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STUDENT RESEARCH

Personalization of Power in Iran:
Regime Incompetency and Protests in Iran

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Abstract: A new musical hit in the Islamic Republic is called "Salute Commander (Salaam-e Farmande)." The song, performed by a group of teenagers, has been frequently broadcast on Iranian TV and radio and performed in schools, squares, and stadiums across the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic performed it in Tehran's biggest football stadium during the year's largest event, mobilizing 10,000 supporters. While the music does not rhyme or have a deep meaning, it is very catchy; in it, children pledge allegiance to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—the titular "commander." "Who has called his children?" They sing, "I'm a child, but just call me and watch what I'll do for you," and "I become your general," referencing Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander General Qasem Soleimani.[1]

The song and the Islamic Republic's repeated broadcasting efforts are an excellent virtual sign of Khamenei's personalization of power, an effort he has made since he became supreme leader in 1989. He gradually personalized the pillars of the Islamic Republic (the IRGC, the clerical network, and Iran's bureaucracy, respectively) by purging dissident elites, ideological selection (Gozinesh), indoctrination, surveillance, and repression. Thirty-three years later, Khamenei has essentially completed his personalization project within the government and is prepared for a swift succession. As a result, the nature of the IRI has changed. It has shifted from an electoral authoritarian regime to a personalistic rule. This paper will explain the process and mechanisms used to personalize the pillars of power in Iran and the consequences of this transformation.

Keywords: Iran, Khamenei, personalization, the cult of personality, bureaucracy, clergy, the IRGC, personal rule, authoritarian regime.

Introduction: Iran Under Khamenei 1989-2022

What is the nature of the Islamic Republic, and how can we categorize it? Before discussing Iran's domestic and international politics, political scientists should consider the nature of the Islamic Republic and how it can be categorized. A country's regime type, whether it is a democracy or an autocracy, has a significant impact on its policies. For instance, democracies tend to avoid expansionist foreign policies as the public bears the cost of war. In contrast, autocrats are more likely to engage in military adventures. The same logic applies to authoritarian regimes as well. Among all of them (party system, military, monarchy, and personalist regime), competitive party systems are less corrupt and more efficient than personalist regimes, which are the most corrupt.

The exact type of the Iranian regime has remained a mystery for many observers, with labels ranging from Islamic democracy to a theocratic regime, apartheid regime, hybrid regime, or totalitarian regime. Personal, military, and party rule elements can all be found within the Islamic Republic. Like most authoritarian regimes, the Islamic

Republic does not fit precisely into one category: "The Iranian government combines elements of multiple regime types, but the balance of power within the system has shifted over time."[2] However, this paper argues that under Khamenei, Iran has shifted from a hybrid authoritarian regime to a personalistic and sultanistic rule based on Islamic ideology by the early 2020s.[3]

This has been Ayatollah Khamenei's project since he became the Islamic Republic's second supreme leader in 1989, a process in which he has sought to exercise power with as little restraint as possible. As a result, other institutions lost their ability to operate independently of the leader, who now controls policy, the appointment of institution leadership, and the security apparatus.

The Islamic Republic came to power due to the 1979 revolution, which overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy and replaced it with a theocratic regime, in which Islam became the base of the constitution. The clergy has also found political supremacy over civilian and military elites. According to the new constitution approved in 1979, the Islamic Republic is based on the idea of the guardianship of the jurist or Velayat-ye faqih, in which a high-ranking Shia jurist holds political leadership over the country.[4] This doctrine believes that an Islamic jurist is the only legitimate figure for political leadership during the absence of the hidden (last) Imam (the twelfth imam of the Twelver Shia, who disappeared in 874 CE on God's order). During the occultation, Islamic jurists were the general representative of the hidden Imam and the source of reference for lay Shia, as the hidden Imam is not accessible to the public. According to Khomeini's interpretation, Islamic jurists are not only religious but also political leaders of the Muslim community. Enhancing this position, the 1989 constitutional revision saw the title of Guardian Jurist changed to "Absolute Guardianship of Jurist" or Valyat Motlaqe-Faqih, increasing the supreme leader's power.

As an undemocratic idea, the philosophy of guardianship of jurists has had the potential to personalize power in the hands of the supreme leader.[5] As a religious authority, the supreme leader oversees Iran's religious foundations, holy shrines, and a vast network of clergy and seminarians that grew significantly after the 1979 revolution.[6]

Since Iran's constitution is based on this idea, the Islamic Republic's political system helps the leader further personalize power. As the highest position in Iran's political structure, the supreme leader holds vast power, from delineating and supervising "the general domestic and foreign policies of the Islamic Republic" to being the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, with the ability to declare war or peace. He also appoints and dismisses the head of the judiciary, the head of the massive state media, and selects six clerical members of the Council of Guardians, the body with authority to vet electoral candidates and veto parliamentary decisions. In fact, "the end of monarchy in Iran in 1979 was the beginning of this process of personalization of power by the clerics. …. Iranian Shi'ite clerics have successfully monopolized political power by presenting themselves as the mere messengers and interpreters of God's rule in any age."[7]

As the revolutionary leader, Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini became the first Vali-e-Faqih (Guardian Jurist), the highest position in the political structure, according to the newly approved constitution of 1979. Because of Khomeini's charisma and popularly recognized religious authority as the revolution's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini naturally emerged as Vali-e-Faqih in the post-revolutionary order.[8] Khomeini consolidated power and relatively quickly controlled elites and pillars of the regime without too much challenge.

However, the situation changed after Ayatollah Khomeini died, and Hojatoleslam Seyed Ali Khamenei became the regime's second leader in 1989. As a fundamentalist Shia clergy, Khamenei was a follower of Iranian radical Islamist Seyyed Mojtaba Nawab Safavi, who intended to establish an Islamic government in Iran in the 1940s. Born in 1924 in Qom, Iran, Nawab Safavi was one of the earliest Shia political figures with radical views. He strongly advocated for establishing an Islamic government in Iran and fervently supported the principles of political Islam. In 1946, Nawab Safavi founded the Fadaiyan Islam movement, which was responsible for several acts of violence, including assassinations and attacks against those perceived as enemies of Islam. One of the most notable assassinations done by the Fadaiyan-e Islam was the assassination of Ahmad Kasravi (a lawyer, writer, and secular reformer, who was critical of the Shi'a clergy and their ideology) in 1946. Although Nawab Safavi was executed in 1955, his legacy still fuels radical Shia Islamists, including Khamenei. [9]

Khamenei translated Seyyed Qutab's books (the father of jihadi radical Islamists) into Persian. As one of the active students of Khomeini and a political dissident jailed during the Pahlavi regime, Khamenei quickly rose through the ranks in post-revolutionary Iran. He served as a member of the Revolutionary Council, Tehran's Friday Imam, and the deputy to the defense minister. He was later elected as a Parliament (Majles) member and Iran's president from 1981 to 1989. After Khomeini died in 1989, he was appointed the second supreme leader in 1989 by the Assembly of Experts, a body consisting of tens of ayatollahs or mujtahid in a closed session.[10]

Under Khamenei's leadership, five different presidential administrations have served, including Rafsanjani's administration, which focused on economic liberalization and reconstructing Iran's post-war economy between 1989 and 1996. Seyyed Mohammad Khatami was a Reformist with a political development agenda who was in power from 1997 to 2004. Ahmadinejad was a hardliner with a cultural agenda for the re-Islamization of the country between 2005 and 2012. Rouhani was the fourth president who worked under Khamenei's rulership, who was seen as a moderate and sought to solve the nuclear issue and remove sanctions (2013-2021). The last president under Khamenei's leadership is Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, an Islamist who came to office in 2021.

Despite the differences in administration, Khamenei "has maintained his power by restructuring the Islamic theocracy and imposing his conception based on the militant vision of political Islam, morality policing, anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism, anti-

Americanism."[11] During Khomeini's rule, these pillars played a significant role in the Islamic Republic. Following his death, some Shia Islamists advocated for ease in Iran's relations with the West and the normalization of the Islamic Republic. At the same time, Khamenei insisted on these pillars and urged for the revolution's continuation.

Khamenei's personalization projects had three main phases. He tried and successfully controlled the Islamic Republic's three pillars, security apparatus, seminary, and bureaucracy, by applying several methods, including purging non-loyal elites, ideological selection, massive indoctrination, and draconian surveillance.

Three main pillars are associated with a political regime: repression, legitimization, and cooptation. Gerschewski (2013) suggests that these three pillars are the fundamental principles of lasting autocratic rule, which he calls "the three pillars of autocratic stability."[12] In Iran, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is the main enforcer of repression and serves as the backbone of the Islamic Republic. Meanwhile, the clerical establishment provides legitimacy to the regime as an Islamic one. In this regard, the bureaucracy cooperates with the educated and middle-class Iranians.

The Personalization of the Security Forces

Dictators personalize the security forces to remain in office and simultaneously decrease the risk of coups. Personalization of security forces is achieved by tying the security elites' fate closely to that of the leader and increasing the informational advantage of the leader over these elites.[13] "One of the consequences of personalizing power is the increased reliance on repression in these regimes."[14]

Iran's security forces were the first pillar of power that Khamenei secured power over in 1989. As a cleric subscribing to militant Islam, he has always held a keen interest in security and military forces. As soon as Khamenei became the leader, he asserted military authority as Iran's commander-in-chief. He opposed the suggestion of merging Iran's conventional army with the IRGC and, on the contrary, pushed for an overall expansion of the Guard.

The IRGC was created in 1979 to support the clergy and defend the newly formed Islamic regime against any coups from the army. During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the IRGC expanded to three branches (Air Force, Ground Force, and Navy). Under Khamenei's leadership, the Guard added two more units to its branches, the Basij Resistance Force and the Qods (Jerusalem) Force, in 1989. The IRGC gradually grew to play a significant role in Iranian politics under Khamenei's rule.

To ensure the Guard's commitment to himself, Khamenei appointed closer allies and expanded their responsibilities to include managing all ideological and political training and the culture and propaganda activities in the Guard. Khamenei consistently purges the IRGC of members seen as insufficiently loyal to the supreme leader. The first purge started

in 1989-1990. All those who opposed his leadership or supported Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri (initially designated as Khomeini's successor but removed due to his objections toward the regime's ruthless suppression of political dissidents) were kicked out. The second purge of the IRGC happened after 1997, when 73 percent of the IRGC members and their families voted for reformist Mohammad Khatami—and, effectively, against the supreme leader, who had backed the conservative candidate, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri. Finally, the third purge of the IRGC began with the 2009 disputed presidential election, when some IRGC commanders supported reformist candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi, opposing Khamenei's strong support of Mahmood Ahmadinejad.

The recruitment system of the IRGC has been altered to replace less dedicated or openly dissenting members with more committed personnel. Since the 2010s, the focus has been recruiting individuals from more religious and conservative parts of society to create a more ideologically motivated Guard. The IRGC is carefully selecting new personnel from the most zealous and indoctrinated members of the Basij militia, who are among the most active members of Iranian society.

The Guard members' training includes a complete ideological and political indoctrination program. Indoctrination of the Guard has constantly increased since 1989, with almost 50 percent of Guard training currently being ideological. The topics consist of Islamic studies, matters of religion and politics, including the superiority of clergy, the doctrine of Velayat-e faqih (clerical rule), exporting the Islamic Revolution, shaping an Islamic world, and "jihad in the path of God," anti-Americanism, and the eradication of Israel. However, the most crucial element of the IRGC indoctrination is total obedience to Khamenei or (Velayat-e madari) doctrine.

To ensure the IRGC's loyalty and subordination to the leader, a massive surveillance system is implemented throughout the Guard's intelligence and counterintelligence organizations. The IRGC counterintelligence organization, created in 1989, and the IRGC intelligence organization, formed in 2009, operate directly under the leader's control and serve as Khamenei's principal tool for constantly scrutinizing military personnel.[15]

The Guard has become personalized to serve the supreme leader due to ideological selection, intense indoctrination, frequent purges, and strict surveillance. Throughout its history, the Guard had consistently backed Khamenei over standing presidents, even when those presidents, like Mahmood Ahmadinejad, who were initially supported by the Guard and the leader. In 2010, when Ahmadinejad and Khamenei split, most guardsmen remained loyal to Khamenei, despite Ahmadinejad's continued support of the IRGC.

The Guards' personalization can also explain the leader's success in using the Guard to suppress the Iranians who dare to protest his regime brutally. According to Reuters, for example, in November 2019, when people protested the regime's economic policies and increased gas prices, more than 1,500 people were killed in less than two days. So far, the Guard consistently supports Khamenei and his regime at the expense of killing hundreds of Iranians.[16] The IRGC did not show any hesitation in killing Iranians. This is precisely

why dictators place loyalists at the heads of security organizations. These people will use violent coercion to keep the regime in power.

Ideologization/ Personalization of Clerical Network

The clerical network is the second pillar of power that Khamenei gradually personalized and thus enhanced his control over. Shia clerics have historically held greater independence from the state than their Sunni counterparts, primarily because most Islamic rulers were Sunni, and Shia were the minority. Under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736), Shi'ism became the state religion in Iran, and Ulema became part of the ruling elite, which continued under the Qajar dynasty (1798-1924). However, even during this time, most Shia clerics remained financially independent of the state, thanks to religious endowments and relying on lay Shia Muslims' religious taxes. During the Pahlavi monarchy from 1925 to 1978, the independence of the Shia clergy from the state became more pronounced due to the secularization and Westernization policies of the Pahlavi regime. For centuries, the independence of the Ulema from the state allowed them to maintain their power and influence. During the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) and the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Shia Ulema played crucial roles in shaping these events.

The 1979 revolution was a turning point in Iran's history, bringing the clergy into political power. Under the theocratic regime, clerical networks expanded rapidly after the revolution. The number of clergy and seminarians increased from a few thousand to 500,000. Paradoxically, the Islamic Republic brought most clerics under increased state control and supervision. Most clerics now work for the regime, which controls all seminaries, mosques, and religious institutions. The elimination of Shia Ulema independence and their subordination to power has weakened the clerical establishment. It is, in fact, the death knell of the Shi'a clerical political power if the current regime crumbles.

In 1989, when Khamenei became the supreme leader, he was a middle-rank clergy with the title of Hojatoleslam, unlike Ayatollah Khomeini, who was a grand ayatollah when elected as the first supreme leader after the revolution. However, when Khamenei was selected in 1989, the regime propaganda apparatus promoted him as an ayatollah, a higher rank in the clerical pyramid structure, a promotion without credibility and against the Shia clerical tradition. This was a significant blow to the independence of the seminary and the credibility of the clerical credentials.

Later in 1994, Khamenei announced himself as the grand ayatollah and Maraj-e taqlid (the source of emulation and a model of ethical conduct) with the help of his regime's security forces. Maraj-e taqlid is the highest rank in Shia clerical network.[17] He was again promoted after his supporters gave him the title of the Imam in 2009. Imam is a title Shia followers gave to the twelve infallible successors of Prophet Mohammad but later conferred on Ayatollah Khomeini as he held high popularity around the 1979 revolution.

While Khamenei lacked clerical credentials in seminary schools and its accompanying authority over the clergy, he gradually controlled and personalized the clerical system through different mechanisms, most importantly, the regulation of seminary schools, training a new generation of ideological clergy, marginalization of dissident clerics, and cooptation of influential nonpolitical clergy.

Since 1989, Khamenei has created a massive administration through which he controlled all aspects of clerical life, including student housing, curricula, and credentials. He directly appoints all members of the Supreme Council of the Seminary and the Center for the Management of Seminaries, the highest organizations ultimately responsible for managing all seminary and clerical life, including admissions, issuing credentials, and granting permission to wear clerical clothing.[18]

The creation of a massive administration to control the clerics and the huge expansion of the number of clerics from a few thousand to more than 500,000, all on the state payroll, ought to highlight the tremendous unproductivity and cost to the national economy.

These organizations exclude and marginalize the dissident seminarians and co-opt the high-rank clerics. In addition, the loyalty of seminary students to Khamenei is safeguarded through paying a high salary and other benefits and priority access to jobs, including positions within Iran's armed forces, educational system, mosques, and state bureaus.

Khamenei established a widespread surveillance system to monitor seminarians all over the country. One of these institutions is the Department of Statistics and Investigation. It works on behalf of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and monitors clerics in their public and private lives. The Statistics and Investigation departments are one of the deputies of the Council for the Management of Seminaries. It is "responsible for moral, social, and political control of clergy and surveillance, and collecting and analyzing the information and intelligence in seminaries."[19]

Other institutions that help Khamenei suppress his clerical critics include the Special Court for the Clergy. Through the Special Court for the Clergy, Khamenei has silenced his opponents.[20] Khamenei also created a special clerical militia, subordinated to forces of the IRGC, to attack and repress his opponents, including the 83 Imam Sadeq Battalion and the Clergies Basij organization.[21] Both are placed under the Guard's control; these forces ensure that clerics do not oppose the regime or its leader. Through these organizations, Khamenei has repressed any opponent's voice and suppressed the clerics at all status levels, including the highest rank, such as Grand Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri and Ayatollah Azari Qomi. They explicitly criticized the Iranian supreme leader's legitimacy, who turned the seminary circles into state employees.[22]

Another step in personalizing the clergy was training and organizing a generation of devoted and ideological clerics who could help Khamenei maintain his power. After naming himself as ayatollah, Khamenei started his upper-level class, Dars-Kharij-Fiqh (Higher Jurisprudence Studies), in his office in Tehran in 1990.[23] Dars-Kharij-Fiqh is the most advanced level of seminary education, equal to a PhD in the modern educational system, wherein seminary students can specialize in Shia jurisprudence and receive training to become an ayatollah or mujtahid (religious authority who can issue a competent legal opinion).[24] Only a mujtahid can teach these courses.[25] Khamenei started teaching this course, against the tradition of seminary schools, without being a mujtahid. Through teaching these courses since 1990, Khamenei has trained and mentored about 3,000 high-rank clergies, whom he later appointed as his representative in different civilian and military institutions, including the assembly of experts, the Guardian Council, and the head of seminaries in Iran. A few examples are Hojatoleslam Ali Arafi, the head of seminary schools; Hojatoleslam Rostami, the leader representatives at Iranian universities; Hojatoleslam Qomi, the head of Islamic propagation organizations; Hojatoleslam Haji Akbari, the director of "Imams of Friday Prayer Policy Council," and Hojatoleslam Hojatolislam Ali Abbasi, president of Al-Mustafa International University. Most of these people are less than fifty years old, had no role in the Iran and Iraq war or the 1979 revolution, and rose to power only with the supreme leader's support.

Khamenei has further asserted his control over the entirety of the clerical establishment by appointing his former students at the head of seminary schools explicitly created to train middle-rank and lower-rank clerics, including Al Mustafa University, Imam Khomeini University, Baqir al-Olum University. Al Mustafa University, for example, recruits mostly non-Iranian Shia seminarians. With more than seventy branches inside and outside the country, the Al-Mustafa International University has approximately 30,000 graduates who spread through the world to promote Shia Islam, export the revolution, and promote Khamenei's ideology.

In brief, Ayatollah Khamenei has been advocating for a faster ideologization process of the seminary. He aims to establish an Islamic utopia and believes a "revolutionary Howzeh" can help achieve this goal. The supreme leader views the seminary not only as a place for teaching Islamic theology but also as a training ground for a new generation of clergy who will be the vanguard of the Islamic Republic's future.

The personalization of seminary schools increased repression; massive surveillance has led to rising emigration of clerics to other Shia centers outside Iran, such as Najaf in Iraq. This process also led to a widening gap between people and the clergies and rapid delegitimization of clergies among the Iranian people. The resentment and hatred of clergies and seminary schools among many Iranian people is clear, especially in the last few years, where religious symbols such as mosques and seminary schools have been burned to protest the Islamist regime, and many clergies have been attacked on the streets.[26]

Ideologization/Personalization of the Bureaucracy?

Bureaucracy is the last pillar of the regime, which Khamenei has controlled and personalized. The Islamic Republic was initially cynical about Iran's modern bureaucracy created by the Pahlavi monarchy and attempted to dismantle it. According to the 1979 Iranian constitution, the bureaucracy is the product of oppressive regimes and should be dismantled entirely.[27] As a result, there was a short period of de-bureaucratization in the early 1980s, during which many technocrats were fired. Many formerly bureaucratic functions were transferred to revolutionary institutions, including "the construction jihad."[28]

However, since the mid-1980s, the need for a modern administration to manage the country convinced the revolutionaries not to dismantle the bureaucracy completely. Instead of dismantling, the Islamic Republic has controlled the bureaucracy through political screening, replacing old bureaucrats with ideologically committed individuals and surveilling them throughout their tenure. Civil servants and managers were prejudicially hired or promoted based on their taahhod (ideological commitments) rather than their takhasoos (technical expertise). Meritocracy consequently fell to the wayside because new state employees were inexperienced and entirely under the control of the clergy and the IRGC.

When Khamenei became the leader with the support of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the power was divided between two men in the 1990s. Rafsanjani, who became president (1989-1996), focused on rebuilding Iran's wrecked economy by relying on Iranian technocrats and empowering the state bureaucracy. Unlike the previous decade, Rafsanjani's administration prioritized technical expertise over ideological commitments, attempting to de-ideologize and depoliticize the government apparatus. Rafsanjani's cabinet consisted of several religious technocrats; many were educated in the West during the Pahlavi monarchy. Some later founded the Iran Party's Executives (Hezbe Kargozarane Sazandegi), propagating rapid economic development and normalizing the regime's relationship with the West.

Under Khatami, this trend continued. Khatami's administration was run by the Islamic Participation Front, a reformist political group consisting of primarily leftist religious technocrats. Under the reformists, Iran's domestic and foreign policy became more pragmatic than in Khomeini's era. From 1989 to 2003, some technocrats who were sacked after the revolution were rehired, while clerics and IRGC members were marginalized in public administration.[29]

During the reform period, while Khamenei's control over the state bureaucracy was limited, he could continue his personalization campaign within the IRGC and clerical pillars of the regime. Khamenei found the opportunity to control and personalize state bureaucracy after the victory of Mahmood Ahmadinejad and the emergence of the neo-conservative bloc in 2005. Khamenei strongly supported Ahmadinejad in realizing his vision of establishing an Islamic government through Ahmadinejad's administration.

The creation of an Islamic government is the third phase of the revolution, according to Khamenei's manifesto, which was initially published in 2000. In Khamenei's view, out of the five stages of the Islamic revolution, only the first and the second have been achieved: the victory of the Islamic revolution (1979) and the consolidation of the Islamic Republic in 1982. Unlike the reformists and pragmatists, who believed in the regime's normalization, Khamenei argued that three stages still need to be realized: creating an Islamic administration, society, and ummah (civilization), respectively. To achieve an Islamic government, the bureaucracy should be purified and filled with revolutionary-minded individuals instead of bureaucrats.[30]

As a populist, Ahmadinejad also did not believe in bureaucracy. During his electoral campaign, Ahmadinejad criticized Iran's bureaucracy as it forms a kind of government within the government … which makes many issues opaque and impractical, trapping the 1979 revolution in its resilient and irreversible web, neutralizing revolutionary fervor, intending to return the situation to the pre-revolutionary era.[31] Ahmadinejad undermined the bureaucracy to fight back and dismantled some bureaucratic institutions, including the Management and Planning Organization (MPO) in 2007, the highest office responsible for planning and evaluating long-term development policies and annual budgets.

He also implemented extensive changes in the bureaucracy, such as approving the Civil Services Management Law in 2007 and the general policies of the administrative system in 2010. This was the first time after the 1979 revolution that the regime approved laws to regulate the oversized bureaucracy and create an Islamic public administration.

For example, the Civil Services Management Law promotes Islamic ethics, culture, and the tripartite relationship of government/people/employees based on Islamic values and the Constitution.[32] Also, based on the general policies of the administrative system, the organizational design was updated to hire more committed individuals. Like the first decade following the revolution, Ahmadinejad's era also returned to the priority of ideological commitment or taahhod over technical expertise (takhasoos).

During this hardliner's era, or rule, from 2005 to 2012, the old technocrats were replaced with new and more loyal groups, mainly from the IRGC and the Basij. Various bureaus were filled with a new class of public-sector employees known for loyalty to Ahmadinejad and his policies. The result was replacing experts with indoctrinated individuals and rapidly expanding state employees. For example, the Ministry of Health and medical education's personnel increased from 230,000 in 2004 to 440,000 in 2012.[33] Despite the expansion of the Ministry of Health, the tragedy of replacing experts with ideologically indoctrinated personnel and the ideological thinking of Iran's supreme leader, who personally banned the import of vaccination from the United States and the United Kingdom, resulted in a high death toll in the COVID-19 pandemic.[34]

Khamenei's project for personalizing state bureaucracy was not completely realized in the Ahmadinejad administration because of the expanded rift between the president and the supreme leader since 2010. At the same time, the strong presence of reformists and centralists at the middle-rank level in state bureaucracy impeded Khamenei's will to personalize the state bureaucracy.

The victory of Rouhani in the 2013 presidential election continued to obstruct Khamenei's plan, as Rouhani relied more on traditional Western-educated technocrats, like his mentor, Hashemi Rafsanjani. Many members of his cabinet were graduates of American universities, including his foreign minister, Javad Zarif, who managed to sign Iran's nuclear deal (or JCPOA). This is a point demonstrated partly by the fact that the Rouhani cabinet held more PhDs from US universities than US President Barack Obama's cabinet. Rouhani, a technocrat himself, was expected by cabinet members to rehabilitate Iran's devastated economy, which had suffered from banking and economic sanctions. Rouhani also revived Iran's bureaucracy, prioritized expertise over ideological commitment, and restored institutions dismantled by Ahmadinejad, such as the MPO, to achieve this goal.

During the Rouhani presidency, Khamenei and his supporters in the IRGC and seminary schools constantly criticized Iran's bureaucracy as the cause of corruption and mismanagement. They stated that the bureaucracy should be reformed and replaced by the Jihadi organization. For example, Major General Jafari, the IRGC commander at that time, clearly said the revolutionary people, such as the Revolutionary and Basij forces, should run the critical posts of the system.[35] Clarifying revolutionary people, he said, "Anybody who considers itself revolutionary should have absolute obedience to the supreme leader." The IRGC newspaper also wrote about the need for revolutionary, religious, and energetic managers to create an Islamic government and an Islamic utopia.[36]

The second chance for Khamenei to personalize bureaucracy was the victory of Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, which was achieved by manipulating the 2021 presidential election. The goal was to realize Khamenei's vision for creating an ideological government, which he described as "young and Hezbollahi" in his 2019 manifesto, published for the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.

Since 2021, when Raisi came to power, there has been a massive purge of the state bureaucracy of old elites in favor of young and indoctrinated elites, who rose to power for their connection with Khamenei's office and demonstrated personal obedience to the leader. As a result, almost all high ranks of elites belong to a younger generation of ideological elites; most graduated from Iranian ideological universities, such as Imam Sadeq University (ISU), which was created to blend Islamic and modern social sciences. These universities (semi-state-owned) were established on the principle of "unity between universities and seminaries" to nurture the future policymakers, technocrats, and experts of the Islamic Republic.[37]

Many bureaucrats in higher managerial positions have been replaced by younger, inexperienced, and indoctrinated ones. In one case, Iran's labor minister, Hojjat Abdolmaleki, a graduate of ISU, proudly claimed he had replaced 1,000 managers at the rank of director-general and above in his ministry in less than a few months.

To fill out the state bureaucracy with a younger, more ideological, and inexperienced generation, the Raisi administration has changed the Civil Services Management Law, approved in 2007, and reduced the years of experience required for managerial posts. For example, the expertise needed for the highest management rank was reduced from a minimum of ten to six years. On another side, they added a requirement of having "Jihadi attitudes" as a qualification for managers, echoing Khamenei's order to replace bureaucratic management with Jihadi management. According to Khamenei, the state "must prefer jihadist management to worn-out (old) bureaucracies. This is one of our priorities …. The country's officials should pursue jihadist management in the executive branch, judiciary, and various sectors."

The personalization of power transforms the state bureaucracy, creating effective organizations to implement Khomeini's demands as the Imam of the ummah, as the commander of Iran's militia, the Basij, clarified.[38] The loyal, obedient agents follow the Imam's order without asking questions (Velayat-e maderi).

Personalization of Power, Dumbification of State, and Mass Uprising

Protest and revolt are not new phenomena in post-revolutionary Iran. From the early 1990s, Iranians protested the Islamic Republic, including from 1991 to 1995. These protests were mainly driven by rural migrants and slum dwellers who settled in the city outskirts and demanded amenities such as clean water. From the early 2000s, middle-class Iranians protested the Islamic Republic and its suppressive political policies. The 1999 and 2003 student protests were examples in which students, as precursors of the modern middle class, demanded more political liberty and rights. Still, the 2009 Green Movement was the most critical protest by middle-class Iranian against the regime after the disputed presidential election, which led to the reelection of Mahmood Ahmadinejad in 2009. The Green Movement primarily comprised urban dwellers, gaining popularity mainly in Iran's major cities. The movement focused on nonviolent means to demand political change.

International sanctions, mismanagement, corruption, and regime incompetency hit Iran's economy and pushed much of the middle class to a lower level in the 2010s. The contention of political repression, social and cultural repression, and environmental degradation (such as water scarcity and air pollution) intensified in the 2010s. Ayatollah Khamenei's anti-Americanism and the IRGC's interventions in the Middle East evaporated hope for normalizing the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary regime. As a result, Iranians became more critical of the entire regime. The number of labor protests has increased rapidly since 2013. For example, about 400 labor protests occurred in 2015, spiking to approximately 900 in 2017.[39]

The demonstration from December 2017 to January 2018 were a turning point when the Iranian demand shifted from reforming the system to dismantling the regime. This round of protests spread to eighty-eight of Iran's cities. Some of these cities never had before experienced protests. The Dey protests were composed of young, educated individuals from the "middle-class poor" who called for social justice. These protests differed not only in terms of the social composition of protesters but also in their views toward the regime.

President Donald J. Trump's 2018 withdrawal from Iran's nuclear deal and imposition of crippling sanctions worsened the economic situation in Iran. The Islamic Republic's decision to cut energy subsidies and enact a 300 percent rise in gas prices in November 2019 led to a massive protest. Iranians demanded regime change—slogans chanted during the 2019 protests were more radical and secular compared to the past. In almost one hundred cities, people protested the regime and were brutally suppressed by the security forces. In less than a few days, 1,500 people were killed throughout the country.

Personalization of the state bureaucracy has undermined the regime's capacity and ability to respond to growing social, economic, environmental, and political challenges. By replacing the experts with indoctrinated and inexperienced elites, the Islamic Republic is sticking to the web it created, the dumbification of the state. Undermining meritocracy, the regime is shifting to promoting ideologically committed people without qualification over less ideological experts necessary for running the state and its bureaucracy.

The dumbification of the state has been visible in all state bureaus, including environmental bureaus. An example of this dumbification of the state is the story of the Asiatic cheetah, a critically endangered species that gave birth to three cubs in captivity in Iran. The regime first claimed all three cubs were females; later, they said they were male. Because the cubs were touched by hand, the mother cheetah didn't accept its cubs, and as a result, all of them died.

The personalization of power and undermining of meritocracy has led to massive state mismanagement and corruption, which in addition to international sanctions, has resulted in poor performance of the Islamic Republic in the social and economic sphere. Promoting like-minded individuals by Khamenei also created a more suffocating social environment, especially since Raisi came to power in 2021. In addition, the intensification of morality policing and extensive internet control has led to massive dissatisfaction among Iranian youth.

Accumulation of social, economic, and political repressive policies led to the eruption of Iranian society again in 2022 after the death of Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for wearing an improper hijab and died in police custody. As a result, almost 135 cities have seen protests, even in places that had never seen any demonstration, including the town of Khomein, the birthplace of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the 1979 revolution.[40]

The protests in Iran have persisted for three months despite significant efforts to suppress them. Sadly, the situation has resulted in over 500 fatalities, 20,000 arrests, and over 10,000 injuries. Furthermore, there have been reports of individuals subjected to physical harm, detainment, and abuse for speaking out for their fundamental rights.[41]

While the trigger of the 2022 protests was the death of a Kurdish Iranian girl, there are structural long-term reasons behind the massive protest. The Iranian economy suffers from structural problems, and its situation has worsened in the last decade. In addition to the stagnation economy, high inflation, and massive poverty, the state could not create jobs. Social and cultural restrictions have accompanied political repression and economic stagnation. As a proto-totalitarian regime, the Islamic Republic has tried to control Iranians' private and public life. With moral policing, gender segregation, and restrictions over clothing, the Islamic Republic created a stagnant society, which many Iranian resent.

The 2022 protest cut across Iranian society and united people from different strata and varying ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and generational backgrounds in opposing the Islamic Republic. This was unlike the 1999 student protests, the 2009 middle-class protests, and the 2019 lower-class movements. For the first time, in these recent protests, we saw a strong presence of high schoolers, primarily girls, who defied and protested the Islamic Republic and its totalitarian Islamist ideology.

While the previous rounds of protest mainly demanded some political reform and economic relief, the uprising in 2022-2023 was against the entire regime, calling for dismantling the theocratic police state and replacing it with a more liberal and representative system. The Mahsa protests can also be seen as a social revolution regarding its demand for replacing a religious patriarchal social order with an equal social order. It represents a shift in the way Iranian people think. Emphasizing life versus death (martyrdom in the path of God), one of the pillars of Khomeinism, is also essential, as Khomeinists idealized the idea of death, as liberation, from an unjust world.[42]

The Islamic Republic has controlled and repressed the mass unrest despite mass protests. One of the consequences of personalizing power is the increased reliance on repression in these regimes. The Guards' personalization can also explain the supreme leader's success in using the Guard to brutally suppress the Iranians who protest his regime. So far, the Guard consistently supports Khamenei and his regime at the expense of killing hundreds of Iranians.[43] This is precisely why dictators place loyalists at the heads of security organizations. These people will use violent coercion to keep the regime in power.

Conclusion

Since Khamenei's rise to power, he has gradually personalized all aspects of government power by using marginalization and suppression of critics, hiring new elites who owe their position to the leader, ideological indoctrination, and wide-ranging surveillance.

As a result, Khamenei has both maintained and developed his power and ultimately ruled as a new Sultan based on Islamic ideology. Ironically, forty-three years after the revolution, the clergy, who accused the monarchy of wrongdoings such as dictatorship, self-glorification, corruption, and wasteful public funds, are now engaging in activities they previously opposed, criticized, and discredited.

Khamenei has undermined his regime by personalizing power, promoting loyalists, and creating an ideologically safe civil service and military, thus institutionalizing governmental incompetence. The result has been growing corruption and mismanagement, which led to the resentment of Iranians, who already lived under proto-totalitarian rule.

The 2022-2023 protest was the last eruption of Iranians' accumulated anger and frustration. While the regime has been able to control and silence Iranians by brutal force, the protests will erupt soon since the dumbification of the state makes reform implausible.

Personalizing power and promoting ideologically aligned individuals has led to more ideologicalization of state policies domestically and internationally. Despite the Biden administration's efforts, the Islamic Republic has shown no interest in rejoining the Iran nuclear deal and has formed alliances with China and Russia. The Islamic Republic has provided Russia with various models of Komezki drones, including the Shahed-136, to support their efforts in the war with Ukraine.

Regarding the domestic policies of Iran, it is noteworthy that the re-ideologization of the state has resulted in an intensification of morality policing. Despite pushback from Iranian citizens, the government has resumed enforcing strict Islamic dress codes and other moral standards. This trend became apparent after the Mahsa Amini protests began to subside, and it has been met with mixed reactions from the public. Nonetheless, the state appears dedicated to promoting its ideological agenda through these measures, regardless of any opposition it may face.

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The Long Israeli-Palestinian Impasse:
Is the 'One-State Solution' the Answer?

Guy Ziv

Abstract: The long impasse in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking has dashed the hopes for a nearterm resolution to one of the world's most intractable conflicts. The continuous expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank has made the creation of an independent and contiguous Palestinian state an exceedingly difficult undertaking that has gotten farther and farther from reach. Consequently, a growing number of scholars, practitioners, and activists have shifted their attention away from the two-state paradigm to the so-called "one-state solution." The latter, however, has dramatically different interpretations by its proponents, with one version premised on full equality and another on Jewish supremacy sans equality—irreconcilable positions. Only a small minority of Israelis and Palestinians, moreover, support the one-state solution in any of its variants. Unless steps are taken by the Israeli government to keep the two-state solution alive, Israel will become a binational state with the conflict remaining unresolved.

Keywords: Israel, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Middle East peace process, one-state solution, Palestine, two-state solution.

Introduction[1]

The failure of Israeli and Palestinian leaders to reach a peace agreement based on the two-state solution despite decades of intermittent negotiations has led to widespread skepticism among Israelis, Palestinians, and observers of one of the world's most intractable conflicts that a separate Palestinian state will ever be created in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza Strip. The idea of creating an independent Palestinian state alongside the Jewish one has long served as the paradigm for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, accepted by Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas; nearly every Israeli prime minister since the late-1990s—Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, Benjamin Netanyahu (briefly), and Yair Lapid; and every US president from Bill Clinton through Joseph Biden. Yet, the absence of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks since April 2014, the continuous expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and the deep-seated mistrust between the two sides have led to waning public support for the two-state solution and pervasive doubts that it will be realized. Consequently, a growing number of scholars, politicians, activists, and commentators have shifted their attention to the "one-state solution" as an alternative approach for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Is the one-state idea a viable substitute for the two-state solution? This paper addresses this question. It argues that, while Israel is heading toward a one-state reality, the disparate visions behind the Israeli and Palestinian one-state supporters are irreconcilable, thus rendering this solution a non-solution. It is shown, moreover, that notwithstanding widespread pessimism regarding the two-state solution, a one-state solution lacks the popular appeal that would be necessary for resolving the conflict.

A Binational State in the Making

In August 2022, Israeli geographer Amnon Soffer made headlines when he announced that Jews were becoming a ruling minority in Israel. By Soffer's count, there were now 7.53 million Arab Israelis and Palestinians and only 7.45 million Jews—less than 47 percent of the population—in the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.[2] Less than five years earlier, the deputy head of the Israeli Civil Administration, COL Uri Mendes, caused a similar stir when addressing the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Demographic parity between Jews and Muslims already existed, he said, noting that there were 6.44 million Jews and 6.5 million Muslims in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.[3] These periodic reality checks, however, proved ephemeral, generating little public discussion; the alarming headlines receded as quickly as they had arrived. Still, the demographic trends are clear: Without a major diplomatic initiative to end the 56-year occupation, Israel—the country founded as a Jewish state for the Jewish people—is heading inexorably toward a binational reality. The implications of such an outcome point to a harsh consequence for the Zionist project: a state that would no longer be able to bill itself as both Jewish and democratic.

The idea of a Jewish-Arab binational state is nearly as old as the Zionist movement itself. While mainstream Zionists sought a sovereign Jewish state, a small but vocal minority of Zionist thinkers envisioned alternatives that centered around the notions of coexistence and shared power between Jews and Arabs in Palestine. Supporters of binationalism were typically motivated by social justice concerns; some, by its romantic allure. Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, an Orthodox Jewish writer in Galicia (Poland), embodied the latter, advocating intermarriage as a solution to Arab-Jewish tensions in Palestine: "And type shall find its countertype and become one."[4] Writing in the early 1900s, he envisioned a Jewish-Arab state in which mosques would be seen near synagogues and where the voice of the muezzin (the person who calls to prayer for Muslims) would be heard alongside the sounds of Jewish prayers.[5]

Several organizations were founded in the first half of the twentieth century that diverged from mainstream Zionism's emphasis on Jewish independence. These groups advocated, instead, a binational solution to the Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine. The Hashomer Hatzai'r movement, founded in 1915 by Polish Jews in exile in Vienna, aimed "to realize a binational socialist society in Palestine."[6] Equality between Jews and Arabs as a shared goal would stem from socialist international solidarity, thus settling the question of who controls Palestine.

In April 1925, a small group of Jewish intellectuals met in the home of sociologist Arthur Ruppin to found a new movement that would advocate power-sharing with the Arab population. Formally launched in March 1926, Brit Shalom "aimed to persuade Jews and Arabs to work together" in order to create "a state for two nations."[7] Gershom Scholem, a scholar of Jewish mysticism who was active in this movement, argued that Zionism should be based not on colonial power, manifested in the Balfour Declaration,

but rather in a binational arrangement with the Arabs of Palestine.[8] Brit Shalom fell apart in the 1930s, but in the 1940s its members founded Ihud, a political party with the goal of creating a binational state in Palestine that would be integrated into a larger Arab federation.

The main problem with the path advocated by the supporters of binationalism, however, was that they managed to attract only a miniscule proportion of Jews in Palestine to their cause—Brit Shalom did not number more than 100 members—and there were practically no takers on the Arab side. It thus never really stood a chance for success. Jewish-Arab initiatives to reach an agreement in the 1930s and 1940s were few and far between, invariably collapsing due to mismanagement by the initiatives' organizers, misunderstandings, disagreements over the limits of Jewish immigration, and even the assassination of Arab "collaborators" by the associates of Haj Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem and leader of the Palestine Arab Higher Committee.[9] With the adoption of the Biltmore Program at the Zionist conference, which was held in New York City's Biltmore Hotel in May 1942, the Zionist movement officially endorsed "a Jewish commonwealth" in Palestine. The binationalist agenda could not compete with the now-official Zionist policy. Following the United Nations vote on 29 November 1947 to partition Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, UN General Assembly Resolution 181 was accepted by the Zionist leadership and Israel was on its way to statehood.

The One-State Solution: A Model of Political Inclusion with Equality

In 1985, Oxford-trained philosopher Dr. Sari Nusseibeh floated a radical idea as a sort of intellectual exercise: Israel should be allowed to annex the occupied territories and Palestinians would then take on Israeli citizenship.[10] Nusseibeh, a Palestinian moderate who had always supported Israel's right to exist, was trying to point out that continued Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip would eventually lead to a binational state given the demographic realities. Throughout most of his career, Nusseibeh was a strong advocate of a two-state solution and argued forcefully for it in his 1991 co-authored book, *No Trumpets, No Drums*.[11]

Twenty-five years after his trial balloon, following two major Palestinian uprisings (known as the Intifadas) and an on-again, off-again peace process, Nusseibeh revisited his proposal that Israel annex the occupied territories. This time, he argued that the "Palestinians in the enlarged Israel agree that the state remain Jewish in return for being granted all the civil, though not the political, rights of citizenship."[12] In this binational state, the Palestinians would enjoy "full civil rights even without the right to hold elective office—so that they can enjoy the civil benefits of the de facto single state without being accused of diluting or 'defiling' its Jewishness," Nusseibeh writes.[13] Edward Said, another prominent Palestinian intellectual, took it a step further. He concluded that Palestinian self-determination in a separate state was "unworkable, just as unworkable as the principle of separation between a demographically mixed, irreversibly connected Arab population

without sovereignty and a Jewish population with it." His conclusion was for the two peoples to share the land "in a truly democratic way, with equal rights for each citizen."[14]

Nusseibeh and Said were not the first public intellectuals to broach the one-state idea in contemporary times. In 1982, Meron Benvenisti, an Israeli political scientist and a former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, briefed the American Enterprise Institute on a study he and other Israeli social scientists had conducted. They concluded that, in light of Israel's settlements policy—which was amounting to de facto annexation—the time for a political solution involving the West Bank was "five minutes to midnight."[15] Two years later, Benvenisti released a report warning that Israel may have passed "the critical point" in terms of assuming a "quasi-permanence" of the occupied territories.[16] Seventeen years of policies related to Israel's occupation, he argued, had produced a "dual society" consisting of Jewish settlers, on the one hand, and "more than a million Arabs who will not have full democratic rights," on the other hand.[17]

Benvenisti's study may be a mere footnote in history, but his argument that Israel's settlements policy in the West Bank had led to a point of no return is today a common refrain. "There are too many settlements, too many Jewish settlers, and too many Palestinians, and they all live together, albeit separated by barbed wire and pass laws," wrote historian Tony Judt in the October 2003 issue of *The New York Review of Books*. He, too, had concluded that the two-state solution was "probably doomed."[18] In the ensuing two decades, numerous scholars and commentators have bemoaned the death of the two-state solution.[19]

Some recent "converts" to the one-state idea were, like Nusseibeh, early supporters of the two-state solution. Ian Lustick writes that it "will not and can no longer come about from negotiations."[20] Lustick believes that the Israeli polity has become so uncompromising over the years that it is inconceivable that a government could be produced that would implement this solution.[21] He argues that in its place, de facto annexation will inevitably (though not immediately) lead to the reality of a one-state democratic, non-Zionist entity. Rather than the two-state solution, which has "passed the point of no return," Lustick envisions "an inclusive multinational democracy" that would serve as "a state for all its citizens," a long-term prospect that would entail overcoming the challenge of Palestinian emancipation.[22] In the summer of 2020, Peter Beinart, a liberal Orthodox Jewish intellectual and also a longtime supporter of the two-state solution, declared that he, too, had reached the conclusion that it was dead. "It's time to imagine a Jewish home that is not a Jewish state," wrote Beinart, arguing for the need "to abandon the traditional two-state solution and embrace the goal of equal rights for Jews and Palestinians."[23]

These one-state proponents argue for full equality to Arabs and Jews in a single state. Sociologist Sammy Smooha sums up the contours of such an entity:

> The new Palestinian-Jewish state would consist of two co-nations without a minority and a majority and without any legal dominance. There will be equality of rights, languages, cultures, and state symbols. Arabs and Jews will share power and get their proportional share of the appointments, budgets, and other public goods. Each community will administer its own institutions and not intervene in the affairs of the other. All important national decisions will be made jointly.[24]

Although still a minority view, this solution has been gaining support among Palestinians, particularly younger ones disillusioned with the peace process that has failed to give them a state or even the hope that one will emerge in their lifetime. A December 2022 poll found that 26 percent of Palestinians favor a one-state solution with equal rights, while 71 percent are opposed to this solution.[25] A poll of Palestinian public opinion taken the previous year found the same percentage supporting this solution.[26] There is some fluctuation in Palestinians' support for this solution based on events on the ground. For example, a poll taken in April 2022 found that 33 percent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip supported a one-state solution, although three months prior it had the support of less than 24 percent following intercommunal tensions in Israel and clashes between Israel and Hamas.[27]

This one-state solution with equality for all, however, has only miniscule support among Israeli Jews, with a recent survey by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) finding that only 14 percent of Jewish Israelis favor it, even as their support for a two-state solution has dwindled to 34 percent.[28] Would Jewish Israelis ever agree to forgo the symbols, institutions, policies, and the very definition of Israel as a Jewish state? Could Jews and Arabs conceivably agree on a new set of common symbols and institutions and work constructively on creating a new system and policies that would leave neither group feeling disadvantaged? It is highly improbable that a substantial number of either Jews or Palestinians would consider discarding their desire for self-determination based on their identity. Fatah activist Ahmed Ghneim's fear that "in one state, one of us [Israelis or Palestinians] will feel the need to dominate the other" surely resonates with many Palestinians and Israelis alike.[29] The May 2021 riots in Israel, which saw the worst violence in two decades in Arab-Jewish mixed cities, such as Jaffa and Acre, raises doubts about the sustainability of intergroup cooperation given the historic intergroup hostility.[30] As Jeremy Pressman asks, moreover, why would Jewish Israelis willingly forfeit the advantages they enjoy in a system that privileges them? "Few states ever willingly modified their self-definition or national identity in such a significant fashion due to external demands rather than internal transformation," he observes.[31]

Even Jewish Israelis who might be open to the idea of coexistence in a single state based on the premise of full equality of opportunity as well as equality under the law may be unnerved by the attempts of a segment of one-state backers to delegitimize Israel's existence. Some of the loudest voices proclaiming the death of the two-state solution were never supporters from the start. This group includes Palestinian activists, like Omar Barghouti, a founder of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott

of Israel and a leader of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement, which advocates punitive measures against Israel. Writing in *Electronic Intifada*, Barghouti proclaims "good riddance!" of the notion that the twostate solution is dead. This solution, he argues,

> …was never a moral solution to start with. In the best-case scenario, if UN resolution 242 were meticulously implemented, it would have addressed most of the legitimate rights of less than a *third* of the Palestinian people over less than a *fifth* of their ancestral land. More than *two thirds* of the Palestinians, refugees plus the Palestinian citizens of Israel, have been dubiously and shortsightedly expunged out of the definition of the Palestinians. Such exclusion can only guarantee the perpetuation of conflict.[32]

Barghouti goes on to condemn Zionists for "their colonization of Palestine" and for "the dispossession and expulsion of most of the Palestinian people in 1948 to establish Israel in their stead." Similarly, Virginia Tilley argues that the two-state solution "remains unworkable because it was flawed from the start, resting on the discredited idea—on which political Zionism stakes all its moral authority—that any ethnic group can legitimately claim permanent formal dominion over a territorial state."[33] For anti-Zionist critics like Barghouti and Tilley, the very notion of a Jewish state, therefore, is inherently problematic. Those "searching for peace," Tilley writes, "must finally question the core logic of Zionism."[34] According to Tilley, "the one-state solution is the only viable one," acknowledging that the obstacles to this solution—the protagonists' "national ideologies, internal politics, and mutual antipathies…are formidable."[35] In a provocative op-ed published in the *Washington Post*, an advocate of the one-state solution declared that its main obstacle "is the belief that Israel must be a Jewish state."[36] While most Israelis may not be familiar with Barghouti, Tilley, or George Bisharat, the professor of law who penned the afore-mentioned op-ed, the premise held by many supporters of a single state—that a Jewish state in part of historic Palestine was never legitimate—is unacceptable to most Jewish Israelis.

The One-State Solution: A Model of Political Inclusion with a Jewish Identity

Alternative visions of the one-state solution have been put forth by Israelis on the political right. Historically, the Revisionist Zionists had opposed partition of *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel). The forebear of today's Likud, the party that has dominated Israeli politics since the late-1970s, was Ze'ev Vladimir Jabotinsky, who in 1925 founded the Revisionist movement. A small minority among Zionists back then, Revisionists promoted the ideology of a "Greater Israel" (a biblical reference that refers to the Whole Land of Israel), seeking to establish a Jewish state on both sides of the Jordan River. The Revisionists rejected outright the notion of a Jewish state on just part of Mandatory Palestine and thus opposed both the 1937 British Partition Plan and the 1947 UN Partition Plan, in contrast to the mainstream pre-State Zionist leadership that accepted it. Even before the 1947 UN plan was unveiled, David Ben-Gurion, the Labor Zionist leader who

later became the first prime minister of Israel, had concluded that the solution to the Zionists' conflict with the Arab inhabitants of Palestine lay in the establishment of two states—one Jewish and one Arab. In February 1947, he articulated this position in a letter to the British foreign minister.[37] On 18 June 1947, the Jewish Agency, which Ben-Gurion chaired, adopted his proposal that declared it was prepared to discuss a compromise over the land.[38]

Although most Israelis on the political right long ago abandoned the idea of a Greater Israel, the right has remained steadfast in opposing the idea of partitioning the Jewish State. After Israel's victory in the 1967 War, the right-wing Herut party (a pre-cursor of the Likud) called for annexing the new territories captured from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Although the Herut government led by Menachem Begin, a follower of Jabotinsky, ultimately conceded the Sinai Peninsula in exchange for peace with Egypt in 1979, Begin stood firm in opposing the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza or of making any sort of concessions concerning these biblical territories.[39] Decades later, when the Likud government of Ariel Sharon decided to unilaterally disengage from the Gaza Strip, Sharon and Likud moderates (as well as some moderates from the Labor Party) bolted from their political home to form the short-lived centrist Kadima Party. Those remaining in Likud opposed disengaging from Gaza or parts of the West Bank. To this day, Likud and its satellite parties on the right remain firmly opposed to a two-state solution.

Although many on the right seem to prefer the status quo over the two-state solution, a growing number have embraced the notion of a single state from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River. Right-wing proponents of a one-state solution are themselves disunited on their vision; they agree on annexation of the West Bank—or at least large parts of the West Bank—but differ on whether to offer citizenship to the Palestinians who live there. Some of them support the notion of equal rights for both nations. Reuven ("Ruvi") Rivlin, a former Likud parliamentarian who served as Israel's president from 2014 to 2021, sees a binational solution as less threatening to Jewish statehood than partitioning of the land.[40] According to Tzipi Hotovely, a Likud politician who served as Israel's deputy foreign minister before being appointed ambassador to the United Kingdom, a Palestinian state would be a far greater danger to Israel than a binational state in which citizenship is extended to Palestinians. In the latter scenario, "we have a degree of control, but the moment you abandon the area to the Palestinian entity, what control do you have over what will happen there?" she asks.[41]

Journalist Noam Sheizaf, who has conducted extensive interviews with right-wing supporters of a one-state solution, summarizes what their one-state solution would look like:

> Gradually and unilaterally, Israel would annex the West Bank…beginning with Area C and then moving to B and A. Barring security clearances (and according to some—loyalty oaths), all Palestinians will end up having blue Israeli identity

cards with full rights. The army will return to dealing mostly with national defense, and the police will take over civilian policing duties in the annexed territory. Constitutional measures that will define Israel as a Jewish State would take place in advance…Palestinian refugees will not be allowed back. Gaza will not be annexed, and will return to a fully independent region, separated from the State of Israel. Except for Rivlin, who floated the idea of a dual parliament system (which actually makes his one state closer to a confederative model), none of the others mentioned major changes in the electoral system and they expected Palestinians to vote for the Israeli Knesset…[42]

Sheizaf points out that, in contrast to leftwing supporters of a one-state solution who want to see a "state of all its citizens" with no particular identity, the Israeli right envisions a process "at the end of which the Palestinians will enjoy full personal rights, but in a country whose symbols and spirit will remain Jewish."[43] "My outlook has two motivations," Hotovely explains. "First, my deep belief in our right to the Land of Israel. Shiloh and Beit El settlements are, for me, the land of our forefathers in the full sense of the term. The second thing is that I do not ignore the fact that there are Palestinians here."[44] As to how Israel would cope with an Arab minority of 30 or 40 percent when it has a hard time containing a minority of 20 percent today, Hotovely argues that "coping with the Arab minority is a lower price than the danger of the Qassams, the delegitimization and the immoral actions we will commit in coping with them, and also preferable to giving up parts of the homeland, including Jerusalem."[45]

Hotovely's position is attractive to those for whom democracy is no less important than the biblical sites in the West Bank. Caroline Glick, an Israeli conservative journalist and author who has advised Prime Minister Netanyahu, has similarly promoted a one-state plan that would entail annexation of the West Bank (but not Gaza) while offering citizenship to the Palestinians. She, too, sees no reason to part with biblical cities like Jerusalem, Jews' "eternal capital"; Hebron, "the city of their patriarchs and matriarchs"; and Elon Moreh and Beit El—both settlements with a biblical connection that are located deep in the heart of the West Bank. And, like Hotovely, Glick is convinced that retaining the West Bank is critical to Israel's security. "Without these areas," she argues, "Israel would be incapable of defending itself from external invasion, penetration by foreign terrorists, or penetration by Palestinian terrorists." She also worries that a Palestinian state would "encourage millions of foreign Arabs to immigrate" and that such a scenario "would destroy Israel."[46]

Glick cites Palestinian polling data showing that between two-thirds and three-quarters "admire Israeli democracy more than any other democracy in the world and do not support an Israeli withdrawal from Judea and Samaria." According to Glick, her one-state plan would actually benefit the Palestinians:

> The Israeli one-state plan will put an end to the subjection of Palestinians to despotic rule. It will grant the Palestinians who live in these areas automatic permanent residency status and render them eligible to apply for Israeli citizenship.

>As permanent residents, they will be accorded the same civil and legal rights as all Israeli citizens, and if they apply for and receive Israeli citizenship, they will have the right to vote in national elections. Gaza, from which Israel withdrew completely in 2005, will remain a self-governed Palestinian territory.[47]

However, since "it can be reasonably assumed that only a small number of Palestinians are likely to apply for full Israeli citizenship," the vast majority of Palestinians would *not* be eligible to vote in national elections, according to Glick's plan.[48]

Israeli Jewish critics of the right's one-state vision argue that it is delusional. As the late Professor Carlo Strenger has written, millions of Palestinians who have suffered under Israeli occupation for decades and have been in bitter conflict with the Zionist movement for more than a century cannot possibly identify with such a predominantly Jewish state. "Would you expect Palestinians from the West Bank to sing Hatikva [the national anthem of Israel] and identify with the Star of David?" he asks rhetorically.[49] The notion that Palestinians would sooner or later accept a binational state that was Jewish is condescending and ignores Palestinian national aspirations.[50] Critics of the one-state solution also point to the breakup of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and the separatist movements in the UK, Quebec, Spain, and Belgium, which has experienced violence and where many Flemish people want independence.[51]

The One-State Solution: A Model of Political Exclusion

In contrast to the notion of a shared state that would remain Jewish but would be based on equality, Jewish supremacy characterizes the vision of far-right proponents of a one-state solution. It is a vision that features neither inclusiveness nor equality. And, whereas most Israelis seek to maintain a state that is both Jewish and democratic, far-right annexationists value the *Jewish* over the *democratic* and would be willing to forgo the latter if it came to it. While a clear majority of Israeli Jews reject this idea, it has been gaining support in recent years. A 2017 survey found that only 15 percent of Israeli Jews and 10 percent of Palestinians would support a solution in which one side is denied equal rights.[52] By 2020, however, 22 percent of Israeli Jews had come to support it.[53] Indeed, the most recent Israeli elections, held on 1 November 2022, produced the most right-wing, religious government in the country's history, with key members of the new Netanyahu-led coalition subscribing to this model of a one-state solution.

One prominent member of the new coalition, Bezalel Smotrich, the leader of the far-right Religious Zionism party and a government minister with oversight over the IDF Civil Administration that governs the West Bank, has in the past stated: "They tell us that we will have to give citizenship to a million and a half Arabs, but I say that if we must choose between democratic and Jewish, I have no doubt what I would choose. Democracy is a tool for the survival of the Jewish state."[54] Smotrich's political ally, Itamar Ben-Gvir, who leads the far-right Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party and is currently serving as the national security minister, seeks a one-state solution that would include a government agency to "encourage" Arabs who do not accept the Jewish state to leave Israel.[55]

Even without radical proposals like Ben-Gvir's expulsion idea becoming government policy, this model of political exclusion is essentially an apartheid system. While some critics of Israel, such as BDS activists, have been applying the "apartheid" label to Israel for years, others warn that Israel is not at present an apartheid system but that it is indeed heading in that direction.[56] Examples of the latter include Israeli human rights organizations, such as Zulat, and left-leaning retired politicians like former Prime Minister Ehud Barak.[57] Then-President Rivlin had warned that certain policies favored by the far-right—for example, legalizing Israeli settlements on privately owned Palestinian land—would lead to the perception of Israel as an apartheid state.[58]

The One State Visions' Irreconcilable Differences

Given these starkly different visions for a one-state solution, it is difficult to imagine how this chasm could be bridged. In contrast to differences among supporters of a Palestinian state concerning the details of a two-state solution (e.g., final borders), proponents of a one-state solution disagree over its very essence: whether the state will be a Jewish and/or democratic one with equal rights for all. The premise of Palestinian advocates of a single state is profoundly different than that of one-state advocates who insist on maintaining a state with a Jewish identity, just as the premise of one-state advocates who emphasize full equality is profoundly different from one-state advocates who would deny Palestinians political rights; these are irreconcilable positions.

None of these versions, moreover, has yet to attain widespread support among Israelis or Palestinians. Unilateral moves by Israel—for example, annexation of the West Bank—would transform the Jewish state into a binational one, but this would hardly be a "solution"; on the contrary, it would only invite more strife between Israelis and Palestinians. Nor would a binational state that emerges organically—a plausible scenario given Israel's settlement policy and demographic realities—constitute an agreement and thus cannot be seen as a viable resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A binational state would almost certainly see a spike in Israeli-Palestinian tensions, probably resulting in substantially more bloodshed than in the past or present.

If the one-state solution is not feasible, is it prudent to revisit the idea of separation by creating an independent Palestinian state? To be sure, a clear majority of Israelis and Palestinians have lost faith in the prospects of the two-state solution. A recent survey shows that 69 percent of Palestinians think this solution is no longer feasible, mirroring the pessimism found among Israelis.[59] Yet this same survey shows that it remains the preferred solution for Palestinians: 32 percent support this solution (as opposed to 26 percent, who favor the one-state solution).[60] Among Israelis, too, the two-state solution remains the most popular choice, with recent surveys showing around 40 percent support.[61] Support for this solution is lower among Jewish Israelis (versus Arab citizens of Israel), with only 32 percent supporting it, according to a September 2022 survey by IDI.[62] Still, despite the pessimism concerning its realization, the two-state solution

remains more popular than the one-state alternative for Jewish Israelis, Arab Israelis, and Palestinians residing in the West Bank and Gaza.

But is the two-state solution still a possibility, even after its death has been declared on countless occasions? For experts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the jury is still out, as shown in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article that points to major disagreement over this question among dozens of leading practitioners and scholars.[63] The Biden administration, for its part, continues to support the two-state solution, even as Prime Minister Netanyahu's government rejects it, having declared that the Jewish people "have a natural right over the Land of Israel."[64] The Commanders for Israel's Security (CIS), a movement representing hundreds of retired senior officials of the Israeli security establishment, advocates initiatives it would like to see the Israeli government take to keep the two-state solution alive. Its proposals include "civilian separation," i.e., steps, including investments in infrastructure, trade, industry and employment, and improved freedom of improvement, to promote the Palestinian Authority's rehabilitation and improve the day-to-day lives of the civilian population in the West Bank; maintaining Israeli security control with a sustained effort to prevent acts of violence from either side including the border police, while removing all settlements deemed illegal by the Israeli government; and political-diplomatic measures that would create a viable political horizon for an eventual agreement based on the two-state solution.[65] Similarly, Blue White Future, another non-partisan Israeli organization co-founded by Ami Ayalon, a former head of the Shin Bet internal security service, and former peace negotiator Gilead Sher, supports Israeli actions, such as refraining from building new Israeli settlements and from expanding existing ones east of the separation barrier and in Arab neighborhoods of Jerusalem, to keep the prospects for a two-state solution alive.[66]

Indeed, the vast majority of former IDF generals and heads of the Mossad and Shin Bet intelligence agency and internal security service, respectively, see the two-state solution as an important strategic objective for Israel.[67]

In recent years, the old idea of a confederation has been revisited by a small group of Israelis and Palestinians who support "two states," but "one homeland." This "Land for All" initiative can be seen as a variant of the two-state solution as it would give both peoples the right to self-determination in two independent, sovereign, and free states. Yet, the boundaries between these two states would be open to the free movement of civilians from both sides provided they respect the rights of all residents.[68] Without a political leadership promoting such a confederation, it is unlikely that this or other diplomatic initiatives involving the Palestinians will be seriously considered by either the Israeli or Palestinian government. A more likely scenario in the near-term is the continuation of the status quo or, more precisely, creeping annexation that, if unchecked, will transform Israel into a forced binational state sans a negotiated agreement.

Conclusion

Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking remains a distant prospect, even as Israel has made great strides in normalizing relations with once-hostile Arab states. With the two-state solution seeming more and more like a pipe dream, the one-state solution has been increasingly put forward as the sensible alternative to a separate Palestinian state. A single state with full equality, its supporters argue, can more easily be realized than a sovereign, contiguous Palestinian state given the steady expansion of Israeli settlements over the years and the unlikeliness that any Israeli government will remove them and part with the West Bank and East Jerusalem as part of a negotiated two-state solution. Supporters of a one-state solution on the Israeli right, however, envision a state that would have a distinctly Jewish identity—a vision that Palestinians would be unlikely to support. Others on the Israeli right would forgo Palestinian political rights to achieve this purpose. These Jewish nationalists, including senior figures in the present Israeli government, envision a single Jewish state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea without political rights for the Palestinians. As this article tries to show, the disparate visions of the one-state solution and the unpopularity of this solution in any of its variants, renders it a non-solution. If tangible steps are not taken in the near future to keep the two-state solution alive, such as those proposed by senior veterans of the Israeli security establishment, Israel will become a binational state, but with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict far from resolved.

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Women, Peace, and Security in the Middle East: An Agenda of Empty Promises?

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Abstract: I put the spotlight on the global Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, launched in October 2000 by the United Nations' (UN) Security Council in the form of Resolution 1325, to secure women's physical security and their participation in peacebuilding and post-reconstruction activities. Framing the discussion are theories of norm and policy diffusion and of militarized masculinities, and a review of the literature on UNSCR 1325 and its National Action Plans (NAP). Examining the NAPs that the Arab League and several MENA states have adopted, I assess strengths and weaknesses of the documents, finding them largely aspirational and symbolic. I conclude that the WPS agenda has considerable potential but is undermined by the international system's disarray and growing militarization.

Keywords: UNSCR 1325, WPS agenda, NAPs, Middle East and North Africa, militarization human security

I. Introduction: The MENA Geopolitical Landscape

That the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is beset by tensions, rivalries, and conflicts is beyond dispute. Quite apart from the territorial and political legacies of European colonialism and the post-WWI "mandates," a listing would include the overlong Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the US/UK 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq, the 2011 NATO attack on Libya, and the assault on Yemen by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). (See Table 1.) The US military footprint in the Middle East, while shifting, remains enormous, with more than 60,000 troops stationed in various countries. This includes 13,000 troops in Qatar, the US Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, some 2,200 troops in Kuwait, about 5,000 personnel in the UAE, and two air bases and 3,000 troops in Saudi Arabia.[1]

The post-Cold War world order was supposed to bring about a "peace dividend" but instead was followed by the "new wars" and more violence, including sexual violence against women.[2] The 1990s saw the United States attack Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait, followed by brutal international sanctions. Algerians experienced a bloody battle between the state and armed Islamists. Peace plans between Israel and the Palestinians failed to achieve the goal of justice with peace. In the wake of the Project for a New American Century and the US-led "war on terror," the 2003 US/UK invasion and occupation of Iraq not only destroyed the country's physical infrastructure and political institutions but also opened the way for years of chaos followed by a reign of terror by the so-called Islamic State.[3]

The 2011 Arab Spring uprisings began with the promise of democratic transitions, but only one was relatively successful (that of Tunisia) while other countries saw reversals

to authoritarianism and the patriarchal status quo or experienced internationalized civil conflicts. The NATO bombing of Libya produced a failed and fractured state, which Libya remains over a decade later. The decision to try to topple the Syrian regime was undertaken by the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, and it opened the way for the incursion of jihadists from some eighty-two countries.[4] The massive displacement and outmigration of Iraqi and especially Syrian citizens, the ISIS murders of Christians in Iraq and Syria, the attempted destruction of Iraq's Yazidi community and the enslavement of its women by ISIS, and the descent of Libya into a conduit for human trafficking and illicit migration—these are but a few of the consequences of the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 decision to destabilize Libya and Syria. The steady stream of Western weapons to Saudi Arabia and the UAE enabled those countries to intervene in Yemen's civil conflict in 2015 and create what the United Nations (UN) called the world's worst humanitarian crisis, worsened in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic.[5]

Adherence to multilateralism tends to be weak. The Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the 2015 nuclear agreement involving the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, along with the European Union and Germany) was a move away from diplomacy and dialogue to unilateralism and contention. State sovereignty is frequently violated. In 2019, the United States, Turkey, and Israel audaciously launched military attacks on Syria. In early January 2020, the United States assassinated the top ranking general of a sovereign state, Iran, in another sovereign state, Iraq. Later that year, Israel assassinated an Iranian nuclear scientist in Tehran.

The 2020 Abraham Accords—mediated by the United States and now involving Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Sudan, and Morocco—entail business, diplomatic, and security agreements that serve to isolate Iran, further marginalize the Palestinian question, legitimize Morocco's acquisition of the Western Sahara, and ignore human rights violations by the member states while guaranteeing even more US weapons sales, especially to the Gulf sheikhdoms. Citizen grievances over unemployment and rising prices generated a cycle of protests in Iran, Iraq, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, and elsewhere. The 2022 Russia-Ukraine-NATO war exacerbated regional and global crises; its fallout includes both shortages and rising prices of food, fuel, and fertilizer, continued income and wealth inequalities, imbalances in humanitarian aid, and increased military spending and weapons flows.

Table 1. Timeline of Conflicts

1948	Arab-Israeli War
1953	CIA/MI5-backed coup d'état in Iran
1956	Suez War: Israel, UK, France vs Egypt
1962	Yemen proxy war
1967	Arab-Israeli war
1970	Black September (Jordan vs PLO)
1973	October War (Israel vs Egypt)
1980-88	Iraq-Iran war
1982	Israel invades Lebanon
1990-91	Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; Persian Gulf War (US-led Operation Desert Storm)
1992-99	Algerian civil conflict: Islamist terrorists vs the state
2000	Palestinian al-Aqsa intifada
2001	Al-Qaeda attacks on US, Sept. 11
2003	US/UK invasion of Iraq
2006	Israeli attack on Lebanon
2008-09	Israeli attack on Gaza
2010-11	US and EU sanctions on Iran
2011	NATO attack on Libya
2011-	Syrian uprising and external interventions; US and EU sanctions
2015-	Saudi/UAE attacks on Yemen
2014-19	ISIS "Caliphate" in Iraq and Syria
2020	US assassination of Iran's General Ghassem Soleimani (January); Abraham Accords signed (September)
2023	Renewed clashes in Israel-Palestine

Those realities of world politics have taken place alongside promotion of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, launched in October 2000 through UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, and intended to secure women's physical security and their participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. A corollary to the WPS agenda is the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), which Sweden pioneered in 2014 under then-Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom to improve upon UNSCR 1325 and to expand gender equality and women's leadership in global governance. Such conflicting developments raise questions about the status of international conventions and norms for women's participation, rights, and physical security. Specifically, this article addresses the following questions: To what extent has the WPS agenda and preparation of the required National Action Plans (NAP) been adopted in the MENA region, arguably the most militarized and penetrated world-region and one where patriarchal institutions persist?[6] What is the evidence for any implementation of the NAPs, and what are the challenges?

Framed by world polity theory on norm and policy diffusion and feminist international relations (IR), this article examines the WPS literature on the global diffusion of UNSCR 1325 and continuing challenges. My evaluation of the resolution's strengths and weaknesses is informed by the special issues of three scholarly journals devoted to an assessment of UNSCR 1325, which provide context for the examination of the few MENA NAPs that have been adopted.[7] A survey of the literature on FFP in light of recent developments in world affairs leads me to question the capacity of those norms and policies to transcend the imperatives of an international system driven by power, profit, and militarized masculinities.

II. Theory and Literature Review

World society theory (also known as world polity or world culture theory) emphasizes norm and policy diffusion through international organizations and treaties, which constitutes a shared modernity with values of rationality, universalism, and individualism.[8] Scholars have studied the expansion of women's suffrage, human rights, foreign aid, and economic liberalization, as well as gender mainstreaming and parliamentary gender quotas.[9] Adherents consider world society theory an improvement over *realism in international relations,* which posits more or less autonomous and self-interested nation-state actors in an essentially anarchic world ("micro-realism"); and an alternative to the "macro-realism" of *world-system theory,* which posits that nation-states reflect a global system of (unequal) economic and political/military power driven by capital accumulation.[10] In this framework, multilateral organizations such as the UN play a key role in the diffusion of modern policies, structures, and values across the world, pressuring states and domestic organizations to adopt similar values and programs. Through the global diffusion of UNSCR 1325's WPS agenda, the UN, other intergovernmental organizations (IGO), and civil society actors agree on the importance of women's physical security and empowerment.

World society scholars have contributed much to our understanding of institutional isomorphism and the global adoption of cultural scripts and world models, but the theory is weak on political economy and the highly unequal distribution of resources across and within countries. Studies (with a few exceptions) fail to recognize the embeddedness of treaties, multilateral organizations, and professionals in international power structures. "Decoupling" is acknowledged if downplayed: "Some external elements are easier to copy than others, [or] inconsistent with local practices, requirements, and cost structures. … [W]orld cultural models are highly idealized and internally inconsistent, making them in principle impossible to actualize."[11]

Feminist IR acknowledges power structures, even as it has promoted the UN's global women's rights agenda, which includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and UNSCR 1325. Indeed, critical feminist IR scholars

argue that mainstream understandings and practices of international security build on and normalize existing structures of power within international relations.[12] A dynamic field of research, its notable publications include the early works of Cynthia Enloe on militarism and the 2019 *Oxford Handbook of Women, Peace, and Security*. The long history of feminist peace action spans the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) in the early twentieth century to Code Pink in the twenty-first century. Some scholars and politicians suggest that men and women hold different perspectives on peace and security, with women being more likely to recognize the links between the two and to promote dialogue. This is because of women's clearer understanding of what Cockburn aptly called the "continuum of violence," which ranges from domestic violence to women's abuse, displacement, and deaths during conflicts and wars. [13]

True's political economy approach to that range of violence highlights the interplay of poverty, masculinities, and neoliberal economic globalization.[14] This view is shared by activist groups. At the 2017 meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), speakers focused on key strategies and opportunities for ending violence against women (VAW) "by tackling dominant macroeconomic structures that exploit and perpetuate women's economic inequality and increase women's exposure to violence."[15] One such strategy and opportunity is the adoption of *human security*. Advanced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1994 and 2022, and endorsed by many feminist organizations, human security shifts the exclusive focus on national security through military means to one that encompasses economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security.[16] Women's security, therefore, requires the absence of economic, sexual, and military forms of violence, along with their political presence and guaranteed human rights.

Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, however, note that "protecting basic human rights is one of the international community's most pressing *and elusive* goals" (my emphases) in that states both incorporate core human rights and violate or bypass them. Weak institutional mechanisms to monitor and enforce norms and international agreements can enable governments to ignore the agreements, even though they remain important advocacy tools for social movements and civil society activists. This the authors call "the paradox of empty promises."[17]

UNSCR 1325: Diffusion and Limitations

Adopted in October 2000, UNSCR 1325 was the product of years of global feminist advocacy regarding violence against women. Earlier, the final Vienna Declaration of the 1993 Conference on Human Rights asserted that VAW was an abuse of human rights, and it highlighted the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudice, and religious extremism. The declaration also stated that human rights abuses of women in situations of armed conflict—including systematic rape, sexual slavery, and forced pregnancy—were violations of the fundamental principles of international human

rights and humanitarian law. The 1998 Rome Statute, which established the International Criminal Court (ICC), was influenced by the lobbying efforts of the Women's Caucus for Gender Justice. The statute governs administration of the ICC and mandates appointment of gender specialists, especially those with expertise on violence against women and children.[18]

Research, advocacy, and lobbying were carried out by feminist professionals in several international organizations, notably United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), in concert with activists in transnational feminist networks (TFNs), who formed the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security and held informal meetings with members of the UN's Security Council to advocate for a resolution on women, peace, and security.[19] A goal was to shift the focus away from victimization, and "raise the visibility of and attention to women's grassroots local and national peace building efforts," which studies were documenting.[20] That goal came to be inscribed in UNSCR 1325, which calls on governments, as well as the Security Council itself, to include women in negotiations and settlements with respect to conflict resolution and peace building. Its four pillars—participation, protection, prevention, and relief and recovery—signal the crucial role that women are to play in peace and security efforts. The key actors in the implementation of UNSCR 1325 are national governments, tasked with preparing NAPs in collaboration with other national actors, including women's civil society organizations.

The adoption of UNSCR 1325 thus saw the women's rights agenda inserted within the realms of national and global security. The UN itself has increased the number of women heads of peacekeeping missions, and by early 2023, women constituted 36 percent of those in peacekeeping leadership positions. Covering longstanding conflict arenas—such as Eastern Congo, Central African Republic, Cyprus, the Golan (Israel/Syria), Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Western Sahara—the missions' mandate is to help "countries navigate the difficult path from conflict to peace."[21]

UNSCR 1325 was followed by nine resolutions to address specific concerns regarding the protection of women in violent conflicts, and women's inclusion in peacebuilding; it is worth noting that five pertain to women as victims of sexual violence (see Table 2). Diffusion and promotion of the WPS agenda by IGOs, international non-governmental organizations (INGO), domestic women's groups, and TFNs, along with the preparation of NAPs, reflected efforts by feminists and other activists to construct alternative conceptions of international security.

The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) devotes a team that monitors adoption and implementation of UNSCR 1325 NAPs and provides updated information on its PeaceWomen website.[22] As of July 2023, 104 UN member states (54 percent) had adopted a NAP, although just 36 percent had allocated a budget for implementation. Some fifty-four countries had crafted one NAP; twenty-seven had

two; seventeen had three; and six countries were on their fourth NAP. Some 33 percent of NAPs were outdated, having expired in 2021 or before. The US commitment to the WPS agenda appears less than robust, as an examination of the "United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security" suggests:

> The WPS Strategy acknowledges a tremendous amount of untapped potential among the world's women and girls to identify, recommend, and implement effective solutions to conflict. At its core, the WPS Strategy recognizes the benefits derived from creating opportunities for women and girls to serve as agents of peace via political, economic, and social empowerment.[23]

Table 2. Overview of UNSCR 1325 and Subsequent Resolutions

Resolution	Description
SCR 1325 (2000)	Affirms the importance of the participation of women and the inclusion of gender perspectives in peace negotiations, humanitarian planning, peacekeeping operations, and post-conflict peacebuilding and governance.
SCR 1820 (2008)	Recognizes that conflict-related sexual violence is a tactic of warfare and calls for the training of troops on preventing and responding to sexual violence, deployment of more women to peace operations, and enforcement of zero-tolerance policies for peacekeepers with regards to acts of sexual exploitation or abuse.
SCR 1888 (2009)	Strengthens the implementation of Resolution 1820 by calling for leadership to address conflict-related sexual violence, deployment of teams (military and gender experts) to critical conflict areas, and improved monitoring and reporting on conflict trends and perpetrators.
SCR 1889 (2009)	Addresses obstacles to women's participation in peace processes and calls for development of global indicators to track the implementation of Resolution 1325, and improvement of international and national responses to the needs of women in conflict and post-conflict settings
SCR 1960 (2010)	Calls for an end to sexual violence in armed conflict, particularly against women and girls, and provides measures aimed at ending impunity for perpetrators of sexual violence, including through sanctions and reporting measures.
SCR 2106 (2013)	Provides operational guidance on addressing sexual violence and calls for the further deployment of Women Protection Advisers.
SCR 2122 (2013)	Calls on all parties to peace talks to facilitate equal and full participation of women in decision-making; aims to increase women's participation in peace-making by increasing resources for women in conflict zones; acknowledges the critical contributions of women's civil society organizations.
SCR 2242 (2015)	Marks the 15th anniversary and reaffirms commitment to Resolution 1325; highlights the role of women in countering violent extremism and addresses the differential impact of terrorism on the human rights of women and girls.
SCR 2467 (2019)	Recognizes that sexual violence occurs on a continuum of violence against women and girls and stresses the responsibility of addressing root causes of sexual violence, specifically structural gender inequality and discrimination.
SCR 2493 (2019)	Urges U.N. member states to commit to implementing the nine previously adopted Women, Peace, and Security resolutions.

Source: USIP (2022), "What is UNSCR 1325?"

The four "Lines of Effort" that follow, while laudable, appear largely *pro forma*, as they include sentiments such as "Preventing conflict and preparing for disasters" but present no examples of best practices. (The 2003 invasion of Iraq and the chaos that ensued are not mentioned.) Nor is it clear that the document remains intact, given the frequent policy changes that follow electoral cycles, as with the Trump administration's abrogation of the JCPOA. The document asserts that engagement with "WPS principles at the global level will be selective" and "in ways that advance America's national interests." The document would appear to confirm the presence of "empty promises" in the world polity.

NATO has endorsed UNSCR 1325 and prepared a plan of action.[24] Its three pillars are *integration* (gender equality as an integral part of NATO policies, programs, and projects), *inclusiveness* (representation of women across NATO and in national forces is necessary to enhance operational effectiveness and success), and *integrity* (systemic inequalities are addressed to ensure fair and equal treatment of women and men alliance-wide). The reference to "integrating a gender perspective" does not appear to extend to areas and peoples outside the alliance.

Although the UN plays a critical role in disseminating the WPS agenda across world society, disagreements continue among experts regarding the success of UNSCR 1325 nearly a quarter century after its adoption. The UN Secretary-General periodically prepares reports on the resolution; in 2004 he noted uneven progress and in 2020 he referred to the problem of increased militarization.[25] In a 2020 interview, three members of the NATO parliamentary assembly cited the following problems: inability to translate commitments into concrete actions at the national level; significant underfunding; the need to engage men; absence of time-bound goals backed by monitoring, accountability provisions and enforcement mechanisms; and the need for "a more resilient global and regional architecture … to collectively work on gender and WPS if we are to see progress."[26] Former Swedish Foreign Minister Wallstrom said in an interview that UNSCR 1325 implementation was slow and still very much about "comparing failures."[27]

The WPS Agenda: Feminist Assessments

In 2011, Shepherd wrote that the resolutions, notably UNSCR 1889 (adopted 2009), recognized "women as agential subjects" and offered "a unique opportunity for critical engagement with what 'women' might be, do or want in the field of gender and security."[28] Women's agency certainly includes their roles in peace movements and peace-building initiatives, but it also includes the embrace of militarized masculinity by some women in power. As Halley argues in her study of "governance feminism," certain strands of feminist knowledge can become conflated with the dominant international security agenda, which so many feminist scholars have criticized.[29] Moreover, it is unclear how women can be agential subjects in states or regions characterized by authoritarianism, patriarchal family laws, or high military spending.

A recent assessment of UNSCR 1325 asserts that it is "hampered by poor national implementation" and "has yet to become an international norm."[30] It points to gaps in implementation such as insufficient data, lack of funding and support for civil society initiatives, and competing interests and identities held by UN member states. Even where a NAP is formally adopted, institutional barriers—including lack of budgeting and enforcement, or weak commitment—may prevent implementation, with "decoupling" ensuing.[31]

Some criticisms of UNSCR 1325 relate to the "use-value approach" of the UN's dissemination strategy, which highlights the system's advantages if women are included.[32] As such, UNSCR 1325 focuses on women and neglects the role of men, masculinity, and systems of power in perpetuating violence and conflict, overlooking militarization and its impacts on women. Even so, Standfield notes ambivalence and resistance on the part of member-states toward UNSCR 1325.[33] Rather than challenging the dominant practices and discourses of international security, much less promoting human security, the resolution enables the "international community" to harness women's agency in the reproduction of existing hierarchies of power.[34]

Gibbings describes UNSCR 1889 as the result of years of gender-mainstreaming advocates "marketing" women as "untapped resources" for the decision-makers at the UN.[35] Indeed, the WPS gender mainstreaming strategy itself has been criticized. Scholars note the risk of "rhetorical entrapment" caused by the reliance on experts to pursue "neutral policymaking;" accordingly, the resolution "is not radical enough to be used as a transformative gender mainstreaming tool."[36]

Scholars, practitioners, and activists who advocated for UNSCR 1325 and the associated WPS agenda all recognized gender as a relation of power. Power relations also exist at the level of the international system, whereby economically and militarily strong states have power over weaker or poorer ones. In her study of Palestinian women's peace activism, Farr examines the disconnects between the stated intentions of UNSCR 1325, women's activism on the ground and in academia, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. She concludes that there is little evidence that the treaty offers an effective mechanism for either Palestinian women's voices or for a just and lasting peace. Aharoni highlights the secrecy of many peace negotiations, making it difficult to assess women's roles, gender dynamics, and contributions to outcomes.[37] While not specifically focused on UNSCR 1325, Shalhoub-Kevorkian describes Palestinian women's daily experience of the continuum of violence, from "honor killings" to Israeli subjugation and periodic military attacks.[38]

In separate writings in 2011, Harrington and Khalili criticize racialized US military actions. Harrington writes that "[i]n the post-Cold War order the US poses as leader of the democratic world and defender of women and children against brutal men who instigate 'new wars' characterized by mass rape." For Khalili, US counterinsurgency in Afghanistan

and Iraq had the goal of "securing acquiescence through reproducing gendered, raced, and classed hierarchies."[39] A comparison of responses by that "international community" and global governance institutions to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq versus the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine would seem to confirm feminist critiques of the racialization of international laws.[40]

In her 2016 analysis of NAPs, Shepherd finds that "outward facing" NAPs—such as those produced by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia—focus not on demilitarization strategies but rather on "making war safe for women;" such a stance, she notes, is reinforced by the representation of war and insecurity "overseas" rather than within the national context. Echoing feminist arguments about violence as a continuum, she calls for a human security perspective "to capture the full expression of threats to women's security." Writing on the Dutch NAP, Muehlenhoff argues that the global diffusion and significance of UNSCR 1325 notwithstanding, the plan's governing structure in the Netherlands (as elsewhere) "is still made for specific racialized 'Others' and prioritizes national security interests."[41] For Pratt, 1325 normalizes war for some actors—those in the "international community" who enact "masculinist" protection—while proscribing it for others, typically "brown men" considered to be the perpetrators of violence in conflict zones. Addressing NATO's implementation policy of increasing women in the military, Wright notes that it "was far from the intention of the feminists who lobbied for and drafted UNSCR 1325 and speaks to the issue of unintended consequences of pursuing a feminist agenda through an institution embodying hegemonic masculinity." Similarly, Kapur and Rees are critical of "the deliberate militarization" of the WPS agenda.[42] Citing Cockburn, Farr writes that the weakest element of UNSCR 1325 is that it does not focus on "*ending war itself*, which after all, was the main reason the United Nations was established and is precisely the Security Council's brief." [43] Indeed, UNSCR 1325 fails to condemn war and leaves intact the international security architecture in which the use or threat of violence is perceived as legitimate.

Given critiques of UNSCR 1325's record and of a world-system characterized by inter-state rivalries and hegemonic posturing, how realistic is implementation of the WPS agenda in the MENA region?

III. MENA National Action Plans and the Arab League's Regional Plan

According to one expert, the success of NAPs "depends on their funding and the commitment to ensure their full implementation."[44] This is a widespread problem across world-regions, including MENA. Of the 23 MENA countries, seven have a NAP.[45] Iraq was the first to prepare one (in 2014), followed by Jordan and Palestine (2017), Tunisia (2018), Lebanon and Yemen (2019), and the UAE (2021). Egypt announced plans to prepare a NAP in 2019 but has yet to do so.[46] The Yemen NAP makes no mention of a budget, and neither does the UAE's NAP. Tunisia's NAP states that the government will "ensure allocation of budgets for the economic and social empowerment of women and girls in the reconstruction stage [of peace processes]."[47] (See Table 3.)

Morocco announced the launch of a NAP in a March 2022 videoconference featuring Nasser Bourita, Minister of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation, and Moroccan Expatriates. He noted that "the gap is growing between words and deeds," stressing that "we still live in a world where women are more than ever affected by humanitarian crises and armed conflicts." Bourita emphasized that "the Kingdom has adopted the principles of inclusiveness, innovation, and a holistic approach in the development of its National Action Plan, which includes concrete commitments in the areas of preventive diplomacy and peacekeeping, the promotion of a culture of peace, and the empowerment of women."[48] There was no mention of either the Abraham Accords or the continued tensions with Algeria over the Western Sahara and the Polisario struggle for independence. Moreover, Morocco has increased its military spending, reaching 4.3 percent of GDP in 2020, with weapons purchased almost exclusively from the United States since 2009.[49] Its high military spending could take resources away from education and especially health, about which there has been much citizen dissatisfaction, not to mention any implementation of a NAP.[50] (As of July 2023, the Moroccan NAP was not yet available.)

Table 3. UNSCR 1325 National Action Plans, MENA Countries

MENA country and NAP year(s)	Main objectives	Budget allocated (Yes/No)	Current military spending (%GDP)
Iraq 2014-2018, 2021-2024	(2014-18 plan, pp. 14-15) Contribute to building and sustaining peace and security in Iraq through enhancing partnerships with civil society and judiciary towards achieving equality between women and men and social justice in all spheres of life to allow women to play their equal role. … elimination of violence against women …	Yes	2.3 (2021)
Jordan 2018-2021	(pp. 19-20) Increase women's participation in peacekeeping; prevent extremism and protect against GBV; respond to needs of refugee communities; harmonize with international plans and frameworks	Yes	5.0 (2021)
Lebanon 2019-2022	(p. 17) Increase women's political representation; involve them in conflict prevention initiatives; prevent and protect women from GBV; respond to needs resulting from natural disasters and conflicts; amend discriminatory laws	Yes	3.0 (2020)
Morocco 2022-	Not yet available	n/a	4.2 (2021)
Palestine 2017-2019; 2020-2024	Protect women and girls from impacts of Israeli occupation and enhance their human security; hold Israel accountable for violations; ensure women's participation in governance, involve them in recovery and reconstruction efforts	No	

Tunisia 2018-2022	(p. 43) Empower women and girls; promote their participation in building sustainable peace and stability; contribute to the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination and working to immunize society against the dangers of conflict, extremism and terrorism.	No	2.8 (2021)
UAE 2021-2024	Integrate women's needs into foreign policy priorities; involve women in conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and peacekeeping troops; involve them in preventing violent extremism	No	5.6 (2014)
Yemen 2020-2022	Enhance women's involvement in governance; prevent conflicts, sexual violent, terrorism; protect women from all forms of violence; address humanitarian needs.	No	4.0 (2014)

Sources: WILPF 1325 National Action Plans (NAPs), http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/; World Bank, https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=ZQ

Unlike some countries in the region, including nearly all that have adopted NAPs, Morocco revised its family law in 2004 and repealed its "marry-your-rapist" legal loophole (as several other MENA states have done), but it has yet to adopt a strong anti-VAW law. Tunisia has had a liberal family law since 1956, and its 2017 anti-VAW law is the most robust in the region, but a parliamentary bill to establish equal inheritance rights in the family has been blocked since 2019.[51] The other Arab countries that have prepared NAPs retain discriminatory family laws that contradict the goals of the WPS agenda. A challenge to a meaningful NAP, therefore, would lie in the persistence of patriarchal institutions that place women and girls in a secondary status and leave them vulnerable to domestic and community violence.

The League of Arab States produced a regional plan which purports to cover the entire Arab region.[52] The Arab League's Executive Action Plan, "Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security 2015-2030," notes the "magnitude of challenges" facing the region—including conflicts, extremism, and violence against women—and describes the mechanisms for UNSCR 1325 implementation. These cover the inclusion of women in the military, security, and peacekeeping sectors; the repeal of some laws that encourage or overlook VAW; adherence to CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Cairo Declaration for Arab Women: Post-2015 Development Agenda. It also lists the women's national machineries that oversee implementation.[53] The Arab League Plan has been followed by two progress reports on various state initiatives, and in 2021 the Arab Network of Women Peace Mediators was formed to complement the region's WPS agenda. The network was organized by the Arab League's Social Affairs Sector for Women, Family, and Childhood Development, along with UN Women's Arab regional office.[54]

The UN's Economic and Social Commission for West Asia (ESCWA) is similarly attuned to the WPS agenda, working with regional and international partners to help Arab member-states implement the WPS agenda, largely through technical assistance

and the preparation of policy briefs and progress reports that include various indicators and indices. Partners include UN Women, League of Arab States, Arab Institute for Women (LAU), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Oxfam, and Georgetown Institute for WPS.[55]

As a 2018 UN Women report notes, a "NAP-WPS is essentially a planning document. It is the outcome of a process of establishing priorities, identifying key actions to address those priorities and provision of resources to implement stated action points." [56] Careful planning and budgeting, however, are not always present, and governments sometimes leave the process to civil society actors. Iraq began with the Alliance for the Implementation of the National Action for 1325, established in 2008, and the Iraqi Network for UNSCR 1325, established in 2010. Palestine's UNSCR 1325 network was set up in 2010 by the General Union of Palestinian Women. Libya's UNSCR 1325 network consists of civil society organizations (CSO) and independent activists. The Yemen NAP appears to have been largely conceived and prepared by CSOs. It is worth noting that Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Palestine are weak and highly penetrated states. How they might implement their NAPs remains to be seen.

Syria's March 2023 return to the Arab League (from which it had been expelled in 2011) may offer some respite, while the China-brokered Iran-Saudi Arabia rapprochement could ease some of the region's tensions and rivalries—even if the WPS agenda has not had a visible role. But with Syria and Yemen largely in ruins after years of internationalized civil conflict, it is unclear how civil society actors and government agencies could secure funding for the extensive reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts needed. In a recent statement before the UN Security Council, Iraqi civil society representative Khanim Latif described harassment of and retaliation toward human rights and women's rights defenders. She spoke of the persistence of violence against women and girls despite Iraq's adoption of a parliamentary quota for women and its formal adoption of a NAP. Pointing out that the Iraqi government had yet to allocate a budget for and fully implement the Yazidi Survivors Law adopted in March 2021, she ended by urging the international community to "relinquish militarized approaches and to instead support us, with technical expertise and resources, as Iraqis, to rebuild our homeland, end corruption and work towards lasting peace."[57] At a time when the West's attention and financial resources are fixated on Ukraine, how likely is Iraq—not to mention Yemen and Syria—able to secure international assistance?

For now, the MENA NAPs and civil society initiatives would appear unable to override conflicting inter-state interests and the external forces that continue to determine the region's stability and security. Neither have the NAPs incorporated the goal of *human security*. Governments might take a cue from the TFNs that have done so, such as the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace, which organized a roundtable in March 2013, during meetings of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, on "human security as the missing link between women's rights, conflict, and peace."[58]

Expanding the WPS Agenda? FFP and MENA Military Spending

Just as UNSCR 1325 NAPs have spread across world society, so has the idea of an FFP, an initiative designed to draw on feminist principles and goals for the pursuit of foreign and security policies, including aid, trade, development and diplomacy.[59] In Wallstrom's formulation, it rests on three pillars—rights, representation, and resources—and posits that gender equality is central to security and foreign policy. Wallstrom later added a fourth pillar, "reality checks," which suggested that FFP could be trumped by *realpolitik.* Sweden's lead was then followed by Canada (2017), France (2018), Luxembourg (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain and Germany (2021), and Chile (2022). The pioneering country abandoned FFP when a new government came to power in 2022 and declared that "the Swedish foreign policy must be based on Swedish values and Swedish interests."[60]

As with UNSCR 1325, FFP has been met with a growing scholarship. One set of studies provides a theoretically informed and rather positive description of the policy initiative, arguing that FFP is ethical and productive.[61] In a different vein, Rosén Sundström, Zhukova, and Elgström conduct a media analysis and find that most coverage of FFP is rather modest, notably in non-Western countries. Thomson argues that the developing norm of FFP adheres to the international liberal order and reflects existing gendered global hierarchies and states' positions on the world stage. Thompson and Clement stress the novelty but also the absence of a universal definition of FFP.[62]

Countries define and implement the FFP differently. France and Canada fund commitments to healthcare for women and girls, including family planning and access to sexual and reproductive health. They also promote access to education, raising the legal age of marriage to 18, vocational training and employment opportunities, and improvements in infrastructure for rural areas. Missing from those commitments are references to conflict resolution and prevention, which themselves are closely linked to women's (physical) security and enjoyment of rights and resources. Thompson and Clement note that France has a large military presence and many business interests in the African continent; that Sweden has been criticized for its weapons sales to countries with human rights violations, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and that Canada similarly sold arms to Saudi Arabia. Writing about Germany's FFP, Brechenmacher points out the absence of references to human security and the recent significant increases in Germany's military spending under the country's Social Democratic-Green government. [63]

Military spending is quite high in MENA countries, and most weaponry are purchased from the US, as well as Britain and France. Figure 1 illustrates military spending as a proportion of GDP in MENA countries from 2010 to 2018. Data were not available for the UAE for all years, but in 2010, according to the UNDP, military spending consumed fully 6 percent of GDP, two to three times more than the UAE spent on health or education.[64] Yemen's military spending in the years before the Arab Spring uprisings reflect its involvement in the US-led "war on terror." The trade-off with human security and women's wellbeing was substantial: Yemen had a maternal mortality rate per 100,000

live births of 210 (twice as high as Morocco's 110, the next highest in the region), and just 36 percent of births were attended by skilled health personnel. Yemen's mean years of schooling were just 2.5.[65] Heavy veiling and child marriage were widespread. In most MENA countries, according to World Bank data, at an average of 34.3 percent, out-of-pocket health spending is much higher than the world average (18.2 percent), East Asia and the Pacific (26.1 percent), and Europe and Central Asia (18 percent).[66] There also is consensus that the quality of schooling has declined in many MENA countries.

Figure 1. Military spending, MENA countries, 2010-2019
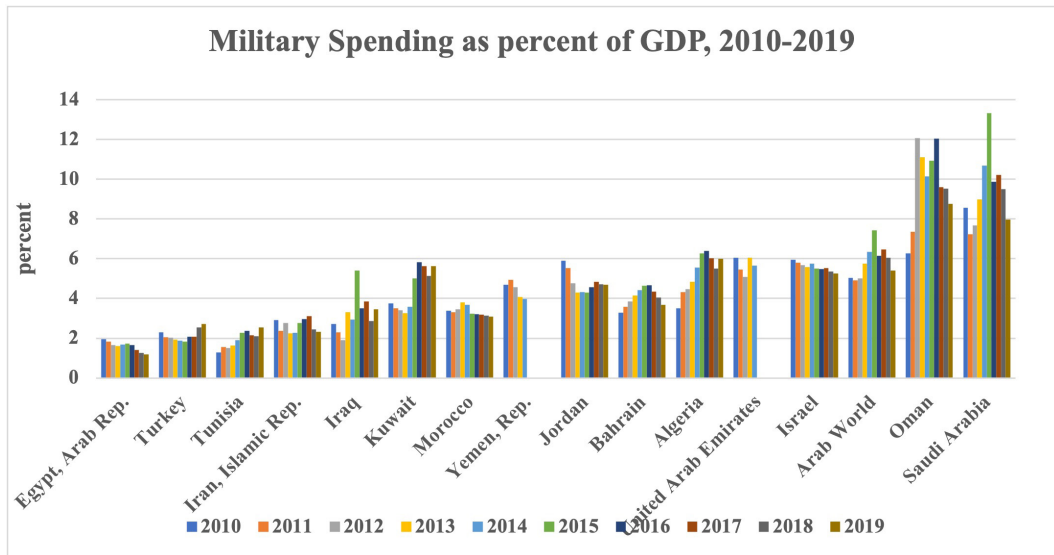
Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators (accessed March 2020)

The most recent data on military spending as a percentage of the GDP shows very high spending for the Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, 6.6 percent; Oman, 7.3 percent; Kuwait, 6.7 percent; Qatar, 4.8 percent; and Bahrain, 3.6 percent) and high rates for Algeria (5.6 percent) and Israel (5.2 percent). As noted, Morocco's spending has increased to over 4 percent of GDP. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) shows a high figure for Libya for 2013: 7.6 percent, which compares to a mere 1.8 percent in 2008 under Ghaddafi. In recent years, Tunisia has increased its military spending to 2.8 percent of GDP. On the low side are Egypt (1.3 percent) and Iran and Iraq (2.3 percent).[67] It is beyond this paper's scope to delve into aid, but it is worth noting that some 35 percent of the total US 2021 aid to Jordan ($1.2 billion) was in military assistance ($425 million). Jordan and the US have a free trade agreement, but this seems not to have made a dent in the country's extremely high unemployment rates (23 percent overall; 30 percent female), including those of college-educated youth (40-50 percent).[68]

Aggestam and True examine "feminist governance" as a normative, ideational and institutional feature of foreign policy, noting the formation of formal and informal networks of women foreign policy leaders that advance the WPS agenda, naming Samantha Power, Madeleine Albright, and others.[69] Yet, as Zehra Arat argues, the liberal feminist foci on gender equality are not geared toward the empowerment of all women—whether working-class women within a state or women in less-powerful countries. To paraphrase Arat, if a Saudi jet fighter purchased from France drops a bomb on a residential area in Yemen, does it matter that France purports to adhere to FFP, or that the pilot is a woman? If US sanctions on Iran create a revenue crunch on the government such that the public sector wage bill is reduced and women's employment declines, does it matter that Samantha Power has established an informal network of UN women ambassadors? As Mackay noted, the translation of women's political leadership to "thick" substantive representation is not automatic.[70]

Other questions are equally pertinent. What does it mean to place women, girls, and gender equality at the center of a feminist foreign policy? Which women are meant to benefit? Is a feminist foreign policy compatible with the continued eastward expansion of NATO and increased military spending by its member-states? Does building a wall between Finland and Russia reflect feminist values? Does continued militarization of the MENA region strengthen gender equality and guarantee women's physical security, much less bring about a more peaceful and cooperative world?

IV. Conclusions

At the 2017 CSW meetings in New York, it was gratifying to hear, from the Moroccan representative, that the arms trade to MENA should stop, if peace as well as financing for women's economic empowerment were to become genuine priorities. An Iraqi woman delegate spoke of the "exceptional circumstances" in her country that included widespread violence, including VAW, internal displacement, and outmigration. Statements submitted by the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance, Nazra for Feminist Studies, and the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights noted the violence faced by women human rights defenders: harassment and prosecution in Egypt, smear campaigns in Yemen, imprisonment in Bahrain, and abductions by rebel groups in Syria; the persistence of discriminatory family and labor laws; increasing informalization of women's work and lack of social protection; and "the social impact of the rising tide of political Islam" along with "socially conservative groups that totally deny the right of women to work."[71] For such feminist activists and organizations, UNSCR 1325 offers hope and legitimacy.

Widely hailed as a landmark resolution, UNSCR 1325 is the only one with an anniversary that is "celebrated by a growing constituency of practitioners and advocates."[72] The product of collaboration between UN agencies and transnational feminist networks, the resolution recognizes women as integral to conflict resolution and successful peace processes, and it calls for greater female representation. Scholars and activists agree that

the resolution is a significant normative step forward for gender equality and women's empowerment, "a work in progress" with tremendous ethical and normative potential.[73] Viewed through a world society lens, the UN has successfully disseminated the WPS agenda throughout the world in the form of NAPs and helped diffuse an important international norm and policy agenda.

Yet there are shortcomings and deficits, gaps between policy and practice, and notable "decoupling." The WPS agenda is inconsistent with the discriminatory family laws in MENA countries, and with the weak or non-existent VAW laws; these should be reformed. Formal commitments to create a NAP do not necessarily indicate a formal commitment to implementation. The Arab NAPs remain unfulfilled, replete with unrealistic promises in a regional and global context of conflict and high military spending. In general, NAPs seem unable to influence the power-and-profit calculus of individual states or alliances of states. FFP, thus far, appears largely ceremonial. And yet, to return to Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui, the paradox lies precisely in the fact that although states may be unwilling to implement UNSCR 1325 or a robust version of a feminist foreign policy, those normative and policy initiatives remain powerful tools for transnational feminist networks and nationally based advocacy groups.

Feminist IR scholars have contributed critical analyses of masculinized discourses of security and state-centered rivalries, and they also have argued for multilevel and multidimensional definitions of security that include "the absence of violence whether it be military, economic, or sexual," as well as expanded notions of human security.[74] Women's peace groups and other women-led organizations and movements dedicated to the wellbeing of people and the planet have made notable interventions in international public policy discussions, despite formidable structural and institutional obstacles. A world organized around values of peace, diplomacy, and multilateralism would look very different from our contemporary world order. Toward that end, the following steps might be taken, and indeed written into NAPs:

- Integrating the human security perspective;

- Setting a timeline to reduce military spending to under 2 percent of GDP;

- Creating budgets for WPS-NAP implementation, with clear timelines and accountability measures; and

- Ensuring the participation of women diplomats, advocates, and activists at all levels of governance, and especially in negotiations to end conflict, build peace, and craft new laws.

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to her academic career, Moghadam has twice been a UN staff member (UNU/WIDER, Helsinki, Finland, 1990-1995; and at UNESCO, Paris, 2004-2006). Her many publications include *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (1993; 2003; 2013), *Globalization and Social Movements: The Populist Challenge and Democratic Alternatives* (2020), and *After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa* (2021, with Shamiran Mako).

In fall 2021, Moghadam was the Kluge Chair, Countries and Cultures of the South, at the US Library of Congress, working on a project entitled "Varieties of Feminism in the Middle East and North Africa." A recent publication, co-authored with two Kurdistan-based Iranian sociologists, is "Women in Iranian Kurdistan: Patriarchy and the Quest for Empowerment," *Gender & Society* 35, no. 4 (Aug. 2021): 616-642.

Endnotes

1   See https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Ref-0213-US-Military-Bases-and-Facilities-Middle-East.pdf. See also https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/13/us-military-presence-in-the-middle-east-and-afghanistan#:~:text=US%20military%20presence%20in%20the%20Middle%20East%20and,with%20Iran.%20By%20Alia%20Chughtai%2013%20Jan%202020.

2   See Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), and her 2005 LSE lecture at http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/global/Publications/PublicLectures/PL_Old%20Wars%20Cold%20War%20New%20Wars%20and%20War%20on%20Terror1.pdf. Feminist groups were especially outraged by the extent of sexual violence during civil conflicts in Rwanda, Burundi, and Yugoslavia.

3   The Project for a New American Century, launched as a think-tank by the neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan, and with the cooperation of other neocons who joined the George W. Bush administration, ended after it had accomplished its goals of regime change in Iraq and the ramping up of US global military power.

4   An early exposé may be found at https://www.cnn.com/2013/11/04/world/europe/isis-gaining-strength-on-syria-turkey-border/index.html.

5   "Humanitarian crisis in Yemen remains the worst in the world, warns UN," *UN News*, February 14, 2019, https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032811.

6   A review of the World Bank's *Women, Business and the Law* report shows the many legal disadvantages that MENA women face.

7   *International Feminist Journal of Politics* volumes 13 (2011) and 22 (2020); *International Political Science Review* 37, no. 3 (June 2016); *Women's Studies International Forum* (2021). The NAPs for MENA and all other countries may be found on the WILPF website at https://1325naps.peacewomen.org/index.php/nap-overview/. These are the special journal issues on which I base much of my critical analysis of UNSCR 1325.

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9   For example, Liam Swiss, "A Sociology of Foreign Aid and the World Society," *Sociology Compass* 10, no. 1 (2016), 65-73; Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, "Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming," *International Studies Quarterly* 45 (2001): 27-57; and Sarah Bush, "International Politics and the Spread of Quotas for Women in Legislatures," *International Organization* 65, no. 1 (2011): 103-137.

10   John Meyer, John Boli, George Thomas, and Francisco Ramirez, "World Society and the Nation-State," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 1 (1997): 144-181.

11   Meyer et al*., 154.*

12   For an overview, see Marysia Zalewski, "Feminist International Relations: making sense…," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics,* 2nd ed., ed. Laura Shepherd (Routledge, 2015), 3-13.

13   Ann Tickner, *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Valerie Hudson, Bonnie Ballif-Spanvill, Mary Caprioli, and Chad Emmett, *Sex & World Peace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Margot Wallstrom, "A Womanly Virtue: Female Representation as Global Security Strategy," *Harvard International Review* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 30-34; and Cynthia Cockburn, "The Continuum of Violence: A Gender Perspective on War and Peace," in *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones*, eds. Wenona Giles and Jennifer Hyndman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

14   Jacqui True, *The Political Economy of Violence Against Women* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

15   Author notes at the event, held during the sixty-first session of the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, Women's *Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work*, which convened on March 13-24, 2017, in New York. The side event was organized jointly by ActionAid, the African Women's Development and Communication Network, and the Association for Women's Rights in Development.

16   See UNDP special report, *New Threats to Human Security in the Anthropocene: Demanding Greater Solidarity* (New York: UNDP, 2022); see also V. M. Moghadam, "Transnational Feminism and Global Governance: Peace, Economic Policy, and Covid-19," in *Handbook of Feminist Governance,* ed. Marian Sawer et al. (Edgar Elgar, 2023), 274-285.

17   Emilie Hafner-Burton and Kiyoteru Tsutsui, "Human Rights in a Globalizing World: The Paradox of Empty Promises," *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 5 (2005): 1373-1411.

18   Carol Cohn, "Mainstreaming Gender in UN Security Policy: A Path to Political Transformation?," in *Global Governance: Feminist Perspectives,* eds. S.M. Rai and G. Waylen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); and Yakin Erturk, *Violence Without Borders: Paradigm, Policy and Praxis Concerning Violence Against Women* (Bethesda, MD: Women's Learning Partnership Translation Series, 2016), 67-83. The US has not joined the ICC, likely because it would be held accountable for actions in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

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22   See http://1325naps.peacewomen.org/, accessed July 2023.

23   "The United States Strategy on Women, Peace and Security," June 2019, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WPS_Strategy_10_October2019.pdf.

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25   See "Secretary-General's briefing to the Security Council on Women, Peace and Security," United Nations Secretary-General, October 29, 2020, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-10-29/secretary-generals-briefing-the-security-council-women-peace-and-security-scroll-down-for-french-version.

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30   Vanessa Newby and Allana O'Malley, "Introduction: WPS 20 Years On: Where Are the Women Now?," *Global Studies* 1 (2021): 1, 4.

31   Space limitations prevent delving into the literature on policy implementation, but see Peter May, "Implementation failures revisited: Policy regime perspectives," *Public Policy and Administration* 30, nos. 3-4 (2015), 277–299, on the Obama-era Affordable Healthcare Act, including gaps and backlashes. His references to the complexity of policy design, adoption, implementation, and durability, especially around "intractable issues," can be extended to the

WPS agenda and NAPs. On problems of implementing gender equality norms and policies, including gender biases, weak enforcement, changes in executive leadership, and under-resourcing, see Merike Blofield and Liesl Haas, "Policy Outputs," in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics,* ed. Georgina Waylen et al. (Oxford University Press, 2013), 702-726.

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33 Catriona Standfield, "UN Mediation and the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda: Moving Rhetoric to Reality," briefing paper, Syracuse University, August 2017, https://securitypolicylaw. syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/INSCT-White-Paper-Standfield-mwedit082217.pdf.

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39 Carol Harrington, "UNSCR 1325 and Post-Cold War Feminist Politics," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* (2011): 557-575; and Laleh Khalili, "Gendered Practices of Counterinsurgency," *Review of International Studies* 37, no. 4 (October 2011): 1471-1491. Khalili refers to the notorious Abu Ghraib incidents, the instrumentalized use of healthcare in Afghanistan to obtain tactical information to US forces, and the sexualized interrogations of prisoners at the US-run Guantánamo Bay prisons.

40 In an interview with the BBC on February 24, 2023, Tony Blair rejected the comparison of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine with the UK/US 2003 invasion of Iraq, claiming that Ukraine was an innocent party whereas Iraq was not. Similarly, in an interview by NPR's Mary-Louise Kelly on January 12, 2023, Condoleezza Rice was able to state that countries do not have the right "just because they are bigger" to attack weaker countries, and she was not challenged about her role in the US attack on Iraq. See https://www.npr.org/2023/01/12/1148810028/condoleezza-rice-warns-ukraine-needs-more-weapons-and-money-in-its-fight-with-ru.

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Saudi Arabia and Iran in a Multipolar Global World Order: Scenarios for the Future of the Middle East

Diane M. Zorri

Abstract: In the twenty-first century, the centers of power have become more widespread, resulting in increased interdependence and shared interests across national borders. This has led to significant political and security challenges, which have altered the nature of threats and required continuous responses from leaders in the political, economic, and military arenas. There is a growing agreement that the dominant strategic paradigm is moving away from the Western model of dominance and influence toward a more diverse era of "multipolarity." The Middle East lies at the crossroads of many of these changes, while global superpowers jockey for political influence across the region. The relationship between two of the Middle East's leading powers, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, reveals a complex interplay of small states, regional powers, great powers, rival sectarian organizations, and proxy groups. This paper will investigate how Saudi Arabia and Iran are adjusting their foreign policy and alliances in response to the changing global power dynamics and what those adjustments could mean for the future of the Middle East.

Keywords: Iran, Saudi Arabia, great power competition, realism, sectarianism, strategy, security.

Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran are both major regional powers seeking a dominant position in the Middle East, yet their competing interests, geopolitical goals, and ideologies have been the source of tension and rivalry. At its core, the conflict is emblematic of a deeper tension between different modes of economic and political organization, with Iran representing a challenge to the dominant neoliberal order championed by the West and the market-oriented approach taken by Saudi Arabia. To further complicate the regional dynamics, Saudi Arabia is a majority Sunni Muslim state, while Iran is a majority Shia Muslim state, and the two countries often project conflicting views on the role of Islam in politics. Each country has accused the other of supporting terrorist organizations, fomenting unrest, and interfering in each other's political systems. The conflict is an important case study for the way in which ideas and ideologies can become powerful social forces, driving historical change and shaping the contours of an entire region.

Background

The schism within Islam that occurred during the early years of the faith is widely recognized as a crucial turning point in its history. Following the passing of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD, a group of elders convened to select his successor as the leader of the faith. Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, was chosen as the first caliph, but he

only held the position for a brief period of two years before he died suddenly. The next three caliphs, including Abu Bakr, are collectively known as the Rashidun, or the Rightly Guided Caliphs.[1] Umar, the successor of Abu Bakr, was assassinated by Persians, while Uthman was killed by mutinous soldiers. The fourth caliph, Ali, who succeeded Uthman, was murdered by extremist factions, which led to a split within the Islamic *ummah* (the Muslim community). Ali's death caused great controversy and disagreement among the faithful, who were unsure about who should succeed him. Muawiya, the governor of Damascus and one of Uthman's cousins, stepped in to fill the power vacuum and consolidate his political power within the growing religion. However, many in the faith disputed Muawiya's claim to the caliphate and believed that the political problems within the faith were rooted in how the successors of the Prophet were chosen.[2] This particular sect believed in the doctrine of divine appointment of the Prophet's successor, rejecting the idea that human choice could determine it. They contended that only the will of God could designate the rightful successor through the Prophet's lineage. Consequently, this group of early Shia dissented from the faith and disavowed the legitimacy of the Rashidun. Their belief system maintained that the son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad, Ali, "should have been the Prophet's immediate successor instead of Abu Bakr."[3]

The Shia were traditionally perceived as an unorthodox group that operated outside the conventional Islamic political system, as the Sunnis swiftly integrated religion and politics. As a result, for many centuries, the Sunnis dominated the political landscape of the Islamic world. Nevertheless, this pattern began to change with the emergence of the Safavid dynasty in what is now Iran. Over the centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death, Persians adopted Islam gradually through the efforts of "dynastic rulers, imperial politics, and intermarriage."[4] In the latter part of the Middle Ages, individuals who were either related to or claimed to be related to the Prophet Muhammad held considerable political influence in Iran. In 1501, the Safavids, a powerful Persian clan, overpowered Mongol invaders and assumed the reins of power in Iran, officially designating Shia Islam as the country's religion. For the ensuing five centuries, Shia Islam held a prominent position in the cultural milieu of the Iranian plateau, challenging the Sunni empires to the west.

By way of contrast, Saudi Arabia serves as the seat of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina, making it a significant religious and cultural center for Muslims around the world. Over the last century, Saudi Arabia's geopolitical landscape has witnessed dynamic shifts, from decline of the Ottoman Empire to the emergence of the modern Saudi state. In modern times, Saudi Arabia's strategic importance, largely driven by its vast oil reserves, has solidified its position as a key player in global energy markets and a focal point in regional power dynamics.

Saudi Arabia and Iran Today

Comparing Saudi Arabia and Iran with regards to how they project their instruments of power yields a stark contrast of national goals, ideological motivations, and perceptions of the other states in the region.[5] Saudi Arabia's foreign policy is centered around protecting its national interests, promoting stability, and maintaining close relationships with key international partners, particularly the United States.[6] Saudi Arabia has long seen itself as a leader of the Arab and Muslim world and has used its significant economic and political influence to advance its priorities in the region.[7] The country is seeking to expand its international footprint and deepen its ties with a wider range of countries, including China, India, and Russia. At the same time, the Saudis have taken a more assertive approach in dealing with regional challenges, such as Iran's influence across the Middle East and the ongoing conflict in Yemen.[8] The Saudis also have taken a firmer stance with regard to Iran, both through its own military actions and by supporting its allies in the region. For instance, the kingdom has blamed Iran for supporting proxy groups that threaten its security, and it has accused the Iranian government of destabilizing the Middle East.[9] At the same time, Saudi Arabia also has pursued diplomatic efforts to counter Iran's influence. The kingdom has sought to build a coalition of Sunni-majority countries to counteract Iran's perceived efforts to dominate the Middle East, and it has worked closely with the United States and other Western countries to pressure Iran through sanctions and other means.

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy approach with Iran can be characterized by a mix of confrontation and engagement, as the kingdom seeks to protect its interests and assert its dominance while at the same time avoiding "a larger conventional conflict."[10] However, the situation remains highly fluid and tensions between the two countries continuously ebb and flow, with the potential for escalation always present. Saudi Arabia has launched several ambitious economic reforms aimed at diversifying its economy and reducing its dependence on oil. It also has taken steps to promote religious moderation and tolerance, as part of a broader effort to modernize its society and strengthen its international image. On the balance, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy reflects their determination to defend their national interests and maintain a positive regional and global standing, while simultaneously adapting to a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.[11]

In contrast, Iran is a theocratic republic with a unique system of governance that combines elements of Islamic theocracy and democratic republicanism.[12] The government of Iran is based on the principles of Shia Islam as defined through its Supreme Leader, who is the ultimate authority in the country. Iran's first Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was an Iranian religious leader, politician, and revolutionary who played a significant role in the establishment of the Islamic Republic in the late 1970s. The ideological framework developed by Khomeini during the 1970s serves as the foundation for the Iranian regime and its foreign policy. In addition to acting as the defender of Shia Islam, the Iranian government aims to spread its style of theocratic governance, referred

to as *vilayet-al-faqih*.[13] This approach to Islamic jurisprudence maintains that Tehran has a responsibility to extend this hierarchical form of governance to all Shia communities, especially those in neighboring Iraq and Syria. Iran employs soft power methods to achieve this goal, such as safeguarding Shia holy sites throughout the region, providing resources and aid to the needy, renovating mosques, and appealing to the emotions, traditions, and common experience of Shia Muslims.[14]

It can be argued that Iran is employing a revisionist approach in its foreign policy which is designed to improve its position in the international system and the Middle East.[15] Iran has multiple foreign policy objectives that can be broadly categorized into four or five general groups. Amongst these are projecting economic and military influence across the Middle East, exporting the Islamic revolution, protecting adherents to Shia Islam, and strengthening their conventional forces.[16] Tehran's approach involves utilizing its influence over groups that further its goals, regardless of whether they share the same ideology. Furthermore, there is concern within the international community that Iran might be engaging in uranium enrichment with the objective of pursuing a nuclear weapon. This objective is aimed not only at enhancing Iran's international standing but also at strengthening its bargaining power vis-à-vis more powerful governments and organizations, both regionally and globally. The mere possession of a latent capability in nuclear technology provides the regime with diplomatic leverage and strengthens its position in negotiations.

One of Iran's most recognized entities is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a powerful military organization established after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The IRGC's primary role is to protect the Islamic Republic of Iran and to defend the principles of the Islamic Revolution. It hosts its own army, navy and air forces. The IRGC also has a significant presence in the Iranian economy and controls many businesses and industries in the country.[17] In addition to its military and economic roles, the IRGC also is involved in many political and social activities in Iran. It is especially known for its support of hardline conservative policies and for its opposition to Western influence in the country. In April 2019, the US government designated the IRGC and its component commands a terrorist organization.[18]

The IRGC's Quds Force is a unit that operates outside of Iran's borders and is responsible for supporting and organizing Iranian-backed foreign militias and insurgents. Using the guise of protecting Shia Islam as their *raison d'etre,* the Quds Force often conceals its ulterior motives. During the initial period of the Arab Spring, reports indicated that Iran dispatched the Quds Force to Syria ostensibly to safeguard Shia holy sites. However, subsequent evidence revealed that the true purpose of the mission was to quell opposition groups challenging the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.[19] The Quds Force also has provided safe havens for al-Qaeda fighters and is known for is its training and arming of groups across the Middle East including Hezbollah in Lebanon, militias in Syria and Yemen, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq.[20]

Framework for Analysis

This paper employs a neorealist framework to analyze the intricate relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the context of the transitioning global world order toward multipolarity. Neorealism, a prominent school of thought in international relations, places significant emphasis on power dynamics as a driving force in shaping global dynamics.[21] In accordance with this approach, the international system of nation-states is often categorized into distinct polarities, namely bipolar, unipolar, and multipolar, each with distinct attributes that mold state behavior.

Scholars and experts in international relations frequently interpret the world order through the lens of power dynamics, with neorealism offering a valuable perspective. By classifying the global system into different polarities, it becomes possible to discern patterns and motivations that guide the actions of nation-states. Historical examples elucidate the impact of these polarities: the Cold War era, characterized by bipolarity, witnessed intense competition between the Soviet Union and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, culminating in proxy conflicts on the periphery of their spheres of influence. Alternatively, a unipolar world order centers on a dominant superpower extending its authority with limited challenges. In contrast, the multipolar configuration features multiple regional powers vying for ascendancy and influence.

Neorealists assert that the multipolar world order is notably precarious due to the heightened potential for conflict and strain among nation-states.[22] The multipolar global world order engenders a scenario wherein several states contend for supremacy, giving rise to intricate patterns of alliances, rivalries, and collaborations that reshape conventional power dynamics. In this context, the evolving relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia takes on even greater significance, as these two regional powers navigate the complexities of an emerging multipolar system. Neorealism's emphasis on power as a key determinant of state behavior provides the foundation in this analysis for understanding how these actors interact within the context of shifting power dynamics. To this end, this analysis seeks to explore the nuances of the Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship within the framework of neorealism, shedding light on the intricate interplay of power, alliances, and rivalry as the global world order transitions to a multipolar structure.[23]

Iran and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Great Power Politics

In the dynamic landscape of international relations, the interactions between Iran and Saudi Arabia showcase intricate interplay of regional powers on the broader canvas of great power politics. Over the last century, both countries have deftly navigated their positions in relation to major global powers. This intricate balancing act brings them into a delicate dance with major players such as the United States, Russia, and China, as each pursue their strategic interests in the region. Over the last decade, the Chinese have stretched their economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious plan to build infrastructure and engage with governments around the world. The United

States has maintained a strong military presence in the Middle East and Russia has acted as a bulwark to counterbalance Western influence. As Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to engage with and react to the great power actors, their stance and decisions reverberate not only within the Middle East but also throughout the larger arena of global geopolitics.

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has had a contentious relationship with the United States but has fared much better with China and Russia both diplomatically and economically. China is Iran's largest trading partner for both exports and imports, and the two have collaborated widely on shared economic interests. Meanwhile, the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war presented Iran and chance to deepen its military ties with Moscow, selling military hardware and unmanned aerial vehicles.[24] Conversely, Saudi Arabia has traditionally aligned with US interests, with the United States acting as the security guarantor for several Arab states. In the last several years, Saudi Arabia and Russia have found areas of common interest, particularly in the realms of energy cooperation and regional geopolitics. Saudi Arabia, as a major oil producer and exporter, has engaged with Russia to coordinate oil production levels and stabilize oil prices. Russia is the largest producer in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)+, a cooperative effort between OPEC and ten oil exporting countries to stabilize the oil market. Saudi Arabia also balances its relationships with the United States and Russia against the Chinese, who act as a major trading partner and a weapons supplier for the kingdom.[25]

A rudimentary assessment of the relationships of Saudi Arabia and Iran in the context of great power competition reveals the importance of China to both countries as both an import and export partner, which pales in comparison to the economic relationship each country maintains with Russia. Both countries also are involved with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with Iran as a member and Saudi Arabia as an observer. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has been successful at balancing its military relationships with China and Russia, while keeping the United States highly engaged in the region.

Table 1. Iran and Saudi Arabia: Great Power Competition[26] (Table is the author's own)

		CHINA	RUSSIA	UNITED STATES
Iran	Mutual International Organizations	UN, SCO	UN, SCO, OPEC+	UN
	Embassy	Yes	Yes	No
	Exports / Imports	$9.22B(1)/ $10.25B(1)	$280.5M/ $1.34B	0/ $142.3M
	Armed Proxy/ Proxies	Cooperative, Weapons Supplier	Cooperative, Weapons Supplier	None
Saudi Arabia	Mutual International Organizations	UN SCO (Observer)	UN, SCO (Observer), OPEC+	UN
	Embassy	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Exports / Imports	$10.6B (2) / $30.2B (1)	$81.04M/ $1.44B	$4.95B(5)/ $16.2B(2)
	Armed Proxy/ Proxies	Expanding, Weapons Supplier	Expanding	Cooperative, Weapons Supplier

Regional Issues

Focusing at the regional level shows Saudi Arabia and Iran have quite different security interests and geopolitical positions with regards to the future of the Middle East. In particular, within Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Yemen, both Iranian and Saudi Arabian divergent influences can be seen in the body politic, armed groups, and religious institutions. As both states jockey for regional hegemony and simultaneously position themselves within the dynamics of a multipolar global world order, they have left an indelible mark on the fabric of the sociopolitical landscape of the region. These marks can be seen across diplomatic, economic, military, and political realms.

Table 2 offers a summary of the mixed relationships that Iran and Saudi Arabia project throughout the Middle East. While the analysis does not include every state in the region, it looks at the areas where both Iran and Saudi Arabia are actively working to influence the government and foreign policy outcomes. There is a stark difference in how each country projects its power, Iran relying much more on armed proxy organizations and groups, and Saudi Arabia relatively more engaged through trade.

Table 2. Iran and Saudi Arabia: Regional Comparison[27] (Table is the author's own)

		Iraq	Syria	Lebanon	Yemen	Israel
Iran	Mutual International Organizations	UN, OPEC, OIC	UN, OIC	UN, OIC	UN, OIC	UN
	Embassy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
	Exports / Imports	$8.5B / $58.69M	$158.1M/ $6.71M	$66.43M / $12.54M	$1.00M / $1.21K	0
	Armed Proxy/ Proxies	IRGC, Quds Force local and regional militias	IRGC, Hezbollah, local and regional militias	Hezbollah	Ansar Allah (Houthi)	Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Hamas; Hezbollah
Saudi Arabia	Mutual International Organizations	UN, OPEC, Arab League, OIC	UN, Arab League (2022)	UN, Arab League, OIC	UN, Arab League, OIC	UN
	Embassy	No	Reopened 2023	Yes	Yes	No
	Exports / Imports	$1.02B / $18.59M	$71.92M / $325M	$147.59M / $159M	$2.08B / $226.32M	0
	Armed Proxy/ Proxies	-	-	-	-	-

Lebanon

Lebanon's strategic position on the Mediterranean Sea as well as its proximity to Israel has made it a vital national security interest for the Iranians. Access to Lebanese ports enables Iranians to ship goods to Europe, and being able to hit Israel gives Iran leverage in international politics. During the 1980s, Lebanon served as the foundation

for Iran's approach toward growing proxy forces amongst Shia populations to secure their military and logistical efforts. Lebanese Hezbollah, is the most long-lasting of Iran's proxy forces, has served as a blueprint for Iran's foreign policy approach in other Middle Eastern nations that have a notable Shia population. Today, Iran remains a major supporter of Hezbollah, making it one of the most powerful actors in the country. However, Iran's support of Hezbollah also has been a source of tension. Some Lebanese political groups view Hezbollah as a destabilizing force in the country and have accused Iran of using Hezbollah to interfere in Lebanese politics.

Historically, Saudi Arabia has had a significant influence in Lebanon through its support for Sunni political and religious groups, particularly the Future Movement led by Lebanon's Hariri political family. The Hariri family has been a strong ally of Saudi Arabia, and the late Prime Minister Rafik Hariri had close personal and business ties with Saudi royals. However, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Lebanon has been strained in recent years, particularly since the Lebanese political crisis of 2017, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri. Saudi Arabia was widely believed to have been involved in holding Hariri hostage and pressuring him to resign. The incident sparked a political crisis in Lebanon and led to heightened tensions between the two countries.

Iraq

The complex composition of Iraq, consisting of antagonistic ethnic, national, and religious groups, presents challenges for establishing stable political institutions, leaving the country vulnerable to Iranian influence. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the political situation in Iraq, it is crucial to examine the historical origins of the Shia political class and their rise to majority status, as well as the historical oppression they faced. It also is essential to analyze the historical and religious context of the rivalry between Iraq and its theocratic neighbor, Iran, which represents two major Islamic factions.

In Shia Islam, an important differentiation exists between the religious authority in Najaf, Iraq and the theologians in Qom, Iran. For many centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Najaf was considered the most sacred city in Shia Islam due to its significance as the final resting place of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who is viewed by the Shia as his rightful successor. The Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, based in Najaf, espouses a "quietist" stance toward religious matters in governance, which emphasizes a bottom-up approach wherein the state's "good" comes from the people. In contrast, Qom's ruling clerics advocate "*vilayet al-faqih*," or a government by religious jurisprudence. Following the overthrow of the Western-supported shah in 1979, *vilayet al-faqih* became the central slogan for pro-Khomeini revolutionaries. Despite the current socio-religious bonds between Iran and Iraq, their history is fraught with conflicts and betrayals that contradict the ideological discourse of supporters of Khomeini's *vilayet-e faqih.*

Directly prior to the 2003 invasion by the U.S. and coalition forces, political parties were prohibited in Iraq. However, two Shia political groups—the Islamic Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—rose to prominence despite this ban during Saddam Hussein's rule. Both parties found exile in Iran during the 1980s and 1990s, and both groups swore allegiance to the religious authority of Ayatollah Khomeini (and by 1989 Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) in Qom, Iran. Initially riding the wave of Iran's revolutionary fervor, they remain highly influential in Iraqi politics today.

During the US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran began preparing political groups to wage an insurgency against the United States and its allies. After the invasion, its agents gathered intelligence on which Iraqi politicians the Americans trusted and where they lived.[28] Iranian actors utilized Iraq's Special Groups, a Shia militia trained by Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), to advance their interests. In pursuit of this goal, the Quds Force of the IRGC chose to replicate Hezbollah's successful model by dispatching two of the organization's most skilled leaders to oversee the operation.[29]

After the fall of the Ba'ath party, Iran also seized the opportunity to coopt the tribal supply routes in Iraq's western provinces to gain unfettered access though Syria onto ports on the Mediterranean. The supply routes also were key mediums for weapons to Iraqi militants. One of the most widely known weapons was a new type of improvised explosive device (IED) known as an explosively formed penetrator (EFP). During the Iraq War, coalition forces discovered hundreds of weapons caches that were suspected of originating in Iran.[30] Providing training and arming Iraqis endowed them with the essential technological skills to effectively combat the common adversaries they faced alongside the IRGC. It was also a chance to indoctrinate Iraq's Shia Muslims with the Ayatollah's principles. In addition, because Iraq didn't have effective control over its borders after the fall of the Ba'ath Party, Iranian-backed smugglers freely trafficked narcotics, arms, organs, and other high-value, high return-on-investment merchandise.

The network Iran uses to train Iraqi militants is highly institutionalized and has been in existence for several decades. During the coalition presence in the country, basic training was usually performed in Iraq, often by Lebanese Hezbollah representatives, and was themed around the broad vision of evicting US forces from Iraq.[31] Following the departure of the US military from Iraq in 2011, the Iranian-backed armed groups received little public support; however, this changed rapidly as the Iraqi government granted these groups formal missions and authority in police matters, legitimizing them in the eyes of the public. By 2014, the popular mobilization forces (PMF) of Iraq were perceived as legitimate organizations that maintained peace and security. These PMF were almost exclusively linked to established political parties, many of which had been in existence for decades. The Shia militias, benefiting from their long-term presence and political connections, were often better funded and equipped than the Iraqi Army and police units.[32]

By way of contrast, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iraq deteriorated in 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait, which prompted a US-led coalition in partnership with Saudi Arabia to intervene and reinforce Kuwait's sovereignty. In 2003, Saudi Arabia was initially critical of the US occupation and opposed the removal of Saddam Hussein's government. The Saudi government also accused the new Iraqi government of being too close to Iran. However, in recent years, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iraq has improved significantly. In 2015, Saudi Arabia reopened its embassy in Baghdad after a 25-year hiatus, and the two countries have been working to improve economic and political ties. The improvement in relations has been driven in part by the threat posed by *Daesh*, which also carried out attacks in Saudi Arabia.[33]

Syria

Both Russia and Iran consider Syria a crucial ally and an important gateway to the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, Iran has consistently worked to maintain its influence in the country. In the early 2000s, Iran supported the Ba'ath Party leader Bashar al-Assad and his regime, which faced opposition from both democratic protest movements and religious fundamentalists. When the Arab Spring arrived in Damascus in 2011, Assad's regime quickly suppressed all forms of protest. By 2013, moderate and extremist groups had joined the anti-Assad Free Syrian Army (FSA) to overthrow the Ba'ath Party. Despite the West's support for a post-Ba'athist Syria and alignment with the FSA's objectives, the close ties between Assad and Russia made it challenging for Western nations to back the democratically oriented revolutionaries. The Syrian Civil War left uncontrolled areas in the eastern provinces of Syria vulnerable to the influence of sub-state actors and proxy forces.[34]

Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Iran has been actively involved by providing military, financial, and political support to Assad's government. Iranian military advisors and troops have been deployed to Syria to assist the government in its fight against rebel groups and extremist organizations. Iran also has supplied financial aid to the Syrian government and trained pro-government forces with the help of Lebanese Hezbollah. Along with supporting the Syrian government, Iran has seized the opportunity to extend its regional influence and broaden its sphere of control in the Middle East. As the Syrian conflict escalated, the Russian-backed Syrian Armed Forces and their allies joined the fray against the FSA, various Sunni opposition groups, Salafist mercenaries, inconsistent Kurdish armed factions, and Iran's proxies. Due to the interconnected nature of alliances and national interests, both the Americans and the Russians became increasingly embroiled in the conflict over time.[35]

At the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Saudi Arabia accused the Assad government of committing gross human rights abuses and of succumbing to Iranian foreign policy objectives. In return, the Syrian government accused Saudi Arabia of supporting extremist groups and of trying to undermine Assad's regime. The two countries severed diplomatic

ties in 2012. However, in recent years, there have been some signs of a possible thaw in the relationship; in 2018, the Saudi foreign minister said that his country would consider reestablishing diplomatic ties with Syria if the government changes its behavior. Since then, there have been reports of back-channel talks between the two countries, and some analysts believe that Saudi Arabia is seeking to improve its relationship with Syria as part of a broader effort to counter Iran's influence in the region.

Yemen

Yemen is a prime example of how regional ambition, substate actors, and proxy forces can converge in a multipolar global world order. The country's security situation is intricate and constantly evolving, shaped by externally supported militant groups, a history of civil wars and armed resistance, tribal powers armed with modern weapons, long-standing animosity, and a weakened political infrastructure.[36] Widespread corruption, military and political defections, and a power imbalance among local elites contribute to the highly destructive environment in Yemen. Adding to this complexity, Yemen is experiencing growing sectarian divisions among its religious groups. The turmoil in Yemen allows regional powers like Iran and Saudi Arabia to conduct proxy conflicts through the country's religious factions. Additionally, great powers have a vested interest in maintaining stable oil markets, promoting human security, and ensuring safe maritime transit, which may lead to their indirect involvement in Yemen's political turmoil.

Within Yemen, the most prominent challenge to the state comes from *Ansar Allah*, a group of irregular forces also known as the Houthis. The Houthi organization originated in the early 1990s as a religious and cultural revivalist movement among Yemen's Zaidi Shia Muslim minority. In the early 2000s, the Houthis began to take on a more political and military character, with the goal of challenging the central government's control over the country's northern regions. Since then, the Houthis have fought several wars with the Yemeni government and have taken control of large parts of northern Yemen, including the capital city of Sana'a. The group's ultimate goal is to establish an autonomous state in northern Yemen that is ruled by Zaidi Shia Muslims. In addition to their domestic support base, the Houthis are supported by the Iranians who provide them with weapons and other forms of assistance.

Amongst the external opposition to the Houthis, Saudi Arabia has taken the lead. While the Houthi stronghold is in the northwestern part of the country, the Saudis have been supporting the old regime in the coastal city of Aden, which is in southern part of the country and also hosts the bulk of Yemen's naval forces. The role Riyadh has played in Yemen is not without precedent, as the Saudi Arabian government has been the principal external influence in the region since the withdrawal of British colonists and Egyptian expeditionary forces from the country in the 1960s.

In March 2014, Riyadh mobilized a coalition of militaries and began airstrikes against the Houthi-dominated areas in Yemen and their affiliated groups.[37] Seeing the rebellion

as only a local phenomenon which was too close to the Saudi southern borders, Riyadh decided to go to war to support the Yemeni president, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. In 2014, the US government chose to support Saudi Arabia over the Houthis. Until 2018, the political consensus in Washington generally supported Riyadh's war goals and their means to achieve them. London also maintained its traditional support of its former Gulf-protectorate states. From the start of the hostilities, the Royal Saudi Air Force and Navy managed to blockade the Houthi-controlled territory.

The Houthis formed a natural coalition with Tehran and Hezbollah against Saudi intervention. While overt arms and training deals between the Iranians and Houthis are not publicized, there are reports of covert arms deals, training, diplomacy, and assistance. For instance, one report suggests the Iranians sent fighter pilots to Lebanon where they "received Lebanese passports and then travelled to Yemen to join the fighting in advance of the Houthi takeover."[38] Another report suggested Hezbollah operated training facilities in Yemen.[39] A 2018 confidential United Nations (UN) report provided strong evidence of Iranian assistance in modifying the weapons.[40]

In 2018, with the relative consolidation of Yemeni political power under Hadi, Saudi-led forces made significant battlefield progress against the Houthis. This was especially pronounced in the Al-Hudaydah region, a Houthi-majority coastal area just south of the Saudi border near the Red Sea. In December 2018, the Houthis and Yemeni government again participated in UN-sponsored peace negotiations. By April 2019, Yemen's parliament assembled in the Yemeni city of Seiyoun where deputies selected a speaker and vice speakers. In May 2019, the Houthis withdrew from three Red Sea ports they had once controlled to allow the UN to manage food imported for the starving Yemeni population.[41] In retaliation for efforts to aid the Yemeni government, the Houthis have fired missiles into Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. While the United States had initially supported the Saudi coalition, over time the political tenor in Washington shifted toward complete disengagement from Yemen.[42]

Israel

Although Saudi Arabia and Israel have had a strained relationship in the past, the relationship between Israel and Iran is considered to be one of the most contentious in the Middle East, marked by deep-seated animosity and mutual distrust. Iran has been a vocal critic of Israel and has supported various anti-Israel groups, including Hamas in Palestine's Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Iran's repeated calls for the destruction of Israel and its alleged support for anti-Israel terrorist groups around the country have fueled Israel's concern about Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and the threat it poses to Israel's security. Israel has accused Iran of supporting anti-Israel forces in the region, including in Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, and of working to destabilize the Middle East. The relationship between the two countries has become increasingly hostile in recent years, particularly since the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, which Israel views as a security threat that it has been actively working to undermine.

In 2020, Israel joined the Abraham Accords, a series of normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, which represented a significant shift in the regional politics of the Middle East. The normalization of relations between Israel and the Arab states represented a major diplomatic victory for Israel and a recognition of its place in the region. Importantly, the Abraham Accords offered Israel a way to counter Iran's influence. While Israel views Iran as a major threat to its security and stability, the normalization of relations with several Arab states isolated Iran and sought to dampen its influence in the region.

Substate Actors

Beyond the tensions in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Yemen, lie the multitude of substate actors with political and military agency. Within the Middle East their populations have proliferated over the last two decades. Groups such as Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, *Daesh*, and the Muslim Brotherhood are examples of substate actors with an outsized influence on regional politics. Substate actors often rely on a "principal" state for military assistance, training, and arms, and in exchange, they serve as proxies for their principal state. Initially, these groups tend to follow the political will of their principal, but over time, the relationship may change, allowing for greater autonomy for the proxy forces. Principals also may abandon their agents due to domestic or geopolitical factors, leading the agents to seek alternative support and independence from their former principal. In situations where multiple potential state sponsors are involved, proxy forces may assert their independence by seeking out new principals. These underlying dynamics make the proxy relationship fluid and create opportunities for other countries to intervene. This perpetual cycle of intervention and failed governance exacerbates efforts to maintain safety and stability, and makes it difficult for states to maintain a monopoly on the legitimate use of force in many Middle Eastern countries.

Scenarios

Going forward, the tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran is likely to follow one of three general paths along the spectrum of conflict. At the extreme, hostilities between the two countries reach an apex resulting in a military confrontation. At the opposite end of the spectrum, the two countries reach ease tensions two the point of rapprochement. The third scenario lies between conflict and rapprochement, where both states remain embroiled in an ideological battle, but the conflict stays short of war.

Conflict

In the first scenario, the tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia leads to an armed conflict. While this scenario could unfold in a number of contexts, the most likely situation for an armed conflict would take place in a contested location where military forces from both states are present. While Iran has proxies and interests in several Middle

Eastern states, Saudi Arabia's open military involvement has been limited to conventional conflict in Yemen. So, while an armed conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran could certainly erupt in many states across the Middle East, the propensity for such an event is drastically higher in Yemen.

The conflict in Yemen involving the Houthis has become a complex and protracted conflict involving multiple parties, including the Yemeni government, a Saudi-led coalition, and various regional and international actors. The conflict has had devastating humanitarian consequences, including widespread famine and disease outbreaks. Reports show that the Saudis have spent billions of dollars on its military for training and most modern American and European equipment.[43] And, while the Yemeni war efforts are costing the Saudis billions per month, Tehran spends only a few million dollars per month to aid the Houthis.[44] Thus, while cost-benefit analysis of the war significantly favors the Iranians, the sunk cost for the Saudis makes the war difficult to abandon.[45]

Rapprochement

At the opposite end of the spectrum, both Iran and Saudi Arabia come to a negotiated settlement of their disputes. This may happen in a number of circumstances, especially if one or both sides see that rapprochement leaves them in a better strategic position. Importantly, the status quo sees that both countries face vulnerabilities at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. In Saudi Arabia's case, it can be argued that the sustained operations in Yemen have not served the long-term national interest. Looking at it from a strategic perspective, despite Iran's efforts to establish socio-religious and military ties throughout the region, its history of betrayal and conflict could significantly influence the decision-making of neighboring countries. At the operational level, although agents recognize the importance of principals in establishing their capabilities, they also realize that the principals' support is driven by self-interest rather than loyalty. This "agency slack" could be taken advantage of and potentially weaken Iran's position to the point where peace talks become feasible. On a tactical level, Tehran depends on the supply line it has established through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to circumvent UN sanctions, and disruptions to these supply lines or proxy organizations could significantly impact Iran's willingness to negotiate. These supply lines also are crucial for maintaining the support of the Iranian people.

Rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia would require political will, a sustained and sustained effort by both sides, and support from the international community. While it may be a difficult and complex process, it is possible that the two countries could overcome their differences and work toward a more peaceful and stable relationship. Despite the challenges, there have been signs of a possible thaw in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. For example, the two countries have engaged in indirect talks through intermediaries and have made gestures toward improving their relationship, such as the exchange of prisoners and talks of reopening embassies. In March 2023, the

Chinese made a grand entrance into Middle East diplomacy, negotiating a normalization of Saudi-Iranian relations which resulted in the reopening of embassies and an agreement to not interfere in the other state's internal affairs.

For some, the Chinese foray into peacemaking could signal the decline of US hegemony in the Middle East, or it could simply be a short-lived attempt to increase their own economic footprint in the region. Meanwhile, the diplomatic breakthrough is buffered by several unresolved issues, most notably Iran's nuclear ambitions. While Saudi Arabia is not directly involved in Iranian nuclear negotiations, serious efforts toward rapprochement also would require a commitment to the tenets outlined in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The objective of the JCPOA was to place constraints on Iran's nuclear program in return for the lifting of economic sanctions. In May 2018, the United States withdrew from the agreement and reinstated economic sanctions on Iran. Since then, Iran has gradually stepped away from its commitments under the agreement, increasing its uranium enrichment and stockpiling levels beyond the limits set by the JCPOA. Efforts to revive the JCPOA have been ongoing. In April 2021, talks were held in Vienna between Iran and the remaining parties to the agreement, with the United States participating indirectly. In June 2021, Iran elected a new president, Ebrahim Raisi, who has expressed support for the negotiations. However, negotiations have not yet resulted in a revived agreement. Overall, the status of the JCPOA remains uncertain, with the possibility of a revived agreement depending on the outcome of ongoing negotiations and the willingness of all parties to return to compliance.

Competition

The final scenario between conflict and rapprochement would be where both Iran and Saudi Arabia remain competitive rivals, but the hostilities do not lead to open warfare. In this scenario, the use of military force is not explicitly declared, and the lines between war and peace, and between combatants and civilians, are blurred. Conflicts of this nature are often referred to as "gray zone" activities. In the gray zone, state and non-state actors engage in a range of activities that fall short of full-scale armed conflict but are nevertheless hostile and destabilizing. These activities can include cyberattacks, information operations, economic coercion, proxy warfare, and other forms of non-military aggression.

The gray zone can be a challenging space to navigate, as it blurs the traditional boundaries between war and peace and makes it difficult to determine the appropriate response to hostile actions. It also can be difficult to assign responsibility for actions taken in the gray zone, as they can involve multiple actors and be difficult to attribute. The increasing use of the gray zone by state and non-state actors has led many analysts to suggest that traditional concepts of warfare may be inadequate in the face of these new forms of conflict. Instead of conventional combat, adversaries in the weaker position traditionally keep conflicts in the gray zone. Gray zone conflicts provoke sensibilities

and give its proponents a much-needed strategic advantage by prolonging hostilities. While Saudi Arabia and Iran may appear to restore diplomatic ties or move toward rapprochement, gray zone activity gives each side leverage in negotiations.

Conclusion

The evolving landscape of global geopolitics is punctuated by the ascendance of China's economic prowess and Russia's resolute military maneuvers in Ukraine, suggesting that the once-unassailable lodestar of Western hegemony is fading. Within this context, an insightful lens is provided by the neorealist school of thought, which underscores the significance of power dynamics in shaping the intricate tapestry of international relations. As the world experiences a perceptible shift toward multipolarity, a critical perspective emerges, characterizing this transformation as an opportunity to challenge the prevailing dominance of established great powers.

Yet, the journey toward this reimagined multipolar equilibrium necessitates nothing short of a fundamental overhaul of existing international norms and institutional frameworks. The path to such a recalibration is fraught with challenges across the Middle East, given the entrenched interests that underpin the current power hierarchy, with the most influential states being hesitant to relinquish their privileged positions. In particular, status quo powers, exemplified by the United States, are poised to resist profound alterations to the distribution of power, as such shifts would entail relinquishing a portion of their influence.

The reverberations of this emergent multipolarity reverberate even in regions far removed from the focal points of global power plays. Within the Middle East, a realm already marked by complex dynamics, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are grappling with the turbulence generated by this transition. Navigating the intricate interplay between shifting international dynamics and nuanced subnational factors poses a substantial challenge for these actors.

While the evolving global order may evoke scenarios of uncertainty and transformation, one element remains constant: the enduring conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although the backdrop of shifting power dynamics might lead to conjectures of heightened conflict, analysts widely converge on the likelihood of these two regional titans eschewing conventional warfare. Saudi Arabia's tacit strategic alignment with the United States and Iran's calculated restraint act as significant deterrents to outright military confrontation. Thus, even amidst the ebb and flow of international power dynamics, the stage is set for a subtler form of contestation, as evidenced by the prevalence of "gray zone" activities— tactics that skirt the edges of open conflict while maintaining a tension-laden status quo.

In essence, this intricate interplay of global shifts, regional dynamics, and enduring alliances exemplifies the multi-dimensional chessboard on which contemporary international relations unfold. As the world embarks on a trajectory toward a more

multipolar future, the lens of neorealism offers invaluable insights into the motivations, strategies, and consequences that characterize this complex journey. In this analytical context, the Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship serves as a microcosm of the challenges and opportunities that define this new era of global multipolarity.

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US-China Economic Rivalry: Prospects for Peace in the Middle East

Dan Ciuriak

Abstract: An economic interpretation of history suggests that war is a continuation of economic rivalry in pursuit of the object of desire in economics—economic rent. For the Middle East, the Industrial Revolution precipitated competition for control of its vast reserves of oil, a critical complementary asset for the machine age. The economic rents accruing to oil subjected the region to the "natural resource curse" of under-development and conflict between hegemonic powers. The escalation of US-China competition to dominate the key technologies of the modern digital economy into a full-blown economic and technological war squeezed China in the markets of the United States and its allies, pushing China to alternatives, including the Middle East, where it now has a pervasive economic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, which has provided it a platform for diplomatic engagement. Any illusions of China rapidly converting its growing economic presence into leverage for peace in the region, which its brokerage of the Iran-Saudi Arabia restoration of diplomatic relations might have inspired, have been rudely shattered by the outbreak of war between Gaza and Israel. The key takeaway, however, is that, in the Middle East, the technological conditions that drive economic rivalry between China and the United States do not drive conflict between the two in the Middle East and that can only be good for the region. The first Industrial Revolution brought conflict to the region; the subsequent industrial revolutions are moving the nexus for conflict elsewhere.

Keywords: United States, China, Middle East, geoeconomics, economic rents, geopolitics.

Introduction

An economic interpretation of history suggests that war is a continuation of economic rivalry in pursuit of the object of desire in economics—supernormal profit or economic rent.[1] As economic rivalry has evolved from a contest for prime land in the pre-industrial age, to a mercantile contest for trade routes and ports in the industrial era, to boardroom battles over intellectual property, and, most recently, to data in the era of intangibles, technological dominance determined which countries were able to forge rent-extracting empires, and which suffered the consequences of rent-extraction and being the pawns of hegemon games.

The Middle East, which lost its knowledge leadership, its competitiveness, and its caliphate with the Industrial Revolution in the West, has fallen into the latter category for the past two centuries. The Russian and British Empires competed for its vast mineral wealth and control of strategic trade routes through intrigues, proxy wars, and diplomatic maneuvering during the "Great Game" in the nineteenth century; the Soviet Union and the British/American hegemons took over in the twentieth century when the main prize became the resource rents from oil, the original "black gold."

China under the declining Qing Dynasty, during its brief Republic era and subsequently through the tumultuous years of war and civil war, had not been a major political factor in the region for the past two centuries. Following the consolidation of communist rule, China did intervene in the region by providing support for nationalist movements and seeking to export its brand of socialism in rivalry with the Soviet Union during the Mao years, but that intervention was withdrawn under Deng. As a largely closed economy that was self-sufficient in oil, China prior to its opening up was not an economic factor in the Middle East.[2]

The subsequent rise of China, following its opening up at the beginning of the 1980s, had limited implications for the region until China became a net importer of oil in 1993. At this point, China became a growing market for the region's oil exports. Further, reacting to the combination of depletion of existing fields, downgrades of estimates of the potential from its offshore and Xinjiang basins, and the relatively high costs of extraction in China compared to the Middle East, China developed in short order an oil strategy that involved pursuit of foreign sources. To this end, China put its leading state-owned oil companies—China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC), and China National Petrochemical Corporation (Sinopec)—on a financial footing to acquire overseas operating rights and to undertake overseas oil exploration.[3]

Nonetheless, in its quest for oil, China did not look primarily to the Middle East. There were two basic reasons: (1) US domination of the region and of the sea lanes, which created a strategic vulnerability to increased dependence on Middle East sources; and (2) China's legacy oil-refining capacity was designed for its domestic high-quality waxy crude oil, not the low-quality heavy oil exported from Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.[4] Accordingly, China looked to other places where US and European companies were not major competitors, including Central Asia, Russia, Venezuela, and Africa, often stepping in as Western companies stepped out, as for example in Iran.[5]

China did come onto the US radar as an energy-dependent player in the late 1990s, particularly as analysis of China's future energy demands pointed to substantial increases in its future energy imports. But the main concerns this aroused at the time were that China would be vulnerable to energy blackmail to export military equipment to unstable oil-producing regions, and that China's import dependence would weaken the effectiveness of multilateral sanctions by inducing it to make opportunistic engagements or to adopt positions in the United Nations that might not be in line with US interests.[6]

In short, while oil has been a constant source of great power rivalry since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, China and the United States for reasons of history did not become direct economic rivals in the main oil-producing region, the Middle East. This situation prevailed until the US-China relationship, which had historically flipped several times from adversarial to formal or tacit alliance, flipped again into adversarial mode with the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," including a trade and economic component in the form of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), an agreement described

as being about who would write the rules of the road in the Asia Pacific, and a military component through the adoption of a new Air-Sea Battle doctrine aimed at ensuring US ability to operate in the West Pacific.[7] China's asymmetric response took the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which served to introduce China into the Middle East as a potential geoeconomic and geopolitical rival to the United States in a way it had not previously been.

In this changed context, the question arises: What does the breakout of a full-blown trade and technology war between the United States and China portend for the Middle East, particularly given the continued secular changes in the relative size and economic capabilities of the two economies, including importantly the US shift from being a major net importer of oil to a net exporter? This note takes up this question.

The note is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the economic context for the evolution of the US-China relationship over two phases. The first, following China's opening up, was one of symbiotic interdependence as China industrialized, starting its economic miracle, while the United States made the transition into a knowledge-based economy, a transition that underpinned the US rise to its unipolar moment. The second, following the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia" and China's entry into the knowledge-based and data-driven economy, witnessed a shift into adversarial mode. Section 3 considers one of the geopolitical and geoeconomic consequences of this shift into adversarial mode, namely China's BRI-based engagement in the Middle East, which positioned it to become a significant economic and later political player. Section 4 attempts to tease out the implications of the escalating US-China technological rivalry for the future of diplomatic relations in the Middle East.

Section 1. From Symbiotic Interdependence to Economic Rivalry

1.1: Symbiotic Interdependence

In 1980, the United States had a mature industrial economy generating a per capita income of $39,000 in today's dollars but was facing relative decline and an industrial challenge from Japan: "Red Sun Rising" was the new fear factor in American discourse.[8] But technological developments were about to launch the US economy into a new phase—the knowledge-based economy. The release of the IBM personal computer (PC) in 1981 and the release of computer-aided design/manufacturing (CAD-CAM) software for the PC in 1981-1982 put powerful new tools on the desktops of researchers across the country.[9] A complementary policy development was the passage by the Carter administration of the University and Small Business Patent Procedures Act (Bayh-Dole Act) in 1980, which recognized the importance of innovation and intellectual property for the US economy.[10]

By contrast, in 1980, at the time of opening up, China was one of the poorest countries in the world, with a per capita income of a little over $950 per annum in 2023 US dollars (USD).[11] It had an industrial base, but one suited for autarky, not trade. For all intents and purposes, China was industrializing from scratch as it opened up.

The timing of the US entry into the knowledge-based economy and China's opening up can only be described as serendipitous for both countries.

The US economy was rejuvenated by its newfound innovation dynamic, and the United States went from strength to strength, dismissing Japan's industrial challenge, winning the Cold War, and reaching its unipolar moment, while enjoying a jet-fueled boom in the value of its intangible intellectual property assets, even as it shuffled off unskilled labor tasks to Asia, increasingly to China.

Meanwhile, China acquired production tasks and learned the industrial arts of a modern economy, starting on its way to becoming the new "workshop of the world."[12] As it industrialized, China put in place modern economic governance to manage a private sector economy, legalizing private enterprise, preparing its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for public listing, establishing stock exchanges, developing corporate governance and securities laws, establishing a government bond market, etc.[13] In preparing to join the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, it steeply reduced tariff protection; and, under its WTO accession commitments which were quite onerous compared to those demanded of other developing country applicants to the WTO, carried out a major liberalization of non-tariff measures in its trade regime and further tariff reductions.[14]

To be sure, there were political bumps in the road (relations cooled following the Tiananmen Square incident of 4 June 1989 and during the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996), but subsequently the Clinton administration extended "Permanent Normal Trade Relations" to China in 2000, setting up the George W. Bush administration to support China's accession to the WTO in 2001. The positive relationship reached an apogee during Bush's last year in office, when he urged Taiwan and Beijing to resume their dialogue, leading to a Taiwan-mainland economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) and the re-opening of direct commercial links across the Taiwan Strait.[15]

1.2: Setting the Stage for Economic Rivalry

Almost immediately after the Bush apogee, the US-China relationship underwent another phase change in 2009 as the incoming Obama administration announced its "pivot to Asia." This consisted of a trade component—the TPP, which was couched as an initiative to ensure that the United States, not China, wrote the rules of the road for commerce in the Asia-Pacific; and a military component—the Air-Sea Battle doctrine, which was crafted to address China's rapidly growing ability to assert China's claims in the South China Sea and to deny US force projection in the West Pacific more generally.[16]

What exactly underpinned the pivot is unclear. An in-depth review of the context for the pivot by Kenneth Lieberthal for Brookings reveals no specific incident or rationale.[17] Lieberthal, for example, notes that Obama had met with his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao ten times and with Premier Wen Jiabao repeatedly, a pattern mirrored by meetings between US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner with their Chinese counterparts. Speculative reasons offered include changes in personnel

in the Obama administration that gave greater sway to more hawkish views on China. Overall, the sense one gets from American commentary (and one shared in China, according to Lieberthal) was that the United States was walking into the Thucydides Trap: the pivot was simply a reaction to China's rise.[18]

For its part, China was putting in place the conditions that would justify American anxieties about China's emerging economic and military capacity. It made technological modernization the cornerstone of its economic policy, welcomed foreign direct investment, and used its economic clout to obtain technology transfer commitments. It also began to invest abroad at scale with technology acquisition a key objective – e.g., by establishing overseas research and development (R&D) centers to tap into technology developments abroad, and by acquiring and transplanting western enterprises with advanced technology.[19] China promoted homegrown technology development through a policy of "introduction, digestion, absorption, and re-innovation," steeply raised R&D investment as a share of GDP and expanded its R&D workforce, and expanded tertiary education with a heavy emphasis on science and technology.[20] It also invested heavily in its intellectual property (IP) infrastructure, including upgrading its IP laws, recruiting and training patent examiners, and instituting specialist IP courts.[21] China had learned the game and its IP creation soared (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Patent Applications, Top 5 Patent Offices, 1980-2021
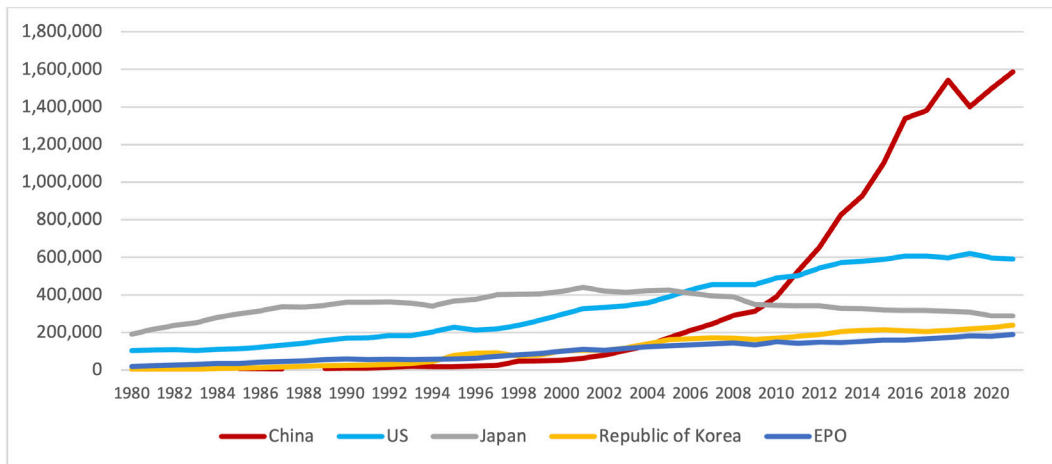
Source: World Intellectual Property Office, World Intellectual Property Indicators 2022 (https://www.wipo.int/publications/en/details.jsp?id=4632&plang=EN)

With a lag, so did China's international receipts (Figure 2). While China still trails the United States by a good distance in international earnings on its IP ($11.7 billion to the US's $124.6 billion in 2021), China's receipts grew at an annual rate of 31.4 percent over the period 2010-2021 compared to the US's 1.3 percent (while this latter figure understates actual earnings captured by US companies due to the parking of IP in tax havens, the growth rate is much lower than China's with any adjustment).

Figure 2. International Receipts for IP, 1980-2021, USD millions
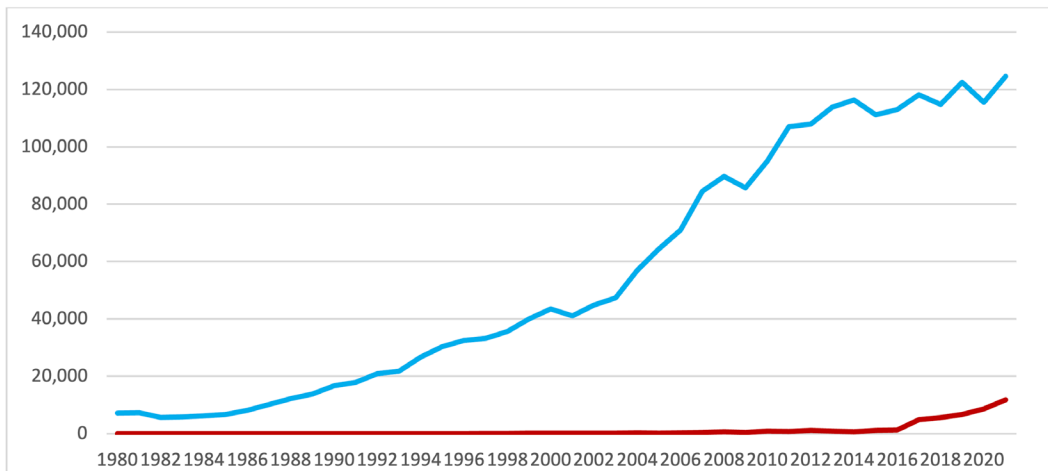
Source: World Bank Indicators, Charges for the use of intellectual property, receipts (BoP, current USD) (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.GSR.ROYL.CD)

As well, China was importing technology in prodigious amounts—by 2021, it surpassed the United States as the leading importer of disembodied technology in the world. After joining the WTO, China expanded its international IP payments by 17.3 percent per annum to 2021.

Figure 3. International Payments for IP, 1980-2021, USD millions
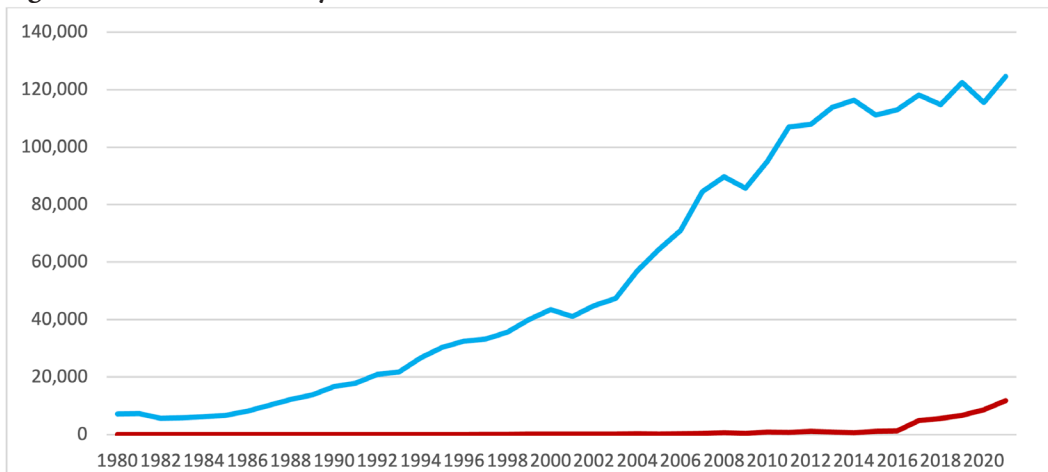
Source: World Bank Indicators, Charges for the use of intellectual property, payments (BoP, current USD) (https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BM.GSR.ROYL.CD)

Not only did this comprehensive policy of technology acquisition propel China into the knowledge-based economy, but China was also simultaneously gearing up for the digital transformation and the data-driven economy. China had developed comprehensive

internet regulation and supervision under a doctrine of "Internet sovereignty" that was motivated both by the desire for political control and out of national security concerns. This was implemented through the Golden Shield Project (the "Great Firewall"), which was completed in 2008.[22] When Apple released the iPhone 3 in China in January 2008, China's technology-using consumers readily adopted the smart phone, setting the stage for explosive growth in mobile e-commerce—and the generation of the data that would later fuel China's AI development. E-commerce as a share of retail sales was negligible in 2009; by 2013, it matched the US share; and by 2016, it was 50 percent larger and surpassed US sales in absolute terms.[23]

As this review underscores, while the US-China relationship underwent a phase change from tacit alliance to one of "frenemy," the Middle East was not one of the bones of contention.[24] Nonetheless, the increasingly fractious geopolitical and economic rivalry led China to a much deeper engagement with the Middle East, an issue to which we turn next.

Section 2. Containment and Response

China interpreted the framing of the Obama Administration's pivot as policy of "containment", notwithstanding that there was no such policy formally in place.[25] The exclusion of China from the International Space Station (ISS) by the US Congress in 2011 and the launch of major investigations into China's IP practices by the US International Trade Commission in 2010, which raised the threat of use of the Special 301 sanctions, also colored the atmospherics of the relationship.

China countered in a number of ways. Excluded from the ISS, it continued to develop its space program on its own and not only built its own space station but eventually landed a Mars rover and a lunar probe that brought back rocks from the moon. Facing the threat of IP sanctions, it made, as noted, a concerted push to raise its IP game. Excluded from the TPP negotiations (which included so-called "poison pills" for China in the form of commitments on IP and data that were considered impossible for China to accept at the time), it put its weight behind the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was signed by China and fourteen other Asia-Pacific countries in November 2020, making it the largest free trade agreement in the world.[26]

China was also quite prepared to play hardball where its interests were concerned. Of particular relevance were the moves to shut down Facebook, Twitter, and Google's YouTube, the world's leading internet firms at the time; to control information flow in China during its clampdown on conflict between Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang in 2009; and to block virtually all Google services in China as Alibaba was going public with its initial public offering (IPO) in mid-2014.[27]

2.1: The Belt and Road Initiative as a Containment Counter

But the counter that is of most interest for the present discussion is the BRI, launched by China's President Xi Jinping in 2013. US containment was essentially maritime in nature, underscored by US naval operations in the East China Sea and regular Freedom of Naval Operations (FONOPS) through the Taiwan Strait. In this context, China naturally looked west to its Asian hinterland, which historically had been connected to China through the Silk Road.[28]

It is important here to underscore that the idea of a "New Silk Road" was hardly new in 2013—it had become a common trope in discussions of Central Asian policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union.[29] Indeed, the United States had floated its own "New Silk Road" policy as part of an attempt to extricate itself from Afghanistan, hoping to use a network of trade relations supported by infrastructure development to replace military occupation.[30] All China had to do was to make this idea its own. It did. And this took China directly to the Middle East.

While the exact membership and project list of the BRI is somewhat unclear, it appears that in short order, the BRI covered the Middle East quite comprehensively, including both strategic partners of the United States and adversaries.[31] Of particular note are the following:

- **Iran**: Iran joined the BRI in 2018; in 2021, it signed a 25-year strategic and economic partnership agreement with China covering projects amounting to $400 billion. The projects target energy development (oil, gas, petrochemicals, renewables, and nuclear power, and energy infrastructure) and port construction to support Iran's integration into BRI trade routes.[32]

- **Saudi Arabia**: Saudi Arabia also joined the BRI in 2018; in 2022, it was the biggest recipient of BRI investment in the Middle East, primarily in gas projects.[33]

- **United Arab Emirates (UAE)**: The UAE has indicated its ambition to be China's major Middle Eastern partner in the BRI; China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) has chosen Khalifa Port as the base of its Middle East operations, making Dubai a major logistics and transport center for goods moving between China and the rest of the world.[34]

- **Djibouti**: The Addis Ababa-Djibouti high-speed rail link, a high-profile BRI initiative, was completed in 2018; while the traffic on the line has been slow to grow, it represents a vital link for Ethiopia to connect to global markets.[35] China established its first naval base abroad in Djibouti in 2017.

- **Egypt**: Following a state visit by Xi in 2016, Egypt signed twenty-one partnership agreements with a total value of $15 billion, with a key focus on the Red Sea coast and Suez Canal as part of the Maritime Silk Road.[36]

- **Turkey**: Turkey was an early joiner and has the distinction of being part of both the overland Silk Road, through its rail links to Central Asia as part of the "middle corridor" of the BRI, and as part of the maritime Silk Road. China has invested in a major Turkish port in Istanbul, which is profiled as part of the BRI.[37]

Israel does not appear to be formally part of the BRI, but it might as well be. Since 2014, China's investments in Israel have grown sufficiently to be considered a major change in the Middle East's geopolitics. For China, the main motivation is access to Israeli technologies to support its transition from the "world factory" to a global innovation leader. However, Israel has significant infrastructure developments planned, including in the energy sector, which would be a good fit for both countries.[38]

The bottom line is that the BRI brought China deeply into the Middle East, with the result that "the MENA region is crisscrossed by Chinese-built or bankrolled ports, railways, highways, power stations, pipelines, landmarks, and even entire cities."[39]

2.2: The Economics and Geoeconomics of the BRI

As the US formalized its containment policy with the switch to an "Indo-Pacific" framing for its presence in the West Pacific, China also formalized the BRI initiative in strategic terms:

> Beijing has overlaid a strategic-level concept to its otherwise disparate patterns of engagement. In so doing, the Xi administration has consolidated its multiple lines of efforts and the diverse Chinese-based actors—both state and private— into a grand narrative: one that serves the strategic purpose of integration.[40]

The US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) has four pillars—trade rules (especially for the digital economy), supply chain resilience, GHG emission reductions, and anti-corruption—but no money as yet.[41] At this point a quantification of its impact would be impossible.

The BRI rhetorically prioritizes "policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity;" in practice, it prioritizes economic infrastructure (especially trade-related transportation, digital, and energy) and funding. In total, China is estimated to have spent as much as $1 trillion; predicted expenses over the life of the BRI could reach as much as $8 trillion.[42] This prioritization reflects three basic factors: China has excess capacity in infrastructure development, excess foreign exchange, and the logic of the BRI as a breakout from the US containment strategy by diversifying its trade routes and reducing vulnerability to choke points.

The main economic impact of the BRI is expected to be a reduction of shipping times and trade costs. Estimates developed for the US Federal Reserve Board suggest that the reduction in shipping times and overall trade costs could be palpable at the global level at between 1.2 and 2.5 percent and 1.1 and 2.2 percent respectively.[43] For BRI economies,

the change in shipment times and trade costs could be larger, ranging between 1.7 and 3.2 percent and 1.5 and 2.8 percent, respectively. The BRI economies located along the corridors could experience the largest gains with shipment times reduced by up to 11.9 percent and trade costs by up to 10.2 percent.

Trade cost reductions of this order of magnitude would have a powerful impact on the volume of trade, with significant impacts on economic output. To cite two studies that attempt to quantify this impact, one finds increases of regional income of 2 to 3 percent, with some areas realizing gains of as much as 12 percent, while by-passed areas shrink; another finds real GDP gains of 3.4 percent for participating countries and by up to 2.9 percent for the world as a whole.[44]

There are many caveats, of course, about any quantification, including issues related to the consequences of the debt incurred in these projects, such as the much-discussed "debt trap diplomacy" issue and what this might imply not only for the debtor countries but also for China.[45] Other issues include the actual extent to which the funds spent are additional versus simply reprofiled, and the possibility of actual negative welfare effects despite the growth impacts, and the limited weight on renewables in the energy spending. China's BRI spending fell off considerably after the initial wave due in part to the pandemic and China's self-isolation but also due to problems that had been identified in the implementation of the BRI. In 2019, prior to the pandemic, Xi had already promised a "BRI 2.0" with greater emphasis on debt sustainability and environmental impacts taken into account.

However, while the net benefits of the BRI in economic terms is open to question, there is little doubt that the BRI has had a major geoeconomic impact in terms of empowering China. One perspective on this is to consider the sheer number of participating countries: as of March 2022, 147 countries had joined the BRI by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with China.[46] By comparison, the WTO, which is an institution built on the basis of trans-Atlantic trade under US leadership over seven major negotiating rounds, and which enrolled China and Russia at the height of the US unipolar moment, has 164 members.

Each one of the BRI MOUs is a one-on-one in which China is the larger economy and the one underwriting the relationship with investment commitments. If we understand geoeconomics as the use of economic power for diplomatic purposes, the fact that this roster of signatories was built up in the face of intense US counter-lobbying simply adds to its significance, including in geopolitical terms, in light of China's 2022 Global Security Initiative, the six general commitments of which are redolent of the BRI when first announced.

2.3: The Middle East as China's Soft Power Proving Ground

The Middle East was an ideal place for China to test the strength of the soft power influence it had built up through its BRI investments, particularly in view of the fact that

it had no recent historical engagement as a hegemon to serve as baggage, which allowed it to position itself as a neutral party for diplomacy.

First, the Middle East provided a big stage: the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran for regional dominance, largely rooted in the Sunni-Shia sectarian divide, has been a major factor sustaining conflicts in the Middle East, including the proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. This rift offered a challenging but clear test case for any diplomatic intervention. Success would unequivocally demonstrate diplomatic influence.

Second, China had built up significant relations with both parties. Saudi Arabia was an early and enthusiastic supporter of the BRI and China was becoming an increasingly important partner as the United States became a net exporter of fossil fuels following its shale oil revolution (as discussed further below). Meanwhile, China's twenty-five-year comprehensive cooperation agreement concluded with Tehran in March 2022 included a major BRI component.

Third, the US pullout from Afghanistan in August 2021 was a clear signal to regional powers of its receding strategic interest in the region. This vacuum, combined with China's increasing investments and involvement, puts China in a prime position to steer the geopolitical trajectory of the Middle East.

Fourth, the fact that the administration of US President Joseph Biden had been considering smoothing relations with Riyadh and Teheran to mitigate the impact of the restrictions on Russia's oil exports, provided an opportunity to upstage US diplomacy.[47] We have since seen this become something of a pattern. For example, during the visit to China by US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, Huawei released its Mate60 cell phone with technology that is competitive with other top-line cellphones, including seven nanometer chips produced in China, a development that the US technology blockade was designed to prevent.[48] Shortly thereafter, Xi skipped the G20 leaders meeting in New Delhi, just days after attending the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) Summit in Johannesburg, which had accepted several Middle East countries into the BRICS club. With this move, Xi not only effectively downgraded a club formed during the US unipolar moment by sending Premier Li Qiang in his stead, but also pre-empted any repeat meeting with Biden, as had taken place in the 2022 G20 summit.[49]

Section 3. US-China Economic Rivalry in the Middle East Going Forward

The preceding sections have traced the evolution of the US-China relationship from one of symbiotic interdependence to one of "frenemy." Along the way, the strategic moves of the two players served to greatly expand China's economic and diplomatic engagement in the Middle East. This section considers the three potential bones of contention between the two powers in the Middle East going forward: oil, the role of the US dollar in trading oil and as a reserve currency for the regional petrostates, and data.

3.1: Oil Rents

The natural resource curse has been blamed for under-development, with one channel being civil war, and another being hegemonic rent extraction.[50] Energy security has long been a foreign policy issue for the United States in the Middle East, but it is hard to avoid the fact that it was the low-cost, rent-generating oil sources in the Middle East that were fought over, muddying the waters as to whether it was security or capture of oil rents that was at issue.[51] But that era is largely over. There are three pertinent observations that suggest Middle East oil will be a much less prominent feature of great power competition in the future than it has been in the past.

First, the United States is not in any urgent hunt for oil overseas. According to the US Energy Information Administration, in September 2019, the United States became a net petroleum exporter for the first time since monthly records began in 1973, as the fracking revolution unlocked vast reserves of oil and gas.

The United States was pulled toward the Middle East because the world's richest reserves were there. The oil shocks of the 1970s had starkly revealed the vulnerability of the US economy to oil supply disruptions, and it could not afford to allow the Soviet Union or a hostile post-revolution Iran to gain control of these reserves and hold the United States hostage.[52] The US's waning interest in the Middle East reflects the dramatically changed situation in the twilight of the age of oil (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4. US Natural Gas Proved Reserves (trillion cubic feet), 1970-2021
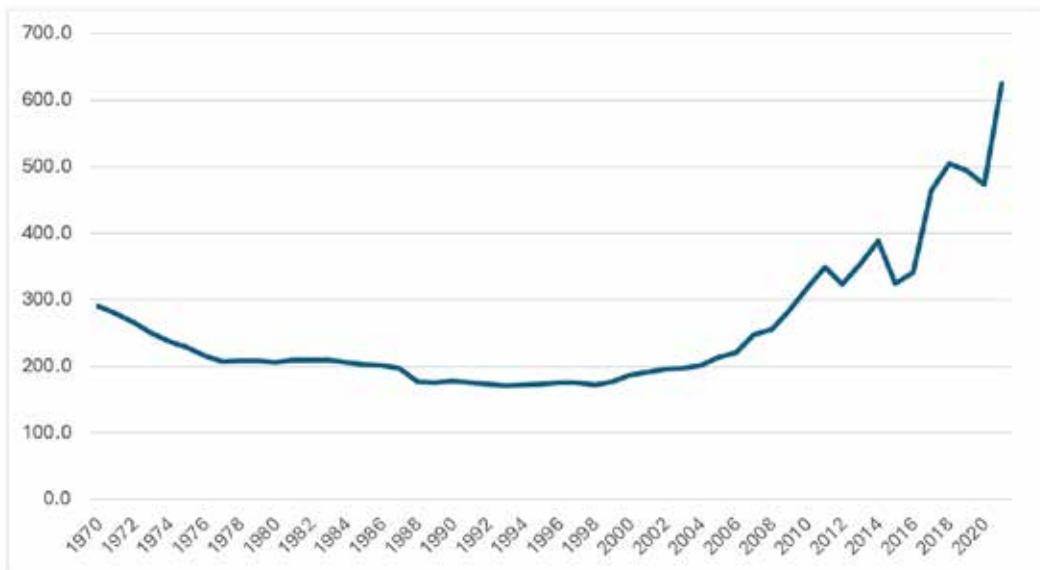
Source: World Intellectual Property Office, World Intellectual Property Indicators 2022
(https://www.wipo.int/publications/en/details.jsp?id=4632&plang=EN)

Figure 5. US Proved Oil Reserves (billion barrels), 1970-2021

To be sure, the sanctions on Russian oil following the 24 February 2022 invasion of Ukraine caused an oil price spike that the Biden administration sought to mitigate by releasing oil from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, but this event also showed that the United States can respond to price shocks through market mechanisms.[53] The United States does have continued interests in Middle East oil, but these are clearly muted compared to the past.

Second, China is in the hunt for energy but its military has been developed to deny US access inside the first island chain, not to project force in places like the Middle East, where the United States still has considerable military assets, a point not missed by Middle Eastern parties.[54] China thus must pursue energy security through commercial channels; hence the prominence of the energy portfolio in the BRI. More importantly given the imperative of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, China's strength is solar, where it is the global leader by far, and wind, where it is poised to become the world leader.[55] Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, is gearing up for a green energy future, including developing green energy for export to Europe, which will create demand for the green energy infrastructure that China sells.[56] This is a very different energy play than the oil wars of the past. The BRI 1.0 energy envelope targeted mainly fossil fuels; however, BRI 2.0 is said to have been greened.

Finally, Russia's energy blackmail of Europe has likely restructured energy markets for the indefinite future. As the climate change energy transition accelerates, Russia will be dumping oil and gas to willing takers to avoid them becoming stranded assets.

Color the prospects for peace in the Middle East positive on this score.

3.2: The Role of the Dollar

A related issue is the possibility of the emergence of a "petroyuan" to displace the "petrodollar," with consequential impacts on the role of the dollar as the global vehicle currency for trade and finance. China has been promoting greater use of the yuan for its bilateral trade, including for its oil trade with Saudi Arabia.[57] The accession of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates to the BRICS club at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg, 22-24 August 2023, has put considerable wind in the sails of this speculation.[58]

Many shoes would have to fall for this issue to become material in any theatre other than the war of geopolitical narratives and none of these are likely to fall in the foreseeable future. The internationalization of the yuan cannot happen to any meaningful degree while China maintains capital controls and lacks a large international float of liquid RMB-denominated bonds; this limits use of RMB in payments to bilateral relations and this use is itself circumscribed because of bilateral trade imbalances (for example, India and Russia dropped a plan to trade bilaterally in rupees and rubles because of the trade imbalance).[59] Beyond this, the US security relationship with the Gulf states, their massive holdings of US dollar-denominated assets, and the fact that their currencies have hard pegs to the US dollar all militate powerfully against the role of the yuan in the Middle East becoming a trigger for conflict.[60]

3.3: Data Rents

The main global battleground between the United States and China is digital technology. The data-driven economy is one of superstar firms operating at global scale. All the major platform firms are active in the Middle East: Google, Microsoft, and Amazon from the United States; Tencent and Alibaba from China; SAP from the European Union; and others. The Middle East was a laggard in taking to e-commerce and adopting cloud services but is now a rapidly growing market and the business press has frequent articles about these firms' excitement about the market and their plans for additional data centres. The Middle East is a small but interesting market for firms but hardly strategic at the geopolitical level.

Most international transmission of data is through undersea cables (in some sense, the "cloud" is mostly underwater). Control of cables has been mooted as a potential geopolitical flashpoint, but this does not for the most part impact the Middle East. China's Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) Cable, which has landing spots in strategically important centres like Djibouti and Suez, is already in place and there are competing cables put in place by western private sector consortia (e.g., the Facebook-backed 2Africa cable). This area is competitive with companies from Europe and Japan as well as the United States and China providing capacity.

As for 5G networks, the Middle East is a small market since growth of 5G is driven by economic development and consumer demand; in the Middle East, this is mainly in the small population Gulf states and Israel. Huawei, which has been effectively excluded

from North American and European markets, has pivoted to the Middle East, where it competes with the other major 5G suppliers with a significant cost advantage.

To summarize, the Middle East is not likely to be a battleground for data rents. Color the prospects for peace positive on this score as well.

Conclusion

The arguments laid out above make the case that economic and technological rivalry between the United States and China was inevitable given the stakes put on the table by the technological developments in the data-driven economy and the extraordinary growth in China's capacity to contest them with the United States, notwithstanding that the United States was the source of these technological advances and had first mover advantage.

China started to industrialize in earnest more than a century after the United States; it joined the knowledge-based economy 30 years after the United States, and it joined the data-driven economy more or less contemporaneously. By 2018, it was fiercely competitive in all three areas. China's progress in building a modern military and its rapid development of a space program were likely sufficient to prompt a US review and competitive response at some point—something akin to the Obama pivot was likely inevitable.[61]

America's "Sputnik moment" with China came when Huawei seized the lead in the development of fifth generation (5G) telecommunications networks. As stated in a leaked National Security Council memo:

> Whoever leads in technology and market share for 5G deployment will have a tremendous advantage toward commanding the heights of the information domain … everything from automated cars and aircraft to advanced logistics and manufacturing to true [AI] enhanced network combat.[62]

The United States was described as losing in this race and failure would mean that "China will win politically, economically, militarily."[63]

The escalation in the intensity of the rivalry was in good measure dictated by the United States, which played offense starting from the Obama pivot and progressively ratcheted up by first the administration of Donald J. Trump and then the Biden administration. Importantly, China's counter moves brought it into Middle East affairs economically which paved its way diplomatically in the region in a major way.

While the United States and China may be at loggerheads over the general-purpose technologies built on the nexus of big data, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, their economic interests in the Middle East and their engagement in the region appear to be asymmetric. At the global level, China's rise has ceased to be peaceful as the "no limits" pact with Russia helped precipitate a full-blown war in Europe; the many flashpoints in the South China Sea and across the Taiwan Strait could now flare into conflict as well. But

for the Middle East, the economic calculus does not point in that direction. Nonetheless, the hegemon games are underway in the Middle East and, if the United States has actually experienced its "Suez moment," and if China's pervasive commercial presence in the region provides it the basis for brokering a Pax Sinica, it is of interest to consider what that peace might look like.

The West stakes its moral authority on rules and procedures, not outcomes. We value free and fair elections, rule of law, freedom of religion, free enterprise, etc. Thus, one of the major selling points for the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) intervention in Afghanistan was the day of blue fingers—election day in Kabul.[64]

China stakes its moral authority on outcomes, in particular on delivering stability and economic security. The "iron rice bowl" principle paved the way for the communist faction in China to gain and remain in power; the modern incarnation is couched in terms of delivering stability and (moderate) prosperity.

These are not necessarily competing principles or values. Good procedures can lead to good outcomes and good outcomes generally depend on sound procedures. But not necessarily.

Economics has a theory for the latter case—the theory of second best. The concept of the second best was first introduced by Richard Lipsey and Kelvin Lancaster in their 1956 paper, "The General Theory of Second Best."[65] Welfare theory showed that the attainment of a Pareto optimum (a situation where no one can be made better off without making someone else worse off) depended on the fulfillment of all the optimum conditions simultaneously. Lipsey and Lancaster showed that, if a constraint prevents the attainment of one of the conditions required for a Pareto-optimal outcome, meeting the others was not generally optimal, even if attainable. This led to an important negative corollary: there is no a priori way to judge on the optimality of alternative particular actions where one or another condition is sub-optimal.

Insofar as a regional "Pax Sinica" might emerge in the foreseeable future, it could come with, to use a hackneyed phrase, Chinese characteristics as China exports features of its development state model: ubiquitous surveillance, controlled information space, and state-led economic development that China prioritizes to achieve stability. This is already in train: according to the Middle East Center, China provides Iran advice on "manipulating public opinion."[66] To the extent the Middle East buys into China's suasion to tone down hostilities, peace at some price is likely more attractive than the continuous conflict it has experienced since the collapse of indigenous rule. However, any illusions of China rapidly converting its growing economic presence into leverage for peace in the region, which its brokerage of the Iran-Saudi Arabia restoration of diplomatic relations might have inspired, have been rudely shattered by the outbreak of war between Gaza and Israel. China has built significant relations with Iran and Russia which support Hamas and with Israel. But it is on the sidelines as the atrocities in that war unfold and the US dispatches carrier groups to the East Mediterranean.

In the longer term, for the Middle East, it is a question of caveat emptor in terms of the features of the Chinese model that countries adopt. China's rise, for example, was driven by the fact that it allowed its private sector to flourish, enabling the emergence of superstar companies like Alibaba, Tencent, Bytedance and Huawei, the rise of the world's largest number of Fortune 500 companies (135 in the 2023 Fortune Global 500) and the emergence of the second-largest contingent of Unicorns (by one listing, 248 to the US's 712).[67] China established a NASDAQ-style technology exchange and built up its knowledge-based economy infrastructure. China is also applying to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Partnership for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a trade agreement based on the US model. Insofar as China's soft power and economic engagement in the Middle East winds up exporting this model, it is a re-export of the American model and, to that extent, of no concern to the West.

If China is only exporting infrastructure, that is potentially more problematic, not only for the contracting parties but also for the multilateral system, insofar as failed infrastructure projects lead to multilateral bailouts, for example.[68]

If China is mainly exporting resentment—as was much in evidence at the BRICS summit in Johannesburg—the question becomes what is the Middle East buying?

The key takeaway, however, is that, in the Middle East, the technological conditions that drive economic rivalry between China and the United States do not drive conflict between the two in the Middle East and that can only be good for the region. The first Industrial Revolution brought conflict to the region; the subsequent industrial revolutions are moving the nexus for conflict elsewhere.

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54   In a recent commentary, Yoel Guzansky and Tuvia Gering write that "Arab states generally see their relationship with the US—with its superior military capabilities—as vital, and understand that China cannot and does not want to replace the US in this role in the short term" (Yoel Guzansky and Tuvia Gering, "Xi of Arabia: Enjoying the Favor of the King," INSS Insight No. 1671, Institute for National Security Studies, December 2022, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/xi-saudi-arabia/). That said, Guzansky and Gering go on to write, "Looking ahead, they [the Arab states] are concerned about the White House's lack of attention to their security challenges, hostile tones in Congress, and disagreements on issues such as political freedom and human rights. Even if the deployment of US military forces in the Middle East remains unchanged, the Arab states are growing skeptical of the US willingness to use them when the chips are down." This captures the sense of transition with US military pre-eminence in the region continuing but its interest in the region waning and its leverage beyond the security realm consequently fading.

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The Syrian Express and a Russian String of Pearls?

Richard A. Moss

Abstract: How did Moscow support its intervention in Syria and how has the experience changed Russian thinking about maritime logistics? With ties to naval theory and the Soviet past, the "Syrian Express"—the supply route from the Black Sea to Syria via the Turkish Straits—has changed the way Russia views its role in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and beyond. Russia's 2022 Maritime Doctrine reflects these aspirations and rationale to establish additional logistics support facilities astride strategic chokepoints in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Keywords: Russia, Syria, Vladimir Putin, *punkt material'no-tehnicheskogo obespechenija* (РТМО)/пункт материально-технического обеспечения (ПТМО)/logistics support facility, 2022 Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation.

Introduction

In 2004, US analysts described China's construction of ports, pipelines, and highways across the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions as a "string of pearls" strategy. A report on "Energy Futures in Asia" for the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment reportedly described China's goal of building commercial ports and piggybacking naval and intelligence-collection bases astride strategic waterways.[1] Scholars have found the term problematic, and Beijing itself has reframed its efforts as a "maritime silk road" and "One Belt, One Road," stressing the economic rather than military aspects of its infrastructure projects.[2]

While the term "string of pearls" may evoke images of China's maritime expansion, it can also apply to Russia, especially since Moscow began its overt intervention in Syria in 2015. The resurrection of the logistics supply facility (*punkt material'no-tehnicheskogo obespechenija* or PMTO) at Tartus reflects a return to Soviet conceptions of maritime power, albeit with a modern twist of economy of force. According to Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Russia uses its limited assets to gain resiliency to conduct military operations on a shoestring budget. Indeed, per Gvosdev, Moscow's "ability to project disruptive military power continues to give it relevance on the global stage, even if it lacks the economic wherewithal of other major powers such as the United States or China."[3] Russia's success in supplying its forces and expanding its positions in Syria has spurred a formal intention to replicate the process to geostrategic chokepoints in the Red Sea, Indian Ocean, and beyond, as evidenced in the Russian Federation's 2022 Maritime Doctrine.

The maritime resupply known as the "Syrian Express" has been the primary enabler by which Russia executed its intervention. The Syrian Express, or the Syrian Line, as it often appears in Russian, is the maritime supply route from the Russian ports in the Black Sea (usually Novorossiysk), through the Turkish Straits, to Syrian ports in the

Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's use of this route started long before Russia's direct, overt intervention on behalf of the Assad regime on September 30, 2015, but expanded substantially as Moscow launched military operations.

This article examines the details of *how* Moscow implemented the Syrian Express, overtly and covertly, and finds that Moscow's military sealift on its own was insufficient to support operations. Russia surged, adapted, and supplemented its modest military lift capabilities to support limited operations. Indeed, Tartus may be the first pearl in the string; rather than tacking military functions on top of commerce like China, Russia is trying to build exports on top of military logistics points. Furthermore, Moscow uses service support centers to both project limited power in important geographical chokepoints and also position itself as a spoiler for its adversaries.

Figure 1. The Syrian Express Route

Past is Pretext

Russian-Syrian ties stretch back decades. The Soviet Union established relations with Syria in 1946, before the latter had formally declared independence from France, and helped Syria establish its military. The two countries signed a non-aggression pact in 1950, and Moscow provided diplomatic and international support for Damascus. Ties further increased after the Suez Crisis of 1956, as the Soviet Union positioned itself as a friend to Arab countries against the Western powers, particularly Anglo-French-Israeli

collusion.[4] However, Moscow declined a Syrian request for Soviet intervention in the Middle East in 1956.[5] Ties increased again after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and Moscow established itself as the superpower patron to Egypt and Syria.

Under Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union signed the original agreement to establish a logistics support facility (PMTO) in the port of Tartus in 1971-1972 with Hafez al-Assad, the predecessor and father of Syria's current dictator-president.[6] Already-close ties expanded in breadth and depth under Hafez. From the 1970s onward, the Soviet Union used Tartus for repair, refueling, and resupply of its Fifth Eskadra (Fifth Squadron), its naval force that was aligned against the Mediterranean-based US Sixth Fleet. Following the realignment of Egyptian foreign policy and expulsion of Soviet military advisors under Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, the Soviet Union relocated its 54th Operational Brigade of auxiliary vessels from the Egyptian ports of Alexandria and Marsa Matruh to Tartus in 1977. At the same time, the 229th Division of naval expeditionary auxiliary vessels, subordinate to the Black Sea Fleet, was formed in Tartus.[7]

The 1980s were probably the heyday of Soviet-Syrian relations. In 1980, Damascus and Moscow signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which was a Soviet-Arab response to the Camp David Accords that established peaceful relations between Israel and Egypt. The 1980 treaty provided an Article 5 security guarantee for Syria, and, in a secret protocol, the Soviet Union guaranteed to help Syria in the event of an Israeli (or Iraqi) attack.[8] Building off the agreement, in 1983 the Soviet Union and the Syrian Arab Republic signed an agreement to expand the Soviet presence in Syria, specifically at the port of Tartus and at Tiyas Airfield. The 1983 agreement resulted in the deployment of the 720th Logistics Support Facility of the Black Sea Fleet to Tartus, which included three floating berths, a floating workshop, storage facilities, barracks, and commercial facilities.[9]

The demise of the Soviet Union in late 1991, the formal dissolution of the Fifth Eskadra in 1992, and Russia's withdrawal of most of its presence in Syria put Russo-Syrian relations on a backburner for two decades. Russia made some infrastructure repairs at Tartus from 2009 to 2010, but staff at the logistics facility was reduced to a skeleton crew.[10]

The outbreak of armed conflict in Syria in 2011 changed everything. After some teenagers scribbled anti-regime graffiti on the wall of their school in the southern Syrian city of Dar'ā, Assad cracked down. Local discontent, economic problems, ethno-sectarian tensions, and the intervention of foreign powers, among other issues, resulted in a full-blown civil war in which saw the Assad regime fighting for its survival. Initially, the Syrian Express was intended to deliver weapons systems and supplies to Syria that were under contract before the eruption of the conflict. As the conflict deepened, however, Moscow's assistance expanded. Following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, shipments originated from Sevastopol, in addition to Novorossiysk. With Moscow's involvement in Syria in 2015, shipments increased further still.

Moscow and Damascus formalized the arrangement and established semi-permanent Russian position in Syria under the terms of a 49-year lease, later ratified by the Russian Duma in January 2017. The new agreement allowed the expansion of the facilities, in addition to infrastructure modernization, although some of the specifics remain in classified appendices. However, we know Moscow has free rein at the logistics point and may host up to eleven ships at Tartus, including nuclear-powered vessels.[11] There is a separate agreement for the Russian "aviation group" at Humaymim Airfield (aka Basel al-Assad Airport) and possibly other airfields in Syria.[12] In July 2020, Syria and Russia signed a supplemental agreement ("Protocol #1"), in which Syria transferred additional land and coastal waters near Humaymim airfield to Russia to set up a medical and rehabilitation center.[13]

In many ways, Moscow's return to Tartus reflects a return to Soviet thinking about the importance of logistics hubs. In addition to the Egyptian and Syrian locations, the Soviet Union had large bases at Dahuk, in what was then Ethiopia (Eritrea gained control of the area in 1991), and on Socotra, Yemen on the Red Sea, in addition to a major facility at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam on the South China Sea from 1970 to 2002.

Today, the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) refers to its Mediterranean naval force based in Tartus as the "Permanent Mediterranean Operational Formation." It is not a "squadron (ескадра)" of 40-50 ships, as in Soviet times.[14] Although organizationally part of the Black Sea Fleet, the Permanent Mediterranean Formation is frequently comprised of ships from other fleets. In the lead-up to the current war in Ukraine, Russia bolstered its forces in the Mediterranean. After Turkey disallowed warship transits to the Black Sea through the Turkish Straits in 2022, Russian-deployed ships were relegated to the Mediterranean or had to return to the Northern, Baltic, and Pacific Fleets.

Theory Meets Practice

If strategy is matching ends with means, then logistics is the glue that makes strategy possible. Luminaries of sea power have long stressed the importance of maritime commerce and military transportation capabilities, such as resupply, heavy lift, and logistics points.[15]

Most accounts of the Russian/Soviet Navy describe the importance of Admiral of the Fleet Sergei Gorshkov (1910-1988) as the architect of the Soviet Navy's expansion from the 1950s to the 1980s. In his influential book, *The Sea Power of the State*, Gorshkov stressed the importance of maritime transport, commerce, and exploration: "An important component of the sea might of the state is marine transport which since ancient times has held one of the leading places among other forms of transport…This is the most economical form of transport due to the high carrying capacity of ships, relatively small capital investments in fitting out sea routes, and the lowest gross expenditure of power per speed of displacement of cargo." "In light of this," the admiral concluded, "the merchant

fleet must be regarded as a universal component of the sea power of a country which has a most important role in war and peacetime."[16] As part of his push to recapitalize Russia's fleet with building modern warships, Gorshkov also directed Soviet and Warsaw Bloc shipyards to develop a maritime lift capability that survives today, five decades later, and forms the backbone of the Syrian Express.

In fact, the Ropucha-class "large landing ship" (*bolshoy desantny korabl*, or BDK), built in Warsaw-Pact Poland during 1970s to the early 1990s, has been the mainstay of the Syrian Express. The roll-on roll-off (RO-RO) design has a deck for tanks or fighting vehicles that runs the entire length of the ship. The vessel can also accommodate more than 300 troops. The Ropuchas can haul about 500 tons of cargo. The *Tsezar Kunikov*—a Ropucha built at the Stocznia Pólnocna shipyard in Gdańsk, Poland, and launched in 1986—has made the most round-trip voyages (forty) of any ship in the Syrian Express since January 2015.[17]

Figure 2. Russian Landings Ships (*The Ropucha-class large landing ship remains the mainstay of the Russian fleet)*

Class	Picture	Specifications
Alligator Project 1171[18]		Entered service in 1966. Length of 113m, beam of 15.6m, and draft of 4.5m. Displacement of 3040t, and a full-load displacement of 4650t. Crew of 69. Range of 4800nm at 16kts.[19]
		Syrian Express Ships: *Nikolay Filchenkov, Saratov* (destroyed in 2022), *Orsk*
Ropucha Project 775[20]		Entered service in 1975. Length of 112m, beam of 15m, draft of 3.7m, a displacement of 2200t, and a full-load displacement of 4100t. Crew of 95. Range of 6093 nm.[21]
		Syrian Express Ships: *Aleksandr Otrakovskiy* (Ropucha I), *Aleksandr Shabalin* (Ropucha I), *Olenogorskiy Gornyak* (Ropucha I),[22] *Georgiy Pobedonesets* (Ropucha II), *Kalingrad* (Ropucha II), *Minsk* (Ropucha II), *Novocherkassk* (Ropucha II), *Tsezar Kunikov* (Ropucha II), *Yamal* (Ropucha II), *Azov* (Ropucha III), *Korolev* (Ropucha III)
Ivan Gren Project 11711[23]		Entered service 2018. 2 built, 2 under construction. Length of 120m, beam of 16.5m, hull height of 11m and a draft of 3.8m at a full-load displacement of 6,600t. Crew of 100. Range of 3500 nm at 16 kt economical speed. 18 kt maximum speed. Can support single Ka-29 (Helix-B) helicopter.[24]
		Syrian Express Ships: N/A

Although fewer in number than the Ropuchas, three out of the four remaining Alligator-class large landing ships, built from 1966 to 1975, have also supported the Syrian Express. The Alligator-class carries about 1,000 tons of cargo and 300-450 troops, and is a RO-RO, like the Ropuchas.[25] All fourteen ships in the class were retired between 1992 and 1995 but four were brought out of retirement for the Syrian Express.[26] The *Orsk*, commissioned in 1968, was returned to active duty in the Syrian Express as recently as January 2018.[27] The *Nikolay Filchenkov*, commissioned in 1975, has the second-most round trips to Syria (thirty-one) since January 2015.[28] Another Alligator-class vessel, the *Saratov,* was used in the Syrian Express but was destroyed in March 2022 at a pier in Berdiansk, Russian-occupied Ukraine by a possible SS-21 tactical ballistic missile.[29]

While its aging fleet of Alligator- and Ropucha-class landing ships made Moscow's intervention in Syria possible, demand immediately outstripped capacity and Russia had to switch to or supplement with other means of transporting men and materiel. How Russia shipped the supplies beyond the Soviet-era landing ships is something of a puzzle. Some methods were above board, such as the re-purposing of naval auxiliaries like the *Yauza*, an Amguema-class polar cargo ship, and the *Sayany*, a converted timber carrier. Other approaches were less straightforward and almost certainly designed to obfuscate matters.

In 2015, through a web of shell companies, the Russian military, through the Ministry of Defense logistics company *Oboronlogistika* (which was formed in 2011), bought and refurbished used civilian vessels, which it then enlisted into service for the Syrian Express.[30] Converted civilian carriers included the renamed vessels *Dvinitsa-50*, *Kazan-60*, *Kyzyl-60*, and the *Vologda-50*, among others.[31] Russia also purchased several additional RO-RO ships, such as the *Aleksandr Tkachenko* and the *MV Novorossiysk*. In 2016, Moscow added the pre-owned RO-ROs *Sparta II* and *Sparta III*.[32] As of late September 2018, *Sparta III* was suspected of transporting a Russian-made S-300 (SA-20) surface-to-air missile system to Syria after Syrian air defenders accidently shot down a Russian Il-20 reconnaissance plane following an Israeli strike against probable Hezbollah-associated targets in Syrian territory.[33] Russia has also contracted transport from commercial shippers based in or controlled by friendly countries to evade sanctions and restrictions on arms shipments to Syria. An example is the Sierra Leone-flagged *Taha Y*. As a result of these activities, *Oboronlogistika* ships have been placed on the US Treasury's list of sanctioned vessels.[34]

Tales of the Turks

The best measure by which we can gauge the scale of Russia's twenty-first century intervention in Syria is the chokepoint of the Turkish Straits and the role of Turks—both official and unofficial—in tracking the Syrian Express.

"I started observing ships in the Bosporus when I was a teenager and I began taking photos for myself in 1987," Devrim Yaylali told *Newsweek* in 2016. "At the start of the

internet I published photos about the Turkish navy. Eight years ago I found it dull so I started to write about every ship that I saw in the Bosporus on my blog and then merged all the pictures I took." *Newsweek* called Yaylali "the man who stares at boats." Although he does not sail, Yaylali is a passionate ship spotter, a hobbyist who runs the website turkishnavy.net. He was among the first people to notice the large increase of Russian vessels transiting the Turkish Straits in 2012, and he started publishing lists online. Even with the return of Soviet-era tactics of Russian ship captains trying to hide their tracks, Yaylali sees bloggers and hobbyists like himself as way to make it harder for militaries to "fool the people."[35]

Another Turk, Yörük Işık, photographs and tracks ships that transit the Bosporus Strait on his active Twitter account (@YorukIsik) and website, http://bosphorusobserver. com. With over 51,000 followers on Twitter, Işık has a large and influential web presence. This presence is well deserved, as Işık was among the first to identify the ships Russia bought via third parties for use in the Syrian Express.

Ship watchers like Yaylali and Işık are an indispensable resource for tracking and documenting the flow of ships from Novorossiysk to Syria. They provide the most current information and capture the transit of Russian-owned or contracted ships through the Turkish Straits with surprising reliability and regularity; if they miss a northbound transit to the Black Sea, they often capture it on the backend when the ship travels south again.

Figure 3. Yörük Işık and the Syrian Express on Twitter

Under the Montreux Convention of 1936, Black Sea (riparian) states—which includes Russia—must notify the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) before passage through the Turkish Straits eight days prior to the intended passages.[36] The Turkish government tracks the transits of military vessels through the Straits and the MFA publishes annual reports with the treaty, its annexes, and reports on commercial and military transits. There are lags in publication and the reports do not necessarily identify transits of civilian cargo vessels that may be transporting military goods or some military support vessels, such as some of Russia's Chilikin-class oilers. Despite the time lag and a few minor omissions, the Turkish MFA reports remain the most accurate and the only publicly available, official record.

The Turkish MFA reports also make it possible to evaluate how comprehensive and accurate the ship spotters have been in their reporting. Comparing the official lists with turkishnavy.net and bosphorusobserver.com, Yaylali and Işık between them captured 65 percent of the Russian transits in 2014 compared to 86 percent in 2016. Understandably, the ship watchers missed more nighttime transits and weather/fog may have also been a factor. As mentioned previously, however, they seldom missed both legs of a transit, which makes possible a confident determination of notional north- or southbound transits when one is missing.

Another resource available to those researching the Syrian Express is data from the Automatic Identification System (AIS), which the International Maritime Organization's International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea requires aboard internationally-traveling ships of 300 or more gross tons and all passenger-carrying vessels.[37] AIS complements radar, using a transponder to broadcast a ship's identity, type, position, course, speed, navigational status and other safety-related information to shore stations, other ships, and aircraft. AIS data is available online, but historical data is difficult to access without using paid services, such as marinetraffic.com or IHS's Sea Web service. In addition, the information is voluminous.

Moreover, Russia has almost certainly been using methods to obfuscate AIS data, such as turning off transponders after a ship passes through the Turkish Straits or transmitting false destinations or cargo information. Eagle-eyed internet denizens have noticed discrepancies and, like the Turkish ship spotters, were able to identify vessels involved in the Syrian Express from the start of Russia's Syria intervention. Broadcasting false destinations or simply turning off AIS transponders are fairly rudimentary methods; in time of war Russia may employ more robust electronic warfare methods, like jamming global positioning system satellite signals, or cyber capabilities to deny, tamper with, or overwhelm AIS tracking.

Figure 4. A Real AIS Turn-off (as seen on Twitter by TankerTrackers.com)
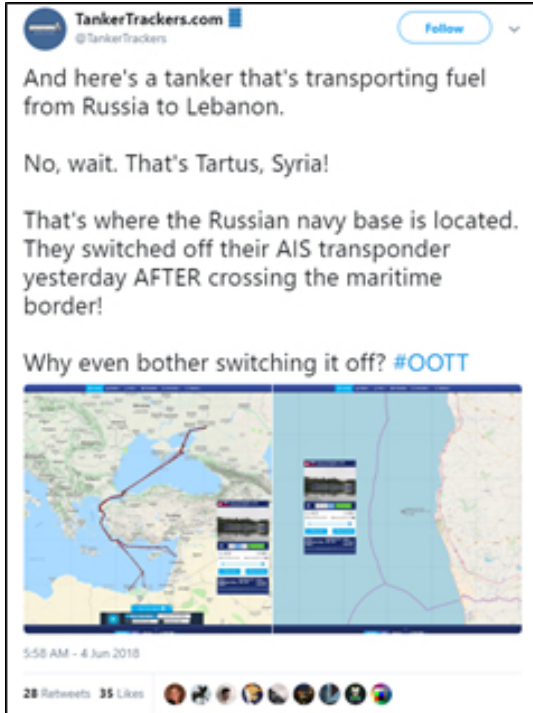
Using AIS data, Mikhail Voytenko, a trained merchant marine navigator and journalist, wrote an online article in November 2015—one month after the official Russian intervention in Syria—that explored the ships, ports, and costs of the Syrian Express. By filtering for ships suitable for transporting military cargo out of Novorossiysk or the Ukrainian port of Oktybrsk, Voytenko identified sixteen general cargo and RO-RO vessels involved in Russia's maritime supply line to Syria. This included the general cargo vessels *Kareem R*, *Transfair*, and *Atlantic Prodigy*, in addition to the ro-ro *Aleksandr Tkachenko*. Voytenko summarized, "As naturally, [the Russian] military soon came to [understand] that the best and most convenient way to support Syrian Express, [was] ownership of the vessels. It's cheaper, and it allows to provide maximum security and fullest possible concealment of [the] vessels' movements."[38]

AIS data has the potential to fill in missing pieces of the Syrian Express puzzle. Not all Russian aid and military shipments to Syria arrive from Novorossiysk via the Turkish Straits. Unfortunately, tracking much beyond the Novorossiysk-Tartus route is beyond the scope of this analysis, which focuses more narrowly on filling the knowledge gaps regarding military cargo transits from the Black Sea to Syria. Further research on alternative shipping routes would likely shed additional light on the full scope and scale of Russia's maritime logistics arrangements.

Numbers Games

According to a video on the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) website in August 2018, Russia delivered an average of 2,000 tons of cargo to Syria each day by sea and by air over a nearly three-year period from 2015 to 2018. The MoD claimed:

> There have been 424 deliveries by sea and 2,785 deliveries by air transport to ensure the activities of the group of troops (forces). A total of 3,250 people, 4,501 weapons and pieces of military hardware, and 1.55 million tons of cargo have been delivered by sea; 91,285 people, more than 1,000 weapons and pieces of military hardware, and 55,846 tons of cargo have been delivered by air.

Although air transport gets a lot of the attention, such as the speedy airborne delivery of the S-400 Surface-to-Air Missile System to Tartus in 2015, it is really the steady flow of materials over water via the Syrian Express that has sustained Russia's intervention in Syria. Using the MoD's numbers, it appears that 96.5 percent of cargo was transported by sea, with each delivery carrying an average of 3,655 tons. In comparison, air transport delivered only 3.5 percent of cargo shipments by weight, but 96.4 percent of the personnel.[39]

It is possible to make a good faith effort to check the Russian MoD's numbers using information from the Turkish ship watchers, annuals reports from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and AIS data. While the data compilation does not account for all Russian shipments to Syria, which does not come exclusively from the Black Sea, it probably captures most of the major muscle movements and is a reasonably adequate yardstick for discerning overall trends.

The movement of Ropucha- and Alligator-class landing ships is likely the best gauge for Russian military activity and operations tempo over time in Syria. The transits of landing ships are the best covered between available data sources, and the cargoes are almost exclusively military in nature. Landings ships have distinct silhouettes and are hard to miss as they transit the narrow traffic lanes of the Turkish Straits. With Turkey's closure of the straits to military vessels, however, this tracking essentially ends in March 2022.

Figure 5. Ropucha- and Alligator-class Landing Ships Southbound Transits through the Turkish Straits (by Quarter), 2013-2022
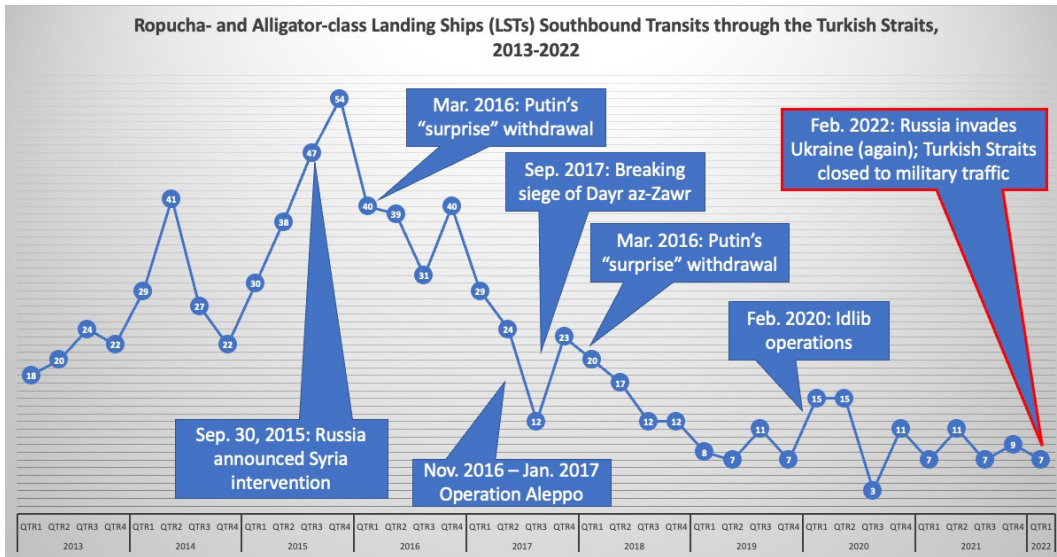
The data show a peak of landing ships southbound through the Turkish Straits in the Q4 2015, in line with the start of Russia's intervention in September of that year. The trend since that quarterly peak of fifty-four southbound transits has been on an overall downward trajectory with smaller peaks corresponding to Operation Aleppo (to capture Aleppo), the deployment of Russia's lone carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* in Q4 2016, and a push to break the ISIL siege of Dayr az-Zawr in the eastern part of Syria along the Euphrates River in Q4 2017.

Similarly, there were declines in landing ship southbound passages after Russia's two publicly announced withdrawals from Syria. In March 2016, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a "surprise" withdrawal but the decline in shipments was short-lived and reversed with the start of Operation Aleppo later that year.[40] In December 2017, Russian dignitaries, including President Putin and Defense Minister Shoigu, flew to Syria for a photo opportunity with Bashar al-Assad and announced a partial withdrawal from Syria, which the Russians claimed had been "completely liberated" from ISIS. At Humaymim Airbase, Putin declared, "I have made a decision: most of the Russian military contingent staying in the Syrian Arab Republic is returning home, to Russia."[41] Nearly a year later, however, there were still ISIS-controlled pockets in Syria despite a noticeable decline in shipments throughout 2018.[42]

Looking at overall Russian military passages through the Straits shows an overall peak in Q4 2015 with the official intervention in Syria, and smaller increases in Q4 2016 and Q4 2017 corresponding to major operations.

As the main thoroughfare for the Syrian Express, the transit of Russian warships are also reflected in Russia's relative share of overall international military passages through

the straits. Despite year-by-year increases in declared transits by naval vessels from all countries through the Turkish Straits for this period, Turkish MFA reports indicate Russian military traffic comprised 67.12 percent of military passages in 2014, 82.47 percent in 2015, 82.76 percent in 2016, 49.13 percent in 2017, 66.5 percent in 2018, 61.68 percent in 2019, 59.31 percent in 2020, and 60.81 percent in 2021.[43] Official data are not available for 2022.

Figure 6. Russian Military Ships (all) Southbound Transits through the Turkish Straits (by quarter), 2015-Q1 2022
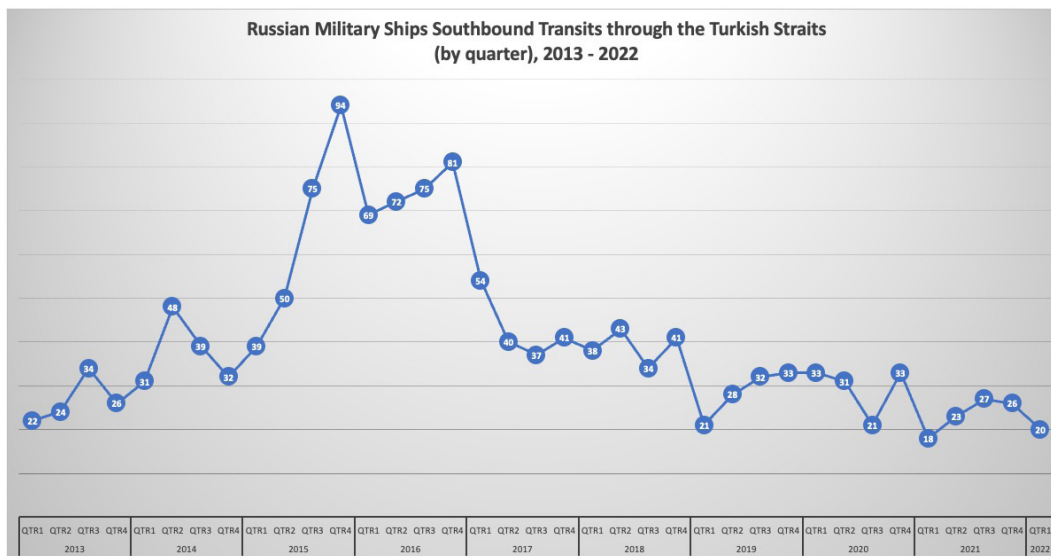
Tonnage over time is a useful metric for describing the Syrian Express but there are some important caveats. On the micro level, it is difficult to determine the cargo capacities of individual ships, which often are not listed. Using the difference between a ship's gross tonnage and its summer deadweight tonnage—both of which usually can be found—is an imperfect solution because the difference is the theoretical upper limit for carrying capacity and so represents a potential maximum rather than actual load. Second, capacity varies by types of cargo. Hauling grain is different from hauling bullets, like shipping tanks is different from moving troops.

On the macro level, multiplying identified ship transits by their carrying capacities yields an estimate of 1.17 million total tons shipped by sea through the Straits from January 2015 to August 2018. This sum stands 25 percent shy of the Russian MoD's claim to have shipped 1.55 million tons since September 2015. It is plausible that the 25 percent difference originated from outside the Black Sea and would, thus, never be observed transiting the Turkish Straits. Due to the calculation constraints described above, the 1.17 million ton estimate almost certainly exaggerates the cargoes carried on identified ships. It is almost just as likely, however that additional unidentified ships also carried Syrian Express cargoes on this route.

We analyze the numbers we have, not necessarily the numbers we want. Examining the Syrian Express's tonnage over time reveals the same trends as landing ships and military passages: an overall peak in late 2015 and smaller peaks in the fourth quarters of 2016 and 2017. The Russian MoD's figure of approximately 2,000 tons per day since 2015 seems plausible.

With the closure of the straits to military transit as a result of Russia's attack on Ukraine and the resulting unavailability of landing ship lift, support for Russian forces in Syria has almost certainly shifted to *Oboronlogistika* ships and other commercial carriers. Future analysis of AIS and the Turkish ship spotter data could reveal the details of post-closure modifications to the Syrian Express.

Analysis

Drilling into the nitty-gritty details about the Syrian Express confirms much that was already widely understood since 2015 but also reveals some less well documented observations.

First, detailed analysis confirms that landing ships were the backbone of the Syrian Express until the Turkish Straits were closed to military traffic in 2022. However, Russia's fleet of aging Ropucha- and Alligator-class ships was insufficient to the task at the start of Russia's intervention in Syria. Simply put, Moscow utilized everything that floated at the start of its operations—including two out of four Alligators, eight out of fifteen Ropuchas, multiple auxiliary vessels, and even a repurposed polar cargo ship and a timber carrier. Nevertheless, it still needed to acquire additional vessels and hire commercial carriers to meet demand.

Russia attempted to actively conceal its increased throughput, but ship spotters (and Western governments) detected the dramatic increase in shipments through the Turkish Straits. The claim that Western governments and militaries were taken by strategic surprise by Russia's adroit mobilization to support the Assad regime against terrorists appears to be self-serving Russian propaganda. While far from the truth, the claim may nonetheless resonate with domestic audiences in Russia.

In the category of what is new, there are several observations.

Despite a downward trend in shipments and tonnage since 2015, Russia sustained a level of shipments above its pre-intervention shipments to Syria until the second half of 2018. Notwithstanding noticeable declines after announced withdrawals of forces, Russia is maintaining its presence in Syria and looks like it will be there for the long haul. The investments in expanding infrastructure in Tartus and elsewhere signify that Moscow is looking at its Mediterranean base as a permanent presence.

Russia is maintaining a relatively light footprint in Syria, although prior to Ukraine it had to ability to surge its shipments to Syria. Moscow demonstrated this capability during Operation Aleppo and in breaking the siege of Dayr az-Zawr.

While the Kremlin may have lacked sufficient military capacity to support expeditionary operations in 2015, the downward trend in shipments since the start of operations probably signifies that Russia has spare capacity and likely shifted to non-military transport. Moscow is also building new capacity with the Ivan Gren-class landing ships that have begun coming online (albeit at a glacial pace), and also continues to procure used cargo ships.[44]

Close examination of Russian voyage patterns also reveals regular schedules and a small convoy structure. Individual ships make one to two round trips per month, and groups of ships will often travel the same direction within a 24-hour period. There may be practical reasons for two-ship convoys, such sticking to a regular schedule for offloading and processing cargoes at limited-capacity facilities like Tartus, and the availability of Russian military escorts through the Aegean and Mediterranean. Convoys that include the same ships from passage to passage were more common in 2015 and 2016, when shipments were more frequent, but certain ships pairs still travel the same direction within a 24-hour period. For example, the *Aleksandr Otrakovskiy* and *Aleksandr Shabalin* (both Ropuchas), made joint transits in February, April, May, and June of 2015, as did the *Tzezar Kunikov* and *Azov* (also Ropuchas) in August, September, and October 2015.

Last, and perhaps most important, the spike of Syrian Express passages through the Straits in 2015 demonstrated that Moscow had made the decision months in advance of its official intervention in September 2015. Moving heavy equipment, troops, and war materiel to marshaling yards and then aboard ships takes planning, logistics support, and time.

Russian Armed Forces Chief of Staff General Valery Gerasimov admitted as much in a candid interview with *Komsomokskaya Pravda*. Gerasimov told the interviewer, "We had virtually no experience moving troops and forces over such a distance, to the territory of a state that does not border our country." Planners "considered the experience" of Operation Anadyr in 1962, when the Soviet Union moved troops to Cuba, and also rehearsed the movement of units in "useful" snap exercises. (Gerasimov left out the fact that Operation Anadyr also involved the attempted secret deployment of nuclear-armed missiles and precipitated the Cuban Missile Crisis.) The deployment "took something like a month… [but] the logistics component required more time," Gerasimov stated. "We had to create an infrastructure and an all-round logistics system."[45]

The Syrian Express has not been the unequivocal success Gerasimov and others have portrayed. Repurposing old commercial vessels entails some risk. In December 2015, for instance, near the peak of the Syrian Express, the *Kyzyl-60* had to be towed through the Straits to Sevastopol.[46] Similarly, the *Aleksandr Tkachenko* suffered a propulsion casualty in November 2017 in the Aegean Sea while in route from Novorossiysk to Tartus and needed to be towed by a Greek tug.[47]

Increasing traffic through the narrow confines of the Straits, one of the world's busiest waterways, also creates potential hazards. The seventy-eight crew members of the Russian Navy intelligence ship *Liman* discovered this the hard way in April 2017, when their ship collided with a sheep-hauling cargo vessel and sank near Istanbul. Fortunately, the sailors were rescued and there were no fatalities.[48]

Conclusion

The Syrian Express demonstrates that Russia possesses the necessary military lift capacity to support modest operations outside Russian territory. The distance is not vast, and the tempo has been on a downward trajectory since 2015. The Syrian Express supports a modest deployment of Russian warships to the Permanent Mediterranean Formation, but, at least at present, there is no Fifth Eskadra to constantly challenge the US Sixth Fleet as was the case during the Cold War. That said, Russia maintains more than a token presence of Russian ships and submarines in the Mediterranean, and it would be unwise to ignore that potential threat. Moreover, the formation is large and capable enough to support RFN spoiler operations that seek to threaten or intimidate ships transiting through the Suez Canal.

In contrast to the 2015 Maritime Doctrine, which mentions neither Syria nor the Red Sea, Russia's 2022 Maritime Doctrine reflects the changes in Moscow's approach to the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond as a result of its intervention in Syria. The new doctrine calls specifically for:

> [D]eveloping relations with the states of the Middle East and North Africa with adjacent seas and areas including the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea; pursuing a resolute policy to ensure military-political stability in the Middle East region; strengthening the partnership with the Syrian Arab Republic, providing comprehensive assistance in regional conflicts resolution; ensuring a permanent naval presence of the Russian Federation in the Mediterranean Sea based in the Naval Logistics Support Center [PMTO] on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic, and establishing and developing logistics support centers on the territory of other states in the region; developing economic and military-technical cooperation with Mediterranean basin states.[49]

It would appear that Moscow's thinking is evolving toward making Tartus its first pearl. Russia is not going away from the Mediterranean, but rather building a sustainable footprint to continue its operations in Syria and also as a starting point to increase ties with other countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and beyond. While Russia and Sudan signed an agreement to establish a PMTO at Port Sudan in 2019 and the military junta in Khartoum has approved the plan—perhaps after getting Moscow to sweeten the deal—the agreement cannot take force until an as-yet-to-be-formed Sudanese legislature ratifies the agreement.[50]

Many challenges remain for Russia's aspirations of establishing PMTOs beyond Syria, primarily revolving around its war against Ukraine. The limitations are political, technological, and economic as sanctions limit Russia's access externally and Moscow keeps prioritizing its war against Ukraine.

Russia seems likely to continue its efforts of great power projection on a shoestring budget near strategic chokepoints, and Moscow's development of the Syrian Express illuminates how Russia moves equipment and sanctioned goods through repurposed commercial vessels, ship-to-ship transfers, AIS obfuscation/misdirection, and other means. As this article goes to press, a joint investigation between Bellingcat and Scripps News reveals Russia's evolving tactics to export stolen grain from occupied Ukraine.[51] Moscow appears to have practiced and perhaps developed many of these methods with its Syrian Express.

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Perspectives on Religious Extremism and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

Ali G. Dizboni

Abstract: Religious extremism is arguably the most controversial topic in the post 9/11 era. This divisive and sensitive topic not only has pitted academics, policy makers, and political parties against each other but also has become a source of passionate discord among the public. This article surveys a number of perspectives on the relationship between Islam and extremism and notes that a constructivist perspective offers a better account of the relationship between Islam and extremism as well as provides more possibilities for the contributions of Islamic actors to peacebuilding in the region than others. Indeed, despite its limitations, constructivism offers a better picture by de-emphasizing an essentialist account of Islam and by bringing Islam into the debate on peace and extremism. The article first briefly reviews three key views for understanding the relationship between Islam and extremism: correlation, denial, and constructivist perspective. It then applies the constructivist perspective on al-Qaeda narratives and concludes with a discussion of the utility of such a perspective for peace making in Middle East.

Keywords: Extremism, Islam, constructivist perspective, Middle East, al-Qaeda, peacebuilding.

Introduction

Islamic extremism is arguably the most controversial topic in both academia and the public policy realm in post 9/11 era. This divisive and sensitive topic not only has pitted academics, policy makers, and political parties against each other but also has sown passionate discord among the general public. Academics have attacked one another with accusations of political correctness, appeasement, new colonialism, war mongering, policy agenda-driven research, and a lack of objectivity.[1] Political parties have feuded over issues such as policy framing and securitization, root causes versus Islam fascism/fanaticism. Moreover, Islamophobia and an anxiety over the presence of Muslims in Western societies became characteristic of mainstream views and fringe movements.

The discussion on Islam in understanding extremism needs to take into account the broader context of political violence in Middle East. One must consider the prevalent context of turbulent geopolitics, regional and international rivalries, and social turmoil. Since 2001, Middle East life and politics have been significantly affected by political violence of all types such as state terrorism, state sponsorship of terrorism, systematic repression practiced by authoritarian states, nuclear proliferation, interstate conflict, proxy war, non-state jihadi organizations, various forms of extremism, ongoing civilian (intra state) conflict, foreign military intervention (e.g., regime changes), humanitarian disaster, and large scale non-Islamist social movements such as the Arab Spring and waves of social protest (e.g., Iran).

Over the last few years, research and media coverage of Islam and extremism in Middle East has seen a sharp decline. The military defeat of ISIS in 2017, the killing of al-Qaeda leaders, and a decline in non-state terrorist operations in the region and beyond are just some of the reasons for the shift/decline in such coverage. Relatively speaking, scholars on extremism and radicalization are now tending toward the study of other emerging types of extremism such as that exhibited by elements of the far right in the US.[2]

This is not to say that the preoccupation with the threat of *religiously* motivated extremism in the region and beyond has dissipated or faded away. Such threats may take new shapes and directions. The return of the Taliban to power, the reactivation of ISIS branches in the region and beyond (e.g., Africa), lingering sectarian killings (communitarian violence) in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and, on a more general level, the *wars within Islam* over the future of Middle Eastern societies are but some of the indications of the persistence of these threats.[3] In the cyber domain, jihadi extremism did not relent and peaked during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The general malaise about Islam (whether justified or not) is very present. In the region, one sees generational shifts in attitude toward political Islam and Islamist parties. Beyond the region, Islamophobia among Western publics and elsewhere (e.g., India, Myanmar, China, and others) is present.

Indeed, the challenge of religious extremism—both in the Middle East and elsewhere—remains. So, too, does that of assessing it. To what extent are past analytical approaches capable of providing the insights required to understand and address these challenges? This article attempts to address this question. More specifically, it briefly reviews three prominent views for understanding the relationship between Islam and extremism: correlation, denial, and constructivist perspective. Second, it summarily applies the constructivist perspective on al-Qaeda narratives. Finally, the article will discuss the utility of such perspective for peace making in Middle East. This article argues that constructivism, despite its limitations, offers a better picture by de-emphasizing an essentialist account of Islam and by bringing Islam in the debate on peace and extremism. This article is not about the theology of extremism in Islam or an apologetic exercise, for that matter. Rather, it presents a brief critical overview of scholarly views on Islam and extremism and concludes with a discussion of the potential contribution of religious actors to peacebuilding in the region.

I. Islam and Extremism?

A thorough discussion on why terrorists act is beyond the scope of this article. Such a question covers a wide variety of hypothesised motivations, causes, purposes, objectives, and aims. Present scholarly typologies primarily emphasize structural causes as well as political and ideological drivers/motivations and refer to how extremists themselves justify/legitimize their actions. As usual, *mea culpa,* the disciplinary scholars admit that

an overarching/parsimonious theory on the *root causes* of terrorism is very challenging and has yet to be achieved.[4]

A cursory look at the scholarly literature on extremism and its linkages with Islam singles out a spectrum featuring those who hold that Islam is not relevant at all in the understanding of extremism at one end and those who maintain that *new terrorism* has changed the nature of terrorism itself on the other.[5] There is also a somewhat middling position where religion *acts as a collective action solution*. In this approach, the ultimate purpose of terrorism is political change and not moral redemption in the afterlife. Others, such as Scott Appleby, have suggested strong, weak, and pathological classifications of religion in the explanation of extremism.[6]

Building on this spectrum view, this critical review, far from being exhaustive, briefly overviews three types of linkages drawn from the scholarly literature. Generally put, the correlation thesis views Islam as closely associated with extremism, followed by the thesis that Islam should be brushed aside as an irrelevant explanatory factor. Finally, a third view holds that that both theses offer an incomplete picture, and a more fruitful question would be why and how extremist actors construct/perceive Islam. In other words, one should go beyond the correlation and irrelevant theses and focus on how religious narratives are constructed by the extremists. In this approach, the real question is not if Islam as religion leads/drives to violence but rather how it is perceived by extremists.[7]

Several cautionary observations are in order here. First, one should remember that each academic discipline views the question from its own disciplinary standpoint and axioms. For instance, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, and religious studies experts tend to approach the topic using their own assumptions and methods with not only explanatory consequences but also praxis/policy implications. Second, as alluded to before, the climate surrounding the post 9-11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing global anti-terror wars have created a predominant social phobia regarding Islam and Muslims in not only the West but also elsewhere.[8] The empirical and fact-based research must resist the temptation of playing on mainstream fear, biases, and misperceptions and their political instrumentalization by actors with vested interests.[9]

Beyond this and regarding the scope of this article, this research focuses on the non-state Sunni case of extremism (al-Qaeda narrative on jihad). And while extremism and terrorism can exhibit nuanced differences conceptually, they are used interchangeably throughout. Generally described, while extremism refers to a belief in the legitimacy of resorting to violence for political objectives, terrorism refers to the actual resort to such violence. As for the concept of Islam, it refers to a vast corpus of scriptures, customs, complex history, sectarian legal schools, and mystical and philosophical traditions. The diversity and the plurality of opposing scholarly interpretations of Islam as religion is still very much alive today, including not only its sharia precepts but, more importantly, its foundational theological and eschatological tenets.

A. A Cursory Review of Thesis 1: Islam and Extremism a Correlation

Here one finds many formulations of the correlation thesis. These range from identifying Islam as the primary driver of extremism to Islam as a secondary driver (interacting with) other factors such as military interventions and deep social grievances. In sum, Islam is part of the problem of extremism in the region. Simply put, this corpus of writing, be it case study-oriented or more general in character, submits that Islam and extremism are correlated (i.e., co-occurrence and causality linkage).

The assertion of such an association between Islam and extremism comes from scholars of different persuasions and backgrounds. Notably, the origins of such views date back to long before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as the first religious revolution in modern history. The long-established orientalist tradition of scholarship (e.g., historians, theologians and anthropologists, literary critics) on Islam argued for the endemic causes of violence in the Muslim history, culture, and religion.[10] That being said, in the post-Cold War era, arguably the most famous examples are the works of political scientist Samuel Huntington and the historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis. Both approach the question from identity (self-definition) and civilizational (history) levels of analysis and have had significant influence on policy makers in the US and elsewhere. Huntington describes the Muslim world as a monolithic Islamic civilizational identity with a charged history of conflict against the *Judaeo-Christian civilization*. To be fair, he admits the violent history of colonialism and imperialism in the region. Yet, he submits that identity is the source of emerging wars.[11] In this civilizational matrix of world politics where culture plays a dominant role, Islamic civilization has the most tense and bloodiest relationship with the West. In his view, the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in opposition to Western universalism is the key driver of the conflict between Islam and the West. Lewis, in works such as *The Political Language of Islam* and *The Crisis of Islam,* presents a similar thesis (in 1990, prior to Huntington's work in 1993) and claims that the first terrorist movement in history emerged among Muslims with the sect of assassins. Islam, by definition and history, is in an unending holy war. Jihad is a morally, legally, and religiously binding commandment on Muslims to expand the *Ummah* in a continuous battle until the victory of *Dar al-Islam* (the Abode of Islam).[12] One sees this line of thinking reflected in other writings on the *New Terrorism* (e.g., Bruce Hoffman, Walter Laqueur). The *fourth wave* of terrorism (Islamic terrorism) is radically different from previous secular waves in numerous ways (e.g., value system, worldview, uncompromising nature, casualty rate). This New Terrorism is believed to be the most pernicious and lethal due to its faith-based nature.[13]

A somewhat more extreme example of the correlation thesis can be characterized as the essentialist/textualist argument. In reference primarily to the foundational *scriptures* (such as the Quran and Hadith), the tenants of this view maintain that Islam is, first, a very political religion and its prophet is a statesman. Here the linkage between Islam and politics is the crux of the argument. Second, jihad has a privileged place in the

Quran and the prophet is a military commander: Jihad is declared against polytheists, unbelievers, hypocrites, and rebels (external and internal enemies).[14] A prime example of the essentialist argument is Hector Avalos' research on the origins of religious violence. Conflicts are about scarce resources (i.e., spiritual blessing), a concept borrowed from political science but applied in theology. The divine blessing goes only to those who obey God and stand ready to implement his commandments, which includes resorting to violence, believed to be a sacred obligation. Reference to videotapes of suicide bombers prior to the conduct of their terrorist operations is widely used to demonstrate Islamic extremism. In this belief system, defeat is impossible and victory—either military or spiritual—is certain. Faith is not a justification but a legitimation of the jihad and a mark of true believers. This argument also uses the violent history of Muslim societies as a supplementary vindication for their case.[15]

Another example of theological excavation for extremism is the latest writing of famous sociologist Mark Juergensmeyer. While Juergensmeyer maintains that the underlying conditions for the emergence of terrorism are socioeconomic, real and deep grievances (e.g., a sense of alienation, marginalization, and/or social frustration, among others) shared by large masses of people, once expressed by secular ideologies, are now championed by jihadi discourses. For him, religion comes in the mix as a key component of the motivational discourse. This motivational discourse presents itself as an alternative to invasive secular politics and culture. Religion becomes the framework or the ideology of the resort to jihad against the West and its satellite corrupt governments. Islamic "images and themes" are an expression of a deeper underlying social malaise/crisis. Religion is not the initiator or the creator of political violence. It is the medium of expression which needs to be examined and taken into account. In Juergensmeyer's words, what Islam (like some other religions, in his view) brings (i.e., contributes) to violence is the following: personal reward, vehicles of social mobilization, an organizational network, moral justifications, a justification for violence, an all-encompassing worldview, and, most importantly, the cosmic war. Such a view of war accounts the most for the problematic nature of jihadism (like other variants of extremism in other religious traditions). Cosmic war, in contrast to secular wars (similar to the above-mentioned New Terrorism thesis) implies absolutism, the impossibility of compromise, and the demonization and dehumanization of an enemy portrayed as evil.[16]

Similarly, the French scholarship of Islam and terrorism (experts such as political scientist Gilles Kepel and *Radicalisation de l'Islam*), sees jihadism as rooted in Salafi foundational texts. Kepel, for instance, presents the genealogy of the contemporary ideology of jihadism by carefully tracing it back to the core writing of Salafists, starting with the medieval Islam *Hanbali* scholar Ibn Taymiyya.[17]

In sum, the correlationist literature sees the relationship between Islam and extremism as one beyond mere contextual, accidental, or contingent. When it comes to extremism, for instance, Islam has, to say the least, problematic content conducive to violence.

Notably a few observations are warranted on the flaws in the correlation thesis. The first involves reductionism in methodology. It is methodologically very challenging to attribute causal linkages or associations to social phenomena. Epistemological and methodological limits in the social sciences make it very difficult to demonstrate cause-effect association/relationship. Second, essentialism (trans-historical Islam as an independent analytical factor with fixed ontological properties) brushes aside not only the diversity of equally valid and widespread readings of *scriptures* but also the contextual analysis of those texts. Quranic verses, even taken at face value, are a reservoir of diversity in terms of content, precepts, utterances, and, most importantly, interpretation. There are contradictions, inconsistencies, and gradualism in the foundational texts uttered by Mohammad. A textualist approach to the Quran ironically resembles the way the extremists project those texts. Furthermore, how can one reduce the diversity and divergences within the Muslim world (scholars and public) to one entity with fixed and permanent features with inherent violent animosity toward secular modernity (i.e., the Western civilization)? The key problem with the correlationist argument is that it overlooks the plurality of Islam, both theologically and historically, and attributes the extremism to Islam rather than to the construct of meaning by extremist actors.

B. A Cursory Overview of Thesis 2: Brushing Aside Islam as a Driver of Extremism

In contrast to the correlation school, one finds a variety of strands in a second group of literature ranging from Islam as being a religion of peace taken hostage by extremists to an emphasis on secular research methodology that ignores religion in general and emphasizes the causality of material factors (non-transcendental) in fueling extremism. There is no space in this article to render justice to the vast scholarly literature (Muslim and non-Muslim) focused on internal theological discussions in Islam, the hermeneutic evolution of Muslim understanding of Islam, and the epistemology of Islamic knowledge (historicity and empiricism).[18]

On the methodological irrelevance of Islam, political scientist Robert Pape is possibly the most prominent and cited example. Pape holds the view that most suicide bombers (used as critical case study) do not act out of a religious belief system but rather for political strategic reasons (strategic choice). Based on the Chicago dataset project of suicide terrorism, he claims that jihadists are political actors rising to defend their culture and land in an asymmetric balance of power. Rejecting the individual level of analysis, Pape applies rational choice theory to institutional/organizational behavior. To Pape, political violence does not emanate from individual indoctrination or psychological proclivities. By downplaying the individual idiosyncrasies and using Thomas Schelling's concept of the *rationality of irrationality,* he holds that organizational/collective rationality overrides individual irrationality. Despite the controversial nature of suicide in Islam and the lack of popular support for such action, suicide terrorism seeks the maximum of coercive impact through such action.[19] In a similar vein, work by Mia Bloom on the strategy of suicide terrorism explains suicide terrorism with reference to two factors. First, the failure

of other forms of resistance (a recurrent theme in the history of contemporary Muslim jihadism) and intense inter-group competition (the subject of much recent literature on infighting between al-Qaeda and ISIS).[20] In brief, Islam cannot and does not explain extremism.

The irrelevance of Islam as an explanatory factor takes interesting forms in the literature and is reminiscent of the concept of pathological terrorism (suggested by Appleby). Sociologist Olivier Roy (*Islamisation des radicaux,* in contrast to Kepel) moved from an earlier position characterizing Islam as being important in explaining terrorist events such as 9/11 to *nihilistic* jihadism. The new generation of French jihadists are accultured (illiterate in Islam and not interested in Islam *per se*). Roy downplays the ideological dimension (unlike Kepel) and emphasizes the generational frustration of these new jihadists searching for new meaning and change in France.[21]

Some of the advocates of this thesis (i.e., ignoring/dismissing Islam as an explanatory factor) believe that the emphasis on the prevalence of Islam in terrorism has counterterrorism and policy objectives (functional advantages). In his book, *The Myth of Religious Violence,* William T. Cavanaugh argues that counterterrorism needs to legitimize its war on terror. It does so, based on a binary securitization vision: one side is considered secular, rational, and enlightened, and the other fanatic, obscurantist, and evil. One can extend this functionalist logic to terrorist actors like al-Qaeda. As the author states, "(t)he disbelief of the enemy and its resulting hollowness, hypocrisy and terrorism enables al-Qaeda to present itself as the true follower of Muhammad and its attacks as sanctioned resistance." The distinction between Islam and unbelief serves al-Qaeda's self-definition as the vanguard of the *ummah* and legitimises its violence as part of the timeless war between truth and falsehood. Ultimately, the end goal is to appeal to the Muslim youth.[22]

In sum, the second thesis believes that extremism has drivers and causes other than Islam. Islam comes into play as an ad-hoc factor or contextual observation. Extremism is not about Islam but driven by other material rationales and justifications.

Again, this article posits several observations on the *denial (dismissal) thesis*. First, part of the literature in defense of Islam as a religion of peace must systematically apply the scholarly methods critical to the objective study of religious texts. Referring to parts of the Quran as an authentic message or attempting to make it more palatable to contemporary readers ends up being an apologetic exercise. Furthermore, those internal theological exegesis need to be more reflective, self-critical, and, more importantly, parsimonious. A believer's defense of their faith as a faith of peace is important, yet it needs to be rigorous, comprehensive, and coherent. Second, as noted before, in the *realistic* secular paradigm, religious/perceptive/belief system factors are irrelevant. However, research in social sciences came a long way from the 1990s dominance of secular methodology. Religion *matters* in understanding international relations, foreign policy, and comparative politics.

Brushing religion aside as an epiphenomenon or as irrelevant in understanding jihadism misses the place that Islamic history, themes, and images occupy in the jihadist *construct of meaning*.

Both previous theses either see Islam, in whole or in part, closely associated with extremism or innocent of terrorism because of its peaceful content and irrelevant given secular social science methodology.

C. Constructivist Perspective

As briefly discussed above, both previous theses have methodological and conceptual flaws. Theorization of terrorism is difficult (if not impossible) to test and verify. First, each major theorization effort, even those which are the most formalized and empirical, have been falsified by factors such as later developments in jihadism or the discovery of new data, or through falsification by rival models.[23] Second, Islam is not an objectified fact, an essence to agree on with undisputed definitional components. For example, although all Muslims agree that God is one and Mohammad is the prophet, the understanding of unicity and the meaning of the prophecy is subject of intense theological and philosophical debate among Muslims. These debates have very significant social and intellectual consequences.[24] Islam has contexts, histories, and interpretations. Third, this article suggests that a constructivist perspective, despite its limitations, might offer a better account of the relationship between extremism and Islam. Here, the question of extremism in the Middle East needs to be looked at from the standpoint of the construction of meaning and discourse by the violent actors. Islam matters in the interpretation of political violence in order to explore how individual terrorist groups/ actors construct their ideology of jihadism in the present context.[25]

There is an important distinction here. The question is not how Islam drives/causes political violence but rather why and how jihadist constructs of ideology and discourse incorporate Islam in their narratives. For example, in contrast to traditional schools (such as Marxism, realism, and liberalism), constructivism questions the immutable and reified meta concepts (such as anarchy and power politics in the Islam religion). It suggests a structure-agency interactive approach in order to understand how a plurality of actors engage in the process of the construction of meaning and assign different meanings to those grand concepts. Anarchy is understood in significantly different ways by these Islamic religious schools. Similarly, it is a fact that when one looks at the historical evolution of Islam, we see many *islams*, not only in rituals and customs but also in culture, philosophy, theology, ethics, practice, and polity. The search for *true Islam* as, for example, an apologetic attempt is beside the point. One way to explain this vast number of *islams* (despite the fact that there is only one book) is to explore an actors' agency for the construction and appropriation of meaning. Recent research on jihadi politics by Tore Hamming (2022) offers a case in point. Hamming shows how ISIS and al-Qaeda delved into bloody infighting in Syria while both strongly believed themselves as representing the true Islam.

In the following, we briefly present the al-Qaeda construct of meaning to see how and why it incorporated Islamic images, themes, and history into its ideology, presenting itself as the guardian of *true Islam* and rejecting others as corrupt apostates and disbelievers (i.e., whoever does not follow al-Qaeda doctrine). These constructs by definition are modern (acting and reacting in a modern context of globalization and nation states), selective, ahistorical in their reading of Islam, and praxis-oriented (provocation, recruitment, and galvanization, etc.). These constructs selectively detach early Islamic teaching from its context and transpose it literally to its contemporary situation and objectives. Other Muslim actors, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, vigorously oppose such constructs and offer rather modernist interpretations of Islam.[26]

II. Constructs of Meaning by Al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda has incrementally formulated its rhetoric of global jihad. The *Far Enemy* (US) became the immediate target and reference to the Islamic content became increasingly prominent (starting in 1996 with Osama bin Laden's statement). Immediately following 9/11, bin Laden (not a Muslim scholar or cleric) adopted more explicit and specific language in his statements—portraying jihad as "fundamentally religious, a battle between the Muslims and the 'Crusader people of the West,' and the enmity between them '(as) one of faith and doctrine."[27]

This religious construct has secular components. The religious themes are entangled and intertwined with secular claims. In religious language, it may also be understood as a defensive war, in contrast to holy war/offensive jihad). Al-Qaeda claims to be the righteous jihadist leader (avant-garde) of *Umma* to liberate Muslim lands from occupation and from the rule of traitorous/puppet governments (*closer enemy)* in a battle between *hagh* (truth*) and batel* (falsehood*),* a never-ending battle to the Day of Judgement. As usual, al-Qaeda's statements do not stand the test of consistency and coherence. Following al-Qaeda terminology, one can ask if this *cosmic, all-encompassing war* is between Muslims and Non-Muslims (i.e., a war between religions), a war between religion and secular (tradition and modernity), or a war between the *Din* (true religion) and the *Kufr* (disbelief in general). Again, our objective here is not to delve into the minutia of contradictory or inconsistent al-Qaeda statements, nor into severe criticism levelled by Muslim scholars and clergy against these statements, but rather to show that one should not equate al-Qaeda narrative with Islam.[28]

The scrutiny of reasons al-Qaeda gives for its extremist actions is a mixture of religious appeal and socioeconomic and historical grievances. One way to read this construct is that faith (as understood by al-Qaeda leaders and supporters) is a legitimizer of "non-religious" grievances that are intimately intertwined. A prime example is the al-Qaeda condemnation of the US occupation of Muslim lands, most importantly, the presence of American troops in Arabia (i.e., the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia since the Gulf War of 1990-1991). Somewhat reminiscent of Communist rhetoric, the US is portrayed

as "…plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorising its neighbours, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighbouring Muslim peoples."[29] Given that US has a long history of meddling in Muslim countries, why is this *occupation* vehemently opposed while the cooperation with the US in Afghanistan in 1980s was deemed acceptable? What does al-Qaeda think about the occupation of Iran and Kuwait by Saddam Hussein? What does al-Qaeda think about the liberation of Kuwait by American forces? Many Muslims believe that the US action to liberate Kuwait from Hussein's occupation was a right thing to do. Saudi clergy issued fatwa to legitimize the security treaty between the Saudi king and Washington. Again, bin Laden himself was part of the mujahidin in Afghanistan, in partnership with the US and Saudi Arabia against the Soviet Union.[30]

To continue with the intertwining of secular claims with *sacred* ones, al-Qaeda issued many statements on its defense of Islam for protecting the Muslims from humiliation, restoring their honor, and giving them revenge. Much like the concept of *asabyya* in Ibn Khaldun writings, it can be argued that the distinction between tribal connotations of honor and revenge and the defense of the sacred is very unclear [31] It is therefore a legitimate question to ask about the distinction between these secular (tribal) motivations and religious ones. As Peter Nanninga suggests, rather than making an arbitrary decision to amalgamate or separate the two sets of different motivations (jihad, *ummah* and honor/revenge), it would be safer to argue that "…both could better be seen as part of the cultural repertoire from which jihadists draw to motivate, shape, justify, and give meaning to their violence."[32] From a constructivist perspective, the agents assign meaning (as opposed to discovering the meaning) within a textual and material structure. Beside the question of how al-Qaeda brands and constructs its ideology, there is a question of why. In such a confrontation and declaration of war, al-Qaeda frames the violence as sacred and self-appoints as the only authentic Muslim defender of the *ummah* in the footsteps of Muhammad. However, when one looks at the cultural and political contexts, al-Qaeda as an extremist fringe organization/movement is in an asymmetric war requiring an overarching rhetoric to legitimize, recruit, and galvanize perpetrators and supporters. The empirical research demonstrates that constructs of meaning can have strong praxis implications. In works on the farewell videos of al-Qaeda's suicide bombers one sees that al-Qaeda religious rhetoric has a strong galvanizing impact of empowerment and agency on those followers who truly believe that they are defending the *ummah* against its enemies. In fact, "…this is something different from designating al-Qaeda's suicide attacks as 'religious violence' or claiming that religion, as an abstract category, has contributed to these attacks."[33]

If we follow the previous two theses (i.e., correlation and irrelevant), the analysis of the al-Qaeda case would be different. The correlationist argument would view al-Qaeda extremism as emanating from Islamic content (images, history, theology…). al-Qaeda narratives have direct references to Islam (the Quran in particular) and builds its legitimacy on those references. The question here is not if al-Qaeda leaders and

followers are sincere Muslims. This is beside the point. What is more important is that one should avoid jumping from al-Qaeda discourse to the conclusion that Islam drives their extremism. If Islam is the driver of extremism, Muslim moderates would be a rarity. What al-Qaeda presents is a construct of meaning within the structure of plural Islamic repertoires and the dominant political context. Following the irrelevant thesis, the study of Islamic content of al-Qaeda narratives does not matter and the investigation needs to focus on material factors. Yet brushing aside the content of the narrative leaves a few key questions unanswered. How does Islam come into play in the discourse formation? What are al-Qaeda strategies in narrative building? To what extent are the counter narratives presented by Muslim peaceful actors important in opposing radicalization and promoting peace?

III. Islam and Peacebuilding in the Middle East

Given the previous critical review and the brief case study of al-Qaeda, one can conclude that instead of asking if Islam contributes to violence, it would be more useful to inquire about *the process by which jihadist actors construct meaning* within their cultural and political setting (i.e., Middle East). These actors appropriate values, norms, and principles and assign a set of purposes to their actions within a structure of constraints and opportunities. Furthermore, questions such as what the true Islam is or if Islam is a religion of war or peace are beside the point. A rather non-rigid and dynamic understanding of the relationship between religion and political violence opens untapped possibilities for future cooperation between religious actors and peacebuilding efforts in the region.

Religious involvement in peacebuilding must take into account the broader context of political violence in the Middle East. As mentioned in the introduction, the region is highly volatile and unstable with populations living under all types of political violence involving internal and external actors. A "one size fits all" approach in resolving these conflicts is impossible. The diversity and complexity of interests, issues, and actors are beyond the pale. Some of the current debates—both conceptual and case-oriented—centering on the role of Islamic actors in peacebuilding are outlined below.

Post-9/11 peacekeeping missions (e.g., regime change, stabilization) and efforts in the Middle East did not yield the results desired for numerous reasons. First, these policies centered mostly on stabilization and anti-terror military operations. The end goal was to eradicate terrorist threats to the West. Second, some peacebuilding measures relied on secular assumptions of *negative peace* (absence of conflict) and, more importantly, on the negative role of religion in peacebuilding.[34] Third, the liberal peace project understandably tended to export a model of liberal democracy.[35] In this model (possibly premised on the early post World War II experience in Japan and Germany), peacebuilding can be likened to a mechanical scientific formula whereby a number of resources and institutions are injected into local situations building on the assumption that all want freedom.[36] The

Iranian (shah of Iran) and Turkish (Ataturk model) experiences of modernization show that any unidirectional, prescriptive, and, more importantly, state-centric authoritarian approach is bound to face resistance from a local population with different histories and contexts. Imported modernization in the Middle East detached from local contexts (sociologically and intellectually) faces serious obstacles.[37] Fourth, in order to be effective, peacebuilding must address the root causes of various types of political violence and extremism in general. In this perspective, instead of excluding or brushing aside Islamic actors in peacebuilding, it would be more useful to integrate them in the process.

The question is how can one involve Muslim activists in the peace enterprise? One suggestion in the literature emphasizes change from within. Eric Patterson suggests five ways that *religion* can contribute to peace. First, the conflict actor renounces violence based on religious teaching or experience. Second, a conflict actor, faith inspired, reports a calling, a vocation for peace engagement. Third, religious leaders engage in peace using their spiritual assets. Fourth, in order to reconcile, religious claims create broader identifications than those responsible for fighting. And fifth, faith-inspired forgiveness transcends ongoing unresolved conflicts.[38] These suggestions and many others that are similar bet on individual or group leaps of faith, a change from within, a change of heart and mind. Patterson's five suggestions remind of the plurality of understandings of Islam moving from fixed essence of Islam as religion to the agency of Muslim actors to assign meaning to the relation between their faith and their context.

In a case study on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Dov Waxman maintains that, although on the surface the immediate impulse is to marginalize religions from peacebuilding, a case should be made for including religious actors and values to foster peace. The Oslo process (the same could be said about the Abraham Accord), he continues, failed in part because religious people on both sides did not believe in the legitimacy of such a secular agreement. They felt alienated and marginalized from the process. Waxman suggests that the peacebuilders should have provided religious justifications for territorial concessions in order to entice the moderate religious actors and people on both sides in order to sell the deal. Such joint thinking and partnership have effects on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and would marginalize the extremist narratives on both sides. If such a coalition of the willing is formed, fringe groups cannot spoil it.[39] Another case study in the Middle East tends toward the same conclusions. It is a personal account of a US military chaplain in Iraq. The chaplain emphasizes the pitfalls but also the promises and mitigated success of his initiative in bringing about some level of sectarian peace in parts of Iraq.[40]

These three case studies on religious peacebuilding in the Middle East are heartwarming but also lead to questions such as how religious change of hearts and minds happens? Why are religious moderates not involved in peace? What are the reasons behind secular peacemakers' pessimism toward religious peace building? The list of questions goes on.

There is a vast literature in the field of Middle Eastern studies on, for example, Islam and peace, Islam and democracy and freedom, Islam and liberalism, and so on. Reformists, seculars, clergies, public intellectuals, and academics have proposed ways to reconcile their construct of Islam with peace.[41] Why do these ideas fail to take root and become concrete in terms of policy formation and social change? Why are these proposals not included in the engineering of peace and positive change? These questions, as mentioned before, require multilayered answers.

The literature on religion, conflict, and peacebuilding presents concerns and promises on such a partnership. Appleby suggests that there is an increasing convergence

> ...of previously separate and self-contained understandings and practices… in three areas, creating a nexus for collaboration, a common ground that should be cultivated by religious leaders, development experts, and peacebuilders alike. These areas of convergence are: 1) a focus on the local community, engaged in its full creative potential by external actors, through an elicitive method of discernment and practice; 2) an emerging consensus regarding the "rules of engagement" with local communities; and 3) a growing recognition, rooted in reflective practice, that the criteria for "authentic" human development must be articulated and addressed on a case-by-case basis.

He suggests the following rules of engagement in order to move from convergence to strategic partnerships:[42]

> 1) The people most directly affected by proposed development programs or peace processes must participate extensively in planning them and carrying them out. 2) Be as inclusive as possible in eliciting values, concerns, insights, and interests, paying special attention to marginalized and aggrieved groups. 3) Provide space for conflict among divergent values and support for accommodations, by insiders and outsiders alike. 4) Practice transparency in engaging local elites, religious actors, and state officials at every stage of the planning and implementation process.[43]

Building on previous experiences and pro religious peace literature, two observations can be advanced regarding the realization of a positive role for Muslim actors in peacebuilding in the Middle East. First, given the wide range of conflicts in the region, the priority must be given to ceasefire. External actors' intervention (supplying weapons, expertise, diplomatic coverage, information operations, and more) in a civil war needs to be ceased and the conflict needs to be de-escalated. Second, a non-essentialist, context dependent view of Islam is essential. Indeed, such an understanding of pluralism in religious knowledge and practice is a necessary (although not sufficient) precondition for successful religious-secular partnerships in peacebuilding. On the secular side, the liberal project must be ready to discuss a diversity of understandings of peace, development, and prosperity with other actors. In fact, peacebuilding is not about finding good Muslims or bad Muslims or searching for theological sources for peace in Islam. The challenge is much deeper. This is not only a partnership based on institutional funding and cooperation but

also, at a deeper level, a self-criticism (reflective practice) from within religious traditions. We need to take stock of already plural understandings of Islam. Instead of being swayed by convenient political alliances with fundamentalist voices, peacemaking efforts need to activate real communication (dialogue) and to cast the net wide in order to include the plurality of constructs of faith within Muslim communities and non-governmental organizations (NGO). Are secular and religious actors ready to drop their intellectual blinders to enter in *dialogue* and adopt these rules of engagement? Do we see such a convergence in the Middle East between secular and religious interests and objectives? Are we cognizant of the traps, setbacks, and obstacles in such a partnership? Absent efforts to seriously address these areas, the prospects for achieving a constructive role for religion as a force for peace in the Middle East will likely remain distant. Unlike correlationist and the irrelevance theses, a constructivist approach becomes more plausible in harnessing the potentiality of Islamic actors for peacemaking. Interestingly and closer to home in Canada, one of the pillars of the Canadian counter extremism is close engagement with Islamic actors and communities.[44]

Conclusion

With reference to the al-Qaeda case and peacebuilding literature in Middle East, this article argued that a constructivist perspective provides more insight on the relationship and the linkages between Islam and extremism than the alternatives. Indeed, a constructivist thesis reframes the question from Islam being a source of extremism or Islam as a non-pertinent concept to study extremism to a question of how al-Qaeda appropriates Islam in its broader extremist narrative. Al-Qaeda extremism is not about the theological tenets of Islam but rather about how Islamic content is incorporated and ideologized. At a practical level, examination of religion and peacebuilding debates and cases in Middle East illustrates both the challenges to peacemaking in the region (ongoing multilayered conflicts and interests) and the possibilities that constructivist perspective can open for real dialogue, intersubjectivity, and grassroots engagement.

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Endnotes

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The US Failure in Iraq Post-2003 and Backlash against US Foreign Policy

Jeremy Pressman

Abstract: Why was the US intervention in Iraq in 2003 and thereafter unsuccessful? Many writers, such as Brendan R. Gallagher, have rightly pointed to the poor US planning and the prior conditions in Iraq. I suggest a third aspect—nationalist resistance to the idea of foreign forces controlling Iraq and denying Iraqis full decision-making autonomy. The heavy US application of military force sparked a backlash which manifested itself in three ways. First, US military intervention in Iraq created or facilitated the growth of actors who are or later become US adversaries. Second, it changed the balance of power in favor of US adversaries and against the United States and its allies. Third, it made the United States government central to the war narratives of some actors. Demonizing or fighting the United States became a rallying cry and a source of recruitment and fundraising.

Keywords: Middle East, Iraq, US foreign policy, war, backlash, military intervention.

Introduction

Why did the United States war on Iraq in 2003 ultimately fail? Brendan R. Gallagher makes a compelling case that poor US planning for the post-combat phase set the stage for failure.[1] But in doing so, he leaves out part of the story, the way in which the use of force can often backfire and undermine the national security of the state using force. In other words, even excellent planning might not have mitigated all potential problems created by the massive US military presence in Iraq. And given that one implication of his work is that the United States should have gone in bigger and stayed longer, the possibility of Iraqi backlash would have been that much greater.

Three things happened in Iraq that helped define the US failure and they all fall under the rubric of what counter-measures military force can spark. First, US military intervention created or facilitated the growth of actors who were or later became US adversaries. Second, it changed the balance of power in favor of US adversaries (especially Iran) and against the United States and its allies. Third, it deepened the centrality of the United States government to the war narratives of some actors. Confronting, demonizing, or fighting the United States became a rallying cry and a source of recruitment and fundraising.

Already in 2005, Andrew J. Bacevich highlighted the hubris that came with the US belief that the dominant application of military force would lead the United States to prevail in the Greater Middle East, including Iraq, post-2003.[2] But he did not spell out how that belief would translate into specific national security setbacks. In looking at the US failure in Iraq, the aim of this article is twofold:

1) To expand on Gallagher's emphasis on planning and "preconditions in the targeted country" as the key variables that dictate whether US intervention, in Iraq or elsewhere, is likely to succeed.[3] There is a third variable that is relevant, the agency of the local actors in the face of US military action. Thus, my conclusion is greater skepticism than Gallagher about the possibility that any version of the US invasion of Iraq could have led to a stable outcome in Iraq.

2) To build on Bacevich's argument by detailing three specific problems that resulted from the US use of military force in Iraq.

In the next section, I explain Gallagher's argument and suggest a third relevant factor for understanding success and failure. I then note Bacevich's more general hesitation about the efficacy of US military force. Next, I note work highlighting that the pursuit of security may often actually generate more insecurity. What happened to the United States in Iraq has a deeper grounding. I then explore the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. I suggest three pathways by which US military intervention in Iraq harmed US national security, thereby fleshing out Bacevich's critique. In general terms, some of this study also reminds us of the damage that was done to Iraqis and Iraq itself during the US invasion, US occupation, and Iraqi insurgency.

Failure in Iraq

Most of the time, in the post-Cold War period, the United States has prevailed in the initial combat phase of military intervention but then the period of reconstruction or nation-building does not go well. In looking at four cases—Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq (2003), and Libya—Gallagher argues that US success and failure in the reconstruction phase depends upon the interaction between two factors, the "preconditions in the targeted country" and the quality of US planning for the post-combat effort to rebuild the country and set up its new government. In Iraq, he argues that poor US planning was a major culprit for US failure.[4]

Gallagher does ask whether success in Iraq was possible even had the US government conducted excellent planning, but in doing so his analysis of Iraq—the target country—is too narrow.[5] Specifically, in addition to US planning, he also is focused on the pre-existing factors in the country, such as the level of economic development, the ethnic and religious picture (e.g., is there fragmentation?), the state of infrastructure, and the nature of Iraqi institutions. It is a more static picture about the existing lay of the land at the time of the US invasion. While certainly important, another internal aspect is the agency that Iraqi actors could exercise in the face of invasion, occupation, and the loss of autonomy. They can and did fight back in the face of the US violation of Iraqi sovereignty and nationalism.[6]

My point is that the outcome in Iraq turned on three baskets of issues, two of which Gallagher emphasized.[7] This includes US pre-war planning for the postwar phase; the

demographic, institutional, economic, and other conditions in Iraq at the time of the invasion; and, I would add, the reaction of the Iraqi people to a foreign takeover by the United States, a country deeply hostile to the Iraqi government and its leader, Saddam Hussein.[8] What Iraqi political actors planned to do with the country post-combat was just as important as what the US government planned to do in the country at that point.

What Iraqi actors could do is neither wholly independent of nor determined by US planning. The looting and general security vacuum that developed in Iraq as the US forces toppled the Iraqi government and disbanded the Iraqi army likely affected Iraqi decision making. In the absence of domestic stability and security, Iraqi leaders and militias took matters into their own hands. At the same time, even a well-conceived and well-executed US plan would still have been a massive violation of Iraqi sovereignty and deep intrusion into Iraqi control of Iraqi affairs. Even in the absence of looting and a general security vacuum, Iraqi elements could still have been motivated to fight back.[9]

Once we consider the agency of Iraqi actors, it becomes clearer how Gallagher's preferred approach for Iraq might have been a double-edge sword. If the US goal was stability and the democratization of Iraq, Gallagher explains that could have meant a longer, larger US presence: "we might have spearheaded an international stabilization force of roughly 350,000 to 400,000 troops to secure Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and other major cities for an extended period." That is more than double the number of military personnel who were actually mobilized. Promoting democracy, he concludes, "is a long-term enterprise."[10] James Dobbins agreed: "Rebuilding a failed state takes an enormous commitment of manpower, money, and time."[11] But a longer, larger US presence also would have been more likely to anger Iraqis and fuel the backlash. A heavy footprint is intrusive, offers more points for friction, and might well mean less Iraqi decision making for that time period. To put it another way, a heavy footprint might well fuel a militarized Iraqi response.

The exact definition of US success in Iraq also matters to this assessment of what went wrong. For Gallagher, success is "if the targeted country has sustainable progress in stability and democratizing institutions for at least a decade."[12] But if we are judging the success of a US intervention, I would add that the result cannot be a worsening of US national security. A successful intervention of Iraq should have been positive both for Iraq (stability, democratization) and for the United States. In practice, it failed for both, with Iraqi instability and governance problems as well as greater insecurity for the United States.

For Bacevich (writing in 2005), US policy leading up to and including the 2003 invasion of Iraq was overly reliant on military force, leading to an unrealistic assessment of the likelihood of success in 2003. Broadly across the region, he notes, "The growing reliance on military power served only to rouse greater antagonism directed at the United States."[13] In the early 2000s, officials from President George W. Bush's administration had

growing confidence in US military power after more than two decades of an increasing US military and political presence in the Greater Middle East. While Bacevich worries about the backlash against US policy in Iraq (2003 and thereafter), he does not detail the exact pathways by which US force spurred Iraqi reactions.[14] I take up those pathways below.

Backlash

The notion that military policy can be counterproductive is well-grounded in the study of international relations. If one critique contests the morality of international hegemonic (or imperial) behavior, a second one questions the efficacy of meddling and intervention.

Robert Jervis described the spiral model, in which each state military action is met by a reaction from a neighbor and potential adversary, with events eventually spiraling toward war.[15] The interactions ratchet up toward confrontation even when neither side is intent, from the beginning, on starting war. Building on the security dilemma, Jervis argued that defensive measures don't necessarily fortify the defense; most importantly, they may have the opposite effect, ultimately leading to a situation of greater insecurity. The security dilemma was, in the words of John Herz, "a vicious circle of power competition and armament races, leading eventually to war."[16]

The spiral model does assume states are not seeking to expand. But what if one or both countries have expansionist intentions? We still might posit an interactive action-reaction effect that spirals out of control toward war. Rather than standing pat or backing down, states might take escalatory steps in response to their rival's intentionally threatening or aggressive military policies.

My application to the Arab-Israeli conflict is a case study of the way forceful actions undermine an actor's national security and other basic goals such as independence.[17] For example, I wrote about Egypt's escalations versus Israel in May 1967. The end result? In the June war, the Egyptian armed forces were crushed in just six days of fighting. Egypt lost control not only of the Gaza Strip but also the entire Sinai Peninsula, a sovereign piece of Egyptian territory. Israel more than tripled in area as a result of the war.[18]

Another example was the second Palestinian uprising (2000-2005), in which Palestinian militias and Israeli armed forces battled.[19] This second intifada was much more militarized than the first, with suicide bombings as one central Palestinian tactic. The casualties and the violence drove the Israeli Jewish public right, and the belief that Israel had no Palestinian partner for a negotiated solution became widespread and deeply entrenched. The Israeli left, including the key Israeli proponents of a negotiated resolution based on mutual concessions, has not recovered since. Today, the Palestinian national movement is very far from any successful outcome. The Palestinian leadership is fragmented, and the Gaza Strip is besieged by Israel. In 2022, Palestinian casualties,

mostly at the hands of the Israeli military, were at the highest level since the second intifada more than 15 years earlier. The possibility of a two-state solution is near dead, with over 650,000 Israeli Jewish settlers now living in the occupied West Bank.[20]

Other scholars have more explicitly engaged US foreign policy history. Chalmers Johnson focused on covert US actions and how it often helped spark "blowback."[21] Though his work is more about covert action and CIA activity, Johnson did highlight US aerial bombing as another tactic that caused others to fight (back) against the United States.[22]

Alexander Anievas considers these feedback dynamics from an economic perspective, relating how US economic policy causes a cyclical backlash against the United States. The US government fostered market-based economies around the world to further the reach and growth of the global capitalist economy, including US-based multinational corporations. This capitalist push weakened local institutions and social structures, leading to disorder amidst a nationalist backlash. In turn, US military intervention aimed to defeat the nationalists and restore stability for the markets. But that could be more provocative than pacifying. The result, Anievas wrote, was "a vicious cycle of revolution and counterrevolution."[23]

One caveat is that I don't try to isolate the exact part of the Iraqi invasion and occupation that caused the backlash. Was it the invasion and civil war as a whole? Was it the US violation of Iraqi sovereignty? Was it the US dismissal of international inspectors and multilateralism? Was it US torture at the Abu Ghraib prison? At this point, I do not think my evidence is fine-grained enough to draw such distinctions.

Beforehand, US officials predicted a rapid exit from Iraq.[24] They expected to be drawing down US forces in Iraq by the end of the summer of 2003. That did not happen. An insurgency broke out and instead of a few months, US forces stayed in Iraq for years.

The war and insurgency were costly. One survey found that the war led directly and indirectly to almost 500,000 Iraqi deaths from 2003 to 2011, not to mention the injuries, trauma, and displacement.[25] Iraqis faced year of chaos, insurgency, and instability. Brown University's Costs of War project put the total of direct death at 275,000 to 306,000, including Iraqi civilians, Iraqi and foreign military personnel, and others.[26] About 8,500 US, British, and other external military personnel and US contractors were killed.[27] One 2021 estimate of the US costs for Afghanistan, Iraq, and other post-9/11 military action is over $8 trillion, including $2.2 trillion in future obligations for veterans' medical and disability costs.[28] A 2023 estimate of costs in Iraq and Syria for 2003-2023 estimated a cost thus far of $1.8 trillion, with another $1.1 trillion in expected post-war veterans' care costs by 2050.[29] As Hal Brands concluded, "No serious observer can dispute one early judgment on Iraq: it was a debacle."[30]

Beyond General Characterizations, How Did the US Invasion of Iraq and its Aftermath Affect US Security?

1) It led to the creation of a new US adversary, the Islamic State.

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Sunni Muslim minority in Iraq was disproportionately powerful but that changed with the US invasion. When the US toppled Hussein's government in 2003, the new Iraqi state left Sunni Iraqis greatly disempowered, both politically and militarily. One key misstep was that rather than keep Iraqi Sunni military personnel on the Iraqi government payroll, the Coalition Provisional Authority quickly disbanded the Iraqi army. This move created a reservoir of armed, disgruntled Sunni Iraqis who played an important role in destabilizing the country and drawing Iraq into civil war. The US intervention disrupted Iraq's existing power hierarchy, turning some powerful figures into "losers" under the new political system. Those pushed to the margin fought back.

Some of these former soldiers helped strengthen al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), an organization led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. [31] Al-Zarqawi had been planning and organizing to confront the United States even before the US attack commenced in March 2003.[32] In that sense, AQI became the vehicle by which some angry Sunni Ba'athists expressed their opposition to the US invasion and the change in Iraq's government. After al-Zarqawi's killing in 2006, AQI re-named itself as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

Eventually, the United States and the Iraqi government had the upper hand over the insurgents and agreed to a timetable for the withdrawal of US forces.[33] The US-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement (2008) called for the full removal of the US military by the end of 2011. It was years after the United States government originally thought it would leave, but it was a departure timetable, nonetheless.

But then the Arab Spring (2011) and the ensuing civil war in neighboring Syria created another opportunity for some of the Iraqi Sunni insurgents. ISI began to get stronger again: "With the US pullout in 2011, an opportunity to expand the operation to war-torn Syria, and in a wider sense [Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri] al-Maliki's sectarian governance, it managed to resurface once again."[34] With the move into Syria, as well as Iraq, the name again changed to the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS). By 2014, ISIS was capturing land in Syria and Iraq and the Islamic State was a territorial reality. Having implemented the Bush-era withdrawal agreement and hoped to leave Iraq behind, the administration of President Barack Obama was drawn back in to stop the Islamic State.

The overall point here is to emphasize the two ways by which the US invasion against Hussein's Iraq contributed to the emergence of a new adversary, the Islamic State. One is hard to quantify, the number of ex-Iraqi soldiers and other Iraqi Sunnis who ended up as ISIS or Islamic State fighters, officials, and sympathizers. Tomáš Kaválek makes clear that ex-Ba'athists played an important role in ISI's military improvements. Under Abu

Bakr al-Baghdadi (leader of ISI/ISIS from 2010 to 2019), radical Islamism was a better recruitment tool but Iraqi Ba'athist knowledge "further transformed the organization into a more capable body, especially regarding security, intelligence, and military operations."[35] In 2014, one-third of the top 20 ISIS leaders were former officers in the Iraqi military under Hussein and several more of those leaders had been in Iraqi intelligence.[36]

But there is a second way as well. The US invasion helped create the political vacuum and insecurity that fueled the rise of AQI/ISI/ISIS.[37] If one government fails or is absent, another governmental actor may well step in to fill the gap.

In response to the Islamic State's growth, the United States committed military personnel and resources to the fight. In the fall of 2014, it began aerial bombing in Syria and established the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) to fight the Islamic State. In 2016, one US scholar claimed the Islamic State "has achieved more than al-Qaeda ever has, and it has many more recruits and far more support among Muslims as well."[38] In 2017, the US military had 2,000 personnel in Syria.[39] ISIS also may have inspired a deadly attack in San Bernardino, California.

The broader but harder to detect effects may be important as well. For example, the Islamic State received extensive media coverage and that may have downstream benefits to the organization itself or others in the violent, Islamist space.[40] Or, the Islamic State adherents might target and weaken authoritarian governments in the region that are allied with the United States.[41] Or, the rise of ISIS may have complicated the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia and the reduction of US meddling in the Middle East. These kinds of effects are plausible even if the exact causal evidence is harder to tease out.

2) The US invasion shifted the balance of power in favor of a different US adversary, Iran.

In the almost 45 years since the Iranian Revolution, the United States has focused significant resources on confronting and marginalizing the Islamic Republic of Iran. But Iran has neither been defeated nor convinced to changes its policies and rejoin the pro-US camp in the region. The 2003 US attack on Iraq helped Iran in terms of the distribution of military power.

First, it removed Hussein's Iraq as a strategic rival and counterweight to Iran. Recall that Iran and Iraq had been at war from 1980 to 1988. That war ate up the time and resources of both countries, leaving them little capability, if not will, to emphasize confronting others such as the United States. For the US government, limited US steps, such as re-establishing diplomatic relations with Iraq or maintaining US naval patrols in the Persian Gulf, were sufficient to capitalize on an already-advantageous situation: two potential rivals fighting each other.[42]

In the 1990s, Iran and Iraq were no longer at war, and the US military took on the direct responsibility of managing both US rivals in a policy dubbed dual containment. That was expensive and included stationing many US military personnel in the region. Both countries were subject to significant US economic sanctions. By 2000 or so, though, dual containment was not seen as a long-term answer. For example, leading neo-conservative hawks instead pushed for toppling Hussein's Iraqi government.

When the United States did just that—invaded Iraq and eliminated the Hussein government—it meant Iran's "primary rival" in the region went from powerful to zero power.[43] As Louise Fawcett noted, Iraq had been a "useful balancer" against Iran.[44] Iraq's 400,000 or so army and Republican Guard soldiers, thousands of tanks and armored vehicles, and hundreds of combat aircraft and helicopters were erased from the ledger.[45] This was especially true given that Iraq then spent years consumed by its own civil war and in absolutely no position to challenge Iran. Iran still had strategic concerns about Saudi Arabia and Israel, but it was not fighting directly with either.

Second, several newly empowered Iraqi Shiite parties were very sympathetic to Shiite-led Iran. After trying for years to gain ground inside Iraqi politics, Iranian officials had access to Iraqi decision makers in a manner that was totally different from before the US invasion of Iraq: "The war provided Iran with the opportunity to act out its regional ambitions via Iraq."[46] Some Iraqi officials were now likely consult with Iran and seek Iranian opinion on strategic policies that previously had been decided with little direct input from Iranian officials. To put it another way, pro-Iranian Iraqi officials now had the ability to try to shape Iraqi national interests in a way that Iran would like.

Iran also directly supported and trained Shiite militias inside Iraq such as the Badr Corps, the military wing of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (later the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq). In 2020, the US assassination of Qassem Soleimani, then head of Iran's Quds Force, took place in Baghdad, not in Iran. It is the Quds Force—a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—that works with allied militias outside Iran.

The US invasion did create some challenges for Iran. The Iranian government worried that the empowerment of Iraqi Kurds could embolden Iranian Kurds to seek more power. At the same time, Iran worried that "the formation of a Sunni mini-state in the central regions of Iraq could potentially be a base for Arab nationalists and extreme Sunni Islamists." The Islamic State made this concern concrete. Moreover, as it appeared Iran was getting more powerful due to Saddam's fall, other countries like Saudi Arabia and the United States did more to counter-balance Iran.[47]

In sum, overall, the Gulf strategic balance and the Iraqi domestic political balance shifted in Iran's favor as a result of the 2003 US invasion.[48] In early 2023, one US analyst observed, "The pro-Iran militias remain very powerful and their political leaders dominate Iraqi politics and institutions."[49] Or, retired Lt. Gen. Jay Garner, who initially led the

US reconstruction of Iraq, put it more bluntly: "We overthrew Saddam and handed the country over to Iran."[50]

3) The US invasion gave a major rhetorical and symbolic boost to US adversaries.

The US invasion (2003) reinforced the centrality of the United States government to the hostile narrative of US adversaries, acting as a motivation for recruitment and support. This conceptual claim is difficult to isolate because so many US government actions in the Middle East have been seen as aggressive and hostile and thereby could have this effect. That includes the post-1979 rivalry with Iran, the 1991 war on Iraq, the presence of US military personnel in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, support for Israel against Palestine, and attacks on al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban post-9/11. In writing about ISIS, Samantha Mahood and Halim Rane made the general point: "Perceptions of Western foreign policies as being against Islam and in support of Israel are equally harmful in perpetuating anti-Western sentiment and Islamic radicalization."[51] But that doesn't help assess the relative importance of the 2003 invasion and its aftermath to that process.

There is some suggestive evidence, but a systematic judgment on this point remains incomplete. Thomas Hegghammer found that in al-Qaeda declarations, Iraq became a more prominent focus than even Palestine. Iraq also became the most discussed topic on radical Islamist web forums. Most material posted to the sites, such as videos, concerned Iraq.[52] For many violent jihadists, the invasion confirmed "Washington's evil intentions."[53] In two cases where violent attacks happened (Madrid, Amsterdam), Petter Nesser found that the Iraq War was an important motivation for the militants.[54] Another study found that in July 2007, "the geographical focus in 78 [percent] of the material on the quasi-official Jihadist websites was on Iraq."[55]

Although my focus in this section is on rhetoric and symbolism, there are material elements as well that relate Iraq to Islamist militancy. Some scholars studied whether the Iraq War increased terrorist attacks.[56] Another physical factor was the prisons in Iraq where militants might meet each other, get trained and indoctrinated, and build networks.[57] We know that foreign fighters "created new terrorist networks and gained valuable battlefield experience."[58]

Conclusion

Of course, it is difficult to weigh the messy US invasion and occupation against a counter-factual Iraq where Hussein or his acolyte was still brutally ruling Iraq in 2010 or even 2020.[59] While neither scenario is necessarily reassuring, we can be certain of the casualties and devastation only of the Bush administration's pathway of invading Iraq, deposing Hussein, and installing a new Iraqi government. It was extremely costly and went nothing like they claimed to have expected.

One can see how this situation becomes a self-justifying cycle for the alleged need for the US armed forces to intervene globally. Analysts may see that as problem for Washington. From the perspective of minimizing violent invasions and their inhumane fallout, it is a problem. From the perspective of committed hawkish US officials seeking to use US power judiciously to coerce the world into submission to US dominance, it is also a problem.

Expending so many resources on one state and one war leaves less for the other foreign adventures. Furthermore, the lack of US success sends the wrong message to other US adversaries. It is an anti-deterrent.

The pathways outlined here help delineate what it means to say that national security policy, and maybe US national security policy specifically, often creates a situation that is worse off and more costly than when the intervening state began. The counterproductive result can be new or reconstructed enemies, a shifting balance of power to the benefit of rivals, fuel for hostile fundraising and membership recruitment, and the expending of limited resources, thereby squeezing out support for other internal or external policies.

As I noted above, the ethical challenge to a major power's military interventions is important to address. But even if we set those moral qualms aside, we still need to recognize how often the pragmatic case for intervention falls apart, sparking costly and damaging results that may lead to even deeper and messier military meddling. I am deeply skeptical that this is a fixable problem. A military violation of sovereignty is such a violent act that destruction and mayhem are highly likely if not inevitable. Nationalism, and defending one's nation-state from foreign invaders, is a potent motivating ideology. In a situation of military intervention, it becomes a powerful fuel for forming opposition. Not to mention that the intervenor's existing rivals elsewhere may look at this as an opportunity to fan the flames, possibly worsening the costs for everyone involved.[60] Military intervention begets military intervention.

The course of the Iraq war, and the different pathways to lesser security afterwards, may lead to a healthy skepticism about how leaders talk about war. Maybe the default position should be to assume war results in high costs, a long duration, and multiple spillover effects.

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Pressman also wrote *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), a part of the Cornell Studies in Security Affairs; and, with Geoffrey Kemp, *Point of No Return: The Deadly Struggle for Middle East Peace* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997). He has published journal articles in *Diplomatic History*, *International Security*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Science Advances*, *Social Movement Studies*, and elsewhere (https://jeremy-pressman.uconn.edu/writings/journal/).

Endnotes

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2   Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced By War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016). For a much broader point about the difficulties of succeeding at military intervention and regime change, see Alexander B. Downes, *Catastrophic Success: Why Foreign-Imposed Regime Change Goes Wrong* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021)

3   Gallagher, *The Day After*, 11.

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6   Another work that does not emphasize this point and has a rosier view of what the United States could have achieved in Iraq is Brands, "Blundering Into Baghdad: The Right - and Wrong - Lessons of the Iraq War."

7   Byman also emphasized Iraq's structure and poor <u>US</u> planning (as well as poor policymaking). See Byman, "An Autopsy of the Iraq Debacle."

8   Another factor that only partly comes out in my analysis is the extent to which the US military attack damaged Iraqi institutions: "The war's initial assault on Baghdad included attacks on nearly every government ministry, as American forces attacked a wide range of public facilities and infrastructure." This assault continued with the leaders of the US occupation who "were fairly systematic in ridding Iraq of state administrative authority and transforming its institutional landscape." Andrew J. Flibbert, *Iraq: Power, Institutions, and Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 94-95. We might think of it as pre-existing, internal conditions plus the war's consequences.

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13   Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 194.

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60   Examples include US support for the anti-Soviet Mujahideen in Afghanistan (1980s) and US and European support for Ukraine against Russia (2022-2023).

The Danish and British Asylum Externalization Schemes: Details and Impediments

Daniel Haitas

Abstract: This article explores externalization schemes regarding asylum claims that have been proposed by Denmark and the United Kingdom in relation to Rwanda. Some of the details, issues and impediments that exist regarding implementing such schemes are examined here. It shall be seen that despite the fact that the countries in question are two independent states, their relationships to certain supranational and international structures means that there may potentially be complications and obstacles in their attempts to implement policies relating to border security and asylum which they believe are in their national interest.

Keywords: Asylum seekers, Denmark, European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), European Union, Rwanda, United Kingdom.

Introduction

Migration is one of the key issues facing Europe today. Though this is a matter which by no means has disappeared from European public debate and policy in the last several years, issues such as Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Ukraine naturally came to compete with it in terms of focus. However, now with the recent upsurge of migration to Europe and claims of asylum from such regions as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the issue is now very much in a position of prominence. An aspect of this is the need to articulate and implement a European response regarding this matter. For this paper, two countries shall be examined in terms of their responses: the United Kingdom and the other is the European Union member state of Denmark. More specifically, this study focuses upon proposals for the use of externalization as a tool of migration and asylum policy. The proposals by both of these countries to process asylum seekers offshore, specifically in the African state of Rwanda, shall be explored. These countries were chosen for analysis due to their support for externalization and their desire to utilize Rwanda for this purpose. These similarities make a joint analysis of their proposals together here a logical and natural choice.

This study attempts to address the issue of institutional and legal impediments in the pursuit of policies by state actors regarding the defense of their borders and in dealing with migration and asylum claims. This is done by looking at issues which have arisen with regard to the United Kingdom and Denmark's attempts to pursue externalization policies. It shall be seen that despite the fact that the countries in question are two independent states, their relationship to supranational and international structures such as the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) means that there are potential complications and obstacles in their attempts to implement policies relating to border security and asylum.

Certain Aspects of the European Migration and Asylum Seeker Issue

The European migration crisis of 2015 was rooted in the conflicts taking place both in Iraq and Syria.[1] In that year, over 1.2 million people requested asylum in the European Union, with 362,800 having come from Syria (first on list) and 121,500 from Iraq (third on list).[2] However, already in 2014 there had been a 44 percent increase in terms of asylum applicants to the European Union, over 625,000, of which 20 percent were Syrians.[3] In fact, since 2013, Syria has been the main state from where people request asylum in the member states of the European Union.[4] In 2022, newly arrived people seeking asylum in the European Union reached 881, 220, which was a 64 percent increase from the previous year and the highest since 2015 and 2016.[5] Most of these came from Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and Turkey.[6] The European Border and Coast Guard Agency has warned that it only expects an increase in migratory pressures over the coming decade due to geopolitical factors, conflicts, and various megatrends.[7]

The European Union is a supranational structure composed of twenty-seven states. The formulation and implementation of coherent, unified policy often requires painstaking compromise and consensus. This can cause difficulties when dealing with pressing issues—migration and the formulation of asylum policy being a striking example of this. An argument for member states giving up aspects of their decision-making powers in the process of EU integration is that being part of a larger institutional integrative community means belonging to a group that can increase standing and possibilities. Though this is undoubtedly true in many respects, such membership leads to very real restriction of action in certain areas.

With regard to migration and asylum, there is a shared competence or authority between the European Union and its member states, manifested through a number of mechanisms and frameworks.[8] This includes the Common European Asylum System, an important component of which is the Dublin Regulation III, which has been implemented since July 2013.[9] According to this, the EU member state that is the point of entry for the asylum seeker into the European Union is responsible for processing that individual's application for asylum.[10] This also requires the asylum seeker to be sent back to the country responsible for dealing with their application if the individual in question attempts to apply for asylum in another Dublin state.[11]

International norms are integral to the EU's asylum order. In the post-war period, the United Nations 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (which was subsequently amended with the 1967 Protocol) laid the foundation for the international refugee framework.[12] The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union specifically states that its asylum policy must be in compliance with the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol.[13] The European Union accepts the definition set out in these instruments, though its legislation refers specifically to a "third-country national," that is, a non-EU citizen, fulfilling this definition.[14]

The migration crisis that began in 2015 brought into focus the basis and nature of cooperation between EU member states with regard to the management of migration and asylum policy.[15] This included differences in approaching these issues and the difficulties in creating a unified response.[16] For example, the events of 2015 called into question the adequacy of the Dublin III Regulation.[17] Subsequently, certain methods of addressing this issue have been proposed with the aim of defending borders and dealing with large-scale migration and asylum claims. One of these is externalization.

The Externalization Concept

Externalization is the process whereby a state engages in extraterritorial management of migration, limiting the ability of individuals to make asylum applications on the territory of the state in question.[18] It can be understood as a kind of policing of state borders at a location away from those actual borders.[19] An important component of this concept is the need for the externalizing state to enter into agreements with partner states.[20] This is a concept which arguably is not wholly foreign in the European context. In fact, it had been discussed since the 1970s.[21]

The European Union implemented a form of an externalization policy in the wake of the 2015 migration crisis, with the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal.[22] According to this, a number of measures were agreed to, including that, from 20 March 2016, all irregular migrants arriving to the Greek Islands from the territory of Turkey are to be returned back to the latter.[23] Furthermore, in the case that a Syrian was resettled from Greece to Turkey, there would be a resettling of a Syrian to the European Union from Turkey.[24] According to the agreement, Turkey also was obligated to implement measures to stop new routes (either by land or sea) for illegal migrants to cross into the European Union from Turkey.[25] In return, Turkey received 6 billion euros in aid as well as a promise to move toward granting visa-free travel to the European Union for Turkish citizens.[26] Additionally, there was a pledge to update the EU-Turkey customs union and re-energize the Turkish EU accession process.[27]

It should also be pointed out that the European Union also has been involved in the Emergency Transit Mechanism, which is a United Nations programme.[28] This was established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in November 2017 in order to send vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees in Libyan detention to Niger.[29] Later, in 2019, an Emergency Transit Mechanism was set up involving Rwanda.[30] This involved that country receiving asylum seekers and refugees located in Libya, a scheme supported by the European Union, among others.[31]

Externalization as a solution for dealing with Europe's migration and asylum issues is a concept which has become more acceptable than it once was.[32] There can be no real doubt that greater openness to this approach can be accounted for in part due to the frustrations felt as a result of the prolonged difficulties Europe faces in this area. In

these circumstances, state actors may become more willing to propose solutions such as externalization. One of the most prominent examples of this in Europe today is Denmark.

Denmark

Denmark has taken a particularly strict stance with regard to migration and asylum in recent years. Since 2015, legislation has been introduced which has brought about important changes to its asylum system.[33] This has occurred within the broader context of the migratory pressures that Europe had particularly experienced since 2015. In that year, 21,225 people claimed asylum in Denmark, a jump from 14,792 the previous year and 7,557 in 2013.[34] The largest group among these were from Syria.[35] The Danish government passed legislation that same year in order to reduce the number of those seeking asylum in the country.[36]

This included reducing benefits by almost half to asylum seekers.[37] Additionally, in that same year, a certain temporary status was created for those having experienced indiscriminate violence (as opposed to specific individual prosecution), which covered a portion of Syrian asylum seekers in Denmark.[38] This law allowed for the loss of this temporary protection when conditions improve in the homelands from whence they came.[39] Later, in 2019, the Danish parliament legislated that all refugee protection in Denmark is to be temporary in nature.[40] It has been said that these Danish policies regarding revoking the residence permits of asylum seekers is somewhat unique within the European Union.[41] In 2019, the Danish government ruled that Damascus region of Syria was now a safe place for asylum seekers to return to, a view at odds with both the European Union and the United Nations.[42] This led to the withdrawal of residence permits for a number of asylum seekers from Syria.[43] More recently, the Syrian regions of Tartus and Latakia have also been classified by the Danish government as safe for return.[44] Additionally, in early 2016, Denmark passed a law enabling police to seize the nonessential assets of refugees over the value of 10,000 kroner. However, this only applies to items which do not possess sentimental value.[45] This is in order to meet the expenses of an asylum seeker's stay in Denmark.[46]

Regarding the broader aims of Danish asylum policy, Prime Minster Mette Frederiksen stated, "We cannot promise zero asylum seekers, but we can set up that vision."[47] A factor in Denmark's policy relates to "social cohesion," with Frederiksen saying, "We need to be careful that not too many people come to our country, otherwise our social cohesion cannot exist."[48] This principle may be seen as being linked to legislation that exists to prevent the formation of "parallel societies" in Denmark.[49] This involves ensuring that residential areas contain no more than 30 percent of individuals of non-Western origin.[50]

Denmark announced that it would pursue a policy of externalization regarding asylum seekers, with its parliament passing Bill L226 in June 2021.[51] The law makes provision for asylum seekers to be moved to non-EU member states for the process of their asylum applications and for the purpose of protection.[52]

The major feature of this plan has been for Denmark to process asylum claims in the African state of Rwanda.[53] In September 2022, the two countries expressed their desire to cooperate regarding asylum.[54] They issued a statement saying that they "are jointly exploring the establishment of a program through which spontaneous asylum seekers arriving in Denmark may be transferred to Rwanda for consideration of their asylum applications and protection, and the option of settling in Rwanda."[55] The statement added that the two countries wish to explore the possibility of creating a formal agreement.[56] Denmark agreed to fund the scheme.[57] Part of Denmark's former willingness to pursue an independent line on this issue was what it perceived as the slowness of the process at the European Union level.[58]

When the Danish parliament passed Bill L226, the response from the European Union was sceptical. A European Commission spokesman stated that the law raises issues about both asylum procedure access and also access to protection, and that in fact it wasn't possible according to present European Union legislation or proposals.[59] More specifically, it was stated that the law would violate the right to asylum, which is enshrined in the European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights.[60] However, the Danish government argued that it has an op-out with regard to justice and home affairs.[61] Thus, Denmark is exempt from EU policy with regard to the areas of asylum, borders, or migration.[62]

The concept of the "opt-out" is a mechanism allowing for various member states not to participate in certain areas of European Union policy.[63] Denmark obtained four opt-outs at the time of its accession to the European Union.[64] One of these relates to justice and home affairs, with Denmark not participating in the broader migration and asylum policy of the European Union.[65] This shows that Denmark, from the beginning of its European Union membership, has been prepared to chart a more independent path with regard to certain areas of the broader European integration project. However, despite its opt-out, Denmark nonetheless participates in the Dublin III framework.[66] Though Denmark was not a party to the original regulation establishing Dublin III, a separate 2006 agreement means that the framework also applies to Denmark.[67] It is also a party to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol.[68]

The Danish government has not progressed with its plans and, in January of this year, it announced that it was suspending its negotiations with Rwanda regarding this matter.[69] The government still wishes to see such a reception center established beyond the borders of Europe, but would rather that this be done together with the European Union or with other countries.[70] This is a change from its previously more independent approach. Danish Migration and Integration Minister Kaare Dybvad said, "We still have the same ambition, but we have a different process."[71] In fact, the same minister stated that Denmark's seeking consensus in pursuing its policy is connected to a greater willingness in Europe now to consider stricter approaches with regard to asylum policy.[72]

Denmark itself had noted possible risks associated with implementing its Rwanda plan. For example, if it transfers asylum seekers to a third country, it could result in European Union member states concluding that Denmark was no longer participating within the Dublin III framework.[73] This then could lead to the possibility that Denmark would no longer be able to return asylum seekers to the member state in which they first registered.[74] A statement on behalf of the European Commission had said that whether the Danish plan to relocate asylum seekers to third countries impacts its participation in the Dublin framework would depends on the details of a specific agreement.[75]

An argument can be made that within the broader context of the European Union's institutional and legal structures Denmark is entitled to pursue its Rwanda scheme as a result of its op-out. However, the prospect of pursuing an independent policy and also potentially being excluded from the Dublin III framework must necessarily weigh heavily on any Danish policymaker's mind. Specifically, if it were no longer considered by other EU member states as party to the Dublin framework, it would lack the ability to return asylum seekers to the first country of entry to the European Union. This would not be beneficial to its attempts to deal with migration and asylum. Beyond this, pressure in favour of consensus and unity between member states regarding an issue which impacts the whole of the union may undoubtedly inhibit Denmark's actions. This illustrates that even in the case where a country obtains an opt-out in the name of retaining sovereignty, the integrative, supranational structures of a regional integration project such as the European Union may in the end inhibit the exercise of this option. There is an innate impetus in such a multilateral and deeply integrated structure as the European Union to reach consensus and common solutions, particularly regarding such a controversial and epoch-defining issue.

Having now seemingly abandoned pursuing an independent path regarding this matter, the issue now is whether Denmark has a real possibility to see other EU member states adopt its proposed approach in dealing with asylum seekers. Austria has actually called for the processing of asylum seekers in safe third countries, specifically naming the United Kingdom and Denmark as examples of such a policy.[76] Additionally, there have been reports that the German government is considering transferring people who are apprehended in the Mediterranean to North Africa for offshore processing purposes.[77] However, this is considered unlikely to actually be adopted and implemented.[78] Nonetheless, it is significant that the German government appears to be discussing this as a possibility, which can be considered as an indicator of the fact that more forceful solutions are being considered in order to deal with this issue.

Migratory pressures continue now for the time being and will well into the future. As Europe grapples with finding solutions, it is not outside the bounds of possibility that the Danish view will become even more accepted and popular throughout the European Union. Despite this realistic possibility, it must be kept in mind that the European Commission has clearly stated that such a scheme as proposed by Denmark breaches

EU norms and standards. Thus, the only way in which this could occur is that there be a consensus within the European Union to bring about changes or compromises regarding these norms and standards. This would then allow for externalizing measures resembling those proposed by Denmark. At least until the present time, this has seemed unlikely and naturally would involve significant difficulties and complexity.

The United Kingdom

Brexit was one of the most definitive events in more recent British history and indeed that of the whole European integration project. Concerns regarding migration and sovereignty played a decisive role in this development and, indeed, a major aspect of the Brexit narrative was that of "taking back control."[79] The United Kingdom's exit from the European Union has led to various changes in migration practices, including that it ceased to be part of the Dublin III framework.[80] However, the United Kingdom is still a party to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol.[81] Furthermore, the United Kingdom's leaving the European Union had no impact on its being a member of the ECHR, based in Strasbourg. This court, founded in 1959, is not an institution of the European Union. It deals with applications from both individuals and states claiming that there has been a breach of the rights contained in the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).[82] These rights apply to everyone in each signatory states' jurisdiction, even extending to non-citizens.[83] The ECHR's judgments are binding upon the relevant country in each particular case.[84] However, it should be noted that there is a lack of strong enforcement mechanisms with regard to judgments—and with no punitive sanctions in cases where judgments are not implemented.[85] It should be also noted that the UK Human Rights Act explicitly states that no public authority may act in a way that contravenes the European Convention on Human Rights.[86]

Recently, the issue of migration has again come into focus in the United Kingdom. In 2022, the United Kingdom received over 89,000 asylum applications, with the highest number of applicants coming from Albania, followed by Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.[87] In April 2022, then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that the United Kingdom and Rwanda had entered into an agreement whereby the former would fly individuals to the latter when their applications for asylum were inadmissible in the United Kingdon.[88] This refers to the asylum seeker having travelled to a "safe third country" on their way to the United Kingdom.[89] In the case that their application is accepted, they will subsequently be able to remain in Rwanda with refugee status, being unable to settle in the United Kingdom.[90] In the case that their application for asylum is refused, they will leave Rwanda and move to a country where they are entitled to stay.[91] Later, the UK government passed the Illegal Migration Bill.[92] Under this, all illegal migrants to the United Kingdom who are unable to be sent to their country of origin can be sent to Rwanda.[93] The Rwandan government has stated that it is willing to accept thousands of individuals under the relocation scheme.[94] In return, Rwanda would receive funds of 140 million pounds.[95] This deal is called the Migration and Economic Development Partnership and is linked to providing development aid to Rwanda.[96]

Foreign and domestic sources have criticized the UK government's plan, claiming that it goes against the UK's human rights and international law obligations.[97] For example, the UN Refugee Agency stated that it was strongly opposed to it.[98] It believes that it breaches the UK's international obligations, not meeting the requisite standards both with regard to legality and appropriateness.[99]

So far there has not been any relocation of asylum seekers from the United Kingdom to Rwanda.[100] Several individuals brought an application before the UK High Court challenging the government's Rwanda plans.[101] In December 2022, the court ruled that it is in fact lawful for the UK government to arrange to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda and subsequently for any asylum claims to be processed there instead of in the United Kingdom.[102] However, in January 2023, the UK High Court granted a group of nine asylum seekers the right to appeal the court's ruling in the Court of Appeal.[103]

Subsequently, that court ruled that it did not consider Rwanda a safe third country as it believed issues with its asylum system mean there is a risk that asylum seekers could be returned to their home country where they could encounter inhumane treatment and persecution.[104] This would subsequently lead to a violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which places a prohibition on inhuman treatment and torture.[105] The court stated that the already-mentioned UK Human Rights Act requires that the government comply with the convention.[106] In response, the British government said that it plans to appeal the verdict in the Supreme Court.[107]

The Rwanda scheme has also come under scrutiny in the ECHR. An Iraqi national had originally claimed asylum in the United Kingdom but was to be transferred to Rwanda as his claim in the United Kingdom was deemed to be inadmissible.[108] The date for his removal from the UK to Rwanda was set for June 14, 2022. However, a request was made to the ECHR to stop the removal of the individual (after the UK High Court refused to grant interim relief), which it granted on the same day.[109] This led to lawyers for six others also making similar successful appeals.[110] The ECHR ruled that the asylum seeker should not be transferred to Rwanda until three weeks after the rendering of the final decision in the ongoing domestic judicial proceedings regarding the matter.[111]

In response, Johnson appeared to suggest that the decision may make it necessary for the United Kingdom to rethink its connection to the ECHR and make appropriate legislative changes.[112] British Home Secretary Suella Braverman has said that the ECHR is "politicised" and "interventionist," and that its jurisprudence is sometimes "at odds with the will of Parliament or British values more generally."[113] It has also been reported that there are members of the government who have talked about the possibility of leaving the ECHR in the future.[114] It should also be noted here that the 2023 Illegal Migration Bill includes a provision granting the UK home secretary the power in certain situations to ignore ECHR interim injunctions that stop deportation flights taking place.[115]

The United Kingdom is no longer constrained by the EU framework regarding migration and asylum. However, it has faced international criticism as well as domestic hurdles and opposition. The issue of the ECHR and its influence in the United Kingdom remains. Indeed, the United Kingdom's being a party to the ECHR has inhibited the implementation of such a policy. However, it has been seen that the UK's own domestic court system has enforced norms contained in the European Convention of Human Rights, obstructing the implementation of the Rwanda scheme.

It has been said that if the United Kingdom leaves the ECHR, it would be an outlier in the international community, along with such countries as Russia and Belarus.[116] The country's reputation would likely suffer damage.[117] Traditionally, the United Kingdom has had a strong commitment to fulfilling its human rights obligations under international law.[118] It has seen itself as playing a leading role regarding human rights and the rule of law and in supporting a rules-based international order.[119] All these factors no doubt help to explain why the government maintains that it will not leave the ECHR.[120] Taking all this into account, it seems highly unlikely that a British government would go so far as to repudiate a major pillar of the human rights international law framework as it would likely diminish its standing on the global stage.

Conclusion

The UK government appears determined to press on with its externalization plans despite certain obstacles that have arisen, while those of Denmark are now stalled, perhaps permanently. A major factor leading to this state of affairs relates to the latter being an EU member and mindful of the attitudes of the EU institutions and other member states as well as certain norms in place (despite its op-outs). In reality, the very nature of the EU integration project inhibits a member state from going it alone regarding a matter which so strongly impacts it as a whole and which in reality requires union-wide responses and solutions.

The United Kingdom has left these structures with the very clear aim of pursuing more independent policies without the former supranational constraints. However, it has still encountered obstacles due to its relationship with the European Convention on Human Rights, the ECHR, and even in its own court system. In the case that the United Kingdom implements its proposals (something which is far from certain), surely its results and consequences will be watched with great interest by other European countries. Their relative success or failure in dissuading asylum claims would no doubt have a very significant impact on the migration and asylum debate within the European Union.

Denmark has for the moment acquiesced to the necessity of operating within broader EU multilateral structures, realizing the impracticality of pursuing its original, more independent course of action. Whether more member states will come to share its support for externalization remains to be seen. Ultimately, the United Kingdom, post-Brexit, has a freedom of action that Denmark does not. Brexit promised to restore sovereignty,

including with regard to border control. Certainly, it has regained powers in this area in a number of situations. Yet, regarding asylum seekers, it is, to an extent, still held accountable to an international framework and structure which predates the European Union, one from which the United Kingdom is unlikely to completely disentangle and disengage. The obstacles that the UK government has encountered has shown that it was not the European Union alone that obstructed independence in this area. Thus, Brexit was not the ultimate solution for those who hoped that it would lead to complete and unimpeded British sovereign freedom of action.

A UK withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights and ECHR would be a significant and highly controversial step for the United Kingdom to take. Such a development could be seen as a continuation of Brexit. That is, for the sake of sovereignty and the desire for independent action, it would disconnect from another important institution established on the European continent in the post-war period. It is beyond question that such a move would lead to the United Kingdom suffering a reputational blow, particularly in Europe but no doubt internationally as well. It could thus potentially weaken British soft power and influence. The examples of Denmark and the United Kingdom ultimately demonstrate the limits and difficulties of truly independent action for a nation state in certain vital areas, particularly in the broader European context.

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Analysis of Paralysis: A Critical Examination of the Obama Administration's Response to Russian Subversion in 2016

Jahnavi Sodhi

Abstract: In 2016, Russia escalated the scale of its electoral interference activities by interfering in the US presidential election. In doing so, it undermined American democracy and the authority of the Obama administration, which struggled to respond effectively. Despite the fact that the Obama administration faced certain domestic and systemic constraints, it was primarily the administration's own flawed assessment of the situation and the goals it set for itself that accounted for the weak response. Ultimately, what happened in 2016 holds important implications for the use of subversion as a tool of statecraft in the US-Russia rivalry.

Keywords: Russia, United States, US-Russia rivalry, Obama administration, presidential election, cyber, subversion.

Introduction

During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union often resorted to electionmeddling in each other's spheres of influence, making it a fairly ubiquitous form of subversive statecraft. However, in 2016, Russia undertook an unprecedented attack on American democracy, interfering in presidential elections in the United States itself, marking a "significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort."[1] Faced with Russia's active measures, President Barack Obama's administration was gripped by a so-called "paralysis of analysis," eventually mounting a weak response that has been heavily criticized."[2] Thus, Russia was able to successfully subvert American democracy by undermining Obama's presidential authority.

What made Russia's use of active measures effective in eroding the power of the Obama administration in 2016? Although it cannot be denied that the administration was facing an unprecedented attack and operating with real constraints, my research shows that these constraints by themselves did not completely impede a strong response. The administration had significant policy options at its disposal that it either simply chose not to exercise, or that it delayed exercising in time, inadvertently making Russia's actions more effective than they would have been otherwise.

In this paper, I will detail the Obama administration's response to Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election and why it has been criticized. I will then argue that the effectiveness of Russian subversion in 2016, as understood through the erosion of the Obama administration's power and the weak response it elicited, ought to be attributed primarily to the administration's flawed assessment of the situation and the goals it set for itself. Finally, I will show that what happened in 2016 holds strategic implications for the use of subversion as a tool of statecraft in the US-Russia rivalry.

Russia's Election Meddling in 2016 – Examining Motive and Means

From 2014 to 2016, Russia's campaign evolved from being a "generalized program" to undermine the presidential election, to a more "targeted operation" to help elect the candidate of Russian President Vladimir Putin's choice.[3] Consistent with Levin's argument on electoral interference by great powers, as the Russians were able to identify in Donald J. Trump a candidate that they could cooperate with to damage Hillary Clinton's campaign, whose views they perceived as threatening to Russian interests, they were able to combine the "motive and means" to interfere in America's presidential election.[4]

As early as 2014, Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) used trolls on various social media platforms to spread propaganda and disinformation regarding the presidential candidates, exacerbating pre-existing divides in American society.[5] Soon after, the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency, hacked thousands of emails of Clinton campaign staffers, as well as the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's (DCCC) and the Democratic National Committee's (DNC) computer networks.[6] Subsequently, they disseminated the information to the American public, through online personas like Guccifer 2.0 and websites like WikiLeaks.[7] Russia also targeted voter registration systems and websites in at least twenty-one states.[8] Finally, the Russians established contact with key members of the Trump campaign.[9] Thus, given the blatant external interference in US domestic authority structures, Russia's actions arguably constituted a violation of America's Westphalian sovereignty.[10]

The 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) on Russian activities stated, "Moscow's intent was to harm the Clinton Campaign, tarnish an expected Clinton presidential administration, help the Trump Campaign after Trump became the presumptive Republican nominee, and undermine the US democratic process."[11] According to the assessment, Russia's activities represented "the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the US-led liberal democratic order."[12] Russia's goal of sowing chaos and undermining American democracy was more consistent with its use of other hostile measures against the United States over the years, as opposed to the more ambitious goals of damaging Clinton's chance at a victory and helping Trump get elected. It was also the goal its 2016 campaign undoubtedly achieved. While Russia's activities undermined American democracy in multiple ways, I will focus on the successful erosion of the Obama administration's authority, and its weak response, as a measure of the effectiveness of Russian subversion in 2016.

The Obama Administration's Response – Options Deliberated vs Deployed

As early as 2015, reports of Russia's activities reached Obama. However, it was not until July 2016 that the administration set up an interagency committee to draw out possible countermeasures that could be used against Russia.[13] Members of the committee mainly disagreed on when and how best to respond. Some, like Victoria Nuland, then assistant secretary of state for the Bureau for European and Eurasian Affairs, wanted to

undertake "light deniable countermeasures," as early as July itself, while others treaded a more cautious approach.[14] The retaliatory responses deliberated ranged from standard operations like diplomatic expulsions and economic sanctions, to measures like sending a US naval carrier group into the Baltic Sea to signal resolve.[15] The more aggressive responses proposed included the National Security Agency (NSA) launching a series of offensive cyber-attacks to bring down the websites that had been used to leak Clinton's emails, to attack Russian news sites and intelligence agencies, and to release damaging information the United States possessed on Putin himself. However, these were rejected given fears of escalation.[16] Other cyber responses included spreading disinformation and using the signaling power of cyber action by conducting exercises in a fictional country, to demonstrate that the United States could harm Russia's entire critical infrastructure.[17] By late September, the administration had "all but ruled out" a response that would involve retaliating against Moscow before the elections had concluded.[18]

In August 2016, Obama wanted his aides to obtain a high-confidence assessment from the intelligence community on Russia's motives and Putin's involvement (presumably to justify a strong US response); identify and defend against vulnerabilities in state election systems; and get bipartisan support in Congress for a statement condemning Russia's activities.[19] After much deliberation, the intelligence agencies were able to reach a consensus on the motives for Russia's actions, as well as Putin's personal involvement in the operation. Subsequently, on October 7, the intelligence agencies released a joint statement regarding the Russian government's involvement in the hack and dump operations.[20] However, Obama did not sign the statement to avoid appearing partisan.[21] Notably, the statement did not reveal the full extent of the issue; it did not inform the American public of Putin's personal involvement or the goals of the operations.[22] As to Obama's other instructions, his aides were unable to get bipartisan consensus for condemning Russia. Democrats and Republicans ultimately released separate statements regarding foreign intervention in US elections, with only the former explicitly mentioning Russian involvement.[23] Additionally, US states did not agree to allow federal intervention in their voting systems.[24]

Obama met with Putin during the G20 summit in September 2016. At the time, he was advised by senior US officials to make a clear warning to Putin that messing with the votes (by way of altering voter data, for example) would constitute an act of war.[25] However, Obama refrained from drawing such an explicit red line. Thus, it was not until October that Obama warned Putin, via the "Red Phone" system, that any tampering with the votes would merit a response equivalent to that involving "armed conflict."[26]

On December 9, a month after Trump won the election, Obama ordered the intelligence agencies to conduct a comprehensive review of Russia's activities.[27] Subsequently, once the threat of further electoral meddling on Russia's part had subsided, Obama approved a series of measures on December 29 to punish Russia. To begin with, he amended a 2015 executive order, allowing for the US president to respond effectively to foreign cyber interference, to include electoral interference.[28] Following this, the administration

expelled thirty-five Russian diplomats and sanctioned the Russian intelligence agencies responsible for the intervention, namely the GRU and the FSB, in addition to three other entities and four individuals involved in the operations.[29] The administration also cracked down on two Russian compounds operating in the United States and said that it would take more actions that would not be publicized.[30] Additionally, before leaving office, Obama reportedly approved a covert operation that would involve infiltrating Russian infrastructure with cyber weapons—in a manner that would be "the digital equivalent of bombs"—that could be used in case of future escalation or, better still, to deter Russia from escalating in the first place.[31] Thus, as outlined in the 2020 report produced by the U.S. Senate's Select Committee on Intelligence, the response mostly focused on "protecting election infrastructure and castigating the Russians prior to the election, saving punitive responses until after Moscow's ability to affect the 2016 election had passed."[32]

The administration's response has been criticized on the grounds that first, it did not do enough, given that the "punishment did not fit the crime," and that second, whatever little was done, was done too late.[33] The Senate intelligence committee found some additional flaws in the administration's approach. The administration significantly limited who had access to the information and when they had access to it.[34] By withholding the full extent of the situation from the congressional intelligence committees, the administration had "prevent[ed] members from conducting oversight, developing policy responses, or advocating for transparency with the public."[35] The committee also found that the GRU continued interfering in the election even after Obama's private warnings to Putin, thus calling into question the deterrent power of such threats, in which the administration had often expressed great confidence.[36]

Additionally, even after election day, the administration did not respond for weeks which according to Susan Rice, then the national security advisor, was due to disagreements among agencies about the policy options to be exercised.[37] This highlights a key flaw in the response, for if the administration had decided early on that it would not respond until after the elections had concluded, it should have agreed upon, well in advance, options that could readily be deployed.

The sanctions that were eventually imposed to punish Russia have also been criticized for not being strong enough. Moreover, these sanctions had already been deliberated with respect to previous Russian actions, and thus were not specific to the 2016 election meddling.[38] Even the officials who designed the sanctions against the FSU and GRU said that the use of sanctions was more symbolic; Obama and his advisers already knew their economic impact would be "minimal."[39] This was despite the fact that Anthony Blinken, then deputy secretary of state, admitted that the US Treasury was forthcoming on supporting economic sanctions that would have been equivalent to economic warfare.[40] Even the October 7 statement has been criticized as adding only marginally to what the public already knew, namely that the Kremlin was behind the operations.[41]

However, at the same time, the Senate intelligence committee noted that the administration "was not well-postured to counter Russian election interference activity

with a full range of readily available policy options."[42] Nonetheless, multiple senators argued in the same report that despite the fact that the administration felt extremely constrained, "such factors d[id] not excuse the administration's failures to heed clear intelligence warnings, establish an effective deterrent, or take effective action to counter Russia's activities before, and after November 8, 2016."[43] According to them, the constraints did not limit the administration's response, and Russia's actions should have merited "nothing but a strong response," given that it was a matter of "protecting American democracy."[44] Thus, while it is true that the administration did not have the widest array of options, it still had more options, as highlighted above, than it chose to exercise.

The Decision to Exercise Restraint – Flawed Assessments and Goals

Although there are many factors that can explain Obama's decision-making, I will argue that the weak response is best explained through the flawed assessments made, and the goals set, by the president and his administration.

Obama and his administration made some key assessments of the situation that guided their response as the situation unfolded. The initial reluctance to respond, and the subsequent delay in the response, can be explained by the fact that throughout his presidency, Obama had been a rather "deliberate and cautious" leader.[45] He was generally averse to overreacting to Russian provocations, for he viewed Russia as a weaker power and a "regional spoiler" that did not have the power to inflict significant damage on the United States and pose a threat to its national security.[46] Given his assessment of Russia, Obama preferred maintaining a policy of "strategic patience."[47] Interestingly, even in one of his final press conferences, after the elections had concluded, Obama stuck by his earlier assessment of Russia—"the Russians can't change us or significantly weaken us…they are a smaller country. They are a weaker country. Their economy doesn't produce anything that anybody wants to buy, except oil and gas and arms."[48] Moreover, Obama had also been pursuing a "reset" with Russia since 2009 which, while it may have ended in 2014 with the invasion of Ukraine, could still explain the unwillingness to let relations worsen any further under his presidency; he believed it was in everyone's interest that the United States had a constructive relationship with Russia.[49] And finally, Obama's approach to decisionmaking in general included a heightened focus on achieving consensus. This was evident in 2016 when he emphasized getting a consensus from the intelligence community on Russia's motives, even if it meant that the response would be delayed.

As the situation progressed, Obama became even more reluctant to respond, as he believed Russia had escalatory dominance in the situation—according to Shimer, Obama "did not feel as though he was operating from a position of strength."[50] In particular, he was afraid that they had not yet seen the worst of Russia's campaign. He feared that a stronger response would provoke Russia into taking further action, such as editing voter data to prevent voters from casting their ballots, with Russia eventually having the upper hand in any such escalation and the United States not being able to respond in a commensurate manner.[51] Ultimately, while the administration knew what the Russians could do, they did not know what they would actually end up doing.[52]

The administration also believed that the most effective way to stop Russia would be through direct, private communication between Obama and Putin to threaten retaliation for any further provocations.[53] Notably, while the administration stood by this assessment, the Senate intelligence committee found that despite the warnings, Russia continued its cyber intrusions "to include further public dissemination of stolen emails, clandestine social mediabased influence operations, and penetration of state voting infrastructure through Election Day 2016."[54]

The administration also set certain goals, which guided its response and greatly constrained its decision-making. First, the administration was worried that by exposing Russia's activities to the public, it would be playing right into the Kremlin's hands, especially if its goal indeed was to sow chaos, as it had been with previous Russian active measures.[55] Thus, it wanted to avoid doing so in the first place. Second, Obama was hesitant to mount a strong response to Russian interference before the election had concluded, given that he was intent on not being perceived as too partisan, as he had been campaigning for Clinton at the time.[56] As noted previously, his concern of appearing partisan even prevented him from signing the intelligence agencies' joint statement. Third, Obama was fixated on protecting the "integrity of the election."[57] Given that he wanted to ensure a peaceful transition of power, he did not want to risk things getting out of hand by provoking Russia and creating havoc among the voters.[58] Thus, higher-level officials in the administration asked their staffers to "stand down" and were not willing to take any measures that might be perceived as being too aggressive and escalatory in nature.[59] Obama's focus on protecting the integrity of the election can also be explained by a key "political calculation"—he believed Clinton was likely to win the presidency and was unwilling to take actions that would call into question the legitimacy of her presidency.[60]

Therefore, the Obama administration tied its own hands with respect to responding to Russian aggression, largely playing defense despite having significant offensive options at its disposal.

Counter Arguments – Domestic and Systemic Constraints

In this paper, I have argued that what made Russia's use of subversion in 2016 effective, as understood through the erosion of the Obama administration's authority, was primarily the administration's flawed assessment of the situation and the goals it set for itself. However, others could argue that there were factors at the domestic and/or systemic levels that had a greater role to play. While there is no denying the fact that the administration faced some external constraints, I will show that the weak response remains best explained through the flawed assessments and goals of the Obama administration itself.

To begin with, it would be misguided to completely dismiss the role of the political environment in America at the time. First, the high degree of political polarization meant that Obama failed to get bipartisan consensus on a joint statement condemning Russian

activities, and that many states were opposed to allowing federal intervention in their voting systems. Second, Trump was publicly claiming that the election was being rigged against him, increasing the risk of Obama appearing too partisan by exposing Russian activities.[61] However, I would argue that the lack of a conducive political environment was not an absolute roadblock to taking stronger action. It was only an unwanted hindrance that was given more importance than required, because of Obama's reluctance to be perceived as partisan. Moreover, some domestic constraints seem to have been self-created and could have been avoided. For example, Jeh Johnson, then secretary of homeland security, pursued the idea of designating electoral infrastructure as "critical infrastructure" with election officials from all fifty states without explicitly warning them of the Russian threat and was naturally met with instant resistance. As Shimer puts it, "state officials could not unite against a covert operation they did not know existed."[62]

It can also be argued that it was the intelligence agencies that severely constrained the administration's response. Obama was intent on getting a consensus on Russia's motives and Putin's involvement; however, despite credible intelligence, the agencies were slow on reaching a consensus. According to Nuland, "the attribution from the intelligence community… came far later than it should have."[63] This delayed the statement from the White House, affecting the timeline of the response and thus its effectiveness.[64] Moreover, the administration also faced some resistance from the intelligence agencies on publicly exposing Russia. This is because the agencies were concerned that doing so would reveal important assets in Russia, compromising their intelligence-gathering abilities at a key moment in the US-Russia rivalry.[65] Nonetheless, achieving consensus was solely Obama's decision and hence was a self-created constraint in terms of delaying the response. Similarly, if the administration itself was decisive about exposing Russia's actions, the intelligence community's hesitance would not have posed as big a constraint as some might argue.

Realists could argue that there were constraints at the systemic level as well, for any retaliation by the administration would have invariably exacerbated the security dilemma and risked escalation. For example, if the administration had decided to release any damaging information it possessed on Putin, or imposed sanctions at the scale of those being used against Iran, and Putin perceived such actions as endangering his regime's security, the risk of escalation would have been significantly greater.[66] However, the potential escalation that the administration feared was that Russia would change the actual voter registration systems to tamper with vote counts.[67] This would have constituted the highest level of election interference—messing with an "inherently governmental function"— and thus would have constituted a clear violation of the United States' Westphalian sovereignty, according to the Tallinn Manual.[68] Obama himself reportedly told Putin that "international law, including the law for armed conflict, applies to actions in cyberspace" and that the United States would "hold Russia to those standards," essentially implying that the United States would consider the alteration of votes an act of war.[69] Thus, I would argue that the far superior capabilities of the United States, economically and militarily, would have effectively deterred Russia from escalating the situation in the first place and risking war with the United States.

However, the administration was not just concerned about Russia escalating, but also was convinced that Russia had escalatory dominance—the idea that a state has "a markedly superior position over a rival, across a range of escalation rungs, [and] that its rival will always see further escalation as a losing bet."[70] Yet, I would argue that Russia did not in fact have escalatory dominance, and this was more of a personal assessment on the part of Obama rather than a systemic reality. First, the same "intellectual tendencies" regarding Russian escalatory dominance that guided Obama's response in 2016 had been observed two years earlier with respect to responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[71] As a result, Obama had refused to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine.[72] However, after being elected president, Trump approved lethal weapons sales to Ukraine without any significant escalation from Russia, showing the difference between the Obama administration's perception and the reality of Russia's ability to escalate.[73] Second, the administration's messaging in 2016 itself was contradictory. For example, Obama gave a press conference where he said that in the new era of cyber intrusions, the United States had "more capability than anybody, both offensively and defensively." Thus, while on the one hand they maintained Russia had the upper hand in the situation, on the other, they claimed the United States had unmatched capabilities. The administration also expressed great confidence in the deterrent power of the threats they made, while iterating Russian escalatory dominance.[74] However, the main reason any threats made privately would possibly deter Russia from doing anything further would be, arguably, if Russia believed that the United States indeed had the upper hand in any possible confrontation. Third, the US clearly had the ability to respond to Russia with matching capabilities, in a manner that would not have made it a "losing bet." In fact, as early as July 2016, according to Nuland, the administration had the option to respond using a "very reciprocal" measure that "would have looked exactly like what [Putin] does, been relatively deniable, and been completely painful."[75] In other words, the United States had the ability to counter-escalate, which would not have been possible if Russia had escalatory dominance in the first place.

Another system-level explanation for the Obama administration's actions could be the lack of international norms on whether non-forcible intervention, especially in a foreign country's elections, constitutes a violation of the principle of non-intervention as defined in international law. Russia's actions in 2016 lacked the coercive element and the proof of the "usurpation of an inherently governmental function" that is characteristic of the standard definition of illegal intervention.[76] As Ohlin argues, rather than being a violation of the principles of sovereignty and intervention, Russia's activities were a violation of the principle of selfdetermination.[77] Given the lack of legalization of the concept of self-determination, this could have reasonably constrained the administration's ability to call out Russia's actions on the international stage, and threaten the use of force as a legitimate response. Nevertheless, violating international law has not completely stopped the United States from pursuing its national interest in the past.[78] Notably, the United States also could not have blamed Russia on the international stage for interfering in its elections without being called out for hypocrisy, given that America itself has interfered in elections around the world.[79] However, this should not have deterred the administration from making such

claims in the international community, given that "widespread noncompliance does not automatically transform the behavior into compliance."[80]

Similarly, an alternate norm-based consideration could have been that, after the Obama administration first received intelligence on Russian actions, for a while it was unsure whether they constituted regular espionage or more serious sabotage. Thus, the administration was operating in a "grey area."[81] Although espionage constitutes a violation of domestic US law and is illegal, it is internationally tolerated as a form of "routine intelligence," given its ubiquity.[82] Of course, after Russia dumped the hacked emails, its operations were no longer regular espionage, for it had "weaponized the data."[83] However, for that brief moment between the hacking and the dumping of the emails, the Obama administration could have been reasonably constrained by the blurred lines between responding to espionage and responding to sabotage. Nonetheless, despite the ambiguity, the seriousness and unprecedented nature of the threat meant that it would have been prudent for the administration to have started preparing well in advance for defending against potential sabotage, instead of waiting to see what would have happened.

It can also be argued that cyber operations by themselves can work as an effective deterrent, and the administration's weak response reflected the successful deterrent power of cyberwarfare, given the ambiguity surrounding cyber capabilities and the difficulty of attribution. By gathering highly classified information and infiltrating voter registration systems, Russia managed to deter the United States from taking stronger retaliatory measures, out of the fear of provoking an escalation. Moreover, according to Blinken, it was the unprecedented nature of Russia's cyber campaign that was a significant constraining factor, given that they were operating in a "new world of misinformation" where "information warfare was the new front line."[84] Nonetheless, while it is true that Russia's hack and dump operations had parts that seemed disjointed and isolated, the Obama administration was aware that these were connected as part of a larger cyber campaign.[85] The only part of the cyber campaign that the administration did not understand "in real time" was the social media disinformation.[86] However, while cyber operations can have some deterrent power, I would argue they are unlikely to be sufficient by themselves in preventing a government from launching a counteroffensive. And while the administration was also reasonably caught off-guard by the social media manipulation, it could have still acted earlier with regard to the release of the emails and the attacks on electoral infrastructure. At the same time, though, the fact that the administration could not properly understand the social media disinformation campaign implies that they should have erred on the side of caution in the first place.

Implications – Subversion and US-Russia Rivalry

Despite the fact that the success of Russia's subversive campaign to undermine American democracy was enabled in large part by the weak response it elicited, rather than the particular form of statecraft itself, it holds key implications for the use of subversion in the US-Russia rivalry.

First, what happened in 2016 shows that subversion as a tool of great power rivalry is here to stay. As Stent puts it: "For Russia, war and peace are not binaries; they merely sit at opposite ends of a continuum. Somewhere in between lie active measures and 'political warfare.'"[87] To understand why this is the case, it is important to analyze why Russia chose subversion in particular in 2016, as opposed to other forms of statecraft. Given that Russia is economically and militarily weaker than the United States, subversion allowed for relatively low-cost means to achieve high-yield goals without facing any serious consequences.[88] In particular, the high risks associated with interfering in a US presidential election meant operating using covert means allowed for a level of deniability which, although extremely implausible, Russia maintained throughout to signal its resolve and avoid escalation.[89] Additionally, a large part of the Russian campaign focused on spreading disinformation, and it was operating in an internet age that made it easier than ever before to achieve such mass dissemination, while also making attribution highly difficult.[90] At the same time, the domestic political situation in America, with heightened polarization and a candidate that toed a line largely favorable to Putin, meant that the pre-existing conditions for Russian active measures to take advantage of were already in place. And finally, as Maschmeyer argues, erosion as one of the three main strategies of subversion—manipulation, erosion, and overthrow—undermines the target by "eroding public trust, exacerbating societal tensions and sabotaging institutions and infrastructure." These were precisely the goals Russia was trying to achieve, given that it could more easily erode the administration's power than try to manipulate or overthrow it altogether.[91] As many of these perceived benefits and pre-existing conditions remain intact, it is only likely that Russia will continue to use subversion.

With regard to election meddling in particular, the intelligence community has assessed that Moscow is likely to "apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the US presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against US allies and their election processes."[92] Thus, the United States confronts an environment in which Russia's cyber campaigns and electoral meddling are likely to become even more ubiquitous, with cyberwarfare holding strategic value akin to that of military conflict.[93] It is also important to remember that Russia did not just seek to harm Clinton's campaign or elect Trump. Rather, it sought to undermine American democracy itself. In this way, Russia has "ushered in a new era in election meddling," in that the aim will no longer be to just elect one party or the other but disrupt American democracy itself.[94]

Conclusion

Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election constituted a gross violation of America's Westphalian sovereignty. It is a matter of grave concern that Russia was able to use its subversive activities to undermine American democracy, paralyzing the Obama administration as it struggled to formulate a response, without facing any serious consequences. While some may argue that the myriad domestic and systemic constraints the administration faced were responsible for the weak response, my analysis shows that

it was primarily the administration's flawed assessment of the situation and the goals it set for itself, that are to blame. Nonetheless, Russia's actions in 2016 hold important strategic implications for the use of subversion in the US-Russia rivalry, and should be seen as a learning opportunity to protect against future Russian interference in American democracy.

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Policy Recommendation on Afghanistan and Update to 2023: Evacuation Railroad

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Abstract: The fall of Afghanistan and the immediate geopolitical space in the region represented a unique instance of political will and alignment toward Afghanistan between the United States and the European Union. Combined with pressing concerns of increasing danger to an at-risk population of Afghanistan citizens who collaborated with the US-led coalition, immediate and broad-reaching action was needed to ensure not only the safety of these individuals left behind in Afghanistan but also those who were evacuated. This paper proposes joint US-EU collaborative efforts and revisions to pre-existing evacuation frameworks to facilitate further evacuations out of Afghanistan. The challenges that existed in spring 2022 in the immediate aftermath are described, and subsequent proposals on redress are provided as a case study for failures in pre-existing frameworks. Further analysis of developments since spring 2022 demonstrate applicability and lack thereof because of the changed geopolitical space.

Keywords: United States, European Union, US-EU collaboration, Afghanistan, evacuation, US SIV, EU CEAS.

Introduction

On 30 August 2021, the United States and coalition governments evacuated Afghanistan after 20 years of conflict, leaving the country in control of the Taliban. In the immediate aftermath of the evacuation, discussions between the United States and European Union began on developing a mutual framework to engage the new Taliban government. A key concern of this framework was the safety of Afghan collaborators who supported the US-led multi-national mission of the past two decades and who were left behind in Afghanistan after the evacuation was complete. This essay seeks to recap the aftermath of the conflict for this at-risk group, the immediate situation these collaborators faced under Taliban control, and the evacuation efforts in the months following the coalition pull-out. Furthermore, this essay proposes a collaborative policy between the United States and European Union in supporting further evacuation efforts, designed as part of heightened US-EU collaboration and cooperation.

Immediate Situation in Afghanistan Post-Evacuation

In the aftermath of two decades of conflict, a key concern of US-EU collaboration was on the safety of Afghan collaborators of the multi-national coalition, who were left behind under Taliban control. These individuals remained at risk of retaliation because of assisting coalition efforts administratively or militarily, or because of their affiliation with the previous government. The Association of Wartime Allies (AWA), a non-governmental organization (NGO), reported that approximately 78,000 Afghans who had worked for

the US government and applied to the US Special Immigrant Visa (US SIV) program for at risk-individuals remained in country post-collapse.[1] This estimate did not consider others who had worked with other international coalition partners or who were affiliated with the previous Afghan government. A US Department of Defense estimate, in conjunction with AWA, reported approximately from 100,000 to 300,000 allies remained who had not applied to the US SIV but were eligible to do so with either the US or other coalition nation partners.[2]

Collaborators faced retaliatory violence as a continuation of Taliban modus operandi during the coalition era lasting from the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 to the withdrawal in 2021. During the coalition era, reprisals against collaborators with US or other coalition partners ranged from assassination, threats delivered to family members, and kidnapping conducted by local units of the larger organization.[3] This continued after the takeover, with early reports stating that the Taliban had increased efforts to target collaborators and associated families in "house to house" operations to eliminate these individuals, according to the Norwegian Center for Global Analyses.[4] In addition, evidence showed that the Taliban government was aware of the identities of collaborators, due to information shared by the coalition forces of individuals who were eligible for evacuation during the Kabul airlifts. This presented a time-sensitive challenge as the security of these collaborators rapidly deteriorated as Taliban efforts to target these individuals became increasingly effective through utilizing coalition information.

A secondary challenge in negotiations with the Taliban was the possibility of the organization being largely decentralized in controlling daily life. Evidence suggested that retaliatory strikes took place independently from central Taliban control which offered amnesty to collaborators, indicating two operational narratives of the Taliban government. The first narrative was that the Taliban was making empty promises to meet Western calls for amnesty. The second narrative is that the retaliatory strikes were conducted in a decentralized manner by local officials, similar to the retaliation policy during the coalition era. Each narrative posed significant challenges to any engagement by the United States or European Union; however, given the historical precedent, as well as the chaotic nature of the takeover, the second narrative was the more likely scenario regarding collaborator safety.

Ensuring Taliban co-operation to guarantee collaborator safety remained a difficult prospect for the United States, European Union, and other coalition partners with the prospect of a decentralized Taliban government. Negotiations between the Taliban and the United States and European Union depended on the Taliban's guarantee to meet international expectations for responsible governorship over Afghanistan, and to achieve international recognition, as well as economic aid and development, which remain key issues for the regime today. However, with the possibility that the Taliban is decentralized, and the control of what constitutes the organization is segmented at the national, regional, and local level, the enforcement of any guarantee is unlikely to succeed. This is because

enforcement would require agreement between national, regional, and local organizations which comprise the umbrella term of "the Taliban." With evidence showing local and regional leaders have operated independently, these leaders theoretically may not abide by international agreements, even if the national leadership agreed. Thus, negotiations between the two blocs were significantly hampered by these concerns, which posed significant challenges in negotiations.

Challenges to Continued Evacuation in up to March 2022

In February 2022, the Taliban halted evacuations and departures without approval by the regime with "reasonable" cause.[5] This was announced in response to the reported poor conditions of refugees in Qatar and Turkey in early 2022.[6] This was a break from past policy which had limited restrictions and Taliban oversight on evacuations, with the last recorded official evacuation flight having taken place on December 1, 2021.[7] In March 2022, statements from Deputy Director of Information Zabiullah Mujahid noted that travel restrictions would not apply to those who had obtained legal documents to depart the country, shifting the mechanism of evacuation further under Taliban control.[8] This made future evacuation efforts difficult to plan or enact, with the possibility of the travel policy further changing, combined with the lack of protective agreements over collaborators with the Taliban government for both international and domestic entities. To further complicate evacuation efforts, the infrastructure of the approval system necessary to leave the country was backlogged or in halted certain cases beginning in October 2021 with a flood of applicants seeking to leave.[9] Therefore, another challenge posed by organizations in 2022 was collaborating with the Taliban government to support both authorizing evacuations and facilitating expedited passport and visa services to depart the country.

From August 2021 to March 2022, evacuation efforts were limited in terms of direct government support, with most efforts taking place through NGOs such as "Evacuate Our Allies," or "No One Left Behind," which provided not only legal and legislative advocacy but also direct support in resettling evacuated Afghan individuals in the United States or facilitating limited evacuations of collaborators from Afghanistan. In terms of government efforts, preliminary negotiations with the Taliban regime avoided direct efforts to establish firm evacuation frameworks. Public statements made by EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, outlining the expectations of the EU in engaging with the new regime for international recognition, as well as US efforts to negotiate through Qatar to secure evacuation flights out of the country in late 2021 and 2022, represent part of these indirect efforts. The effectiveness of these efforts was hampered by the shifting policy changes under the Taliban regime and were limited in the scope of how many individuals could be evacuated due to the aforementioned challenges requiring direct Taliban collaboration. This represented a significant shortfall in the relief and security of these individuals in the months following the August withdrawal.

Internationally, Afghan collaborators faced another barrier to exodus. Foremost among them is the US SIV. This visa, developed in early 2010s, remained the primary means to allow Afghan collaborators who had supported the military efforts during the conflict. However, the visa program has delivered only middling results since the fall of Afghanistan. As of early March 2022, reports by the US State Department claim that only half of Afghans evacuated during the withdrawal were eligible to obtain SIV status. The Afghan collaborators remaining in Afghanistan who had applied up to March 2022 reported difficulties in meeting certain requirements, such as medical exams and in-person interviews for visas where medical facilities and the US embassy in Kabul are limited or closed, according to the report by AWA. [10] Additionally, this program had a limited number of slots, a slow processing speed of visas, and stringent physical evidence requirements.

These circumstances are exemplified in the case of Sakhidad Afghan, an interpreter who was killed while waiting three years for his US SIV application to be approved.[11] This indicates that while the US SIV was somewhat successful during the time of its adoption, it remained woefully inadequate to adapt to the volume of a full pull-out of the American presence in Afghanistan and takeover of the Taliban as the standing government. Furthermore, the framework of the US SIV was not meaningfully adjusted with the August withdrawal, with only more slots authorized to cope with increased volume. These forms of regulatory practices posed another major barrier to collaborators remaining in Afghanistan, leaving thousands administratively stuck in the country.

The European Union has a similar process which could have been utilized for the purposes of evacuation, that being the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). CEAS is a multi-national system in which EU member states agree to facilitate and coordinate asylum and return procedures, distributing asylum seekers across the EU.[12] Afghan refugees would apply into this category as part of the European Union's mechanism to host individuals fleeing from persecution or serious harm in their country of origin, or, in this case, of Afghan collaborators seeking refuge from persecution by the Taliban. However, according to a report by the European Council for Foreign Relations (ECFR) in August 2021, these efforts by Afghan refugees have been met with aversion by EU member states, which in turn have applied restrictions against migrations in their domestic spheres.[13] This came in the aftermath of the Syrian refugee crisis, particularly with Slovakia and Germany both indicating aversion to have another influx of refugees, largely due to domestic backlash against past refugee policies. Therefore, in both the United States and European Union, the available mechanisms were inadequate for the crisis at hand and faced significant political barriers which needed to be overcome to further facilitate evacuation efforts.

Domestically, the resettlement of evacuated Afghan refugees from the fall of Kabul in the United States showed more of the logistical strains in taking on a large influx of individuals. The Associated Press reported that the disproportional acceptance of

refugees was being undertaken by states which have higher costs of living. The amount of stipend money, as of September 2021, budgeted for each Afghan evacuee who either lacked or was in process of obtaining a US SIV was $1,225 to cover all living expenses. This amount was far below what would be needed but refugees were ineligible for state-based social assistance programs.[14] To subsidize direct government support, NGOs and other non-profit organizations supported evacuees through resettlement efforts such as housing, community outreach, transportation, and job support.[15] However, those efforts remained limited in scope, with federal efforts reporting that budget cuts in 2021 and 2022 left government-funded resettlement agencies struggling. Meanwhile, non-profit organizations that relied on public support found that donations waned and waxed.[16]

Part of the challenge faced was the evacuation of collaborators and refugee family members, representing a large concern for those already evacuated and those who are seeking to leave. Reports of separated families of interpreters and other refugees who left behind family in Afghanistan were common, such as a 2022 PBS news report about one refugee, Latifa, the wife of an interpreter, who herself was evacuated during the Kabul evacuations, but her husband and children were left behind in the chaos.[17] Another case was that of Andisha Shah, an Afghan refugee who was separated from her family during the evacuation and is now seeking to find her sister and nephews who were able to flee through Pakistan.[18] In both instances, the backlog of special visas and other bureaucratic barriers and challenges represented both a deterrence to depart and was another consideration of policy proposals seeking further evacuation efforts.

Prospects of Collaboration

The prospect of collaboration on the issue of Afghanistan remained a priority for both the United States and European Union in March 2022 and represented an area of opportunity where both could combine their political power and resources to address the crisis of coalition collaborators remaining in Afghanistan. As of March 2022, the United States and European Union had both committed in staying in Afghanistan both to alleviate the humanitarian crisis and to limit a potential power vacuum through statements at the 2021 EU-US summit.[19] Borell and US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken had both made statements at the 2021 US-EU summit to the possibility of engaging with the Taliban, and its relationship as an entity. Borell stated:

> In order to support the Afghan population, we will have to engage with the new government in Afghanistan, which does not mean recognition, it is an operational engagement. And this operational engagement will increase, depending on the behavior of this government.[20]

Blinken also stated:

> Going forward, any engagement with a Taliban-led government in Kabul will be driven by one thing only: our vital national interests. If we can work with a new Afghan government in a way that helps secure those interests (…) and in a way

that brings greater stability to the country and region and protects the gains of the past two decades, we will do it. But we will not do it on the basis of trust or faith. Every step we take will be based not on what a Taliban-led government says, but what it does to live up to its commitments.[21]

These statements demonstrated that for the United States and European Union, engagement with the Taliban was recognized as necessary to achieve foreign policy goals, but was not an indication of recognition, which opened the possibility for direct collaboration. In addition, this direct engagement was backed by both the United States and European Union, which both pledged to utilize humanitarian aid as a means to reach security agreements with the Taliban.

This posed an alignment of goals for both political blocs and presented the opportunity for a strategic framework to be enacted between the United States and European Union to achieve shared goals regarding Afghanistan. Given this opportunity, the European Union's annual Schuman Challenge focused in 2022 on Afghanistan. It was through this opportunity that the following policy recommendation was written on the topic of developing an "evacuation railroad," with the goal of evacuating Afghan collaborators left behind in Afghanistan after March 2022.

Policy Recommendation – Evacuation Railroad

The collaboration effort, utilizing the strategic alignment of political will between both blocs, attempted to address the barriers to exodus, as well as keeping open the door for negotiation and requests. If the United States holds the economic power to negotiate, the European Union can serve as the negotiator. This was planned to be achieved by the United States and European Union in continuing humanitarian aid and in negotiating for establishment of a pipeline of protected collaborators, as a so-called "evacuation railroad." This railroad would seek to utilize NGOs and US data on individuals who assisted, in contacting and verifying these individuals as eligible collaborators. These individuals then would be processed and evacuated overseas to Turkey, where the United States and European Union would coordinate in having them fulfill streamlined visa requirements. To achieve these goals, and the co-operation of third-party actors, the influence of both blocs and a bilateral approach in both areas of influence can be combined to alleviate the crisis.

The first step would be to ensure the ability for individuals who have fled to enter the United States and European Union through reformation of existing visa programs. This was to be done with both the United States and European Union retooling the US SIV and EU CEAS, by either granting an emergency status allowing individuals to temporarily waive interviews and medical exams until in the country of departure or fully waiving requirements. Considering the bilateral approach, this approach gave a wide margin of available locations for individuals to resettle thereby limiting the burden of hosting a large influx of refugees. By resettling the individuals over the two blocs, some of the risk

of individual EU member states resisting the plan could be mitigated. In the United States, NGOs previously mentioned had received limited domestic backlash, indicating at some support for refugee influxes, given the humanitarian crisis during the Kabul evacuation.[22]

This initiative had past historical precedence for success. The US SIV program was an early attempt of this approach in assisting at-risk interpreters by granting a special visa, bypassing certain requirements other visas require. Due to the scale of the evacuation and the limited access of services in Afghanistan, expansion of this program and others like it were necessary given the increasing danger. Even earlier was the United Nations-led (UN) Orderly Departure Program, which successfully facilitated the evacuation of South Vietnamese collaborators fleeing to Southeast Asian countries, by creating a similar evacuation pipeline to partner countries.[23] This was accomplished by UN member states volunteering to take in a proportion of Vietnamese refugees through both coordinated special status visas and relocation support. The economic and domestic burden of this initiative by each participatory state was limited as the burden was shared among them, resulting in a successful resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees across the world. In applying this case to Afghanistan, the scale of the proposed evacuation would be smaller in dealing only with the evacuation of collaborators, however, such an initiative has been proven in the past in the case of the Orderly Departure Programs.

The next step was to negotiate with the Taliban in securing their cooperation with this plan, in the form of security guarantees for these individuals, as well as facilitating approval and assistance to depart Afghanistan. This was a vital step, as absent these guarantees, even with foreign visas, evacuees would be unable to depart the country and would be deterred from doing so by the security risks. To incentivize participation by the Taliban, the United States and European Union would establish numerical, or percentage-based, goals of successful evacuations of collaborators and their families in exchange for the release of frozen economic assets. Success would be defined through the confirmation of their successful departure from Afghanistan and arrival at their destination. Additional confirmation that these individuals were not harmed in departing the country, through a debrief process upon arrival, would incentivize the central governing body of the Taliban to ensure agreement enforcement through constant review.

These economic assets represented a strong proportion of the influence the European Union and the United States held. Gaining both international recognition and release of the frozen economic assets were both goals of the Taliban regime. The United States held $7 billion and the European Union €2 billion in economic assets of the Afghan government, according to Shah Mehrabi, representative of the Afghan Central Bank.[24] The European Union was also withholding €1.4 billion in economic development aid to Afghanistan at the time.[25] These assets served not only as a necessary part of economic development and recovery, areas in which Afghanistan has been struggling post-takeover, but also as steps toward international recognition, in inheriting the Afghanistan Republic assets. This has been corroborated by statements made by Taliban delegate Shafiullah Azam in

the first official talks with the Taliban government in Oslo, Norway in January 2022, as well as Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi, and Shah Merhabi, in calling for increases in foreign aid to the country, as well as the release of these assets.[26] This therefore was a negotiation opportunity for both blocs to leverage cooperation from the new regime, given previous relations.

In conjunction with evacuation efforts, full economic and political support was planned to integrate ongoing NGO efforts in Afghanistan utilizing the evacuation framework. It would allow for an on-ground presence in evacuations and provide a necessary feedback mechanism for NGOs to report violations of the agreement. The status of NGOs operating in Afghanistan allow them to reach and collaborate directly with collaborators and the Taliban government as mediators and prepare these collaborators for evacuation in securing documents, helping pack belongings, and then bringing them to the airport, like efforts prior to the evacuation halt. By securing Taliban collaboration with this project with the leverage of economic assets, the United States and European Union could secure an avenue of departure through supporting NGO efforts.

The next step was to facilitate evacuation flights out of Afghanistan. After the fall of Afghanistan, Qatar had been critical in hosting remaining evacuation flights and negotiating with the regime. The plan recommended a continuation of these efforts in facilitating flights out of the country. However, as the destination remained a preliminary concern, given previous issues with the visa process, sourcing a third-party hosting country was necessary given the volume and the nature of visa and asylum programs. While hosting in the United States and European Union would have been ideal, it was unfavorable given domestic resistance to immediate facilitation and the urgent need for medical care, given the state of Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis with food and medical care shortages. Therefore, an alternative was needed for either outflow or as a staging area for individuals to be held until revisions to the US and EU visa systems were accomplished.

Turkey was recommended as the primary staging point. In March, Turkey hosted approximately 300,000 Afghan refugees after the fall of Kabul, in addition to an estimated four million Syrian refugees of the Syrian crisis. The European Union could lead in gaining the Turkish support, as one of the largest providers of financial aid, with negotiations being held to approve an additional €3 billion financial aid package to host Afghan refugees.[27] The European Union, by offering such a large financial aid package, thus had a strong negotiation point to request Turkish support for this plan, which included temporary hosting of evacuated collaborators to allow for the processing of visa paperwork, obtaining the necessary medical care for them, and preparing destinations for receiving them. However, a report by the ECFR noted that Turkey by early 2022 was reluctant to accept more, given the domestic debate over the refugees' prolonged stay.[28] The plan accounted for Turkish resistance by stressing the temporary nature of hosting, in addition to ensuring extended financial aid by the European Union for Turkish cooperation.

The final step in this plan for collaborators was resettlement in either the United States or the European Union. Most would be resettled in the United States because of the large proportion of Afghan collaborators who either supported US forces or were employed by the United States in some way, with at least 78,000 being eligible applicants to the US SIV. The plan recommended that the United States should host a large proportion of the resettlement burden. If the United States hosted the brunt of Afghan collaborators, this would alleviate EU aversion to the plan because of fears of a refugee surge, as described earlier by the ECFR report. Because more of the collaborators would be resettled in the United States, this increased European support for this initiative, both collectively and among individual EU member states. The European Union, particularly the individual EU member states who participated in the coalition, would only host their associated Afghan collaborators, including Germany, Belgium, France, and Norway, if any, in addition to other willing members of the European Union reflected in the CEAS and historical orderly departure programs.

In conjunction with resettlement efforts, a key part of the plan was to increase official support NGO efforts which had borne the brunt of efforts to resettle individuals. NGOs such as Operation Allies Welcome in Oklahoma had resettled about 68,000 refugees, with additional states accepting a large proportion of refugees.[29] Increasing support financially for these organizations would help continue their efforts with each new influx of arrivals. Additionally, after the fall, a proportion of refugees were hosted in US bases. These also could be utilized until more permanent areas of resettlement could be established. In either scenario, increasing the economic support of NGOs would assist in resettling these collaborators.

Changes from March 2022 Onward

Much has changed since this plan's inception in March 2022, as both domestic and international political will and attention has wavered on the issue of Afghanistan. Some concepts outlined in the policy proposal have seen limited application, and considerations in dealing with the Taliban have been fundamentally changed from immediately after the takeover. However, as the Taliban government has centralized its control, and with shifting domestic pressures, a new set of challenges are faced by both collaborators remaining in Afghanistan and those who were successfully evacuated to the United States. While some elements of the policy proposal remain valid, unfortunately given the changes in US domestic priorities and the decreased international willingness to engage the Taliban regime, the timeframe for implementation has passed, and the current political regime would be unlikely to support any increased efforts.

Since March 2022, evacuation efforts have increased with government support, particularly by certain EU member states, in facilitating the evacuation of Afghan collaborators from neighboring countries such as Pakistan who are at risk of deportation back to Afghanistan. The Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and

Cooperation continued evacuations past March 2022, successfully evacuating an estimated 3,900 refugees, 2,200 of which included collaborators with the European Union as well as North Atlantic Treaty Organization-affiliated (NATO) personnel.[30] This was accomplished through establishing emergency visas and access to Spain to eligible persons, as well as the promotion and rapid application of the EU CEAS framework. This allowed for the evacuation of 942 individuals, out of the 3,900 total evacuees, via the Spanish embassies in Tehran, Ankara, New Delhi, Akbarabad, Nur-Sultan and Moscow, similar to the proposal.[31] This proves the concept of the ability for the European Union to retool these frameworks to rapidly evacuate large amounts of individuals to be transferred to EU member states, or enable transfer to elsewhere, such as the United States. However, most efforts by the EU bloc has been focused on providing international aid through NGOs to improve living conditions in Afghanistan or neighboring countries, rather than exfiltration to the European Union.[32]

Since March 2022, another key consideration for engagement was the possibility of decentralized control among the then-emergent Taliban government. Almost one year from that March, the Taliban government has achieved political consolidation as a singular bloc, being described as a "Hermit Kingdom … a combination of vice and virtue politics, punishment retributions, political alienation, and selective patronage."[33] With one of the key concerns of the railroad plan being that of enforcement, this represents a positive political development on the part of engagement. With this development, international regimes can engage the Taliban, and any successful agreements would be both attributable to the central authority, increasing the probability of any successful agreement being upheld.

Currently, however, it is unlikely that the United States and European Union would be willing to engage the Taliban, with political support to openly engage the regime remaining limited given both shifting domestic interests and international condemnation. *The Hill*, reporting in December 2022, stated, "America's desire to move on leaves in question its obligation to the thousands of Afghans it worked with, either left behind or in legal limbo in the US and elsewhere."[34] Furthermore given the treatment of women and concerns about human rights violations since March 2022, the United States, European Union, and UN have publicly condemned the Taliban administration, with Reuters reporting in December 2022 that Borrell stated, "Together with other providers of assistance to the people of Afghanistan, the EU will have to consider what consequences this decision, and the recent decision by the Taliban to close universities for women, will have on their engagement with our countries and organizations."[35] Limited engagement, however, is in place with the US State Department acknowledging in October 2022 of an interagency US delegation meeting Taliban administrators in Qatar.[36] This is additionally demonstrated by the head of the EU delegation to Afghanistan, Raffaella Lodice, meeting with the acting interior minister of the Islamic emirate, Khalifa Sirajuddin Haqqani in January 2023.[37]

The issue remains unsolved, as of September 2022, there remains approximately 160,000 people remaining on the visa waiting list, with an unidentified Afghan aid group estimating it would take more than eighteen years to approve all the visas at the current pace.[38] Additionally, of 76,000 evacuated refugees in the US, many face deportation due to the temporary legal status of the SIV provided expiring in 2023 combined with backlogged processing, a concern which was listed in the proposal.[39] The status of the evacuated individuals currently lies in the Afghan Adjustment Act, a legislative proposal to establish an interagency task force to streamline visa processing and re-approach evacuating collaborators in Afghanistan, much like what this paper'sproposal advocated for to be established.[40] However, current domestic resistance against the legislation is present in Congress, with security concerns about the effectiveness of vetting given certain instances of Afghan evacuees subsequently being deported as security risks.[41] As a result, it remains unknown whether this legislation will pass given both increasing opposition to the bill, as well as shifting domestic attention and interest toward Afghanistan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, because of changes in both the US domestic and international interest and political will, the prospects of this policy proposal's implementation or effectiveness are limited. Limited application of certain portions of the framework have been implemented, as seen both in Spain and in proposed legislation in the United States to establish portions of the proposal. However, while certain challenges, which were caused by engaging with a newly established regime, have been alleviated, new challenges have cropped up, which make the prospects of the "evacuation railroad" unlikely to be implemented given increasing political disinterest to engage with the Taliban, and rising political disinterest in assisting further evacuations. While this remains a pressing challenge, which requires a cooperative effort among not only the United States and the European Union, but also, given the challenges, a new framework adapted to the political realities of 2023 in order to alleviate the risks these Afghan allies face by being left behind.

The United States and European Union should not forget those who have served with faith and support to the coalition mission. As part of both political blocs' efforts to continue engagement with the new Taliban government, efforts must be made not only to ensure the protection of an at-risk group, but also to demonstrate the willingness to protect international allies. The evacuation railroad serves as only one example of a planned effort which could be implemented to reach that cause. Cooperation between the United States and European Union allows for a multi-lateral approach in resolving complex challenges arising from 20 years of conflict and represent an opportunity for the two blocs to engage within the region as responsible actors. While the efficacy period for this proposed policy's framework has passed, approaching new challenges through the lens of US-EU cooperation can show new avenues of resolving future complex challenges involving evacuee crises.

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Legacy of Loss: The Armenian Genocide in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Madeleine Shaw

Abstract: The ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian) has its roots in the Ottoman Empire's twentieth-century genocide of its Armenian population and sequential episodes of ethnic cleansing. Turkish President Tayyip Erdoğan's desire to increase Turkish influence in the Caucasus, combined with his country's ongoing denial of the Armenian genocide, has fueled Armenian suspicions that Turkey seeks to "restore the Ottoman Empire." Turkey has greatly supported Azerbaijan in the conflict, providing military training, technology, and even Syrian mercenaries. The conflict has escalated in recent years, with Azerbaijan launching a fierce attack on Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020 and again in 2022, and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accusing Azerbaijan and Turkey of trying to "bring to completion the Armenian genocide." Until the conflict's history is understood and grievances are reconciled, violence, including Azerbaijan's ongoing humanitarian blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh, is bound to continue.

Keywords: Armenian genocide, Nagorno-Karabakh, Artsakh, Turkey, Armenia, Azerbaijan.

Introduction

Early in 2022, 13-year-old figure skater Adelia Petrosyan won the silver medal at the Russian Junior Figure Skating Championships in Moscow. The Armenian-born Russian performed to "Artsakh," an Armenian folk song composed by Ara Gevorgyan. On a YouTube video of the program, one commenter remarked that "[it's] a beautiful piece with such deep emotional value to Adelia as an Armenian. I feel like there's something very moving in the music, and in how she performs to it, I can't explain it, I just want to rewatch it over and over again. This program is not just a program, it's so much more than that."[1] Another viewer commented that "the main wealth of Armenia is its talented people and culture. No matter how much pain is caused to her, she will live and prosper. And no one can defeat her."

Petrosyan's performance was clearly deeper than surface level. "Artsakh" has been a heavily popular song in Armenia and Armenian diaspora communities since its release in 1999. The song is regularly used in Armenian cultural and political events due to Artsakh's significance as an Armenian province and now the Armenian name of the Nagorno-Karabakh region.[2] Known as the Republic of Artsakh, the de facto independent territory is internationally recognized as Azerbaijani but contains a majority of ethnic Armenians and backing from the Armenian government.[3] The heavily disputed region has produced a long and deadly conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan (and Turkey, as it turns out) that plays out viciously across politics, economics, and even culture.

In the early 2000s, confusion in a Russian ice show led the Azerbaijani ambassador to Russia to allege that "Artsakh" was not Armenian at all but was instead composed using an Azerbaijani folk song. In 2007, Azerbaijani rhythmic gymnast Dinara Gimatova performed to the song, causing controversy and scandal among viewers.[4] One Azerbaijani commented on a YouTube video of Gimatova that "Armenians very cleverly stole our song." Another retorted, "No one knew this composition, now people know the melody. If you are such patriots, don't watch the performances of our gymnasts."

A simple glance at the comments on any performance of "Artsakh" will reveal the dynamic tensions between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Petrosyan provides a case study on the lasting impacts of both the Armenian genocide and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, particularly on how Armenians view themselves. In this paper, I will argue that critical events in Armenian history—namely the Armenian genocide and repeated incidents of ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan—have profound impacts on Armenia's self-identity during its conflict with Azerbaijan. I will focus on how Turkey and Azerbaijan's denial of the Armenian genocide contributes to hostility toward Armenia and the perpetuation of Armenia's victim complex.

The Armenian Genocide

In order to understand the complexities of how the Armenian genocide plays out today, it is important to know the facts. In 1915, the Ottoman Empire was a heterogenous homeland to Arab, Kurdish, Jewish, and Christian communities, including some 2 million Armenians.[5] Armenia, a Christian nation founded in the fourth century A.D., had been under the control of various empires when it was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century.[6] Ruled by Muslims, the Ottoman Empire allowed religious autonomy yet subjected its Armenian minority to prejudice and unfair treatment.[7] Still, the Empire's Armenian communities thrived and were typically better educated and more financially stable than many Turks, leading to jealousy and increasing resentment.[8] With the rise of the Young Turks—a small, nationalist group of Ottoman politicians within the larger Committee of Union and Progress (CUP)—a new wave of discrimination against Armenians began. [9] Interestingly, the Young Turks were initially supported by the Ottoman Armenian population after ousting the "Bloody Sultan" Abdul Hamid II who had murdered hundreds of thousands of Armenians and destroyed hundreds of Armenian villages from 1894-1896.[10]

At this point in history, the Ottoman Empire was struggling to survive the first World War. Previously a thriving empire, Constantinople had fallen victim to the Balkan Wars, triggering its sharp decline.[11] The Ottomans entered World War I in 1914 on the side of the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary—against Britain, France, and Russia. Ottoman leaders knew that the survival of their empire hinged on their victory in the war, and thus the support of minority groups within the empire was crucial.[12] That year, both the Russians and the Ottomans vied for Armenian support. When the

Ottomans were dealt several hard blows in 1914, the Young Turks began blaming their downfall on treacherous Armenian support for the Russians.[13] While some Armenian nationalists did aid the Russians, the vast majority of Armenians remained loyal to the Ottoman Empire, with some even serving in the Ottoman army or assisting the war effort in other ways.[14] As Taner Akçam writes, the "outbreak of World War I provided the Young Turks with the perfect cover to carry out their murderous plans."[15]

With suspicion of Armenian treachery at a high, the Young Turks demobilized Armenian soldiers and began removing Armenians from the Eastern front (nowadays Eastern Anatolia).[16] On 24 April 1915, Ottoman officials rounded up and executed hundreds of Armenian cultural leaders and intellectuals.[17] As deportations grew throughout the empire, Ottoman authorities began systematically massacring Armenians, death-marching entire villages into the Syrian desert, and pursuing a campaign of terror using rape, public executions, slavery, and forced conversion.[18] Experts estimate that about 1.5 million Armenians—90 percent of the pre-war Armenian population—were killed in the time frame of just one year.[19] Indeed, it is known that when Raphael Lemkin coined the term "genocide" in 1944, the systematic annihilation of the Ottoman Empire's Armenian population was fresh on his mind.[20]

The genocide did not stop after 1915; Armenians remaining in Turkey were systematically forced into conversion, massacred, or imprisoned.[21] From 15-17 September 1918, Nuri and Enver Pasha murdered an estimated 30,000 Armenian civilians in Baku after taking the city from the Russian army via the newly-formed Islamic Army of the Caucasus.[22] After the orchestrators of the genocide fled to Germany later that year, the eastern part of Armenia declared independence during the collapse of the Russian Empire.[23] Its sovereignty was short-lived; Armenia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1922.[24] During its lengthy tenure as a socialist republic, Armenia's cultural heritage and memory of the genocide were suppressed in order to quell dissent. However, trauma obviously remained; on the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide in 1965, hundreds of thousands of Armenians gathered in Yerevan to demand the Soviet Union's recognition of the Armenian genocide.[25]

Genocide Denial

In a speech given shortly before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Adolf Hitler infamously told his generals, "After all, who today remembers the annihilation of the Armenians?"[26] Seeing that Turkish officials were not held responsible for their crimes, Hitler was able to justify the Holocaust to both himself and the German people. In fact, Hitler was known to have studied in-depth how the Ottomans carried out the Armenian genocide, with German military advisors and future members of the Nazi party stationed in the Ottoman Empire in 1915.[27] Viewing the Holocaust in light of genocide denial explicitly demonstrates its catastrophic impacts. As Hakobyan and Mollica write in "Encountering Turkish Denialism," denial "is an integral part of genocide" in which violence is

committed amidst a lack of responsibility for past crimes as a continued "assault on those who survived the genocide and their descendants."[28] To this day, Turkey has pursued an ever-advancing campaign of erasing its past even amidst an abundance of survivors' accounts and historical consensus certifying the events of 1915 as genocide.

Turkey has several motives for denying the Armenian genocide, among them the preservation of its national identity. With the creation of Turkey came "a new identity, distinct from the Ottoman Empire, allowing [Turkey] to distance itself from past crimes."[29] Successive generations of Turks have built their national identities on top of genocide denial, making it incredibly difficult to dislodge. Ankara also fears territorial concessions and possible reparations associated with admitting to its past crimes. Many experts cite the "Sevres Syndrome" (referencing the proposed partitioning of the Ottoman Empire to European powers in 1920) as the root of Turkey's existential fear of territorial loss.[30] Armenian journalist Davit Safaryan puts it that "the process of official recognition of the Armenian genocide pursued by Armenia is perceived in Turkey as a subconscious threat to its fundamental territorial integrity and security."[31]

In order to protect its identity and prevent territorial loss, Turkey adamantly denies the genocide at home. Turkey indoctrinates its youth via curriculums that teach of rebellion, disloyalty, and violence by Armenians during World War I.[32] Additionally, Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code criminalizes "denigrating Turkishness," thus making any acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide illegal.[33] Those who mention the events of 1915 in a negative light or attempt to open the conversation risk "public condemnation, or worse, face criminal prosecution."[34] Numerous authors, historians, journalists, and outspoken Turks have been prosecuted and imprisoned from the controversial law, namely Nobel Prize-winning author Orhan Pamuk, historian Taner Akcam (author of several sources used in this paper), and fiction writer Elif Shafak.[35] The Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink was famously assassinated by Turkish nationalists in 2007 after being acquitted in a trial over Article 301.[36] A Turkish judge justified the law by saying that the discussion of genocide "unfavorably affects national security," and has been used to justify "chang[ing] the geographic and political boundaries of Turkey."[37]

Turkey also pushes other states to avoid recognizing the genocide by funding biased research and propaganda across the world, especially in the United States. Roxanne Makasdjian, executive director of The Genocide Education Project, informed me that Turkish lobbying for years has left Armenian genocide education out of US history textbooks, a phenomenon she considers "equivalent to learning about World War II without mentioning the Holocaust."[38] Makasdijan represented the Armenian American community while facing off with Turkish government representatives who opposed an Armenian genocide memorial in San Francisco.[39] Turkey has also attempted to expand its influence by establishing Turkish Studies programs at prominent American universities, including Princeton, Georgetown, the University of California, Berkeley, and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).[40] While seemingly benign, these departments have

funded academic publications that seek to deny or raise doubt about the Armenian genocide.[41] Such small-scale efforts to combat the past have been coupled with diplomatic pressure. Amidst several recent recognitions of the genocide in France, the Vatican, and most recently the United States in 2021, Turkey recalled its ambassadors and issued a series of economic warnings, including threatening to discontinue the US airbase in Incirlik, Turkey.[42]

Experts have interestingly been able to track the timeline of Turkey's various narratives on the Armenian genocide with changes in global human rights and genocide norms. While at first Turkey sought to outright deny any loss of Armenian life, it now seeks to avert blame by considering the deaths collateral damage of war or blaming Armenians for initiating violence.[43] In 2014—nearly a century after the genocide—Turkey's President Tayyip Erdoğan for the first time in Turkey's history issued an apology to the Armenians, yet still perpetuated this modern Turkish narrative that both Turks and Armenians suffered.[44] The Republic of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website claims that the "Armenian narrative" "describe[s] a world populated only by white-hatted heroes and black-hatted villains," where "the heroes are always Christian and the villains are always Muslim."[45] Evidently, Turkey's refusal to recognize wrongdoing and provide reparations has long enraged Armenians and plays largely into Turkish foreign relations today.

The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

During the incorporation of Armenia and Azerbaijan into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Soviet leaders gave autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority region between the two states.[46] As part of Stalin's "divide and rule" policy to split up ethnic groups in the Caucasus, however, Soviet leaders delegated the region to the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.[47] In early 1920, Azerbaijan initiated a massacre of the Armenian population of Shusha, the capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, after Armenian residents protested the Azerbaijani annexation of the city.[48] For the next seventy years, Azerbaijan discriminated against and intentionally attempted to diminish the Armenian population of both the Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan autonomous republics. Azerbaijan's success in expelling Armenians and Armenian cultural heritage from the neighboring Nakhichevan region pushed Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh to seek reunification with Armenia.[49]

With ethnic tensions violently suppressed during the Soviet era, nationalism re-emerged in the late 1980s amidst Gorbachev's "glasnost" policy.[50] In 1988, unprecedented numbers of Armenians took to the streets to push for the Azerbaijan-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh's incorporation into Armenia.[51] In response, however, Azerbaijani forces began door-to-door pogroms of up to 20,000 Armenians in Baku and Sumgait, sparking even more unrest and displacement among Armenians in the disputed region and further coalescing Azerbaijani nationalism around maintaining Nagorno-Karabakh.[52] After the autonomous region declared de facto independence from Azerbaijan in 1990, large-scale fighting began.[53]

The two states fought a deadly battle in what is known as the First Nagorno-Karabakh War from 1991 to 1994. The devastating conflict had casualties estimated at 30,000 with over a million displaced on both sides.[54] Armenian troops gained control over Karabakh and surrounding regions, expelling over 500,000 Azerbaijani residents.[55] In 1994, Russia brokered a cease-fire that left the region and surrounding buffer zones under the control of Armenian separatists backed by the Armenian government.[56] Peace remained fragile, with tensions and border skirmishes flaring up every few years. In 2016, violence erupted along the region's border, with large-scale shelling killing dozens of civilians and troops.[57]

In late 2020, an economically revived Azerbaijan struck back against its occupied territory with the help of its ally, Turkey.[58] Scholars point out that the attack was planned at the perfect time and thus had amplified effects; COVID-19 was at its worst, the Trump administration was coming to an end, the US presidential election and State Department were facing unprecedented challenges, and the Armenian prime minister was becoming increasingly unpopular.[59] Azerbaijan began its campaign with a week-long bombardment of Armenian villages in the disputed region, following up with the large-scale use of air strikes on Armenian targets.[60] This new technology, largely a product of Azerbaijan's close relationship with Turkey, devastated Armenian forces in just forty-four days.[61] Armenians suffered heavy losses, surrendering nearly three-fourths of their pre-war territory in and around Nagorno-Karabakh.[62] In a 2020 report by the International Partnership for Human Rights, both sides were verified to have committed war crimes, "deliberately and indiscriminately fir[ing] on civilians with heavy artillery or air support, sometimes killing or wounding whole families."[63] More than 100,000 are thought to have been displaced with around 6,500 reportedly dead.[64] In November 2021, border attacks by Azerbaijani troops on the southern border killed fifteen Armenian soldiers and took twelve as prisoners; in 2023, cross-border violence and blockades of humanitarian corridors continue.[65] Clearly, the conflict is still very alive.

Turkey-Azerbaijan Connection

Following the launch of Azerbaijan's 2020 assault to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh, Erdogan exclaimed that Azerbaijan and Turkey were "one nation, two states" and that Turkey would stand with its "Azeri brothers with all [its] means…on the battlefield or the negotiating table."[66] Turkey has evidently committed strongly to its promise to its ally, training Azerbaijani armed forces, holding joint military exercises, and supplying crucial weapons including armed drones, rocket launchers, and F-16 fighter jets.[67] Ankara even sent as many as 1,000 Syrian mercenaries, mostly from the Syrian National Army, to aid Azerbaijani fighters in the separatist regions.[68]

Turkey, bound by close ethnic and cultural ties to Azerbaijan, had always been an ally and supporter of Azerbaijan's claim to Nagorno-Karabakh, yet did not play such a key role in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict until recently. Experts cite Erdoğan's desire to maintain Azerbaijan as a major energy consumer and investor, as well as gain influence

in the Caucuses in opposition to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Minsk Group, composed of Russia, France, and the United States.[69] Specifically, Turkey seeks to grow its regional and global power by gaining leverage over Russia that could give it increased leverage in Syria and Libya.[70] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan agrees with this theory, telling Al Arabiya in 2020 that Turkey wants to "restore the Ottoman Empire."[71] This past year, Erdoğan posed with a map of the "Turkish world," showing the area from Turkey to eastern Russia shaded red.[72]

Others insist that Turkey and Azerbaijan are allied together because they both actively dispute Armenia's ties to its territory and seek to de-legitimize the state.[73] As Armenian diaspora member Makasdjian framed it, Turkey and Azerbaijan are united in their "policy of denying the Armenian genocide" and seek to "squeeze" and "erase" Armenia "from the east and west" in order to "pave the way for a large 'Pan-Turkic' bloc."[74] Armenian journalist Safaryan offered that "it appears [to Turkey] that Western Armenia is just a part of the Turkish fatherland" and [to Azerbaijan] that "Eastern Armenia is a territory held by the [Azerbaijani] Shia Khans."[75] Whatever the reason for Turkey's support, Erdoğan's actions have had profound impacts on Armenian identity considering Armenia and Turkey's difficult past.

Anti-Armenianism in Turkey

The first product of Armenia and Turkey's controversial history during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the proliferation of anti-Armenian sentiment in Turkey, demonstrated explicitly by speeches from Erdoğan and other Turkish officials. In July 2020, Erdoğan proclaimed that "we will continue to fulfill the mission our grandfathers have carried out for centuries in the Caucasus."[76] In December, he exclaimed, "May the souls of Nuri Pasha, Enver Pasha, and the brave soldiers of the Caucasus Islam Army be happy."[77] Clearly, Erdoğan's rhetoric alludes to the continued destruction and cleansing of the Armenian state and its people, especially relevant in the context of the ongoing conflict for Nagorno-Karabakh. Ironically, Turkey's former Prime Minister Tansu Çiler repeatedly called for the deportation of Armenians in Turkey if Armenia continued "blaming [Turkey] for the pursuance of the Armenian genocide."[78] Garo Paylan, an Armenian member of the Turkish parliament, responded to this rise in official anti-Armenian rhetoric in late 2020: "Any hate speech towards the Armenian people makes our own citizens an imminent target" and brings back memories of "anti-Armenian pogroms" that have occurred over the "past four generations."[79]

Hate speech and racism from ordinary Turks have correlated with Turkey's growing involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh and anti-Armenian sentiment from government officials. In 2005, an American poll illustrated that the most disliked group in Turkey was Armenians, followed by Jews and Americans.[80] Following the launch of Azerbaijan's campaign for Nagorno-Karabakh, anti-Armenian demonstrations spread throughout Turkey. On 28 September 2020, the day after the attack began, a parade of cars draped

with Azerbaijani flags drove through Istanbul's Armenian Kumkapı neighborhood in front of the Armenian Patriarchate.[81] Turkish and Azeri demonstrators chanted anti-Armenian slogans and constantly honked, presumably to scare Armenian residents.[82] An Armenian man living in the neighborhood told reporters, "I wonder if something will happen to my children if I stay" following the parade.[83] Similar demonstrations occurred in Beyazit Square—the execution site of many Armenian intellectuals in 1915—and around the Hrant Dink Memorial Site and the Agos office in early October.[84] Signs from anti-Armenian protests have featured "Stop the Armenian lie," "You [Armenians] are all bastards," "We will descend upon you in the night," and "Death to Armenians."[85]

Along with anti-Armenian demonstrations in Turkey, domestic and international hate crimes and terrorism against Armenians have proliferated during the conflict. In Istanbul, the Grey Wolves, a far-right nationalist militant group associated with the Turkish Nationalist Movement Party, actively prey upon the Armenian community.[86] The terrorist group released an official "threat" against Armenians in 1994, followed by repeated death ultimatums in 2012 and 2015.[87] The Grey Wolves were recently linked to anti-Armenian marches and the defacing of Armenian memorials and businesses in the largely Armenian town of Decines-Charpieu, France. In what was known as the "Hunt for Armenians," a mob of Turkish nationalists chanted, "We are going to kill the Armenians" in late October 2020.[88] The Grey Wolves, officially known as the Ulku Ocaklari [Idealist Hearts], are banned in France as a terrorist organization, with Germany and the European Union likely to follow suit.[89] Makasdjian told me that in the weeks leading up to the 27 September 2020 attack on Nagorno Karabakh, arsonists "completely gutted" the San Francisco Armenian Cultural Center, the site of numerous Armenian-American community organizations, and vandalized the community's day school with gunshots and threatening graffiti.[90] Evidently, Turkish nationalism coalesced around the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and resulted in hate crimes against Armenians throughout the world.

Turkey has also pursued a process of indoctrination of its Armenian population in order to promote anti-Armenian sentiment and eradicate Armenian identity. After the recapture of Shushi, a city in southern Nagorno-Karabakh, in early November, Erdoğan and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev announced the opening of a Turkish school sponsored by the Ulku Ocaklari (Grey Wolves) Education Foundation.[91] Similar Turkish schools had been opened in northern Syria, with photos of schoolchildren as young as three holding up the Grey Wolves symbol, images that spread across the internet and caused international outrage.[92] Additionally, Turkey has promoted the "Turkification" of Armenian land by renaming streets and other public sites. In Shushi, Aram Manukyan Street, named for the founder of Armenia and defender of Van during the Armenian genocide, was changed to Ataturk Street.[93] Many Armenians see this as a parallel to the forced Turkification of Armenian genocide survivors in attempts to conceal their Armenian heritage.

Last, Turkish hostility toward Armenians has manifested itself in the cultural re-engineering of former Armenian lands. During the Armenian genocide, Ottoman

officials used the resettlement of Muslim populations to alter the demographics of former Christian communities.[94] Similarly, Hakobyan and Mollica found in their research that Turkey has "engaged in the large-scale recruitment and transfer of Syrians to Azerbaijan" during the recent Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.[95] Turkey reportedly offered the families of surviving Syrian mercenaries to move to the territory gained by Azerbaijan in southern Karabakh. This process of resettlement is often "synchronized with the cleansing of Armenians."[96]

Ethnic Hatred in Azerbaijan

The second result of the Armenian genocide in Nagorno-Karabakh is extreme ethnic hatred on behalf of Azerbaijan. Interestingly, around 600,000 refugees from the first Nagorno-Karabakh War have remained internally displaced in Azerbaijan for roughly thirty years, with government officials purposely preventing their absorption into society via poor refugee facilities and resettlement policies.[97] In other words, Azerbaijani refugees have been used as a political weapon against Armenians in Azerbaijan's fight for Nagorno-Karabakh. This, combined with the memory of the 1992 Armenian massacre of around 600 Azerbaijanis in Khojaly, results in large-scale animosity toward Armenians.[98] This state-sponsored anti-Armenianism manifests itself in the dehumanization of Armenians and celebration of Armenian deaths as well as the widespread destruction of Armenian cultural heritage.

The widespread hatred in Azerbaijan can be seen via the dehumanization of Armenians and glorification of their death, displayed specifically in Azerbaijan's "Spoils of War'" theme park in Baku. The recently-opened park, also called the "Military Trophies" exhibit, displays captured Armenian equipment, an arrangement of helmets of dead Armenian soldiers, and wax models of Armenian soldiers with grotesquely exaggerated features.[99] Photos recently circulated on social media showing Azeri children playing with the mannequins and saluting the military at the exhibition in military uniforms.[100] This clear state-sanctioned dehumanization of Armenians and disturbing promotion of anti-Armenianism creates an atmosphere where crimes against Armenians are justified and even praised. As Lavinia Badulesec writes in her analysis of dehumanization in the conflict, "once a group is denied of humanity, actions such as expulsion, dispossession, ethnic cleansing, or genocide appear as justified."[101]

Accordingly, this dehumanization of Armenians in Azerbaijan has resulted in a slew of war crimes and an apparent lack of humanity in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. When asked how the Armenian genocide plays into the war over Artsakh, Armenian Dartmouth student Kami Arabian said that Azerbaijan's lack of regard for human life elicited memories of genocide for his community.[102] Indeed, while both sides were found to have committed war crimes during the 2020 war in a report by the International Partnership for Human Rights (IPHR), Azerbaijan was found to have explicitly targeted civilian infrastructure, including hospitals, residential areas, and heritage sites.[103] The use of white phosphorus gas by Azerbaijani troops is also known to have destroyed forests

and cropland in the region.[104] Additionally, nearly sixty Armenian civilians are thought to remain prisoners of war in Azerbaijan and have reportedly been subjected to torture and sham trials in an effort to give Azerbaijan bargaining power over Armenia.[105]

Last, Azerbaijan has engaged in a state-sponsored campaign of "cultural genocide" for the past thirty years in order to destroy Armenia's historical claim to the region. During the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020, numerous cultural icons, including churches and cemeteries, were damaged, destroyed, or converted for Azerbaijani use in what historians are calling "the greatest cultural genocide of the [twenty-first] century."[106] Armenia's Ghazanchetsots Cathedral in Shushi, a symbol to many Armenians of the "rebirth of the Armenian nation," was intentionally struck twice by drones on the one hundredth anniversary of its 1920 restoration.[107] Like many other churches in the region, the Armenian Cathedral in Kars, Turkey was converted into a mosque in 1993.[108] As Foreign Minister Raffi Hovannisian put it, the destruction "takes back even the most modern-minded Armenian to the year 1915.[109] The attempted erasure of Armenian heritage threatens to press forward not just in Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh but into Armenian itself. In 2018, Aliyev claimed that "Yerevan is our historical land and we Azerbaijanis must return to these historical claims."[110] Fear that Azerbaijan will continue to reject Armenia's claim to its land resonates strongly in Armenia, where anxiety that Azerbaijan and Turkey are continuing genocide perpetuates the conflict.

Insecurity in Armenia

Last, the Armenian genocide contributes to the deeply engrained self-identification of Armenians as victims both within Armenia and abroad. Numerous Armenian leaders have referenced a fear of the repetition or continuation of genocide in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, especially when pressing for international support. In 2016, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan commented that "there will be neither extermination nor deportation of Armenians in Artsakh. We will not tolerate another Armenian genocide."[111] In 2020, he said that "Turkish involvement in [Nagorno-Karabakh] gives feeling to [Armenians] everywhere that Turkey wants to repeat what happened 105 years ago…and create another genocide."[112] Pashinyan claimed in a recent speech that "Karabakh under Azerbaijan's control means Karabakh without Armenians, which is genocide."[113] Clearly, history plays a large role in the modern conflict. As Sargsyan remarked, "For [Armenians] of Nagorno-Karabakh, this is a fight for life because they have been fighting against Genghis Khan, Lenk Timur and the others for thousands of years."[114] To many Armenians, Turkey's denial of the genocide and strong support for Azerbaijan "fuels historic and current existentialist fears."[115] During our interview, Arabian told me Armenians believe the saying that "those who erase history are bound to repeat it."[116]

Because of this victimization, Armenia (not unjustifiably) classifies both Turkey and Armenia as existential enemies. However, this process makes Armenia blind to its

own injustices and prevents efforts to negotiate a settlement.[117] Armenian politicians continue to equate both Azerbaijan and Turkey to immoral enemies: "The dream of Azerbaijan is to occupy Artsakh and ethnically cleanse it from Armenians" (Sargsyan, 2016); "Azerbaijani-Turkish bandits…[seek] to carry on with their genocidal policy and bring to completion the Armenian genocide" (Pashinyan, 2020); "Azerbaijan repeated the practice of 1918…slaughtering and expelling Armenians" (Foreign Minister Eduard Nalbandian, 2020).[118] Badulesec argues that "constant references to 'massacres,' 'atrocities,' and 'ethnic cleansing' of the Armenian people allude to the 'evil' nature of Azerbaijanis and encourage [Armenians] to adopt negative attitudes towards them."[119] This generalization of all Azerbaijanis and Turks as the enemy leads to a "lack of critical self-reflection" on "possible wrongdoing on [Armenians'] part," as well as the inability to trust any negotiation or settlement.[120] Whether right or wrong, extreme victimization and the surfacing of past grievances perpetuate the conflict and ultimately prevent peaceful resolution.

Conclusion

Since the start of hostilities in 1990, a new generation of Armenians and Azerbaijanis has been shaped by violence, ethnic hatred, and a constant fear of displacement. To Armenians, the struggle over Artsakh brings back powerful memories of the loss and pain previous generations endured in the Armenian genocide. Coupled with clear anti-Armenianism in Turkey and Azerbaijan, it seems that the ability of Armenians and Azerbaijanis to live side-by-side is diminishing with every new border clash or charged political speech. In order to chart a different course, international peacekeeping efforts must maintain the 2020 cease-fire and promote trust, compromise, and compassion. Long-term resolution to the conflict must focus on resettling displaced persons and creating an atmosphere of tolerance and empathy on both sides. Without recognition of past grievances and the overcoming of engrained animosity, "the legacy of genocide will never end."[121]

Madeleine Shaw is a rising junior at Dartmouth College majoring in Government and Russian with a minor in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies. She is particularly interested in conflict resolution, human rights, and counterterrorism, and plans to pursue a career in diplomacy, human rights, or intelligence. Shaw interned at the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs last spring and Exodus Refugee Immigration resettlement agency the prior winter. Now a Presidential Research Scholar, Shaw worked in Professor Lyall's Political Violence Field Lab during her first two years at Dartmouth and was selected to present research at the Norwich University Peace & War Summit last year. She currently serves as senior editor of the *World Outlook International Affairs Journal* and under-secretary-general for Dartmouth's annual Model UN conference. From Bloomington, Indiana, Shaw has completed Indiana University's Summer Language Workshops for both Russian and Arabic languages. When she is not studying or spending time with friends, Shaw can be found competing for Dartmouth's figure skating team, giving campus tours, or reading history novels at local cafes.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH: authors must include a brief biographical sketch, including institutional affiliation, primary publications, and relevant experience. Length should be 200 words or less.

REFERENCES: JPWS uses *The Chicago Manual of Style's* notes and bibliography system with endnotes. For further information on references, please consult The Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition.

Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner. *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

Book chapters: Roehrig, Terence. "Stability or Instability? The US Response to North Korean Nuclear Weapons." In *North Korea and Nuclear Weapons: Entering the New Era of Deterrence*, edited by Sung Chull Kim and Michael Cohen, 129-56. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017.

Journal articles: Glaser, Charles L. "A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice between Military Competition and Accommodation," *International Security* 39: 4 (2015): 49-90.

Online sources: Bonenberger, Adrian. "The War No One Notices in Ukraine," *New York Times*, June 20, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/opinion/ukraine-russia.html (accessed December 20, 2018).

For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference.
Feldman, *Germany's Foreign Policy of Reconciliation,* 73-78.
Roehrig, "Stability or Instability?," 131.

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