

Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy

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Beyond Borders:

Middle East In Empire, Diaspora, And Global Transitions

This issue is dedicated to the tenth anniversary
of the Syrian revolution

Spring 2021

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Table of Contents

Letter from the Editor Reilly Barry	2
Inside the Houthi state: Intolerance and silencing of dissent Fatima Abo Alasarar	5
What We Ignore, We Empower: Five Decades of Despair Under the Assad Regime Oula A. Alrifai	9
Interview with Jay (Jihad) Abdo: “The pain of refugees is a part of me ... I don’t only study the pain of a character I’m playing, I carry it with me.” Mouhanad Al Rifay	13
Iraq-US Relations: An Iraqi Perspective Muhammad Al-Waeli	18
The New ‘New Middle East’: On Palestine, Normalization and US Foreign Policy Agenda Ramzy Baroud	22
Refugees and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Jordan Christina Bouri	28
Posts to Protests: Looking at Instagram’s Role in the 2019 Lebanese Revolution Ghazi Ghazi and Christina P. Walker	31
The (Apparent) Death of the Arab-Israel Conflict as We Know it Avi Issacharoff	38
A Golden Opportunity for a Middle East Strategic Alliance Gilad Kabilo	41

Kissinger, Kerry, Kushner: Making and Missing Peace in the Middle East Martin Kramer	44
Reimagining US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Alternatives to Ensure Democracy and Create a Peaceful Path Forward Sumaya Malas	48
Unnoticed Transitions: The Middle East and Georgia Ekaterine Meiering-Mikadze	52
From Reset to Rancor and Back Again: Assessing Turkey's Tortuous Approach to the Biden Administration Blaise Misztal	58
Elizabeth R. Nugent, After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition Andrew O'Donohue	64
Informal Control of the Turkish State: Lived Experiences from Kurdish Borderlands Dilan Okcuoglu	67
Decentering Europe: Thinking Beyond "Parting Ways" and Jewish-Arab Nostalgia Atalia Omer	72
Where is Iran? The complexities of Iranian diaspora ties to the homeland Alex Shams	77
The West in Retreat: Power Influence in the South Caucasus After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Daniel Shapiro	89
A Vision of a New Middle East - Then and Now Gabi Siboni	92

Letter from the Editor

Beyond Borders: Middle East In Empire, Diaspora, And Global Transitions

Anthropologist Engseong Ho treats the topic of empire and diaspora as intertwined and complexly linked in his 2004 article, “Empire through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat”, specifically focusing on Western empires and Muslim diaspora.

Ho’s academic findings on the linkage between empire and diaspora inspired the basis of this edition. For the 7th print edition of the *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy* (JMEPP), we wanted to look beyond domestic politics of individual countries in the region to 1) see how other regions interacted with the Middle East and vice versa, rather than operating inside restrictive geographic parameters, 2) explore how empire as a growing conceptual framework is complicating the nation-state scope of investigation, and 3) understand how the movement of peoples in the diaspora, including refugees, drives policy within and outside of the region’s territorial demarcations. Thus, in viewing politics and policy in the Middle East under the frameworks of empire, diaspora, and global transitions, fruitful conclusions can be drawn about where policy may go in the upcoming decade, viewing the importance of transregional connections as paramount.

The Middle East saw its share of globe-altering events in the last year. While JMEPP seeks to offer original analysis beyond the headlines, almost all major contemporary regional developments have been addressed in the present edition. The list, of course, is not exhaustive, but includes the Abraham Accords and increasing international marginalization of Palestinians, the renewed fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, continued protests amidst crises and weakening state institutions in Lebanon, and the rise of Turkey’s aggressive imperial foreign policy, to name a few. While there are major global transitions afoot as relates to the region, there is also a lack of transition— sadly, the 10-year anniversary of the Syrian revolution marks little change for those living under the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. Likewise, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen persists. The edition discusses what may become of newly inaugurated President Biden’s policies toward the region, including the challenge of renegotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. And finally, the edition would be remiss to not address how Covid-19 has impacted the region.

We took going “beyond borders” seriously. Alex Shams redefines Iran as a space by culture, rather than invisible lines marking political boundaries, and explores how this can foster better understanding during deep political divides between the US and Iran. Rethinking space

geographically, Omer explores spatial bounds between Europe (“not solely as geography, but as a set of ideological, intellectual, and political projects”) and the Middle East, arguing that “the Israel/Palestine case both symbolically and concretely represents the continuous presence of Europe in the region.” The inclusion of the Caucasus in this edition also exemplifies the porous nature of borders, exploring Georgia as a north-south borderland between Europe and the Middle East (Meiering-Mikadze). Additionally, Okcuoglu offers us an incredible portrait of the literal borderlands of Kurdistan and “the way people in the Kurdish borderlands experience state strategies for surveillance and control of populations,” thus, “shedding light on the informal source of state authority in contested borderlands: arbitrariness and uncertainty.” (Okcuoglu)

In tackling Empire, we see vestiges of American imperial presence in Iraq (Al-Waeli), and the pattern of shifting empires and influences (Russia, Turkey, Iran) in the Caucasus and how that affected the fighting which broke out in July in Nagorno-Karabakh. Though historical acts of American imperialism still affect the region, multiple authors conclude that with the West “seen as busy with itself” especially in the case of the Caucasus “former Russian, Ottoman and Persian empires” intersected and “their modern successor states meet and compete” (Meiering-Mikadze). Shapiro also defines the U.S. and the wider west in this arena as the only real geopolitical losers.

The power of diaspora is undeniable in contemporary Middle East affairs. We feature powerful voices commemorating the Syrian revolution, and a featured interview with Syrian actor Jay Abdo now residing in the U.S. on what it means to be a refugee. These voices embolden calls to make Syria a priority in the Biden administration after so much tragedy—as Oula Alrifai puts it, “what we ignore, we empower.” Alex Shams beautifully takes up the nature of Iranian diaspora in the US, explaining the need for more diasporic organizations to make connections with contemporary Iran rather than demonizing it and focusing on solely ancient Persian culture—“they often have a tendency to overlook Iran as a living, dynamic place, perpetuating the same stereotype of Iran as a land mired in backwardness since the 1979 Revolution.” We also explore the steps that Jordan, as the first country in the world to vaccinate refugees, took to immunize asylum seekers and refugees through Bouris’s analysis.

Finally, we come to global transitions, including recognizing a lack of global transition regarding Syria and Yemen. The arguably biggest transition in the region was the normalization process between Israel and numerous Arab countries, and the Abraham Accords. We offer numerous perspectives on this historic turn; as some argue, “these US-brokered agreements give the United States a strategic edge. In the Middle East, America needs that more than ever.” (Kramer) In light of these developments, Baroud puts forth that “not only does normalization marginalize Palestinians, but it redefines the ‘enemy’ of Arabs altogether. And, “according to this new thinking, the Israeli occupation of Palestine is no longer a priority for some Arabs, but the supposedly expansionist Shia Iran is.” Kabilo also focuses on Iran here. He offers an alternative

vision to the JCPOA, and what it could offer to the Biden administration, a plan “consolidating a center of gravity consisting of moderate Sunni states against Iran, connected by intelligence, security and economic cooperation.” Additional transitions in the use of technology in social protests are explored by Ghazi and Walker, and Misztal takes us through new horizons in what is possible for a once strategic alliance between Turkey and the US.

While many of these major transitions have been lauded, others view the region mired in familiar and repetitive past issues. Baroud takes us back to what George W. Bush harkened as a “New Middle East” in 2008, to stabilize the region in favor of American-Israeli interests, and comments that through “the constant targeting of Israel’s enemies throughout the region and more, it is clear that US foreign policymakers are still committed to the [old] New Middle East idea.” Along these lines, Malas remarks that “Although President Biden claimed that ‘Diplomacy is back!’ at the Munich Security Conference earlier this year, his subsequent February strike in eastern Syria indicated business as usual.” Ultimately, it may be that, as Omer tells us, “New horizons for the Middle East cannot be imagined without grappling with Europe’s persistent presence and historical entanglement in the region.”

Politics and policy in the region are as complex as ever. Where there are global transitions, there is also a lack of transition in important developments and humanitarian crises, and we believe that investigating the region across borders, and through the lens of empire and diaspora, offers us the best way to understand the most pressing issues facing the region within and without.

Reilly Barry

Editor-in-chief

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Inside the Houthi state: Intolerance and silencing of dissent

Fatima Abo Alasarar¹

On 5 August 2015, eight unidentified armed men stormed the home of Dr. Abdulkader al-Junaid, forcibly detaining him. Dr. Al-Junaid, a medical doctor from Yemen, was politically active on social media. His activism was not tolerated by the Houthi insurgents who overthrew the internationally recognized government, sparking a civil war². On the day of his abduction, Dr. al-Junaid sent a message for the world to see, tweeting “Houthi militiamen are inside my home.” He spent 300 days in prison, enduring abuse and helping fellow abductees, the majority of which were political activists. When he was released he found his home destroyed and was ultimately forced to leave.

Unfortunately, most human rights abuses in Yemen are not reported for fear of reprisal by the Houthis. Many activists and defectors are reluctant to report crimes against them due to the risk it could pose on their families and friends. Careful to keep the peace, many remain quiet and wish for a quick end to the violence. However, Yemen’s conflict is now

entering its seventh year, with little awareness of the human rights abuses that citizens are enduring under the militia. The overwhelming focus on the humanitarian situation has given the Houthis the freedom to continue operating with impunity.

Since the start of the conflict in September 2014, Houthis have shown no tolerance for any political activity, leaving millions of Yemenis completely isolated under their political and media control. Houthis worked systematically to remove all facets of civil activism associated with the regime change during the Arab Spring of 2011, limiting protests, constraining freedom of assembly, and threatening activists. According to UN agencies, there were 357 human rights violations and abuses against journalists in Yemen nationwide, including 28 killings, two enforced disappearances, one abduction, 45 physical assaults, and 184 arbitrary arrests and detentions.³ Abuses against civilians are also rampant. The Women Abductee Association, a women-led nonprofit organization in Yemen, published in its 2018 report a shocking number

of 1,496 abduction cases, 54 of which were state-related unlawful detentions, and the rest were by the hands of the Houthi militia. The political culture that Yemeni civilians are experiencing now is paving the way to a deeply authoritarian state, entirely controlled by the Houthis no matter how a political settlement looks like.

These abuses have gradually increased with time. From 2015 to 2017, Houthis shared power with the overthrown President Ali Abdullah Saleh, which allowed them to deepen their control of state institutions long-held by Saleh loyalists. However, as the Houthis' ambition and power grew, they imposed changes that violated social norms. This led to internal disagreements between the Houthis and their local allies, resulting in killing Saleh after he attempted to defect.

Unexpectedly, however, Saleh's death was a pivotal point in Yemen's history. It has removed the last power that kept the Houthis in check and increased the Houthi movement's vulnerability by exposing their ties to Iran, a powerful regional actor seeking to rival Saudi Arabia and deepen its influence in the region. In an attempt to keep things under control, Houthi authorities responded to protests with excessive force. They began recruiting their followers and sympathizers in the security sector, spreading informants as a system of detecting internal threats and dissent. They have also found creative ways to gather information and stop dissent from happening by training an all-female force, known as al-Zainabiyat,⁴ in charge of collecting information

and arresting women. In 2018, this female force took the lead in squashing a peaceful protest in Yemen's capital Sana'a. They detained dozens of women affiliated with the former president's party, known as the General People's Congress Party (GPC), torturing many of them in the Central Security Prison and other unauthorized facilities. Detained women were beaten by batons and shoes, electrocuted, and forced to sign affidavits of compliance, preventing them from the right of assembly.

Most abuses, such as abductions or beating up of protestors, are now institutionalized by the Houthis to maintain a semblance of "legal" control over civilians in the areas they govern. The Houthi authorities arrest officials, journalists, and religious minorities, often using them as a tool to push for more concessions from Hadi's government and the international community. For this purpose, Houthis used a Specialized Criminal Court in Sana'a's northern capital, trying activists, journalists, and anyone who publicly disagreed with them. In April 2020, the Houthis' court sentenced four journalists to death and six others to jail on charges of "publishing and writing news, statements, false and malicious rumors and propaganda."⁵ Many of these arrests are publicized and covered daily in the Houthi-TV local media and satellite channels as a way to justify the abuses and normalize the Houthi authority's actions against citizens.

As a non-state actor, the Houthis do not abide by international conventions or treaties. They have often portrayed themselves as victims of the conflict, shedding light on the crimes

committed by the Saudi-led coalition or the US drone warfare in the country to deflect from their criminal activity. The Houthi dynasty proclaims an Allah-given right to govern Yemen as a unique advantage for the Zaydi religious elites, which violates the basic tenants of Yemen's constitution and the 2013 National Dialogue Conference⁶—a mechanism that regulated Yemen's transition after the overthrow of Saleh. From this perspective, their use of threats, execution, arbitrary detention, torture, and forced labor to maintain fearful obedience is in service to a greater cause. Under Abdulmalek al-Houthi, who serves as the supreme leader of the movement, it is common to hear politically-charged messages mobilizing against the aggression (mainly Saudi, Israel, and the United States) disseminated in his sermons and regularly broadcasted in Houthi TV channels. Generally, there is no tolerance for messages outside of the Houthis' leadership broadcasts, which has left opposition fearful of speaking out. Many activists and civilians have steadily left Yemen, relocating to neighboring countries including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and Egypt. The brain drain in the country continues to rise, with internal migration from the Houthi-held areas to government-controlled areas in the South of the country.

Because of their absolutist beliefs, Houthis have systematically limited religious freedom in Yemen and threatened other practices. They have created myths about Sunni-sect followers by describing them as terrorists. They also targeted peaceful Salafi civilians in the institute

of Dammaj who resided in Saada's Northern communities in 2013 shortly before they occupied other parts of the country. Houthis have also singled out the Bahais and Jews as believers in two religions that should not be practiced in Yemen. Yemeni Jews, who hail from the same region as the Houthis in Saada, were driven out by Houthi followers in 2008, losing their ancestral homes and possessions overnight,⁷ with the last wave of Jews forced to leave this year. In a similar vein, members of the Bahai community have gotten targeted. Hamed Bin Haydara, the Bahai community leader, was arrested in 2018 and sentenced to death along with other members of his faith. After a two-year international pressure campaign on the Houthis, he was ultimately released.⁸ Mr. Haydara, who was forced to leave his home for good, described the Houthis' tactics as applying a policy of "silent extermination" of the Baha'i cultural and social heritage, calling it a "religious cleansing crime."⁹

The Houthis strictly control Yemen's economy in northern areas as all official government establishments, including the military, are now under their command. State resources are being funneled into the war effort, paying for weapons and military expertise despite widespread shortages of food, fuel, healthcare, and other necessities.

State resources are also used to fund an extensive surveillance network. The Houthis actively spied on citizens through technology and recruited informants who are paid directly by the Houthis. The informants monitor both civilians and foreign aid workers and all Yemeni

staff working with them, requiring reports detailing humanitarian organizations' work including the United Nations and nonprofit organizations where it is imperative to rely on local staff. Foreign journalists are often heavily monitored and excluded from places the Houthis do not want them to enter.

While Dr. al-Junaid has been released, there is still a significant amount of prisoners and civilians facing unknown destinies in detention with or without hope of deliverance. This is why there needs to be a more prominent call to action regarding the human rights of civilians living in conflict. The United Nations and the rest of the international community need to be aware of the Houthis' propensity to pressure and coerce civilians as a way to extract political concessions from their opponents or as means for leverage during UN-backed negotiations. It is imperative that any attempt to resolve the conflict in Yemen focuses primarily on citizens' well-being in both the short and long-term, reducing the possibilities of them falling into another tyrannical system that is even worse than the one they overthrew.

Endnotes

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What We Ignore, We Empower: Five Decades of Despair Under the Assad Regime

By **Oula A. Alrifai**

While March 12 marks fifty years of dictatorship and terror in Syria since Hafez al-Assad's infamous coup d'état, March 15 is the 10th anniversary of the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime. For most Syrians, since at least 2011, the very idea of home is shifting beneath their feet. A whole nation has gone forcibly homeless during the past ten years.

Having fled my hometown, Damascus, in 2005 as a result of direct death threats from Bashar al-Assad, my family and I continue to struggle to make sense of the idea of home. Where is home and what does it mean? Most people do not navigate life between the layers like I do. Being an immigrant yesterday, today, and tomorrow, I am constantly thinking of which part of me belongs and blends the most, and what aspects of my being provoke the least. I search for home in the bits and pieces of my day, every day. Sometimes it makes sense, but most of the time it is a struggle. Perhaps the idea of home is this for now; it is the collective pain Syrians carry with them on this earth. We share this home regardless of where we find

ourselves. Our fate seems to be decided by tyranny. But is this how it should be? I refuse to accept that.

I see Syrians holding Bashar al-Assad and his father's regime accountable for all the crimes they have committed against them. Without accountability, the future would be even darker. The daily horror Syria has witnessed during the past ten years in front of the eyes of the world is nothing like it has seen before. After a decade of utmost despair, will Syrians one day be free? I want to believe so. I want to see it happen. As I debate this question in my mind, I am reminded of Gandhi's words: "Remember that all through history, there have been tyrants and murderers, and for a time, they seem invincible. But in the end, they always fall. Always." I dream of Syria as a country where the people determine the destiny of the nation, not one man! Not one family! Bashar al-Assad will never change, he only knows how to destroy a country and burn it down. And silence emboldens his illness. Bashar al-Assad must not be allowed to grow stronger.¹ Syrian

immigrants and refugees across the globe share this home of pain, while they dream of a home of freedom, justice, and basic human rights.

For four decades prior, Syrians suffered in silence. And during this past decade they found themselves always lost and always asking for directions. They feel stuck in a tornado blowing them whichever way the wind blows. They pack their identity in a suitcase looking for a new home to plant their roots; hoping that where there are roots there is power, only to be confronted with the reality that they are merely topsoil. They work hard and succeed, yet they still feel homeless, estranged, and out of place. Their lives have to fit in a small luggage for the journey ahead. Most of the childhood photos are gone. Only a few are saved and carried from land to land. Their hopes and dreams are shattered. They belong nowhere, yet they strive to fit everywhere; in the places in between. They are never seen. They should be seen.

I am a Syrian by birth and an American by choice. On 7 September 2005, my family and I were forced to flee Syria. Although I despised the system I grew up in, it was still painful being uprooted. My family and I did not leave Syria by choice. No. That choice was made for us by the Syrian authorities whose sole claim to legitimacy lies in the fact that they have power, and whose only reason for ordering us to leave our country was their desire not to be held accountable for the way they exercise their power. The willful blindness that was a necessary part of my existence in Syria and made life tolerable was removed the moment I

set foot in the United States. My blurred vision at the time was nothing more than a necessary transitional period during which I had to learn how to see again, how to live again, and how to regain my sense of purpose.

Overcoming hardships are ideals embraced by my family, and their historical struggle and accomplishments keep me moving forward. On my mother's side, my great-grandmother was an English teacher in Haifa during the British Mandate of Palestine, while my great-grandfather obtained (by mail) a PhD in civil engineering from Bennett College of Sheffield. In 1948, my grandmother with her parents fled their hometown Haifa to Syria when she was six years old. They found refuge at the ancient Jobar Synagogue in Damascus. In Syria, she grew up to become one of the first female medical doctors in the 1960s and was the one who instilled in me a strong work ethic and the value of education: something no one can take away. On my father's side, the Alrifai family is highly respected as leading Islamic scholars, *ulama'*, in Syria. Because of the Assad regime, I lost my maternal grandfather who died under torture in Assad's prisons in early 1980s. I also lost my father in 1991 due to health complications as a result of torture by the Assads. And in 2005, I lost my country due to direct death threats to my mother and stepfather. Pain is carried on from one generation to another. When will this end?

As an American, we have the resources to help before our collective neglect can never be undone. America can be a leader with the integrity to tell the truth in a world that lacks

it. America has the power to make people listen and the grit to act on it. “We the people” are the hope of the oppressed, in Syria and everywhere. Millions of Syria’s children² are crying for help. We have to resist becoming numb to their sorrow.³ And we should all be sorry for the loss of life. Dwight D. Eisenhower once said “when children are starving, how can we in the future expect them to be apostles of peace?” For four decades, the voices of millions of Syrians were muted by tyranny and fear. But since 2011, Syrians have broken the fear only to face violence, torture, terrorism, barrel bombs, chemical weapons, kidnappings, assassinations, mass graves, regional politics, international politics, egos, interests, the list goes on and on. Syrians do not have the luxury to survive additional cascading scenes of policy failure. Syria’s human rights activists and freedom fighters, most of whom are no longer with us, have sacrificed their lives for freedom and democracy.⁴ Their legacy should be carried on and their dreams should be fulfilled, at least for their children. America must not be implicit. In fact, the brutal dictator is giving President Biden every reason to prioritize Syria.⁵

To save Syria, America’s policy must change. It cannot be a continuation of the status quo. It is time to correct past mistakes of prior US administrations. Sectarianism, a failed healthcare system, a collapsed economy,⁶ displacement,⁷ and human rights violations are problems of the future in Syria if we stay silent. These problems are certainly the only future Syrians have, if we fail to act now. Because it is a simple truth: what we ignore, we empower.

Oula A. Alrifai is a fellow in The Washington Institute’s Geduld Program on Arab Politics and a former asylee from Syria. She holds a BA from the University of Maryland and an MA from Harvard. Her thesis at Harvard, “The Self-Flagellation of a Nation: Assad, Iran, and Regime Survival in Syria,” focused on the development of the Iranian-Syrian relationship in the 1970s and 1980s through the lens of religio-political dynamics.

*Alrifai is the executive producer of the award-winning documentary *Tomorrow’s Children*, which explores the plight of Syrian refugees forced into child labor in Turkey. The documentary is available to stream on Amazon Prime. Prior to rejoining The Washington Institute, Alrifai worked at the Middle East Initiative at the Harvard Kennedy School.*

Endnotes

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Interview with Jay (Jihad) Abdo:
**“The pain of refugees is a part of me . . . I don’t only study
the pain of a character I’m playing, I carry it with me.”**

By Mouhanad Al Rifay



On 24 October 2020 Syrian-American Hollywood actor Jay (Jihad) Abdo cast his vote for the first time ever in a presidential election. He and his wife Fadia Afashe, a lawyer and visual artist, were never allowed to participate in free elections before or even have the choice to vote for a presidential candidate whom they felt connected with. Jay and Fadia were silenced citizens. They didn’t choose to be silent, they were gagged by a bloody regime to which violence has no limits. Yet in the 2020 US election, along with thousands of Syrian-Americans, Jay and Fadia made their voices heard loudly.

In 2011 Jay, Fadia and hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of ordinary and not so ordinary Syrians tore out the bloody gags that choked them for generations. The couple couldn’t simply march down the streets of Damascus or Homs alongside peaceful protesters, they had to be careful. Jay and Fadia are well known artists with a responsibility and public influence that attract the regime’s ire, violence and retribution. Nonetheless, unlike the majority of Syrian artists they refused to be muzzled, especially as the Assad regime’s military industrial complex dropped its barrel bombs, missiles, and chemical weapons over Syrian cities indiscriminately, intentionally targeting civilians and wiping out entire neighborhoods that rose against it.

In the years leading up to the 2011 uprising, dubbed the Dignity Revolution, Syrian artists were organized into informal camps depending on their relationship with the Assad regime and the intelligence apparatus. Those favored by the regime establishment had more opportunities to rise within the Syrian scene of visual and performing arts. Others who maintained a

distance from the regime like Jay and Fadia, were “used for the regime’s narrative” Jay told me over the phone. “The regime uses the opposition to showcase an illusion of democracy projected at the free world,” a fake facade of controlled characters playing parts in a false narrative fooling no one. Some artists voluntarily played the role; others had no choice.

Given his success and fame in Syrian drama, film and television, Jay found himself frequently invited to speak at talk shows produced by the Syrian state television about liberty, human rights, and equality with other liberal and progressive artists from his small circle of friends and colleagues. “We attempted to express our hopes and ideals through our work, despite the circumstances forced upon us. Our scripts and scenarios showcased a thirst for freedom, democracy and justice,” Jay said, “justifying our covert activism as a response to statements and opinions expressed by the President [Bashar Al-Assad] himself” and embodied in the regime’s narrative of counterfeit democracy.

They chose to remain distanced, despite the privileges provided by the regime to favored artists. “I never received any support from the Syrian state or statesmen. I was always chosen for roles based on my talent and abilities to play the characters. In fact,” Jay said “I was told by producers that my name was forcefully removed from casting lists on orders of the regime, or that I was denied a leading role in favor of a regime favorite.” Multiple branches of the Syrian intelligence apparatus have to grant official approvals for film and television productions.

Early in 2011 during the popular peaceful uprising, Jay and Fadia were full of hope. They believed that true change was possible and that Syria was on the cusp of a historic moment in which its democratic aspirations were finally tangible. “Fadia and I were excited to see the regime fall or implement true systemic reform in the Syrian constitution and state institutions . . . we didn’t expect the regime to be this bloody and stupid.” When the regime started committing massacres, “I wanted it to fall, but I was terrified,” Jay said earnestly. “I was so afraid to speak up because I lived under two bloody dictatorships, that of Hafez Al-Assad in Syria and Nicolae Ceaușescu in Romania. I know what it means to live in fear.” In 1980 Jay received a scholarship to study civil engineering in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, and graduated in 1987. During his time there, communist Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena ruled Romania with an iron fist, devastating the country and its people. Nicolae and Elena, were executed by a firing squad on Christmas Day in 1989 after being convicted of genocide.

The regime’s illusion of civil modernity and Bashar Al-Assad’s narrative of democracy, spearheaded by his British wife Asma, was shattered by his bloodthirsty military campaign against Syrian civilians, whose only fault was demanding true implementation of the democratic narrative. “We couldn’t imagine the extent of the regime’s violence and brutality.”

By October of 2011, Jay had to flee Syria after stating in an interview with the Los Angeles Times that “the government, military,

intelligence branches, and the President are responsible for the bloodshed.” For weeks he was harassed and intimidated by the state media, pressuring him to apologize and praise the dictator Bashar Al-Assad publicly. He “didn’t respond to their pressures, but couldn’t say no,” especially after a number of his artist friends were arrested and disappeared like Zaki Cordello and Samar Kokash, both actors. “Samar Kokash was detained for five years after helping an injured young girl, and donating bread to [internally displaced] people sleeping under street trees in Damascus . . . five years. . . she was like a flower.”

Jay had planned to meet with Zaki Cordello to produce slogans for the revolution, yet Zaki was arrested the day before.

Fadia was already in the United States in August 2011 studying at the University of Minnesota, months after the revolution began, when the famous Syrian political cartoonist Ali Ferzat was kidnapped and assaulted by an armed pro-Assad militia in Damascus after releasing multiple anti-government cartoons ridiculing Bashar Al-Assad. They hammered his hands, intentionally smashing his fingers, as a warning statement to artists who dared use their craft and public influence against the Assad regime. Battered and bloodied, Ali Ferzat was dumped on the side of the Damascus International Airport highway. As Ali Ferzat’s story shocked the world and received wide international coverage, Fadia urged Jay to leave Syria.

Four days after Jay received his US visa, he left Damascus. “I thought I would return

within months . . . the regime was destined to fall,” he said. “You’ll laugh at me if I tell you this, but I left some dishes in the sink and gave the plants extra water, enough for a month.” Jay exhaled telling me that he had made two years’ worth of mortgage payments before leaving. “It’s all gone now . . . like all of Syria. Money is nothing, so many young men and women are gone . . . Who cares about money?”

“In Syria life is expendable, it’s worthless. Doesn’t matter if you’re a scientist, a woman or a child . . . in Syria your life is worthless.”

By the end of 2011, Jay and Fadia decided to apply for political asylum in the US. As death threats and violence increased, they knew there was no way back to Syria. For them, Syria was home no more. Almost overnight, Jay found himself working as an Uber driver and delivering pizza and flowers in LA, where he and Fadia relocated to after her graduation from the University of Minnesota. “I enjoyed Uber. I got to know many different people, and very interesting characters that helped me learn more about the American society” Jay told me with a diligent voice, “It made me feel like I belong, even though I made very little money.”

Fadia waited fifteen months or more for her work permit, while Jay tried to secure a living auditioning for acting roles in LA. They filled their time volunteering for nonprofit organizations that provided help for Syrian refugees in the US and abroad. “Just like we needed help, many

other people did too. So we tried our best, with the little resources we had.”

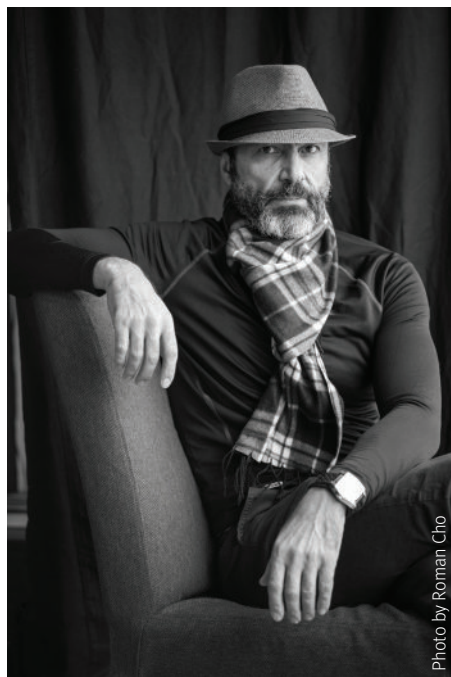
Jay introduced himself to Hollywood playing

small unpaid roles in short films directed by young graduating film students, whom he met while volunteering at various nonprofits in LA. Little did he know that his small steps were in fact paving the way for a major breakthrough starring alongside Academy Award winner Nicole Kidman and actor James Franco in the 2015 major motion picture *Queen of the Desert*, directed by German film director Werner Herzog.

“Herzog was looking for an authentic Levantine actor to play the role. He didn’t want someone who appeared from the region, he wanted an actor from the region who understood the culture and spoke the Arabic language. And I was able to add to the role because I play the Rebab and recite poetry,” Jay explained. In *Queen of the Desert*, Jay in fact plays the Rebab on screen, possibly for the first time in a major western motion picture. And in 2016, Jay starred in *A Hologram for the King* alongside Tom Hanks.

Like most refugees and asylum seekers in the United States, Jay was unable to use his Syrian passport for any international travel. He had to apply for a Refugee Travel Document, which has its own special process and is issued by the USCIS. “I almost missed filming *Queen of the*

Desert on location in Morocco. I almost missed all the films, but Fadia, a young lawyer, gave me the greatest support.” Fadia independently followed up with USCIS, and expedited the process for Jay. And she also helped secure him the necessary visas, explaining to Arab embassies the urgency. Arab states do not formally recognize Refugee Travel



Documents, and Fadia had to pull some strings.

Three of Jay’s short films were shortlisted for Academy Awards: *Bon Voyage* (2016), *Facing Mecca* (2017), and *Refugee* (2020). Each of the three shorts depicts a different juncture in the overarching plight experienced by millions of refugees worldwide, particularly Syrian refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea or fleeing indiscriminate bombardment of their hometowns by the Assad regime military.

Being a refugee himself, Jay’s performance transformed completely. “I think of the characters on a much deeper level than before. Their pain is now mine, not that of other people. The pain of refugees is a part of me, my essence and my existence. I don’t only study the pain of a character I’m playing, I carry it with me.”

With a doleful tone, he said “there is now a sense of unity, an equality, between the character and me.” Despite his academic and extensive professional background, Jay now wields his own personal experiences, and those of his friends and colleagues, to enrich the characters he plays on the screen, that otherwise may fall flat or seem one dimensional.

In 2017 Jay and Fadia attended the 89th Academy Awards ceremony, carrying with them the aching hearts, pride, hopes and aspirations of a broken people from a shattered land called Syria. And in 2020, as the Syrian civil war entered its 10th year, with their newly freed voices Jay and Fadia voted loudly against injustice and stood firmly for the intrinsic right of immigrants and refugees to live in peace, free from fear or persecution.

Moubanad Al Rifay, senior staff writer at the Harvard Journal for Middle East Politics and Policy.

Moubanad Al Rifay, is a Syrian-American award-winning documentary filmmaker, humanitarian, and human rights activist. At Harvard's CMES he is focused on journalism and narrative writing, and developing further expertise in Middle East focused critical political and cultural commentary. After graduating from the University of Maryland, College Park in 2014 with a BA in psychology, international development and conflict management, Al Rifay managed various USAID-funded programs at leading international development organizations in Washington, DC. He also co-founded the Syrian-American Network for Aid and Development (SANAD), a nonprofit

organization dedicated to the education of Syrian children. In 2018, Al Rifay released his first short documentary, “Tomorrow’s Children,” that exposes the suffering of six Syrian refugee children forced into child labor. “Tomorrow’s Children” won the Impact Award at the 2018 San Francisco International Festival of Short Films, and is now available on Amazon Prime. Al Rifay also helped produce a weekly Arabic-speaking political program that interviewed US policymakers, and published many articles in leading publications like the Huffington Post and Lebanese Daily Star. He has been involved in the Syrian democracy movement years before the uprising, disseminating information about human rights violations to Western media, and was featured in many media outlets including The Washington Post, Lawfare, NPR, AJ+, Al Jazeera Arabic, and the Harvard Gazette. Al Rifay was a political asylee and received US citizenship in 2015.

Iraq-US Relations: An Iraqi Perspective

Muhammad Al-Waeli

After four turbulent years of the Trump presidency, the world waits to see how the Biden administration will approach global affairs. Iraq will be one of the crucial foreign policy issues for the United States. As most commentary is written from a US perspective, there is a definite lack of insights from an Iraqi point of view. This essay aims to shed light on the shortcomings of the US approach towards Iraq in the past and how to remedy that going forward.

One of the core issues regarding the Iraq-US relationship is that the US always approaches Iraq with Iran in mind. This issue predates the fall of Saddam Hussein and precedes both him and the Iranian Revolution, which toppled an American ally. Afterwards, the United States supported Saddam in an eight-year-long war against Iran, which resulted in a destroyed Iraqi army and economy.

After Saddam's invasion of Kuwait was met with a global coalition that led to his withdrawal, Iraqis revolted against the regime in the north and south.¹ To detect military buildup and

to limit the regime's reprisals, coalition forces implemented no-fly zones in the northern and southern regions.² While the Kurdish north benefited from the no-fly zone and achieved de-facto autonomy from the regime, the Shia in the south were punished by Saddam's forces for their uprising. It is believed that one reason the United States did not further intervene to support Iraqis and prevent the crackdown by Saddam's Republican Guard was the fear that the Shia, if successful in their revolt, would establish a government in Baghdad that would tilt towards Iran.³

After 2003, and most recently during the Trump presidency, the "Iran framework" of US policy towards Iraq has become clear. The United States chose to strike Iraqi targets it deemed close to Iran.⁴ When Iraq's parliament called for US troops' withdrawal from Iraq, the American response was dismissive, contradictory, and rather hostile.⁵

The region reached a perilous point when the United States assassinated the Iranian Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani

and Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis, the deputy head of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, on Iraqi soil.⁶ Disregarding the animosity between the United States and Iran, this put Iraq in a difficult spot. Soleimani was on an official visit, and his assassination resulted in Iran putting a lot of pressure on Iraq. It later provoked the Iranians to strike the Ain Al-Asad base on Iraqi soil despite US presence. In the end, Al-Muhandis was an Iraqi official, regardless of his opposition to US presence in Iraq. These actions convey a clear message to the Iraqis that one wrong move by the United States can disrupt the delicate balance they have been struggling to maintain.⁷ This and other behaviour demonstrates that the United States has always approached Iraq with Iran in mind.

Another critical issue that Iraqis face today is foreign intervention in political activism in the country. While protests have occurred on multiple occasions after 2003, the October 2019 protest movement was distinguished by its size and its ability to force the resignation of Prime Minister Adil Abdul Mahdi's government.⁸ Since then, there has been some concern that Iraq's skillful political players might politicize the protest movement and hijack the protesters' demands.

Furthermore, there have also been concerns that foreign intervention in the protest movement could make the movement vulnerable. The United States seems to have engaged in such intervention, for example when former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made public comments supporting the anti-Iranian sentiment of some of the protests.⁹ As a result,

some activists who are seen to be working with foreign powers have become targets for violence. In 2018, several activists visited the American consulate in Basra and had photos taken there. In 2020, one of those activists was assassinated.¹⁰ While the investigation has not yet yielded any definite result, it did lead to questions being asked as to how wise it is for the protest movement and its activists to receive public support from foreign missions. It also raised concerns amongst Iraqis, who are suspicious of foreign intervention, that the US might exploit the protest movement to pursue its agenda despite risks involved for activists. A safer approach could be for the protestors to remain unaffiliated in the geopolitical competition in Iraq. Their focus should be on the protesters' legitimate demands. Alternatively, those with political ambitions could establish their own political parties and thus participate in the political process, as is currently happening.

From an economic standpoint, Iraqis always thought that after the United States ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq might turn into another Germany, Japan, or South Korea. Admittedly, this was an overly optimistic view and Iraq did not even achieve the same level of economic prosperity as its neighbors. Although there are many reasons why this did not happen, an essential one is the US role in rebuilding Iraq. In the last decade, American aid programs were plagued by many issues, as several US Inspector Generals have commented on.¹¹ Except for a few examples, these aid projects have sadly become known for heavy corruption

and mismanagement.

The United States keeps pressuring Iraq to stop importing Iranian gas, instead of helping the country achieve independence from Iran in its energy supply.¹² Currently, the import of Iranian gas is essential for Iraq's electricity production. The United States also substantially reduced the timeframe for Iranian gas import waivers from several months to as low as anywhere from 45 days to three months.¹³ The bottom line is that Iraqis are still suffering from a lack of electricity and necessary infrastructure.

The Strategic Framework Agreement (FSA), signed between the US and Iraq in 2008, represents a bright spot in the US-Iraq relationship.¹⁴ The FSA aims at laying the foundation for a friendship and long-term cooperation between the two countries and regards Iraq's sovereignty as a cornerstone of the agreement. Yet after signing the agreement, Iraqis were not able to see much positive change. Furthermore, when Iraqis see the United States pulling out of a comprehensive, multilateral, and undeniably crucial international agreement such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it raises concerns about how serious the US is about the FSA agreement.¹⁵ Applying the FSA could be a great way to remedy the US-Iraq relationship going forward. Addressing Iraq's economic issues might be better for public diplomacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people than striking US adversaries on Iraqi soil.

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The New ‘New Middle East’: On Palestine, Normalization and US Foreign Policy Agenda

Ramzy Baroud

With regard to Israel, there is a crucial difference between the new president, Joe Biden, and former US President Donald Trump. While the latter was an opportunistic politician who merely applied his callous business tactics in the realm of politics, the former is, or at least claims to be, an ideological Zionist.

‘Everybody Knows (Biden) Loves Israel’

On several occasions in the past, Biden has spoken in his various official capacities about his love for Israel: “I am a Zionist. You don’t have to be a Jew to be a Zionist”¹; “My name is Joe Biden, and everybody knows I love Israel”²; “Were there no Israel, America would have to invent one”³ are just quick samplings of some of his many utterances in the past. Coupled with his habitual criticism of the Palestinian leadership and all forms of Palestinian resistance, it is difficult to imagine that the Biden administration would generate a fairer, or at least more balanced, foreign policy regarding Israel and Palestine.

But will Biden be any different from Trump? Likely only in terms of style, not substance. On the one hand, the nomination⁴ of Antony Blinken, a long-time friend of Israel who also served under the Obama-Biden administration, is an early indication that Biden wants to restore previous US foreign policy diplomacy, not just in the Israel-Palestine context, but with regard to Iran, EU relations and other contested geopolitical fields. The message here is clear: yes, there will be a gradual detour back to America’s “soft diplomacy” tactics, along with a subtle assurance to Israel, that it has nothing to worry about.

On the other hand, the Biden team has already reassured⁵ Israel that the new president has no intention of reversing any of the Trump administration’s decisions which favor Israel at the expense of Palestinians and, unsurprisingly, in violation of international law. Therefore, the new US embassy will remain in Jerusalem as the US administration will not, under any circumstances, renege on its recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital; the

new administration will likely support some form of Israeli annexation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, though it may argue that such a step would have to be done through some kind of dialogue with the Palestinian leadership and so on.

The Palestinian Authority: The Powerless Authority

Consequently, what would be the use of restarting the “peace process,” when the components that are required to obtain the coveted peace are no longer on the proverbial negotiation table? Palestinians are now expected, as they have always been, to go through the motions of talking about peace with no specific end in sight and without a political horizon. Moreover, there can be no “two-state solution” when the envisaged Palestinian State lacks the territories, territorial integrity or any control over its borders and natural resources.

For a sovereign State⁶ to be recognized as such, it must possess these four characteristics: territory, population, authority and recognition. Only the final aspect has been partially secured, as the State of Palestine is recognized⁷ by 138 of the 193 United Nations members and was admitted, as of December 2012, to the UN—and subsequently to other UN bodies—as a non-member observer state⁸. This aspect alone is merely enough to give Palestine a virtual existence.

As for “territory,” Israel has no plan for Palestinians to enjoy full sovereignty over any piece of land, anywhere. Meanwhile, the Palestinian “population” is fragmented⁹ within

South African-like bantustans throughout historic Palestine; each group is governed by a different set of Israeli rules. If these Palestinian communities have anything in common, it is the fact that they share some level of Israeli oppression, racism, apartheid and the Israeli perception of them as a “security” or “demographic threat.”

The Palestinian Authority is an “authority” only, insofar as its limited ability to govern semi-autonomous and very small regions in the West Bank located in what is known as “Area A,” which consists of 18 percent¹⁰ of the West Bank. Aside from that, the PA plays the role of the hired gun, allowing the Israeli military to rule over the West Bank with the least amount of dissent possible among ordinary Palestinians, in exchange for US-led international aid. This bizarre existential relationship between the PA and the Israeli occupation is streamlined under the so-called “security coordination,” a joint Israeli-PA military apparatus that ultimately aims at protecting the safety of the Israeli army and lessening tensions around expanding illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

Israeli settlements continue to expand, unhindered. The Israeli pretense that the growth of settlements was part and parcel of inevitable “natural growth” became unnecessary during the four-year term of the Trump administration. Entire new settlements were initiated and old settlements that were deemed “illegal” by the Israeli government’s own selective definition of “legality,” are now being recognized and incorporated into the Israeli settlement enterprise. The decision to

retroactively legalize¹¹ settlement outposts was passed by the Israeli Knesset (parliament) in February 2017. Currently, there are 143 Israeli Jewish settlements officially established by the government, 113 outposts and approximately 630,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, all deemed as illegal under international law.¹²

The Rise of Netanyahu's 'Economic Peace'

None of this is likely to be affected by the new US administration. Even the mere possibility that a "conflict" may arise between Washington and Tel Aviv in the coming months and years—similar to the tension that took place between both countries during the Obama administration—is now remote, according to assurances by US and Israeli officials. Israeli former Foreign Minister, Tzipi Livni, believes that "Biden and Blinken will embrace and build on the steps taken by Trump that were 'in accordance with Israel's interests,'" according to Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*.¹³

Even if the Palestinian leadership had the audacity, let alone the wisdom, to challenge this status quo, it is likely to do so with far fewer Arab allies. The so-called "normalization" between Israel and Arab countries has upset the long-standing geopolitical paradigm in the region like never before. In November 2008, when right-wing Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, argued in favor of what he called "economic peace"—essentially, the abandoning of a political solution to the Israeli occupation and, alternatively, focusing on

economic integration between Israel and Arab countries—many dismissed his rhetoric as wishful thinking.¹⁴

Normalization between Arabs and Israel is precisely the 'economic peace' that Netanyahu had preached years ago, a concept that replaces the formula "land for peace" with "peace for peace." The real danger of this new modus operandi, aside from the obvious loss for Palestinians of their traditional Arab allies, is the fact that it attempts to overlook the Palestinians entirely from the new Middle East equation. Not only does normalization marginalize Palestinians, but it redefines the "enemy" of Arabs altogether. According to this new thinking, the Israeli occupation of Palestine is no longer a priority for some Arabs, but the supposedly expansionist Shia Iran is.

The New Enemy: Iran as Israel

For Iran, however, Israel and its American backers are the true enemies. Iran's full involvement¹⁵ in the Syrian civil war from the very onset demonstrated Teheran's strong belief that the war in Syria and the strong US-Arab involvement in this protracted conflict were largely motivated by US-Israel-Arab determination to break down what Iran and its allies refer to as the "Axis of Resistance," which includes Hezbollah and the Palestinian movement, Hamas, as well.¹⁶

In fact, the "Axis" almost broke up when Hamas, under the urging of Qatar, Turkey, and other Middle Eastern states, parted ways¹⁷ with Iran, purportedly as a response to the latter's support of the Syrian government. The

Hamas-Iran ties, however, are being slowly mended, thanks to mediation carried out by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group, which never severed ties with Iran. The reasons that Hamas walked back on its decision to abandon the Iran-led alliance include the failure of Arab States to help the Palestinian movement break its international isolation and end the siege on Gaza. The lackluster Arab support of Hamas' strategic shift turned into complete betrayal during the deadly Israeli war on Gaza in 2014. Some Arab governments even blamed the Palestinian Resistance, not Israel, for the war. The lack of a unified, let alone meaningful, Arab response to the war provided an opening to Teheran, which reached out to Hamas once more, in the hope of repairing ties.¹⁸

The Saudi-led Arab siege on Qatar, the strongest Arab ally of Hamas in 2017, further isolated the Palestinian group, leaving it with fewer friends in the region. Once more, new geopolitical circumstances in the Middle East gave further impetus to the Hamas-Iran dialogue. If no fundamental changes occur to the current regional paradigm, a full Hamas return to the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" is just a matter of time.

If Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad for that matter, were blacklisted in the past by various Arab regimes due to their rapport—real or imagined—with the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, the ties with Iran are another strong reason for their continued demonization. If Islamic Palestinian groups cannot be incorporated into Arab political agendas at the moment, will the Palestinian Authority,

and its dominant Fatah party, continue to be the acceptable Palestinian representation, even after Arab-Israeli normalization is completed?

'Palestine' as a Commodity

Several Arab governments, including United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Morocco and others, have made it clear that Palestine and Palestinian politics are no longer leading factors in their own foreign policy calculations. What now matters to these countries is their alliance with Israel, in exchange for various forms of American support against Iran - as in the case of Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain; exchange of political support¹⁹—as in the case of Morocco; or financial handouts—as in the case of Sudan, which has also been removed from the US list of "state-sponsored terrorism." In other words, Palestine has been turned into a political commodity to be exchanged for specific demands, concessions or, in some cases, hard cash.

For the above countries and others, ties with the Palestinian Authority are no longer a priority. This leaves the PA with two dismal options: to continue their ties with Arab governments that normalize with Israel in exchange for continued financial aid, or to entirely sever ties with those normalizers. On November 18, PA President Mahmoud Abbas decided²⁰ to send Palestine's ambassadors back to Abu Dhabi and Manama, only weeks after supposedly downgrading diplomatic ties with these capitals following the devastating "Abraham Accords." In other words, the PA has resolved that even the Arab-Israeli "economic peace" is not enough

to alter the official Palestinian strategy, if any had existed in the first place.

The New ‘New Middle East’

In December 2008, the George W Bush administration declared²¹ the birth of a “New Middle East.” That seemingly arbitrary designation was, in fact, based on part hope, part wishful thinking that the invasion of Iraq would fundamentally restructure and “stabilize” the geopolitics of the Middle East in favor of American-Israeli interests.

Many historians have erroneously analyzed the George W Bush years in isolation, juxtaposing Bush’s war-hungry neo-conservatives with President Barack Obama’s supposedly kinder and gentler politics. Yet, judging from the rapid transformation in the region, Israel’s growing military prowess, Arab-Israeli normalization, the marginalization of Palestine and the Palestinians, the constant targeting of Israel’s enemies throughout the region and more, it is clear that US foreign policymakers are still committed to the “New Middle East” idea.

Of course, the game is (still) afoot as many pieces of this political puzzle are still out of place. While it may take years for the full consequences of the budding Israeli-Arab alliance to be fully appreciated, there is little doubt that the short and long-term harm of these political intrigues will always take place at the expense of the Arab peoples, especially Palestinians.

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Refugees and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Jordan

By Christina Bouri

In January 2021, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNRWA) reported Jordan as the first country in the world to vaccinate refugees.¹ From the onset of the country's COVID-19 public health crisis, the government has included them in every aspect of its response. Jordan began its vaccination plan with the intent of vaccinating at least twenty to twenty-five percent of its population by the end of 2021, including its large refugee population.² According to reports from the World Bank in 2019, Jordan boasted an estimated population of 10.1 million people.³ Of that population, 744,795 are refugees, with about 650,000 being Syrian refugees registered with the United Nations.⁴ The first recorded case of COVID-19 in the refugee camps was announced in September 2020, and since then approximately 1,928 refugees living in the camps have tested positive for the virus.

The Jordanian response to immunization includes anyone living in the country, and therefore asylum seekers and refugees—including but not limited to Syrian, Iraqi, and Palestinian populations—in Jordan have

received and will continue to receive the vaccine for free. Alongside this response, the Jordanian government has prioritized citizens over the age of sixty-five and those with underlying health conditions in their COVID-19 vaccination rollout plans. From the beginning of the vaccination campaign, the government has reported fewer daily COVID-19 cases among the refugee population. Jordan has continuously tried to mitigate the spread of the virus through a harsh nationwide shutdown, but in November 2020, COVID-19 cases spiked and national authorities—as advised by the Jordanian Ministry of Health—reinstated the harsh lockdown measures that had been alleviated in late summer of 2020.⁵ The UNHCR also reported that the general population has seen an infection rate of three percent whereas the refugee population has maintained a 1.8 percent infection rate. Though the Jordanian COVID-19 response has been vigilant about keeping the proportion of COVID-19 cases among the refugees low, any major breakout in the camps could prove to be catastrophic.

In early January 2021, the government established an online platform where Jordanian citizens, refugees, and asylum seekers could sign-up through a lottery-based system. Eligible citizens will be informed, via text message, of their vaccination date and time. Jordan's COVID-19 inoculation program is unique. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), of the almost 133 countries that house refugees, only fifty-four have explicitly covered provisions to vaccinate populations including asylum seekers, refugees, and internally displaced populations.⁶ Jordan has been the only one to enact such vaccination measures. Other countries with large Syrian refugee populations, such as Turkey and Lebanon, have yet to stipulate the role of refugees in their nationwide vaccination programs. The UN High Commissioner of Refugees, Filippo Grandi, extended his gratitude for Jordan's response to the inclusion of refugees in their public health response to the pandemic. Grandi states that "once again, Jordan has shown exemplary leadership and solidarity in hosting refugees."⁷

Legally, public health responses that are established and enacted are under the jurisdiction of the national authorities. The UNHCR is aware of the limited capacity they have in influencing such decisions, but they have been advocating for the inclusion of internally displaced peoples, stateless populations, and refugees, through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), in the national COVID-19 strategies of host countries. The COVAX Facility is a global initiative that

unites vaccine manufacturers and governments to ensure the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine to those in the greatest need of it. Under this initiative, low-to-middle income countries have been prioritized as part of the response. Grandi asserts that "global and equitable access is what will ultimately protect lives and stem the pandemic."⁸

The International Medical Corps (IMC) has been working in the two largest camps in Jordan: the Zaatar and the Azraq camps. The majority of Syrians living in Jordanian cities are impoverished and thousands live in these two large camps in isolated corners of the country.⁹ In coordination with the Jordanian Ministry of Health, data collection, educational sessions regarding the vaccine, and transportation methods to vaccination centers have been coordinated. The IMC has also worked to help people navigate the online portal system to schedule vaccination appointments.¹⁰

There remains the issue of coverage. In an address made at the World Economic Forum on 28 January 2021, King Abdullah II pledged support for the inclusion of all those residing in Jordan for the sake of covering a large portion of the population during the vaccination campaign. There are refugees without legal residency, worried about alerting the government of their status, yet King Abdullah II said in his address that inclusion would be from the need to ensure an "efficient and equitable distribution of COVID vaccines, as well as treatments."¹¹ King Abdullah II emphasized that the vaccine must be treated as a global public good wherein lower-income countries are not left at the end

of the waiting line as higher-income countries buy out a majority of the vaccines. The coming months will determine the efficacy of the Jordanian vaccination campaign and we will see which countries shall follow suit.

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Posts to Protests: Looking at Instagram's Role in the 2019 Lebanese Revolution

By Ghazi Ghazi and Christina P. Walker

Introduction

The social media platform Instagram has become increasingly popular for calls to action and mobilizing protests. Various social media accounts have emerged to publicize government corruption throughout the world.¹ In Lebanon's case, @thawramap on Instagram serves as a medium to hold government officials accountable for their corruption, broadcast protest locations, and provide information and resources to citizens.

According to the Instagram page, Thawra Map is dedicated to supporting the October Revolution by mapping all locations for peaceful protests. Scholars recognize social media's ability to mobilize the public. However, prior research primarily focuses on "mini-blog" sites like Twitter.² With images becoming more influential in storytelling, it is vital to look at the mobilization abilities on sites like Instagram, where the image is the focal point.³ Therefore, we use the case study of Thawra Map to discover how Instagram is being used to disseminate information and mobilize citizens.

How Thawra Map Started

The Thawra Map (@thawramap) Instagram is run using contributions from Lebanese citizens. The administrators then post information on Lebanese politics and actions people can take. The account stirs political participation by encouraging Lebanese citizens to send information about politicians' whereabouts in the country and the diaspora.

The original Thawra Map's first mobilization was on 7 December 2019, shortly after the start of the revolution. The October Revolution began on 17 October 2019, when Lebanese people took to the streets to peacefully protest an ongoing economic crisis. Security forces were quick to crackdown, firing tear gas and rubber bullets at peaceful protestors.⁴ A popular chant, "All of them, means all of them," reverberated across Lebanese cities, showcasing that the people had had enough of corrupt politicians and were determined to hold them accountable.

While the original account is now deleted, Thawra Map's first post came after a blogger asked for citizens' support following a journalist's

assault at a former government minister's home. By January 2020, Thawra Map created an online map that now showcases 80 plus government institutions, 450 plus politically exposed persons' (PEPs) homes and businesses, and 34 plus protest locations. Thawra Map has since shifted to sharing information about politicians and their families to show the dichotomy in living standards between government officials and average citizens. This shift was especially prominent after the Beirut Blast on 4 August 2020. After the blast, Thawra Map began posting about looking for missing persons and helping citizens be compensated for their losses. In January 2021, Thawra Map boasted that they had posted 294 PEPs sightings with 86 confronted. Since Lebanese citizens continue to face economic and political crises, government accountability remains essential.

Social Media and Protests

Social media scholarship surrounding protests has asserted that the internet helps spread information about current events, assisting activists in diversifying and enhancing their audience and promoting engagement.⁵ The study of social media platforms' impact on protests, particularly across the Arab world, increased post-Arab Spring.⁶ However, most social media-protest studies focus on text-based media like Twitter. Scholars have found that Twitter was predominantly used to facilitate discourse among activists and political organizations, helping to sustain movement mobilization.⁷

However, it is essential to expand social

media-protest research to image-based social media platforms like Instagram. Scholars have found that image and video usage is continually increasing, even on more text-based platforms.⁸ Using Instagram as a platform allows activists to organize peoples by disseminating information, fostering participation, and engaging in political discussion. Instagram scholarship has looked at how political organizations (i.e., politicians, political parties) have used information, focusing on self-promotion and ideal candidate framing.⁹

Research Question/Hypothesis

In light of prior scholarship, we ask, "How can Instagram be used to facilitate political discourse amongst civilians?" and *if* "Can Instagram be used to hold government officials accountable?" We hypothesize that the most-used frame is political organizing, followed by political conversation, and finally, political mobilization.

Methodology

We based our themes on Theocharis et al.'s (2015) Twitter coding framework, which includes political mobilization (when the post has an explicit call for action or distributes information about a future event), political organizing (when the post refers to organizational issues or includes live-action reporting), and political conversation (when the post has political statements, reported news about the causes of the movement, or distributes information about the crisis).

Post Selection and Coding

We coded all images and videos (N=406),

including their caption on the Instagram account @thawramap, from 11 January 2020 (the date of the first post) to 10 January 2021 (the date of the last post at the time of coding). We coded the first image and the caption for each post. For videos, we watched the entire video and coded its content and caption. For each post, we saved the image or a still from the video, copied the caption, and saved the link into our coding sheet to analyze.

Once we saved the images and captions, we began coding the basic elements of the photo/video and caption contents (i.e., if the post had an emoticon, English/Arabic). We coded using a binary construct: 1 if the element was present, or 0 if it was not. For themes, we created elements that would be present in the post that depict the three themes. Some posts had elements from more than one thematic category.

Results

Our data shows that political organizing is used most often, visible in over 86 percent of posts, followed by political conversation at almost 40 percent of posts, and lastly, political mobilization at 23 percent (Table 2). These results follow our original hypothesis that political organizing would be the most prevalent theme across the account.

Looking at basic post information and description, 97.78 percent included English while less than 23 percent included Arabic. Additionally, 73 percent of the posts had a negative tone. Of the total number of posts analyzed, 69.7 percent were photos, and 30.3

percent included videos.

Our themes included various subfields that warrant closer attention. Overall, only 22.17 percent of posts included a call to action, 74 percent included a politician's location, 19.95 percent of the posts included confrontation of a political figure, 10 percent showed Lebanese security forces, and 17 percent documented injuries, and 30.05 percent of posts included conversations on issues within the country.

Discussion

Returning to our research questions, Instagram is currently being used to facilitate discourse amongst citizens by posting images and videos about Lebanon's conditions. With posts being primarily in English, the account is reaching not only people within Lebanon but also the diaspora abroad and political organizations that could give international attention to the cause. Thawra Map currently uses Instagram to hold government officials accountable by posting information about problems in the country (i.e., economic crises, lack of resources, lack of shelter) and actions that citizens can take. This information that would previously go unnoticed is being called to the forefront of the political lens.

Following our hypothesis, political organizing is the most prominent theme on the Instagram page, as shown in Figure 3. This demonstrates that Thawra Map is using Instagram to share organizational issues and post live-action reporting about what is happening during protests and confrontations. With political conversation being the second most popular

theme, followed by political mobilization, it seems that Thawra Map is more concerned with the collective taking “easier” political actions rather than engaging in physical protests. “Easier” political action, in this instance, is defined as citizens engaging publicly in political ongoings and issues within their country. Since most posts include a negative tone, Thawra Map shows citizens how serious the problems within Lebanon are and how they must share, engage with, and discuss them.

It is important to note that Thawra Map does include some positive posts. The creators have created a map that not only shows the locations of politicians’ homes, places for protests, and boycotts, the map also includes hospital locations and available beds. This shows that Thawra Map, while primarily being used for government accountability, also serves as a platform for citizens-helping-citizens and generating social conversations.

Overall, @ThawraMap has created a space for organizing, mobilizing, and creating conversations on Lebanese issues. Thus, this account is facilitating political discourse in the country and holding government officials accountable. Future research should analyze additional Instagram accounts to see how Instagram is being used for government accountability globally and specifically in neighboring countries, such as Iraq.

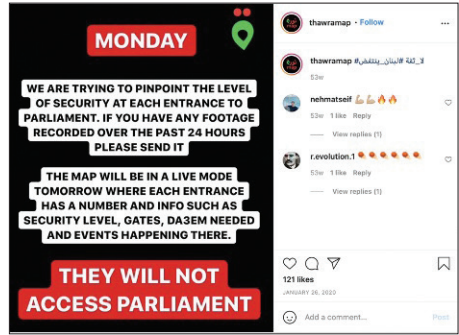


Figure 1 Example of Political Mobilization



Figure 2 Example of Political Organizing



Figure 3 Example of Political Conversation

Table 1: Coding Sheet for Post Information and Frames

Master Frame	Subframe	Description
Post Information	<i>Tag</i>	Was someone tagged in the post?
	<i>Hashtag</i>	Did the post include a hashtag?
	<i>Emoticon</i>	Did the post include an emoticon?
	<i>English</i>	Did the post include English?
	<i>Arabic</i>	Did the post include Arabic?
	<i>Replied to Comment</i>	Did @ThawraMap reply to comments?
	<i>Negative Tone</i>	Critique, scandal, conflict, failure, controversy, stagnation, negative emoticons
	<i>Positive Tone</i>	Solution of problems, approval, gratitude
	<i>Video</i>	Was the first piece of content a video?
	<i>Photo</i>	Was the first piece of content a photo?
Political Mobilization		The post has an explicit call for action or gives information about a future event.
Political Organizing	<i>Future Protest Info</i>	Did the post include information about a future protest (i.e., location, time)?
	<i>Call to Action</i>	Did the post ask its followers to do something (i.e., protest, find politician)?
Political Conversation		The post refers to organizational issues or includes live action reporting.
	<i>Security Forces</i>	Did the post include security forces?
	<i>Missing Persons</i>	Did the post include information about missing persons?
	<i>Politicians Location</i>	Did the post include information about a politician or family members location?
	<i>Past Protest</i>	Did the post include information about or the impacts of former protests?
	<i>Injury</i>	Did the post include injuries?
	<i>Arrest</i>	Did the post include information about arrests made?
	<i>Confrontation</i>	Did the post include confrontations of politicians?
	<i>Identification</i>	Did the post include an ask to identify people in photos?
		When the post makes political statements, reported news about the movements causes, or distributed information about the crisis.
<i>Issues in Country</i>	Did the post discuss issues or problems in the country?	
<i>Government Statement</i>	Did the post include a statement from the Lebanese Government?	
<i>Law/Lawyer</i>	Did the post include a reference to specific laws or actions taken by lawyers?	
<i>NGO/IO Action</i>	Did the post include information about NGO or IO actions?	
<i>Instagram Information</i>	Did the post include information about the Instagram Account @ThawraMap?	
<i>Statistics</i>	Did the post include statistics about the country or Instagram?	
<i>COVID-19</i>	Did the post include references to COVID-19?	
<i>Crisis Education</i>	Did the post include information about the crisis?	

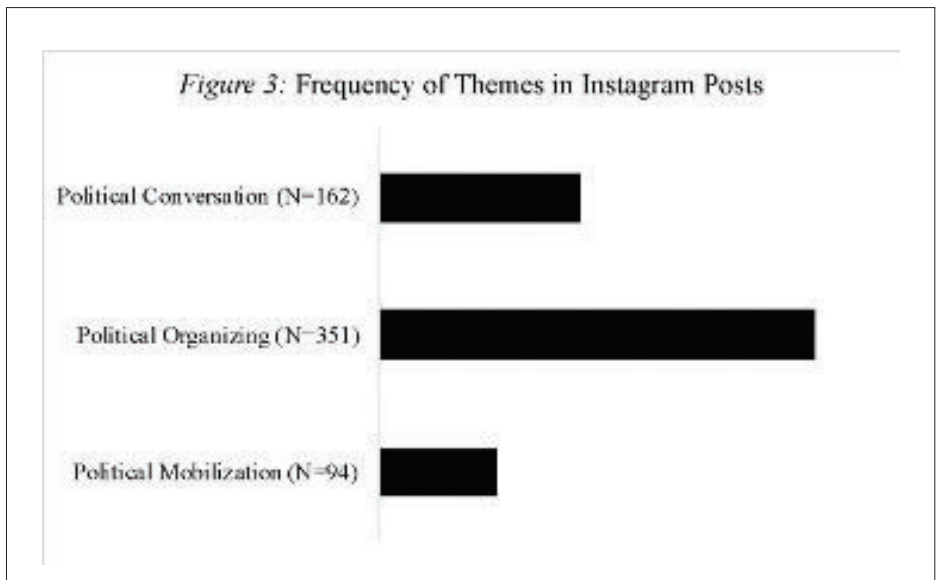


Table 2: Frequency of Themes on @ThawraMap Instagram Frames

		Yes	No
Post Information	Tag	60	346
	%	14.78	85.22
	Hashtag	60	346
	%	14.78	85.22
	Emoticon	20	386
	%	4.93	95.07
	English	397	9
	%	97.78	2.22
	Arabic	93	313
	%	22.91	77.09
	Replied to Comment	117	289
	%	28.82	71.18
	Negative Tone	297	109
%	73.15	26.85	
Positive Tone	42	364	
%	10.34	89.66	
Video	123	283	
%	30.3	69.7	
Photo	283	123	
%	69.7	30.3	
Political Mobilization	Future Protest Info	18	388
	%	4.43	95.57
	Call to Action	90	316
%	22.17	77.83	
Political Organizing	Security Forces	41	365
	%	10.1	89.9
	Missing Persons	8	398
	%	1.97	98.03
	Politicians Location	301	105
	%	74.14	25.86
	Past Protest	24	382
	%	5.91	94.09
	Injury	17	389
	%	4.19	95.81
	Arrest	6	400
	%	1.48	98.52
	Confrontation	81	325
%	19.95	80.05	
Identification	2	404	
%	0.49	99.51	
Political Conversation	Issues in Country	122	284
	%	30.05	69.95
	Government Statement	16	390
	%	3.94	96.06
	Law/Lawyer	4	402
	%	0.99	99.01
	NGO/IO Action	1	405
	%	0.25	99.75
	Instagram Information	11	395
	%	2.71	97.29
	Statistics	32	374
	%	7.88	92.12
	COVID-19	24	382
%	5.91	94.09	
Crisis Education	24	382	
%	5.91	94.09	

N = 406

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The (Apparent) Death of the Arab-Israel Conflict as We Know it

By Avi Issacharoff

The year 2020 will surely be remembered as one of the most extraordinary years in the history of the Middle East. In the summer, Israel signed normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and a few months later diplomatic relations with Morocco were renewed after 20 years. The breakthrough between Israel and the United Arab Emirates was just the tip of the iceberg of the long-term changes Israeli-Arab relations are undergoing.

This was not a sudden change, but a process which began more than a decade ago, with the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” in December 2010 in Tunisia. The uprisings, which swept most of the Arab world, were a catalyst to the end of the status quo in which Israel is surrounded by enemies in a protracted war with its Arab neighbors. The tension began to dissipate in a gradual process that has since changed the regional balance of power and Israel’s decades-old security strategy. In the decades since the establishment of the State of Israel and until the 1990s and early 2000s,

the country has faced an existential threat from neighboring Arab states that strove to annihilate the country, and almost succeeded during the Yom Kippur War. Generations of Israel Defense Forces soldiers trained for a scenario an invasion of Israel by Egypt and Syria like in 1973, and even a scenario of the Iraqi army invading Jordan and being tempted to attack Israel, as happened in the 1990s¹.

The Arab Spring Disrupted the Decades-Old Paradigm

The Arab Spring disrupted this paradigm, bringing dramatic changes in the balance of power between the Arab states and creating new alliances that could not have been expected at the end of 2010. The Arab-Muslim world fragmented into several camps, the most prominent being the moderate Sunni camp and the “Shiite Crescent,” as coined by Jordan’s King Abdullah². Israel found itself growing strategically closer to the Sunni camp that understood that the greatest threat to its survival was not from Israel, but rather from the Shiite

axis led by Iran. It was a matter of time before the cliché “my enemy’s enemy is my friend” also materialized. The existential threat of Arab invasion that Israel has faced for so many years had largely disappeared from the world.

The Arab Spring has changed several countries. It is already difficult to describe Libya and Yemen or even Lebanon, Syria and Iraq as sovereign states. They have become deeply fragmented countries that have become a battleground in the war between the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia and Iran’s Shiite, with the superpower nations - especially Russia - seeking to build regional spheres of influence. The civil wars in Syria³ and Yemen⁴ and the unrest in Lebanon and Iraq repeatedly illustrated the deep hostility between Shiites and Sunnis in the region. This hostility was manifested in open battles which made it seem as if 1400 years had not passed since the death of the Prophet Muhammad ignited a war of succession between those perceived as the fathers of Shia Islam fathers and their Sunni counterparts.

Sunni States Have Realigned Their Perception of the Major Strategic Threat

The chaos of the Arab Spring paved the way for the takeover of territories by two key elements, the first being radical Islamist terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and the second consisting of Iran and its proxies. Every piece of land in Iraq and Syria occupied by ISIS in the previous decade was a potential for takeover by Iran’s proxies. The Ayatollah

regime used Shiite troops, often from Lebanese Hezbollah and sometimes from Pakistani and Afghan militias, sent to various parts of the Middle East to create de-facto Iranian outposts. The rulers of the moderate Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, watched in horror as the “Shiite Crescent” invaded the space that ISIS evacuated and expanded from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean⁵.

Realigning the perception of the major strategic threat from Israel to Iran also happened in Jordan and Egypt, which already have peace agreements with Israel and have had ongoing security cooperation for several decades. Even countries affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Erdogan’s Turkey and Qatar, have diplomatic and non-diplomatic ties with Israel. A prominent example is Qatari officials working with Hamas in Gaza to preserve the ceasefire, done with Israel’s blessing even at the cost of transferring funds to a Hamas-controlled area⁶. And so Israel took its place besides Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan in the open confrontation with Iran, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and what was left of Alawite Syria.

The Palestinians Have Been Dropped from The Agenda

The removal of the existential threat to the State of Israel from the various Arab states and the establishment of diplomatic relations with many of them are of course excellent news regarding the future and stability of the state. However,

another element that has stood out throughout the years in the Israeli-Arab context is absent here from the new arrangement in the Middle East—the Palestinians. The agreements with the Gulf states have eliminated a resolution on the Palestinian issue from the agenda, which Arab states have been demanding since the establishment of the State of Israel as a condition for any kind of normalization. In the summer of 2020, the dam was suddenly breached, and it now seems that the Arab states are no longer waiting for peace agreements of any kind between Israel and the Palestinians.

Many in Israel were proud of this development and saw it as a substantial achievement of Prime Minister Netanyahu's foreign policy. However, it is doubtful whether the status quo between Israel and the Palestinians and the relative security calm with the West Bank and even with Gaza will continue for much longer. Removing the Palestinian issue from the regional agenda has led Israel to expand Jewish construction in the West Bank, and in effect the two-state solution has become irrelevant. Evacuating settlements where about half a million Jews live across the Green Line seems more absurd than ever. The death of a two-state solution does not mean that the Palestinian problem will disappear. It will reappear sooner or later. However, Israel and the major powers, including the United States, must recognize the fact that instead both sides are required to reach a solution under a new framework that is not yet known to us or is currently discussed in relatively limited forums, such the cultural confederation framework. Without meaningful

discussion between the parties, the outbreak of another violent round between Israel and the Palestinians, will become not a question of "whether", but of "when."

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A Golden Opportunity for a Middle East Strategic Alliance

Gilad Kabilo

After the Trump administration's military, economic, and rhetorical hard line against Iran, the Biden administration is expected to take a more conciliatory approach, reminiscent of the Obama administration. The president has appointed several key figures from his time as vice president to his foreign policy team, including Ambassador Wendy Sherman, who led the negotiating team with Iran in Obama's administration as deputy secretary of state, and Biden's former security aide Jake Sullivan as national security advisor. These appointments, among others, telegraph the administration's willingness to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, in some form.

The JCPOA was a prolonged traumatic event for Israel, which lives under the threat of Iranian nuclear attack and the genocidal rhetoric of the Ayatollah. The secrecy in which the US-Iran negotiations began, as well as the zeal with which the agreement was promoted, were interpreted by Israel's leaders and much of its population as a sign that the Obama

administration was ready to mortgage the security of its closest ally for a questionable delay in Iran's nuclear program. Many in Israel are wary of a return to the agreement, and of those in the new administration that champion this approach.

In what seems like an effort to calm these suspicions, Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has stated that the US administration would consult with Israel and US-allied Arab countries about its policy toward Iran, indicating a cooperative line toward Israel as the game between Iran, the US, and Israel begins anew.

The game has changed somewhat over the previous four years, with the normalization between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain rearranging the pieces. This agreement, ushered in during the dying days of the Trump administration, reflected the dialogue and cooperation that had taken place beneath the surface between Israel and the Gulf states in the years since the signing of the JCPOA.

If the JCPOA traumatized the Israelis, the same can reasonably be said about the

Emiratis, Saudis, Bahrainis, and other Gulf states, who have put up with Iran's aggression and threats while watching as IRGC-backed militias spring up on their borders and territory. The combination of the White House's seeming interest in consulting with Israel on its Iran policy and the new relations between Israel and the UAE offer new opportunities to Israel, the US, and the Gulf states.

The agreement has put into play a new option against Iranian nuclearization—a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) in the mold of NATO. This coalition can be an alternative to a negotiated deal with Iran that may slow down its nuclear aspirations but will likely allow the Iranian Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) to continue to build proxy militias all over the Middle East. As the new administration sets its goal for Biden's major foreign policy achievement, Israel and the Gulf states have the opportunity to offer the Biden administration an alternative to a second JCPOA by consolidating a center of gravity consisting of moderate Sunni states against Iran, one connected by intelligence, security, and economic cooperation.

Forming a Middle East alliance will begin by Israel and the Sunni states sending a unified message to the Biden administration regarding Iran, and can continue through intelligence cooperation, some of which is already happening. The inclusion of Israel, the US, and the Gulf states in the alliance will put pressure on other regional nations with strong ties to Washington to join or cooperate.

A potential key player in this dynamic would

be Qatar, which hosts the largest US military base in the Middle East. The small but wealthy nation recently saw the lifting of the Saudi-led boycott against it, mediated by Jared Kushner as part of the Trump administration's foreign policy. Lifting the boycott brings Qatar into play and opens the door for it to cooperate, even indirectly, with the new framework opposing Iran. Qatar is making great efforts to improve its image and branding around the world in order to encourage investment and tourism to the country and reduce its dependence on the economy of oil and gas resources, such as the 2022 World Cup which will put the small country on the world stage. The last thing Qatar wants is to be tied in with the sanctions and negative press that Iran brings.

Since Qatar currently engages actively with the Ayatollah regime, there is a risk that it will succeed in dragging the Gulf states, wary of an inevitable US-Iran deal, into opening a dialogue with Iran to the point of interim agreements or memorandums of understanding that will allow time and space for Iran to build its strength undisturbed, while Israel remains the "odd man out". In that scenario, the US administration may seek an agreement with Iran in the absence of a counterweight in Middle East allies.

Two other countries affecting the possibility of a strategic alliance are Egypt and Jordan. Biden presumably does not hold the same view of the Middle East as Obama did, which soured relations with Cairo after the events of the Arab Spring. His pragmatic and conciliatory approach may encourage Egypt to enter

under the alliance's framework if that alliance also fights the terrorist organizations in the Sinai Peninsula. Jordan's location between Israel and Saudi Arabia would create geographical continuity for the alliance and King Abdullah, who coined the term "Shiite crescent" to describe Iran's growing influence across the Middle East, recognizes the growing threat, and would also benefit domestically from showing his people the fruits of peace with Israel and close relations with the US.

In the coming months, the Biden administration's Middle East policy will become clearer, and the president will lay the path for the major foreign policy achievement of his time in office. Two possible goals are a return to the JCPOA or the establishment of MESA in the NATO model. Formulating a unified front consisting of Israel and the Gulf States could offer the new president a chance to establish a lasting alliance that will be a bulwark against a nuclear Iran and change the face of the Middle East forever.

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Kissinger, Kerry, Kushner: Making and Missing Peace in the Middle East

By Martin Kramer

After Henry Kissinger (class of 1950), the Harvard undergraduate alumnus who has had the most profound effect on the Middle East to date is Jared Kushner (class of 2003), son-in-law of President Donald Trump and architect of the 2020 Abraham Accords. Ponder the irony. Harvard has produced a cavalcade of experts on the Middle East, both practitioners and scholars, with far more knowledge of the region than Kushner's. "I've been studying this now for three years," Kushner said of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict last year. "I've read 25 books on it, I've spoken to every leader in the region, I've spoken to everyone who's been involved in this."¹ That was his primer for his role as broker, first, of Trump's "Vision for Peace" (aka "The Deal of the Century") and later, the breakthrough agreements between Israel and four Arab states.

By conventional standards, Kushner was "winging it." But in policy making, as in real estate, success begins with location. Kushner (and his sidekick, Harvard Law alumnus Avi Berkowitz, class of 2016), ended up in the

White House riding an unpredictable wave in American politics. These twists of fate are not rare; to the contrary, they are par for the course of history. The events that put Kissinger in the Middle Eastern cockpit fifty years ago were no more predictable.

Still, being in the right place is never enough. One has to grasp the meaning of the moment. Jared Kushner understood something fundamental about the Middle East that had eluded the long line of secretaries, deputy secretaries, advisers, envoys, and ambassadors who had preceded him. Having read his 25 books about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he realized that not all Arabs were in its grip.

This was a truth that Barack Obama's secretary of state, John Kerry, hadn't fathomed. Kerry, who had tried his hand in the Middle East right before Kushner, will never live down his 2016 statement, preserved on YouTube and gleefully retweeted thousands of times this past year:

"There will be no separate peace between Israel and the Arab world. I want to

*make that very clear with all of you. I've heard several prominent politicians in Israel sometimes saying, 'Well, the Arab world is in a different place now. We just have to reach out to them. We can work some things with the Arab world, and we'll deal with the Palestinians.' No. No, no, and no."*²

Kushner didn't dismiss the view of Israel's "prominent politicians," but actually put it to the test, and ended up eliciting four "yeses," first from the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, then followed by Sudan and Morocco.

Why did Kerry miss what Kushner saw? Some commentators have portrayed Kerry, and indeed the entire "peace process" establishment, as blinded by bias. But the simpler explanation is a generational difference in the American view of the Arabs. There is an older generation for whom the Arab world appeared driven by ideologies and passions, and a younger generation who see it governed by states and interests.

Kerry, born in 1943, studied political science at Yale when Gamal Abdul Nasser was still riding the crest of pan-Arab sentiment. After 1967, following the emasculation of Nasser, the Arabs seemed to have invested every thought and emotion in the cause of the Palestinians, who violently burst upon the world scene beginning with Black September in 1970.

Kerry belonged to the tail-end of the generation that saw the Arabs through the Palestinian prism. "Is the Israel-Palestine conflict still the key to peace in the whole region?"³ Jimmy Carter was once asked. "Without doubt,"

he answered, "the path to peace in the Middle East goes through Jerusalem." In the estimate of the late Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, "the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the single most combustible and galvanizing issue in the Arab world."⁴ And to be fair, in the past the Israeli-Palestinian conflict *was* both combustible and galvanizing.

But it ceased to be that over time. Thanks to the deal-brokering begun by Kissinger, Israel stopped being regarded in the Arab world as the prime threat to the integrity and stability of Arab states. Peace agreements and American patronage hemmed Israel in. In the place of the Israeli danger, other threats arose: Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which in 1990 briefly erased an Arab state, Kuwait, from the map; and Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, which energized Shiite minorities against Arab governments.

When Kushner, born in 1981, came to study at Harvard, the Middle East looked entirely different than it had to Kerry at Yale. The Palestinians had lost their privileged position among the Arabs, first by allying with Saddam, and then by entering the Oslo Accords. State interests had washed ideology and passion out of Arab politics.

Of course, Arab states had been making their own calculations for years. Egypt and Jordan had reached peace agreements with Israel, and other Arab states had low-profile ties. But while the trajectory was clear, the old hands still couldn't trace the arc. Kushner, on the other hand, saw the obvious: many Arabs had more important priorities than rallying around the Palestinians.

He also located the tipping point of this sentiment in the Arab Gulf states. For Americans of Kerry's generation, "the Arabs" came from Beirut and Cairo, Damascus and Baghdad. Americans had a foothold in oil-producing Saudi Arabia, but the rest of the littoral of the Arab Gulf was "flyover country" run by the British.

The United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Qatar didn't gain independence until 1971. Even then, they weren't much to write home about. The late Roger Owen, professor of Middle Eastern history at Harvard, evoked the ambience in recalling a visit he made to two of the Emirates in the 1970s: "Abu Dhabi and Sharjah seemed only to come alive when a British Overseas Airways—after 1974, a British Air plane—arrived at dusk, when Land Rovers raced out to meet it, and the passengers disbursed slowly in the evening heat."⁵

By Kushner's time, these same emirates had become the Arab world's glittering "Gold Coast," centers of fabulous wealth wedded to unashamed pragmatism. The old ideologies that had grown like weeds elsewhere in the Arab world never struck root in the sands surrounding the skyscrapers of the Arab Gulf. Here were places that had "come alive" in a spectacular way, and where Arabs broke taboos every day.

Yet even this wouldn't have sufficed to produce a breakthrough. Kushner understood the dread felt by these small Arab states over Iran, and how Israel's sounding of the alarm resonated with them. In the game with Iran, Arab Gulf states and Israel stood near one

another on the scrimmage line, and neither had full confidence in the parade of American quarterbacks, each with a different game plan.

A question facing any future historian will be this: was the "Deal of the Century," with its implicit endorsement of Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank, designed in advance as a throwaway, to facilitate the Abraham Accords? Whatever the answer, that is precisely the purpose it ultimately served. "We had been talking to both sides for 18 months," said a senior American official, "but the annexation issue created the atmosphere which was conducive for getting a deal."⁶ If it was so designed in advance, then far from being a "dead-on-arrival" plan, it was a strategic feint worthy of a Kissinger. If not, it was a deft last-minute shift of gears.

Whatever the back story, however, the Abraham Accords and their sequels have introduced a new vector in the Middle East. The most creative and dynamic shorelines on the Mediterranean and the Gulf are now linked. They are the counter to the forty-year bond between Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, which also links the Mediterranean and the Gulf. There is much potential in this fledgling alignment; how much of it will be realized depends on the ingenuity of Israelis and Gulf Arabs alike.

But it also depends on the attitude of the United States. Certainly, it has been hard for the old hands of the Democratic foreign policy establishment to concede that Kushner, wet behind the ears, achieved something that had eluded them. They should get over it.

One doesn't have to believe that Kushner (and Berkowitz) deserve the Nobel Peace Prize, though Harvard emeritus professor Alan Dershowitz has nominated them for one, but one must admit that they got this right.

Remember that Jimmy Carter didn't toss out the Middle East achievements of Richard Nixon and Kissinger, but built them out into a new security architecture for the Middle East. President Biden should consider that precedent and think hard about how to capitalize on the achievements of Trump and Kushner. That need not mean abandoning the quest for a resolution of the Palestinian question. It need not mean locking the door to Iran forever. It does mean nurturing the cooperative spirit of the Abraham Accords. These US-brokered agreements give the United States a strategic edge. In the Middle East, America needs that more than ever.

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Reimagining US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Alternatives to Ensure Democracy and Create a Peaceful Path Forward

By Sumaya Malas

After the departure of Trump from office, a shift of US grand strategy in the Middle East many have called for is an unfulfilled wish under President Biden. Although President Biden claimed that “Diplomacy is back!” at the Munich Security Conference earlier this year, his subsequent February strike in eastern Syria indicated business as usual. The loss of decades to war and foreign intervention in the Middle East has debilitated progress, heightened security-based fears, and hindered democratic consolidation. Despite some scholars’ essentializing view of Middle Eastern exceptionalism to development and democracy, the Arab world’s dysfunction is not wholly due to Middle Eastern state ineffectiveness. Development gains and political freedoms were eroded as a result of regional instability in large part due to US war-making and imperialism in the region.

Internal social and political mismanagement, inequality, and corruption coupled with US interventions in the last two decades has perpetuated regional instability and kept bad

actors in power. A large problem in the region is militarized US security strategy and foreign policies perpetrated by both Republican and Democratic administrations. Continuing down the path of endless war is both unpopular and harmful. Rather, the United States has several tools in the toolbox other than a hyper-militarized security approach to aiding the Middle East in achieving democracy. An array of diplomatic, peacebuilding, and development resources should be deployed to address actual security concerns, achieve sensible foreign policy, and actualize Middle Eastern democracy and stability.

Political Realities and Opportunities for the US

In order to create a new and effective grand strategy, we must understand the damage of previous US foreign policy in the Middle East to ensure that we learn from our mistakes. Although democratization efforts in the region have been a driving issue in US foreign policy since the 9/11 attacks, militarized policies were

inept at bringing about meaningful positive impact- starting with President George W. Bush's "freedom agenda."¹ This era aimed to democratize the Middle East by force if necessary, in order to overcome the prevalent underdevelopment and authoritarianism, yet plunged the newly formed post-colonial nation-states into perpetual chaos and war. Since the start of the Global War on Terror, the broader freedom agenda has not worked out as planned. After the deposition of Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq sank into a decade of conflict resulting in an anti-US insurgency and a regional proxy war. The war and instability led to a decline in many development indicators and worsened the outlook on achieving democracy with more and more US entrenchment in the region.

Until today, the War on Terror has not only led to a foreign policy agenda that indiscriminately kills innocent Black and Brown people in the Middle East, but the continued hyper-militarized US campaign abroad is stunting the region's potential for democratization. The current state of the region is not a confirmation of Middle Eastern exceptionalism to democracy, but rather the consequences of foreign intervention and endless war that has debilitated the region's progress and perpetuated war and instability.

Engagement in the Middle East has become costly with no end, or results, in sight. According to the Costs of War Project by Brown University, the cost of the Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria wars totals about \$6.4 trillion with repeatedly incurring cost of \$8 trillion over the

next 40 years.² The consequences in the region include 335,000 innocent civilians killed and 21 million people living as war refugees or displaced from their homes.³

Although over \$199 billion have been dedicated to reconstruction efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, most of these funds have gone towards arming security forces.⁴ Of the money allocated to humanitarian relief and rebuilding civil society, much of it has been lost to fraud, waste, and abuse, according to the report.⁵ The reveal of the "Afghanistan Papers"⁶ *The Washington Post* further proved the mismanagement of US intervention in the Middle East and the coordinated fraud at the highest levels of government, resulting in massive costs and lives lost. This news not only confirmed that war in the Middle East is not "winnable," but also that especially a militarized approach is not conducive to achieving democracy in the region.

Understanding the shift in attitudes of the people in the Middle East ten years since the beginning of the Arab Spring and possible democracy prospects is also an important step for reprioritizing US national security strategy in the region. The Middle East is not exceptional in its desire for democracy—exemplified in 2011 and in more recent protests in 2019.⁷ The collapse of the authoritarian bargain came about because of the lack of wellbeing, dignity, and freedom many felt. Today, even the development gains from the beginning of the twenty-first century have eroded as UNDP indicators show crippling multidimensional poverty experienced by one-fifth of the population of Arab States

with another one-third reported as “poor” or “vulnerable.”⁸ Despite these challenges and the lack of reform, there is a budding culture of political activism and dissent among Arabs and governments can no longer assume citizen passivity.

Alternatives to Create a Peaceful Path Forward

Since the beginning of the War on Terror, the decades long entrenchment in wars in the Middle East have proven unwinnable and the region is worse off for it.⁹ It is obvious that the Middle East of today is not the same as a decade or two ago, but US foreign policy in the region is as stubbornly enduring as unsuccessfully as before. Continuing to pursue our current militarized foreign policy that has not secured US interests more favorably than a diplomatic or development-oriented one is an expensive and strategic mistake. With recent calls to “end endless wars” gaining popularity on both sides of the aisle, and a new generation of Arabs voicing their dissatisfaction, the US has a perfect opportunity to shift gears in its foreign policy approach.¹⁰

Reimagining a traditional security strategy for US-Middle Eastern foreign policy towards fiscal and diplomatic alternatives utilizes more peace-oriented mechanisms such as rerouting funds and efforts towards development, diplomacy, and demilitarization. The US should begin making long-term investments in human security and democratization efforts in the region such as addressing humanitarian needs, chronic poverty, and increasing civil society

engagement. This will allow for a preventative approach that will build up local capacity with realistic time horizons rather than focus on belated crisis management. Additionally, a redirection of military funding to the State Department and USAID should be coupled with a regional force posture review to reduce the historically high military footprint in the region. Increasing funding for non-militarized approaches will rebuild US peacebuilding, development, and diplomacy tools. Eliminating the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) fund will remove a war slush fund and require any war-related funding to be included in the base budget. Finally, the US’s renewed commitment to diplomacy should be reflected in robust multilateral mechanisms for diplomacy and conflict reduction as well as engaging on issues of health, youth employment, and climate change.

Reform to US foreign policy in the Middle East is both sorely needed and perfectly timed. An expensive and militarized approach is neither smart nor sustainable, politically or economically, and the Middle East today is primed for change. Enacting these reforms will not only promote regional stability, remedy US policy failures, and reclaim a new identity for US interventions abroad, it will also secure US interests more effectively and prevent further Russian and Chinese entrenchment in the region.

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Unnoticed Transitions: The Middle East and Georgia

Ekaterine Meiring-Mikadze

Last year, the world commemorated the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II and the divisions of Yalta it brought along. No less important is this year's centenary of the Treaties of Moscow and Kars by which Bolshevik Russia and Kemalist Turkey not only aborted the post-World War I independence of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, but also sealed these countries off from their broader hinterland. Almost a generation before the Iron Curtain went down in Central Europe, the 1921 arrangements turned into a demarcation line that had hitherto been a permeable frontier area between Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. In fact, over centuries, the area between the Black and Caspian seas had had much stronger cultural, economic and social ties to its southern neighborhood than seven decades of forcible Soviet isolation would suggest. Any educated reader knows about how the Muslim empires intersected with the Iberian Peninsula, and some would be familiar with the Ottoman expansion into the Balkans. Few, however, are aware of Arab conquests

reaching Tbilisi in the early middle ages, of generations of Georgian warriors turning into Mamluks in Egypt and Iraq up until the 19th century, and of early modern Georgian princes and diplomats navigating the great power rivalries among the Ottoman, Persian, and finally Russian empires.

Little of this southern exposure was obvious when the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union disintegrated, and Georgia restituted its statehood lost to the Bolsheviks in 1921. Initially, the Caucasus appeared of peripheral importance, mired in lawlessness with crime networks and warlords presiding over so-called ethnic conflicts. However, as people rid themselves of isolation, a great reorientation towards the West ensued. Likewise, while the region witnessed unprecedented emigration to Europe and beyond, the West came to acknowledge the crucial role of the Caucasus as a bridge from Europe towards Central Asia and beyond. With Western-leaning politicians in charge—Shevardnadze in Georgia—new relations emerged as political conditions slowly

solidified. Among the ideas pursued to turn the Caucasus into a primary East-West corridor were high profile and large-scale projects by which Western governments, international corporations and newly independent Azerbaijan worked on establishing a transport infrastructure for Caspian oil and gas. Hitherto controlled by Moscow, an alternative route for hydrocarbons through Georgia was charted. Over the years, these East-West visions—known as the EU’s TRACECA or later also as Turkey’s ‘Middle Corridor’—turned into reality: from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum oil and gas pipelines to the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line (2017) and large-scale road construction.

The region’s pivot towards the West thereby concealed the role of the Caucasus as the new North-South borderland between Europe and the Middle East. While the large East-West infrastructure projects were actively marketed, the years were also marked by initially less visible developments pointing southwards. So-called Afghan Arabs participated in the Chechen wars in Russia’s northern Caucasus from the mid-1990s onwards. All of a sudden, it was not only hydrocarbons but also jihadi groups that became a common concern to countries in the Caucasus and the Middle East. With Putin unjustifiably accusing Georgia of providing safe havens for terrorists across its mountain border with Chechnya, jihad had become not only a problem in and of itself. It had also turned into a weapon by which Russia tried to justify the bullying in its so-called “near abroad.” Ever since, Russia’s ambitions in the

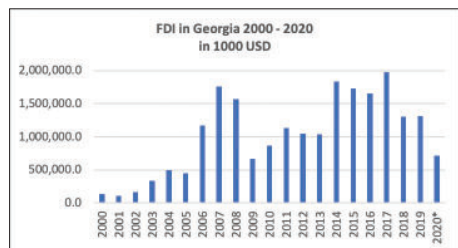
Middle East follow the patterns of its discourse in the Caucasus: to fight terrorism and to project stability. Underlying are its vital interests to align broadly with Saudi Arabia on oil and with Qatar on gas to avoid a repeat of the 1986 oil price collapse that was one of the factors that had sent the Soviet Union downhill. Despite confrontations at regular intervals—such as the killing of Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev in Doha 2004 or over Syria since 2011—Russia has carefully cultivated its Muslim credentials by building representative mosques in Russian towns and by sitting as observer at the table of the Organization of Islamic Conference. The Caucasus is thereby the mental frontline of Russia’s ambitions towards the Middle East where Moscow used to have its useful clients from Algeria to Egypt and from Syria to Iraq, with non-state actors like the Kurds at its occasional disposal in between.

However, beyond great power discourse and global issues, the countries of the Caucasus themselves renewed their southern links with the Middle East throughout the 1990s. And these relations were not laden with conflict. People simply started moving again, as generations of their ancestors had done in historical times. Georgians traveled, not only to countries in the immediate vicinity like Turkey and Iran, or to Israel that has been host to a sizable Georgian-Jewish community since the first wave of emigration in the 1970s. Over time, the rediscovery of Georgia’s hinterland geography in the south widened and started to encompass the Middle East from Egypt to the Gulf. Back in the 1990s, so-called shuttle traders

not only from Georgia but the wider region appeared *en masse* in various marketplaces. Outside Turkey, these small-scale tradespeople transporting goods in suitcases focused on the UAE and more specifically Dubai. Informal import-export networks were created, and much sought-after consumer goods made their appearance in makeshift markets in Georgia and beyond. As the decade progressed, commercial ties became more regular and formal. Transient communities of Georgians and others from the Black and Caspian Seas region were established, most importantly in Dubai. However, to some extent, the ties that first emerged and then solidified were also the expression of Georgia's dysfunctional economic and social system throughout the 1990s. State functions had ceased to exist, the economy stagnated, and pervasive corruption undermined the livelihoods of Georgians who were pushed into poverty and from there to look for opportunities abroad.

Against the background of growing popular discontent, Georgia finally witnessed a fundamental political change in 2003 that would transform its relations with the Middle East, too. With Georgians tired of broken promises of economic improvement, a new government went on a reform course of economic liberalization, deregulation, modernization of public administration and of bringing in new personnel. On the back of diplomatic ties that existed merely on paper, Georgia established new embassies and thereby new avenues of exchange notably with GCC countries. In a strategic approach, diplomats

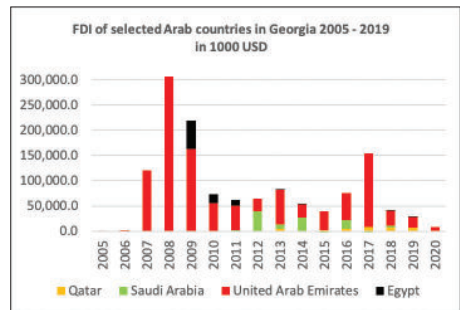
and other officials opened doors to government and businesspeople, sovereign wealth funds and private sector companies, in addition to the arts and culture as well as the science sectors. As a result, the southward flow of Georgian shuttle traders was replaced by a directional shift of Middle Easterners traveling northwards. Trade at the scale of suitcases ceased, and economies of scale emerged. Georgians themselves saw for the first time more opportunities at home, and foreign investors agreed. Up until the millennium, foreign direct investments (FDI) in Georgia had remained rather low. When the Caspian oil and gas pipelines were built between 2003 and 2005, the US and UK accounted for most of FDI. What followed then was different. Investor confidence grew, leading to FDI increases from neighboring Turkey and beyond. Compared with 2002, FDIs had more than doubled by 2004, and in 2006 they passed the one billion USD threshold for the first time.



With business confidence improved, GCC countries were among the first to give a push to the idea to invest in Georgia. Over the period of 25 years since 1996, around half of the cumulative FDIs came from the EU, with ten percent originating in the CIS,

and around 40 percent coming from other countries, of which Turkey and the US were the most important ones in terms of volume. Investment from the GCC may therefore have started *late* in comparison with other countries, but *early* when compared with the infancy in which Georgia's reform programme was. Initial engagement came in 2007 from the UAE-based Rakeen Development in conjunction with the World Bank's International Finance Corporation and targeted the hospitality, logistics and real estate sectors, culminating in the opening in 2012 of Tbilisi Mall, the first state-of-the-art retail shopping and leisure center that brought a touch of Gulf consumer culture to the region. In 2008, the UAE-based Dhahi Group made an investment entry by purchasing the incumbent Kor Standard Bank. Later rebranded as Terabank, it currently ranks eighth in terms of assets with a broad portfolio ranging from banking and financial services to tourism and real estate. The group's flagship project so far remains the Biltmore hotel opened after years of delay in 2016 in the reconverted and upscaled building of the former Tbilisi-branch of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute on the capital's central Rustaveli Avenue. Given the small scale of the Georgian economy at the time, these investments were highly important. First, they came early and strengthened investor confidence at the time, leading to more investments from quarters who would not have wasted a thought on investing in Georgia. Second, they provided opportunities for add-on investments that came to fruition in the second decade, notably around fast-moving

consumer goods. The overwhelming majority of retail brands in Georgia are operated either by Saudi Arabia's Alhokair or Dubai's Majid Al-Futtaim (Carrefour).



Real estate and retailing have since played an important role in developing and strengthening Georgia as a tourism destination for the Middle East. For Georgia, the diversification of its tourism market was an important goal to avoid being at the mercy of Russia that at times had sanctioned Georgia as a travel destination for political reasons. For airlines from the Gulf, Tbilisi fitted their growth model in a region characterized by little-developed local carriers and dominated by Turkish Airways. It only took the security reverberations of revolutions and political upheavals across the Arab region in 2011 for tourism originating in the Middle East to take off in Georgia. As early as 2007, Georgia had introduced visa-free regimes for Kuwaitis, a model rolled out subsequently across the other GCC countries and extended by 2010 also to their foreign residents. It clearly catered to the dissatisfaction of GCC citizens in particular for whom obtaining European or American visas had become a hassle. When other regional

destinations—first of all Lebanon—got exposed to events in Syria and the cold war with Iran intensified, Georgia quickly became an alternative destination. It shared many natural features of mountains and sea, was within the same flight range, highly affordable, and easily accessible in terms of direct flight connections with no visa strings attached. Similarly, for many of the GCC's foreign residents, going on holidays until Covid-19 often came with complications in terms of obtaining a visa even for regional countries like Jordan or Lebanon. For them, too, Georgia turned into a country within reach. FlyDubai started serving Tbilisi in November 2011, followed by Qatar Airways in February 2012, with Kuwait's Jazeera Airways, Saudi Arabia's FlyNas, and Oman's SalamAir following suit within a short span of time. While the Georgian National Tourism Administration in 2019 reported a threefold increase in incoming tourism between 2011 and 2019 to 9.4 million international traveler trips (including 7.7 million international visitor trips), the figure of 156,190 visitor trips categorized under the Middle East in the 2019 statistics is therefore highly misleading. It counts tourists by their country of citizenship, not residence. Many tourists who are third country citizens residing in the GCC are de facto part of Georgia's Middle Eastern market segment, even if they happen to be citizens of the US, Canada, the Philippines, or India. Until Covid-19 started taking its toll since spring 2020, travel and tourism massively underpinned economic growth. Data released by the World Travel and Tourism Council

in 2020 estimates the direct contribution of tourism as being around 9 percent and the indirect contribution as being 26.3 percent of Georgia's 16.3 billion USD GDP. The direct share of tourism and travel in the labor force represents around 138,000 jobs, while the indirect share accounts for roughly 476,000 jobs, a staggering 27 percent of total employment. Prior to Covid-19, international visitor spending amounted to around 3.3 billion USD, representing around 39 percent of Georgia's total export earnings.

As the Caucasus and Middle East have transitioned over the past three decades, the geopolitical equations playing out in both areas have converged. Economic relationships have become undoubtedly more dynamic. Not all that happens thereby actually enters the larger picture of investment or tourism statistics. The Middle East's economic importance for Georgia can therefore hardly be overestimated. Conversely, there is a lot that Georgia could still do to make itself more indispensable towards the GCC. However, both sides need to realize that the regional habitat in which they live and interact as states has changed. Beyond hydrocarbons and jihad, beyond FDIs and tourism-induced growth, the geopolitical equations of the Caucasus and the Middle East have converged. With the West seen as being busy with itself and trailing events, it is primarily Russia, Turkey, and Iran that have competed with and against each other for influence in the Middle East and North Africa, from Iraq to Syria and from Egypt to Libya. It so happens, however, that the

Caucasus is precisely the region where not only the former Russian, Ottoman, and Persian empires intersected, but also their modern successor states meet and compete. Across the Middle East and the Black and the Caspian Seas, nearly identical geopolitical patterns are now at work. They require that all other actors improve the political understanding of their respective hinterlands. In fact, what happens in the Middle East may not stay there, and the same is true to what happens in the Caucasus. On the contrary, the more active regional powers are, the more complex their potentially contradictory relations become. As a result, it is quite possible that any tension or conflict in one region may have repercussions in the other. Risks of larger regional actors pursuing compensation strategies in both regions are real. The countries of the Caucasus and the Middle East must learn how to navigate this geopolitical convergence jointly.

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From Reset to Rancor and Back Again: Assessing Turkey's Tortuous Approach to the Biden Administration

Blaise Misztal¹

Relations between Washington and Ankara have been tumultuous since at least 2014, but the last several months have been especially erratic. Since the election of President Joe Biden, Turkish government officials' statements and attitudes towards the United States have careened wildly. Repeatedly, offers of renewed cooperation by one Turkish minister have been replaced days later by scornful accusations by another. For the new Biden administration, the challenge will be less in determining whether Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is really interested in addressing the problems that beset the strained US-Turkish relationship—he is not—but in what the recent turmoil in Turkish foreign policy signals about Turkey's future.

The year immediately preceding November 2020 was characterized by Turkey aggressively asserting its geopolitical independence. It began with Erdoğan finally persuading then-President Donald Trump in October 2019, after multiple attempts, to withdraw US troops from their positions in northeast Syria along

the Turkish border.² That paved the way for a Turkish offensive into the area,³ aimed at the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia that was the primary US partner in fighting the Islamic State (IS) but whom Turkey considers an extension of the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist group.⁴

That armed incursion into Syria would mark the first of four conflicts that Turkey would insert itself into over the next year. In Libya, it sent advisors, a variety of weapons including drones, and Syrian militia to fight for the United Nations-recognized, but Muslim Brotherhood-influenced, Government of National Accord.⁵ It played a crucial role in supporting Azerbaijan's successful campaign to retake the contested territory of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia, again with drones and reports of Syrian mercenaries.⁶ It increased the pace of its operations, through airstrikes and ground offensives, against the PKK in northern Iraq.⁷ Turkey also took increasingly aggressive measures to continue its exploration

for offshore energy in Eastern Mediterranean waters that it claims as its own, a claim that no state other than Libya recognizes.⁸

Such actions might serve the purpose of widening Turkey's sphere of influence and increasing interest in the offerings of its defense industry,⁹ but they also play well across, and beyond, Erdoğan's motley political coalition. Supporting fellow Islamists is popular with the religiously conservative base of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP).¹⁰ Standing up for Turkic Azerbaijan and attacking the Kurds resonates with the ethno-nationalists of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Erdoğan's coalition partners.¹¹ Asserting Turkish claims to Mediterranean waters against the Turks and Cypriots while increasing engagement with Moscow is favored by the so-called Eurasianists,¹² who believe Turkey's natural allies lie in the East, not West, and who are increasingly well-represented in the security apparatus.¹³ And parts of this foreign policy, particularly the antagonism toward Greece and the Kurds, even resonate with the republican nationalism of the opposition People's Republican Party (CHP).¹⁴

Yet, Erdoğan began 2021 on a notably different tack than the previous year, repeatedly signaling his desire to improve relations with almost every Western state that he had angered or undermined in 2020.¹⁵ He offered to reinstate severed diplomatic relations with Israel and even nominated an ambassador.¹⁶ He exchanged pleasant letters with French president Emmanuel Macron who he suggested required mental treatment.¹⁷ He agreed to talks

with Greece over their maritime disagreement.¹⁸ Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu spoke of wanting to get relations with the European Union back on track.¹⁹

Most strikingly, Turkey began pursuing a reset in its relations with the United States.²⁰ Columnists in government-affiliated newspapers began writing of the possibility that Turkey could help the Biden administration confront Russia.²¹ Minister of Defense Hulusi Akar suggested that Turkey could be flexible in finding a solution to longstanding US concerns over Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system.²²

Yet almost as soon as the offer of improved ties had been made it was seemingly rescinded, and then extended again. In the span of ten days in February, Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu accused Washington of being involved in the 2016 coup attempt while Erdoğan claimed the United States was supporting PKK terrorism against Turkey.²³ Just days later, however, Erdoğan would again stress Turkey's common interests and the desire for a win-win relationship with its American ally.²⁴

Thus far, the Biden administration appears unswayed by Erdoğan's charm offensive and unfazed by its reversals, in part because it seems not to have expected a constructive relationship with Turkey to begin with. As a candidate, Biden described Erdoğan as an "autocrat."²⁵ In his confirmation hearing, Secretary of State Blinken referred to Turkey as a "so-called strategic partner."²⁶ Meanwhile, the Departments of State and Defense have firmly reiterated that there can be no negotiation about sanctions

placed on Turkey and its expulsion from the F-35 fighter jet program as a result of its possession of the S-400.²⁷

Such firmness is the right response until Turkish offers of reset materialize into action, but it is not sufficient to advance US policy and interests. US policymakers must also question what is behind these frequent and rapid changes in Turkey's behavior. This is important less for revealing the sincerity of Erdoğan's overtures, which are likely hollow, and more for understanding the drivers of Erdoğan's foreign policy. Turkey's importance has, if anything, grown with its recent demonstration of the ability to project power in multiple theaters simultaneously. At the same time, the unpredictability of its behavior and the instability of its politics have grown as well.

The short-lived Turkish charm offensive should be dissected and examined for what it might reveal about wither Turkey, and Erdoğan, go next. After all, if Turkey's 2020 foreign adventures were popular and successful, why would Erdoğan change course?

It could be the case, for example, that Erdoğan felt that Turkey had become overextended through its multiple offensives. Or perhaps, sensing that states were aligning against him, both in Europe and, with the Abraham Accords, in the Middle East, Erdoğan was growing wary of being isolated.²⁸ Given Biden's tough rhetoric, Erdoğan might have worried that the new administration would impose tough sanctions if Turkey remained uncooperative.²⁹ Maybe, fighting on the opposite side from Russia in Syria, Libya, and Nagorno-Karabakh, Erdoğan

really is looking for support against a hostile Moscow, the S-400 purchase notwithstanding.³⁰ Alternatively, with Turkey's economy growing weaker, Erdoğan might be seeking to reassure and attract foreign investors or encourage Western support for a bailout from the International Monetary Fund.³¹

Any or all of these explanations might shed light on Erdoğan's decision to reach out to Western states at the beginning of the year. But if he had decided Turkey would benefit from better relations with Washington, why the angry outbursts? Diplomatic, economic, or strategic motivations do little to explain why Erdoğan's outreach was so short-lived and turbulent. For a leader that, over nearly two decades in power, has gained the reputation of both a master tactician and an absolute ruler, Erdoğan's divergent statements and tolerance for freelancing ministers seem particularly unusual.

The answer may lie not in Turkey's situation abroad, but at home. Erdoğan has always relied on political partners to govern Turkey, whether liberal reformists, the Gülen movement, Islamists, or Kurds.³² Even today, though he has seemingly consolidated power, he remains dependent upon various nationalist factions, such as the Eurasianists.

This dependence is not simply electoral or parliamentary, though his AKP does need the MHP to form a majority coalition. More significantly, Erdoğan also relies on his partners to staff and manage the bureaucracy of the Turkish state, especially the security establishment. Early on, Gülenists controlled policy and the judiciary, and used it to weaken

the military, which Erdoğan distrusted. Now, particularly amid his many foreign adventures, Erdoğan is heavily dependent on the military, where nationalists of various stripes have risen to command.³³

All of Erdoğan's past partnerships, however, have ended in acrimony, including a years-long battle by the Gülenists against Erdoğan that began in 2012 and culminated in the 2016 coup attempt.³⁴ The dynamics today are beginning to resemble the early days of that period. The first blow struck against Erdoğan then was the arrest of his intelligence chief for initiating contacts with the PKK that would eventually lead to a promising, but ultimately fruitless, peace process.³⁵ Today, the same sort of infighting and disagreements over policy are evident in the tentative offers and harsh rhetoric toward the US alternately displayed by different members of Erdoğan's cabinet.

If the rollercoaster of Turkish foreign policy is indeed indicative of schisms within the Erdoğan regime, then Erdoğan's outreach to the United States might be driven by a search for assistance in shoring up his insecure position. Whether or not the United States has an interest in helping him, deciphering such signals could be useful for US policymakers in preparing for the prospect of instability in Turkey and mapping out the ways it could affect US interests, from migration into Europe to the dynamics of myriad overlapping Middle Eastern conflicts.

Erdoğan's charm offensive might have been short and unproductive, but that does not mean the Biden administration should simply ignore

it. Analyzing the dynamics that have informed the last several months of convoluted Turkish foreign policy could give US policymakers important clues as to where Turkey will head next. It is unlikely that there is much to be done in the short-term to change the fact that, under Erdoğan, Turkey is a problematic partner. But if the Biden administration could read the signs and get ahead of Turkey rather than continually and belatedly reacting to its unpleasant surprises, that might just be good enough.

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Elizabeth R. Nugent, *After Repression: How Polarization Derails Democratic Transition.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020): 298p.

Andrew O'Donohue

After the Arab Spring toppled Tunisia's long-standing dictatorship, diverse political elites came together to draft and approve a new constitution. During Egypt's democratic transition, secular parties walked out of the constitutional drafting process, then backed a military coup on national television. While existing scholarship has probed the divergent regime trajectories of these two cases, in *After Repression* Elizabeth R. Nugent identifies a novel puzzle: Why were opposition political elites in Egypt so polarized during the transition, whereas in Tunisia they were able to compromise and cooperate?

Nugent's core argument is that differences in the nature of repression under authoritarian regimes shape subsequent levels of polarization during democratic transitions. Thus, whereas previous research on polarization has frequently taken for granted a link between a country's demographic profile and its partisan divides, Nugent looks at the specific processes that create political preferences and identities at the individual level. In Tunisia, she finds that

"widespread repression" helped create among varied political elites "a shared, bridging identity as victims of the regime" (p. 16). In Egypt, by contrast, "targeted repression" of the Muslim Brotherhood engendered a deep identity cleavage between Islamist and secular elites.

A fundamental challenge for Nugent's theory is demonstrating that this kind of targeted repression causes polarization—and not the other way around. Nugent addresses this concern head-on: While acknowledging that dictators have some autonomy in choosing a strategy of repression, she argues that historical legacies of state-building under colonialism have a greater influence in determining whether post-colonial dictators have engaged in targeted or widespread repression (Ch. 3). Thus, Nugent rules out the idea that targeted repression is itself just an outcome of preexisting polarization and calls attention instead to how institutional inheritances constrain a dictator's capacity to use different types of repression. A further challenge is then documenting that authoritarian regimes employed one

repertoire of repression or another, given the immense difficulty of collecting such data in a dictatorship. Nugent synthesizes accounts from international human rights watchdogs, as well as her own interviews, to illuminate this murky issue (Ch. 4).

In what is nothing short of exemplary scholarship—based on over 100 interviews with members of the former opposition in Egypt and Tunisia—Nugent then traces through individual life stories how repression shapes political identities and ultimately levels of polarization (Chs. 5 and 6). She pinpoints three causal mechanisms: psychological, social, and organizational. Psychologically, widespread repression in Tunisia forged a common identity among opposition elites, whereas targeted repression in Egypt meant that the Brotherhood came to perceive itself as “the sole victims of the previous regime” (p. 167). Socially, Tunisian dissidents of diverse stripes were imprisoned or exiled together, whereas Egyptian Islamists were comparatively isolated by their punishment. What is more, the weight of targeted repression turned the Brotherhood into “an increasingly secretive, exclusive, and isolated organization” (p. 34), while Tunisian opposition groups established common initiatives. Above and beyond this detailed process tracing from her interview research, Nugent employs lab experiments to confirm the fundamental psychological mechanism undergirding her theory (Ch. 7).

Nugent’s book is remarkable not only in its attention to the micro-foundations of macro-level regime outcomes but also in

its capacity to reach across geographic and disciplinary boundaries. From American politics research, Nugent draws precise concepts and measurements of different types of polarization, as well as explanations for it. From work on Latin America and Southern Europe, she gleans the core lesson that elite cooperation has a determinative impact on the success of democratic transitions. And from the literature on social psychology, she deploys the framework of social identity theory to illuminate psychological mechanisms that political scientists have often overlooked. Given the book’s syncretic approach, Nugent’s work offers novel insights for scholars working in diverse fields. It would not be hard, for instance, for a Latin Americanist to see that in Argentina’s democratic transition after 1983, the military’s widespread repression helped facilitate cooperation across the decades-old divide between Radicals and Peronists.

While Nugent offers a compelling account of polarization and its consequences, two types of actors deserve more attention in her theory and in future scholarship. Most notably, a key actor in the classic literature on democratic transitions was the military—a potential spoiler that threatened to stage a coup of the kind that derailed Egypt’s democratic experiment. Yet Nugent insists that “[f]ormer regime actors were . . . largely absent from the transition” (p. 17). This approach downplays a key force behind Egypt’s authoritarian reversal and leaves the reader to wonder: To what extent did the option of backing a military intervention shape secular Egyptian politicians’ incentives to

inflare polarization rather than compromise? Did targeted patterns of repression in Egypt perhaps give prominent politicians a sense that they would enjoy relative security under a military government and thereby increase their willingness to support a coup?

Another set of actors that receives mention but less theorizing in Nugent's book is civil society organizations. In Tunisia, as Nugent explains, the constitution process was "at a standstill" by the beginning of 2013, and the country descended into an acrimonious "political conflict," in which "two prominent secular politicians were assassinated" (p. 227). At this critical moment, it was a "quartet of civil society organizations" that played an instrumental role in organizing a national dialogue, setting a roadmap for elections, and getting the constitution process back on track (p. 228). While she acknowledges the contributions of this quartet, Nugent often leaves the impression that the ball is in the *ancien régime's* court. The prior dictator had the power to divide the opposition through targeted repression, but it is not clear in Nugent's account if—and above all, how—opposition actors can work to overcome an inheritance of polarization.

After Repression thus leaves us with a new perspective—and new questions—with which to analyze the complex transitional periods in Egypt and Tunisia. For scholars working on diverse regions and topics, Nugent's research offers a towering contribution to our understanding of political polarization, democratic transitions, and the legacies of authoritarian regimes.

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Informal Control of the Turkish State: Lived Experiences from Kurdish Borderlands

Dilan Okcuoglu

“In 2009, we planted our wheat in front of Turkish soldiers; they could see our land from the military base. We were just about to harvest the produce when they put a ban on it. With this decision, our annual harvest was completely wasted. Soon after this decision, that lieutenant was relocated, and the new one was the complete opposite of the previous one. There is no rule of law here.” These words, reported to me during my fieldwork in the Kurdish borderlands in 2013-2014 by Refik, a middle-aged Kurdish farmer, reflected the way people in the Kurdish borderlands experience state strategies for surveillance and control of populations. His words help us see beyond the formal policies and institutions of state governance, shedding light on the informal source of state authority in contested borderlands: arbitrariness and uncertainty.

Kurdish borderlands are remote and mountainous zones that are conducive to sudden moments of violence and uncertainty. Research on ethnic politics, territoriality, and violence remains a challenge in those

contested areas, where multiple sovereignties (of states as well as non-state actors) meet. Conducting research in these borderlands is difficult;¹ not only because of the terrain, but also because the four nation-states with Kurdish populations—Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria—have imposed severe constraints on both Kurdish populations and scholars interested in the subject.² As a Kurdish female scholar coming from abroad,³ my research—on the lived experiences and perceptions of state building, specifically territorial control—was under surveillance from the very first day I arrived in the region, and the pressure increased as I traveled to rural areas, interfering with my work in both overt and covert ways. Throughout my stay I was harassed on social media; stopped at checkpoints by the military; approached on the street by the Turkish police, and repeatedly questioned about when I would leave. There were other challenges as well: while I did not realise it when I first set out, my research topic was personal. I do not know how many times I found myself crying in the middle of

interviews⁴; what I heard resonated so much with my memories as a child learning about the evacuation and burning down of my hometown in Kurdistan and watching my family's suffering and resilience over the years. I learned, as a child, that sudden changes, creating uncertainty, are embedded into the reality of war and violence. I witnessed the disappearance and extrajudicial killing of people around my father (who has been politically engaged in Kurdish circles since the 70s), my uncles' sacrifices and the continued fight for the rights of Kurds and Kurdistan. My grandfather, who was never able to accept the loss of his homeland and entire family history, died from cancer after his forced displacement to Istanbul in the aftermath of the evacuation⁵. The stories that came up repeatedly in interviews—of the difficulties of everyday life, the arbitrary nature of violence and control, and the constant state of precariousness which kept people alert but also insecure—reminded me of the peak of violence in the 1990s. As Abulof (2014) has shown, deep securitization is widespread in divided contexts where the state officials are not certain about the regime's survival.⁶ Because of that, the state employs both formal and informal mechanisms of control over demography and territory. The informal state controls physical activities, such as farming, travelling, ownership entitlement, and interacting with other people, but it goes beyond that, into the emotional world people inhabit by infiltrating people's minds and hearts. This informal control plays out through uncertainty that rapidly changes everyday dynamics and renders people agitated.

On a very humid day in the summer of 2013, I was sitting with my hosts in a border village in Turkish Kurdistan. A middle-aged Kurdish man, Botan, was telling me about his perception of borders when his brother, seemingly agitated and anxious, appeared and interrupted, telling Botan they needed to leave immediately. Botan, politically active since the 1990s, had been tortured in the past, and was therefore experienced, and well-equipped to deal with the rapidly changing dynamics of the borderlands. He dashed into his house, grabbed his AK-47, and joined a group of men heading out of the village. It wasn't long before they returned. On arriving back, Botan sat down with me again, and filled me in on the events. He told me that their herd—300 sheep and goats—had been abducted by Iranian border guards who had crossed the border from Iran into the Turkish side. "This is the first time something like this has happened here since the 90s. We have risked everything. The Iranian pasdaran (the unofficial name people use for the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) know that these animals are our everything; our daily and annual bread!" His father, who had returned with him, had experienced similar issues. "Both states—Turkey and Iran—are plundering my property," he told me.

The issue with the guards was not only the actions they had taken. It was that they were part of a pattern of the arbitrary use of power by the soldiers, which created an atmosphere of ambiguity for the villagers. Trapped living under the authority of at least two sovereign states, people live in a grey zone, constantly switching

between the different transcripts of public versus private lives and languages (Scott 2009) and enfolded in formal and informal webs of relations with the numerous actors in constant traffic along these borderlands: smugglers from Iran and Turkey; PKK guerrillas; villagers; and soldiers. Those traversing the borders are often perceived as threats to the state and are liable to lose their lives. The Roboski massacre of 2011, is perhaps the most serious example of this, when 34 civilians, who had been involved in smuggling goods across the borders, were killed in an airstrike by the Turkish air force.⁷ Despite these risks, Kurdish villagers still travel to Iraq and Iran to see their relatives. In recent years, however, this has become increasingly difficult because of changes made by the state.

Like many of the other people I interviewed, Garzan, now in his 60s, moved to a village in the borderlands after his hometown was evacuated in the 1990s as a part of the Turkish state's counterinsurgency agenda⁸. Because he has relatives from both his fathers' and mothers' sides in Iraq, he travels there from time to time. In previous times, he travelled across the mountains for these visits, but in 1969, an official border-crossing was opened at Turkish-Iraqi border. This legal crossing, with its rigid control measures, made the crossing much tougher than before. Some of this was bureaucratic. "When I went to the office to get a permit, they told me that they are only open two days per week, and I should revisit on Monday and Thursday," Garzan told me. Other changes were the restrictions imposed on the use of and access to the land;

construction of new checkpoints and dams; building new infrastructure, such as military roads and high-tech castle-like military bases known as *kalekols*; deploying more troops and police forces; recruiting new village guards and creating new paramilitary forces—several villagers reported during the interviews. Such changes, while seemingly banal and limited, are means of controlling not only the borderlands, but also the populations within them.

In response, people, especially in border zones, have also developed diverse strategies to cope with uncertainty and arbitrary use of power in the midst of violence and war: contingent alliances with conflicting actors. In one conversation, a villager told me that the history of getting into contingent alliances goes back two generations: "Our grandfathers told us that their battalion commanders would ask them to bring sugar and other products from the other side of the border. We have been travelling across the borders for decades; this is the biggest advantage of living in the borderlands. But since the state declared the emergency rule, or OHAL, in 1987, the border policies have changed in a negative way, and they have imposed strict control along the borders. This has disadvantaged lives in the borderlands." This shift toward a rigid border control was undertaken alongside other control practices, such as recruiting people as village guards, changing the topography of the region, and recrafting demographics⁹.

This cluster of narratives from the Kurdish borderlands between Turkey, Iraq and Iran reveals the complexity of strategies and

mechanisms that the state uses to control people and territories, but also the need for qualitative research in understanding these phenomena. The impact of the different modes of state control only becomes explicit when considered in combination, from the ground. The Turkish authorities use a combination of formal programmes and policies alongside the informal, but very real, manipulation of uncertainty. This strategy essentially depends upon getting inside people's heads; a form of authority and domination that an exclusive focus on formal policies and institutions would miss. People's lived experiences illuminate how the Turkish state uses uncertainty and dependency as an ad hoc source of authority to control people and territory in its borderlands. This paper is an invitation to reconsider the limits of conventional approaches, which focus primarily on formal institutions and policies for the study of ethnic conflict. The next step will be to show the practical implications of the state's informal networks on state-building in conflict-driven settings of the MENA region.

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Endnotes

- 1 For more details, see Firat Bozcali, "Probabilistic Borderwork: Oil smuggling, nonillegality, and techno-legal politics in the Kurdish borderlands of Turkey," *American Ethnologist* 47(1), (2020): 72-85.
- 2 Academics in Turkey who have studied the Kurdish question from a critical perspective have been silenced, targeted and sometimes imprisoned. See Deger and Unlu (2011) for a detailed account of this issue.
- 3 This is not uncommon. See: B. Maria Olujic, "Coming Home: The Croatian War Experience," in *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Culture*, ed. Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M Rubben (California: University of California Press, 1996).
- 4 For the emotional and ethical challenges of doing field work in conflict zones, see: Elizabeth Wood, "The Ethical Challenges of Field Research in

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5 These insights also relate to the ongoing discussions about the positionality of the researcher in the fieldwork. For further details, see: Aarie Glas and Jessica Soedirgo, "Towards Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 53(3), (2020): 527-531.

6 For the theoretical and empirical discussion of the securitization process in the Israeli-Jewish context, see: Uriel Abulof, "Deep Securitization and Israel's 'Demographic Demon,'" *International Political Sociology* 8(4), (2014): 396-415. For comparative examples, see also: John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 1993).

7 On 27 December 2011, the Turkish army bombed the village of Roboski, killing 34 Kurdish smugglers/villagers who were crossing the Turkish–Iraqi border. This incident, known as the Roboski event, was one of the turning points for the continued peace negotiations between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan's Workers Party (2012-2015).

8 In those years, almost 4000 towns were evacuated and demolished. This has been an effective tool in the hands of the Turkish army to maintain the control of demography and territory. See: *Displaced and Disregarded: Turkey's Failing Village Return Program*, Human Rights Watch, 30 October 2002. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/45dac6a92.html>

9 For more detail on the use of village guards, see: Evren Balta, "Causes and Consequences of the Village Guard System in Turkey," presented at *Mellon Fellowship for Humanitarian and Security Affairs Conference*, CUNY-Graduate Center, New York, NY, 2 December 2004. For the spatial control and demographic engineering in Turkey, see: Joost Jongerden, *The settlement issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An analysis of spatial policies, modernity and war* (Leiden, the Netherlands, 2007): Brill et al., "The spatial (re)production of the Kurdish issue: Multiple and contradicting trajectories," *Journal*

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Decentering Europe: Thinking Beyond “Parting Ways” and Jewish-Arab Nostalgia

Atalia Omer

The time has come to decenter Europe from the heart of the Middle East. What do I mean? Such a decolonial move is not merely material and political, but also epistemic (which I understand as relating to knowledge and its validation) and ontological (which relates to claims about the nature of things as they are). The Israel/Palestine case both symbolically and concretely represents the continuous presence of Europe in the region, not merely physically, but also as a logic and a reactionary political grammar thriving on purist ontological accounts of identity and underwritten by an orientalist episteme. Notably, I refer to Europe not solely as a geography, but as a set of ideological, intellectual, and political projects.

New horizons for the Middle East cannot be imagined without grappling with Europe’s persistent presence and historical entanglement in the region, which scholars from Edward Said to Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg have understood as inevitable for concretely imagining a new syntax for cohabitation.¹ Along with a human rights orientation, such

a new syntax, they envision, will centralize historical injustices and recognize the tragic and ongoing relations between the Holocaust and the Nakba (or the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948). This recognition emphatically does not entail using the one tragedy to justify the other. It is simply to state the concreteness of the historical experiences and entanglements that the targets of these catastrophes have endured intergenerationally. Jewish actors who seek to distance themselves from their Jewish complicity with Palestinian realities cannot simply declare that a century-long history of settler colonialism and ethnoreligious nationalism² is a perversion of Jewish diasporic authenticity and prophetic (non-nationalist) outlook. Such disentanglement reveals a harkening back, an imaginative effort to “return” to a Jewish diaspora from Zion, inverting the Zionist ethos of the “negation of exile.” A longing to “return” to something more real or more authentically Jewish constitutes a historic counterfactual act. It introduces an important critique of Jewish Zionist political

theology, but no resources to rewrite collective passions or to instantiate multiperspectival ethical visions of justice.

This short essay is, therefore, about the limits of relying epistemologically (and ethically) on the resources of Europe or pre-Zionist Jewish experiences to articulate a post-Zionist Jewish vision for a decolonial future, as if Zionism and its historical realities can be theorized out of existence—and, with this theoretical supersession, all of the people who inhabit these realities. This act of epistemic and political decolonization constitutes and enacts historical and sociological erasures. Similarly, an exercise in counterfactual emancipatory return is the longing for Arab-Jewish hybridity and memories of peaceful cohabitation of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian Arabs in the Middle East before Europe arrived. Both modes of “return” circumvent the generative potential for, and inevitable need of, working sociologically and politically from within realities that cannot be theorized out of existence.

Decolonial Jewish futurity will, accordingly, grow out of historical and sociological concreteness, not just abstract philosophizing, though an epistemic interrogation of Jewish modernity is likewise pivotal.³ This is important because a Jewish discourse that interprets itself as decolonial may be Palestine-centric and relational, but may nevertheless suffer from both persistent Ashkenazi-normativity⁴ and, not unlike decolonial discourse broadly, purist impulses⁵ to return to a pre-colonial utopia. Regardless of whose stories of “return” we follow, we are stuck with Europe’s hegemonic

and authorial role in such scripts.

Hence, I suggest thinking of “return” not a utopia but as justice-in-motion, a dynamic state of affairs rather than a static destination. In the case of Jews all over the world (including in Israel), this requires grappling with the diversity of modern Jewish communities and experiences. Reimagining Jewish ethical responses to Palestine/Israel cannot merely be an exercise in purist harkening back. Certainly, Judith Butler argues compellingly for “parting ways” with a homogenizing national discourse of Jewish identity and history.⁶ This parting, she highlights, is necessary for the justice discourse in Palestine/Israel to be articulated relationally, through an actual redressing of Palestinian grievances. On the one hand, this redressing clarifies Jewish ethics as a relational and historical discourse rather than an ahistorical destination. On the other hand, this relational ethics proposes to return Jewishness to its diasporic modes of non-belonging or alterity. Indeed, a relational justice discourse that finally would foreground the historic crimes committed against Palestinians (the “ongoing Nakba”), supposedly in the name of Jews, cannot simply redirect its gaze to (European) Judaism. Reclaiming from Zionism interpretations of Jewishness as prophetic and humanistic, rather than the ethnocentric, masculinist, and militaristic upshot of internalized antisemitism and Europe’s death factories, also renders the longing to Zion and Zionism a mere delusion of redemptive strength.

Indeed, Butler reconnects with a European philosophical canon (e.g., Hannah Arendt,

Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Buber) in order to expose the inauthenticity of Israelism as an expression of Jewish teleology. Her important work and activist stance have crowned her as one of the philosophers and public intellectuals associated with the social movement of American Jews that I reflected on in my recent book.⁷ To rectify the realities of Jewish power, the Jewish Palestine solidarity activists I profile seek to reclaim diasporism as a more authentic form of Jewishness than the one embodied in land-ownership, tanks, drones, and checkpoints. This is Judaism “beyond borders”; it is intersectional, multiracial, and antiracist. Of course, this Judaism is essentially diasporic too. In many respects, activists in the Butlerian camp heed the call issued by decolonial activists such as the French Algerian Muslim political activist Houria Bouteldja to choose between Zionism and antiracism. One cannot be both, she declares.⁸

Such activists truly aspire to connect to the “geographies of liberation,”⁹ mapping not only the international interlocking structures of power and domination, but also the global intersectional connections between one site of oppression to another and their emancipatory visions. They do not want to see themselves implicated in the matrices of oppression and thus interpret their struggles “at home” in the United States against white supremacy as intricately related to their responsibility to work in solidarity with Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and beyond. Engaging in civil disobedience in the West Bank, they leverage their (mostly Ashkenazi and thus

White) Jewish and international privilege to resist the occupation. They do so through organized delegations and on-the-ground relationship building with, and accompaniment of, Palestinian partners in coordinated actions of co-resistance.

Clearly, such Jewish Palestine solidarity activists are Butlerian in their emphatic claim that “occupation is not their Judaism.” They *part ways* with the occupation without explicitly identifying where the lines and parameters of the occupation they resist begin and end (and where the “good old Israel” begins and ends). At the same time, they are not Butlerian because they put their bodies on the ground, acknowledging their complicity and obligation to not merely walk away from the realities of Jewish power, but to actively resist them, concretely with their actual bodies, leveraging their privilege. This embodied resistance is different from philosophizing Zionism out of existence in abstraction from sociological empirics. Yet, in this struggle to dismantle the Israeli occupation as Jews, it is difficult to think beyond the binaries that define the context: Diaspora versus Zion, Jewish authenticity versus its perversion. Inevitably, relinquishing a supposed “birth right” to inhabit the land when one already has a passport and political rights elsewhere is indeed a form of diasporic privilege. A simple Jewish return from state-centrality to the diaspora as a state of mind cannot be willed into existence intellectually. Further, it relies on a concrete at-homeness or belonging elsewhere within a global and international system that still depends on the

basic political unit of the nation-state, eroded as it is, for the “right to have rights,” to recall Arendt’s profound insight.¹⁰

Reclaiming the diasporic as most authentically Jewish inverts the Zionist homogenization of Jews. This homogenization’s ideological roots are located in euro-Christian antisemitic discourses—classical and contemporary—as well as a selective (messianic) reading of Jewish teleology, in its secular and religious registers. That the Palestinian struggle has reestablished itself as pivotal for international, transnational, and global anticolonial social justice coalitions¹¹ enhances the need for Jews to choose between their aspiration to be on the side of justice and the ever-clearer realization that now, decades after the Holocaust, the Zionist discourse of self-determination and physical (as well as messianic) redemption simply cannot be framed through decolonial or anticolonial lenses as earlier thinkers like Sartre misinterpreted it.¹² More and more people in Israel’s shrinking civil society and democratic spaces, such as the important human rights organization B’Tselem, label as “apartheid” what transpires in the political geography of Israel/Palestine.¹³ Jewish supremacy and its technologies of domination appear nothing like a redemptive narrative of political emancipation and quite a lot like a settler colonial regime, in the territories occupied in 1967, but also within the “Green Line” as evident by the so-called “Nation State Law” that explicated *de jure* Jewish supremacy. This is Europe’s legacy through and through.¹⁴

To part ways with Israel and “return” to a diasporic authenticity, therefore, may

prove redemptive to American (and other non-Israeli) Jews who seek to be coherently anti-racist (rather than anti-racist except for Palestine). More critically, some American Jews aspire to reclaim their Jewish innocence by reconnecting to Jewish values rooted in Jewish diasporic powerlessness rather than in supremacist Jewish power. Clearly, American Jewish disengagement from Israel can have profound policy ramifications in terms of shaping US interventions and aid frameworks, which explains aggressive efforts to criminalize criticism of Israeli annexationist and occupation policies through the weaponization of antisemitism¹⁵ and, more broadly, the silencing and chilling of debate. Such efforts entail the careful monitoring, curating, and framing of the narrative about Israel/Palestine.¹⁶

In between reclaimed Jewish “innocence” and the interrogation and dismantling of Jewish power, Europe as an episteme still dominates as an undergirding plotline. This effort to reclaim Jewish diasporism and devalue Israelism relies on a Butlerian erasure of sociological and empirical realities of Jews who cannot simply, as a matter of philosophical decree, rewind the clock back to Europe before it pushed its Jewish citizens out. Europe as an episteme still dominates because the Butlerian frame recognizes Palestinian realities of suffering, but disregards the empirical realities of Jews in Israel. Such realities have transpired historically after the confluence of the tragedies of the Holocaust and the Nakba, and as a part of their ongoing unfolding. The Butlerian approach, therefore, in its discourse of authenticity,

risks ahistoricity, even as it reflects ethically, historically, and relationally on Jewish hegemony and its victims.

So long as the terms of the conversation traffic in a discourse of authenticity and counterfactual return, they remain beholden epistemologically and ontologically to Europe. Decentering Europe, accordingly, means perceiving the concrete sociological realities on the ground generated by the dynamics of violence in all its manifestations. It also requires noticing the many other ways in which Israel as a euro-Zionist project has shaped diasporas in the land itself through its hegemonic teleology, ideological constructs, and racialization mechanisms directed against Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and other non-normative Israeli Jews on a continuum with the occupation's infrastructures.¹⁷ This continuum and system of racialization reveal the ongoing entrenchment of Europe on the bodies and consciousness of racialized communities.

"Jews of Color" in Israel (a concept that has no Hebrew equivalent yet) embody diasporic experiences of disconnect from their cultures, languages, memories, neighbors and their sense of belonging in the region. Israeli Jews who can trace their roots to Iran, Iraq, or Morocco are now strangers and occupiers in a region where their ancestors had been neighbors. On the one hand, the eurocentricity and the orientalism shot through Israeli nationalist discourse and hegemony renders Israel "a villa in the jungle."¹⁸ On the other hand, this Israel, a foreign "extension" of Europe and its civilizational pretenses, has also marginalized

and discriminated against Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and other Jews. This is what I mean by the persistence of Europe's plotline in the region.

Decentering this logic and writing a different plotline will require those diasporas of non-normative Israeli Jews to reconnect to the place—to become of the place again, rather than to part ways. This rewriting would relinquish orientalism and eurocentrism by centralizing mechanisms to redress historical injustices that marked Jews of Color's intergenerational marginality. Thus, rather than a "return" as historical/sociological erasure, this non-utopian justice discourse is an elastic, negotiated, and contested aspiration not for a reclaimed alterity but a reimagined belonging. Equitable and peaceful cohabitation in the Middle East cannot be summoned into re-existence in the same way that "parting ways" cannot erase historical realities and their generative meanings. Undoubtedly, non-normative Israeli Jews have benefited from and participated in the occupation and the infrastructure of Jewish supremacy, even as they have been the victims of euro-Zionism.¹⁹ There is no reclaiming "innocence" through a return to presumed indigeneity in the same way that Jewish "innocence" cannot be reclaimed through parting ways and re-inhabiting diasporic Jewishness.

Still, unlike the Butlerian model of "saving" Jewishness from Israeliness by "parting ways" with Israel, non-normative Jewish Israelis cannot go anywhere. Quite literally, many Ashkenazi Israelis obtain passports by claiming their roots somewhere else in Europe ("just in

case” and to maximize their socioeconomic mobility and status)²⁰ whereas most Mizrahi Jews who came after the Nakba have nowhere else to go from their current diasporas in Israel’s peripheries and slums. This inability to literally “part ways” can pave new pathways for truly reimagining non-hegemonic Jewish re-existence in the land. This re-existence would entail a decolonial move to undo Europe by reclaiming Europe or the Jewish “authentic” experiences of powerlessness and non-belonging through an act of philosophizing empirical realities out of existence.

Similarly, de-centering Europe cannot unfold through a nostalgic return to memories of non-hegemonic belonging in the Middle East, as if the complicity of Arab-Jews or Mizrahi communities in the decades of violent occupation can be theorized away as easily as the Butlerian urging to part ways from a momentary perversion from authentic Jewish ethical locations. Indeed, de-centering Europe would not only mean reclaiming the diasporic from Jewish Zionist teleology, but also reclaiming an at-homeness in the Middle East through a post-Israeli Jewish re-scripting of non-utopian just belonging.

The concept and practice of “return” to a diasporic Judaism or, alternatively, a “return” to a romanticized vision of Arab-Jewish belonging in the region before Europe’s invasion and importation of its “Jewish question”²¹ still presumes ontological certainties concerning the fixities of authentic accounts of identity. Such certainties prevent a historically and sociologically concrete reimagining of “return,”

one that replots a story about being stuck together as the ground from which to envision and enact a justice discourse.²² Only then would Israel/Palestine pivot out of Europe’s authorial voice.

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Where is Iran? The complexities of Iranian diaspora ties to the homeland

Alex Shams

Where is Iran, exactly?

The question might seem deceptively simple. In an age where you can pull up a map at the touch of a button, it's easy to forget that maps can hide just as much as they reveal. The invisible lines in the sand marking political borders are one answer; but they're not necessarily the only right one.

If we define Iran in terms of Persian culture, then those lines are pretty meaningless. Persian was historically spoken from Bengal to the Balkans, and although Persian has found its geography constricted since the age of colonialism, you can still get by with Persian in many places in Najaf, Manama, Dubai, Herat, Kabul, Dushanbe, and Samarqand, all far beyond Iran's physical borders.

Besides, nearly half of Iranians inside Iran speak a language other than Persian as their mother tongue: some connect them to elsewhere, like Azeri Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Turkmen, Balochi, Armenian, Assyrian, Georgian, and Talyshi; others like Qashqai, Gilaki, Mazanderani, and Lori are found only

inside Iran. Not to mention the many, many different varieties of Persianness, inflected by connections far beyond those lines on the map, like on the Persian Gulf coast where centuries of trade and travel with Arab city-states across the water, western India, and eastern Africa have fostered a culture defined by openness to the sea and all that it brings. If anyone ever claims "Iranians are not Arabs," you can be sure they've never visited Iran's vast south, where many Iranians are indeed Arabs, unquestioned nationalist myths aside.

So how to answer, "Where is Iran"? Another factor we could consider is citizenship. But checking passports only complicates the question further. Among the 80 million people living in Iran are around three million Afghans. Many have been there for generations, especially since the late 1800s. Communities expanded dramatically as millions more fled the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and ensuing war. By what standard are Afghans in Iran not Iranian? With the recent granting of Iranian citizenship to the hundreds of thousands of

people in Iran with Afghan fathers and Iranian mothers, the idea that a passport identifies belonging—and that one's home can't be changed—is thankfully being eroded.

Meanwhile, millions of Iranians live far beyond Iran's borders. Some trace their roots back centuries, like the historic Iranian communities of the Iraqi shrine cities, or the Ajami, Baharna, and Baloch communities of the Persian Gulf states. Others left Iran in the 1960s and 70s for education and opportunity abroad, often with government scholarships. The next great wave left after the 1979 revolution and the eight long years of war that followed Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1980, forming the basis of a diaspora of at least 2-3 million people spread across North America, Western Europe, and the Persian Gulf.

So where exactly is Iran? The fact that this is a question more complicated than it seems should by now be clear.

Based on the presence of Iranians beyond those lines on the map, you might expect there to be a great deal of transnational engagement. But this isn't necessarily the case, as suspicion between the homeland and the countries where many Iranians live can make connections tricky to maintain.

At least 1 million Iranians live in the United States, maintaining a tricky balancing act between two countries that have been at loggerheads for years. For decades leading up to 1979, the US backed the Shah of Iran's dictatorship. When the Shah fled in 1953, the CIA engineered a coup that overthrew Iran's democratically-elected government and

re-instated the king, who tightened his grip on power with the help of billions of dollars in US military aid. Just over two decades later, a popular revolution overthrew the Shah. It was little surprise that the United States replaced the old colonial meddler Great Britain as enemy number one on the streets of Iran.

When widespread fears of a repeat of the 1953 coup led to a takeover of the US embassy in Tehran in 1979, this antagonism took new shape. It manifested, in part, in official Iranian suspicion of citizens who fled after the revolution and war, and a lasting distrust of people with dual nationality. Dual citizens have also found themselves on the receiving end of US government harassment and racial profiling. Mutual suspicions are compounded by US sanctions on Iran, which criminalize not only trade and commerce between Iran and the US, but also family connections. Restrictions cover everything from the souvenirs Iranian-Americans can bring home—including things like limits on the number of rugs or the quantity of pistachios or saffron—to their ability to send money back to help Grandma.

While media attention focuses on the "possibility" of war, these sanctions are a kind of silent warfare. This has become especially clear since former US president Obama imposed crippling sanctions on Iran starting in 2011 that cut it off from the international financial system.¹ Iranians are banned from having credit cards that work outside Iran, for example, meaning that everything from buying an international plane ticket to having a Netflix account is replete with legal hurdles. But these

seem like technicalities compared to the massive effects of sanctions on Iran's economy²—not only have they repeatedly blocked Iran from importing medicine and medical supplies, they have tanked the value of the currency, which is today worth less than 5 percent of what it was in 2010.³

The signing of the 2016 Nuclear Deal between Iran, the US, and Europe created the possibility of peace and a horizon of coexistence and prosperity. But these hopes were dashed by Trump's rise to power and his subsequent violation of the Nuclear Deal despite the adherence by all signees to its terms until that point. The new round of US sanctions under the slogan of "maximum pressure" led to exactly the results that the Trump administration intended: tens of millions of ordinary Iranians saw their life savings and career prospects go up in smoke. While civil movements for change had previously focused on calls for greater social and political freedoms, protests in recent years have reverted to bread-and-butter issues as millions fall into poverty. The threat of war from abroad led to the increased closing of space for public debate, stymying progress that had been made in the years prior by active, vocal, and visible civil society movements. Meanwhile, the economic toll of sanctions has made Iranians increasingly poor and reliant on government subsidies and handouts, while concentrating wealth in the hands of those already in power. These are similar to effects that US sanction regimes have had on many other countries, from North Korea to Cuba to Iraq, none of which have been successful in achieving their

aims and all of which led to massive human suffering. Before US sanctions, Iran's economy was growing rapidly and connecting more and more with neighboring countries as well as many states across Asia and Europe, leading to expanding opportunities and connections for Iranians. But the result of Trump's betrayal has left many Iranians not only impoverished but also bitter about the United States. It has shattered hopes many once harbored that the West could be trusted to keep its promises.

That's not to say that connections don't abound. Until Trump's Muslim Ban, tens of thousands of Iranians studied in US universities. Iranian president Rouhani's first cabinet, meanwhile, had six holders of US PhDs—more than any other country, including even the US cabinet.⁴ And across Iran, schools teach English and people follow American culture—making it far more familiar for them than, say, Iranian culture is for Americans.

Under these conditions, it's understandable that connections between Iranians in diaspora and those back home are often fraught. As a result, many Iranian diaspora organizations have focused on things like promoting Persian culture in the United States or spreading awareness of Iran's history among Americans to counter negative images of Iran in the media. These approaches are certainly helpful. But as they often focus on ancient Persian culture, they have a tendency to overlook Iran as a living, dynamic place, perpetuating the same stereotype of Iran as a land mired in backwardness since the 1979 Revolution.

Some of the most promising venues for

building connections and understanding have come through people-to-people ties and scientific, academic, cultural, and sports exchanges, which have grown since the early 2000s. They have led to successful projects to work together to overcome shared problems. Perhaps one of the most surprising results of these connections is a rural health care system implemented through Iranian-US cooperation in rural Mississippi. Established in 2010, it is modelled on Iran's rural "health houses," which are part of the nation's socialized medical system and provide basic care throughout rural areas through a combination of paid and volunteer support. A Mississippi pediatrician named Aaron Smalley, a veteran of the civil rights struggle, spent years studying Iran's model and even visiting the health houses in Iran.⁵ He saw how the health houses—created in the 1980s amidst the Iran-Iraq War when Iran had few doctors and even fewer funds to improve healthcare in poor, rural areas—had been wildly successful in dramatically reducing disparities in health outcomes across the country. Smalley realized that the model was perfectly suited to the Mississippi Delta, one of the most impoverished parts of the United States.

These kinds of stories don't fit neatly with the narratives of Iran and the United States we often hear, or the broader way the world is often presented to us: as a collection of rich countries that should act charitably toward the rest of the world, who may be rich in culture but poor in everything else. If anything, they reveal how much more alike we all are than we realize—and how thinking of the world in such

flat and simplistic terms can limit our ability to see potentials for solidarity and learning lessons from what's happening elsewhere in the world. "America is the best country on Earth" may be great for xenophobic politicians trying to win elections, but it's a poor substitute for critical thinking and an inquisitive eye.

The Iranian diaspora has a crucial role in connecting Iranians and Americans, but the only way they can manage to play that role is if the dominant mentality which sees Iranians in Iran as oppressed victims, and not as part of a society that is as dynamic and vibrant as anywhere else, is left behind. There are dozens of Iranian diaspora TV stations and social media channels, for example, but they overwhelmingly adopt a "poor you" approach that positions Iran as a hopeless mess and the West as a land where dreams come true. Stories like Mississippi Delta poverty—or the waves of protests against racial disparity and police brutality that have defined American politics since the nation's founding—don't fit very well in this good versus bad paradigm. And while the United States may be unique in its level of heightened tension with Iran, these same trends largely hold true for other countries where large Iranian diasporas live, given that those states are largely beholden to US decisions on foreign policy.

This West/good, Iran/bad paradigm doesn't give us a sense of the wide world that exists beyond, like the many models of governance and statecraft in Iran's neighboring countries, across the Arab World, or even in other regions like Latin America and Southeast Asia, all of

which offer valuable lessons. Instead, much of this is ignored in diaspora programming, replaced with a focus on issues of particular concern to the Iranian diaspora. One example of this is mandatory headscarf laws. The legal enforcement of a mandatory dress code is no doubt a pressing issue; but many in Iran have long prioritized other legal reforms that have more wide-ranging effects and are also considered more achievable and less politicized goals. This includes changes to the legal code to address inequalities in how issues like gender-based violence and inheritance are addressed, like a law passed in late 2020 that was Iran's most comprehensive law to date combating gender-based violence.

When diaspora activists like Masih Alinejad focus aggressively on overturning the headscarf law while supporting crippling sanctions on Iran and making common cause with figures like Donald Trump who could care less about women's rights in their own countries but find it a useful tool to wield against foreign enemies, their work can end up harming movements inside Iran by making feminism appear to be allied not with the daily struggles of women on the ground but with US foreign policy goals.⁶ It makes them appear to be allied with figures whose interest in Iranian human rights appears blatantly ridiculous given their close friendships with serial human rights abusers like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt, and discredits Iran's burgeoning and active grassroots movements for change in the process.

When Iran is presented in a vacuum without reference to the region in which it exists or

the historical experiences of the rest of the world or even a meaningful engagement with the complicated and bloody history of Western countries like the United States itself, it impoverishes our analyses and can lead to attempts to "help" that can end up doing damage. The effects of these attempts will be felt foremost by Iranians inside Iran, not those outside. The diaspora discourse can thus have the adverse effect of dumbing down policy debates in Iran. This is in part because many in the diaspora are detached from the complex society that has emerged in the four decades since the Revolution. They are instead focused on issues that animated debates back in 1979 but which may not be priorities inside Iran today, instead appearing anachronistic even to those sympathetic to their aims.

In this context, it's crucial for those interested in Iran to build people-to-people connections and to look beyond the clichés that animate media coverage to build a more meaningful engagement. For Iranians who have grown up abroad, this means taking time to become seriously fluent in Persian, if possible through language programs in Iran (like Dehkhoda or Ferdowsi University) to develop a personal connection with the country. This also means paying attention to contemporary, not just ancient, Iranian culture: learning about Iranian cultural diversity, paying attention to modern writers like Forugh Farrokhzad that revolutionized Persian poetry, and checking out Iranian blockbusters often overlooked by the arthouse international audience. Consider a comedy like *Marmulak*, which tells the story

of an unscrupulous man imprisoned for theft who steals a mullah's clothes and tries to flee the country, only to be mistaken as the newly-sent cleric in the border village where he ends up. Or *Facing Mirrors*, about a friendship that develops between a religiously devout female taxi driver and a trans man from a well-off family. Or *Bashu*, about a boy from southern Iran who flees the Iran-Iraq War and confronts cultural difference in the Caspian coast village where he takes refuge. Sites like IMVBox or Docunight offer access to the vast world of Iranian cinema as beloved by domestic audiences, offering a diverse vision of society.

Iran is home to a vibrant, multilingual and dynamic society. Beyond simplistic stereotypes, romantic simplifications, and flat caricatures, Iran is a country far more diverse than is recognized, including by most in the Iranian diaspora. We are today emerging from four years under Trump during which US foreign policy toward Iran resembled medieval siege warfare, focusing on threats and collective punishment that failed to recognize the humanity of the Iranian people. Moving forward, we can only hope that sanctions will be reversed and replaced with a more humane approach prioritizing people's livelihoods. The diaspora will have a key role to play in rebuilding people-to-people connections and helping create a better and brighter future based on the shared humanity of all.

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The West in Retreat: Power Influence in the South Caucasus After the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Daniel Shapiro

The South Caucasus, a border region between Europe and the Middle East, has long been a patchwork of shifting influences and empires. Located between Turkey, Iran and Russia, this pattern continues today, as the Caucasus remains quite volatile. Most recently, many were taken by surprise when the frozen conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region heated up, leading to 44 days of war and several thousand deaths. Fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh, a heavily Armenian enclave located within Azerbaijan's internationally-recognized borders, first broke out around the fall of the Soviet Union, leading to a 1994 ceasefire and an uneasy peace that generally held for over two decades. When the conflict flared up again in 2020, analysts hurried to make conclusions about its long-term implications. In truth, however, the outcome of this conflict did not represent a major global transition, as the relative influence of the three predominant powers in the region—Turkey, Iran, and Russia—did not change much, and among powers the United

States and the broader West were the only real geopolitical losers.

Turkey: Old politics, new means, geopolitical gains

One power involved in the conflict—Turkey—turned a lot of heads when it loudly announced its involvement in the latest stage of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. A lot of recent analysis focuses on Turkey's meteoric rise to prominence in the region, and indeed, Turkey's rhetoric certainly has become increasingly militaristic—prior to a July spat in Armenia and Azerbaijan's Tavush/Tovuz border region, Turkey had largely stayed away from promising any military assistance to Azerbaijan.¹ After July this position changed markedly, as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pledged² to support Azerbaijan militarily in future conflicts against Armenia, which he called an “invader” and the “biggest threat to peace in the region.”³ In addition to promised weaponry, Turkey also sent Syrian jihadists to the conflict zone, thereby tying the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict into

Turkey's other military endeavors throughout the region and marking a new chapter in Turkish involvement in the South Caucasus.⁴

But Turkey's involvement in the South Caucasus is by no means sudden. Turkey was Georgia's second-largest source⁵ for foreign investment in 2019 and has been Georgia's largest trade partner since 2007.⁶ Turkey and Georgia have collaborated on numerous regional economic development projects, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railroad and the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, among others.⁷ Additionally, Turkey has maintained tight ties with Azerbaijan through the *Bir millet, iki devlet* (one nation, two states) philosophy—in 2020, for example, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev announced that Azerbaijan “stand[s] with Turkey under any circumstances without any hesitation.”⁸ While official relations between Turkey and Armenia remain practically nonexistent, Turkey's historically prominent presence in the other two states of the South Caucasus indicate that their involvement in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was by no means an aberration.

In truth, Turkey invested little into this conflict and gained a lot. They sent drones and technical assistance to Azerbaijan, but they maintained a small physical presence in Nagorno-Karabakh. While the Erdogan administration received some negative press from Armenia⁹ and the West¹⁰, the West paid little attention to Turkey's military involvement in the South Caucasus, as the intrusion was overshadowed by American elections, the COVID-19 pandemic and Turkey's other

regional military endeavors. Turkey, meanwhile, gained quite a bit: with their presence in the new “peacekeeping center” set up by the November ceasefire agreement, Turkey acquired a solid physical foothold in the region.¹¹ The ceasefire agreement additionally called for a transport corridor to be set up through Armenia to connect Azerbaijan's reclaimed western districts with the Nakhchivan exclave, which should help streamline transport ties between Ankara and Baku.¹² While Turkey's physical presence in Nagorno-Karabakh is heavily outweighed numerically by Russian peacekeepers, the Erdogan administration has made it clear that Turkey does not believe that the South Caucasus is in Russia's “sphere of influence” alone.

Iran: Some concerns, but generally positive outcomes

Iran, another power involved in the region, did not benefit from the conflict to the same degree as Turkey; however, despite some security-related worries, Iran generally stands to gain from the outcome. From a security standpoint, Tehran was concerned by the fact that the conflict was fought right on Iran's borders, as much of the fighting between Azerbaijan and the self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh occurred in provinces directly bordering Iran. In addition, Tehran voiced concerns¹³ about the presence of Syrian mercenaries operating close to its borders, with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei stating that should Iran feel “a threat” from these groups, Tehran will “react firmly and unequivocally.” Thirdly, during the

conflict, Azerbaijan extensively used Israeli-made UAVs, leading to worries in the Iranian government that these weapons could be used by Israel to spy on Iran even after the signing of the ceasefire agreement.

However, diplomatically and politically Iran has emerged from the conflict unscathed and likely in a better position than before. Iran has so far pursued a balancing strategy between Armenia and Azerbaijan, preferring to keep friendly relations with as many states as possible, given Iran's international isolation. This strategy has worked well, as Iran has managed to stay on decent terms with both Armenia and Azerbaijan throughout the years. During the fall phase of the conflict, Iran chose to continue this policy, and it ended up being effective, as Iran did not lose diplomatically with either Armenia or Azerbaijan. While Iran did not participate closely in the conflict resolution process, Iran has emerged from the conflict slightly better off than before, mainly due to the fact that Iran's northern border is now entirely undisputed. All disputed territory is located inland¹⁴, away from Iran's borders and from the Araz River¹⁵ on which Iran and Azerbaijan have now signed a deal to continue a hydroelectric project. Stable and secure borders help Iran more than they hurt, even despite the security concerns that accompanied them.

Russia: Big gains, potential future worries

The third power in the region, Russia, is without a doubt the largest player in the South Caucasus. The outcome of the conflict is a huge win for

Russia, as Azerbaijani security depends now on Russia, making it the last country in the South Caucasus where this is the case: Russia already has a military base in Armenia and supplied 94 percent of Armenia's weaponry over the last five years, and it stands behind the conflicts over Georgia's breakaway regions as well.¹⁶ Now, Russia has peacekeepers in Azerbaijan and can thus drive the politics of the region arguably more than at any other point in the post-Soviet period.

While prewar Azerbaijani-Russian relations were generally positive, they had gone through distinct ups and downs over the last fifteen years. Baku has often bristled¹⁷ at Moscow's contributions to Armenia's military and has shown a desire to distance itself economically from Russia at times as well, especially through its collaboration with Turkey and Georgia in opening oil¹⁸ and gas¹⁹ pipelines that pointedly avoid Russia. Due to these factors, having Russian peacekeepers on Azerbaijani soil is of great benefit to Russia, as it firmly solidifies Russia's position in the country.

Although Azerbaijanis generally celebrated the results of the war—Russia's role and all—the future may look different.²⁰ While Russia is defending Azerbaijani territorial gains, they are also watching over the Republic of Artsakh's remaining territory, which still covers a significant piece of the Nagorno-Karabakh region. As the luster of November's military victory fades for Azerbaijanis and the reality that much of Nagorno-Karabakh still does not belong to Azerbaijan—and is guarded by Russia—sets in, anti-Russian sentiment may

begin to creep into mainstream Azerbaijani politics.²¹ For now, however, Russia's increased influence in Azerbaijan puts it in an excellent position in Azerbaijan.

Russian influence looks to grow in Armenia as well. Given the state of the Armenian military, some in Armenia are calling for tighter relations with Moscow²²: Robert Kocharyan, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's predecessor and recently emboldened challenger²³, announced his support for "deeper integration" with Russia, while opposition politician Edmon Marukyan called for²⁴ the opening of a second Russian military base in the country. Additionally, domestically Pashinyan's post-conflict fall from grace²⁵ may prove helpful to Russian interests as well, as any damage to Pashinyan and his more pro-Western reputation²⁶ would likely be looked on favorably by Moscow, which had a better relationship with Kocharyan. Thanks to its maneuvering in this conflict, Russia has enhanced its position in the region, as it can now essentially determine the security situation for all three of the South Caucasus states and is the main external player at the negotiating table for further post-conflict negotiations.

The West: A self-inflicted loss of influence

Among global actors, the West emerged as the big loser in the conflict. Europe and the United States have been intimately involved in the conflict's resolution process for many years, as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk

Group, chaired by the United States, France and Russia, established itself in 1992 as the sole legitimate arbiter of the conflict, and work toward peace was done almost exclusively in this format for many years. But the OSCE was wholly unprepared for the 2020 phase of the conflict, which was intense, short-lived and volatile—not an environment conducive to extensive multilateral negotiations. The Minsk Group, and the West as an extension, essentially did not participate in the conflict, drawing criticism from all sides.

The Minsk Group had been criticized by neighboring states for some time. Turkey lambasted the Minsk Group for "neglecting problems" in the region "for some 30 years,"²⁷ and Iran "consistently opposed the "basic principles" of OSCE Minsk Group-supported settlements. Armenia and Azerbaijan had their issues with the Minsk Group as well²⁸; Azerbaijan, for example, did not trust the Minsk Group due to the fact that the three chairing countries are home to the largest Armenian diaspora communities in the world, and President Aliyev had called the Minsk Group's work "meaningless" just a few months prior to the conflict.²⁹

Armenia's relationship with the West in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is a bit more complicated. Azerbaijan's fear of the Armenian diaspora's influence in the Minsk Group countries turned out to be unfounded, as the United States and France essentially did nothing to support the Armenian side. Caught up in domestic matters, the US was conspicuously absent in the conflict, and calls by

diaspora Armenians for Western involvement on the Armenian side fell on deaf ears.³⁰ While Armenia had been generally more accepting of the Minsk Group than Azerbaijan for much of the entity's existence due to the fact that the status quo situation in Karabakh generally favored Armenians, Armenians also voiced anger at the Minsk Group and the West during the 2020 conflict due to their inaction.³¹

The West certainly could return to the area; Joe Biden's history of more outward-focused diplomatic strategy and experience dealing with the post-Soviet space could catalyze greater American involvement and the reinvigoration of dialogue in the Minsk Group format.³² For now, however, the West is forced to sit on the sidelines as Russia takes over the position of head negotiator in the conflict resolution process.

Conclusion

The 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war did little to change the overall balance of power between Russia, Turkey, and Iran in the South Caucasus. Russia strengthened its role as the main player in the region, Turkey made some significant geopolitical gains but remains behind Moscow, and Iran looks to reap some positive benefits as well. The United States and the broader West, however, lost influence in the region, as their main initiative, the OSCE Minsk Group, failed to reach a peaceful settlement in Karabakh. The conflict is likely not permanently over, as major questions remain as to Karabakh's permanent status, and Armenians around the world (including in the West) remain

dedicated to the preservation of the Republic of Artsakh.³³ But the future role in the region of the Minsk Group—and, by extension, the United States—is in serious question.

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A Vision of a New Middle East - Then and Now

By Gabi Siboni

In *The New Middle East*,¹ former Israel Foreign Minister Shimon Peres describes what the Middle East will look like in the age of peace. In his vision, the future Middle East is shaped by peace and cooperation for mutual benefit in agriculture, trade, tourism, industry, transport, and communications. These endeavors are the fruits of the Oslo Accords signed with the Palestinians on the lawns of the White House in September 1993. Two years later, in November 1995, the government now led by Prime Minister Peres authored a new foreign policy and security tenet:

*“Resources will no longer be devoted to an arms race but to development, based on economic, cultural, and scientific cooperation. Progress in the peace process will be accompanied by the creation of systems for regional cooperation.”*²

Peres' vision was far-reaching. He saw economic prosperity as a lever for positioning Israel as an asset to all Middle Eastern countries. He strove to reach an agreement with the Palestinians out of his belief that the Palestinian

conflict must be resolved before relations with the regional Arab countries of the region could be normalized.

Peres' dream was beautiful but unrealistic. The wave of terrorist attacks that followed the Oslo Accords cast as daydreamers those who propagated the possibility of reaching a lasting peace with Palestinian leadership. During the two years between the first Oslo Accords in September 1993 and the Second Oslo Accords in September 1995, 164 Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks and hundreds more were injured³. Peres' vision went into a deep freeze.

Since then, many leaders in Israel, Europe and the United States have established a paradigm in which the Palestinian problem is at the heart of the regional conflict between Arab states and Israel, and that normalization with regional states will not be possible without an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. Secretary of State John Kerry summarized this approach in 2016 when he said with great determination that “... there will be no separate peace between Israelis and the Arab world.”⁴

Several developments have brought this paradigm to its breaking point. The first was the Arab Winter, which was first referred to romantically as the “Arab Spring” by those who saw the eruptions on the Arab streets as the equivalent from the mid-19th century’ European “Springtime of the Peoples.” The events in the Arab world have shown how far the Palestinian conflict is from the center of pressing regional concerns, and that the root causes of the instability are actually internal issues in Arab society that are unrelated to Israel or the Palestinians. Moreover, most of the revolutions in Arab countries have failed, and the Palestinians have become rivals in the eyes of the new regimes while in many cases Israel has become their ally.

The Iranian threat and the threat of Sunni jihadists from al-Qaeda have validated the insight that Israel and the pro-Western countries in the region are on the same side of the barricade, and that Israel is not the problem but part of the solution. The Arab Spring, which was perceived as a threat in Israel, reinforced these trends.

Second, Iran’s efforts to achieve regional hegemony in the Middle East are intensifying. Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is accelerating, even as the Ayatollah Khamenei declares that there will soon be a new Middle East, but without the Jewish state⁵. The Gulf states are watching as the Iranian threat grows and understand that a strong Israel is important for their security. They are no longer willing to give the Palestinians a veto over their national security. The futility of the Palestinian Authority

and its leadership, which have failed to build a functioning governmental system over the course of more than two decades despite the extensive support many countries have donated. This slowly permeated the understanding in the Gulf states that they were no longer willing to give the Palestinians a veto over their national security.

Shimon Peres’ new vision of the Middle East has thus taken shape, but under the leadership of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the Trump administration. The “Palestinians First” paradigm has been erased in favor of one that puts national interests at the center.

Israel could offer the pragmatic, rich and stable Arab countries significant benefits from a position of economic, security and technological strength. The Abraham Accords go a step further by turning the reality that has thus far been conducted clandestinely into a formalized reality. Thus, the Rubicon was crossed regarding the willingness of the Persian Gulf leaders to make their cooperation with Israel public. President Trump’s “Deal of the Century”⁶ now becomes a practical platform for the organization of pragmatic space in the Middle East.

The Israel-UAE normalization paved the way for further understandings with other Arab states in the Persian Gulf such as Bahrain and possibly Saudi Arabia, drawing a line between the regions “rich countries,” and the “poor countries” which identify with the idea of *mukawama* (resistance) against Israel.

The negative reaction of the Palestinians to the Abraham Accords⁷ places them in the

regional “resistance” camp alongside Turkey, Iran and Hamas. This has long-term significance, as the agreement is a clear signal to the Palestinian leadership that by flatly renouncing the ‘Deal of the Century’ it has missed another historic opportunity and will be pushed yet again to the margins of the regional agenda.

A popular interpretation of the catalysts to the Abraham Accords emphasizes the Israeli waiver of the annexation process, as if the Palestinian issue took precedence over regional cooperation interest. This perspective fails to understand that the agreement with the United Arab Emirates not only neutralizes the influence of Palestinian interest in shaping Israel’s relations with the Arab world, but paradoxically may pave the way for more agreements, subject to the actions of the new administration.

Were Shimon Peres alive today and in a position of influence, he would likely work to leverage the agreement with the United Arab Emirates to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Hopefully history will see President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu’s policies realize Peres’ vision, even if that was not their original intention. Removing the oft-discussed West Bank annexation from the agenda is a critical step in this direction.

Shimon Peres dreamt of a New Middle East in every role of his storied career. He had a dream of a utopian region in which there is peace, good relations and normalization between countries, a prosperous economy, cultural exchanges, and integration between peoples. We may be close to living his dream soon.

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