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Atul Singh (Founder, CEO & Editor-in-Chief)

Abul-Hasanat Siddique (Co-Founder, COO & Managing Editor)

Anna Pivovarchuk (Co-Founder & Deputy Managing Editor)

Fair Observer | 461 Harbor Blvd | Belmont | CA 94002 | USA

www.fairobservers.com | info@fairobservers.com

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Saudi Arabia's Futuristic Ambitions

Giorgio Cafiero & Theodore Karasik
November 1, 2017

Will Saudi Arabia's ambitious vision for a desert megacity help bring about a new future for the kingdom?

In October, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) unveiled Riyadh's plans for NEOM, a futuristic desert city that he hailed as a "civilizational leap for humanity." Situated next to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba, the NEOM zone is close to major maritime trade corridors via the Suez Canal and has potential to further deepen economic links between multiple continents. NEOM will feature the future King Salman Bridge, connecting the city, which is expected to become 33 times bigger than New York, with Egypt and, by extension, all of Africa.

The area allocated for NEOM will encompass roughly 10,000 square miles, stretching into Jordan and including the Red Sea islands Sanafir and Tiran, recently ceded to the kingdom by Egypt. Despite the challenges of making this project a success, the Saudi leadership envisions NEOM becoming a centerpiece of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (FIR) and innovation, ensuring that the kingdom completes a necessary social and political transition.

NEOM comes from the Latin word for "new" (neo). The final "m" stands for the Arabic word for "future" (mostaqbal).

The project, which MBS stated will be built by "people who live in the desert" who possess "colossal will, determination and drive," will be a part of a new Saudi framework. In addition to domestic and foreign investors, the Saudi government will back NEOM with more than \$500 billion, and the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund — the Public Investment Fund (PIF) — will support the futuristic project. MBS spoke of a new type of capitalism, seemingly based on updated Thatcherite principals.

NEOM, which is to open by 2030, will rely heavily on the food, entertainment, energy, water, manufacturing and biotechnology sectors, but most importantly the city is promised to feature state-of-the-art Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones, nanobiology labs, solar panels, hyperloops, luxury retailers and first-rate restaurants. In line with MBS' plans to address climate change, NEOM is intended to inspire a "new generations of cities" with clean energy powering the urban landscape.

SoftBank Group Corporation's Vision Fund and PIF signed an initial agreement to purchase a large stake in the Saudi Electricity Company that will provide the energy required by NEOM. Saudi Arabia's government began investing in Softbank Vision Fund to the tune of \$100 billion to pave the way for the information revolution's next chapter.

PLANNING AHEAD

NEOM fits into MBS' plans for leading Saudi Arabia on its "return" to "moderate Islam," with a less strict version of Sharia law and gender mixing encouraged under this new city-state model. The Red Sea Coast Resorts (RSCR), situated south of NEOM on the kingdom's Red Sea coast, will be made up of luxury resorts, covering as many as 50 islands and 13,127 square miles.

This area between the cities of Umluj and al-Wajh is larger than Belgium and is set to become a tourist hotspot. RSCR and NEOM, which will be Saudi Arabia's largest construction projects to be achieved in progressive steps set for 2022 and 2030, promise to make the Red Sea locale in Saudi Arabia a vibrant and busy regional trade hub that attracts tourists and businessmen from all corners of the world. To make the zone more attractive internationally, there will be looser social rules, with alcohol legalized in RSCR.

Both NEOM and RSCR have the potential to transform the Red Sea into a thriving regional hub that boosts the Hijaz's regional and international standing as a travel destination for tourists and business entrepreneurs alike. Also, with Saudis making major investments outside the kingdom, NEOM represents an opportunity to counter the decline of the oil-rich country's GDP, as oil prices remain controlled by the Saudi-Russian agreement, by encouraging domestic investment to minimize GDP flight that has resulted from minimal opportunities to invest in Saudi Arabia. Added to the

equation is the Hajj and Ummrah industries, which will fuel further revenue and economic growth, helping to diversify the Saudi economy beyond its traditional hydrocarbon sector. By 2030, no matter what the path, the kingdom sees its geo-economic center in these three projects.

Naysayers are recalling Saudi Arabia's past attempts at grand projects. In the mid-2000s, King Abdullah recognized that to succeed in the future, Saudi Arabia must adopt visionary policies, break with the country's ultra-conservative tradition and dispense with the shackles of oil dependency. The construction of six "economic cities" under his leadership was designed to enhance economic competitiveness, create new jobs and diversify Saudi Arabia's economy.

However, even before the plummeting of oil prices in 2014, these cities' progress came slow, primarily due to the kingdom's lack of an efficient economic model capable of reversing Saudi Arabia's ministerial inertia enough to make grand objectives set forth by King Salman's predecessor a reality. The announcement of NEOM raises serious questions about how realistic such dramatic change can be in the kingdom while also drawing attention to the plethora of issues that continue to plague it. Yet, in the NEOM case, MBS and his team are setting out a vision for the fourth Saudi state. The aptly named NEOM stands for a new operating model, a fundamental adaptation to new realities. The kingdom's new operating

model is Vision 2030, which foresees Saudi Arabia both as the epicenter of the Middle East's economic future and also as a global leader in embracing the FIR's fusion of technologies that blurs the lines between the physical, digital and biological spheres. For having the tenacity to embrace NEOM as the centerpiece of the kingdom's future, MBS deserves credit, for he sees NEOM not only as a near-term objective, but also as a springboard that he hopes will secure a strong position for Saudi Arabia in the global economy for the long term.

CHALLENGES AND REALIZATIONS

Due to the Saudi youth bulge, NEOM raises major social questions regarding the social ramifications of high unemployment rates amid an era of accelerated automation jobs. Naturally, the issue of labor under the kingdom's National Transformation Plan is to be dealt with as Saudi Arabia embarks on a new course for economic development, with greater centralized authority placed in the hands of individual leaders and more capital being directed at public programs with the aim of improving the overall economy and standard of living for the kingdom's citizenry. The RSCR is expected to create 35,000 jobs, according to Saudi officials.

The FIR is already disrupting national economies worldwide, but not every country has the financial resources to take advantage of advancements in technology that are drastically changing the international economic system.

Despite being the world's oil-richest country, NEOM's price tag will be steep even for Saudi Arabia. Given the project's grand objectives, the \$500 billion MBS has already committed to making NEOM a reality is a conservative estimate. Indeed, financing NEOM may prove immensely difficult as the kingdom, which depends on the hydrocarbon sector bringing in 90% of national revenue, is already burdened by a persistently low price of oil, substantial entitlement obligations to its citizens and financial commitments to existing projects.

Although in the future, funding for NEOM could come from sources of wealth outside the hydrocarbon sector, for at least the near term the futuristic city will be financed by petrodollars. Thus, the price of oil in upcoming months and years will determine how easily the Saudis will finance the first stages of this grand project. Other factors that will undermine Riyadh's ability to finance NEOM and other pillars of Vision 2030 include the Saudi Aramco IPO's recent setbacks and the costly quagmire in Yemen.

Saudi Arabia is promoting international investment to fund NEOM, and a number of investors have already expressed interest. On the heels of King Salman's visit to Moscow in October, Russia's sovereign wealth fund, the Russian Direct Investment Fund, said it will commit billions of dollars toward bringing Russian companies that specialize in AI, port infrastructure, high-

speed transportation, health and education to NEOM.

Yet where this money may come from remains to be seen. British business magnate Richard Branson has spoken of building hotels in the city, and Japan's SoftBank Vision Fund is already active in the kingdom. Yet to secure sufficient amounts of foreign investment and successfully position NEOM as a global hub, the Saudis must make their country an attractive destination for international businessmen and investors. Security risks stemming from the Yemen crisis' spillover into the kingdom's territory and problems with Saudi Arabia's brand in Western countries will challenge the Saudi leadership to do so in an effort to achieve NEOM's full potential.

NEOM is a dream that adds excitement and impetus to Vision 2030. Of course, there is risk involved throughout numerous areas, from finance and insurance to construction, in addition to the multifaceted impacts that this project will have on Saudi society. Even if rocky, the path will be necessary as Saudi Arabia embarks on a revolutionary transformation.



Giorgio Cafiero is the founder and CEO of Gulf State Analytics, a geopolitical risk consultancy based in Washington, DC. His research interests include geopolitical and security trends in the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Middle East.

Cafiero is a regular contributor to several think tanks and publications, including the Middle East Institute, Atlantic Council, The National Interest, Al Monitor, and LobeLog.



Theodore Karasik is a research fellow. For the past 30 years, Karasik worked for a number of US agencies examining religious-political issues across the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia, including the evolution of violent extremism and its financing. He lived in the United Arab Emirates from 2006 until 2016, where he worked on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) foreign policy and security issues surrounding cultural awareness, cybersecurity, maritime security, counter-piracy, counterterrorism, and infrastructure and national resilience.

Sudan Welcomes Its Newest Refugees

Sumaya Almajdoub
November 1, 2017

Sudan shows how granting more freedoms for refugees to legally live, study and work can yield great results in a country with its own troubled past.

Syrians have found refuge in an unexpected place: the Republic of Sudan. The streets of Sudan's capital, Khartoum, are bustling with new Syrian restaurants, bakeries and sweets shops. One shop, Anas' Shwarma, opened in 2014, and employs over 40 Syrian

refugees who fled the war. Sudan, whose own civil war created millions of refugees, is now a top destination country for many fleeing the conflict in Syria. Today, the Syrian community has grown to 100,000 according to Sudan's Commission of Refugees, while other estimates place that number at 250,000. It is Sudan, not the wealthy countries of the West, that is providing a model for alleviating the Syrian refugee crisis.

Sudan's refugee population has been growing since the 1990s, which is no surprise given its shared border with Eritrea and the ongoing civil war in the now independent South Sudan. But what is prompting distant Syrians to seek refuge there today?

Sudan is currently the only country in the world that allows Syrians to enter without a visa and without imposing restrictions when they arrive. This has made Sudan a top choice for Syrian refugees. According to Usamah Mohamed, a Sudanese writer based in Khartoum, "Syrians appear to feel welcomed; they had no issues integrating in society."

Not only has the Sudanese government kept the visa-waiver program, but it also granted Syrians the right to work and education. This means that any Syrian can enroll in a public Sudanese school or college and apply to jobs without needing a permit. In Lebanon, many Syrians have to pay an annual residency fee of \$200 if they are not registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In Turkey, getting a work permit is difficult, with less than 14,000 of the 3 million Syrian refugees being able to obtain one.

Syrians may have the right to work in Sudan, but it doesn't mean they can find jobs easily. Opportunities are limited, and Sudan's unemployment rate is about 20%. But Syrians have been entrepreneurial. According to Noaman Madibbo, a Sudanese student at George Washington University who spent the summer in Khartoum, "Syrians who come to Sudan are very industrious. They started working in trade or crafts. Many work as construction workers, plumbers, tailors, and carpenters. Many more opened up restaurants and bakeries, especially in the capital city." Madibbo's grandfather runs a travel agency and assures that "business is booming," with two weekly flights from Damascus to Khartoum.

Sudan is both a destination and a transit point for many Syrians. Some stay briefly en route to Egypt or even to Europe by crossing from Sudan to Libya. Sudan has offered a citizenship track for any Syrian who has resided in the country for over six months. According to one estimate, over 1,000 Syrians have obtained Sudanese citizenship. Having a Sudanese passport can be incredibly valuable to Syrian refugees as it allows them to travel more freely since many countries have stopped issuing them visas.

Why has Sudan adopted such an open-door policy for Syrians?

Well, according to Noaman, “It’s good PR.” He explains that the government has been praised by some in the international community for its hospitality to Syrians and for the freedoms it grants them. Another Sudanese activist using the pseudonym Maryam A. agrees with Noaman, explaining that “the Syrian crisis is under the spotlight right now and, therefore, Sudan wants to look good on an international level as a supporter of the Syrian people, in hopes that the [Darfur] sanctions will be eased eventually.”

The Sudanese government has long been criticized for neglecting internally displaced refugees in Darfur and other regions in the country. Providing these rights to Syrians is an attempt to exhibit to its citizens and the international community that Sudan is acting in good faith to protect the rights of at least some refugees.

When I asked Usamah Mohamed about the Sudanese reaction to the growing Syrian presence in Sudan, he answered that “it’s been a mixed bag. There’s a certain sense of welcoming hospitality, but a growing sentiment of xenophobia is also present. On social media, Sudanese [citizens] often complain of the economic cost against which hosting such large number of refugees may affect their already hard lives.”

There has been a debate in Sudanese media on whether it’s fair to offer Syrians free services such as health insurance. According to Maryam, many are unhappy about this and argue that

“the subsidized medication these refugees are getting is part of a system Sudanese citizens have been paying for, and that’s unfair.” Usamah pointed out that the non-democratic government did not consult its citizens on the decision to receive Syrians, and “as long as citizens feel disenfranchised, they would not welcome their government’s acts of charity toward foreigners. But to give credit where it’s due, most ordinary people are welcoming of Syrians.”

In 2016, the UNHCR granted Sudan \$10 million to support Syrian refugees, compared to \$58 million given to Egypt, which hosted a comparable population of 100,000 Syrian refugees in the same year. It is worth noting that most Syrians in Sudan are not designated by the Sudanese government as refugees but more like residents with a set of legal rights. This amount may help improve the country’s capacity to aid refugees, but more can be done. Sudan hosts over 2 million refugees, most of them coming from neighboring African countries.

The story of Sudan, a poor country hosting millions of refugees when its own economic conditions are dire, is in fact a common one. The UNHCR found that most displaced people in 2015 and 2016 found shelter in poor or middle-income countries. While much attention has been given to the influx of refugees to Europe, efforts to help low and middle-income countries improve their capacity to aid refugees can go a long way. Other countries can learn from the Sudanese experience that illustrates

how granting more freedoms for refugees to legally live, study and work can be empowering and can yield great results even in country with its own troubled past.



Sumaya Almajdoub is the 2017 Middle East fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy (YPFP). She received her MA in Middle East Studies from George Washington University.

Iran's Greatest Challenge Is Homegrown

Elodie Sellar
November 6, 2017

The prospect of potential domestic unrest has hit a raw nerve in Iran.

Iran has long been a formidable regional force. It has projected its power by backing Shia militias, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, or Sunni groups such as Hamas in Palestine, thereby engaging in a proxy war strategy throughout the Middle East. However, since the independence referendum held in Iraqi Kurdistan on September 25, Iran has become decidedly more explicit in flaunting its involvement in attempting to control the latest regional tensions developing in Iraq between Baghdad and Erbil.

The flash point of this conflict began in Kirkuk when Qasem Soleimani, the head of the Iranian Quds force (the foreign wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC), made his presence there public in October, defiantly demonstrating Iran's influence in Iraq to America. Following the capture of Kirkuk by Shia militias and Iraqi forces, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's photo was promptly displayed in the newly deposed governor's office. In a final show of defiance, after US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told Shia militants in Kirkuk to "go home," Qais al-Khazali, leader of Iran-funded Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia, told America to prepare to withdraw its troops from Iraq.

Two particular events that directly targeted the Iranian regime's weak spot and potentially destabilizing factor — popular unrest at best and uprising at worst — triggered Tehran's increasingly assertive and confrontational stance. Iran fears domestic unrest because, while it has successfully spread its power abroad by empowering Shia parties and militias, internally it has achieved control through severe repression of both its ethnic minorities and dissident political voices.

YOU ARE OUR FRIENDS

The first event came in the form of President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speeches at the UN General Assembly in September, in which both made overtures to the Iranian people. Trump

spoke of “the Iranian regime’s longest-suffering victims: its own people.” Netanyahu declared to the “people of Iran: You are not our enemy; you are our friends.” He then put on a full charm offensive and repeated his advance in Farsi: “Shoma doosteh ma hasteed” (You are our friends). He went on to say that “One day, my Iranian friends, you will be free from the evil regime that terrorizes you, hangs gays, jails journalists, tortures political prisoners.”

Both speeches were accompanied by warnings of Iran’s growing power that must be curbed. This insinuates an interesting strategic change of policy that involves targeting the Iranian regime’s fear of destabilization through internal revolt.

The second event was the unexpected mass support of the Iranian Kurds for Iraqi Kurds’ independence referendum that caught most off guard. Before the results were even announced, the sheer number and speed at which hundreds of thousands of Kurds gathered throughout the Kurdish cities of Iran to celebrate was astonishing. Iranian Kurds defied a repressive regime in a way that had not occurred since the Islamic Revolution. The crackdown was prompt, with anti-riot forces and tanks being sent into Kurdish cities, and over 700 civilians detained. The Mahabad Republic of 1946 — the first attempt at an independent Kurdish state — still haunts the Iranian regime, which is now alarmed by the unity Iran’s Kurds have demonstrated with their Iraqi neighbors.

What is more, this civilian outpouring of support was followed by political solidarity from the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) and Komala, as well as military support from Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK, Iran’s Kurdish militia) that has been fighting in Iraqi Kurdistan in post-referendum confrontations.

The events that occurred in the Kurdish regions of Iran received scant media attention, and when they did, they were demonstratively downplayed. This was the case during a panel discussion organized by The Washington Institute at the end of September, during which it was suggested that only 1,000 people protested, and that the demonstration was fairly irrelevant and easy to contain. The reality on the ground was conspicuously different, and Tehran’s heavy-handed response is an indication of the regime’s angst regarding its minorities.

Iran will go to great lengths to suppress the Kurds, as, despite being an ethnically diverse country in which 40% to 50% of the population is non-Persian, its minorities have been historically repressed. The repression faced by ethnic and religious minorities is widespread, ranging from discrimination, persecution and economic and cultural marginalization, to torture and mass executions in front of relatives after show trials lasting no more than 15 minutes. At times, this has led to unrest. For instance, in 2006, the Azeri minority held large protests and burned down government buildings after a cartoon

portrayed them as cockroaches, with hundreds of protestors were arrested as a result. More recently, in early September 2017, large protests erupted in Kurdish cities following the killing of two Kurdish men by Iranian security forces at the border. These protests were met with tear gas and gunfire, with hundreds arrested.

The Kurds are becoming increasingly restive, threatening the status quo. It is important to bear in mind that the extent of the repressions, executions and silencing that the Kurds face in Iran is such that they are known as the “forgotten Kurds.” It is therefore a common error to underestimate the threat they represent in the eyes of the Iranian regime as their discontent rises.

SIMMERING DISCONTENT

Trump’s recent decision to decertify the Iran nuclear deal and to introduce sanctions against the IRGC under a terrorism financing executive order has received significant media attention and is undeniably part of the reason why Iran is reacting in open defiance to America by showing that it ultimately holds sway over Iraq — an undoubtedly bitter pill for the US to swallow. However, it seems that the recent external and internal tribulations have hit a raw nerve in Tehran.

Indeed, whilst many in Iran do support the regime, many do not. For example, in response to the IRGC designation as a terrorist organization, Iran’s Foreign Minister Javad Zarif launched a Twitter

call of national unity with the IRGC, which was not a resounding success. The social media response demonstrated that many Iranians view the IRGC as an organization that terrorizes its own people. It is noteworthy that many Iranian voices that dissented on Twitter are based inside Iran and not just in the wider diaspora, which is in itself a significant sign of defiance to the regime.

In its attempt to rally popular support behind the IRGC, the regime attempted to create a semblance of overt national cohesion in response to outside pressures precisely because it knows very well that a large proportion of its population does not endorse the regime. Suffice to remember the 2009 Green Movement that erupted in mass protests after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s contested reelection. The repression was brutal, but it was also a clear indication of simmering discontent throughout Iranian society.

Activists from ethnic minorities were also involved in the Green Movement but were soon disenchanted as the leaders were reluctant to support minority rights, which are viewed as having separatist undertones. Ironically, President Hassan Rouhani was elected on the joint promise of achieving a nuclear deal and civil rights reform, including fair trials for ethnic minorities and Green Movement leaders. Yet, today, the human rights situation in Iran has deteriorated even further past the levels of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, according to Ahmed Shaheed, former

UN special rapporteur. Consequently, domestic tensions and discontent may well continue to rise as Rouhani's promises of reforms are not being met.

Iran knows that its most concerning weakness and challenge lies in domestic, not foreign, destabilization. It has therefore resorted to taking a much more openly aggressive stance in asserting its power in the region as its long-term challengers — Israel, America and its own Kurdish minority — have apparently turned to more openly seeking to gaud Iran's weakest point.



Elodie Sellar is a researcher who focuses on global security and the Kurds. She has worked in human rights and refugee

organizations in Togo, India and Scotland. She has conducted research in Turkey and Iraq, focusing on the Kurds, feminism, intelligence and global security.

Plastic Pollution: Turning a Problem into a Solution

Craig Moran

November 6, 2017

Can waste-to-energy technology help solve the global plastic pollution crisis?

When it comes to plastic pollution, it turns out there is a list of worst offenders. According to new research,

just 10 rivers — eight of them in Asia — are responsible for up to 95% of the plastics choking the world's oceans. Famed waterways like the Yangtze in China and the Ganges in India are among those contributing an estimated 410,000 to 4 million tons each year to the roughly 8 million tons of plastic waste that ends up in Earth's oceans on an annual basis.

The discoveries come at a time when the issue of plastic pollution is becoming increasingly urgent, with discarded plastic floating for decades without decomposing. Other pieces end up glomming on to floating junkyards like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, which has recently become the subject of a sarcastic online campaign to recognize it as an official country. Still more breaks down into smaller pieces called microplastics, which are then ingested by fish and other marine species, ending up on our dinner plates. Most worryingly of all, a recent study found that plastic waste also contaminates the vast majority of the water we drink.

With these kinds of frightening findings continuing to accrue, lawmakers, NGOs and even corporations are finally taking action, from improving recycling systems in Southeast Asia to protecting marine habitats. And while this is all well and good, to truly make an impact on plastic pollution — as well as energy security, another critical environmental challenge in Asia — policymakers must expand their portfolio of solutions to include waste-to-energy as well as other novel approaches.

Many promising new initiatives were announced at the EU-backed Our Ocean 2017 conference in Malta, where the Ocean Conservancy, in partnership with industry partners like Procter & Gamble, announced a \$150 million plan to fund collection, recycling and waste management solutions in Southeast Asia.

The initiative aims to nip plastic pollution in the bud, given that nearly half of the plastic debris choking our oceans comes from only a handful of rapidly developing Asian countries. At the same conference, Austrian polyolefin manufacturer Borealis AG launched a new \$5-million project to improve waste management systems in Southeast Asia.

The industry-backed initiatives come on top of longstanding campaigns by NGOs like National Geographic's Pristine Seas program, which aims to build momentum to protect endangered ecosystems and is supported by a number of non-profits active in maritime protection, such as the Philip Stephenson Foundation and the Leonardo DiCaprio Foundation. Celebrity activist-backed initiatives, such as Sir David Attenborough's Blue Planet 2 documentary, have also recently directed public attention to plastic pollution and other environmental issues.

These sorts of initiatives should indeed be welcomed. But at a time when 90% of the world's plastic inventory is still not recycled because of insufficient

infrastructure capacity, policymakers, NGOs and activists should also consider adding another weapon to their arsenal — waste-to-energy, where trash is burned and then is converted to electrical power by turning heated water into steam.

Given that many countries in the Asia Pacific region are grappling with both plastic waste and energy shortages, waste-to-energy would be an elegant way to solve both issues simultaneously. For instance, Australia has been facing the threat of repeated blackouts as the government has introduced subsidies for renewable energies without investing sufficiently in sources of backup power. The country is also grappling with thousands of tons of plastic off its coasts, even as the world's top market for recyclable plastics, China, has now erected barriers to imports of unprocessed scrap materials. This is no small development: Around 70% of the world's plastic waste used to end up in China.

Of course critics might charge that incineration is polluting and that all refuse should be recycled. But incineration methods have evolved considerably over the years, and today's technology — in contrast with visions of smoke-belching bonfires of decades past — emits much lower levels of pollutants.

What's more, a study conducted by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that waste-to-energy actually reduces greenhouse gas

emissions by slashing the methane emissions that come from landfills. Since methane is much more potent than CO₂, the process is one the only technology that actually reduces greenhouse gas emissions in lifecycle terms.

This does not mean that reducing, recycling and removing excess plastic waste should not be the long-term goal. But developing perfectly circular recycling systems for plastic materials is highly complex and might generate higher environmental impact in the long term — especially given plastics' lengthy shelf life. In the meantime, why not generate energy from plastic that is unlikely to be reprocessed and susceptible to being thrown into the nearest gutter or trash pile?

Such an approach could help address the problem of power shortages not only in Australia but especially in developing South Asian nations like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal, where demand for energy has been increasing faster than governments can meet citizens' needs. And while waste-to-energy is not a carbon-free solution, it is still preferable to the outdated coal plants that are running in many of these countries. We also must not underestimate the value of completely removing waste from our rivers, oceans and landfills while in turn reducing methane emissions from landfills, which contributes far more to climate change than CO₂.

Of course, waste-to-energy, like recycling, is no panacea for the mountains of plastic we continue to manufacture and toss into our rivers and oceans. Yet combined with action from industry, NGOs and civil society, it could help reduce the plastic threatening to choke the Earth's blue lungs before it is too late.



Craig Moran is a geopolitical consultant. He has almost two decades of experience advising on and facilitating geopolitical strategies in various fields such as energy and natural resources planning, tourism development, assessing and advising on political and security risks, and handling constitutional and legislative issues across multiple territories.

The Coming Clash between Israel and Iran

Jotam Confino

November 10, 2017

Netanyahu's decade-old warnings about Iran might come in handy now that it seems the voters are turning their back on him.

When US President Donald Trump refused to recertify the Iran deal last month, there was one person in particular who couldn't be happier:

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

When Netanyahu came back to power in 2009, his biggest mission was to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Early on, Netanyahu was in favor of a military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, at a time when US had its hands full in Iraq and Afghanistan, and when the Israeli establishment didn't quite see the dangers Netanyahu envisioned.

Israel had successfully bombed Iraq's nuclear facilities in 1981 and Syria's Al Kibar reactor in 2007. The bombing in Iraq was immediately reported around the world and condemned by the UN, but Iraq didn't retaliate. Saddam Hussein did, however, launch Scud missiles at Israel 10 years later, in 1991. Israel's attack on Syria's Al Kibar reactor in 2007 was more clandestine.

Both Israel and Syria didn't intend to reveal what had happened for different reasons. Israel believed that striking the reactor was necessary for its national security but knew that it would have to be done quietly, as not to provoke or humiliate Bashar al-Assad's regime. The strategy worked, which was why Assad didn't publicly condemn the attack, nor did he retaliate.

Netanyahu believed that striking Iran could be done in the same clinical way, without provoking an international outcry. An attack on Iran would, however, be much more complex, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Israel's intelligence establishment at the time argued that a pre-emptive strike on Iran could damage the relationship with the US, isolate Israel further internationally and potentially be met with an Iranian retaliation in the form of missile attacks, risking thousands of Israeli lives. Netanyahu warned that inaction could be much more catastrophic, allowing Iran to go nuclear.

The prime minister was in disagreement with Israel's military establishment, but, according to Meir Dagan, Mossad's chief at the time, he succeeded in convincing Netanyahu to reconsider the attack. It did not, however, hinder the prime minister from publicly undermining President Barack Obama's diplomatic approach to ending Iran's nuclear ambitions, which was more dovish than what Netanyahu hoped for.

Although Obama stated that "all options are on the table" in 2012, hinting at a possible military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, his strategy from the beginning was to use diplomatic pressure against Iran, whereas Netanyahu wanted to strike Iran already in 2010. Instead of finding common ground with Obama, Netanyahu famously went behind the president's back and tried to persuade US Congress to change America's position on Iran.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF THREAT

After years of warning about the Iranian regime and its intentions, the international community started focusing

on Iran, but not the way Netanyahu wanted. Years of sanctions brought Iran to its knees economically and resulted in a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 countries — US, Russia, China, Britain, France and Germany. Netanyahu was quick to declare it a “historic mistake” that had given Iran valuable time to develop its facilities, and at the same time strengthened its legitimacy as a regional power.

Netanyahu was right about this: Today, Iran has expanded its influence significantly throughout the region, most notably in Syria and Iraq, and its economy is slowly recovering with the help of Russian, Chinese and European investments.

The current situation in Syria, where Assad has managed to consolidate his power, has also solidified Iran’s position, while its proxy, Hezbollah, is slowly tightening its grip on Lebanon. These developments have made Netanyahu’s warnings about Iran relevant again, so that most of the military and intelligence establishment in Israel today agree that Iran and Hezbollah are the main threats to Israel’s security — a role they have taken over from Palestine’s Hamas.

Hezbollah’s entanglement in the war in Syria has caused the paramilitary organization thousands of casualties, but its contribution to Assad’s military successes has also strengthened its confidence as well as its fighting experience. Additionally, it’s widely agreed in Israeli intelligence circles that the group has increased its number of

rockets dramatically since the last conflict with Israel in 2006. It is estimated that Hezbollah has more than 100,000 advanced rockets that can reach as far as Tel Aviv, as well as advanced weapons and drones.

While reports of Iran-backed militias expressing their intention of “liberating the Golan heights,” it’s safe to say Iran would like to station its proxies as close to the Israeli border as possible. So far, Russia hasn’t allowed that to happen, being careful to balance between Israeli and Iranian interests. Israel, however, has taken unilateral action several times since the ceasefire agreement in Syria came into effect.

The latest military strike by Israel in Syria was met with a military response in form of anti-aircraft missiles fired at IDF fighter jets, bringing tensions to a new level. Throughout the Syrian conflict, Israel has retaliated when shots were fired from Syrian territory, but the latest bombings are far more serious. Israel simply will not allow Iran to establish itself near the Israeli border, which is why it has bombed military facilities in Syria believed to be built by Iran.

Iran’s grip on Lebanon became even tighter when its prime minister, Saad Hariri, unexpectedly resigned from his post on November 4. The resignation is widely believed among experts to have been influenced by Saudi Arabia. Hariri’s relationship with Hezbollah has been tense throughout his term, but he managed to work side by side with its

representatives in a national unity cabinet and even accepted that Hezbollah and the Lebanese army cooperate on fighting ISIS.

Since Saudi Arabia has openly supported Hariri, the kingdom naturally wanted him to curtail Hezbollah and Iran's influence in Lebanon. Apparently, it was too much for Saudi Arabia that Ayatollah Khamenei's adviser, Ali Akbar Velayati, met with Hariri and made references to victories made by Hezbollah. Hariri's resignation once again exposes how fragile Lebanon is politically, and how Saudi Arabia and Iran are both pulling the strings behind the curtain of Middle East's political theater.

ELECTION PROMISES

The latest public opinion polls in Israel reveal a heavy setback for Netanyahu and his center-right Likud party, with the center left gaining votes. The latest polls could be a direct result of the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and the prospects of a unified Palestine ready to negotiate for peace. Up until now, most Israelis didn't believe they had a serious peace partner in Hamas, which kept firing rockets on civilians. Since Hamas took over in Gaza, the right wing in Israel has won every election, which is no coincidence. The change in the Israeli mindset started to change around the time of the Second Intifada in 2000. The Islamic extremism that many Israelis see Hamas as being the symbol of has spread fear and pushed the Israeli

government to crack down on Hamas in three military operations since 2008.

The deterrent effect that the last Gaza conflict has had on Hamas, as well as the looming humanitarian crisis in Gaza, could be what finally unified Hamas and Fatah. That would explain why the polls reveal an improvement for the center left that has a reputation of being more open to negotiating with the Palestinians. It's more likely that the result of the polls is a sign of the Israelis finally having had enough of Netanyahu.

The prime minister has been under immense pressure since the first corruption scandals of him allegedly accepting gifts worth hundreds of thousands of shekels from wealthy businessmen.

Then, voice recordings of conversations with Arnon Mozes, an influential publisher, were leaked, in which Netanyahu allegedly negotiates favorable coverage for himself in Mozes' newspaper in exchange for help with sponsoring a bill that would prevent Mozes' rival, Israel Hayom, from being able to distribute its newspapers free of charge. The latest corruption case revolves around a conflict of interests, where Netanyahu allegedly knew that his lawyer was also serving as a counsel for a German submarine company in play to deliver submarines for the state of Israel.

The media has of course been attacking Netanyahu as a result of these allegations, which is why it should come

as no surprise that he is re-launching his critical rhetoric toward Iran and its power play in the region. Netanyahu's decade-old warning about Iran might come in handy now that it seems the voters are turning their back on him.

In the last election, when the polls didn't look promising for Likud, Netanyahu was desperate to mobilize support, promising there wouldn't be a Palestinian state under his leadership. Whether that was the turning point for the voters or not, he surprised most pundits who had predicted his defeat. The polls on election day showed a dead heat between the Zionist Union lead by Isaac Herzog and Netanyahu's Likud. The latter ended up with 30 seats in the Knesset, six more than Zionist Union.

This may be the incumbent's strategy for the next election due in early 2019, this time promising to eliminate any threat coming from Iran. In 2009, during a pre-election interview Netanyahu stated that thwarting the Iranian nuclear threat would be his first mission if elected.

The difference between now and 2009 is that, at least for now, the thwarting had been achieved. The threat emanating from Iran today might not be as extreme as when Netanyahu predicted a nuclear holocaust, but, instead Iran is consolidating its power on Israel's border. Luckily for Netanyahu, the threat today has diminished the old schism between him

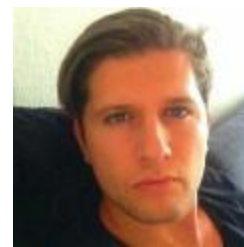
and the military establishment that now shares his opinion.

If Iran continues on its current course of arming Hezbollah and building rocket-manufacturing facilities in Syria and Lebanon, Netanyahu will have an excuse to get support for a military operation against Iranian militias and Hezbollah.

If there is anything that can help him deliver the next election, it's a successful military operation against Israel's biggest enemies.

Equally important is the fact that Netanyahu will have to deal with Trump and not Obama: It will most likely not be as hard to convince Trump to take action against a hostile Iranian regime. Netanyahu might even get support from a Sunni coalition led by Saudi Arabia, which would be an asset in future peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

The already hostile environment in the Golan Heights could very well turn out to be the battlefield where Iran and Israel finally go head to head to settle the score if Iran and Hezbollah continue to provoke an Israeli government preparing for the next election.



Jotam Confino is a Danish-Israeli journalist who covers international politics. He holds an MA in Security and Diplomacy and a BA in

International Studies.

Why Pakistan and Afghanistan Should Keep Trade Away from Politics

Mirwais Parsa

November 10, 2017

Economic and geographic interdependence should compel Afghanistan and Pakistan to reinstate trade and transit and keep it isolated from political tensions.

Since 1947, Afghanistan and Pakistan have been closely intertwined by their cultural affinity, personal contacts and large volume of trade. These ties go back hundreds of years, when the cities of Balkh, Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar and Peshawar were major transit and trade hubs along the Silk Road, in what is present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Shah Hanifi, in his *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier*, states that “the 19th century export of dried and fresh fruits and nuts from Kabul and Kandahar to India was perhaps the most lucrative of the economics of the three localities. Indian merchants financed this high volume exports, and Peshawar was an important base for a large number of bankers and financiers active in this trade.”

In 1965, Pakistan and Afghanistan signed the Afghanistan Transit and Trade Agreement (ATTA) to facilitate the flow of goods and services across their borders. ATTA was renegotiated in 2010, leading to the establishment of

the Afghanistan and Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), which provided both countries the right to use each other’s specified land routes and ports for foreign trade. Based on Articles 3 and 4 of APTTA, Pakistan provides Afghanistan with access to use Karachi, Qasim and Gwadar Ports, as well as the Wagah route for overland trade with India.

Pakistan was granted transit rights through Afghanistan’s border crossings at Ai-Khanum and Sher Khan Bandar (with Tajikistan), Aqina and Torghundi (with Turkmenistan), Islam Qala and Zaranj (with Iran), and Hairatan (with Uzbekistan). In 2012, the Pakistan-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PAJCCI) and the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Coordination Authority (APTTCA) were established to further facilitate the better implementation of APTTA.

Although the signing of the agreement led to a surge in volume of trade and transit among the two countries in the first years, its success had always been limited due to a series of seemingly endless political and security constraints.

Based on data provided by the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), the volume of trade between Afghanistan and Pakistan has dropped from \$2.1 billion in 2015-16 to \$1.5 billion in 2016-17 — a 28.6% decline. Transit trade has also fallen by 23% since 2010-11. According to a survey by PAJCCI, Pakistan’s exports to

Afghanistan have declined by 36% since the fiscal year 2010-11, while its imports from Afghanistan have risen by 169%, with the overall trade balance in favor of Pakistan. Given the innumerable border closures, political tensions and other non-tariff barriers, transit and trade might fall even more drastically in the future.

BORDER CLOSURES

Over the last 15 years, Pakistan has time and again closed the Torkham and Spin Boldak passes — the only ways for Afghanistan to reach seaports and Pakistani markets — detaining thousands of loaded trucks for weeks on both sides of the border. These sudden border closures have cost millions of dollars in trade loss for both countries, and for Afghanistan in particular as the exporter of highly perishable goods such as fruits and vegetables. Farmers and small traders took a hard hit when an entire year's worth of hard work rotted away on loaded trucks stranded on the border for days and weeks.

More recently, on October 17, according to Afghanistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Pakistan not only prevented Afghan trucks from crossing the border but also, without any prior notification, increased the customs tariff rates by up to 150% on 120 out of 741 Afghan goods being exported to Pakistan.

This may be a rational response to the changing prices and revenue attraction. However, as widely believed, it may also

be Pakistan's response to the Trump administration's South Asian policy, which is putting pressure on Islamabad to shut its safe havens for terrorists amid appeals for India's support and involvement in Afghanistan's war on terror. If the latter is true, this can be interpreted as Pakistan's retaliation against policies favoring India or Afghanistan in the region. Pakistan has been using its advantage of being the transit route and the major export and import market for Afghanistan as a bargaining chip to show that Kabul has to pay the cost of superseding Pakistan through economic and political connections.

Afghan President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani took the tripling of tariff rates on Afghanistan's exports as a justification to ban the entry of Pakistani trucks to his country via the Torkham and Spin Boldak crossings on October 23. Instead, he decreed that Pakistani trucks should unload at the border and their goods be carried to their destinations only by Afghan trucks — a practice that Pakistan has been doing since the establishment of APTTA in 2010 with respect to trade between Afghanistan and India over the Wagah crossing.

Ghani's decision is justified based on Article 54 of APTTA, which states that "the contract (APTTA) will remain in force for a period of 5 years from the date of its enforcement (2011) and shall automatically be renewed for a further period of 5 years unless terminated by

either contracting parties with valid justification(s).”

TRUST DEFICIT

It is true that the persistence of the trust deficit between Afghanistan and Pakistan has signaled both countries to reexamine their geo-economic policies and look for alternative routes for their trade. Pakistan, as the main beneficiary of the China’s ambitious One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, and specifically the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), is working on its access to Tajikistan via China using the Karakorum Highway that would make Tajikistan its gateway to Central Asia. On the other hand, Afghanistan has also expanded its trade routes and partners in the region and beyond.

Along with the partial opening of Chabahar Port — Afghanistan’s alternative to the Karachi and Gwadar Ports of Pakistan — and accession to the World Trade Organization in 2016, Afghanistan has signed 31 bilateral trade and investment agreements, 10 bilateral economic agreements and five tripartite agreements.

However, the long-standing trade relations and corporate and private consumers’ reliance on these trade routes and products make the continuation of trade and transit between Pakistan and Afghanistan essential.

The neighbors are intertwined economically to such a degree that, at

least in the short term, it is unlikely that either could find a lucrative alternative trade route or partner. The geographic proximity and the relatively low production costs for their respective exported goods help reduce the overall trade costs between the two countries. This economic and geographic interdependence and mutual gains should compel Afghanistan and Pakistan to immediately reinstate trade and transit and keep it isolated from political tensions.

Furthermore, the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) — a regional trade agreement between eight South Asian countries that was established in 2006 with the intention to promote and enhance trade and economic integration through tariff concessions — has almost failed to achieve its goals. Instead, over the last few years, numerous bilateral, trilateral and quadrilateral trade agreements have been signed, making the renewal and further extension of APTTA inevitable and a most viable option.

There may be many reasons that hindered the implementation of SAFTA: non-cooperation among members due to political disagreements, especially between Pakistan and India; the inability of SAFTA and SAARC to play a role as a regional body due, to some extent, its inadequate institutional structures; and security fears as well as poor infrastructure connecting, or failing to connect, the countries in the region.

The main beneficiaries of APTTA over the years have been Afghanistan's and Pakistan's private sectors, which found wider market alternatives to export and import from. The APTTA also gave ordinary households access to a wider basket of imported goods and services, leading to a drop in prices for goods. According to a report for the fiscal year 2015-16, more than 84,500 containers of goods traveled across the border that have directly or indirectly supported the livelihood of millions of people in both the countries.

There is not only a mutual need to immediately renew the APTTA, but also to extend it to neighboring countries. The agreement would better serve the goal of regional and cross-regional integration if it could be renegotiated and transformed into a transit corridor between Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Tajikistan. Its realization would not be difficult if trust among Afghanistan, Pakistan and India could be reestablished. In fact, India, along with Tajikistan, has showed interest for such a quadrilateral agreement, but Pakistan, while implicitly accepting the inclusion of Tajikistan, has explicitly refused the appeals for the inclusion of India in the treaty.

Due to the prevalence of chronic poverty and the threat of terrorism in South Asia, it is to the mutual benefit of all SAARC member countries to work together for a stronger regional integration. More economic and trade links would reduce poverty directly by affecting growth and income as well as acting indirectly by

increasing trade volume, investment and employment opportunities. Each country should accomplish trade liberalization and, more importantly, devise mechanisms for trade facilitation by minimizing tariffs and removing all barriers to trade.



Mirwais Parsa is an Afghan researcher who is currently pursuing a PhD in Economics at the South Asian University in New Delhi.

They Don't Really Love Trump

Iziah Thompson

November 13, 2017

It would seem there that there is a big Pyongyang problem in the middle of America.

When CNN's Ivan Watson visited Pyongyang over the summer, he complained that he hadn't had "a single 'real' conversation with a North Korean due to immense government paranoia." His Instagram pictures of literature, buildings and artwork all tell a story of an infallible protagonist: In North Korea, Kim Jong-un, his father and his grandfather are the only three heads of state the country has ever had. They have held absolute rule over the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) since its inception in 1945. Perhaps their most potent weapon of

control is the media. Despite freedom of the press and speech being enshrined in the DPRK constitution, all journalists are members of the ruling Workers' Party, and most of the media landscape is dedicated to the upkeep of the supreme leader's cult of personality.

In America, we like to joke that North Koreans may actually believe that Kim Jong-un can stop the rain and make the sun come out, because, as citizens of the United States, we have actual freedoms safeguarded by the Constitution. Yet somehow the belief that a leader can do no wrong seemingly exists among the supporters of President Donald Trump. Are the unwavering 30% plus of Americans who give their vote of confidence to Trump victims of Fox News, Alex Jones and Breitbart propaganda? Or are they afflicted with something else?

I'M NOT GOING TO BLAME HIM

The answer to this question must lie in the minds of Trump supporters themselves. Michael Kruse spent November 2016 in Pennsylvania interviewing Trump voters for Politico following the election. When he returned to see what the triumphant supporters thought about their candidate a year later, his findings were not as shocking as they were disturbing.

Take Pam Schilling, the daughter of coal miners, whose life poignantly represents the plight of this region: once a victim of low wages, now 60, retired and the mother of a son who died of a heroin

overdose in April. If anyone knows about how bad things have been in Appalachia, she does. Shilling expressed that things hadn't changed; if anything, they'd gotten worse. But, when Kruse asked her what would happen if the rest of Trump's presidency runs in the same vein as this past year, she responded, "I'm not going to blame him. Absolutely not."

Kruse followed by asking if anything could change her mind about Trump? "Nope," was Shilling's definitive answer.

He found the same answer again and again in the small Western Pennsylvania municipality of Johnstown. Joey Del Signore, a 61-year-old local, told Kruse just after the election that the newly elected president had six-months to a year to fulfill his campaign promises. Upon Kruse's return, Del Signore had not only moved this deadline — it had disappeared altogether.

"Everybody I talk to," Del Signore said, "realizes it's not Trump who's dragging his feet. Trump's probably the most diligent, hardest-working president we've ever had in our lifetimes. It's not like he sleeps in till noon and goes golfing every weekend like the last president did." When Kruse informed him that President Trump actually golfs more than Obama did, and by a lot, Del Signore quickly changed the subject.

As Kruse visited house after house, going down the list of unaccomplished promises — a failed Obamacare repeal,

the unbuilt wall with Mexico, the continued opioid epidemic, the still-empty steel mills and coal mines — there was an unnerving answer that kept surfacing: “I like him.” Someone added, “Because he does what he says.” It would seem that there is a big Pyongyang problem in the middle of America.

RACIST IN AMERICA

Granted, descriptions of Central Appalachia today don't sound very much like America. The region, bordering Virginia, made-up of land in Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia and parts of Western Pennsylvania, is the front line in an opioid crisis, declared a public health emergency by Trump in October. The heart of coal country has been rotted by the loss of jobs and a pharmaceutical industry that lied about just how addictive prescription drugs can be.

People can't take on all the blame for a system that fined companies a few million dollars for misleading information, while these same companies made billions hooking Americans on heroin-like substances. Addicted to legal highs, they can hardly be blamed for moving onto heroin once prescription drugs became too expensive. Nor can they be blamed for the coal industry's downturn. But all this is not why they voted for Donald Trump. What Kruse discovered was the real impetus that drove the 2016 election, much the way that Christopher Columbus discovered America.

One factor surfaced time and again in the interviews, more often than a love of Trump.

During the reporter's conversation with Del Signore, the NFL protest against America's treatment of black people came up. Del Signore went on to explain how equality must be earned, the way his Italian ancestors earned it. He had to stop himself from saying that they don't deserve equality because of their race. The stern daughter of coal country, Pam Schilling, ended her interview agreeing with her husband that the NFL stood for: “Niggers For Life.”

An American National Election Association study found that racial animus was the number one predictor of whether or not someone voted for Trump. Economic anxiety was in fact a low predictor, even among white voters. For those who see Trump as a leader being carried by the disadvantaged, “brainwashed” millions, think again.

Wouldn't it be so much easier if the problem was that Fox News had morphed minds of old conservatives, or that of the underdogs reaching out for help? If the issue was a rational voter problem, that would be something we can understand and address.

But, unlike in North Korea, where all information is tightly controlled and all dissent is met with incarceration and sometimes death, people in Wilmington, Enid or Johnstown can turn Fox off. They can disagree with the things the leader of their country says or does.

They can opine on policy. When you compare the desolation that both North Korean and Rust Belt residents have seen, it's hard not to see the power and appeal of a supreme savior.

Yet the difference between the North Koreans and those in the US Rust Belt is that one requires the complete control of the means of information and all aspects of life to create conformity. The other doesn't really care about any of that; they're just happy the black man is finally out of the White House.

Is everyone who voted for Trump racist? Not necessarily. But if you chose to vote for the candidate who began his political career by questioning the first black president's birthplace, at the very least you made being racist in America easier.



Iziah Thompson is the policy analyst and editor at Dailyclout.io and a graduate student at NYU Wagner, who received his BA in

Political Science from Monmouth University. He has been published in the Huff Post Blog and served for a year in Americorps, building infrastructure and responding to disaster in the American South. His experience includes work in DC sex trafficking researching and advocacy for the Darfuri Diaspora from South Sudan. He is an advocate of the right to an inclusiveness data-driven democracy, but believes most in a well-informed citizenry.

The Future of Spain's Territorial Integrity

Kinga Brudzinska

November 16, 2017

It is unlikely that recent developments in Catalonia will have an impact on the territorial organization of Spain.

Politicians in Madrid and citizens all over Spain accept the fact that Catalonia's dream is to become an independent republic. However, nobody thought that the pro-independence coalition would go so far as to make its recent (and reckless) attempt to declare unilateral separation. Catalonia's regional president, Carles Puigdemont, completely ignored both the signals of cooperation coming from Moncloa (Spain's central government) and the rulings of the Spanish Constitutional Court. As a result, Catalonia has seen its autonomy suspended and most of its leadership imprisoned.

To further complicate matters, thousands of companies have moved their headquarters from the region, Spaniards are boycotting Catalan products, and Barcelona has just lost the chance to host the EU Medicines Agency after it relocates from London.

Spain has faced numerous crises over the past decade. The deep economic and financial crisis of 2008 was followed in quick succession by the anti-austerity Indignados movement in 2011, multiple corruption scandals at both central and regional levels, and a year-long process of forming a stable government in 2016.

Conversely, a recent survey conducted by the Center for Sociology Report (CIS), a Madrid-based pollster, found that Catalan independence ranks second (29%) among Spain's three top problems, behind unemployment (66.2%) and just ahead of corruption and fraud (28.3%).

Accordingly, the recent crisis over the Catalan question following its illegal referendum and non-binding declaration of independence is another symptom of the country's wider problems. The crisis also underpins a complex clash of democratic legitimacies, where inter-periphery tensions constitute a permanent feature of Spain's political landscape.

This is amply demonstrated by the findings of another poll conducted by the Catalan-based Center for Opinion Studies. While the overwhelming majority of respondents want Catalonia to gain more autonomy from Madrid (64.6%), many are also in favor of remaining part of (49.3%), rather than separating from, Spain (40.2%). Not to mention the fact that many Spaniards from Valencia, Galicia or Andalusia would also like to have a greater say on the future of their country. Indeed, the 1978 Spanish Constitution states that sovereignty resides with its people, which, in turn, implies that all Spaniards would have to agree on letting Catalonia leave the union.

OPERATION DIALOGUE

That said, separatism in Catalonia is partly rooted in its culture and history. While the region has never been independent in the modern sense, it nevertheless retains a strong regional identity and its own language, and was not fully incorporated into Spain until the early 18th century. In more recent times, nationalist parties have contributed to Spanish governance (1977-2012) and signed up to the constitution. However, mutual mistrust between the regional and central government has intensified, especially since the last economic crisis hit Spain. Madrid's response left the majority of Catalans unhappy and feeling that Spain simply takes too much of their money.

The mobilization of nationalist sentiment and civil society gathered further momentum in 2010, following the Constitutional Court's decision to partially outlaw the 2006 Catalan Statute, which was approved both by a local referendum and the central government. While reviewing the statute, which defines the scope of self-government within the Spanish state, the court decided that promoting Catalan as the region's main official language and calling Catalonia a nation violates the Spanish Constitution. What followed was years of inactivity on both sides to ease tensions.

It's hardly surprising, therefore, that the "operation dialogue" launched by Mariano Rajoy's government in 2016, which consisted of frequent visits by the deputy prime minister to Barcelona and a promise of €4.2 billion in infrastructural

investment by 2020, was destined to fail.

It is unlikely that recent developments in Catalonia will have an impact on the territorial organization of Spain, as it will most probably remain part of the kingdom for several reasons. First, secessionist parties have failed so far to win a clear majority in the Catalan Parliament, and many Catalans remain wary of independence.

This feeds into the second point that support for independence may be crumbling. Prior to recent events, the ousted regional government failed to deliver on a key promise made to the Catalan people: a binding and effective referendum with legal guarantees. Moreover, even though the Catalan government claimed to have the required legitimacy, it did not in the end declare independence. Additionally, some high-profile secessionists have recently downplayed their enthusiasm for independence; these include former regional President Arturo Mas, who admitted that Barcelona was “not ready for it.”

It should also be pointed out that Catalonia’s political parties were very quick to accept the new reality of Article 155 that removed the incumbent Catalan government and called for regional elections. Finally, world leaders are hardly falling over themselves to welcome Catalonia into the international fold, with the exception of Venezuela. As the European Commission was quick to point out, even if a referendum were

to be organized in line with Spain’s Constitution, it would mean that an independent Catalonia would fall into the so-called “Barroso doctrine” and find itself outside of the European Union.

WHICHEVER SCENARIO

The upcoming regional elections to be held on December 21 will be key in determining the future political landscape of both Catalonia and Spain. Recent polls suggest that non-separatist parties will win a majority (52%) in Parliament with the pro-independence Esquerra Republicana being the largest party (27%).

It’s a scenario that should inspire both sides of the independence debate to moderate their positions and become constructive coalition partners. Smooth cooperation at the regional level would also vastly improve relations with Moncloa. This “new beginning” would not lead to a review of the Spanish Constitution, which could address the steps of a potential secession by Catalonia, but it could result in Catalonia being granted even more autonomy.

At the end of September, Spain’s government said it was willing to discuss giving Catalonia “more money and greater financial autonomy if the region backed down from its demands for independence.” Back then the offer was not accepted, but it means that there is a room for maneuver on both sides. On the other hand, if the pro-independence movement does the unlikely and wins big on December 21, it will have a

strong enough mandate to negotiate with Madrid for a countrywide, binding and effective referendum with legal guarantees. What will then follow is discussions regarding constitutional amendments that pave the way for secession.

Whichever scenario becomes reality, Madrid and Barcelona must stop blaming each other and restart genuine cooperation. Christmas would be the ideal time for Moncloa to begin a meaningful dialogue on all levels of society, taking care to include Spain's youth, representatives from the nonprofit sector, businesses, finance and academia.

Only by erasing misunderstandings and ignorance on both sides will it be possible to turn the current negative dynamics into a positive and forward-looking development for all Spaniards, the region and the EU.



Kinga Brudzińska is a senior research fellow at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Bratislava, Slovakia. She received a PhD in Political

Science from the University of Warsaw and an MA in Economics from the University of Economics in Krakow. She also holds a Diploma in Latin American Studies from TEC Monterrey in Mexico. Prior to joining GLOBSEC, she worked at the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

For Emmanuel Macron, Is Africa Just PR?

Hugo Norton

November 23, 2017

Some of Macron's diplomatic initiatives are in danger of looking more like convenient photo opportunities if they fail to deliver results.

French President Emmanuel Macron rarely admits that he lacks experience when it comes to high office and foreign affairs. He may have demurred from admitting to Time magazine (which recently published a new interview with him) that he wants to be "leader of the free world," but actions speak louder than words. In crafting his bold approach to foreign affairs, Macron has opted for a risky strategy: mask inexperience with bravado.

From Bonn to Bamako, France's young leader has embarked on a series of interventions that critics could argue have more to do with improving his own public image than finding solutions to the planet's most pressing problems.

Macron has demonstrated a particular penchant for flexing his underdeveloped foreign policy muscles in Africa, where his keenness to act without first assessing the consequences of rashly thought out decisions could well come back to haunt him further down the line.

Capitalizing on fears about the ongoing threat posed by Islamist extremism at home, Macron earlier this month used a two-day visit to Abu Dhabi to signal

France's willingness to tackle jihadi groups in other parts of the world once ISIS has been completely routed from its crumbling "caliphate."

Despite the fact that France's overstretched military is already committed to counterterrorism operations against al-Qaeda-backed militants in parts of its former colonial territories in West Africa as well as patrolling the streets of Paris, Macron appeared happy to suggest he might be agreeable to extending operations to the Horn of Africa, Libya and the Sahel, taking on other Islamist organizations such as Boko Haram.

In a clear extension of the so-called *Françafrique* policy, Macron seems to think the country's colonial links to West Africa bestow upon him license to act in the region and play the "tough on terror" card against Islamist extremism. France's contribution to the G5 Sahel initiative is a living example of this, giving the young president a signature opportunity to lead. And he has taken full advantage: Macron is the project's chief global advocate, convincing his global counterparts to help fund and arm an alliance of Sahel arms to secure borders and fight militants.

In the short term, these tactics may play well with a French electorate that has only just seen an end to a two-year state of emergency. However, offering to jump in bed with a number of unreliable partners could cause serious problems for France further down the line. Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger

(the five members of the Sahel initiative) are all fragile states whose histories are a series of ethnic conflicts, personal rule and military coups. Chad's president, Idriss Deby, is among the region's longest-serving leaders, having assumed power in 1990, while the other leaders have done little to improve governance.

Macron can hardly argue those leaders are getting any better. Mauritania's president and former coup leader Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz looks to gearing up for an undemocratic power grab as part of a bid to remain in office past his constitutional mandate.

Earlier this month, opposition parties staged rallies to pressure the president not to run for a third term in office, describing his rule as "a real ordeal for the country." Human rights groups have condemned the government's treatment of dissenters.

The state regulator ordered the country's five privately owned news outlets to shut down on procedural grounds, while Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed, a blogger who was sentenced to death for criticizing Mauritania's caste system in what the courts deemed was a blasphemous act, has become a byword for political abuse.

If Aziz manages to hold onto power in Mauritania, Macron could be faced with awkward questions about France's commitment to democracy, especially since many have seen the G5 Sahel

force as rubber-stamping an administration hungry for international recognition.

Macron's confused response to the ongoing migrant crisis is another potential Achilles' heel. He initially pledged to fall in line with German Chancellor Angela Merkel's approach while on the election trail, promising that he would commit France to taking its fair share of refugees. Since then, the French president has been notably inconsistent on immigration over his first half year in office.

Aside from being called out for suggesting Africa's true challenge is "civilizational," Macron has pursued a number of policies that call into question his purported enthusiasm for Merkel's open door policy.

The French president's plan for migrant requests for asylum to be processed in Africa was labelled "racist and inhumane" in the European Parliament, while refugee charities have been highly critical of the way the French government has treated migrants forced to sleep in the streets following the closure of the Calais Jungle shantytown last October.

Some of Macron's other diplomatic initiatives do appear to have bolstered his standing on the world stage, but are in danger of looking more like convenient photo opportunities if they fail to deliver results. In July, the French president hosted talks in Paris that resulted in Libya's two rival leaders

agreeing to a ceasefire and free and fair elections early next year. Four months on from those talks, stability on the ground in Libya seems a long way off. The UN envoy to the country warns Tripoli it is not ready for elections.

Similarly, Macron in August brought much fanfare to a new Presidential Council for Africa, designed to help him identify and address challenges facing the continent. Aside from the odd appointment, little has been heard of the council's progress since.

Much of Africa's Sahel is highly unstable and requires well-planned diplomatic assistance from France and the rest of Europe.

Unfortunately, Macron's regional policy is wafer-thin and is primarily motivated by a desire to improve the president's standing on the global stage. While that has garnered the French president short-term PR wins and a number of photo ops, it will likely end up doing him (and more importantly, the people of the Sahel) more harm than good.



Hugo Norton is an Africa policy analyst and adviser at an economic consultancy firm in Brussels, Belgium. He is also an aspiring freelance writer and passionate observer of the politics and lifestyle in Africa.

Will Jacob Zuma Drag the ANC Down With Him?

Jan Hofmeyr

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As the ANC's conference approaches, many within the governing party are beginning to count the cost of a leader who lacks the public's trust.

In December 2007, delegates at the National Elective Conference of South Africa's ruling African National Congress (ANC) took an ill-fated gamble on the party's future. So deep was the resentment of the technocratic impulses of its former president, Thabo Mbeki, that the world's oldest liberation movement, once led by icons like Nelson Mandela and Joe Slovo, lost its senses and elected Jacob Zuma.

A highly compromised character, Zuma stood trial on 783 corruption charges at that time and shortly before had been acquitted on rape charges, after admitting to having had sexual intercourse with the daughter of a close friend.

This decision, which the ANC leadership at the time hailed as a product of the organization's "collective wisdom," has become its collective nightmare. Once in office, Zuma proceeded to leverage the ANC's cadre deployment policy and a powerful presidency, bequeathed by the Mbeki administration, to entrench an intricate patronage network throughout party and state, aimed at enriching his family and sustaining those dependent on his incumbency. Zuma never

managed — nor made any serious effort — to shake off the controversy that dogged him before his ascension to the country's highest office. For most of his presidency, it was never necessary to do so. As power shifted within the party in the wake of the 2007 elective conference, so it did within the state, where Zuma allies took up key positions within the prosecuting authorities and intelligence agencies.

While several of his patronage deployments have been turned down by the courts for being either under-qualified or unsuitable for their respective positions, many other weak appointees made their way into the governance system, resulting in the erosion of good governance practices in key departments, law enforcement agencies and state-owned enterprises (SOE).

As a consequence, the latest BTI 2016 South Africa Country Report of the Bertelsmann Foundation pointed to growing public anger with "the proliferation of corruption and incompetence at various levels of government." In the foundation's most recent Transformation Index (BTI), the country's overall score for democracy declined from 8.70 in 2006 to 7.60 in 2016. Not surprisingly, when S&P Global and Fitch, two of the three major global ratings agencies, downgraded the sovereign along with key SOEs to junk status earlier this year, both singled out policy uncertainty as the major contributing factor to their decision.

As the ANC prepares to elect Zuma's successor in December this year — although not incorporated in the party's constitution, the practice of a two term presidency is entrenched — many within the party, including some of his most vocal erstwhile supporters, are counting the cost of a toxic, predatory presidency that was unleashed upon the state. Amid conditions of anemic growth and the highest unemployment levels in a decade, the consequences of his mismanagement are increasingly widening the gap between reality and the party's slogan of a "better life for all."

ALL-TIME LOW

Not only will the next ANC leader inherit a morally compromised and deeply-divided party — recently, up to 35 ANC members voted in favor of a parliamentary no-confidence vote against Zuma — but there is for the first time no certainty that the organization's next chairman or chairwoman will return to the Union Buildings in Pretoria as the country's head of the state after the 2019 general elections. In the 2016 local government elections, the party ceded control of the country's economic hub, Johannesburg, the administrative capital, Pretoria, and Nelson Mandela Bay, the largest metropolitan area in the home province of former President Nelson Mandela.

Overall, ANC support dropped to 54% from the 66% that it recorded two years earlier during the 2014 general elections.

The reasons for this decline all point in one direction. In the 2015 Afrobarometer survey, only 34% of respondents indicated trust in the office of the president — the lowest ranking for any ANC leader since the country's political transition almost a quarter of a century ago. In a more recent poll by the 24-hour news station, eNCA, in May this year, 62% of ANC voters disapproved of Zuma's leadership.

But also on other fronts the tide has started to turn against Zuma. In March 2016, the country's Constitutional Court found him to be in violation of his constitutional obligations in a matter relating to the use of government funds for the upgrading of his private residence.

In May the same year, the Pretoria High Court ordered the reinstatement of the 783 corruption charges that were controversially dropped by the National Prosecuting Authority shortly after he assumed office. Just a month later, a damning report by the country's public protector ordered a judicial inquiry into alleged improper influence by the Gupta family — three politically-connected brothers, with close ties to the president — not only in the awarding of government contracts, but even the hiring and firing of government ministers.

Importantly, it also asked pertinent questions about the extent to which Zuma may have compromised the integrity of his office through his relationship with the Gupta family, which

also happened to employ his son. In 2017, the cost of his incumbency continued to exert its toll on the ANC as the systematic release of leaked email correspondence between Gupta associates gave further credence to existing allegations about their involvement in the capture of key state institutions, and more court appearances are scheduled in relation to his reinstated corruption charges.

POTENTIAL SUCCESSORS

None of this bodes well for ANC attempts to revive the party's fortunes before 2019. To do so, it will have to distance itself from Zuma and his legacy. Yet, driven by a profound fear of being prosecuted by a hostile candidate, Zuma is now in survival mode and backed by a deeply entrenched and fiercely loyal patronage network that has much to lose from his departure.

The president will be pushing hard for his chosen candidate, his ex-wife and former African Union Chairperson, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, to succeed him. For the same reason, his faction will also be pulling out all stops to put obstacles in the way of Dlamini-Zuma's main contender, deputy president Cyril Ramaphosa.

For many disillusioned South Africans, who have witnessed economic decline and a drop in governance standards under the Zuma administration, the election of Dlamini-Zuma will mean only one thing — more of the same. And more of the same will mean that the

party will ultimately be dragged down below the 50% threshold in two years' time. Given Zuma's own prediction several years ago that the ANC will rule until Jesus Christ returns, the second coming may indeed be upon us.



Jan Hofmeyr is the head of research and policy at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Cape Town, South Africa. He

writes in his private capacity. Hofmeyr is one of 246 country experts who worked on the latest edition of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index, BTI 2016.
