, which she had previously donned, and if she was a virgin.

She was charged with "promoting debauchery" and with joining an illegal organization that "threatens public and societal peace," a charge usually levelled against Islamists and political dissidents, according to Fouad.

Hegazi was released pending trial to find that her family and her neighbours had rejected her and she was fired from her job. Society "welcomed" what happened to her, she wrote in Daaarb.com last March.

"The Egyptian middle class leans towards the socially and religiously conservative right. It supports state decisions to impose guardianship on the society ... they practice social stigma [against anyone who] revolts against this oppressive patriarchal culture that is based on oppressing women, workers, and religious and sexual minorities," Hegazi wrote.

"It is the loudest class in society, so exposing and criticizing it is a duty."

Her words would prove prescient in explaining her life's struggle and the unsympathetic reaction to her death. "[The middle class] laid the foundation for hate, psychological and physical violence, sexual harassment and bullying," she added.



Even in the safety of asylum in Canada, Hegazi was unable to escape the effects of the violence she was subjected to, her friends say.

Exile

Hegazi traveled to Canada months after her release, but never seemed to escape what had happened. "Sarah left Egypt two years ago, but Egypt and its trauma didn't leave her alone," her friend Salama wrote on Facebook.

Though asylum in Canada provided safety from prison, it was taxing in other ways. Her mother died of cancer shortly after she left and her inability to be close to her and her younger siblings at the time took a toll on her, she said. She said she suffered from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks and loneliness. The electroconvulsive therapy she underwent in Cairo and Toronto caused memory loss, she wrote in Mada Masr in 2018. She stuttered, was terrified and attempted suicide twice.

Her writing, activism and support of friends facing depression and arrest continued. Her Instagram account includes posts urging patience with those battling PTSD, along with posts in solidarity with political causes.

After her death, online trolls and commenters said her advocacy for LGBTQ rights was a greater crime than her "sinful sexuality." "Sarah committed a crime against religion and society by supporting homosexuality and publicizing her homosexuality and atheism," one user wrote on Facebook.

Others used expletives and derogatory terms while arguing that she would be denied God's mercy and rot in hell. In Egypt's Twitters sphere, her name was trending along with "People of Lot," a reference to a Quranic passage about punishment for homosexuality.

"The most humiliating and infuriating part in her death are those gloating in it," her friend Amr Mohamed said in a video posted on Facebook. Addressing these people, he added, "She died after detention, torture and expulsion ... what religion that would reward you for insulting a dead person?"

Tributes



In her last Instagram post, Sarah wrote "the sky is more beautiful than earth. I want the sky, not earth."

A day before her death, Hegazi posted a picture of herself lying on green grass under a bright blue sky. "The sky is more beautiful than earth, and I want the sky, not earth," she wrote. Hamed Sinno, Mashrou' Leila's lead singer, put these words to music in a video tribute.

"Her blood is on my hands as much as it is on yours. It should have been me in that prison cell. I apologize if I gave anyone hope that they'll one day see us as human," he wrote on Facebook, also from self-exile.

After her death, an older, familiar photo went viral -- the one of Hegazi wrapped in the rainbow flag, as she was perched on a friend's shoulders, her smile beaming over the crowd at the band's concert in 2017.

Sinno posted the picture, writing: "Freedom to your soul."

In the note she wrote before her death, she said: "To my siblings, I tried to survive and I failed. Forgive me. To my friends, experiences have been cruel and I'm too weak to resist. Forgive me. To the world, you have been extremely cruel, but I forgive."