



Fair Observer

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Fair Observer Monthly



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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a US-based nonprofit media organization that aims to inform and educate global citizens of today and tomorrow. We publish a crowdsourced multimedia journal that provides a 360° view to help you make sense of the world. We also conduct [educational and training programs](#) for students, young professionals and business executives on subjects like journalism, geopolitics, the global economy, diversity and more.

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Fair Observer Monthly

Atul Singh

April 30, 2017

In 1922, T.S. Eliot published *The Wasteland* in which he deemed April to be the cruelest month. After World War I, such a bleak view might have made sense. April mixed memory and desire, stirring dull roots with pain in a continent that was yet to recover from the ravages of war.

This year, April has been a month of war for US President Donald Trump. First, he struck Syria after a ghastly chemical weapons attack. US strikes boosted the bruised president's popularity, but there are serious questions of whether the strikes were punitive, preventive or just. These strikes occurred when Trump was hosting Chinese President Xi Jinping at Mar-a-Lago in Florida. They were in stark contrast to Barack Obama's huffing and puffing but doing nothing when the Syrians used chemical weapons in 2013. Many call it Obama's Neville Chamberlain moment and the precise instance when Russian President Vladimir Putin started running rings around the Harvard-educated lawyer.

This time, the US struck speedily. Yet Syrian planes were taking off the very next day from the very airbase that Americans bombed, calling into question the Pentagon's claims of spectacular success. Barely a few days later, the Americans claimed to have dropped "the mother of all bombs" in Afghanistan. Again, they claimed great success against the Islamic State, but many suspect this was merely a ploy to divert attention from an airstrike that went wrong.

In Syria, the US mistakenly killed 18 rebels whom it is supposedly backing. Friendly fire and collateral casualties have long been problems in any battlefield, but it transpires that, under Trump, the US military might have killed over 1,000 civilians last month in Syria and Iraq alone. Draft dodger Trump is turning out to be rather trigger happy in office, but the violence he is unleashing might come back to haunt Uncle Sam later on.

Even as Trump acts tough, strong man Recep Tayyip Erdogan has tightened his grip on Turkey. Erdogan won a referendum that transforms the Turkish parliamentary system into a presidential one. In fact, such will be the powers of the presidency that Erdogan will be a modern-day sultan. He ran a fierce campaign in a "climate of fear

and censorship” and is now, bit by bit, dismantling the legacy of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. Secularism and reason are out, nationalism and religion are in. Dissent in Turkey is now equated with treason. Ataturk was autocratic himself and terrible to the Kurds as he sought to create a modern European-style nation state. President Erdogan’s vision is far more inchoate.

Even as Erdogan strengthened his vice-like grip on Turkey, French elites were defenestrated in the first round of the presidential election. With 39-year-old Emmanuel Macron and far-right Marine Le Pen emerging as the two presidential candidates for the runoff, this was yet another French revolution. Traditional parties on both the left and the right were decimated. The famously incestuous French elites have been booted out by a clearly dissatisfied electorate.

France’s Fifth Republic set up by General Charles de Gaulle is in deep crisis. The last four French republics were more democratic, transparent and parliamentary. A more diverse France with a spluttering economy and high unemployment could do with some constitutional reforms to renew its democracy. Perhaps *la grande nation* could emerge as an exemplar in this new age of strong men.

**Atul Singh is the founder, CEO and editor-in-chief of Fair Observer.*

Coming Together to Rebuild Afghanistan

Bakhtiar Safi

April 3, 2017

Afghanistan's diaspora around the world needs to take an active role to maintain the positive changes currently taking place.

It is winter in Afghanistan. The snow covers in white the glorious peaks of the country's mountains and plains, but the smoke from wooden stoves pushes up, joining the clouds that are limiting the beauty of the view. To Afghans, their future is subjected to the same obstructions—a feeling that better and brighter days are coming is there, but daily struggles make them too difficult to truly envision.

An existence guided by peace, stability and prosperity has always been a hope for Afghans, but it is only lately that the idea has acquired a concrete foundation. The positioning and engagement of youth in government, the notable reduction in corruption, a significant increase in the number of children attending school, the fall of maternal mortality rate and the steady but constant economic growth have certainly contributed to vivifying this hope.

A number of initiatives, including Afghanistan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the opening of the Chahbahar port in Iran, are now offering many potential trade opportunities.

A COMMON HISTORY

Afghans have historically dedicated and sacrificed their lives to their rich and beautiful country. Nevertheless, Afghanistan has suffered countless political upheavals, from Alexander the Great to this very day. For centuries, this fearless nation has fought and maintained independence with the high price of blood and devotion from countrymen and countrywomen alike.

It is not the sole glory of one person, clan or ethnic group. The pride belongs to all those Afghans who were involved directly or indirectly through their tangible or intangible contributions.

Those engaged directly in the fight have normally taken most credit for their dedication and heroic actions in resisting foreign occupation. For Afghans, they are the ones who are highly esteemed, and history will continue to praise their remarkable service in the name of their country.

Afghans have many to remember from the pages of history, such as [Malalai of Maiwand](#), a 19-year-old girl from Maiwand, Kandahar, who reunified local fighters against the British troops at the 1880 Battle of Maiwand. She fought alongside [Ghazi Mohammad Ayub Khan](#), emir of Afghanistan, and is a national hero of Afghanistan—her story told in Afghan schoolbooks, and many schools, hospitals and other institutions named after her across the country.

Another memorable event is the [1979 Herat Uprising](#) against the Soviet-sponsored regime—the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA)—after it declared new socialist reform that contradicted traditions and values of Islam. People stood against the government and were joined by Afghan army troops. They held the city for about a week, but the regime recaptured the city with the support of Soviet air support. According to estimates, some 25,000 died in this uprising. This day has been continuously celebrated for years by the people in different part of the country, particularly in Herat.

Many of those fighters were the so-called mujahedeen, leading the resistance against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and gaining a lot of support across the Muslim world for their jihad.

THE DIASPORA

But it was always patriotism that inspired the majority of these figures. A deep love for the motherland, the ultimate respect for their fellow countrymen and women who deserve a better future ahead. Until now, millions of Afghans living overseas have not lost this passion and remain strongly and emotionally connected to home. Majority of them might be blue-collar workers, but they support the families and friends that have remained attached to the land. They wear Afghan clothes on Fridays, Nowroz and Eid,

respect the famous Afghan tradition of hospitality, and contribute to educating the world about the social and cultural values that make all Afghans so proud.

They are also active in the political life of Afghanistan, engaging in debate on social media and other platforms. “Every Afghan child is a politician,” said President Ashraf Ghani during his election campaign, and no sentence can describe better the deep passion that all Afghans have for their nation. This enthusiasm, however, sometimes leads to political frustrations.

Due to the lack of extensive media coverage and the difficulty of accessing credible information, many Afghans limit their understanding to the news feeds on social media, which are rarely accurate. Any discussion with the absence of facts and figures leads to misunderstanding, sometimes resulting in heated exchanges of words. Very sensitive posts and comments made by friends often end in strong debates, mostly due to misunderstandings and lack of credible arguments and information used to sustain a point.

In one instance the social media became abuzz with the news of the death of Sadiq Fitrat Nashnas, a prominent and much loved Afghan singer. Despite refutation by many people, including the singer himself, this fake news remained a topic of heated arguments for many days. In another instance, the Afghan government executed a number of notorious criminals after a legal process. A section of Afghans, including the diaspora, started lionizing these characters on social media, based on mere hearsay. These two incidents further exhibited the difference of views between the resident and not resident Afghans.

The most common altercations, however, happen when the expectations between Afghans abroad and those in the country clash. The Afghan diaspora sees the developments, standards, rules and regulations in the West and wants that change for Afghanistan at a snap of its fingers. That is not realistic.

SHARED GOALS

The changes that have taken place did not happen overnight. Afghans started from scratch not just once, but many times over. The unrest initiated as result of the revolution in 1978, the subsequent deployment of Soviet troops and the mujahedeen resistance culminated in the establishment of hardline Taliban regime in 1996, followed

by the war efforts by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that dislodged the Taliban in 2001. More than 30 years of war have affected our society deeply. It should be obvious that it would take a long while for opportunities present in developed countries to become a reality.

Afghans at home also understand and feel the absence of standard schools, standard health services and jobs. According to the latest reports, almost a [third of all children](#) across the country are unable to go to school, and unemployment rate is above 40%. The majority of our students are still studying under the burning sun without furniture or blackboards, and mothers do not have access to reproductive health facilities. They have more realistic expectations about the timeline for change. Long debates on how to reach the best result are pointless if we don't understand that our struggles are aimed at shared goals. We have to join the forces to prove that changes can come, and lost reputation can be regained.

The recent developments show that we are on the right track. Those who used to wait to invest in construction and logistics projects are now thinking of production lines and long-term investments. According to the World Bank's [Afghanistan Development Update](#), the domestic revenues increased from 8.7% of GDP in 2014 to 10.4% of GDP in 2015. This will create jobs and other employment opportunities.

The representatives of young people and women are more visible in the media and official discussions, showing the emergence of new ideas. The recent Transparency International report shows that Afghanistan is not on the list of top three corrupt countries anymore.

This is a notable achievement, reached in part because of initiatives such as the first-ever anti-corruption commission sponsored by the President Ashraf Ghani and inaugurated last July.

The Afghan diaspora has done an excellent job in serving the country and contributing to these achievements, particularly when the country needed them most. According to the one estimate by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the [remittances accounted for around 30% of GDP](#) in 2006. But now, with access to education, jobs and new technologies, the diaspora's help is even more valuable. Afghanistan needs our love and patriotism, and each of us should contribute to this rebuilding phase without giving up.

MAKING UP FOR SHORTAGES

Even a positive and motivational word can bring a notable change in someone's life. Afghans abroad should avoid never-ending debates that only keep the country divided. We need a hand in any way possible to not let these divisions happen again. It can be financial support, standardization of education, mobilizing funds, assisting and connecting Afghan students to international universities, filing their applications for scholarships, advocating for gender rights, translating books—including books for children—or visiting Afghanistan during the holidays to contribute directly to the population.

We have many shortages within the country and any type of contribution by our family members, friends and sympathizers abroad is fundamental. One example of this is Mahir Momand and his [Moska Mobile Library](#). Momand is an Afghan who lives in Australia and in 2016 created the very first mobile library for the children of Afghanistan. A full-time librarian distributes books on a daily basis, traveling throughout the most remote areas and villages of the country. Since the project started, 35,000 children have received not only colorful storybooks, but also educational material on co-existence and peace.

Another remarkable man is Baaz Mohammad, the head of Baaz Welfare Association in Nangarhar province. This association distributes wheelchairs and artificial hands to disabled Afghans. He mobilizes support for this project mainly via his [Facebook page](#) and his social media connections. He posts financial updates, reports and field pictures on his timeline to ensure transparency and accountability on his project. According to his last report, 494 wheelchairs and 70 artificial hands have been distributed in Kabul, Nangarhar and Laghman provinces—20% going to disabled women.

Similarly, Ghousdin Ferotan, The CEO of first Afghan magazine for children, [AKO BAKO](#), recently released the first copy of the magazine thanks to the technical and script support of members of the Afghan diaspora.

There are many other lesser-known initiatives out there, including many efforts made by Afghans in sending money to family members or people in need at home. The

generosity of our community would never stop to surprise, and I am confident that it contributes significantly to the wellbeing of people back home.

This is why there should not be competition between those who have remained and those who have left. We all share an emotional and deep attachment to our roots. If you cannot contribute to the unity, you should certainly not contribute to disunity. Our divisions have blocked our rich culture for too long and contributed to the misunderstandings about our nation around the world.

Inspired by the works and efforts of Afghans abroad and home, this attempt is to make my contribution by engaging in a call for patriotism and love. We Afghans have to remain united, even when far away from home. A positive journey toward a modern Afghanistan is in place, and it is incumbent upon us to at least maintain at present pace.

Let us focus on the way forward where everyone will benefit. It could start by contributing to our economy. The open market is ours: Instead of investing in other countries, invest in Afghanistan—to prove to foreigners that we ourselves believe in the change. Modern times need modern heroes. You and I, and all of us, are the heroes of our change.

**Bakhtiar Safi is an international civil servant based in Somalia.*

The Real Threat to US Interests in Afghanistan

Anna Blue

April 12, 2017

If Russia and China make progress in Afghanistan, they will be emboldened elsewhere.

On March 9, White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer stepped into the press briefing room to [announce a review of American policy](#) in Afghanistan. His major point? That the White House is “working with ... key military leaders to create an approach to

address Afghanistan to defeat” the Islamic State (IS), an indication that the Trump administration sees Afghanistan policy and counterterrorism policy as one in the same.

The recent attacks — one on a [hospital in Kabul's diplomatic quarter](#) and one on [a convoy of aid workers](#) in Jowzjan — by IS have increased hypersensitivity in Washington about [the growing aggression](#) of the terrorist group in Afghanistan. However, the true threat to US interests in Afghanistan is not IS, but encroachment by Russia and China on Afghan sovereignty.

President Donald Trump's focus on “[utterly destroying](#)” the Islamic State has not only diverted attention from a resurgent Taliban's onslaught in northeastern Afghanistan, but also from Russian and Chinese encroachment in the country that the United States has invested so much time and resources in. Russia and China have started to organize around Afghanistan, to reach out to the government in Kabul and to establish a military presence on Afghan borders. Given all that the US has committed to assembling competent governing institutions and empowering the Afghan people, Washington cannot afford to leave Russia and China to become power players in a country formerly [monopolized by NATO](#).

RUSSIA AND THE TALIBAN

Publicly, Russian President Vladimir Putin claims that his interest in Afghanistan is based on self-defense, because Russia wants to prevent Afghanistan from turning into a staging ground for [IS expansion](#). Nevertheless, Trump should seriously reconsider [his demand that US defense officials include Russia](#) as a top partner in the fight against IS, as there is evidence that the Kremlin is furtively [supporting the Taliban](#). In February, the [Russian Foreign Ministry revealed](#) that Moscow is sharing intelligence with the Taliban, ostensibly to counter the threat of IS. Russia admits to extensive contacts with the Taliban, and the Taliban has disclosed that the alliance resulted from “[a common enemy](#),” the United States. [Afghan officials assert](#) that covert meetings took place between Taliban leaders and the Kremlin multiple times, in both Tajikistan and Moscow.

Russia's partnership with the Taliban automatically puts Moscow at odds with the US and undermines the progress made by the Afghan armed forces. Russia's dangerous rhetoric, that the Afghan government has not been effectively tackling IS, empowers the Taliban and dissolves the public's faith in the fragile government.

Given that the Islamic State is [contained in a small part of Afghanistan](#), the heavy Russian response to the group's presence in the country may be a result of other incentives. The combination of military moves in Afghanistan, such as partnering with the Taliban, and diplomatic efforts, such as organizing a strategic plan on Afghanistan with other regional powers, is a sign that Moscow is after more than defeating IS.

Maybe more noteworthy are the Russian efforts to decide Afghanistan's fate without the input of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and the legitimate government in Kabul. In December 2016, [Moscow hosted a conference](#) with key allies, Pakistan and China, on Afghanistan's affairs without any Afghan representatives, a signal that Russia does not believe in cooperating with the democratically elected government in Kabul. Furthermore, it was suggested that the purpose of the meeting was forming an [anti-US alliance in Afghanistan](#).

With the NATO troop presence in the country at the lowest it has been since 2001, and the United States unsure whether or not NATO funding to the Afghan government [will be extended past 2017](#), Russia may see now as its best opportunity to step into the Afghanistan arena. Moscow has every incentive to get involved: an opportunity to exert greater influence among its South Asian neighbors and the chance to undermine US clout in the region.

... AND NOW CHINA

The Chinese have also started to take steps to make their presence known in Afghanistan after years of historical disengagement and a "[low-profile approach](#)" to their neighbor. As Central Asian states increasingly fall [under Chinese influence](#), the US needs to cautiously take stock of Beijing's recent actions in Afghanistan. Beijing has mixed an unusual combination of military and economic measures in Afghanistan, possibly opening a new front of strategic geopolitical competition. China's [new security and economic partnerships](#) in Afghanistan suggests that Beijing is trying to compete with the US as a heavyweight in the country.

For example, according to the Pentagon, the Chinese have reportedly initiated [military patrols on the Afghanistan-China border](#), but Beijing continues to [deny any presence in the area](#). First of all, the continued denial of a troop presence is concerning because it raises suspicion about maligned Chinese incentives. The recent Chinese deployments

have been [too quickly dismissed](#) as minor maneuvers to prevent terrorism in China's Xinjiang province. Instead, these maneuvers should be seen as the provocations they truly are, if only because the patrols [have upset and alarmed India](#), a key partner of the United States in the peace negotiations in Afghanistan.

Given that the Chinese have used "[soft military power](#)" in several Pacific, Asian and African countries in the past to grow its comprehensive power, the United States cannot afford to have the Chinese take the lead in foreign military operations in Afghanistan. The Chinese efforts to exert military power in Afghanistan, and potentially fill the security hole left by official NATO troop withdrawal in 2014, are concerning because they threaten the traditional US sphere of influence.

China continues to try to develop financial clout in Kabul, as well as using economic partnerships with the Taliban to threaten Afghan commercial sovereignty. China is Afghanistan's [top investor](#), which China can use to edge out US influence in Kabul. For instance, in September 2016, China partnered with the Afghan government on its Silk Road project to construct the first [Afghan rail freight in the country](#), which is set to carry \$4 million-worth of goods through northern Afghanistan.

Despite the fact that China is now poised to become Afghanistan's largest trading partner, the Chinese also struck a deal with the Taliban. The Taliban recently announced that it was [handing over mining rights](#) in Taliban-owned territory to a state-owned Chinese company to start a \$3 billion project. By recognizing Taliban territorial rights, Beijing discredited the real government in Kabul and lent the Taliban great legitimacy and economic resources. China appears to be covering all of its bases in Afghanistan — befriendng both the Ghani administration and the Taliban rebels in order to stake out broader influence in the country.

The United States cannot afford to have economic, social and political development in Afghanistan derailed by the rapacity of Russia and China. If Russia and China make progress in Afghanistan, they will be emboldened elsewhere. At stake is the success of President Ghani's government and the infant democratic institutions in Kabul. The US needs to make swaying Russia and China from getting further involved in Afghanistan a priority.

**Anna Blue is the US foreign policy fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy.*

The Next Two Years for Modi

Umang Goswami

April 13, 2017

To truly win the respect and trust of the people, the Indian government should focus on three issues.

The recent [legislative electoral wins](#) for the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) are partly a verdict on its policies of the past three years and partly due to anti-incumbency factors working in its favor. Electoral politics in India is perhaps the most complicated in the world. With no major legislative elections till 2019, albeit one state, the government should step on the pedal and take advantage of this two-year window to implement some path breaking if not big bang reforms. Many issues require attention, but there are three that will have far-reaching impact and give a strong visceral feeling of progress to its citizenry.

First, the legal system is the elephant in the room. People have suffered the painfully slow system for decades. The court visits and expenses break their spirit and turn their hair gray.

This broken system is the biggest and most urgent crisis in India, and no political party has really taken a serious look at this problem and offered any comprehensive solution. This is because of two reasons. It suits parties to have a lethargic system since political parties increasingly have criminal elements in their fold with ongoing cases. And an exponential rise of cases as a result of the population explosion, combined with an outdated system of procedures and processes. This problem impedes private corporate sector progress too, with foreign investors often citing this as a major reason for not investing in India. The government, along with the judiciary, must come up with creative ideas.

Second, on the economic front, Prime Minister Narendra Modi fought the 2014 general election on the promise of minimum government. Not much has moved on that front. While the debate on more vs less government is an ideological one and there are pros and cons to both, there are certain areas where, as Margaret Thatcher put it, “the government has no business being in business.” Hotels, airlines and certain non-strategic manufacturing sectors need to see a swift government exit. Unfortunately, the

Indian bureaucracy is especially status quoist and unimaginative. Abysmal performance and boundless corruption thrives in these sectors.

Courtesy of low oil prices, the government has enjoyed a long leash on the fiscal space front and has felt no urgent need to push the privatization program for revenue shortfall.

Nonetheless, the government must implement the program for the sake of getting rid of inefficiencies. It should reenter this space with renewed enthusiasm and determination. The resources from privatization should be utilized in health care, education and modernizing armed and police forces. Privatization is a very sensitive topic since it involves restructuring and dealing with powerful unions, but the next two years provide enough legroom to implement a decisive program. Not share sale, which is a privatization-lite approach, but shutting down inefficient programs and units and the sale of profitable ones.

Third, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Campaign) is well intentioned but perhaps lacks innovative thinking. It's not an easy problem to tackle because of behavioral and cultural issues in India. The country remains as dirty as it was three years ago. African nations have tackled this problem in a better fashion.

Big cities all over the world like London, Toronto and Paris have successful programs where garbage collection and maintaining the city furniture is completely in private hands. The private company is given a return and also the right to use the refuse to generate electricity outside the city as an added incentive.

In India, these responsibilities are with the municipalities, which are rapaciously corrupt and not incentivized at all. The issue requires courage and political will because the municipalities in India are tiny political party fiefdoms and a source of revenue through corruption. This is a state issue, but the center can start with some guiding principles for states to follow. Something new and brave has to be done about this issue.

These are just three issues but perhaps the most important ones. The BJP might get reelected even if it doesn't do much in the next two years because of a weak, unmotivated opposition, and caste and religious-related political machinations.

But if the government truly wants to win the respect and trust of the people across the spectrum of urban and rural, it must do something about these issues. The resolution will have a trickle down or push up effect on other sectors, too, like infrastructure and foreign investment, which are pet projects of Modi. Failing which, we just stumble along in the crowded flea market of perpetual easy going achievers.

**Umang Goswami is a consultant who focuses on energy finance and climate change issues.*

Iraq's Women: From Poster Children to Peacemakers

Emily Guthrie

April 14, 2017

When it comes to peacebuilding, women are often relegated to more traditional gender roles while their untapped capacity to wage peace is left ignored.

In discussions of conflict and its associated processes of resolution, women are often defined by their relationships to their male counterparts or as tokens representing the brutality of war. Women are either the sisters, mothers or daughters of both perpetrators and peacemakers, or they are mere poster children of victims caught up in battles over power, land and ideology.

When we think of war and armed conflict, we envision traditionally masculine traits such as aggression, power and strength. So why is it that we do not envision opposing traits such as trust, cooperation and fairness when seeking peace? As seen worldwide, when it comes to peacebuilding women are often relegated to more traditional notions of gender roles while their largely untapped capacity to wage peace is left ignored.

Before discussing exactly how to challenge these notions and to incorporate female actors into peacebuilding processes, we must first ask if women do in fact contribute to greater peace and stability. According to a number of research studies, women's participation and equality are both contributing factors to successful conflict resolution efforts and strong predictors of a state's peace and stability.

A CASE FOR WOMEN

One study found that [women's inclusion](#) resulted in peace agreements that were 20% more likely to last at least two years and 35% more likely to last for 15 years. As for predicting peace, research indicates that states with higher levels of [gender inequality](#) are more likely to undergo internal conflict and that gender equality indicators are stronger predictors of peace than more traditional indicators such as GDP, religion or democracy.

Currently, we see that women are drastically underrepresented in peace processes worldwide. In 2012, a [UN Women examination](#) of 31 major peace processes since 1992 found that women comprised “4 per cent of signatories, 2.4 per cent of chief mediators, 3.7 per cent of witnesses and 9 per cent of negotiators between 1992-2011.” Furthermore, [another study](#) found that from 1990 to 2010, only 16% of peace agreements worldwide contained specific references to women.

So why exactly are women being left out of peace processes across the globe? In short, sexism is both a cause and an underlying contributor to other obstacles to inclusion as women and their interests are not seen as priorities. When it comes time to sit down at the negotiating table, [processes tend to focus on belligerents and their representatives](#) who do not want to diminish their authority through the inclusion of other actors.

Furthermore, institutional constraints such as timelines and deadlines make peacebuilders wary of actor proliferation and the task of identifying legitimate and influential parties. Finally, the effects of conflict greatly differ when it comes to men and women. Research shows that while men make up the majority of those killed directly in armed combat, women suffer much more from the [indirect effects of war](#) and may in fact have a higher mortality rate due to indirect factors such as infectious disease, domestic violence, economic devastation and human rights abuses.

Due to this dichotomy in victimhood, peace negotiations often ignore continued threats against women once negative peace, or the cessation of violence, has been established.

These concerns are not entirely new to the international community and a number of efforts have been made to promote women's participation in peacebuilding activities. Passed on October 31, 2000, [United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325](#) is perhaps the most widely mentioned expression of support for women's involvement in peacebuilding. It highlights the fact that in the post-Cold War era, civilians, and women especially, are more frequently the targets of violence and it outlines a number of principles for increasing women's participation in peacebuilding and decision-making. Since 2000, [63 countries](#) have established national action plans to support the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and mentions of [women in peace agreements](#) have increased from 11% to 27%, likely as a result.

IRAQ NEEDS WOMEN PEACEBUILDERS

Iraq, which recently adopted its own [National Action Plan](#) (INAP) and was the first in the MENA region to do so, is poised to present an interesting test for such plans in reconciliation efforts leading up to and following the demise of the Islamic State (IS) within its borders. Despite increased hopes in the wake of a series of recent military victories there is growing concern about what exactly post-IS Iraq will look like. Land disputes between the central government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the presence of and allegiance to multiple security actors, reprisal attacks and tribal conflict, difficulty in IDP returns, tensions between IDP and host communities, an ongoing economic crisis and numerous minority and ethnic conflicts provide enormous hurdles for future reconciliation and stability.

Research by [Sanad for Peacebuilding](#) found that barriers to women's inclusion in peacebuilding processes in Iraq largely fall in line with the rest of the world. In a focus group discussion, participants emphasized lack of women's capacity-building measures, family and social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, pervasive use of negative stereotypes in the media and a lack of civic and human rights education programs as important contributors to women's continued exclusion.

Additional constraints, many of which are irreparable in the near future, also threaten overarching inclusion efforts. For instance, UN Iraq found that only 41.5% of Iraqi women believed that [women should participate in political affairs](#) and only 10% reported joining a clubhouse, social club, union, political party or a women's association.

Furthermore, male biases against women's social inclusion were further identified. [United Nations Population Fund \(UNFPA\)](#) found that only about half of men aged 10-30 in Iraq supported women's right to work. Finally, Iraqi women and girls currently have much lower literacy rates in comparison to their male counterparts, and the figures are much larger in rural areas. In 2013, the [illiteracy rate of women and girls](#) aged 12 and older was 28.2%, which was more than double the male rate of 13%. The illiteracy rate of women and girls aged 15 to 24 in rural areas was 33.6%. All of these figures constitute considerable impediments to women's capacity and social willingness to support and participate in peacebuilding processes.

While there is a vast array of boundaries affecting both women's inclusion and peacebuilding efforts in Iraq, a number of strategies may help mitigate their effects. First, the use of actor mapping, or the identification of influential actors, may help eliminate concerns regarding interest proliferation and representativeness.

Next, relevant entities are encouraged to provide trainings to increase women's peacebuilding capacities across numerous roles and modalities on the peacebuilding spectrum. Finally, rates of women's participation and their effects are virtually unknown in Iraq due to lack of gender disaggregated data from the government, local and international NGOs and international entities. The collection, use and examination of such data provide opportunities to have a better understanding of both gaps and opportunities.

The use of these strategies is paramount in central institutions such as the [National Reconciliation Committee](#) in the prime minister's office. The establishment of a monitoring framework in line with INAP, and the corporation of women in the committee's stabilization mechanisms in areas such as Nineveh, Saladin, Anbar and Diyala will provide unique opportunities to capitalize on the crucial role that women play in society and to pave the way for women's future inclusion both in Iraq and in other conflict areas.

Furthermore, women should play a role in the design and implementation of trust-building mechanisms given women's vital role in communities nationwide.

The Iraqi National Action Plan has certainly provided a framework for women's inclusion in peacebuilding mechanisms moving forward. However, a conscious and concerted effort from the central government and KRG, local and international NGOs

and international agencies needs to also be put forth in order to supplement the objectives of INAP. Otherwise, women will lose crucial opportunities to not only determine their futures but the future of Iraqi society as a whole.

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Is the White House Changing Trump?

Gary Grappo

April 17, 2017

Recent US actions in Syria and criticism of Russia prove that the reality of governing is a perspective like no other, which President Trump may be slowly coming around to appreciating.

There was something for everyone in America's punitive [cruise missile strike](#) on the Syrian airbase earlier this month.

For President Donald Trump, it may have been the first jolting lesson in the reality of governing, as opposed to populist campaigning and pot-shot tweeting. For his American supporters, it may be a dangerous step into the very trap he warned about in his campaign and, even worse, capitulation to Washington's "[administrative state](#)." His American critics on the right will be heartened by his assertion of US power after eight years of seeming backpedaling from America's position of preeminence in the Middle East. His critics on the left will take little solace that an otherwise mercurial and under-prepared chief executive has taken to strong-arm tactics in the volatile Middle East. America's Arab friends and many in Europe already have expressed their near unanimous approval of the attack.

But the major players in the Syria tragi-drama — the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia and Iran — and the rest of the world are scratching their heads. Is there a policy behind these strikes? Does it represent America's reengagement in the crisis? Was it an act of reprisal only or is Washington back in the regime-change mode (i.e., the removal of Assad)?

Trump seemed to have delivered on his predecessor's infamously drawn red line of 2013, which Barack Obama subsequently reversed once challenged by Damascus. He instead took up a non-military exit offered by Moscow via Syria's purported surrender of its chemical weapon arsenal, now proven to be less than complete.

Then presumed-candidate Trump famously tweeted that Obama's red line would be a waste of US resources and strongly urged non-intervention in the Syrian quagmire. But photos of children and infant victims of Syria's April 4 sarin gas attack on Khan Sheikhoun in rebel-held Idlib Province apparently moved President Trump in a way that similar photos of the far worse attack on Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus, in August 2013 did not.

REALITY OF GOVERNING

Perhaps perspective — that is from the Oval Office versus the gilded Trump Tower of New York City — had something to do with it. Would this president, known for an assertive, forceful style, stand by idly as a reviled dictator again used a banned chemical weapon on his own population? The reality of governing is a perspective like no other, which Trump may be slowly coming around to appreciating, even if his erstwhile supporters may not.

But the larger question looms. What now?

In a way, the attack opens the door for American constructive involvement on the crisis by giving it the leverage it has lacked for several years now. That American absence greatly advantaged Assad and his Russian and Iranian minders, the real decision makers now in this country wracked by six years of conflict.

If so, however, Trump will need a strategy to actually take a seat at the negotiating table. One attack and some harsh rhetoric may get the US back in the room, but a seat at the table requires leverage. Is America prepared to employ its formidable military strength in the region — even absent many boots on the ground — to push for an end to the civil war? There's been nothing yet to suggest that such a strategy may be forthcoming.

So, for the time being, the attack seems only to have put Assad on notice that he can likely expect similar punitive action if he attempts such attacks again, but nothing more.

This is perhaps better than Obama's hands-off approach, but little in the way of hope for the more than 4.5 million refugees, equal number of displaced Syrians and vast majority of remaining Syrians desperately aching for an end to their blood-stained national nightmare.

“AN ALL-TIME LOW”

The bigger surprise may actually be the apparent US falling out with Russia. Almost immediately after the attack, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley both proffered comments critical of Russia, with some non-sourced US officials claiming Russian complicity in the Syrian gas attack. After his secretary of state's visit to Moscow, President Trump pronounced US-Russia relations at [“an all-time low.”](#)

Juxtaposed against the sweet words that came out of the Mar-a-Lago summit between the US president and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping and then the [“NATO is not obsolete”](#) U-turn, one can be forgiven for political whiplash à la Donald Trump. Americans were told that Russia could be our friend and partner but the Chinese were public enemy number one and NATO was out of fashion.

The Syria episode and other military-related news may have helped move the Russian interference in the US elections to the proverbial backburner. But both the House and Senate have launched investigations, and the FBI's probe also continues in earnest. The US-Russia reset touted by Trump has been dashed before it even had a chance to leave the starting line. And it'll likely get worse. Syria is only one of several friction points that Washington has with Moscow. The momentum is clearly moving diametrically opposed to the direction on which Trump campaigned, much to the relief of Americans on both the left and right.

There are other signs that the Oval Office perspective is changing Donald Trump — from personnel changes within the White House to muted criticism of foreign trade. More are needed to be sure. For example, if the Middle East intends to be an area of focus for the president, as it indeed should, it would help to have in the room when key decisions must be made diplomats with real knowledge and experience. Judging from one [photo](#) of the president meeting with his key staff reportedly before the Syria decision, the president and Tillerson probably could use a seasoned diplomat with

knowledge of and experience in the Middle East and the Syrian crisis. Trump still has some way to trek up the presidential learning curve.

For now, America has a president who is learning and changing from the man sworn in on January 20. Russia has an American president it did not foresee and for whom it may be looking for the return receipt. Assad has one more worry. And the people of Syria still have no country and no hope.

**Gary Grappo is a former US ambassador and the chairman of the Board of Directors at Fair Observer.*

Gay in Chechnya: Worse Than War

Anna Pivovarchuk

April 18, 2017

Detention, torture and murder of gay men in Chechnya continue the litany of human rights abuses in the country.

“Imagine knowing that you’ve ruined not only your own life but the life of your entire family,” Akhmed tells [The Guardian](#). “I’ve always just wanted to make my mother happy and proud. I was ready to marry. I would have taken all these problems with me to the grave. I could never have imagined in my worst nightmares that I would be sitting here in front of a journalist and saying: ‘I’m a Chechen and I’m gay.’”

Chechnya, Russia’s mutinous, mountainous republic in the restive North Caucasus region, is known for little more than the rampant violence and human rights abuses that have continued unabated since the First Chechen War in 1994. Forced disappearances, abductions, torture ([including women](#)), extrajudicial killings, terrorism, [child marriage](#), political assassinations and organized crime have been the status quo before Ramzan Kadyrov — the current leader of Chechnya — assumed the presidency in 2007, and have not gone out of fashion in the decade since.

What Akhmed spoke out about is the latest, blood-chilling addition to the litany of repression and abuse coming out of the republic: the reported detention of gay men, torture and, in at least three cases, death.

DETENTION, TORTURE, DEATH

In a special report by Russia's leading investigative newspaper, [Novaya Gazeta](#), published on April 1, Elena Milashina and Irina Gordienko have exposed a recent wave of persecution of what in Russian is referred to as "non-traditional sexual orientation." A subsequent report exposed the existence of a [secret prison in Argun](#), a short drive from the capital Grozny, where victims have reported being subjected to electric shocks, beatings, humiliation and extortion.

Several victims have independently testified to having been blackmailed and threatened by the police. Akhmed, who escaped Chechnya, tells of receiving a phone call from the police saying that his family members will be held hostage until he returns. One man told *Novaya Gazeta* that he was "[held on the hook](#)" by the police for over two years, paying monthly bribes to prevent being exposed. A second victim speaks of biting his hands to draw blood to counter the pain from the torture. It helped, he says.

In the ultra-conservative, religious Chechnya this is a lucrative racket for the police. Homosexuality is a taboo, and honor killings are common. In denouncing the investigation, [Kadyrov's press secretary, Alvi Karimov](#), pointed out that "In accordance with local traditions, if someone as much as points a finger at a man from a clan, there is no need to detain him — for a 100 years, until the generation changes, not one woman will marry a man from that clan."

Echoing former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's claim there were no gay people in Iran, [Karimov went on to say](#) that "If there were such people in Chechnya, the security forces would have no fuss with them, because their relatives would dispatch them to an address from which no one returns."

Heda Saratova, a member of Chechnya's human rights council, went further: "I am a Chechen, and what you are saying is worse than war ... I would like to assure you that in our Chechen society, a man who respects himself, traditions and customs would ... do everything possible to make sure that there are no such people in our society," [she told Moscow Speaks](#) radio.

She later apologized, claiming [momentary affectation](#) following the shock of the initial news that there are in fact homosexuals in Chechnya.

It is this shame that the security services exploit. As one victim points out, there are only three ways to get out once you've been detained: pay a steep bribe, give up other homosexuals or be released back to your family, often as a “bag of bones” following the savage beatings by both prison guards and other prisoners, with the danger of further punishment, ostracism or death.

STATE OF LAWLESSNESS

According to *Novaya Gazeta*, “In the last two years — right after the assassination of Boris Nemtsov, for which the organizers went unpunished — mass repressions in Chechnya have become a bad tradition. And with each time these repressions become more and more catastrophic in their scope and ever more absurd in their motivation.” Victims are kept in prison — located on Kadyrov Street — alongside jihadists who traveled to Syria and their relatives, drug addicts and everyone else the Chechen state sweeps up in its wake.

Kadyrov, who was only 27 when he was [handed Chechnya by Russian President Vladimir Putin](#) following his father's assassination in 2004, has ruled the republic with the proverbial iron fist. During the Second Chechen War, Kadyrov headed his father Ahmad's feared militia, known as Kadyrovtsy, who were connected to thousands of forced disappearances, including the abduction of [eight family members of then-President Aslan Maskhadov](#), himself killed in 2005.

According to the human rights group, Memorial, between 2002 and 2006 over 1,000 people went missing — data that only covered a quarter of Chechen territory. According to Kavkaz Uzel, [official figures](#) range between 3,000 and 5,000, [confirmed by Memorial](#). A [2007 Human Rights Watch \(HRW\) report](#) described the areas under Kadyrov's control as being engulfed by “atmosphere of fear,” with those who survived the two brutal wars cowered to the point of being afraid to as much as complain.

As one-time Kadyrov bodyguard [Umar Ismailov](#) testified before being gunned down on a Vienna street, Kadyrov was not only present at tortures, but “amused himself by personally giving prisoners electric shocks or firing pistols at their feet.”

Many opponents turned up dead. Two of the Yamadaev brothers — Kadyrov's main political rivals — were shot, one in Moscow and the other in Dubai; a third brother claimed an assassination attempt against him. Human rights defenders [Natalia Estemirova](#), Zurema Sadiuayeva, lawyer [Stanislav Markelov](#) and [Novaya Gazeta](#) journalist [Anastasia Baburova](#) were all killed. The unsolved roots of Russia's most notorious murders — including those of *Novaya Gazeta's* Anna Politkovskaya (killed on Putin's birthday) and opposition leader Boris Nemtsov (shot in front of the Kremlin) — disappear into Chechnya.

In the run-up to last year's presidential election, which Kadyrov won with a modest [98% of the vote](#), HRW reported authorities "[viciously and comprehensively](#)" cracking down on all dissent. [One story of a man](#), who complained to President Putin about the state of infrastructure in Chechnya during an annual televised call-in, saw himself and his family running for life across the mountains to escape what the deputy minister of internal affairs, Aпти Alautdinov, reminded him in person as Politkovskaya's and Nemtsov's fate.

In March 2016, the head of the [Committee to Prevent Torture, Igor Kalyapin, was assaulted](#) in the center of Grozny. Previously, the organization's offices were ransacked and torched, and activists ambushed and beaten.

With families of terrorists and jihadists subjected to [collective punishment](#), raids on Chechen villages following which people [disappear](#) without a trace, the director of [Memorial, Andrey Cherkasov, writes](#) that the *Novaya Gazeta* investigation hasn't revealed anything new — secret prisons have been a staple of Chechen power structure all through the "counterterrorism operation" launched by Putin in 1999.

But the scope of this brutality is likely to be much more widespread. "In Chechnya there is a much scarier problem: People are so frightened, squashed, that they don't complain," [Kalyapin tells Memorial](#). "People know that we will send the complaint to the Investigative Committee, and as soon they will start trying to do anything, Kadyrovtsy will pay them a visit and will start to pressure them in such a way that the initial torture will seem like flowers."

Novaya Gazeta confirms that in its practice, Russia's Investigative Committee doesn't actually investigate such complaints. When one of the victims tried to file a complaint against his detention in Moscow, it wasn't accepted. In 2006, according to the [US State](#)

[Department](#), the human rights ombudsman received some 3,000 complaints of abuses in prisons. Kalyapin says that the last complaint against Kadyrov's inner circle was submitted in 2015.

All this makes the reaction from the Kremlin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, for the victims to pursue a legal course of action through the courts seem laughable; he dismissed it as "not a prerogative of the president's administration."

PRICE OF PEACE

It is important to remember that all of this is taking place inside a subject of the Russian Federation. After Chechnya was systematically destroyed in the course of the two wars, Moscow poured in endless resources to rebuild and sustain the republic. More than 80% of Chechnya's budget comes from Russia, meaning, as [Boris Vishnevsky points out](#), that in 2017 Russians will pay 640 rubles (around \$10) each in taxes to Chechnya — money that goes toward funding [military rule](#), state brutality and circumvention of Russia's laws, as well as ostentatious showing off. ([Kadyrov's private jet](#) is said to be the most [spacious](#) on the market.)

In a [recent interview](#), Milashina says that the reason for such a [strong reaction to her investigation](#) is the inherent weakness of Kadyrov's regime. With rumors of a [plot](#) against the president by the surviving Isa Yamadaev, security structures "predict that if things continue like that, there could be a revolt in Chechnya, because the population of Chechnya is in an awful situation. It can't last long," she says.

Indeed, [HRW cites a local resident](#): "Now when I think back to the war ... we were not as frightened as now. Fear of a bomb, fear of a bullet — it's something we could live with ... But this ... utter humiliation — I just cannot deal with it, I'm ashamed of myself. Every day, they take away another piece of my dignity."

Chechnya is a closed region, with tight control over information, and the fact that this information got out at all is a [lucky event](#), according to Russia's LGBT rights activist involved in attempts to help gay men escape from the republic.

But now that the information is out, Russia's continuing turning of a blind eye to the human rights situation in the region may come at a high price. If indeed Milashina's assessment is correct, the Kremlin may be subsidizing what in the end might erupt the

brutally-won “stability.” While LGBT rights in Russia have been under assault — with anti-gay propaganda laws, vigilante persecutions and violence against gay men — the situation in Chechnya is a throwback to the Nazi imprisonment of homosexuals during the Third Reich. Words fail at this comparison.

“Nobody knows how many people have been killed,” Akhmed concludes in his interview with *The Guardian*. “It’s just impossible to contact most people or to find anything out. But I would be amazed if it was only three.”

**Anna Pivovarchuk is the co-founder and deputy managing editor of Fair Observer.*

How France’s Far-Left Candidate Turned From No-Hoper to Contender

Cecile Guerin

April 19, 2017

Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s transformation since the 2012 election makes him a more appealing candidate.

For the past two weeks, France’s dramatic election campaign has been shaken by the surge in the polls of left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Mélenchon. The election, which until recently had looked like a runoff between the National Front leader Marine Le Pen and the centrist Emmanuel Macron or the conservative François Fillon, has turned into an uncertain four-man contest.

A poll published on April 10 by [Le Figaro](#) has placed Mélenchon at 18% in the first round, ahead of the initial favorite Fillon, whose campaign has been marred by allegations that he paid his wife and children close to €1 million in fake parliamentary jobs. Four candidates now have a serious chance of qualifying for the second round. Less than a week before the French go to the polls, the outcome of the vote looks more unpredictable than in any election in over 50 years amid indications that close to [one-third of voters](#) are still undecided.

A HARD-LEFT FIREBRAND

A hard-left firebrand known for his distrust of the media and abrasive style, Mélenchon left the Socialist Party in 2008 to create his own political movement, Le Parti de Gauche (Party of the Left), and ran for office for the first time in 2012. That the candidate has gone from political agitator to serious contender five years later is a clear sign that the national mood is shifting. Both right and left populist candidates have emerged as the strong voices in the French election campaign, tapping into the electorate's distrust of elites and the political old guard.

The socialist primaries in January gave a foretaste of the country's desire for change, when the left-leaning Benoit Hamon defeated Prime Minister Emmanuel Valls, whose candidacy was too closely associated with the unpopular government of President François Hollande. The anti-system rhetoric embraced by the front-runners (Fillon aside) is playing in Mélenchon's favor. While Le Pen has declared herself an enemy of "the establishment," the leftist candidate is appealing to the country's angry and disillusioned (the "Unbent France," as his campaign slogan proclaims) and has an established track record as an outsider to France's main political parties.

Mélenchon's well-structured campaign has been aided by the complete overhaul of his communication strategy. From the use of holograms in rallies to the launch of a video game allowing players to wrestle down Wall Street bankers, the candidate's young communications team has infused a new dynamic to his campaign.

A seasoned orator who quotes French historical figures and poetry in his rallies, Mélenchon has also outperformed his rivals in the two televised debates in the run-up to the vote.

While the candidate has modernized his campaign, he could also appear, perhaps paradoxically, as a more reassuring option to voters than five years ago. In 2012, Mélenchon vowed to be "the sound and the fury" of the presidential campaign; his campaign rallies drew large crowds wearing *bonnets rouges* — red Phrygian-style caps associated with the popular uprising of the French Revolution.

Five years later, Mélenchon has toned down the symbolism without changing the substance of his program, which includes 90% taxation on high earnings and the renegotiation of European Union treaties. Calls to civil insurrections have, however, been replaced by the more consensus-building theme of resistance and international

solidarity, while the red background on the candidate's 2012 campaign posters has given way to a more neutral blue, reminiscent of former socialist President François Mitterrand's 1981 reassuring campaign slogan "*La Force Tranquille*" (The Quiet Force). Mélenchon has jettisoned some of the most controversial aspects of his political persona in an attempt to reassure and inspire confidence.

SECOND-ROUND WILDCARD?

With polls suggesting that the election will be a close call, Mélenchon's qualification for the second round has become a plausible scenario. The *Le Figaro* poll has put Le Pen and Macron at 24%, Mélenchon at 18% (up from 10% in March), Fillon at 17% and the socialist Hamon at 10%. Voter loyalties have shifted throughout the campaign as a result of political scandals, distrust of traditional parties and skepticism about pollsters' predictions. The conservative primaries already defied predictions with the victory of Fillon against conservative veteran Alain Juppé.

Mélenchon's camp looks emboldened in the last days of the campaign as Fillon, Le Pen and Macron's voting bases appeared to have reached their ceiling. Fillon implicitly acknowledged his weakened position by [telling his supporters in Paris](#) on April 9: "I'm not asking you to love me. I'm asking you to support me because it is in France's interest."

Macron's campaign has gained momentum in the past few weeks, but his lack of experience in TV debates has been reflected in his stagnation in the polls. Although Le Pen is still expected to win the first round, her recent involvement in controversy about France's complicity with the Holocaust is a sign that her campaign is losing steam.

Several obstacles nonetheless remain for Mélenchon. There are striking parallels between his recent trajectory and his 2012 campaign. A few days before the vote in 2012, polls predicted that Mélenchon would win 16% of the votes, but he could only pull 11.5% on the day. Then, his vote was depressed due to the division of the French left between its radical and moderate strands.

In 2017, the context has changed. The Socialist Party is facing an unprecedented crisis after Hollande's presidency. Mélenchon — the only serious leftist candidate — is popular, but he has not fully shaken off his past reputation. His anti-EU and anti-

globalization rhetoric has alienated part of the French left and could encourage some voters to defect to Macron.

As the eve of the election draws close, Mélenchon is still struggling to shake off his image as the enfant terrible of French politics.

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Turkey's Referendum Poses Questions For Erdogan

Nathaniel Handy

April 21, 2017

In the hour of his triumph, President Erdogan needs his party's shadow men more than ever.

The [referendum result in Turkey](#) bore an uncanny resemblance to last year's result in the [Brexit vote](#) and will also mirror it in the fallout. Like the British government, the Turkish administration will present an almost perfectly divided vote as the united will of the people as a single body. It is a majoritarian attitude that will justify the wholesale implementation of the proposed reforms. That much is clear. But what is more obscure is what the shadow men of the Turkish ruling party will do next.

All eyes are naturally on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan — the charismatic leader who now appears poised to usher in the most profound revolution in Turkish society since Kemal Ataturk instituted his radical Westernizing campaign of the 1920s and 30s. The parliamentary opposition to Erdogan's reforms has remained largely ineffective, with its constituency largely static. Yet the president only just won this vote. Indeed, many observers have [questioned](#) whether he even won it fairly at all. Why was such a dominant political figure pushed to the brink of defeat?

The answer lies in the conservative political majority in Turkey and even within the ranks of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) itself. Erdogan's reforms had some heavyweight, if fairly muted, critics. Former Prime Minister Ahmet

Davutoglu [said](#) in January: “I conveyed my views, evaluation and concerns on the current amendment proposal’s method and content to our president and prime minister in detail.” Those concerns are regarded as one of the reasons he [resigned](#) as prime minister in May 2016.

AKP founders such as former President Abdullah Gul and former Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc have also been [noted](#) by their absence from the “Yes” campaign in the referendum. These less nationalist, more consensus-building politicians are now of fundamental importance to the future of Turkey. Their importance lies not in polarizing opposition, which is what has marked most discourse in Turkish politics recently, but in their ability to act from within the ruling party. Such a knife-edge result increases their influence.

VICTORY AT A PRICE

What is clear is that President Erdogan still has huge support. Indeed, much of the change that has occurred since AKP rule began in 2002 has been for the greater good, including the suppression of the military role in politics, the acknowledgement of Islam as an integral part of Turkish culture and, until the conflicts of the past seven years, a growing openness to both regional neighbors and the minority Kurdish community within Turkey.

The danger lies in the fact that the Turkish Republic has been built, from day one, on distinctly undemocratic foundations. Behind a façade of European-style democracy, the regime of Ataturk built a one-party state with a single acceptable vision of what Turkish society could be. Until the rise of the AKP, any alternative narrative had been snuffed out, if necessary, by force.

One of those competing narratives — that of the Islamic and Ottoman heritage of the region — has been empowered by the AKP and its success largely personified in the figure of President Erdogan.

Do not underestimate the power of the feeling, embodied by the AKP, that “[it’s our turn](#).” While many in the AKP clearly feel uneasy about the concentration of power in the hands of the president, they also feel the weight of Turkish history. This is a country in which a constituency of provincial, religiously observant voters has long been alienated. Even those who are uneasy about the reforms are also nervous of the

AKP losing its grip on power, lest it usher in a return of the old guard. Such processes have already played out in less stable states, such as Egypt.

That nervousness explains, in part, the reticence of the likes of Davutoglu, Gul and Arinc in the lead up to the referendum. At the same time, their silence is an acknowledgement of the political power and ballot box appeal of the president's circle within the AKP.

The question now is whether, in light of an extremely narrow and contentious victory, those silence ranks within the ruling party will feel emboldened to counsel restraint and compromise, or remain silent in the hope that a better Turkey is indeed born as the president promises.

WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Why should the president compromise? The idea that such a dominant figure would take counsel from politicians who could be viewed as yesterday's men might seem perverse. Yet the referendum result presents Erdogan with a new conundrum: In forging ahead with the remaking of the Turkish Republic, just how wide, or how narrow, does he want his circle of support to be?

His enemies are now well arrayed and clearly defined. They include the official opposition parties of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) coalition, spanning a range of secular nationalists, liberals, radical left wingers and the Kurdish vote. By his embrace of the hardline Nationalist Action Party (MHP), Erdogan has made enemies of most Kurdish voters and the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Further afield, the president's stance is increasingly isolating him from the European Union, the United States and most Middle Eastern countries. Nationalist rabble rousing has proved devastatingly effective in elections, but it has also been hugely polarizing. The calculation is whether Erdogan can afford to remain at odds with even some of the central figures of his own party, or whether, now that he has consolidated power, he will look to them to offer avenues to wider support and acceptance.

If the president chooses his equivalent of what the British term a "hard Brexit," there is the prospect of prolonged instability. This referendum has signaled the dismantling of

one pillar of the state Ataturk built: that of the suppression of Islam. Those within the AKP support base will welcome that achievement. Yet there is another pillar — that of Turkish ethnic nationalism — upon which Erdogan is now standing. Until compromise is sought in that arena, peace will continue to elude Turkey.

**Nathaniel Handy is a writer and academic with over ten years of experience in international print and broadcast media.*

Democracy Check: Trump at 100 Days

Ryan J. Suto

April 28, 2017

An assessment of institutional democracy at the onset of the Trump administration.

Since his election to the US presidency on November 8, 2016, there has been much [discussion](#) as to [whether](#) Donald Trump is a rising [authoritarian strongman](#) who will bring the downfall of [liberal democracy](#) in the United States. Has this commentary been hyperbolic? While there are legitimate concerns regarding his presidency, are America's democratic institutions healthy enough to impede the policy agenda of Trump and his far-right administration?

In order to explore these questions and accurately assess the state of America's structural democracy at the 100-day mark of the Trump administration, this article uses [Assessing the Quality of Democracy: A Practical Guide](#) by the [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance](#) as a source for required institutions in liberal democracies. To limit the analysis, the article only considers actions and occurrences since President Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2017. As such, there is no analysis of campaign rhetoric or the 2016 US election. The following institutions are addressed below: transparency mechanisms, the legislature, the judiciary, the security sector, the media, political parties and civil society.

TRANSPARENCY MECHANISMS

Transparency is the ability for citizens to know the actions of government, how tax dollars are spent and who benefits from governmental actions. This broad concept is

a [crucial element](#) of democratic governance. Ideally, citizens should have access to information on the performance and decisions of politicians in order to cast informed votes in the next election. In the US, there exist various reporting and transparency requirements in administrative law, along with the [Freedom of Information Act](#), designed to keep the public apprised of government action. Without legal transparency mechanisms, the public can easily be kept in the dark with respect to corruption, self-interested deals and the funneling of tax dollars to friends and family.

The first 100 days have seen Trump break with traditional, but not legal, transparency mechanisms: he is the [first elected president](#) since Richard Nixon to not release his tax returns, he [refuses to disclose](#) who meets with him at the White House, and he has ignored US Office of Government Ethics [recommendations](#) to divest from his assets that present conflicts of interest with his role as president.

Whereas President Jimmy Carter famously placed his peanut farm in a [blind trust](#) upon assuming office in 1977, President Trump receives [periodic updates](#) from his son on the financial progress of his companies, to which he has [financial access](#) with no disclosure requirements. Notably, the president's proposed tax code reforms would [directly and significantly benefit](#) his own companies.

This is not an abstract discussion for academics: In full, [The Atlantic](#) produced a detailed list of nearly 40 potential conflicts of interest between Trump's government position and his private investments. The White House website has promoted the first lady's [jewelry line](#), a senior White House official potentially violated federal law by promoting the president's daughter's [clothing brand](#) in an official interview, and the State Department and several embassies circulated a blog post that was merely a [detailed profile of](#) Trump's Florida property, Mar-A-Lago. On April 6, the Chinese government granted Ivanka Trump [lucrative trademarks](#), the same day she met with the Chinese president in her capacity as the US president's daughter — who also holds an [official position](#) within the White House along with [her husband](#).

Neither Trump, his family, nor his staff have faced legal ramifications for any of the above actions. Continued corruption and co-option of state resources for personal gain can undermine the rule of law, creating a culture of graft and governance as a means of profit. However, at present, the US has insufficient mechanisms for combating corruption and enforcing transparency: the country has relied on informal traditions,

voter discretion and an independent legislature to ensure America's executive does not gain or distribute improper spoils from the public coffers.

Those mechanisms have failed. The US has no effective office at the federal level that is un-elected, nonpartisan and dedicated to monitoring the use of public resources and investigating corruption with subpoena power. While the attorney general should fill this role, the position is nominated by the president and, as Trump has shown with respect to [acting Attorney General Sally Yates](#), can be removed by the president. Trump's brazen corruption has exposed and exploited a weakness in America's democratic institutions, one that should be mitigated as soon as politicians who are willing to do so are elected.

LEGISLATURE

In democracies, the role of legislatures is clear: to create law, check the power of the executive and provide public debate and discussion as representatives of the citizenry. In a parliamentary system, the legislature can remove confidence in the prime minister and call for early elections. In the US, the bicameral structure requires that bills satisfy a variety of geographic constituencies before reaching the president's desk, allowing the chief executive only the ability to sign or veto legislation. However, various national crises and wars in US history have allowed for more power to concentrate in the president's hands. At present, US presidents take an agenda-setting role with respect to Congress, especially within the first 100 days when the president is often most popular.

As Trump is no mainstream, entrenched member of the Republican Party, he has found difficulty in keeping a sufficient governing coalition in areas such as infrastructure investment and the construction of a wall along the US-Mexico border. Real divisions exist among congressional Republicans; the failure to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), a conservative rallying cry for 7 years, despite presidential support and majorities in both Houses, remains an important example of both Trump's limited influence within Congress and the GOP's internal divisions.

Trump has shown little respect for the legislature during the first 100 days, however. He has signed more executive orders, which do not require action by Congress, than [any other president](#) since World War II. And when the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office provided estimates for the ACA replacement bill he supported, Trump

attacked the assessment as, "[just not believable](#)," lending no legitimacy or deference to a non-partisan source widely respected on both sides of the political aisle.

The most problematic occurrence with respect to democracy and the rule of law is Congress' [refusal to seriously investigate](#) President Trump's financial conflicts of interest or his campaign's potential coordination with the Russian government. The sham of an investigation by the Senate Intelligence Committee had [no dedicated full-time staff](#) to the endeavor [until April 24](#), more than three months after the investigation formally began, and only amid public and Democratic pressure. In the House of Representatives, little effort has been made to subpoena testimony or documentation with respect to Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security adviser who [failed to disclose](#) payments from the Russian government. Congressional Republicans have spent much the first 100 days under a Republican president overlooking potential for corruption for foreign influence at the highest level of governance in favor of political loyalty and pet legislative goals. According to a poll published in [The Wall Street Journal](#), the American people are not surprised, having little confidence that a Republican-controlled Congress can effectively act as an independent check against a Republican president.

While Congress may not have acted as a rubber stamp during the first 100 days of the Trump presidency, it has shown a problematic willingness to turn a blind eye to executive behaviors which, if unaddressed, can undermine the democratic foundation of the US federal government. The extreme partisanship that has led to this propensity must be addressed; otherwise, divided government will mean only gridlock and unified government will mean only blank checks for governmental malfeasance and corruption.

JUDICIARY

In a liberal democracy, the judiciary is tasked with navigating the tensions between a liberal ideal of inherent rights and the popular currents that ebb and flow within society. Ideally, judges are insulated from political consequence, theoretically allowing them to issue legally just decisions, irrespective of public sentiment or policies of elected officials. The judiciary generally maintains no armed force nor wins any election, requiring other political actors respect the institution itself instead of power or popularity. Without the respect, confidence and deference of politicians, government officials and citizens, the judiciary is merely a handful of lawyers in robes.

In the United States, the Constitution's structure implies the ability for courts to rule government action unconstitutional, as detailed in *Marbury v. Madison*, 5 U.S. 137 (1803). While a vast majority of US history has seen Congress and the president respect those derived and implied powers, there have been exceptions. President Andrew Jackson famously ignored the Supreme Court's attempt to protect Native American property in *Worcester v. Georgia*, 31 U.S. (6 Pet.) 515 (1832), and Abraham Lincoln ignored the federal court decision *Ex parte Merryman*, 17 F. Cas. 144 (C.C.D. Md. 1861) (No. 9487). More recently, the [Warren Court](#) period of the Supreme Court, from 1953 to 1969, regularly struck down governmental action in favor of individual liberties, seeking to limit discrimination based on race, national origin, religion or gender.

During President Trump's first 100 days in office, the administration has shown no respect for the powers of judicial review outlined in *Marbury v. Madison*. After a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order with respect to his Muslim ban, Executive Order (EO) 13769, Trump referred to him as a "so-called judge" and the administration claimed "[unreviewable authority](#)" in the arena of immigration. The Court of Appeals affirmed the judge's decision, leading to Trump's veiled threat to "[break up](#)" the Ninth Circuit from which the ruling originated. Trump then issued a second Muslim ban, EO 13780, which was again blocked by federal judges, one from Hawaii. Thereafter, Attorney General Jeff Sessions [stated](#): "I really am amazed that a judge sitting on an island in the Pacific can issue an order that stops the president of the United States from what appears to be clearly his statutory and constitutional power." Slight toward Hawaii notwithstanding, this statement shows either a misunderstanding of or disagreement with the fundamental principle of American democracy that the judiciary can declare governmental actions unconstitutional.

In striking down the successive Muslim bans, as well as [blocking an executive order](#) removing funds from cities that are uncooperative with federal immigration enforcement, the judiciary has acted as intended: a protection of minority rights against the popular passions of the people.

Challenges to democracy remain, however: there are many areas of policy, called Political Questions, where the US federal judiciary traditionally refuses to weigh in. Further, in 2016, the Republicans took the politicization of the judiciary further than ever before with the refusal to even hold hearings on President Barack Obama's

nominee to the Supreme Court, giving Trump his first choice for adding to the court in Neil Gorsuch. However, despite Republicans' general [lack of respect for, or trust in](#), judges, the judiciary remains the [most respected branch](#) of the federal government among the general population, likely because judges are traditionally not overtly partisan.

As Trump cannot arbitrarily remove judges for dissent, and that the American people generally trust judges more than politicians, the judiciary remains a strong guarantor of democracy for the US.

SECURITY SECTOR

One way in which democracy can be imperiled is through the weaponization of the security sector. The military and law enforcement agencies have, in various authoritarian and failed democratic contexts, become either politicized or turned against specific groups in society which have drawn the ire of the chief executive. Further, without civilian control over the military, popular generals have engaged in coup d'états in otherwise democratic states. Intelligence agencies have surveilled on opposition leaders to either expose or fabricate wrongdoing, and police forces have targeted unpopular or minority groups as part of a broader authoritarian agenda.

During the first 100 days, the US military has shown promising developments for the maintenance of democracy. Secretary of Defense James Mattis has contradicted the president on several occasions with respect to issues such as the [role of the media](#), selecting [Pentagon staff](#) and the existence of [global climate change](#). A career military man, Mattis seems to understand the institutional and limited role the US Army plays in maintaining and protecting American democracy. If Trump has any intention of utilizing the military domestically in a direct threat to democracy, there is no evidence it would happen on Secretary Mattis' watch.

Nonetheless, Trump has shown some troubling domestic intentions for his use of America's broad and expansive security sector, such as threats to the traditional insulation of the [FBI](#) and CIA from White House intervention and political meddling. Trump aides have unethically and potentially illegally intervened in ongoing investigations of Trump's presidential campaign, troubling and ongoing concerns that must be monitored as his presidency continues.

Most troubling, however, was the vague language of his Muslim ban executive orders, which gave little guidance to officers on the ground, or their supervisors, on how to properly enforce the order within existing constitutional limits of search and detention. Further, as the unions representing Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents and border patrol officers [endorsed Trump](#) early in his candidacy, many individuals tasked with enforcing the policy were fully onboard with Trump's xenophobic messaging, empowered to carry out the intention of Trump's policy. As accounts of [abuse by federal agents](#) of legal permanent residents, tourists and some non-white citizens bubbled from the terminals of international airports around the nation, Trump offered no enforcement guidance or condemnation. Even after a court order enjoined the Executive Order, officials [continued to enforce](#) Trump's wishes, likely in violation of federal law.

Over a month later, episodes [continue to surface](#) of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agents acting beyond their constitutional authority — met only by the administration's desire to [decrease hiring standards](#) in order to increase the number of CBP agents on the ground. Importantly, by not making law enforcement policy in a centralized manner high in the chain of command, Trump allowed for the intent of the language to be interpreted later by individuals on the ground tasked with enforcement. This chaos and discriminatory application was not a glitch in Trump's policy, but rather a crucial aspect in how it was intended to be enforced.

If any doubt existed that the Muslim bans were created with the intention to incite nationalistic animus, Trump has provided further evidence: he issued an [order](#) requiring the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to “make public a comprehensive list of criminal actions committed by aliens,” created [VOICE](#), an office dedicated to providing information about illegal immigrants who have committed crimes, and [habitually ignores](#) terrorism committed by white people.

MEDIA

Journalism's position as the only profession mentioned in the US Constitution is representative of its uniquely important role in liberal democracy. A press, free of both imposed- and self-censorship, is required to uncover wrongdoing, inform citizens of government performance, engage in policy debates that inform voters and hold officials accountable for their actions. Because of this, the Supreme Court [has recognized](#) broad protections for the press under the First Amendment. While the

press experiences at least some friction with all presidential administrations, journalists in the US have generally enjoyed [relative freedom](#) to pursue their stories.

However, both before and during the first 100 days in office, the Trump administration has been openly antagonistic toward the press. The White House Correspondents Association has been [forced to advocate](#) more with this administration than any other in recent memory for the ability to ask questions required to function as independent checks on the government. The president has such open contempt for any criticism that, according to [nine First Amendment experts](#), the administration's barring of credentialed press from a press briefing based on editorial viewpoint may have violated the Constitution.

As of this writing Trump [has tweeted](#) the phrase "fake news" 30 times since taking office, aimed at any organization or story that may be critical of the president's narrative. In fact, the president described the "intent" of *The New York Times* to be "[so evil and so bad](#)." But most alarmingly, at the Conservative Political Action Conference, Trump referred to the media as the "[enemy of the people](#)" and his chief strategist Steve Bannon referred to them as the "[opposition party](#)."

The likely goal of the White House is to undermine public trust in any article or organization that does not paint the administration in a positive light. "Any negative polls are fake news," Trump [tweeted](#) on February 6. The president also threatened to "[open up the libel laws](#)" in order to sue news organizations. This was presumably uttered to intimidate journalists from publishing criticism, though a vast majority of libel law is found at the state level, far beyond Trump's power to reform. Nonetheless, any attempts to limit press access or independence threaten an important pillar of democracy.

Despite the hostility, media organizations have challenged the president when the White House has repeatedly proffered spurious claims, though ideologically aligned outlets have furthered government statements uncritically. Many organizations have combated the fury of demonstrably false statements from the White House with [fact checks within headlines](#) themselves.

A less visible, though equally pernicious, threat to democracy is [self-censorship](#): the act of rejecting, toning down or avoiding overtly negative reporting in the interest of future access, to avoid retaliation by officials or to satisfy readers. In Washington,

where many journalists and administration officials know each other by first name, a reporter can easily justify self-censorship in hopes to maintain a contact or satisfy a risk-averse editor, especially under an administration that pays such close attention to critical coverage. However, in [fear-based societies](#), self-censorship prevents the public dialogue and precipitates repression. If the press is to continue to provide Americans with an objective and critical understanding of the presidency, their coverage must remain “[uninhibited, robust, and wide-open](#)” in the interest of the health of our democracy.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Despite the general disdain for the two major parties among American voters, a political party system remains vital to modern institutional democracy. Parties allow for voters to easily understand a candidate’s stances on a wide array of issues, build capacity for civic engagement and hold other parties accountable for government abuse or overreach. Those roles can be compromised, however, if an executive can unfairly tip the playing field to advantage or favor one party above others, or co-opt the governing apparatus to serve the political interests of a particular party.

Regardless of having sweeping majorities in both Houses of Congress, President Trump has raised no notable concerns with respect to the existing party structure. While Trump has brought into his administration Reince Priebus, the former chair of the Republican National Committee, this is not unusual for American presidents so long as the aides formally hold no position within the political party during their White House tenure. The Democratic Party, while currently possessing little power in Washington, has seen a [surge of candidates](#) declare for the 2018 midterm elections — potential evidence of renewed energy among the party’s new base.

At present, both major political parties remain independent of the government and inappropriate regulation, such as election laws, ballot access reforms or targeted IRS action which disproportionately hinder or favor political parties unequally. No policies furthered by Trump at this time threaten the Democratic Party itself or favor the Republican Party as an organization. While there are drawbacks to having only two nationally effective parties, one clear benefit is they are likely too powerful for an individual to easily coopt or marginalize.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society consists of formal and informal groups and organizations formed within a society that are fully independent of the structures of governance. Civil society need not be political: everything from your local chess club to the Boy Scouts of America count. As democracies require citizens to be independently active, be familiar with leadership positions and maintain a culture of power-sharing, civil society is viewed as crucial in creating and maintaining citizen participation in, and vigilance over, state governance.

The United States has a robust culture of civil society, but has been criticized since the turn of the century for [calcifying in apathy](#). However, the [Tea Party](#) protest movement on the right, springing to life amidst the 2010 midterm elections, showed that grassroots ad hoc civil society in the US can impact governance at both local and national levels.

Since Trump took office 100 days ago, Americans have engaged in grassroots politics at a level not seen in a generation, with the possible exception of the Tea Party. The scene has mostly been in major cities, beginning with the [Women's March](#) the day after Trump's inauguration where over 2 million people flooded city streets, which has set the tone for nearly all events that have since followed. Following Trump's Muslim ban, tens of thousands of Americans gathered in US international airports around the country to protest the executive order. [Thousands of businesses](#) in cities across the US closed on a declared "Day Without Immigrants." In the weekends leading up to the 100-day marker, [over 120,000](#) participated in the Tax March and hundreds of thousands for the March for Science, both occurring in cities from coast to coast. Elsewhere, usually routine town hall meetings for Republican lawmakers [have been flooded](#) with protesters. The American people are [paying attention](#) to Washington and are showing their frustration.

President Trump, for his part, has dismissed all of the above events as being fueled by "[paid protesters](#)," exclaiming that the "[election is over!](#)" — similar to rhetoric used by the Obama administration in response to the Tea Party, though more forceful. However, Trump has gone further than Obama ever did; for example, he threatened the University of California, Berkeley with a [withdrawal of federal funding](#) when protesters forced the cancellation of an event featuring an alt-right speaker. Further, Trump's inexplicable obsession with asserting demonstrably false accounts of the size of the crowd at his inauguration compared to that of Obama's may be an intentional

attempt to [blur the lines between truth and falsity](#), ensuring his supporters trust White House claims above all others when he seeks to refute objective criticism.

There has also been a disturbing aspect to civil society under Trump: The country has seen an [explosion of hate groups](#) recently, emboldened by the president's xenophobic and nationalistic rhetoric. White nationalist groups are becoming [more open](#) about their racist goals and are [preparing for violence](#).

Taken as a whole, the president himself is in no way an ally of civil society and active public engagement. He sees dissenters as illegitimate agitators and [publicly ignores](#) the racism and crimes of his allies. However, despite these factors and the disturbing increase in hate groups around the country, the past 100 days have shown that citizens of all stripes in the US are paying close attention to their elected officials and are vocal to oppose them when they see fit.

THE ROAD AHEAD

In viewing the first 100 days of the Trump presidency with respect to America's liberal democratic institutions, a worrying trend appears. The president himself, and those he surrounds himself with, has little to no regard for structural or conceptual limits to his office or his role as an employee of The People. Trump's actions betray a desire to unilaterally exert control over much of the American body politic, a decidedly illiberal and undemocratic aim. More kakistocracy than meritocracy, however, this administration stands as much in its own way of cementing unilateral rule as any other segment of American political society. Its failure to court a broader range of the congressional Republicans and insistence on positioning both the judiciary and media as his enemies have neutered Trump's potential to consolidating power. Judges, activists, journalists and minority groups have proven willing and able to marginalize the administration when necessary.

This should bring no comfort, as America's democratic institutions must be updated for the 21st century if they are to prevent [21st-century authoritarianism](#). Trump's first 100 days have shown that strong anti-corruption institutions, the legalization of transparency traditions, law enforcement reform and broader support for objective journalism are needed to enhance American democracy, to say nothing of needed electoral reforms regarding gerrymandering and campaign finance.

While the US Constitution has not changed, gone are the days of emperors and revolutionaries who dramatically seize control of the state. This outdated notion of authoritarianism has been replaced by a [gradual erosion](#) of public confidence in governing institutions, a growing cultural acceptance of corruption and increased incentives for self-censorship. While President Trump will not achieve these aims during his four-year term in office, without targeted reform the next authoritarian-leaning politician may lead America a step further from liberal democracy.

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Political Opportunism Will Make Brexit Worse

Corey Cooper
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Opportunistic nationalists and their shortsighted referenda proposals could usher in the disintegration of the UK.

British Prime Minister Theresa May [recently invoked Article 50](#) of the Lisbon Treaty, which formally notified the European Council of the United Kingdom's intent to leave the European Union. The forthcoming negotiations offer the first glimpse into what the future relationship will be between the United Kingdom and the soon-to-be 27-member EU. However, Brexit also raises [doubts](#) about the political union between the four constituent nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The divisive referendum campaign and its aftermath have reopened old tensions and sowed new divisions between the constituent nations. Driven by opportunism, nationalists in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are proposing independence referenda for their respective regions. These nationalist movements are not monolithic, but they are collectively calling for the dissolution of the UK during one of the most critical junctures in its modern history. If staged, these referenda would amplify the rampant uncertainty and instability caused by Brexit.

The 2016 membership referendum was a national vote. Therefore, all four constituent nations will be leaving the EU, regardless of how each one voted individually. Prior to triggering Article 50, May [stated](#) that “as Britain leaves the European Union ... the strength and stability of our Union will become even more important.” However, from the perspective of nationalists in Scotland, Northern Ireland and, to a lesser degree, Wales, Brexit presents the perfect opportunity to forge independent futures outside of the UK.

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has repeatedly cited the [62%](#) of Scottish constituents who voted against Brexit as a mandate for a second independence referendum. (In 2014, Scotland held a referendum on independence from the UK — the “no” side won). In Northern Ireland, the new Sinn Fein leader, Michelle O’Neill, has also [called](#) for a referendum on Northern Ireland leaving the United Kingdom and joining the Republic of Ireland. Roughly [56%](#) of those in Northern Ireland voted against Brexit. Additionally, Welsh Plaid Cymru leader Leanne Wood [has proposed](#) the idea of an “independent Wales,” although the situation in Wales is different; a slim majority of Welsh voters were in favor of Brexit.

NATIONALISM IN THE UK

In Scotland’s 2014 referendum, [55%](#) of voters elected to stay in the UK. The pro-independence camp left a lot of questions [unanswered](#) regarding Scotland’s economy, currency, borders, defense, trade, relationship with the United Kingdom and its membership in the EU. At this point, it is not clear whether a second referendum [would result in a different outcome](#). Moreover, a decision to leave the United Kingdom and the European Union at the same time would jeopardize any sense of stability or certainty surrounding the country’s future.

For Northern Ireland, Brexit poses a serious challenge for the hard-fought peace enshrined in the 1998 [Good Friday Agreement](#). Currently, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland share an open border that [may tighten as a result of Brexit](#), and there are fears such a development could [reignite](#) sensitive identity politics. However, a referendum on Irish unity is not the way to alleviate this concern; in fact this could spark a new era of violent tensions. Advocates for a referendum and Irish unity have yet to put forward a vision of the region’s future economic and political relationship with the UK. These questions will not be resolved until after the United Kingdom’s negotiations with the EU are finalized and settled.

Advocating for Welsh independence at this point is also premature and irresponsible. However, there is another option. Wood has [proposed](#) a further devolved government as an alternative to full-scale independence, in which the Westminster Parliament would transfer powers to the Welsh Assembly. Greater devolution is more realistic and palatable to voters because it offers autonomy while avoiding the potential chaos of leaving the UK. In fact, this would be a suitable alternative for Scotland and Northern Ireland as well. If the devolution route were taken, these constituent nations could see greater regulatory control over critical sectors such as the environment, labor and fisheries, in addition to greater legislative authority over taxation and welfare distribution.

BAD NEWS FOR BRITAIN

Nationalists in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have seized on the political turmoil following Brexit to move forward with long-held intentions for independence from the United Kingdom. Similarly, Prime Minister May's [snap general election](#), scheduled for June 8, will give nationalists a platform to make the case for independence, which means the prime minister must now also devote a great deal of time and attention to promoting national unity in the face of Brexit.

The best-case scenario at this point would be for regional nationalists to pause their referenda plans until the Brexit negotiations are over and voters digest the new political reality. The Westminster Parliament should then consider [granting additional powers](#) to devolved governments in Edinburgh, Belfast and Cardiff. However, if these plans are not paused, opportunistic nationalist leaders and their shortsighted referenda proposals could usher in the disintegration of the United Kingdom. This would be a dismal prospect for all British citizens, regardless of where they live or if they voted for or against Brexit.

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