

Fair Observer

Monthly



October 2023

Fair Observer
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



October 2023

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

CONTENTS

About Fair Observer	6
Share Your Perspective	7
Can You See the Link Between God and Justice?	8
Mehdi Alavi	
India Is Growing Confident in Its New Role as a Powerful Nation	11
Glenn Carle	
Why Putin — Battered, Not Broken — Retains Power for Now	14
Marko Mocevic	
Were There Two Irish Civil Wars, or Just One?	17
John Bruton	
This Is Not an “Ordinary” Israel– Hamas Conflict	21
Gary Grappo	
Why Is Congress So Polarized? It’s the Institutions	24
Josep M. Colomer	
Revealing Analysis: The UN Is Not Impartial In Cyprus	26
Hasan Ünal	
The Crusades Revisited and Arab Duplicity on Palestine	27
David Holdridge	
Search of the Elusive Is a Human Thing	31
Ranjani Iyer Mohanty	
New Armenian Ethnic Cleansing Is Bad for the World	34
Timur Nersesov	

How to Invest: Forget the Needle, Buy the Haystack	36
Alex Gloy	
Justin Trudeau Is Now Playing a Risky Game With India	40
Kanwal Sibal, Vikram Sood	
Robert Fico Returns: Will Slovakia Become the New Hungary?	44
Daniel Martinek, Peter Techet	
How the New Israel-Hamas War Threatens the Middle East	47
Gary Grappo	
Want to Stop War Crimes? Cut Off Aid to Israel Now	50
Nafees Ahmad	

ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Can You See the Link Between God and Justice?

Mehdi Alavi
October 01, 2023

The majority of the world's population believes in God and believes that there will be justice for the unrighteous. But when it comes to politics, we let famous murderers go unpunished and even praise them. It is time to ask ourselves how we are treating one another while going about our affairs in this transient life.

There is not a culture in the world that does not have some sort of belief in the supernatural. In many cultures, seemingly independently, people have conceived of physical reality as coming from some transcendent source that is unique, purposeful and good. Plato called this source the Form of the Good. Hindus call it Brahman. The Prophet Muhammad, in his Arabic language, preached of Allah. For simplicity, I will call this source God.

Many people who lack faith in God presume that he is just some sort of meme — an idea that got popular at some time, being repeated by enough people. They think that the idea of God will eventually fade away. On April 8, 1966, Time ran the cover story, “Is God Dead?” The article projected that people will have less and less God in their daily lives.

Time's projection has been proven wrong. There is some evidence to suggest that belief in the divine and religion are as natural as language or culture. Belief in God has coexisted with modern science for hundreds of years now, and so far, there is no sign that God has faded away from our

lives. In an April 2022 survey, Gallup International discovered that more than two-thirds of the world's population believes in God, a “life after death” and “heaven and hell.”

Most people do not just believe that there is a God, but that there is life after death, and that there are rewards and punishments there. We do not only believe that God exists, but that he is a just God. We believe that human beings are free agents who are responsible for their own actions. If this is so, God must reward us for our good deeds and punish us for our bad ones.

We feel in our bones that the good will not be unrewarded or the bad unpunished. But in this life, we hardly see it. In most places, a poor person stealing a loaf of bread is punished. Meanwhile, powerful people kill and get away with it. And they steal the bread of the poor. In the 2008 financial crisis, we all saw many executives who manipulated the market for personal gains causing much poverty and destruction worldwide. However, they walked away with large bonuses instead of being tried and going to prison. Murderers get away without a penalty. Sometimes, they are celebrities, like O. J. Simpson. Sometimes, they are heads of state.

The criminals of the world think that they can get away with their deeds because they are not punished by the laws of men. But most of humanity agrees that there will be a higher and more certain justice.

Let's think of global values, justice and peace

Right and wrong are not just social conventions, differing from place to place. Sure, different cultures may agree or disagree on the details of morality. But if you look at human beings as a whole, you will find that the content of morality is strikingly the same.

Universally, human beings admire consideration, compassion, love, empathy, forgiveness, charity, sharing, justice, looking after parents, helping the weak and so on. They condemn murder, harm, contempt, hatred, apathy, theft, revenge, selfishness, rape, lying, hoarding, ignoring parents, abusing the weak and so on.

Though we might sometimes like to deny it, human beings know the difference between right and wrong. We must be conscious of our thoughts and deeds. We must think and reason before embarking on any action by assessing its impact on other people. As the maxim goes, treat others as you want to be treated.

Do we take this seriously? Do we really live as if we believed that good were good and evil were evil? Or do we allow ourselves to compartmentalize, to forget evil when it does not concern us personally? Do we fall into the habit of condemning in others what we excuse for ourselves?

If a police officer pursuing a criminal kills an innocent person in San Francisco, we rightfully stand on the side of the innocent victim and demand justice. However, if a drone pursuing a perceived enemy, kills thousands of innocent people in Kandahar, Afghanistan, do we make as much noise? If the atrocities are even reported by the biased media, we condone them as collateral damage. Where is the objectivity? In the eyes of a just God, is there any difference between killing an innocent person whether he lives in San Francisco or Kandahar?

We know this. We want to believe that this is how a just God would judge, but we do not wish to judge justly ourselves.

If we believe in justice, why do we let the wicked go free?

Recently, a gathering in New York City honoring Henry Kissinger, former US national security advisor and secretary of state, came to my attention. Numerous people came to celebrate the man's 100th birthday, and mainstream media covered the event. I was shocked. How low have we gotten, honoring one of the world's worst criminals?

As they say, the good die young. Kissinger has enjoyed the warmth of the sunlight for a century. According to most people, this world is all he has to enjoy. Once dead, he, like his boss Richard Nixon, will have to answer for the killings of millions of innocent people in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam; supporting juntas in overthrowing Argentinian and Chilean democracies; empowering Pakistan and Indonesia in the genocides in Bangladesh and East Timor, and countless other atrocities across the world. God will demand an account from both of them for the killing, maiming and injuring of every innocent child, man and woman. Those who shared in their crimes by enabling, collaborating in or executing their designs, or by honoring them after the fact, will share in their punishment as well. After visiting Cambodia, Anthony Bourdain said, "Once you've been to Cambodia, you'll never stop wanting to beat Henry Kissinger to death with your bare hands ... and you will never understand why he's not sitting in the dock at The Hague next to Milošević."

Perhaps there is still time for him to repent. I hope that he does — before the world. Repenting must mean acknowledging one's misdeeds and trying to right them, to the extent that it is within one's power.

Justice in the afterlife applies to all. We will all account for our deeds. None of us will get away

with it if we have inflicted harm on innocent people whether in our own family, community, country or war.

Most of us believe that God will not forget the suffering of the innocent, but we behave as if he did. We treat murderers like respectable people, or even heroes, as if one's inequities were forgotten when human beings forget about them. But if justice is real, God is not so fickle. Neither should we be.

We cannot allow ourselves to continue to be so deeply unserious. We have created a dangerous world by ignoring justice and God in our national affairs. Led by the US, all of the permanent members of the UN Security Council indulge in profits from armament. The huge US armory and arms production have turned the world into an arms race. We not only accept that nations own these instruments of death, but see them as a source of prestige.

The proliferation of these weapons is responsible for much of wars and destruction in our world. If only our political leaders paused and contemplated how to justify their actions in the afterlife, we would have had much less armament and a far better world. We would not provoke conflict with sanctions against nations like Cuba and Iran or turn a blind eye to conflicts in Libya and Syria and wars in Somalia and Ukraine.

Let's honor the will of people

The majority of the world's population believes that there is a higher justice. If we truly believe in democracy, the world's order must change to reflect that reality. The UN must change, dismantle if necessary, to hold countries (powerful or not) responsible for waging unjustifiable wars and bring the responsible persons to justice.

No longer must we pretend that inequities will be forgotten with the mere passage of time. We all remember the US waged war on Iraq without any provocation and under a false pretext. None of the guilty parties ever faced justice. George W. Bush and his conspirators are freely moving across the country. Some like Donald H. Rumsfeld have already died without facing justice.

Never again should the scenario in Iraq be repeated anywhere in the world, where a powerful country wages an unjustified war on a weaker one. Human rights must be redefined to count for the innocent victims of wars.

God is not dead. Dead, rather, is the pretense of wealth and power to impunity. Reportedly, two Saudi officers were recently executed for disobeying a command to bomb civilian targets in Yemen. These were men who believed in a higher justice, who preferred the judgment of God over the judgment of men. We should take a lesson from their brave example. We will all be held accountable for our deeds; we must hold each other accountable, too. If we can be aware of this truth — a truth most of us already believe in — we will enjoy a far more prosperous and peaceful world.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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India Is Growing Confident in Its New Role as a Powerful Nation

Glenn Carle
October 06, 2023

India has always been a large nation, but it is only now beginning to flex its muscles and project influence on the world stage. Most educated Indians are aware that their country is a nascent superpower. From GDP growth to international military cooperation to covert operations in Canada, all the signs point to India's growing confidence in its new role.

My plan was to hike in the Himalayas for three weeks. But my hotel room phone rang early on my second morning in Mumbai. “Mr. Carle, your car is waiting for you. And your two ... guides.” “What car?” I asked. “What ‘guides’? And who are you?” “Your car is downstairs, waiting.” Well, I thought, there is no escaping my earlier life in the CIA. I went downstairs.

It turned out that elements close to the top of the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi were aware of my arrival and had decided to “invite” me on a tour. Eventually, they told me that they were dissatisfied with the image the American media presented of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The Modi people wanted to show me “what India is really like,” and what the BJP government was seeking to accomplish.

They insisted that they were not intolerant, much less the fascistic, anti-Muslim nationalists some observers were describing them to be. Those were the biased criticisms of the anglicized,

socialistic English-speaking Congress party elites with whom foreign journalists interact. For three weeks, they took me all over western and northern India and gave me better entrée to the corridors of power than most senior diplomats could ever hope to obtain. They showed me how India's power elites, both BJP and Congress party supporters, see India, as well as what the Modi government wants for the country.

India's national self-image is changing

For a thousand years, India was ruled by Muslims, like the Mughals, and later by the British. Hindus were powerless subjects. But Modi's BJP government sees India as a Hindu nation. This is the concept of Hindutva, a view of Indian society and government, first enunciated during India's struggles for independence against the British, which has guided the BJP since 1989.

Hindutva considers the Hindu religion as the basis of Indian culture and society. This is a powerful nationalistic break from the millennium of colonial subjugation and from the first sixty years of Indian independence, in which India embraced a secular, civic nationalist identity.

The Congress-party opponents of the BJP consider this concept of Indian society and government to be a dangerous betrayal of India's multicultural, tolerant and socialist post-colonial democracy. A majority of Hindus seem to feel empowered by Hindutva, however. Modi and the BJP consistently win substantial support at the polls and in opinion polling, and Modi's reelection in 2024 seems likely.

Hindutva strikes me as a powerful resurgence of national pride, but nationalism also can foster dangerous intolerance. Human Rights Watch finds that there has been an increase in protests against alleged government human rights violations since Modi's election and that government use of

violence to suppress dissent has also increased. The BJP dismisses such criticisms: “The BJP is at least as democratic as the corrupt and totalitarian Congress party and the Gandhis,” I was told repeatedly by BJP supporters.

India is a rising world power

One sees evidence of India’s economic dynamism everywhere. Partially finished new highways and skyscrapers loom overhead even as cows continue to sit placidly in the middle of major roads. Most educated Indians see themselves as citizens of a nascent world power. I was told repeatedly that “over 250 million” Indians have risen from extreme poverty in recent years, the BJP supporters intimating that this was due to Modi’s economic liberalism and industrial policies. The United Nations Development Programme presents a more nuanced picture, showing a decline in poverty that, while indeed impressive, began long before the BJP came to power.

Many Indians do feel that India’s bureaucratic sclerosis continues to slow economic development. Yet the World Bank now ranks India 63rd in its 2023 “Ease of Doing Business” report, up from 140th in 2014. When I was there, I sensed a country defining itself more by a burgeoning world-class economy than by timeless squalor, pre-modern stasis and colonial bureaucracy.

Much of India’s media expresses a simplistic, jingoistic nationalism due to pressure from the BJP according to government critics. Old ways of thought die hard, too: I heard many statements about how Russia remained a “trustworthy friend” and that the US was predatory and had sided with Pakistan for over sixty years.

These are vestigial echoes of a defensive, postcolonial, anti-Western, Congress-party-led India. The power elites with whom I met proudly highlighted India’s growing confidence as a global

power. India is involving itself in the geopolitics of the Caucasus and the Indo-Pacific, aspiring to set global standards for semiconductor chips, building a world-class space program and diversifying its arms purchases as it develops its own arms production industry.

Many of the foreign policy experts with whom I spoke now consider India’s top strategic priority to be counterbalancing China. India’s leadership in the “Global South” or the non-aligned movements, participation in the BRICS organization (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and increasing involvement in Indo-Pacific military maneuvers and in US-centric organizations such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue all seek to strengthen India as a nascent, independent global peer to the US, China and Russia, but above all they seek to counterbalance China. This is why Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar talks of India as a “south-western power” — part of the Global South — but with “very strong bonding” to the West and to Western norms.

India has long sought a seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The UN is nearly unreformable, though, and as a result, the world’s powers will slowly create alternative arrangements to address some of the problems of global governance. The G7 grouping of the world’s richest democracies has taken on increased strategic importance following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. One can thus expect India to pursue, and probably achieve, G7 membership, making a “G8.”

The death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar signals new audaciousness from a rising India

Nothing shows more strikingly India’s new bold and assertive attitude than the recent incident that occurred between New Delhi and Ottawa over the death of Hardeep Singh Nijjar.

Nijjar, a Canadian citizen, had been active in Sikh separatist politics. He organized an unofficial referendum among Sikhs resident in Canada on the independence from India of a new Sikh “country” named Khalistan. In June, Nijjar was gunned down in British Columbia. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau declared the killing had been an assassination, planned by India.

India, of course, denies having assassinated Nijjar, but for years has characterized him as a “terrorist.” India accused him of conspiring to organize a terrorist attack in 2018. India says that Trudeau has made his accusation in order to curry domestic political favor among Canada’s large Sikh population. It is likely, however, that Canada is telling the truth, given the diplomatic costs to Canada’s international standing of making spurious allegations about assassination and Trudeau’s explicit references to “credible allegations” collected by Canada’s intelligence agencies. The countries mutually expelled diplomat to show their anger. Relations between Canada and India have never been worse.

More significant than the tensions between India and Canada, however, is what the assassination says about the “stronger” India of Prime Minister Modi and about the Indian intelligence service’s apparently more aggressive role in India’s foreign policies.

“They need to understand that this is not the same India,” said Vineet Joshi, a senior BJP official. India now, he asserted, “is much stronger under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi.”

India’s foreign intelligence organization is the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). Its mission is the same as those of the American CIA, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, or Britain’s MI6: to collect foreign intelligence on countries of strategic interest. But the RAW, like these other organizations, also conducts “covert actions.”

Traditionally, the RAW has carried out covert operations against targets, including Sikh terrorists, within or near Indian territory. These operations are reputed to have included assassinations, but Nijjar’s assassination would be the first that the RAW is believed to have committed in a Western nation.

States often believe that covert actions offer them solutions to otherwise intractable problems. They believe that there will be no political cost because the actions are “covert.” The reality, however, is that most covert actions are eventually traced to the service that conducts them. When they become publicly known, they cause significant unintended negative consequences — just as we are observing with India’s likely assassination of Nijjar.

It is too early to know whether the “benefits” of the RAW’s assassination of Nijjar — eliminating an individual threatening India’s political integrity — outweigh the damage to India–Canada relations, to India’s standing and influence in the world and the possible increased hostility of India’s long-disgruntled Sikh population in consequence. Nijjar’s death, however, surely signals that India sees itself as “stronger” and freer to pursue its objectives unilaterally than at any time since Indian independence in 1947.

The event illustrates how India is now flexing the sometimes-obtuse muscles of a superpower. It also reveals a significant global expansion of the RAW’s covert actions, transgressing international and democratic norms in pursuit of what India considers vital national interests.

A newer, bolder India moves into the future

I never so much as glimpsed the Himalayas during my three weeks in India. Instead, I saw an India that will soon be the world’s third-largest economy, that is proud to now be the fourth nation

to land on the Moon and that is playing a progressively large and confident role in international affairs. I saw an India that seeks influence in the “Global South” and closer relations with the West to counterbalance China. I saw an India that is struggling to overcome its colonial and socialist bureaucratic legacy and historical hostility to the West. I saw an India that, as it recently demonstrated, is ready to pursue its perceived national interests globally in spite of the costs.

It seemed to me that the BJP, in its efforts to free India of the harmful effects of a thousand years of foreign domination and three generations of socialist torpor and crony leadership, risks alienating its non-Hindu populations and sliding into intolerant majoritarian rule and a strong-man system of government. We will have to see.

[[Newsweek Japan](#) first published a version of this piece.]

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Why Putin — Battered, Not Broken — Retains Power for Now

Marko Mocevic
October 07, 2023

President Vladimir Putin has been Russia’s de facto tsar for over two decades. Some international observers have predicted that military setbacks in the Russia-Ukraine War and the rebellion of Wagner Group’s founder Yevgeny Prigozhin could cause Putin’s demise. They are wrong. Russians see things differently. Putin’s grip on power remains as strong as ever.

Dramatic scenes of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s mad drive to Moscow shocked the world in June. Prigozhin, the leader of Wagner, a Russian private military organization, turned his guns against the government, demanding that Russian President Vladimir Putin fire his political rival, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. With a formidable domestic opponent openly defying Putin, commentators in the international media were ready to say that this was the end. The airwaves filled with early predictions of the regime’s collapse. Then, less than 24 hours later, it was over. Fast forward two months, and Prigozhin was dead, with Putin no less firmly in charge than ever. So what happened? Why is Putin so strong, and why did the predictions of his demise turn out to be hopeful thinking?

Why is Putin's grip on power strong?

The basic answer is that Putin is strong because he is popular. Very popular.

Before Wagner's march on Moscow, around 82% of Russians approved of Putin's performance, according to polling by the Levada Center. Throughout his 23-year presidency, his numbers have generally remained well above 50%.

Putin is a charismatic figure. He strives to project a masculine, in-charge image. His successful military action in Crimea reinforced this perception. Russians have largely backed the president's recent invasion of Ukraine, too.

Putin's ability to appear confident and commanding reassured Russians after a decade of instability. The 1990s saw Russia's Soviet empire collapse spectacularly, and its economy along with it. Older generations still harbor the resentment that the economic downturn caused. It dashed their hopes for a prosperous future. President Boris Yeltsin, infamous for his all-too-public drunken antics, was regarded more as a national embarrassment than as a hero of democracy. A series of apartment bombings in 1999, blamed on Chechen terrorists, made Russians feel unsafe in their own homes. Then, Putin took over and restored stability.

Putin's actions generally improved living standards and reaffirmed Russian influence in the near abroad. At the same time, Putin was gradually weakening democratic institutions and basic freedoms under his leadership, but many Russians were willing to accept this trade-off in exchange for relative stability, prosperity and security.

In the minds of many Russians, the end of Putin would mean a return to the chaos of the 1990s, a shift that few are willing to accept.

Why has Putin survived threats?

While recent events have indeed cast doubt on Putin's authority, the recent predictions of his downfall rely, in my opinion, more on subjective and wishful thinking rather than pragmatic analysis. Despite reversals in Ukraine and the open rebellion of Wagner, Putin's hold on power remains intact.

Putin has shown the ability to recognize and neutralize threats to his regime as they appear. He has survived the political threat of anti-corruption activists, the economic threat of Western sanctions and the military threat of Wagner, coming out strong each time.

Navalny and other political challenges

During his more than two-decade rule, Putin effectively eliminated any democratic alternatives to his leadership. Opposition figures who posed external challenges to his rule have been silenced, imprisoned, or even assassinated.

Alexei Navalny was a charismatic anti-corruption activist and successful political campaigner. He spoke out against embezzlement, cronyism and corruption at the highest levels of government. Navalny garnered widespread support among the Russian population, displaying the ability to mobilize large crowds and weaponize social media effectively. He frightened Putin by taking 27% of the vote in Moscow's mayoral election, where he ran against Putin's ally. The result suggested that his movement was a real political challenge. Losing to Navalny in a future election became a credible possibility for Putin.

In response, Putin attacked him judicially. Navalny soon found himself facing a battery of legal challenges, repeated arrests and trials on trumped-up charges. In 2020, he was poisoned with a nerve agent in Berlin, an incident widely

seen as an assassination attempt. He survived, but was arrested as soon as he returned to Russia. He remains in prison to this day.

Navalny's story is not unique in the context of pro-democracy activists in Russia. Other figures like Mikhail Khodorkovsky and Boris Nemtsov faced similar treatment due to their outspoken criticism of Putin's government. Khodorkovsky, once one of Russia's wealthiest men, spent over a decade in prison. Boris Nemtsov, a prominent opposition leader, was assassinated in 2015 just steps away from the Kremlin.

In 2020, Putin amended the Russian constitution to allow himself to remain in power legally until 2036. While he is still technically only a democratically elected leader, his authority is absolute and his ability to overcome any legal obstacles to his authority is tried and true.

Sanctions

Since 2014, economic pressure has hurt Russia's economy, but it hasn't made the Kremlin change its stance on Ukraine or stop its aggression. Moscow began sanction-proofing its economy shortly after the Crimean annexation. It did this by reducing reliance on Western imports, saving foreign currency and boosting domestic production of goods. Putin knew that depending too much on imports and foreign capital made Russia vulnerable to external economic pressures. Although he couldn't completely separate Russia from the West economically, he found alternative markets like China and India to make up for expected losses from sanctions.

So, Putin was prepared when the US and its allies launched a new round of sanctions following his 2022 invasion of Ukraine. While sanctions did hurt Russia's economy, their impact is less severe due to years of preparation.

Historically, Western sanctions against smaller economies have often proven to hurt regular people more than they can produce a decided change in the target's policies or leadership. The ultimate outcome in Moscow is likely similar. Instead of forcing leaders out, sanctions make the population more reliant on the government, leading to more authoritarianism. A little pain in the purse will not create a revolution; people don't take to the streets until their very livelihoods are threatened. As long as there's relative economic stability, Putin's voter base is unlikely to turn against him.

Wagner

In June, as a convoy of mercenary tanks advanced towards the Kremlin, observers predicted that the ensuing rebellion and chaos would spell the end of Putin's government. However, the march on Moscow ran out of steam in just 24 hours. Two months later, the leader of the perilous coup, Prigozhin, met a tragic end as his plane crashed within Russia.

Although the rebellion failed in its stated objective, it did manage to sow some seeds of doubt about Putin's unchallenged rule. But it left Putin's position essentially intact, and with more than enough power to uproot whatever seeds had been planted. Now, Prigozhin's plane has crashed and burned in a field, while Putin still retains his throne.

The Wagner leader's downfall sends a clear message to other potential adversaries: Putin's hold on power remains unassailable, and any direct challenges to his leadership will be met with consequences. Like any good mafia boss, Putin knows how to tie up loose ends, and he has made sure that everyone else knows it, too.

How will Putin respond to mounting pressure in the short and medium term?

The recent missteps on the Ukrainian battlefield and the failed rebellion have undoubtedly exposed chinks in Putin's armor, potentially opening the door for dissent within Putin's inner circle. This has led many observers to speculate that Putin's reign may be nearing its end. However, predictions of his imminent ousting may be overly hasty. Recent events demonstrate that Putin will not relinquish power easily and that he can make challenges to his authority extremely costly.

Those who anticipated an increase in violence and repression following the rebellion were indeed correct. As Putin strives to maintain and expand his grip on power, we can expect more targeted violence within Russia. However, the law of diminishing returns is at play here. The Kremlin will need to use even greater violence as time goes on to maintain its power. This could become a reason for his eventual downfall, as excessive repression to keep him in power might eventually provoke a public revolt against his leadership.

In the coming years, Putin is likely to face mounting pressure, both internally from his inner circle and the public, as external measures and isolation drain more of Russia's resources. However, it's unlikely that this pressure will lead to an immediate leadership change in the Kremlin.

In response to future challenges to his authority, Putin will likely continue to escalate repressive and security measures to suppress dissent and perceived treason undermining his rule. This will further strain US–Russia relations, leading to more condemnation and a growing divide. While Putin remains at the helm in Russia, Moscow will likely distance itself from Washington and Brussels and build closer ties with their strategic adversaries.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Were There Two Irish Civil Wars, or Just One?

John Bruton
October 09, 2023

Ireland's 1922–1923 was not an isolated incident. It was a direct continuation of the violence of the 1919–1921 war of independence, in which Irishmen killed Irishmen. The cycle of violence continued. It still continues in Irish hearts, until Irish people reckon with their past and embrace the countrymen that they consider enemies.

I have just finished reading *The Civil War in Dublin* by John Dorney. Dorney describes himself as an independent historian.

I have a minor quibble with the title of the book, which refers to “THE” civil war, suggesting that there was only one civil war. I would argue that there were in fact two Irish Civil Wars ... the first one from 1919 to 1921 and the second one from 1922 to 1923.

Irish people fought for Britain, too

I would argue that the 1919 to 1921 war, the Irish War of Independence, was also an Irish civil war. I say this because Irish people fought on both sides in both wars. In fact, I believe most of the people who died on both sides were also in fact Irish.

The members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), who opposed the Irish Republican Army (IRA), were predominantly Irish (and Catholic too, if that matters). Failing to recognize the Irishness of the many natives of this 32-county island who fought on the pro-Union side in the war of independence is a barrier to the reconciliation of all the communities on this island.

If one looks up the excellent book *The Dead of the Irish Revolution* by Eunan O’Halpin and Daithí Ó Corrain covering the period 1916 to 1921, one can confirm that those killed by the IRA were predominantly Irish, such as magistrates, RIC members and supposed informers. Some of these people were Protestants or wanted Ireland to remain part of the UK, but this does not make them any less Irish!

The fact that Irish people fought on both sides in the 1919–1921 war makes it an Irish civil war. Those killed in the first military action of the war of independence in January 1919 were members of the RIC, James McDonnell from Belmullet and Patrick O’Connell from Coachford, County Cork. Both were Irish Catholics.

The first magistrate to be killed, Jack Milling from Glasson, County Westmeath, was an Irish Protestant. He was shot through the front window of his house on Newport Road in Westport, County Mayo, while he was winding up the clock. In his front room. His family subsequently settled in Armagh.

I make these points not as a criticism of John Dorney’s book but as a reminder that, if we want reconciliation on this island, we must recognize that those born on this island who profess allegiance to King Charles and who feel British also have an Irish birthright and are fully Irish. Some will find it difficult to come to terms with this, but it will have to be done.

The political vandals who opposed the idea of recalling by name, on a wall in Glasnevin Cemetery, the people who died on both sides in the 1919–21 war were promoting a version of what it is to be Irish that is deeply exclusionary. They were saying that, if you supported a continuing link with Britain during the 1919–21 war, you were not Irish and did not deserve to be remembered by name on a wall. They were telling the Irish people who fought on the other side that they and their beliefs were to be canceled (to use the modern term). If this attitude persists, we will never have lasting peace or reconciliation on this island

The Second Irish Civil War

We need a fair-minded presentation of painful historic events that forces people to reflect on their own prejudices. John Dorney does that in regard to what I will call the Second Irish Civil War, that from 1922 to 1923.

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The interim period between the truce of July 11, 1921, and the opening of the civil war almost a year later was one during which there was no clear and well-established authority in the state. People took the law into their own hands. Order had broken down and, without order, laws could be

enforced. The longer that continued, the more respect for laws would have been eroded.

Something had to be done to restore unitary authority across the full territory of the state. To my mind, the civil war was fought to restore order and thereby make laws meaningful. What led to this situation?

A peace treaty had been signed between the UK government and an Irish delegation, led by Arthur Griffith, representing the Dáil Éireann (the lower house of the legislature) in December 1921. This treaty was approved by a majority in the Dáil Éireann on January 7, 1922. That should have settled matters. But a large part of the IRA membership did not accept the decision of the Dáil Éireann to accept the treaty.

The biggest objection to the treaty was that it required legislators to swear an oath of

“allegiance to the constitution of the Irish Free State” (which was established under the treaty) and to be “faithful to King George and his successors.” It seems to me that the wording here creates the stronger tie to Ireland and its constitution, compared to the “faithfulness” to King George. In any event, it was not worth falling out over.

We know now, with the benefit of hindsight, that the treaty was capable of being amended (as are all treaties) and of being a stepping-stone to greater independence, as Michael Collins said at the time.

As the argument raged in the early months of 1922 over the wording of the treaty, the IRA broke down into two factions. Each scrambled to occupy key installations in the capital and around the country. Attempts to heal the split failed.

Generally speaking, the anti-treaty side seized installations in the southern half of the country, and the National Army took control elsewhere. In

Dublin, anti-treaty forces, led by Rory O’Connor, occupied the Four Courts and made it their headquarters. They also seized the Kildare Street Club, of which many Anglo-Irish gentry were members, as well as the hall where the Orange Order used to meet.

One has the sense that these buildings were chosen for their propaganda or symbolic value rather than for their military defensibility. Indeed, a preoccupation with symbolism underlay the problems of anti-treaty political thinking.

As said earlier, the majority of the IRA opposed the treaty. This was the case in Dublin too. Only 1,900 of the 4,400 IRA members in Dublin were pro-treaty. Yet when the fighting started, the National Army was able to dislodge the anti-treaty forces from their strongholds in Dublin quite quickly. The Four Courts was taken with the aid of artillery. The buildings held by anti-treaty forces in the vicinity of O’Connell Street were taken in a few days of building-to-building fighting, not unlike the fighting in Stalingrad 20 years later.

The National Army was able to mobilize the support of the country

Why was the war in Dublin over so quickly, when it dragged on in the rest of the country for 10 months?

The National Army may have been outnumbered at the outset of the war, but they were better equipped, with material supplied by the British. They also had much more support from the general public, which meant they had better intelligence.

They were better led, too. The Free State government had a clear sense of purpose, that of establishing the institutions of a new European state.

The anti-treaty side was, both militarily and mentally, on the defensive from the beginning, holding positions and waiting to be attacked rather than advancing to take positions held by the Free State.

The military wing of the anti-treaty formation, led by Liam Lynch, made the key decisions, and the civilian leadership of Éamon de Valera was almost completely sidelined. They were also fighting to defend something ephemeral, a republic proclaimed at the General Post Office in 1916, which had no government and no visible or tangible existence. It was an idea, not a reality.

In contrast, the Free State was established on the principle that civilian leadership was paramount over the army. When Michael Collins took over as chief of staff of the army, he handed over his position as president of the Executive Council to W. T. Cosgrave. Even when Michael Collins himself was killed in action in August 1922, there was a seamless transition of responsibilities.

Soon, as a result of intense recruitment, the National Army would have a huge numerical advantage over the anti-treaty side.

Why was the Free State able to recruit so many troops, so quickly?

Only a small proportion of the population had been involved in the war of independence, and not everybody had voted for Sinn Féin in the 1918 election. This left a large pool from which soldiers could be recruited by the National Army. The National Army was also able to recruit among the unemployed, including those who had fought in the Great War.

The human costs of the war were high

This was a brutal and cruel civil war. The anti-treaty forces wanted to bankrupt the Free State by

blowing up its infrastructure. One such plan was to blow up all the road and rail bridges leading to and from Dublin. This was a failure, and numerous anti-treaty prisoners were taken.

This book gives an account of the execution without trial of anti-treaty soldiers. Some of these executions were part of a planned campaign to intimidate the opponents of the treaty and get them to give up their armed resistance to it. The policy on executions without trial may have shortened the civil war, but it undermined the case that the Free State was fighting for. It was hard to justify, and no one was held to account for it.

Other actions were undertaken, on an unauthorized basis, by groups within the National Army that were out of control.

The worst case, in my mind, is the killing of Edwin Hughes, Brendan Holohan and John Rogers. These were unarmed teenagers caught distributing a leaflet in Drumcondra calling for the killing of Free State soldiers. The bodies of these young boys were found the next day in a quarry near Clondalkin.

All urban centers had been secured for the Free State by the end of August, but the fighting continued on a hit-and-run basis well into 1923, using tactics refined in the 1919–1921 war against the British. Unarmed civilians were targeted by both sides.

The anti-treaty forces finally gave up in May 1923, and they dumped their arms.

Although this book is subtitled “The Civil War in Dublin,” it gives a fairly full account of developments outside Dublin. It is a comprehensive piece of work and I recommend it.

I believe the civil war flowed from the war of independence, which in turn flowed from 1916, which was a response to the militarization of

politics by the Ulster Volunteers. Violence begets violence. It rarely serves any useful purpose.

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This Is Not an “Ordinary” Israel– Hamis Conflict

Gary Grappo
October 10, 2023

From October 7, Hamas has launched a wide-scale rocket and ground attack on Israeli soil, killing hundreds. It is the largest incursion into Israeli territory since 1948. Hamas has likely chosen now to attack because they are encouraged by their Iranian backers. It is up to Israel now to repel the attack and figure out how to deal with the terrorist group in its home base, Gaza.

Early October 7, the Gaza-based Hamas organization launched an unprecedented air, land and sea assault on Israel. The terrorist attack came as Israelis were celebrating the conclusion of Sukkot, or the “Festival of Booths,” and it took the Israelis by surprise. The attack also coincided with this week’s 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War.

The struggle between Israeli forces and militants of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is ongoing. As of about midnight, October 8, reports indicate more than 800 Israeli deaths and thousands wounded, whether in the Israeli towns bordering Gaza that have come under attack or elsewhere due to rocket barrages. Especially noteworthy, Hamas combatants have taken more than one hundred Israelis, including women, elderly and children, hostage.

The ground combat and massive Israeli air attacks on Gaza have led to more than 576 Palestinian dead and hundreds more wounded, according to Al Jazeera.

It won’t be over quickly

It is much too early to make predictions about the war’s outcome, but some observations can be made even as the combat rages into the fourth day.

Israel and Hamas have been engaged in armed conflict over the past dozen years on some half-dozen occasions, not all of which were classified as wars, per se. Most ended in days or weeks, with the most intense fighting occurring at the outset and then trailing off. In almost all cases, Egypt served as the intermediary between the sides in negotiating eventual ceasefires.

None of those previous confrontations, however, match the intensity, scale and audacity of this most recent attack. Moreover, the harshness of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s statement shortly after the initial assaults that “Israel is at war,” his vow to “turn Hamas strongholds into rubble” and his subsequent mobilization of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) reserves suggest we should not expect a quick end to this conflict.

Furthermore, Iran and its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps have been aiding and training Hamas for years in stockpiling rockets, weapons and other

armaments for the long haul. In scale, this conflict shows all the signs of exceeding the viciousness, destruction and death of all prior IDF– Hamas confrontations and even the Second Intifada of the early 2000s. That latter conflict lasted nearly five years and took the lives of some 3,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis, as well as tens of foreigners.

The Iranian hand and the Saudi-Israel normalization factor

Given the lopsided outcome of previous wars and violence, in which Palestinian losses far exceeded Israeli losses, what might have motivated Hamas to launch an attack of this magnitude?

Hamas has said it launched the war due to ongoing abuses of Palestinians by Israel, the continuing Israeli occupation of Palestine and the blockade of Gaza, none of which has changed much over the course of the last few years. Moreover, most of the Israeli–Palestinian confrontations in the last two years have been in the West Bank and Jerusalem, not Gaza. So, we would be wise to take Hamas’s declared purpose for this action with a heavy dose of skepticism.

The balance of forces has changed somewhat due to the aforementioned Iranian (and potentially other) arms flows to Hamas. Nevertheless, Israel’s armed forces are a modern, highly sophisticated, first-world military force with an overwhelming advantage in every category of warfighting. Hamas is a well-armed resistance force without an air force or navy, though it’s creatively utilized boats and gliders as part of this recent assault. Important as well, Israel is backed by the considerable arsenal of the United States, though that has been depleted significantly due to US support of Ukraine in its war against the Russian invasion. Nevertheless, Israel is more than capable to carry the fight to Hamas for a considerable time.

What has changed, however, is the political dynamic. The US, Israel and Saudi Arabia are engaged in intense negotiations that would provide for normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel and new security arrangements between the US and the Kingdom.

That sort of deal presents an alignment of forces in the region clearly unfavorable to Iran and its security and economic interests. It is logical to conclude it would want and seek to torpedo a Saudi-Israel normalization pact, and especially one involving the United States. What could be better than re-igniting yet another all-out conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis?

The Wall Street Journal reported that the plan for the massive attack was hatched in Tehran, which only recently gave the green light to its Hamas proxies to advance on Israel. Iran’s role is undeniable.

Where was Israel’s intelligence?

This very distinct and likely possibility poses another question. How did Israeli intelligence, and US intelligence, too, miss the warning signs?

One report indicates that Hezbollah, the Iran-backed, Lebanon-based terrorist organization, had recently warned the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon to remain on its bases along the Israel-Lebanon border in the weeks ahead. Were there other signs Israeli and American intelligence missed?

The Americans, for their part, have turned the lion’s share of their intelligence resources and assets toward Russia and China and away from the Middle East over recent years. Hamas, which hasn’t threatened the US or US assets, is a low priority for the US. But not so for Israel, which keeps a close and wary eye on Hamas and Iran. It possesses formidable signals, cyber and human

intelligence on the Palestinians, especially on Hamas and PIJ. Likewise on Iran. It's surprising that they did not detect signs of such a massive, multi-pronged invasion force into Israeli territory.

It's even more surprising given the Israeli experience in the Yom Kippur War. At the outset of that war, Egyptian and Syrian forces caught Israel by surprise and inflicted immense damage on the Jewish state and its forces before they could regroup and mount what was ultimately a successful counterattack.

Go for broke, or try another interim solution?

US President Joe Biden vehemently condemned the attack and has promised to support Israel. Other Western governments have made similar statements. Russia, though unlikely to have been directly involved, cannot help but rejoice over it and the prospect of yet another burden imposed on US military resources. Russia can be expected to exploit this rare advantage. If the conflict is prolonged, the US will be hard pressed to meet all its commitments to both Ukraine and Israel.

In addition, Congressional opponents of Biden's recent new funding request for Ukraine will likely stiffen their resistance, arguing that Israel ought to be a higher priority for America's limited resources.

For Israel, the most important consideration is what to do next and how to bring this conflict to an end. To be sure, there will be no such talk of ending this until Israel inflicts severe and devastating damage on Hamas, its leadership and organization — another reason why this conflict is unlikely to end soon.

The kernel of the problem is Hamas's vice grip on Gaza, including infrastructure, security, economy, fuel, schools, mosques, public services, etc. As some have argued, short of an outright

invasion and re-occupation of the Palestinian enclave, it's hard to conceive of Israel totally uprooting Hamas, which has been the governing authority in Gaza since 2007.

Israeli leaders and the IDF are well aware of the challenge of invading Gaza. It would be costly and exponentially more deadly. Israel's last major incursion into Gaza in 2014, known as Operation Protective Edge, met with limited success and proved highly costly in terms of Israeli lives and, especially, Palestinian lives. Any long-term occupation would involve almost nonstop house-to-house urban combat in one of the world's most densely populated areas over a sustained period of time, making such an approach almost out of the question. It would levy an insupportable demand on the IDF and on Israeli financial resources. Would Israel really want to take on the Herculean task of governing a recalcitrant and rebellious population?

What may be possible is a short and very intense incursion to capture or eliminate Hamas's most important leaders, especially in the armed wing. Moreover, Israel would want to inflict irreparable damage to the Hamas military and political organization and terrorist infrastructure. That may still be too tall a task, but infinitely more manageable than any long-term occupation.

The Israelis could turn to the Palestinian Authority and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, to run an Israeli-tamed Gaza. But neither are any more liked or regarded in Gaza than they are in the West Bank. They lack the competence and administrative wherewithal to effectively govern Gaza and would have to turn to the Israeli government for added funding to even start. Even so, while Abbas may publicly sound verbal support for the people of Gaza and their rights, he's likely privately applauding every blow Israel strikes against its political foe, Hamas.

There is one major caveat to all of this, the Israeli hostages. Hamas likely took them specifically to forestall an invasion of Gaza by the IDF. We should not be surprised if they are used as human shields to protect facilities in Gaza and, more important, Hamas assets. Hamas is above all a terrorist organization and willing to employ all means, including the lives of innocent hostages, to ruthlessly advance its goals.

Israel has paid a high price in the past to retrieve Israelis, and even the remains of Israelis, held by terrorists. In 2006, a Palestinian special forces squad infiltrated Israel, captured Israeli IDF Corporal Gilad Shalit and took him back to Gaza. He was held there until 2011 when Israel agreed to release more than a thousand mostly Palestinian prisoners — nearly 300 of whom were serving life sentences — in exchange for Shalit’s freedom. Many criticized Netanyahu for the lopsided exchange. But in the minds of most Israelis, as one ranking Israeli official at the time shared with me, it was a necessary bargain to regain the freedom of one of their own. The value Israel places on human life is a vulnerability of the Israelis with which Hamas is well acquainted and, therefore, can be expected to use to extract major concessions the Israelis will be at pains to accept.

For now, however, the capture of so many Israeli hostages presents a major challenge to Israel and a significant constraint on its military and political options. And it’s likely to prove a highly emotional and divisive issue in an already-divided Israeli body politic.

This Gaza war really is different.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Why Is Congress So Polarized? It’s the Institutions

Josep M. Colomer
October 11, 2023

Political polarization has reached the point that dissident Republicans have fired their own Speaker. How did the political scene get this bad? The explanation lies in a flawed electoral structure that incentivises extreme positions.

The issue was about shutting down the government. It ended up shutting down Congress. The recent removal of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Kevin McCarthy, reflects a policy conflict and shows a serious institutional flaw.

The controversial policy is the public debt. The United States’ national debt reached nearly 100% of GDP, prompting Congress to suspend its debt ceiling months ago. Last month, Congress failed to reach an agreement for the annual budget. Ultras in the Republican party wanted to scrap certain expenses, in particular those regarding the supply of weapons and aid to Ukraine.

A last-minute agreement avoided shutdown for a few weeks, but the wacky little wing of the Republican caucus accused Speaker McCarthy of betraying the party and triggered a motion to

remove him. The episode is not completely new, as the past three Republican speakers of the House were pestered by their own side and resigned or retired before being ousted. But this is the first time in history that they've succeeded in actually firing the Speaker.

A conflict over policy

The policy conflict should not be dismissed as simply the result of acrimony. Bipartisanship and cooperation in Congress flourished during several decades of foreign tension through World War II and the Cold War as external existential threats triggered national unity. But when the mortal external risk became paltry, it looked like there were no limits to internal confrontation.

Over the last thirty years, the public agenda of controversial issues has grown enormously. With just a little exaggeration, one could say that the international Cold War was replaced with a domestic political war. Right now, it is not coincidental that the most aggressive Republicans spurn US aid to Ukraine. A focus on external conflict would reduce the space for domestic policy and make internal confrontation less easy. The new war in Israel may increase their malaise.

A conflict caused by institutions

The institutional flaw is that the framework based on the separation of powers with only two parties incentivizes and exacerbates political animosity. With pervasive partisan antagonism, the filters and "checks" between the House, the Senate and the presidency do not produce fair balances as expected. Actually, mutual checks between institutions boost parties' hostilities and preclude effective governance.

The two major political parties in the US encompass a range of policy proposals and ideological orientations comparable to the typical

European system with multiple parties: There are liberals and socialists within the Democratic Party, conservatives and populists within the Republican Party, and the minor Greens and Libertarians flanking each side. The system has produced factional candidacies and long disputes within each party to select its candidates. There is ideological plurality within parties, but not at the level of competitive bidding for public office. This forces political polarization, as I analyze in my book, *Constitutional Polarization: A Critical Review of the U.S. Political System*.

An additional factor is the system of primary elections to select candidates. In traditional closed-party primaries, low participation heavily skews the vote toward extreme positions on issues with no social or political consensus. The participants in primaries are typically the most active and ideologically motivated people in the entire electorate, so they often favor candidates prone to foster antagonism.

In congressional primaries, only about a fifth of eligible voters tend to participate. On many occasions, the winner in a primary for an open seat, which tends to attract multiple candidates, wins only a plurality of the vote. Thus, many candidates for House seats have been selected by less than a tenth of their party voters. Closed-party primaries can select minority-supported candidates that might not be most preferred by the general public. This is how the House of Representatives is formed and why some of its members sometimes behave like firebrands.

It may be significant that none of the eight Republicans who voted to overthrow McCarthy were elected in any of the five states that select their representatives by top-two open primaries or by ranked-choice voting, alternative systems to closed party primaries that favor more moderate and consensual winners (Louisiana, Washington, California, Alaska, and Maine).

The immediate consequence of the current calamity is the blockage of legislation for the next few weeks. Yet even if the House resumes its activity soon, the threat of a government shutdown in November remains on the horizon.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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Revealing Analysis: The UN Is Not Impartial In Cyprus

Hasan Ünal
October 16, 2023

The UN has historically backed projects that benefit humanitarian efforts. Unfortunately, the UN has decided to block efforts to build necessary infrastructure for the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. The reason might be due to historical bias and political gain.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) wants to build a road, something that would appear to be an uncontroversial decision. The Pile–Yiğitler road project would provide better access to the town of Pile and improve upon and replace the existing dirt road

without infringing on the territory of the Sovereign British Areas. Goods such as food, medicine and freshwater have struggled to reach Turkish Cypriot parts of the town for over 25 years. This new road is a humanitarian project that would enable the smooth flow of essential goods into Pile.

The UN would typically be expected to support such a worthwhile endeavor. Indeed, when Greek Cypriots planned and built roads to Pile, the UN never criticized, restricted, or blocked them. However, when Turkish Cypriots wish to build roads or infrastructure – the UN has taken action immediately.

Suddenly, numerous new UN instruments are contravening the standard customs and processes of the TRNC. The UN has lost its impartiality in Cyprus and is applying different standards regarding its decisions involving Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots.

Inconsistent UN Actions

The TRNC has never hesitated to open up discussions with the UN and its southern neighbors, especially when the well-being of its citizens can be improved – something that the Pile–Yiğitler road project would unquestionably achieve. Yet, at every turn, the goodwill and good faith attempts of Turkish Cypriots have not been reciprocated.

Pile is the only town in the buffer zone with both Greek and Turkish Cypriots. However, only Turkish Cypriot residents face constant checkpoints and restrictions when entering or leaving their homes. They are desperate for reasonable access into their village from the TRNC to finally have proper access to their humanitarian needs.

Since establishing the buffer zone, two new roads have been built from the Greek side into

Pile. The Greek authorities even built a university and theater in the buffer zone. However, when the Turkish Cypriot authorities tried to build a single road, the full force of the UN's might came down.

How can this double standard continue to be applied by the UN? Do they not see that this clearly violates their neutrality and demonstrates a clear and enduring bias? Turning a blind eye to Greek Cypriot projects and then blocking a Turkish Cypriot humanitarian endeavor is frankly outrageous.

This is a dangerous situation to be in. By minimizing Greek Cypriot restrictions and applying full restrictions to Turkish Cypriots, the UN is essentially removing any possibility of Turkish Cypriots living in Pile. Indeed, Turkish Cypriots have increasingly been forced to leave their homes as living in Pile becomes untenable without free access to healthcare, education and food.

It feels like a deliberate strategy to turn the only joint village in the buffer zone – one in a strategically important location - into a Greek Cypriot community. The UN is not to be trusted because it refuses to respect and honor its agreements with our government.

[[Lane Gibson](#) edited this piece.]

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The Crusades Revisited and Arab Duplicity on Palestine

David Holdridge
October 18, 2023

A humanitarian worker reflects on his years in the Middle East and the root of the conflict in Gaza. The contentious Middle Eastern borders drawn in 1919 and Israel's establishment in 1948 sowed the seeds of future conflict. Today, both Jews and Arabs marginalize Palestinians across several countries.

This is a recollection of the Palestinian issue as it came upon me ten years ago — a precursor, if you will, for today.

As it was for Jews born in America after the massacre in Europe, Andrea's childhood must have been disturbed by the tales of the maniacal bloodletting. And disturbed further by other occasional malignancies; those signs along certain American beaches in the 1950s come to mind: "No Jews or dogs allowed." It set their story apart from the rest of us Goys whose nightmares were limited to those offered up by the Brothers Grimm.

I grew up in and around New York. I went to school with girls like Andrea as they emerged after World War II into the American mainstream. I rode the subways of New York with them as a teenager and would spot the tattoos from the death camps on their kin's forearms and instantaneously connect them to the photos in my mind of the Auschwitz gas chambers. I imagined what must have turned in her young mind; that six million of her type had been exterminated like some pathogen and virtually no one had made a protest.

So there we were: just after Cast Lead had concluded in 2009, the two of us, humanitarian workers now, walking 20 meters behind a Palestinian mother and her two girls as we left Gaza.

You see, one gets dropped off by one's Palestinian friend about a half-mile before a fortress wall and you trudge toward its gray terrible eminence through the rubble and trash left by Israeli bulldozers as they had assured unencumbered fields of fire. You feel quite helpless making that walk towards the massive wall, finally getting channeled into a tunnel of hydraulic turnstiles and led through it by a network of intercoms issuing remote commands, always impatient commands of "stop, go, no, leave your coat, leave your bag, no, alone, do it again." With a camera continuously capturing you, each grimace and frustration.

Then, maybe, you go through the last hydraulics and into a hatch at the base of that wall and are now exposed to the floodlights and the pens — plexiglas holding pens with green and red lights indicating if you can proceed from one pen to the next. Sort of like a maze on the floor of this hi-tech cement cavern. Then, far up towards the ceiling you see them for the first time: profiles of the clerks who control the place, who peer down on the movements in the pens, and on the conveyors alongside which like a giant clockworks having now carried away your personal belongings for other unseen searches. And then, finally, from the pens you proceed into the whirl of the 360-degree full-body scan, flashed up in all its originality onto screens before those same clerks.

I suspect that it was not this alone which broke Andrea; it was rather the company we kept with that Palestinian mother and her girls throughout the process, their childhood being disturbed forever, just like hers.

What sticks in my mind to this day is that after the process, out in the parking lot while I was getting into the driver's seat, I had heard Andrea still outside the car off by the fender, as discreetly as she could, retching.

Almost no Westerners go to Gaza. One has to move heaven and earth to acquire the necessary permissions from the Israelis, mostly limited to humanitarian types like myself and selected journalists — meaning the local narratives of what's going on in this pen are easily ignored or twisted by those who wish.

I had been going to Gaza, on and off, for three decades, and Andrea's reaction, Jewish or not, was normal. Few can stomach that Jews could construct and manage such a confinement for humans. It is, as one observer recently described, "an open air prison." No exit. Not by land, sea or air, and with just enough calories and medicines allowed in to prevent famine and disease. And calculated very finely, I should add.

If Israel is more than soil, more than "clear, hold and build" on that soil acquired in 1948, if it is also a homeland in commemoration for all those who have suffered since Christians first proclaimed they had killed Christ, Gaza is a blasphemy and stains the Jewish story. And if not Gaza, then watch the arrogance of a 19-year-old Israeli soldier at a West Bank checkpoint as he strip-searches Grandpa in front his grandchildren. Watch — just above the barrier on the ridge of a West Bank hill — the beautiful arc of a settler's dive into the crystalline water of a swimming pool as the Palestinian farmers in the valley below grieve for no water in their wells. I believe that this can destroy Israel before missiles from Palestine can.

The Arab duplicity

Also gleaned from those many years of living in the Arab world, I can say unequivocally that most

Arab states and citizens don't give a damn about Palestinians and their "open air prison." They too pen them up on a regular basis. For any self-serving autocrat, they are trouble. As vanguards, on posters everywhere, they often own the liberation narrative. But in person, they are stigmatized by the dead hand of dictators as far too clarion for their own good. At their core, Palestinians disrupt the status quo.

As Israeli tanks churned into south Lebanon in June 1982, I was on that border and had watched Lebanese Shi'as wave their "Star of David" flags with great excitement as the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) entered Tyre, pleased to no end that the Palestinians seemingly had been erased from their land. Later that year, I was in Tunisia when Habib Bourguiba put on a grand show of welcoming the Palestinian warriors as they disembarked at the port of Bizerte. It was meant to be a victory festival as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) passed by. School kids were brought out to shout and clap, the PLO marching, head high, right through town and finally to a parking lot secured by Tunisian troops who relieved them of their arms and trucked them far away into the deserts of central Tunisia, effectively neutering them.

Across the Levant, in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, Palestinians are contained, constricted and often penned. Make no mistake, Arab nations abuse them and use them. They have always been a convenient cause célèbre "to quell domestic strife with foreign war." If Israel had not existed, it would have had to be created as a part of the foundation for Arab autocracy, which from Casablanca to Damascus stole their citizens' freedoms and allowed precious little to put in their stomachs.

"Jew Crusader"

That said, while the autocrats are duplicitous about Palestinians per se, their "street" — before and

after Tahrir — does care about "occupation," does care about Arabs as "subservient." Does care that within the Western narrative, beginning with Sykes-Picot when the French and British cartographers divvied up the Middle East without much thought; and then, for their immediate pleasure right up to Pax Americana, sustained and abetted the array of monarchs and emirs who sit majestically on the world's hydrocarbons and, critically, are reviled far more by the Arab street than Jews.

Symbols count. American tanks so near to Mecca incite. Britain and the US as steadfast allies of a twentieth-century national implant in Arabia, swallowing swaths of what Arabs hold to be their land and humiliating them each and every time words come to blows, count. Especially for a people desperately trying to find an identity that is not defined equally as "terrorist" or as so backward that the whole region, other than oil, could sink below the surface and the global stock indices would barely budge.

I recall sitting in my office in Diwaniyah in south-central Iraq during the spring of 2004 amidst my national staff, when the Jaysh al-Mahdi burst in, eyes glazed and very agitated and anxious to do some killing. I was sure I was a goner. Particularly because they had declared the oath to my face that precedes killing: "Jew Crusader." These were street rabble with no inkling of Palestine. But this was the hook that Muqtada al-Sadr had in them; this epitaph that zealots employ across the Arab world just before they pull the trigger.

Jew Crusader. There it is in a nutshell. Convenient for autocrats but also, unprompted, an incitement that can get the street to its feet, quite indifferent as to whatever the hell Palestinians are suffering. That is what swells the ranks of the Arab warriors, notwithstanding that most of the nations that bore them are fabrications of European cartographers themselves. Israel is Western. It is

European- and American-sourced, adapted to its tragic historical circumstances, and it has swallowed up a large share of Arab soil and humiliated the Arab effort to constrain them. "Jew Crusader" was and is the Arab link between Israel and the Crusades, the seizure of property by foreigners along with the expectation that Israel will follow the same trail as the Crusaders.

Tahrir 2010

This was — according to all I heard as I made my way through the great press of the swirling crowds streaming into the square on that warm February day — about an Egyptian, a Tunisian, a Syrian "not being afraid any longer." Part of that was removing the dead hand of the autocrats, one by one, and acting upon those "rights" issues that these citizens will no longer forsake. The other part was about removing the dominance of those great Anglo-Saxon tribes from the choices before them. And noting that Israel, along with the Gulf states, represents the greatest existing current affront to that resolve.

Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi (American-educated at the University of Southern California) was born out of this Tahrir. He presided over a country in shambles, over a street which for any re-found dignity must care far more about a family putting food on the table than what Hamas was doing in Gaza. But it was also now a street that would no longer accept the West as preeminent in its destiny. Morsi was on a tightrope. He was brought to eminence out of the awakening and that was about dignity reclaimed; about dealing with Egypt in despair, tourism defunct and the army unfaithful. He knew that Gaza should not stoke the street. Rather, it will be jobs and opportunities. And the last thing he wanted was for an un-careful militancy in Gaza to wag the Egyptian tail just at the moment he presumed to lead the Arabs out of the wilderness they have suffered since Sykes-Picot. Tahrir's

youth since the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia have shown themselves across the whole Arab landscape willing to die fighting against anything promising less.

Of course, as we all know now, Morsi did not survive the aftermath of his ascension and soon was imprisoned by a version of the "status quo ante."

Hamas: on the razor's edge

Back to Gaza. Yes, cover your ears. Hamas is indeed part "American creation" come back to bite us. Back in the mid-1980s, I was part of a team of relief workers which managed huge welfare programs in Gaza, funded by the US State Department. Hamas was clearly the preferred partner for us and the State Department because of their credibility at the community level as opposed to a corrupt and feckless Fatah but also because they challenged the PLO, who were then considered a terrorist organization. Later in 2006, that American investment came full circle. Hamas won a free and fair election, to a large extent because of their community welfare programs.

It was not so much that they won the election; rather, that the redeemed American favorite PLO lost it. Over two years later, when Andrea and I were leaving Gaza in the wake of Cast Lead, Hamas, the once preferred option for American largess and the elected government, was now deemed so untouchable by the US government that an American like me could be shunned for talking to them. This was a conundrum, to say the least, as we sought to store and distribute relief supplies in a sovereign Strip.

In the immediate aftermath of that chapter of hostilities with Israel (Operation Pillar of Defense), Hamas maintained some tenuous bona fides, but remained squeezed nonetheless in a vise between the Salafists who are anxious to pull the

trigger for Armageddon and the educated Gazans who would be modern. Hamas remained on this razor's edge — an organization which often glorified the child martyrs and reviled modernism with one eye looking over its shoulder at Islamic Jihad and the other eye on its need not to sever its ties to "its big brother" Egypt.

Hopefully, as we look over the horizon, Gazans can dilute their militancy but augment its influence with economic investments, some egress through a port and airport and, in general, presenting "a swords to plowshares" alternative; hopefully in tandem with Israel taking what would be a defining risk (with the US at its back) to allow for a viable and independent West Bank-Gaza unity. In times of great tumult, sometimes the heretofore unimaginable can get a foothold, and certainly, since I first arrived on the scene in 1981, this (2023) qualifies as an era of unprecedented tumult.

The diaspora

Wiki it: 500k strong in Chile, 250k in the United States, 160k in Germany, and so on. Many bemoan the silence of this influential, modern and often wealthy Palestinian diaspora. A colleague of mine from the Lebanese Civil War days recently told me: "If they gave in time and effort — even only 5% of what the Jewish diaspora gives — then the current dialogue of the deaf might be abated." But most are cowed. Those in the States want to disappear into the American fabric, fearful of ending up on some homeland security's list of persons inimical to our national security. Reminiscent, perhaps, of the Hollywood blacklists as a new breed of McCarthyism against Arab Americans rears its ugly head.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]

***David Holdridge** served in the Vietnam War in 1969 as an infantry platoon leader outside of Chu Lai. He was wounded and spent 18 months getting repaired at various hospitals in the United States, culminating with operations at Hartford Hospital in Connecticut where neurosurgeon Dr. Benjamin Whitcomb freed David from his trauma.

Search of the Elusive Is a Human Thing

Ranjani Iyer Mohanty
October 20, 2023

To go searching is to look for something that doesn't exist now. But when we go searching for something elusive, in attempting to define the elusive, we indulge in the present intensely.

Eight people set off from the small town of Tofino, on the west coast of Vancouver Island, in search of whales. We were led by the fearless Willow, a lovely and enthusiastic young lady who had grown up in an even more remote seaside community of "40 people" and "started driving boats at the age of three". After more than two hours of keenly scouring the horizon, we finally spotted 2 whales – actually, several spouts of water and mild crestings of their backs breaking the water surface. We were exhilarated. Willow assured us that we were very lucky; "some tours don't see a whale at all". And yet many people pay good money and go on these whale-watching tours in the hopes that they may see something. But even when they don't see anything, they return happy for the chance to have been part of the search.

The intrinsic value of searching

This is not searching motivated by fortune or fame. This is searching for the sake of searching: to possibly see something few have seen and therefore achieve a sense of accomplishment and differentiate ourselves from the rest of humanity; to hopefully see something supposedly meaningful and thereby validate our existence; to participate, together with others, in an enjoyable process where the outcome is unpredictable; to be – if found – part of something bigger (physically, ecologically, philosophically) than ourselves; to feel alive.

Playwright Eugene O'Neill said "Obsessed by a fairy tale, we spend our lives searching for a magic door and a lost kingdom of peace". David Bowie said "Searching for music is like searching for God"; both are "an effort to reclaim the unmentionable, the unsayable, the unseeable, the unspeakable". Vincent van Gogh said "If I cease searching, then, woe is me, I am lost".

Paulo Coelho said "The search for something can prove as interesting as finding it"; I propose that the search may be more interesting and more essential. Dostoyevsky said "The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for"; I think it lies in the searching for something to live for. Perhaps that's what Ralph Waldo Emerson meant when he said "It's not the destination; it's the journey".

To look for the elusive vicariously through books and movies

For those of us who don't have the time or energy to make the searching journey – or don't know what to search for – we could try to do it vicariously through books and movies.

There are several renowned novels on the search for the more elusive but important things in life. In Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote, aging

nobleman Alonso Quixano rides off from his Spanish village in search of adventure and glory. In Herman Melville's Moby Dick, Captain Ahab takes to the high seas in search of revenge and the whale that took his leg. And one among many spiritual non-fiction is Paulo Coelho's The Pilgrimage, based on his own walk across northern Spain along the Camino de Santiago in search of the simplicity of life.

There are also many movies about 'the search': from that famous quartet searching for home, heart, brains, and courage in the 1939 classic The Wizard of Oz; to Victor Laslo searching for an exit visa in the 1942 Casablanca; to veteran Ethan Edwards searching for his nieces in the 1956 western The Searchers; to Michael Corleone searching for respectability and forgiveness in the 1990 Godfather III; to clownfish Marlin searching for his son in the 2003 Finding Nemo; to Professor Gregorius searching for an alluring author in the 2013 Night Train to Lisbon; to most recently Barbie searching for the meaning of life in the real world in the 2023 Barbie. However, the quintessential searching show has to be the iconic, original Star Trek, where Captain Kirk and his crew simply travel for years and millions of miles – boldly going where no one has gone before – searching for the new and the different.

To search in the age of information

In some sense, we are now living in the age of 'the search'. We're constantly googling something or other. And the fact that we so often go from search to search to search indicates that it's not the finding that satisfies us, rather the searching that addicts us. However, searching for something on the internet is a bit different in that there is an immediate and often a plethora of results. Here, we're referring to a search where the target is elusive.

We whale watchers – and yes, birdwatchers too – are just some of a long line of such searchers. Over the millennia and around the world, people have been searching for and continue to search for the elusive. Some ancient Greeks started us off by inscribing “Gnothi seauton” or “Know Thyself” over the doorway to the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. Many of us are looking for what Plato referred to as our missing half – whether that be found in another or within ourselves. Philosophers in general are said to be searching for ‘the truth’ – which, in today’s world of fake news and AI – is becoming increasingly elusive.

From elusive to extraterrestrials

And then there are those who search for the Loch Ness Monster. This August saw the biggest hunt for the Loch Ness Monster in more than five decades. Nothing conclusive was found but the organizers and hundreds of volunteers seem to have had a wonderful time. It would not be surprising if this became an annual event.

There are those searching for extraterrestrials – even though physicist Stephen Hawkins has warned us of dangerous consequences once we find them and worse, if they find us. But that has not stopped us. In 1974, the Arecibo Radio Telescope broadcast an interstellar radio message into space. Now, scientists are planning to send an updated message.

And going one step further, there is the search for God, which will hopefully end on a much happier note

The tradition of searching is not lonely

Searching for the elusive is so widespread that entire institutions have been set up to monitor and guide the process. There are numerous national and international organizations related to whale watching (e.g., Pacific Whale Watch Association,

Animal Welfare Institute, International Whaling Commission) and birdwatching (e.g., Birds Canada, American Birding Association, BirdLife International). The Loch Ness Project has been gathering data for over 30 years and the Loch Ness Centre organized this year’s gathering. The SETI (Searching for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute describes itself as “America’s only organization wholly dedicated to searching for life in the universe”. One of its most recent projects in collaboration with Cornell University and Breakthrough Initiatives is called the Breakthrough Listen Investigation for Periodic Spectral Signals; it is searching for signals coming from a star-dense area near the core of our galaxy. And of course, there are a plethora of temples, synagogues, churches, mosques, and their myriad associations helping us in our search for God. We searchers of the elusive are not alone, nor are we unsupported.

In some way, perhaps all elusive searches are similar: they occupy us for a long time; they take us out of ourselves and yet put us in the moment; and they give us a sense of purpose. As autumn changes to winter, we walk along the seashore of Vancouver Island – searching for any manner of treasure or sight or insight or peace of mind or just closure – which we may or may not find.

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New Armenian Ethnic Cleansing Is Bad for the World

Timur Nersesov
October 20, 2023

Azerbaijan has conducted ethnic cleansing of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh. Sadly, the world has ignored this act of resolving a frozen conflict by force. This damages the rules-based international order, sets a damaging precedent and makes the world a more dangerous place.

We are currently living in the most multipolar and unstable period the world has seen since August 1914. It took two world wars to undo the consequences of the last period. The rules-based international order as we know it today is being challenged, and for the first time in the 80 years since the end of World War II, wars are being fought that take no notice and don't bother with the pretense of that order. The events that began unfolding in the countries of Azerbaijan and Armenia in September 2020 were the first unvarnished challenge to the legitimacy of that world order, and the Western world has not answered that challenge.

While the history of the conflict goes back for centuries, its relevance for the West begins in 1994 following the collapse of the Soviet Union what is now known as the first Karabakh war ended in April 1994 with a negotiated ceasefire between the Azeris and the indigenous ethnic Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. The ceasefire was followed by commitment from all parties to a mediated settlement under the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group. The terms of that ceasefire were to freeze the line of contact that would leave just under 20% of what

was Soviet Azerbaijan's territory under control of the local Armenians who were supported by the Republic of Armenia, pending a negotiated settlement on self-governance status, resettlement of refugees, and any exchange of territories.

From frozen conflict to ethnic cleansing

Within the OSCE framework, Azerbaijan and Armenia along with three mediators composed of the United States, France, and Russia, proceeded to conduct many rounds of negotiations over the next 27 years. The lack of substantive progress led the conflict to take on the ominous status of a "frozen conflict", with occasional clashes along the line of contact. In September 2020 the situation changed. On September 27, 2020 Azerbaijan launched a war to retake Karabakh in what became known as the 44-day war or the second Karabakh war.

Russia negotiated a ceasefire in November 2020, which was followed by nearly three years of clashes and blockades and an ineffective Russian peace-keeping mission. Azerbaijan justified the war as a resolution to the frozen conflict. It completed its conquest to take over Karabakh with a week-long campaign beginning on September 19 this year. At the conclusion of this crusade, Azerbaijan had established total control of the region of Karabakh and the expulsion of the entire Armenian population of 120,000 people.

The immediate consequence of the failure to respond to Azerbaijan's rejection of its international commitments with the support of Turkey, a NATO member, and Israel, a NATO partner, have been earth shattering. First, it is the complete eviction of all 120,000 remaining Armenians in the region that has been populated by ethnic Armenians for more than two millennia. Azerbaijan committed an ethnic cleansing within essentially one week. The speed of the events was such that the Western powers did not have time to issue reactions through their bureaucratic

processes before the ethnic cleansing was complete.

Moreover, the very public support of a NATO state and NATO partner made any Western intervention a minefield. With Turkish troops directly involved and Israeli weapons on the front line, both of those states had the power to block most any coordinated effort from Western powers to react. For the first time, Western-aligned states were explicitly on the side of undermining an international conflict resolution process.

A terrible precedent for the future

The consequences of this profound failure to protect the rules-based international order will reverberate in generations to come. The September 2020 Azerbaijani military offensive against ethnic Armenians was executed summarily. Azerbaijan made no effort to seek international legitimation or had any concern that an international reaction would follow. The lack of Western response emboldened Russia to leverage the same pseudo-legalistic language used by Azerbaijan to legitimize its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Russia did not drum up support for Armenians through the UN. It did not activate Russia's own alliance structure under the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This alliance of six post-Soviet states — Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan — formed in 2002 proved to be useless for Armenians. Russia did not even make a serious propaganda effort focused on the international community to identify a clear *casus belli*. In essence, Russia did not bother with a single step to legitimize its invasion. Even in the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was done under the auspices of an intervention in a civil war, like the justification used by the United States for its engagement in Vietnam.

Every setback to the legitimacy of the institutions the West relies upon to provide peace and order increases danger. The biggest danger is that state actors start bypassing the international system to pursue their goals. Rules-based orders give us predictability. They create a sandbox, which limits the realm of the possible. If things cannot be confined within that sandbox, then we are increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA). This VUCA world is dangerous in the age of nuclear weapons.

The rise of VUCA at a time globalized economies upon which billions depend for food, water, fuel and basic goods, such unpredictability is frightening. The ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh is a humanitarian disaster. The fact that it has gone completely unopposed is a terrible precedent. Azerbaijan's decision to wage war to resolve the frozen conflict sets an example for others that it will be nearly impossible to walk back without a unified front from the West. This precedent will continually be used to embolden the use of violence to resolve conflict, without regard to international norms and will make the entire world worse off in the process.

[The views expressed in this article are the authors and do not represent the views of the US Government or any company.]

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How to Invest: Forget the Needle, Buy the Haystack

Alex Gloy
October 21, 2023

Individual and professional investors alike have been underperforming benchmark indices for decades. Explanations brought forward include Efficient Market Hypothesis, behavioral biases, trading costs, and timing missteps. While those are possible sources of underperformance, another surprising phenomenon seems to be the culprit.

A recent JPMorgan study has revealed surprising insights. It analyzed returns of various asset classes over a 20-year period. The study found that investors underperform the market. Importantly, this includes both individual and professional investors.

Before examining the reasons for this underperformance, it is important to look at the numbers. The average investor achieved annualized returns of 3.6% over 20 years. The Standard and Poor's 500 (S&P 500 — an index comprising stocks of the 500 largest companies listed on US stock exchanges) achieved annualized returns of 9.5% over the same period. Even bonds, units of debt issued by governments and companies, gave returns of 4.3% over 20 years.

Generally, investors put their money into both stocks and bonds. A 60/40-ratio of stocks and bonds would have returned 7.4% annually, while a 40/60-mix would have yielded 6.4%. Older investors are risk averse and often favor bonds over stocks because of guaranteed returns. In

contrast, stocks can fall dramatically and, at times, lose all value.

With annualized returns of 3.6%, the average investor was able to double his or her money. The 60/40 stock-bond ratio should have led to 4.2 times increase in wealth while a 40/60 mix should have led to 3.4 multiple. Charles-Henry Monchau, the chief investment officer at Swiss Group Syz, estimates 95% of individual investors underperform the market. After fees and commissions, that number might be closer to 100%. Note this means that, except for a tiny percentage, investors almost invariably underperform the market.

In dollar figures, individual investors have left a lot of money on the table. From the end of 2018 to the same time in 2021 the S&P 500 rose by 90%. At year-end 2018, individual investors held equities worth \$26.7 trillion. The annualized return figures tell us that individual investors missed out on gains of \$3.6 to \$5.9 trillion. What is going on?

Underperformance leads to the rise of passive investing

It makes sense that individual investors underperform the market. They do not have the same information as professional and institutional investors. They suffer from information asymmetry. These investors also fear losses, chase market darlings (stocks often discussed at dinner parties and rarely questioned as a good investment), chase hyped-up companies, fail to time the market and make other mistakes that individuals often do when investing or trading alone.

Surprisingly, professional and institutional investors do not outperform the market either. A study by S&P Dow Jones Indices reveals that up to 96% of all active US equity funds underperformed their benchmarks over a 15-year period. Note that

only 30-60% of these funds survived over this period. Most underperforming funds simply closed shop. Some merged with others. So, there is a survivorship bias — a type of selection bias that ignores the unsuccessful outcomes of a selection process — to this 96% figure. The real figure is even higher.

So, why are individual and professional investors struggling to beat the market? After all, an index is a mix of companies of varying quality — some are great, some mediocre and some outright bad.

There is a logical problem with the idea of investors beating the market. Very simply, the market is nothing but all the investors buying and selling to each other. For any trade in the market, one investor has to sell to another. For every investor outperforming the market, another has to underperform.

Over the years, passive investors have emerged. These are exchange-traded funds (ETFs) that contain hundreds — sometimes thousands — of stocks or bonds listed on the market. Their basket of stocks or bonds closely follow the performance of the index neither out- nor underperforming the market.

In recent years, passive investing is rising. As a result, the number of market participants who still can under- or outperform is shrinking. According to Bloomberg data, more than 54% of all assets in US equity mutual funds and ETFs are now managed passively.

Who outperforms the market and why?

As most individual and institutional investors are underperforming, who then is outperforming the market?

Outperformers tend to be hedge funds, activist and quantitative investors, insurance companies, pension funds and conglomerates like Berkshire Hathaway.

Hedge funds use strategies usually not available to individual investors or mutual funds, such as leverage, arbitrage, combination of long and short positions, derivatives, and algorithmic trading. Activist investors take concentrated positions in companies to force management or strategic changes, which is impossible for individual investors due to lack of size. Unlike hedge funds, mutual funds usually do not take a combative stance towards company boards.

Quantitative investors use mathematical models and computer algorithms to exploit patterns and trends in financial markets. Individual and most institutional investors do not have access to trading technology to enter and resell positions within fractions of a second. Insurance companies and pension funds can afford to ignore short-term market turmoil as their capital is usually of long-term nature. Conglomerates like Berkshire Hathaway get a detailed look into the accounts of a potential takeover target before an acquisition, receiving better information than what individual shareholders obtain via quarterly and annual reports.

Note that this long-term advantage of pension funds might be lost as many outsource management of their assets. According to a BNY Mellon study, 50% of the largest public asset management companies exclusively use external managers. These managers tend to take short-term, not long-term decisions. Furthermore, these institutions often suffer from poor governance. This can have a detrimental impact on their performance. Compared to their Canadian peers, “American public pension funds are stuffed with politicians, cronies and union hacks” and tend to perform more poorly.

A simpler reason for why it is so hard to beat, or even match, the performance of benchmark indices like the S&P 500 lies in a skewed distribution of returns. The performance of index member companies is not normally distributed (which would follow the bell curve) but has a huge right “fat tail”. Simply put, only a few companies have astonishingly outsized returns. Not owning those few companies automatically leads to underperforming the index.

Between 1995 and 2022, only ten stocks (just 2% of 500 companies) accounted for at least one-fifth of the performance of the S&P 500. In some years, the top ten stocks provided more than 100% of index performance. This means if we exclude these ten stocks, the S&P 500 would have had a negative return.

Over the first nine months of 2023, the “magnificent seven” — Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, and Tesla — are up 92%, while the remaining 493 members of the S&P 500 have gained only 3%. Seven out of 500 are tiny odds. And it would not have been sufficient to simply own those stocks — one would have had to own them in the same ratio as the index. Those “magnificent seven” stocks currently command a 28% share of the index. Those who want to match the S&P 500 would have to have the same weighted portfolio. This means, investors would have to heavily invest in technology stocks precisely when the sector commands historically high valuations.

Only a few winners emerge from the large number of companies listed on the market. Out of 28,114 publicly-listed US companies, the top 25 (less than 0.1%) are responsible for nearly one-third of all shareholder wealth created since 1926. These numbers underline the fact that the odds of picking those few massive outperforming stocks are very slim. Almost invariably, stock picking turns out to be a losing proposition.

Stock indices are simply less risky

Apple went public in December 1980 at a price of \$22. Adjusted for stock splits, its initial public offering (IPO) price was \$0.10 per share. At today’s price of \$179.49, Apple has since gained 179,390%, a 19% annualized return. Yet to get that return, an investor would have had to sit through multiple difficult periods. From 1991 to 1998, Apple’s stock price declined by 83%, from 2000 to 2003 by 82% and from 2007 to 2009 by 61%.

Any potential Apple investor would have had to shrug off negative news headlines, like this one — “The Fall of Steve Jobs” — from Fortune Magazine in 1985. Shortly after this story, Jobs was fired from Apple. He returned 12 years later and led the company to great success. However, it would have taken a brave and stubborn investor to hold on to Apple stock and they would have had to refrain from taking any profits for a long period of time.

Asked which stock investors wished they had bought (in hindsight), most would likely name Apple or Tesla. However, a beverage company, emerging out of bankruptcy in 1988, steals the crown. Formerly known as Hansen Natural, Monster Beverage rose from a split-adjusted price of \$0.0062 in 1995 to around \$50 today, for a return of more than 800,000%. The annualized gain of 37% for Monster Beverage is almost twice Apple’s 19%.

There is no guarantee that companies can come back from steep declines in stock prices. In such cases, investors’ stubbornness can backfire. The share prices of former market leaders were nearly or completely wiped out. Former stock market darlings such as Nokia (-90%), Palm (-94%), Blackberry (-98%) and Nortel Networks (-100%) are part of a long list of companies that have sunk like lead in water.

In the case of an investment manager, he would have been fired for holding on to Apple or Nokia stock. Holding an ETF saves professional fund managers from the risk of losing their jobs.

Jack Bogle, the founder of investment management company Vanguard, famously exclaimed “Don’t look for the needle in the haystack. Just buy the entire haystack.” The “needles” investors are looking for are the few companies whose shares go on to have an astronomically high performance. The “haystack” is the entire stock index. Vanguard introduced a low-cost index fund in 1976, leading to the success of the ETF. Not only does an index ETF guarantee to closely follow the market but it does so at very low cost. The Vanguard S&P 500 ETF charges 0.03 and even the State Street Global Advisors “SPY” ETF charges 0.09%, a much lower figure than active professional and institutional investors.

What if everyone goes passive?

From a rational perspective it does not make sense to spend millions of dollars on salaries of analysts and portfolio managers if the prospects of outperforming a simple (and cost-efficient) ETF are slim. So what would happen if most investors shifted to passive investing via index-linked vehicles? What if nobody did any research anymore into companies’ fundamentals, balance sheets and products?

Index members could rely on steady buy orders from automatic investing by pension funds and insurance companies. However, this raises other issues. Would the stock price of a company reflect the fact that it was on the verge of bankruptcy or that it had just invented a cure for cancer? Would the price mechanism of the market still work?

In theory, there must be a maximum share of passively managed money beyond which active investing would become profitable again. But the

fundamental conundrum of the market would still remain: for every investor that outperforms there must be another who underperforms the index.

For individual investors, going passive does by no means guarantee investment success. Passive investing simply means no underperformance relative to an index but does not guarantee absolute (positive) performance. It took the technology-heavy Nasdaq Composite 15 years to recuperate losses after the dot-com bubble burst in 2000. Between 1995 and its peak in March 2000, this index rose 800%, only to give back most of its gains by October 2002.

Today, S&P 500 heavyweights such as Apple and Microsoft are valued together at over \$5 trillion. They are sporting historically high valuations with their valuations at 28 and 30 times their estimated earnings respectively. The index containing these stocks doesn’t care about the valuations of Apple and Microsoft. The S&P 500 does not care about the future performance of Apple and Microsoft. Passive investing can solve relative underperformance vis-à-vis the market but not guarantee high returns because, like the Nasdaq in 2000 or Wall Street in 1929, the market itself can lose value.

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Justin Trudeau Is Now Playing a Risky Game With India

Kanwal Sibal, Vikram Sood
October 22, 2023

The Canadian prime minister has stopped trade talks with and withdrawn diplomats from India. He has doubled down on unsubstantiated allegations against the Indian government over the killing of a terrorist who fled to Canada from India. Trudeau's rash actions are not in the interests of either Canada or India.

[Kanwal Sibal is the former foreign secretary of India. Vikram Sood is the former chief of India's foreign intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing. Both are noted policy wonks, formidable intellectuals and prolific writers.]

India-Canada relations have reached a nadir. On October 20, Canada withdrew 41 diplomats and their families from India. This came after the Indian government threatened to revoke diplomatic immunity for Canadian diplomats. India's action came after Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau claimed that there were "credible allegations" that India was behind the killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in suburban Vancouver. Trudeau made this claim in the Canadian parliament, triggering off an international furor.

Nijjar was a naturalized Canadian citizen who immigrated from India in 1997. He first arrived in Canada on a fraudulent passport and his citizenship application was rejected many times. His attempt to claim citizenship through marriage failed because Canadian 'immigration officials considered it a marriage of convenience.' After ten

years of reapplying repeatedly, Nijjar became a Canadian citizen in 2007.

Nijjar was an outspoken advocate for the creation of Khalistan, an independent state for Sikhs to be carved out of Indian territory. Sikh extremists waged a bloody insurgency in the 1980s demanding Khalistan. Two of them killed Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister of India, in 1984. In 1987, a research paper by the CIA concluded that Sikh extremists posed "a long-term terrorist threat" that would prove impossible for India to stamp out. It also went on to say:

"Sikh extremists will continue to rely on violence—in particular, assassination—as their principal tactic for gaining a Sikh state."

In Indian eyes, Nijjar was a Sikh extremist. In 2020, India designated Nijjar as a terrorist, and, two years later, India's National Investigation Agency (NIA) accused him of plotting to kill a Hindu priest in Punjab. Even before Canada granted Nijjar citizenship, the Interpol had issued a Red Notice against him. The Interpol defines a Red Notice as "a request to law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition, surrender, or similar legal action."

Canada's dodgy record on backing Sikh terrorists

Much history lies behind India's strong reaction to Canadian accusations. India has long held that Canada has provided refuge to Sikh terrorists. The memory of Air India (AI) flight 182 still lives strong for the country. On June 23, 1985, Sikh terrorists blew up this flight to India, which exploded off the Irish coast. All 329 people on board died and only 131 bodies were retrieved from the sea.

While AI 182 was still in the air, another explosion at Tokyo's Narita airport killed two Japanese baggage handlers. If it had exploded over the Pacific, another plane would have disappeared, leading to hundreds more deaths.

Canadian authorities arrested Talwinder Singh Parmar, the leader of an extremist group called Babbar Khalsa that is now banned in Canada and India and Inderjit Singh Reyat, an electrician, on various weapons, explosives and conspiracy charges. Both were acquitted of all charges. Pierre Trudeau, Trudeau's father, refused to extradite them as prime minister.

It is now clear that Canadian authorities did not do enough to prevent these attacks. They also bungled the investigation. After much public pressure, the Canadian government set up a public inquiry in 2006 headed by a former Supreme Court judge. In 2010, this inquiry concluded that a "cascading series of errors" had led to the "largest mass murder in Canadian history."

Trudeau has carried on his father's policy of not extraditing terrorists to India. Over the years, Canada has become home to Sikh extremists who want to dismember the Indian state. Almost a year ago, these extremists organized the Khalistan Referendum. Extremist Sikhs in Canada voted for the secession of the state of Punjab from India. This 2022 referendum posed a simple question: "Should India governed Punjab be an Independent Country?" Trudeau has remained deaf to Indian concerns and protests, claiming that free speech in Canada includes even the dismemberment of India, hate speech and promotion of terrorism. He conveniently forgets that every country, including liberal Canada, puts reasonable restrictions on freedoms, which are never absolute.

Trudeau and the Anglosphere have an ax to grind

It is utterly unclear as to who killed Nijjar. Sikh terrorists have now split into many cults, many of them with violent gangs. Often, they raise money for Sikh independence to fund their lavish lifestyles. Musicians have joined these cults, glamorizing violence and propagating hedonism. Many glorify gun culture and terrorism. A rival gang could have killed Nijjar. So could have an intelligence agency in a false flag operation to discredit India after a successful G20 summit.

Hence, it is surprising that Trudeau is making such a big deal about a citizen who arrived in Canada on a false passport after committing crimes in India. Irritatingly, Trudeau is mobilizing the Anglosphere against India. US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan waded into the controversy, promising that India would not get any special exemption for its actions. Australia's intelligence chief has also supported Trudeau's accusations on Nijjar's murder.

The Anglosphere has formed the "Five Eyes," a multilateral intelligence-sharing network of over 20 different agencies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States. The Five Eyes includes both surveillance-based and signals intelligence. The Anglosphere seems to be alluding there is proof of Indian involvement but, so far, has been unwilling or unable to offer any evidence.

More importantly, the actions of the Anglosphere reek of hypocrisy. Let us assume for a moment that India killed Nijjar even though this is a preposterously untrue assumption. Nijjar was a terrorist conspiring to kill Indian citizens and dismember the Indian state. The Anglosphere killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani in Iraq, terrorist Saudi Osama bin Laden in Pakistan and thousands in drone strikes around the world.

Trudeau, Sullivan & Co do not have the privilege of outrage over so-called Indian actions, especially when they lack any evidence.

The Anglosphere is reflexively slipping into old colonial habits in condemning India. This condemnation might have ulterior motives. The Anglosphere is unhappy about Indian leadership of the Global South, which has come at the cost of these Western English-speaking countries. India has led the G20 successfully and admitted the African Union into the organization. The Anglosphere failed to get a condemnation of Russia at the G20 summit at Delhi. Tarnishing India's reputation is in the interest of the Five Eyes because they might be seeking leverage for the Anglosphere.

Why is Trudeau recklessly undermining India-Canada relations?

Trudeau has a history of poor judgment, especially in foreign policy. Unlike Henry Kissinger or Deng Xiaoping, he is ideological, not realistic. In 2018, he accused Saudi Arabia of human rights violations and demanded the release of imprisoned activists. This led to a breakdown in Saudi-Canada relations, which were only restored this year.

To understand Trudeau's actions, we have to understand his ideology. He is the head of the Liberal Party of Canada, which the Conservative opposition has accused of a "radical woke agenda." In September, retired lieutenant général Michel Maisonneuve and his wife argued that Trudeau's woke agenda was destroying Canada.

According to this agenda, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a Hindu fascist political force that oppresses minorities. Trudeau sees himself as standing up to dark rightwing forces threatening democracy. He has a white savior complex, which motivates him to take on the BJP. The left-leaning press in the Anglosphere

fills the wind in his sails, enabling Trudeau to position himself against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the gray world of foreign policy and international relations, this Manichean goodie versus baddie pantomime is childlike, immature and destructive.

Trudeau's woke ideology sees Canada as a liberal democracy that stands for Western values such as democracy, minority rights and freedom of speech. Therefore, Sikhs who form 2.1% of the Canadian population — a higher percentage than in India — have the right to argue for dismemberment of the Indian state. This extreme ideology also gives extremist Sikhs the right to support and conduct violence and terrorism for the secession of Punjab from India.

Trudeau's ideological absolutism on this extreme version of Canadian version liberalism has led to terrible consequences for the country. As The Guardian details, "Canada has a dark history with Nazis," who took advantage of lax immigration laws to come into the country. Sikh extremists and terrorists did the same. Note that Sikhs form 57.69% of the population of Punjab and the vast majority of them do not want to secede from India. Despite forming just 1.7% of the Indian population, Sikhs occupy the highest offices of the state, achieve great success in business and are revered cultural figures. Manmohan Singh, an erudite Sikh economist, was prime minister from 2004 to 2014.

Ideology is not the only reason for Trudeau's reckless Russian roulette with India-Canada relations. Like other parliamentary democracies, the Canadian prime minister has to command a majority in the lower house of the parliament. Out of the 338 seats in the House of Commons, Trudeau's Liberals have 158. This is short of the required majority of 170. Trudeau is in power thanks to the New Democratic Party (NDP), which has 25 seats.

Jagmeet Singh, a charismatic and dapper Sikh, is the leader of the NDP. He has long supported the creation of Khalistan. Last year, he supported Sikh peoples' right to seek independence and the Khalistan Referendum. It is Singh's consistent support for Khalistan that led the Sikh-led Manmohan Singh government to deny him a visa to India in 2014.

Trudeau is in trouble at home. The speaker of the Canadian House of Commons recently resigned "after he praised a Ukrainian veteran who fought for a Nazi military unit during World War II." Trudeau needs the NDP's support to stay in power. As any good politician, Jagmeet Singh is therefore extracting his pound of flesh. For sheer political survival, Trudeau has little option but to wave the Khalistan flag to stay on as prime minister.

What is the way forward?

India regards Canada as an important partner. Thousands of Indians study and live in Canada. The country has a good education system, a dynamic economy and fantastic healthcare. Indian and Canadian businesses are working closely on some of the world's most pressing matters. India's Reliance Industries and Canada's Brookfield Asset Management will soon be manufacturing renewable energy and decarbonisation equipment in Australia. Brookfield and other Canadian funds have invested billions of dollars into the Indian economy.

Until recently, India and Canada were discussing a free trade agreement. On September 1, Trudeau's government paused these talks. The way forward is to renew these talks, sign a trade agreement and deepen the economic relationship between two of the world's leading democracies.

Trudeau is living on borrowed time. Even if his coalition government does not fall, he is likely to

lose the 2025 elections. Till then, India will have to keep calm and carry on. Things have moved on from 1985 and India is a much greater power that has to stand up for its interests against Canada until Ottawa embarks on a more sensible India policy. If Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre becomes prime minister, he must control Khalistani terrorists on Canadian soil, improve ties with India and conclude the win-win India-Canada trade agreement as a top priority.

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Robert Fico Returns: Will Slovakia Become the New Hungary?

Daniel Martinek, Peter Techet
October 24, 2023

Robert Fico's return to power is because of the instability of the previous governments and a canny populist campaign. Under his rule key Slovakian institutions, especially the police and the prosecution, may once again be filled with Fico-loyalists, benefiting corruption, clientelism and oligarchy. He is also protectionist and pro-Russia, offering a big challenge to the EU.

In Slovakia, the left-wing populist Robert Fico will return to power and form a coalition with leftist and nationalist parties. Fico was removed from power by the Slovak people in 2018. However, from 2020 to 2023, Slovakia experienced a high level of chaos. There were frequent government crises and prime ministers changed frequently. After so much instability, many Slovak voters now yearn for some stability.

As a result, Fico's corruption scandals seem to have been pushed into the background. The return of a politician like Fico in Bratislava, who maintains strong ties with the Hungarian Viktor Orbán, can have significant implications for Central Europe and the European Union (EU).

To understand the importance of Fico, we have to go back to 2018. In the wake of the cold-blooded murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, protests are taking place across Slovakia. The public demanded an explanation of and political

accountability for the cases revealed by Ján Kuciak. These involved the network between the members of the ruling party SMER — slovenská sociálna demokracia (DIRECTION – Slovak Social Democracy) and controversial businessmen considered to be part of organized crime that has conducted massive financial frauds.

Protests led Fico to resign. There were other personnel reshuffles in the government coalition. Fresh parliamentary elections followed in 2020. Capitalizing on a strong anti-SMER political agenda and establishing his election campaign as a fight against Fico and his network, Igor Matovič led his Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL'aNO) party to a decisive victory. Considered the gravedigger of Fico's political career in 2020, the former prime minister Matovič has now become its resurrector.

Resurrection of Robert Fico

October 1 turned out to be a sobering morning for liberal Slovaks. With a relatively strong mandate of 23%, the SMER party won the early elections, consequently forming a government coalition. The party has partnered with SMER-defectors who formed the HLAS party led by Peter Pellegrini. He replaced Fico as prime minister and was prime minister from 2018 to 2020. The right-wing Slovak National Party (SNS) is also a coalition partner

Despite both Fico and Pellegrini categorizing their parties as “social democratic”, their memberships in the European Socialist Party were suspended. This happened due not only to the recent radical rhetoric and political positions of SMER, but also to the party's willingness to form a coalition with the SNS. Many EU Social Democrats consider the SNS to be a far-right entity with an extremist ideology.

For the past three years, Fico or Pellegrini have been in opposition. They harshly criticized not

only Matovič's mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the inter-coalition conflicts that ultimately led to the fall of Matovič's government.

Fico's and Pellegrini's criticism and the promise of "stability and order" after years of political turmoil ultimately materialized in an electoral victory. Paradoxically, Fico can thank Matovič for his political comeback. Matovič built his political program on the anti-Fico premise but failed to deliver.

Despite losing more than half of his supporters, Matovič managed to retain his place in the parliament. Throughout the campaign, Matovič was the most radical critic of the "mafia," a term he used to describe Fico's people. He went so far as to getting into physical confrontations with politicians from the SMER-party. Yet Fico's populism trumped Matovič's anti-Fico populism.

The promise of stability to those suffering from poverty

How is it possible that Fico is coming back? Did everyone forget the 2018 protests?

The election results have put influential groups of controversial businessmen that run clientelistic networks involving government officials and the police, prosecutors, judiciary, financial administration and secret services back into focus. The connection of SMER members to persons involved in organized crime, which was revealed five years ago, seems to play no role anymore.

Instead of criminal prosecution, Fico and his party fellows now will be protected with political immunity. Promising professionalism, expertise, experience and stability, Fico has risen to the top of the political ladder once again. Slovak voters dissatisfied with the previous government and declining living standards have helped Fico to climb this ladder.

Slovakia has one of the worst public finances in the EU. It is also the second poorest country in the EU. Segments of Slovak society are currently on the verge of extreme poverty. They were fed up with the chaotic government of the past years and yearned for strong leadership.

Fico's political narrative about the struggle between liberalism and conservatism, gender ideology and traditional values was another clever political tool to win the support of overwhelmingly conservative Slovak voters. Using pro-Russian disinformation tactics and blaming the war in Ukraine for declining living standards helped Fico win as well. Fico made the argument that the role of his government is to place the interests of Slovakia and Slovaks first, which is not what many European countries are doing.

Fico has declared: "The protection of the sovereignty and national-state interests of the Slovak Republic will be the government's priority." This declaration during the signing of a memorandum of understanding with future coalition partners resonates with voters.

Will Slovakia become the second Hungary and will Central Europe turn illiberal?

Slovakia will now follow a "policy of many azimuths." Simply put, Fico will prioritize nationalism and protectionism. His thesis is that this would improve living conditions of Slovakian citizens at home. Hence, Slovak political, military and diplomatic support for Ukraine will no longer continue. Fico has also been blunt in his criticism of EU sanctions against Russia. Now, the EU will have to deal with another blackmailer like Hungary's Orbán within its institutions.

Fico will emulate Orbán in domestic policy too. He is highly unlikely to build a decent and matter-of-fact political culture or a positive relationship and trust in state institutions. Instead, the erosion

of democratic institutions, the continued departure from the rule of law, oppression of minorities and the shrinking of the civil society environment will become the new political reality.

The question on everyone's lips is simple: Will Slovakia become the second Hungary? Fico would like that. However, it is up in the air whether he can establish an "illiberal democracy" as easily as Orbán did in Hungary. Orbán has been in power for 13 years with a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian parliament. This allowed him to rewrite the constitution and the election laws. Institutions are fully controlled by Orbán's Fidesz party, while Fidesz-affiliated oligarchs have taken hold of the economy. The free press is weak, the opposition is divided, and change seems unlikely in Hungary.

Even under Fico, Slovakia presents a different picture. He will govern with a coalition in which Pellegrini will represent a pro-European, values-based approach. Fico's coalition will prove to be unstable. The SNS with many independent MPs is not bound by party discipline. An "illiberal democracy" of the Hungarian variety is not an imminent threat in Slovakia. However, there is a big risk that key institutions, especially the police and the prosecution, may once again be filled with Fico loyalists, benefiting corruption, clientelism and oligarchy.

In the foreign policy debates within the EU, Fico is likely to espouse positions similar to Orbán's. The Slovakian leader will oppose migration, resist further European federalization and favor a more friendly approach towards Russia. Hungary can also anticipate that potential sanctions against Budapest, related to rule of law violations and corruption, might be blocked by vetoes from Bratislava.

The former unity of the Visegrád-Group states stands shattered. Prague and Warsaw have pro-European and pro-Ukrainian governments, while

Budapest and Bratislava are more critical of the EU and lean more towards Russia.

The EU has a new test in preventing how far Fico can go with his illiberal plans in Slovakia. It remains to be seen if Brussels can assert its values and principles in Bratislava. Fico presents an existential challenge for Slovak civil society, which once successfully ousted him from office.

[The [Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe](#) produced this piece and is a partner of Fair Observer.]

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How the New Israel-Hamas War Threatens the Middle East

Gary Grappo
October 27, 2023

An Israeli victory is Iran's worst case scenario. Therefore, Tehran is likely to activate its allies to undermine Israel without provoking all-out war. However, intensifying conflict in Gaza amplifies chances of miscalculation and a second Arab Uprisings could engulf the Middle East.

Question: Setting aside for a moment the epicenter of the current Israeli-Hamas War — and the colossal battle to come once Israeli ground forces enter Gaza and the real battle is joined — how bad could this conflict really become?

Answer: Very bad. Mostly because of the risk of miscalculation. Emotions are at their peak, judgment is suspended, and the sides are operating on hair-trigger responses. Nonetheless, there are mitigating factors that could potentially mean less involvement of forces outside the immediate conflict.

The proximate cause for this concern is Iran. In addition to Hamas itself, Iran's proxies in the region include Hizballah in Southern Lebanon, a collection of some half dozen Syrian and Iraqi militias, and the Houthis of Yemen, all of which currently view both Israel and the United States as enemies. Ironically, all, including Hamas, are Arab but variously take orders from and are armed, supplied, funded, trained, advised and often directed by Iran, which is not Arab but Persian. At present, no Iranian forces, save for a handful

advising and directing ground forces in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq, are seriously threatened by this conflict. Iran is using its Arab proxies, aka pawns, to pursue its decades-long war against Israel.

The Hizballah gamble

Of all the proxies/pawns confronting Israel, none is as threatening as Hizballah. Armed with an estimated 150,000 rockets and missiles, as many as 2,000 drones, and a military force of some 100,000 (per Hezbollah, but fewer than 50,000 according to estimates by Jane's Information Group), it is a potent military force. In 2006, when it last battled Israel, it was armed with 15,000 rockets, or about what Hamas had at the start of the current conflict. And while Hizballah was able to stand its ground and remain in Southern Lebanon, it took a severe beating, brutally devastating Lebanon in the process. Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hizballah, subsequently acknowledged his regret for having started that war, given its horrendous toll on Hizballah and Lebanon.

Nevertheless, Hizballah's engagement in the present war would tax Israel's forces and resources, likely obliging it to redirect forces and assets from Gaza to its northern border. Were Hizballah to launch even a fraction of its missile arsenal against Israeli cities, tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of Israelis could perish. Israel would respond with the full force of its much more potent military apparatus. Recently, it threatened to "return Lebanon to the stone age" in the event of a major Hizballah military attack on Israel. Given the level of destruction in the 2006 war, this isn't an idle threat. To add further grist to the argument, unlike in 2006, Hizballah faces the power of two US aircraft carrier battle groups off the Lebanese coast and two air force fighter squadrons deployed to the region, which adds a massively powerful punch in aircraft and cruise missiles to the Israeli onslaught. US President Joe

Biden's cautionary warning to Hizballah, "Don't!", also is no bluff.

Nasrallah's aforementioned admission is important. Would he risk repeating his mistake of 2006, with a much worse ending? It is also worth noting that Lebanon has been in an economic and financial spiral over the last several years propelled in part by continuing political disarray and dysfunction. Hizballah's political stock in the country is at an all-time low. A war in Lebanon, which would be the inevitable consequence of a Hizballah conflict with Israel, would be vehemently opposed by Lebanon's tattered political leadership, the Lebanese army and most of all by the Lebanese people, including a likely majority of the sizeable Shi'a population from whom Hizballah draws its political support.

For Iran, is Hamas worth the risk?

How hard would Iran push Hizballah to enter the fray in the event of a potential Israeli defeat of another important asset, Hamas? Only Tehran can answer. However, Iran likely places the highest priority on the health and survival of Hizballah. It is viewed as an indispensable strategic asset in the event Iran itself is faced with an attack or war. Risking Hizballah and potentially Iran's own defensive capabilities doesn't appear a smart bet.

Iran's outright entry into the war also appears unlikely. Perhaps for Hizballah, Iran might respond, but not Hamas. And pushing Hizballah into a war it would very likely lose would almost certainly prompt Iranian involvement. With all sorts of political, economic and environmental problems at home and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in declining health, Iran would not want a war with Israel and most especially with the United States.

Ultimately, the decision lies with Tehran. Is it willing to risk a truly regional conflagration in its

irrational, perverse pursuit of destroying Israel? Is it willing to stand by as Israel destroys Hamas, an Iranian ally and proxy in Gaza, and lose a major pressure point on Israel directly on its border? A defeat of Hamas would be a humiliating defeat for Iran, almost comparable to the Soviet Union's in 1973 when Israeli forces crossed the Suez Canal, surrounded the elite Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai and were headed for Cairo. However, Hamas' defeat, but without Hizballah's destruction, would still leave Iran as a formidable foe. Without Hizballah, Iran is measurably weaker.

Even without overt intervention, Hizballah has the ability to menace and tie down Israeli forces in northern Israel. Importantly, both sides seem to know how far they can push their forces without crossing some unspecific line, which would then require full-scale retaliation by one side. The Hizballah attacks at the current level demonstrate solidarity with Hamas, prove to Iran's other proxies that it supports them in their efforts, but avoid a drawn-out war that risks severely crippling Hizballah and devastating Lebanon.

The major problem with that scenario is unpredictability. War is inherently unpredictable. A slight miscalculation by Iran, Hizballah or Israel could trigger conflict that might quickly spiral out of control. If a Hizballah rocket, for example, were mistakenly to land in a populated Israeli area, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) would be obliged to respond with significant force, to which Hizballah would likely respond in kind. The Middle East's nightmare scenario will have begun.

And then the risk next door

The other Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen present a threat of a significantly lesser degree. They lack the power and numbers to do consequential harm to Israel. Those Syrian and Iraqi militias and the Houthis are a greater threat to American forces in (or near in

the case of Yemen) those countries, though here too the threat risk is minimal. Nevertheless, the Americans will want to avoid the loss of American lives.

Still, Syrian militias elsewhere, several of which are directly advised by Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers, already threaten the Golan and northeastern Israel and cannot be ignored. They present a menacing drain on Israeli forces and resources. Although the risk is lower, an errant rocket on an Israeli town would undoubtedly trigger a strong Israeli response against Syria as well as the militia force that fired it. Bashar al-Assad, who has finally established himself as the leader without peer in Syria, will not be anxious to have Syrian groups of any stripe drag his war-devastated nation into a conflict with Israel, or by extension the US.

One final front that was already heating up is the West Bank. More than 100 Palestinians have been killed since the start of the year, making this the most violent year there since the Second Intifada (2000–2005). Iran possesses less influence there than elsewhere, but it has managed to insinuate it of late with the help of Hizballah, funneling weapons and perhaps even operatives to support Palestinian resistance movements, e.g., the Lion's Den, and aid a West Bank revival of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The major threat posed there is its proximity to Israel's major population centers: Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

Despair and hopelessness are as intensely felt in the West Bank as in Gaza. The Palestinian Authority, led by an aging Mahmoud Abbas and a corrupt and inept coterie of Fatah elites and fat cats, nominally governs the West Bank but lacks credibility and is thoroughly distrusted by the Palestinians living there. Palestinian Security Forces are reluctant to insert themselves for fear of doing Israel's bidding. Right-wing Israeli settlers have stepped up their violence against Palestinian

towns and villages, sometimes with the willing participation of IDF soldiers. That is further fueling Palestinian animus and rage. The area is ripe for Iranian mischief and rabble-rousing and is a dagger aimed at the heart of Israel.

A full-on uprising on the West Bank would require significant Israeli forces to quell over an extended period of time. The toll on military personnel of such an occurrence, along with the ground campaign in Gaza, would represent a major taxing of IDF forces and assets. And it is in that scenario that others, especially Hizballah, may incorrectly perceive an advantage. That in turn precipitates an expansion of the Israel-Hamas conflict that so many fear.

Armed uprisings in both Gaza and the West Bank present another problem. Such an uprising will undoubtedly attract massive support in the Arab world. Think of the Arab Uprisings on steroids, except this time it will revolve around an issue that Arab governments will have to support. If it lasted for any length of time, as seasoned Middle East journalist Robin Wright has pointed out, it could potentially jeopardize the relationships Israel has painstakingly negotiated over decades with its neighbors Egypt and Jordan, as well as with Abraham Accord members the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. It would also destroy the ongoing talks over normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

What's in it for Iran?

Given the hesitation to see the Israel-Hamas war escalate to involve outside forces or expand to additional fronts, why does Iran take the risk?

First, the Islamic Republic likely sees this moment as a chance to prove its mettle on the regional and even global stages. Its deployment of proxies on Israel's southern, northern and northeastern borders demonstrates its ability to

project, if not power, then at least effective resistance, and threaten Israel. Success in war is greater with allies, and Iran has proven it has them. As such, it cannot be ignored.

Secondly, Iran seeks to destabilize the Arab Middle East, fragment its centers of power, and, in the ideal scenario, separate it from the United States. Iran would then stand as the unchallenged power in the region, which it frankly believes it is already. Therefore, the aforementioned West Bank nightmare scenario bears watching carefully.

If Israel is successful in ridding Gaza of Hamas — regardless of how that is defined — look for Iran to immediately rally its proxies, including whatever remnant of Hamas that may survive. Iran will continue fighting Israel to the last Arab, all the while protecting and advancing its Islamic Revolution.

Israeli victory over Hamas is the worst case for Iran. The regime of mullahs is playing for much higher gains and sees its odds too attractive to ignore. This makes it an extremely dangerous time for the Middle East.

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Want to Stop War Crimes? Cut Off Aid to Israel Now

Nafees Ahmad
October 28, 2023

Innocent Israelis suffered an inhumane tragedy which must not be minimized. But Israel has no right to inflict suffering on other innocents in response. Diplomatic protesting will do nothing; if the international community wants to save Gazan lives, it must hit Israel in the pocket.

In cases of chaotic and amorphous tragedy, like that of NATO's invasion of Afghanistan or Russian aggression against Ukraine, we can turn to international law to bring clarity and help us sort our right and wrong. But the slaughter perpetrated earlier this month by a group like Hamas seems to be different in kind. Political and legal commentators were left in a state of helplessness, their pre-existing categories utterly inadequate to evaluate the causes and consequences of the event. In the face of an atrocity of such magnitude, all such analyses appear insufficient. The only thing to be said is that it was an assault on human dignity itself. Nothing more. Reducing the worth of those killed and abducted by Hamas and seeking to defend these crimes against other injustices is reprehensible.

Human dignity is the guiding premise for dealing with this calamity and all others resulting from it. We cannot allow questions of political consideration, blame or revenge to distract from our commitment to this fundamental value. But the requirement to uphold human dignity only has absolute application if it also has universal application, and vice versa. This is the prerequisite

for the possibility of democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Human dignity must be upheld at all costs and under all circumstances. So, just as we cannot forget the innocent Israelis whose lives were taken away at the hands of Hamas terrorists, neither can we forget the innocent Palestinians who were slain by Israel.

Since 2007, Israel has arbitrarily imposed a naval and commercial embargo on the Gaza Strip, placing it under quarantine. Israel made three military incursions against Gaza in 2009, 2012 and 2014. 1,434 Palestinians were killed in 22 days (December 27, 2008–January 18, 2009), including 1259 civilians and 288 minors. 30 children died among the 103 Palestinians between November 14 and November 21, 2012. Between July 8 and August 26, 2014, 1,462 civilians—including 551 children—were slain. According to Richard Falk, the Special Rapporteur for the Occupied Territories of the United Nations, 40% of Gaza's male residents have visited Israeli prisons. In Israel, administrative detention allows for an accusation for six months without any charges.

As Israel prepares to launch an offensive of unprecedented proportions against Gaza, the numbers will doubtlessly become more shocking still.

How do Palestinians get caught up in the violence?

Young Palestinians in the Gaza Strip make for easy recruitment for the Hamas military forces because more than 50% are unemployed.

Out of a population of 5 million in Palestine (of whom 2 million live in the tiny Gaza Strip), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) today cares for more than 800,000. On May 24, 2023, the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Tor Wennesland, pleaded with the

Security Council that “swift action is needed to prevent outbreaks of violence between Israelis and Palestinians and to avert an imminent food crisis,” to no avail. So, hunger and desperation deepen in Gaza, fueling extremism.

As with its founding in December 1987 at the start of the first Intifada, Hamas' election win in 2006 cannot be separated from the radicalization of Palestinian society in response to the Israeli embargo. Hamas maintains a robust network of philanthropic organizations within a humiliated and defenceless populace.

How Israel has sought to punish Gaza

In retaliation for Hamas rocket attacks, Israeli assassination squads have killed the militant group's top officials. Since then, its leaders have fled to Qatar. In a news conference, the head of the Israeli Air Force bragged that his organization had carried out between 80 and 100 extrajudicial targeted killings with a “90% success rate.”

But Israeli reprisals extend much farther than killing Hamas leaders. It has engaged in an inhumane program of collective punishment.

When the Nazi troops advanced through Eastern Europe and into the Soviet Union, they were notorious for destroying such towns and burning them to the ground, killing everyone in them—man, woman, and child—as a form of collective punishment whenever they encountered the slightest resistance from smaller villages. Such collective punishment has long been considered a war crime, violating the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, customary International Humanitarian Law rules and the UN Charter, which based its laws of war on the Nuremberg Tribunal established after World War II, specifically lists it as such.

For years, Israel's IDF has disregarded international law and carried out similar, albeit more targeted, criminal acts, destroying homes and frequently killing innocent women and children if suspected Palestinian terrorists were thought to have resided there. This strategy was used even though the alleged "terrorist" had previously been apprehended or eliminated.

Israel's leaders have launched a fierce, vicious, and genocidal campaign of collective punishment against the entire Gaza Strip and its 2.3 million trapped residents. This includes cutting off food, water, electricity, and, as a result, sewer and water treatment systems.

The military is preparing to impose a full siege on the prisoner enclave of Gaza, according to Israel's so-called "Defence" Minister Yoav Gallant, who also declared, "We are fighting animals, and we will act accordingly." According to the Gaza Health Ministry, 900 Palestinians already perished in the first few days of Israel's reprisal against Gaza, including 450 children. Despite his unintentional grimly ironic double entendre, Gallant's brutal language is clear, and his policy is an epic war crime of genocidal proportions.

It is revolting to hear Gallant use rhetoric reminiscent of the Nazi soldiers who surrounded the walled-off Warsaw Ghetto prison camp where over 500,000 Polish Jews were imprisoned before being burnt and blown up in a final orgy of explosives and cannon fire.

Israelis have suffered terrible crimes at the hands of Hamas fighters, but these do not excuse Israel's impending response of collective punishment. The initial Israeli bombing and shelling in Gaza left horrific scenes. True, Israel does have the humanity to bury most of the dead victims, many of whom were probably children and elderly civilians, rather than leaving them

bleeding out in the street like the victims of Hamas did. But innocents are dead all the same.

US military aid to Israel

On October 12, 2023, in Philadelphia, a sizable, grey four-engine jet with the recognizable fat, squarish fuselage of a military C-17 lumbered eastward. This was almost certainly the first of many such enormous US military cargo planes headed for Israel and was packed with heavy weapons, bombs and other horrors created by the sick minds of engineers in the US arms industry. These industrialized killing tools are bad enough in the US military's arsenal, even for Americans. Still, they should never be given as a gift to a nation that intends to use its overwhelming power to end the lives of countless civilians as a form of collective punishment for the actions of fighters they have no control over. This is especially true for people in Gaza who are entirely at Israel's mercy and unable to escape their walled-in and fenced-in open-air prison there.

Suppose the US doesn't intervene to stop this Israeli war crime before it ramps up. In that case, it will be fully complicit in this potentially enormous atrocity by Israel and its military. It is vital to persuade the US to stop providing Israel with military support before any attack on Gaza. The collective punishment of Gaza will be swift and severe to finish the killing job before the US, most likely acting behind the scenes, can force it to halt. The residents of Gaza may not be able to control the armed terrorists and Hamas leaders who dominate them. Still, the US citizens can prevent the US government from arming Israel more so that it can commit these and other war crimes.

Most of the US's international aid to Israel, since the creation of the Jewish state, is military. An eye-popping \$260 billion in aid has been provided to Israel to control the Palestinians living under its forced occupation. That assistance has

been provided without conditions, even after Israel sunk a marked US Navy ship, boarded a Turkish ferry in international waters, killed an American teen for documenting their act of piracy, shot and killed an American woman reporter who was covering a Palestinian protest in the West Bank or, most recently, invaded Gaza and killed thousands of people.

Israel's forced transfer of the population of the Gaza Strip will amount to a war crime under international law. The military offensive will significantly raise the death toll. The best way to ensure Israel's security is to restore the Palestinian people's dignity, not, as Interior Minister Eli Yishai of Netanyahu's administration proclaimed during the bombardment of the Gaza Strip, to "to send Gaza back to the Middle Ages."

Further, Israel won't pay attention to the tepid remarks of US leaders who bemoan their war crimes. They won't start listening until US help is wholly cut off. And that will only take place if American citizens demand it. So, let's refrain from wasting time protesting war criminals. Let's pressure international leadership to stop providing help rapidly, lest they become passively complicit in these war crimes. The cost of abandoning Palestine is unfathomable.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]

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