THE JERUSALEM STRATEGIC TRIBUNE

AFTER IRAN CONFRONTING THE BROTHERHOOD

From Regime Collapse to the Next Ideological Battle

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Only Trump Can Defeat the Muslim Brotherhood Before It's Too Late

by Ahmed Charai

While America has long focused on defeating terrorist networks like al-Qaeda and ISIS, it has largely overlooked the ideological infrastructure that gave birth to them. At the heart of that ecosystem lies the Muslim Brotherhood—a transnational Islamist movement that has inspired, influenced, and in many cases directly spawned the world's most dangerous jihadist organizations.

Today, the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideological allies no longer operate in the shadows. They glorify terrorist attacks on American citizens, coordinate with US adversaries like Iran, and exploit both foreign and domestic platforms to spread extremist ideologies under the cover of civil society.

The October 7, 2023 massacre in Israel—executed by Hamas, the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood—was a grim reminder of this reality. That day, terrorists slaughtered entire families, committed mass rape, and kidnapped civilians—including American citizens. In the aftermath, Islamist movements from North Africa to the Levant openly celebrated the atrocity. Brotherhood-affiliated political parties in Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan praised Hamas and condemned anyone who dared to speak out. This was not just regional posturing—it was ideological solidarity with terror.

But the threat didn't stop in Gaza. Just weeks later, the Houthis in Yemen—aligned with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—launched a wave of attacks on US warships and commercial

vessels in the Red Sea, resulting in American casualties. Meanwhile, Iran-backed militias in Iraq targeted US troops, US facilities, and allies. These groups, while often sectarian rivals, are increasingly united by one goal: the destruction of American power and influence in the Middle East.

What unites them is not just strategy—it is ideology. Despite theological differences, Islamist actors like Hizbullah, the Houthis, and the Muslim Brotherhood have converged in their hatred of the West, their rejection of pluralism, and their dream of a region ruled by religious authoritarianism. Their alliance is built on shared logistics, media platforms, and battlefield coordination—but also on a deeper, mutual belief: that history must be rewritten through jihad and tyranny.

Recent developments in Iran—marked by unprecedented military strikes and the looming threat of regime collapse—have only raised the stakes. For decades, the Iranian regime has served as the primary benefactor and strategic partner of Islamist movements across the region. It has funded and armed Hamas and Hizbullah, offered safe haven to Brotherhood-linked operatives, and used its vast propaganda network to spread a militant vision of Islam.

Should the Iranian regime collapse, it could mark the beginning of a regional transformation. But it also risks chaos if the ideological infrastructure it nurtured—especially the Muslim Brotherhood—is not simultaneously dismantled. The fall of Tehran's theocracy must be seen not as an endgame, but as a rare window to confront the full spectrum of Islamist extremism, both Sunni and Shia, and to deny the Muslim Brotherhood its most powerful strategic ally.

In Egypt, once elected in 2012, the Brotherhood leader Morsi moved swiftly to place his authority above judicial review, suppress the press, and consolidate power. The same authoritarian instincts are visible in Brotherhood-affiliated parties across the region. In Tunisia, the Ennahda party revealed its radical nature after October 7, praising Hamas and stoking division. In Morocco and Jordan, Brotherhood-affiliated parties have openly justified Hamas's actions and continue to call for support of the group, even after the massacre.

These factions actively intimidate dissenting voices, labeling critics of Hamas as traitors and demanding punitive action—stifling free speech and silencing moderates.

THIS IDEOLOGY HAS NOW REACHED AMERICAN SOIL—WITH DEADLY CONSEQUENCES

In Colorado, an Egyptian immigrant reportedly connected to the Muslim Brotherhood was charged after violently attacking American Jewish protesters. The FBI confirmed the assailant's ideological ties to Islamist extremism, and authorities are investigating whether the incident was

Photos: Reuters, Wikipedia

premeditated and politically motivated.

In another tragic event, two Israeli embassy staffers were killed in a terrorist attack carried out by an individual linked to a radical Islamist network. Though the attack occurred abroad, it served as a stark reminder that the Brotherhood's ideological tentacles extend well beyond the Middle East, targeting Israeli and Western interests wherever they operate.

These are not isolated acts of violence. They are manifestations of a global ideology that sees Western democracies—and those who defend them—as enemies to be destroyed.

In recent months, American campuses have seen a disturbing rise in pro-Hamas demonstrations, antisemitic rhetoric, and open hostility toward Israel—all fueled by narratives long promoted by Brotherhood-linked groups operating in the US. These organizations present themselves as civil rights advocates, yet many have documented ties to foreign entities that fund extremism. They leverage American freedoms—free speech, non-profit tax status, religious liberty—in order to weaken democracy from within.

The idea that democratic resilience alone can neutralize these threats is dangerously naïve. Islamist movements do not seek to participate in liberal democracies—they seek to exploit them until they can replace them. They do not accept pluralism or debate—they seek dominance. Left unchecked, these networks do not just radicalize minds—they eventually claim lives.

SO WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DO?

First, the Muslim Brotherhood must be formally designated as a foreign terrorist organization. This would allow the US government to freeze assets, block travel, and prosecute those providing material support. Past administrations have considered this step, but bureaucratic hesitation prevailed. The facts today make inaction indefensible.

Second, the US must pursue legal and financial action against domestic organizations with clear ties to the Brotherhood or other foreign Islamist movements. Many of these groups receive funding from governments or private donors overseas, often through American banks. If American citizens or institutions are facilitating the spread of extremism—even unwittingly—they must be held accountable.

Third, Washington should impose travel bans on the leaders and family members of Islamist movements that glorified the October 7 massacre. These individuals should not be allowed to visit, invest in, or operate within the United States. Such a policy would signal that praising terrorism disqualifies you from enjoying the privileges of the West.

Fourth, the United States should use its diplomatic and economic leverage to push partner governments to crack down on Islamist parties that incite violence and promote religious authoritarianism. Using strategic partnerships, the US can help countries reform laws that currently allow extremist groups to dominate political discourse and silence dissent.

Fifth, and most urgently, the United States must prepare for the potential collapse of the Iranian regime not by hedging, but by leading. This is a chance to dismantle a decades-old alliance between Tehran and the transnational Islamist networks it empowered. It is a moment to weaken both the financial and ideological arteries that sustain the Muslim Brotherhood. Failure to act now will allow a new, more chaotic alliance to take root from the ruins.

This is not a call for religious discrimination, nor a rejection of free expression. It is a recognition that certain ideologies—when organized, financed, and weaponized—pose an existential threat to the freedoms they exploit. Islamist extremism does not remain in rhetoric—it translates into action. And when those actions result in the deaths of Americans and allies, silence is not an option.

The war on terrorism has entered a new phase. Today's most dangerous adversaries are not just in the mountains of Afghanistan or the deserts of Syria. They are political actors, social media influencers, and community organizers—sometimes even in Western capitals—who wear suits, speak in soundbites, and exploit liberal institutions to undermine liberal values.

If the United States fails to confront this ideological enemy now, we will pay the price later—in blood, in broken alliances, and in diminished national security.

The time for complacency is over. The time to act is now. ✳

AHMED CHARAI

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OPTIONS FOR DESIGNATING THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AS A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION

by Jonathan Schanzer

Once again a Trump administration is debating whether or not to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. The last time around, during Trump's first term, the effort petered out amidst disagreements among Trump's then principals. This time around, the stars may be better aligned. However, the inevitable controversy surrounding such a move must still be managed. Islamist groups in the United States and beyond are expected to fight the measure through legal, media, and other means.

The key for the Trump administration is to approach the problem with a scalpel, not a sledgehammer. Certain Muslim Brotherhood branches meet clear criteria for a terror designation. Others are less cut and dry. Distinguishing between the two could be the difference between a successful initiative and one the sputters like the last time around.

BACKGROUND ON THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded in Egypt in 1928 by a charismatic school teacher, Hasan al-Banna, as a response to the British colonial presence in Egypt and the spread of Western culture more generally. It has inspired many anti-Western terrorist movements for nearly a century. An Egyptian journalist and Brotherhood member, Sayid Qutb, further articulated Islamist views that contributed in the 1950s to the movement's expansion. Over the decades, this network grew rapidly outside of Egypt. Today, it's a global phenomenon, with chapters that operate both openly and underground, in the West and in the Muslim world.

While the hate-filled ideology of this movement is consistent, the outward expression of its worldview is not always violent. Some offshoots of the movement simply provide a safe space for Islamist hatred of the West. Nevertheless, the movement must be seen as a stepping-stone toward violent jihadism. In perhaps the most notorious historical anecdote, Osama bin Laden's partner in the creation of al-Qa'ida was Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the late leader of the Islamic State, was also believed to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his youth. Many other terrorist leaders in the Middle East began with Muslim Brotherhood indoctrination.

The Muslim Brotherhood became careful over the years, as its leadership came under varying degrees of pressure from Middle East governments. Some (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain) have declared the Brotherhood an illegal terrorist organization. As a result,

individual chapters have had little choice but to curb their ideological fervor, and to restrain their members from engaging in violent acts. Morocco's Muslim Brotherhood chapter, for example, has positioned itself as a loyal opposition to the King. The Brotherhood in Jordan did the same for decades, until authorities broke up a plot to attack the Kingdom in April 2025.

At the height of the war on terrorism, as the United States government sought to shape hearts and minds in the Middle East, the George W. Bush administration attempted to assess whether or not a terror designation against the Brotherhood was feasible. The varying levels of extremism exhibited by the disparate chapters of this network made the bureaucracy skittish. Momentum stalled and the issue dropped further and further down the list of national security priorities.

The Obama administration simply had no appetite to pursue the Muslim Brotherhood. During the Arab Spring protests, amidst a surge of Brotherhood activity from Libya and Egypt to Yemen and Syria, the administration tried to co-opt the movement to steer the chaos toward stability. Obama sought out Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a global patron and enabler of the Muslim Brotherhood, as a partner in this endeavor. Obama ultimately soured on Erdoğan after his brutal crackdown on the peaceful Gezi Park protests in Istanbul of 2013. But this did not change Obama's overall tolerance for the Islamist movement, even as it continued to destabilize Middle East states.

When the Trump administration ascended in 2017, there was a clear desire to tackle the issue. Congress held hearings; discussions were convened at senior levels of the administration. But the strategy for a terrorist designation was never formed. Internal debates mired the issue in bureaucratic process, then the pandemic of 2020 ensured that the issue remained low on the list of priorities through the end of Trump's first term.

THE OPTIO NS TODAY

While the Biden administration shrugged off the matter for four years, the question of designating the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organization is now back up for debate.

The Trump administration appears to have at least three viable options on the table. The easiest approach, and the bluntest, would be to issue an executive order. The order could make the entire Muslim Brotherhood, the sum of all its disparate parts, an outlawed group. Such a move would spark an outcry among those who would correctly argue that not all chapters of the group are violent and therefore do not meet the criteria for designating a terrorist organization. The order would still likely hold until the election of an administration that would repeal it. But, in the interim, the global Muslim Brotherhood would take a beating.

Another approach would be to issue a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation through the State Department, adding the Brotherhood to the US list of FTOs. Under the leadership of Secretary of State Marco Rubio, this may be a viable strategy. But slapping an FTO designation on the Muslim Brotherhood will not be simple. The process requires evidentiary documents cleared by multiple layers of lawyers. But if such a designation were to meet the criteria of the State Department lawyers, its international legitimacy would be enhanced.

A third approach would be to work through the Treasury Department to issue Specially Designation Global Terrorist (SDGT) targeted sanctions on individual Muslim Brotherhood branches as evidence is accumulated against them. The Brotherhood in Yemen (the Islah Party, which partners with the Houthis) and Jordan (where a violent Brotherhood plot was recently broken up by the government) are very likely to meet such criteria. From there, the Treasury could begin to expand the network to other affiliates that meet criteria.

The Treasury Department's process offers the opportunity, over time, to designate the entire Muslim Brotherhood. When evidence points to certain branches or individuals from the Brotherhood's disparate branches providing financial, technical or material support to groups already under sanctions, they themselves become targets for designation. Such an endeavor is by its nature iterative. It would be based on a process that was first introduced with the introduction of Executive Order 13224 in late 2001, as the US government began to issue sanctions against a wide range of terrorist groups.

What to do about Brotherhood branches in the United States and in Western allies that meet the criteria for designation? The United States no longer imposes sanctions on domestic entities. The process of blocking the assets of those still living and working in America proved far too cumbersome. So, these matters become the jurisdiction of federal law enforcement. The FBI would need to get busy. Fortunately, Task Force 10/7, which was stood up in early 2025 to fight antisemitism in the United States, may already have a few good leads on this front.

In Europe, the Muslim Brotherhood is also a major concern. A new French report suggests that a crisis may be brewing. The combined intelligence of Europe and the United States, coupled with input from Israel and perhaps some other Middle Eastern countries, could prove useful. In some cases, foreign governments may choose to join the United States in a bilateral designation, with concurrent law enforcement action, based upon evidence provided by the United States government.

The debate over a Muslim Brotherhood designation is beginning to gain steam. As some of Trump's other policies generate controversy, this one may seem less so today. In light of Brotherhood-led violence in several countries in recent years, many believe US policy measures against the organization are long overdue. The ball is in Trump's court. ✳

JONATHAN SCHANZER

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THE MAHMOUD KHALIL CASE

A protest in support of Mahmoud Khalil, NYC, March 2025
Photo credit: Melissa Bender via Reuters Connect.


RELEASE
MAHMOUD
KHALIL

by Robert Silverman

American diplomats are supposed to serve at least one tour on the visa line overseas, interviewing would-be visitors. It's important work that has the side benefit of supplying some good stories. The Mahmoud Khalil case reminds me of a story from my first tour at Consulate General Jerusalem in 1990, interviewing mainly Palestinians on the West Bank.

One day we received a handwritten letter in Arabic addressed to the American Consul. It was from a woman in a small West Bank village who wanted to inform us of the visa fraud perpetuated by her husband. When they married over 20 years before, he had promised her that he would get a visa, go to the US, marry an American woman, become an American citizen, then divorce the American and bring her over to the US. He used to visit her in the family house in the village once a year, bringing presents for their children. But eventually she came to realize that her no-good husband had no intention of bringing her to the US. So she wanted to let us know. An experienced visa officer told me this kind of letter was not uncommon.

This guy was living the dream of multiple wives in different countries. Multiple wives are of course permitted in traditional Muslim societies though not in most Arab countries outside the Gulf. A young British-educated academic in the West Bank once introduced me to his "mums" (plural). In the US, hiding this practice results in the revocation of US residence and deportation because of fraud.

The relevance of this story to Mr. Khalil is the possibility of fraud in his visa application. That form asks "Have you ever, or do you intend, to provide financial assistance or other support to terrorists or terrorist organizations?" Less than a year after arriving at Columbia on a student visa, 30 year-old Khalil was leading American undergraduates in actions in support of Hamas after its October 7 attack. Hamas is a charter member of the US terrorism list. Had he truthfully answered the questions on the visa form – or perhaps had the visa officer checked out his social media – then he should have been denied a visa.

But Mr. Khalil slipped through the visa vetting process. Then he married a US citizen, which allowed him to adjust status to permanent resident and get a pathway to citizenship. Now he will get his day in immigration court facing deportation. The US media have misleadingly reported his subsequent deportation proceedings as the Trump administration punishing his protected speech.

If Khalil had merely led peaceful pro-Hamas demonstrations, then deporting him would indeed raise an interesting freedom of speech issue: Can an alien (in this case a lawful permanent resident alien) be deported solely for speech that would be protected for US citizens under the First Amendment? That is not clear. Certainly lawful permanent residents don't enjoy all of the rights of US citizens (e.g., they don't vote). But the specific issue of deporting an alien solely for protected speech hasn't been directly addressed by the US Supreme Court. Some lower courts have said you can do this, on the theory that since pro-terrorism speech is a valid basis for excluding someone from entering the US, so it is also a basis for deporting someone who has already entered. Other courts say no, that once an alien enters the US, he or she enjoys the same speech protections as a US citizen. Two recent podcasters are worth listening to on this, former prosecutor Andrew McCarthy and law professor Eugene Volokh. I could argue it both ways, but it's not relevant to the Khalil case.

Khalil was involved in illegal occupations of buildings (Alexander Hall at Columbia which was vandalized and a school janitor injured, and the Barnard library where classes were disrupted). He served as the negotiator on behalf of the occupying students with the university, pressuring the administration to accommodate student demands based on their illegal activity. He helped organize an illegal encampment on the campus that denied access to "Zionist" students. Therefore the First Amendment defense will not get him off, because many of his actions are not protected speech. (Note: These are state crimes, but no one expects Alvin Bragg, the partisan New York County district attorney, to follow up in these cases with prosecutions.)

Secretary of State Rubio did not rely on either Khalil's potential criminal activity (aiding and abetting break-ins) or Khalil's possible visa fraud to explain the decision to deport. Instead Rubio cited this provision of the Immigration and Nationality Act: "An alien whose presence or activities in the United States the Secretary of State has reasonable ground to believe would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States is deportable."

Does Secretary Rubio have reasonable ground to believe there are potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences in this case? I believe so. Allowing pro-Hamas actions on US college campuses that incite violence (such as occupying university buildings) and threaten Jewish students undercuts the US policy of combating antisemitism overseas. Passivity could also hurt relations with allies that oppose Hamas, e.g., Israel and the UAE.

Ultimately Khalil's deportation may present a constitutional issue, but that would be a separation of powers issue. Can a federal judge substitute her or his judgment for that of the secretary of state on what is a reasonable decision in foreign policy? The constitution gives the President (and designees) plenary power in the conduct of most foreign affairs. In the statute cited above, the Congress recognizes that power in deportations. Thus I feel confident that the federal bench – at some level – will side with the secretary of state's judgment in this area.

It would be more difficult to deport a foreign student who had solely expressed antisemitic hate speech or expressed support for Hamas. That free speech issue, however, is not what we are facing in the Khalil case. ✳

ROBERT SILVERMAN

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Israeli Air Force fighter jets taking off for Iran on June 13, 2025. Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

WHAT LED TO THE STRIKE AGAINST IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROJECT?

by Eran Lerman

On June 9, the Government of Israel decided on an extensive military operation, begun at three in the morning on Friday June 13, against Iran's nuclear facilities, military leadership and ballistic missile infrastructure. Leading to this decision were a threat perception, which has been growing for decades, a window of opportunity, which opened in autumn 2024, and the immediate trigger – the apparent failure, acknowledged by the Trump administration, of the diplomatic track.

Politically and personally, Netanyahu (who had been keen to strike already in 2010-2012, only to be held back by the defense establishment) clearly seeks to make this, rather than the disaster of October 7, 2023, the defining moment of his life and legacy. He was able to prevail this time, despite serious doubts raised in internal discussions, because the threat has become more acute than ever – and because Iran's deterrent posture was greatly reduced. The full and final outcome of Israel's decision is far from clear. But it is safe to assert that it has ushered in a new chapter in regional history.

THE TRIGGER: IRAN'S INSISTENCE ON CONTINUED ENRICHMENT

There were two immediate reasons for Israel's decision to act on June 13. The first was the apparent deadlock in the talks between the American and Iranian negotiators; and the other was the growing Israeli impression that the Trump administration – despite its threatening posture, including the bomber deployment to Diego Garcia – was not likely to opt for military action, even if the talks were apparently heading towards failure.

The American negotiating position, even if stated at times in ambiguous or nuanced terms, was that Iran must give up not only its nuclear weaponization efforts but also its uranium enrichment at all levels. Tehran, on the other hand, refused to accept full dismantlement of its nuclear infrastructure (specifically, the enrichment facilities). This is what Libya's Mu'ammar Qaddafi had agreed to do and his ultimate fate – US-led intervention, defeat and death – perhaps weighed heavily on the Iranians' mind, and led them to interpret this American demand as a precursor to further pressure and ultimately regime change. Rather than offer further concessions, their position hardened.

Five rounds of talks did not close the gap on the crucial issue of enrichment and the sixth was cancelled, as Iran withdrew from the talks. Thus, with Iran's stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent U-235 – a short step away from weapon-grade – growing dangerously week by week, Israel came to see the situation in terms of "it's now or never."

What nevertheless seemed to stay Israel's hand, at least for a while, was not the overt American warnings not to act, but rather the hope that the US military itself might take action, with its superior capabilities including the 2,300 kilogram smart bomb, the "Massive Ordnance Penetrator." As wide differences of opinion emerged in the ranks of the Trump

administration as to the use of force, the inner circle of Israeli decision makers apparently concluded that it would be too high a risk to let the country's defense be subject to this level of uncertainty.

Were the openly stated differences of opinion between the Americans and Israelis an elaborate scheme to lull the Iranians into complacency? While some observers are inclined (given Trump's post-facto support for Israel's action) to suggest that this was the case, they may well be guilty of the familiar fallacy of over-explanation.

Trump's preference for a negotiated outcome was – and is – genuine. He did, however, use the prospect of Israeli action to push the Iranians towards a deal, and now he is again trying to leverage Israel's actual action in order to get Iran back to the table on his terms. But for Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i, such a submission to America's will – from a position of weakness – may still be akin to an admission that the Islamic Revolution has come to the point of failure. The American offer to return to the table will not be met at this stage.

THE LONG-TERM FACTOR: IRANIAN REGIME AS EXISTENTIAL THREAT

This sense that Israel's very existence depends on taking action against an Iranian regime with an exterminatory agenda is rooted in decades of growing threat perception. It is particularly true for Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has been at the forefront of this issue for decades, and now sees it as an opportunity to redeem his record from the failures of preparedness on October 7, 2023.

The elimination of Israel is central to the identity and purpose of the Islamic (or rather, Islamist) Republic. For the revolutionary regime which took power in 1979, the pursuit of Israel's demise serves as important proof that Iran, a revolutionary Shi'ite power, can do (and does) much more than the Sunni "weaklings and traitors" elsewhere in the region, who made their peace with the Jewish state.

This central idea and vision, moreover, has been systematically translated over the years into an active program of support for proxies and partners willing to act against Israel. Primary among these has been Hizbullah in Lebanon, for years a major threat on Israel's northern front. When Palestinian Islamic Jihad (a fully controlled proxy) and Hamas (a more independent ally) took power in Gaza in 2007 they increasingly relied on Iranian support. They also seek to overthrow the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and would like to undermine and destabilize the Jordanian monarchy. Iranian-backed Shi'a militias in Iraq, and more significantly, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, have all played a role in a "ring of fire" around Israel, joining the action initiated by Hamas in October 2023. Finally, in April and October 2024, Iran took direct action of its own, launching massive missile and drone attacks against Israel (albeit with very limited results).

The Iranians' false claim that this is a civilian project (and that there is a "fatwa" or religious injunction against nuclear weapons) was never taken seriously. There are no civilian uses for uranium enriched to 60 percent: it can only be a final stepping-stone to weapons-grade enrichment. In any case, by 2018 Israel came to possess the Iranian nuclear archive, confirming previous evidence of work on weaponization, even if it was suspended for a while back in 2003. More recently, fresh intelligence sources indicated that the work of the weapons group has aggressively resumed.

In addition, Israel concluded that Iran was massively increasing its ballistic missile arsenal. This was in defiance of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 of 2015, but once its provisions expired on October 18, 2023 – while Israel's attention was obviously elsewhere – Iran embarked on a much expanded program. Netanyahu claims this program would have produced some 300 missiles a month, generating the prospect of massive destructive power even without a bomb. This, too, drove the decision to act: but it was only in November 2024 that this took the form of a planning directive.

THE WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

Iran's nuclear (and missile) projects have been a permanent presence on the minds of Israeli decision makers for decades. They have also preyed on the thoughts of people on the street. Yet the decision to take all-out action – as distinct from what Prime Minister Naftali Bennet once called "a thousand pinpricks" of sabotage and assassinations – was put off again and again.

There was an active internal debate between 2010 and 2012 on taking military action. Netanyahu's push for it was blocked by the security professionals' reservations (and American objections). There were questions at the time as to Israel's capabilities, as well as what seemed then – and later – to be the formidable retaliatory arsenal of Iran and its proxies. All this curbed the enthusiasm of the intelligence community and defense establishment.

After the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), there came a period in which Iranian enrichment was slowed down, and the likelihood of a "dash" to the bomb was put off by a few years. This gave Israel vital breathing space, but the time gained was not used to enhance the preparations for action against Iran, and resources were directed to other missions. This remained the case even after President Trump, back in 2018, nixed the American commitment to the JCPOA. It was only later that Israel's leaders, from both sides of the partisan divide, woke up to the reality of the newly accelerated Iranian project.

What changed the Israeli cost-benefit analysis were two dramatic changes in the final months of 2024: the death of Hasan Nasrallah and the sharp reduction in Hizbullah's ability and will to attack Israel; and the collapse of the Asad regime, enabling Israel to destroy residual Syrian capabilities and then act freely through Syrian airspace. In addition, the Iranian missile barrages in April and October 2024 did limited damage. And Israel's counterstrikes exposed the weakness of Iran's air defenses.

The aggregate impact of these changes made it possible for Netanyahu to designate April 2025 as the point in time for the attack: but owing to President Trump's push for a negotiated outcome (and the concurrent hints at possible American military action) it was postponed by several weeks.

Meanwhile, the rationale for it did gain international grounding: the announcement by Rafael Mariano Grossi, the Argentinian diplomat serving as director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency. It lent legitimacy to Israel's sense of urgency but did not produce it. Moreover, the common assumption that the Iranian people would "rally around the flag" if the country would come under attack may no longer be valid, given the growing disenchantment with the mullahs' regime.

Where will this lead? As Israel's National Security Adviser Tzahi Hanegbi openly said on June 13, Israel's military achievements, and America's determination that Iran must not have a nuclear capability, should be translated into an enduring diplomatic arrangement, which would also serve regional security writ large. More still needs to happen before the conditions for such an outcome mature. ✳

ERAN LERMAN

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Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian addresses the nation after Israeli attacks on June 13, 2025.
Photo credit: Morteza Nikoubazl via Reuters Connect

IRAN'S FALSE CALM SHATTERED

by Aidin Panahi

Iran until recently was a paradox: a deeply unpopular regime that appeared superficially stable. Three years after the massive nationwide protests of 2022, Iran's streets were calm, though signs of discontent were starting to resurface, with scattered strikes and business closures, including unrest among truck drivers. Most Iranians despised the Islamic Republic; their quietude was strategic, not ideological.

This illusion of calm was shattered on June 13 when Israel launched precision strikes across Iran, destroying key Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) bases, military command centers, and nuclear facilities. Top commanders were killed. Footage of mushroom-like clouds and flattened barracks has flooded Iranian social media, sparking widespread fear and, in some areas, quiet celebration. For many Iranians, this was the first time the regime's invincibility had been visibly called into question.

BEHIND THE RECENT CALM

Iran's fate ultimately rests with a silent majority, what Iranians call the "gray zone" population (قشر خاکستری). These are ordinary citizens: teachers, shopkeepers, bureaucrats, mid-level civil servants, and even some within the security apparatus who neither publicly oppose nor enthusiastically support the regime. Their silence reflects self-preservation, not loyalty. Every modern revolution has hinged upon similar groups. When these individuals sense regime collapse is imminent, their withdrawal of passive support becomes decisive.

Consider the psychology behind this silence. Decades of brutal crackdowns, from the Green Movement in 2009 to the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising in 2022, have conditioned many Iranians into a psychological state known as "learned helplessness." When people repeatedly witness their protests crushed and their loved ones imprisoned or killed, they internalize a sense of futility. They have not stopped wanting freedom; they have stopped believing their actions can achieve it.

After three days of the regime's visible weakening, under Israeli strikes, Iranians have not flooded the streets. Sources inside Iran suggest caution rather than indifference. People are closely watching to see if this external pressure will persist or fade. Fear of a violent crackdown remains real. Memories of brutal suppression are fresh. Private conversations reveal that the Iranian public broadly favors regime change but seeks clear signs that international pressure will back them this time. They also seek signs of internal fractures within the security forces or high-level defections.

The political theorist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann described a "spiral of silence" created by oppressive regimes. When dissenters perceive themselves as isolated, fear keeps them from speaking out. Iranian authorities rely on arbitrary arrests, executions, and sophisticated surveillance precisely to maintain this silence. Yet beneath such silence simmers anger, awaiting a credible trigger to erupt. For many, the destruction of military headquarters and the death of senior IRGC figures may be that signal. Reports from Tehran, Shiraz, and Isfahan suggest that even among the gray-zone population, a sense of irreversible change is growing. Psychological control by the regime has limits, as seen in moments of spontaneous nationwide defiance.

Now, with IRGC command structures partially dismantled and elite commanders eliminated, cracks are appearing. Sources inside Iran report local confusion among military ranks and signs of hesitation in enforcing curfews. Yet, for many in this group, moving from passive to active opposition depends on sustained momentum. The cost-benefit calculus for the silent majority – especially those within the state – has shifted, yet they continue to watch cautiously for further signs of regime vulnerability.

Inside Iran, reactions to Israel's military actions are complex but revealing. While state media decry Israeli aggression, privately many Iranians express relief or even cautious approval. Social media commentary from within the country shows that ordinary Iranians see Israel's actions not as attacks against the nation but against the oppressive structures of the regime. These nuanced views, carefully voiced in encrypted chats and indirect online comments, indicate a growing gap between regime narratives and public sentiment.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

What the Iranian people expect from the free world is consistent moral clarity alongside targeted pressure on the regime's core oppressive machinery. Israel's military strikes are ongoing, and they must remain focused on regime targets. Civilian infrastructure, particularly energy and public services, must remain off-limits to avoid unnecessary suffering among ordinary Iranians

Coordinated actions by Western nations could turn the tide decisively against the regime, translating current frustrations into actionable rebellion.

Implement existing oil sanctions rigorously to deny Tehran critical financial lifelines. Aggressively target and dismantle third-party oil brokerage networks, particularly those operating through China, Russia, and regional intermediaries. The regime must feel economically isolated, not merely inconvenienced. America's European allies should immediately trigger the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's snapback mechanism at the UN Security Council to reimpose expired sanctions and restrict Iran's access to weapons systems. Simultaneously, Washington should press for international designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization, building on existing US designations and encouraging alignment from the EU, UK, and regional partners.

These moves would not only isolate the regime legally and financially but would also reinforce the message to the Iranian people that the world sees their oppressors for what they are, perpetrators of terrorism.

Yet sanctions alone are not enough. Breaking the regime's coercive machinery – especially the IRGC and the regular Iranian military (Artesh) – is critical. While senior IRGC commanders remain ideologically and financially tethered to the regime, many lower-ranking personnel are driven more by national duty or economic necessity than by fanaticism. During recent protests, disobedience and moral hesitation among these ranks revealed cracks in loyalty. A targeted psychological campaign offering safety, dignity, and a role in a post-regime future could decisively erode the regime's ability to suppress unrest. The battle is not over ideas but over perception, specifically, whether or not regime change is possible and near.

Therefore, target rank-and-file members of the IRGC and Artesh. Offer credible avenues for defection and rehabilitation. These efforts, drawing from Cold War models, could include trusted messengers, strategic planning, and clear post-defection guarantees.

Address the Iranian silent majority through Persian-language platforms, consistently messaging that silence perpetuates suffering and that regime collapse is both imminent and desirable. Empowering this silent majority will create internal paralysis for the regime, hastening its demise. Success hinges on repetition, credibility, and narratives of power and hope.

Promote targeted accountability measures. Israeli and Western intelligence services should selectively focus on high-ranking IRGC commanders and regime officials directly involved in documented acts of international terrorism and severe domestic human rights abuses. Such precise actions, referencing existing international law and human rights conventions, would inspire fear among regime hardliners, reduce their operational cohesion, and accelerate internal defections, weakening the regime from within.

Iran's apparent calm has been shattered. The Israeli strikes have provided a critical opening, demonstrating vulnerability within the regime's core. A coherent strategy, centered on economic isolation, psychological operations, and information warfare, could turn this momentary weakness into permanent collapse.

The Islamic Republic is not just an internal Iranian problem or a threat to Israel. It is an engine of global instability. Standing with the Iranian people is a strategic imperative. It's about disabling a hostile power that threatens international security. The Israelis have opened a crack. The world must decide whether to widen it or allow the regime time to seal it shut. ✳

AIDIN PANAHI

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Photo credit: Reuters/Hasnoor Hussain

THE ISRAEL–IRAN WAR: THE VIEW FROM ANKARA

by Sinan Ciddi

When Israel struck Iran on June 13, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan waited several hours before issuing a fiery rebuke, accusing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu "and his massacre network" of "setting [the] entire region on fire."

At the same time, Ankara must have quietly welcomed the attacks against its regional rival in Tehran. Turkey has benefitted from Israel's ongoing degradation of Iranian influence throughout the region.

CARPE DIEM FOR TURKEY

Erdoğan sees Iran's misfortunes as opportunities. This is most visible in Syria. With Iran-backed Asad deposed, Ankara has become a major backer of the Ahmed al-Shara'a regime, intending to use Syria to project Turkish power throughout the Middle East. Ankara has begun to solidify its economic grip on Syria, securing major infrastructure construction projects. It also seeks to complement its existing military presence inside Syria (some 20,000 troops), by training and equipping the new Syrian military, and has emphatically declared that it has no intentions of leaving Syria anytime soon.

From the perspective of Israel, Turkey seeks both to displace Iran and to weaken Israel's position in the region. After the Asad regime fell, Israel destroyed several Syrian military airbases in which Ankara intended to station its F-16 fighter jets, close to Israeli military positions.

In the eastern Mediterranean, Erdoğan's "Blue Homeland" *(mavi vatan)* doctrine calls for aggressive use of the Turkish navy to assert sovereignty in disputed areas of the Aegean. Turkish vessels routinely challenge Greek and Cypriot ones, even in their own exclusive economic zones. Greek and Cypriot complaints are largely ignored by the EU and NATO, which see Turkey as a major troop contributor in facing Russian threats, and as a potential mediator between Russia and Ukraine.

ANKARA'S VULNERABILITIES

Turkey's military strategists are aware that they share a key Iranian vulnerability highlighted by Israel's precision strikes: Turkey sorely lacks air defense capability. One Turkish defense analyst now recommends that Turkey puts "all [its] money on...Iron Dome, Kaan-Hurjet [Turkey's own fighter jet], air-to-air missiles and ballistic-cruise missile programs. We will struggle for 10 years, but it is better than falling into Iran's situation."

A second vulnerability is economic. Turkey is well integrated into global trade and financial networks, creating both an engine of growth but also a dependency on short-term capital inflows. Disruptions caused by perceptions of instability could trigger lack of investor confidence and a cut-off of new lending to Turkey. Erdoğan's economic dependence is well understood in foreign capitals, and both Presidents Trump and Putin have effectively threatened this card in prior disagreements with him.

THE SHORT-TERM ISSUE: F-35

The Israel-Iran conflict will likely motivate Ankara to redouble its efforts to be readmitted into the F-35 stealth strike fighter program. Ankara renewed this effort after Trump assumed office in January 2025. Erdoğan is seeking a White House meeting with Trump, where he will likely tell Trump that a large NATO power like Turkey needs a formidable air force, equipped with the F-35. Only with such a capability can Turkey ensure sustained peace and stability in Syria and protect a potential ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, likely Erdoğan talking points supporting this ask.

At present, Turkey's air defense capabilities consist mainly of a fleet of aging F-16's and an inactive S-400 surface to air missile defense system purchased from Russia in 2019. It was Turkey's acquisition of this Russian weapon – against repeated US warnings – that resulted in Turkey's removal from the F-35 program and sanctions by the US under provisions of the Countering of America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act.

Turkish acquisition of F-35 jets would cause serious concerns with US allies Greece and Israel, given Turkey's hostile behavior towards them. For Israel, providing Ankara with the F-35 could be seen as violating the US pledge of ensuring Israel's regional "qualitative military edge" in advanced technology.

Turkish access to the F-35 raises several technological concerns. If Turkey were to activate the S-400 system after getting the F-35, the missile platform would be able to collect sensitive stealth information on the F-35 and transfer it to the Russian military. In addition, Turkish engineers could reverse engineer parts of the F-35 for their technology. Turkish defense contractors have developed their own fifth generation fighter jet: the "Kaan" which is still in testing. Engineers are seeking to develop an indigenous engine, which the Kaan lacks. If components of the F-35 are reverse engineered by Turkey, the greater risk is that their blueprints are subsequently sold and end up in the hands of our Russian and Chinese adversaries. The Pentagon counts on the F-35 to defend US national security for decades to come.

In short, Erdoğan seeks to position Turkey as a dominant power in the eastern Mediterranean and wider Middle East, in the wake of Israel's actions against Turkey's historic rival, Iran. But he is vulnerable on both military and economic grounds. The United States should not offer him a helping hand to achieve his regional ambitions at the expense of our closest allies. ✳

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THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA

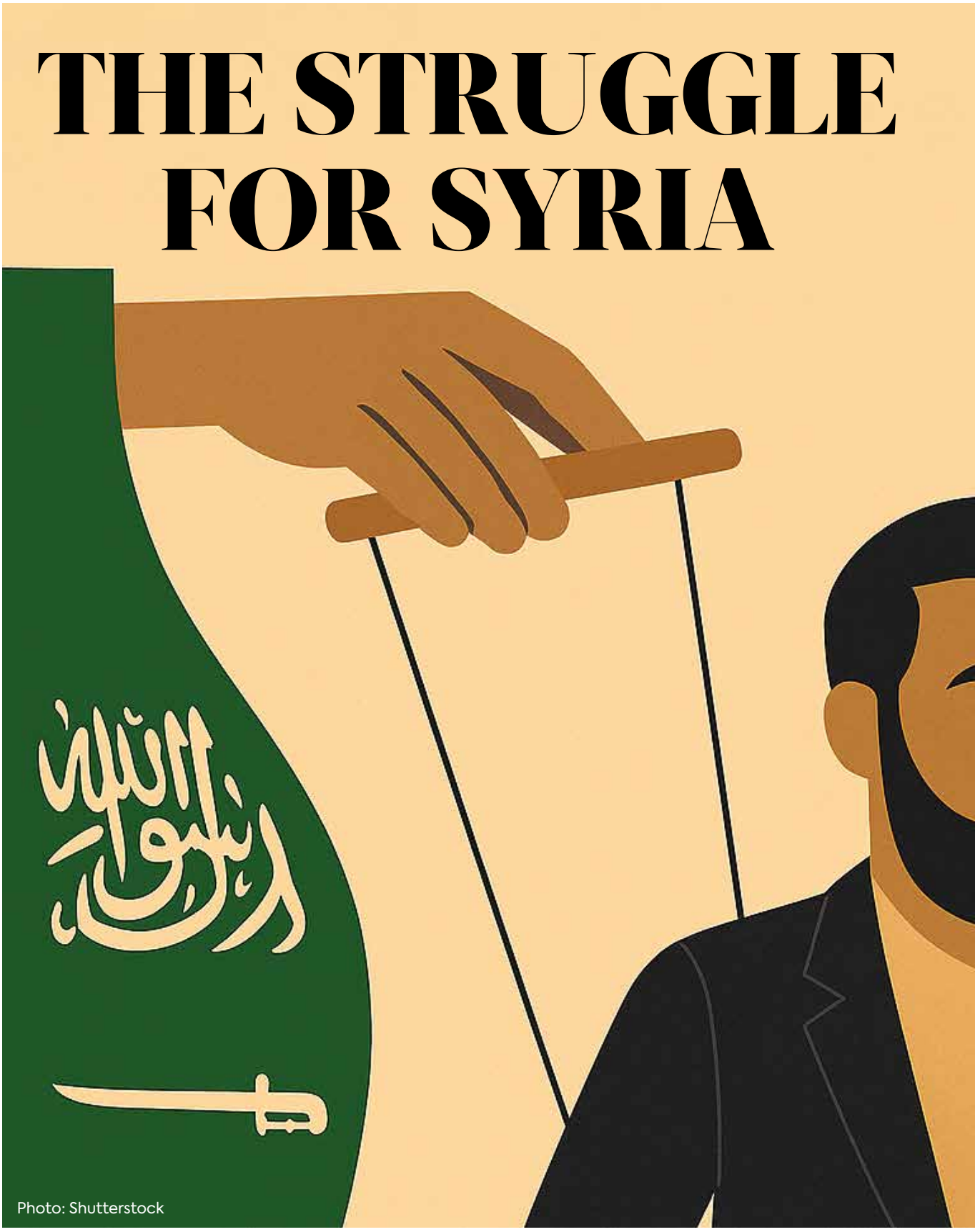

Photo: Shutterstock

by Steven A. Cook, Sinan Ciddi

On May 14, President Donald Trump stood smiling with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman and Syria's self-declared leader, Ahmed al-Shara'a, on the sidelines of the President's visit to Riyadh. After the get together, the President declared that the United States would lift sanctions on Syria and re-establish diplomatic relations between the two countries.

For some observers, Trump was creating an environment that would facilitate badly needed aid and reconstruction assistance. For others, normalizing al-Shara'a—the leader of an al-Qa'ida offshoot who once served time in prison in Iraq for anti-American violence—was a potentially dangerous development. Al-Shara'a's moderation was something to be tested, not accepted at face value.

Although the Saudi Crown Prince brokered the Trump-Al-Shara'a encounter, some analysts regarded the meeting as a victory for Turkey, vindicating the bet Ankara made on al-Shara'a and his Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham beginning in 2017. But declaring someone or some country the victor or loser in geo-politics is not useful.

The more interesting issues for Syrians and their new leader are what kind of country do they want and which regional actor is going to be the one to get them there? With all the fanfare around the President's meeting with al-Shara'a, it may seem banal to suggest that it remains very much up for grabs. But the struggle for Syria has just begun.

A number of countries seek to influence Syria's trajectory, but only two, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, matter. Israel's buffer zone, its commitment to protect Druze, and the Netanyahu government's not-so-secret talks with the new leadership in Damascus are important. But Israeli influence will not be decisive in Syria's future path. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are generally wary of the new order in Syria (despite Dubai Ports World's recent agreement to develop the port of Tartus), but they have neither sought to shape it nor disrupt it. For Washington's part, the Trump White House seems content to help Syria by lifting sanctions, normalizing ties, and declaring the country "open for business," all of which are important. But the administration seems wisely intent on avoiding deeper involvement in Syria's transition.

Turkey and Saudi Arabia are different. They both have the resources, interests, and incentives to influence Syria's post-Asad path. Some of those interests are shared, such as pushing Iran out of the Levant, but it might be too optimistic to suggest that Syria can be a shared Saudi-Turkish project. Indeed, despite a rapprochement between Riyadh and Ankara dating back to 2022, mistrust lingers. In Riyadh, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ambitions to be the leader of the Muslim world rankles the custodian of the two holy mosques and Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood is an outstanding concern. In many ways, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are moving in opposite directions, which is why Ahmed al-Shara'a and Syrians would be better off under Riyadh's tutelage than Ankara's influence.

In a variety of ways, Saudi Arabia is the more inclusive of the two countries. Admittedly, it

is a low bar, but where Saudis are enjoying the benefits of liberalization, albeit top down and controlled, Turks are contending with a long slide into authoritarianism.

Turkey has regularly scheduled elections, which Saudi Arabia does not, but this democratic practice is increasingly fraught. When Erdoğan has not liked the outcome of elections, he has made sure mayors are stripped of their power or put their municipalities in receivership. He has also used the coercive apparatus of the state to weaken his rivals, notably the arrest of Istanbul Mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, on spurious charges of corruption, raising suspicions that the Turkish leader may no longer be interested in elections as a means to remain in power.

The Saudis still have a way to go toward equality, but women in the Kingdom are enjoying new freedoms and entering the work force in droves. In Turkey, they may be comparatively better off, but the trendlines are troubling. Women face increasing pressures to exit the workforce and become homemakers. A decade after signing onto the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, Erdoğan pulled his country out of what became known as the Istanbul Convention claiming that it contradicted Turkish family and social values.

Christians cannot build a church in Saudi Arabia, which is bad for religious pluralism, but Turkey is hardly better. In the last decade the government has taken over churches and turned them into mosques, including the world famous Hagia Sophia. A variety of Christian sites—some of which were also museums—existed without controversy for a long time, but they have met a similar fate. The Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) is clearly sending a message that religious pluralism in Turkey is now something of the past.

The Saudis have also become less rigid in enforcement of religious principles whereas the Turks have become more doctrinaire. In 2017, the Turkish primary education system banned references to evolution theory in the national curriculum and the share of religious schools has dramatically increased at the insistence of the AKP.

Saudi Arabia's religious police have been broken, much to the delight of many Saudis; the religious establishment no longer has the power it once did, though the courts remain a redoubt of reaction. Saudi religious representatives have in recent years preached tolerance and respect for the man-made laws of the lands in which Muslims live. In contrast, Erdoğan and the AKP, which come from a different Islamist tradition than the Muslim Brotherhood, have nevertheless embraced the Brothers' style of Islamism, which is uncompromising in its drive to Islamize society. As Erdoğan did in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, he seeks in Syria to entrench an Islamist regime that is both ideologically and geopolitically aligned with Ankara.

On human rights, both countries come in for scathing criticism from the US State Department, but Turkey leads Saudi Arabia in the number of journalists jailed and political prisoners.

Syria is, of course, a diverse and complicated country. Some Syrians will want to live in a more conservative environment, and some will want to live in a more pluralistic one. If Ahmed al-Shara'a is true to his word about building a new Syria that is for all Syrians, he and his people will be better off with the Saudis at his side than the Turks. ✳

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US President Donald Trump meets with Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, May 14, 2025. Photo credit: via Reuters

SAYING THE RIGHT THINGS: THE NEW SYRIA TAKES A FIRST STEP TOWARDS THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

by Thomas Warrick

Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa has a colossal problem. Syria's infrastructure, including housing and commerce, was significantly destroyed during more than a decade of civil war. The new Syrian government will have great difficulty rebuilding Syria after more than a decade of civil war unless US and other sanctions are lifted.

Syria has been under comprehensive sanctions for decades. The United States has considered Syria a state sponsor of terrorism since 1979. Further US sanctions were imposed for Syria's actions in Lebanon and for atrocities of the Assad regime and use of chemical weapons against the Syrian people. These are the sanctions Trump likely intended on May 13 to lift.

Additionally, the United States and other countries have imposed terrorism sanctions against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other groups that made up the coalition of groups that overthrew the Assad regime in December 2024. His nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Jolan indicates he is from a family from the Golan. He fought with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and later led al-Nusra Front, which was the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. Many of Sharaa's top lieutenants are under individual sanctions. These terrorism sanctions may stay on, for the time being. When State Department officials met with Sharaa in December, the only relief the United States offered was the cancellation of a $10 million reward for Sharaa's arrest.

Sharaa and other officials of the new Syrian government have been careful to say the right things: that Syria wants peace with its neighbors in order to concentrate on rebuilding at home. On April 19, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa told two visiting Republican members of Congress that Syria was interested in discussing joining the Abraham Accords with Israel and other countries.

This got the attention of the Trump administration and led to President Trump's surprise announcement in Riyadh on May 13, that he was lifting sanctions against the Syrian government. Trump encouraged Sharaa during their meeting on May 14 to join the Abraham Accords and exclude Palestinian and ISIS terrorists from any influence in the new Syria. Trump rightly considers the Abraham Accords to be a great diplomatic achievement and he wants to expand the Accords to include Saudi Arabia and other countries.

No one expects Syria to join the Accords right away. Both Israel and Syria have serious issues to resolve before normalization is possible. Israel is deeply concerned with the intentions of a government dominated by so many figures with ties to terrorist groups that have called for Israel's destruction. Syria is concerned with Israel's recent occupation of Syrian territory and still regards the Golan Heights (taken during the

1967 war) as Syrian. According to an Arabic TV channel in Syria, after Sharaa's meeting with the two Republican members of Congress, the Syrian government wrote a letter to the United States saying it would not normalize relations with Israel as long as Israel occupied Syrian lands. In the same letter, though, the Syrian government said it was determined to build a state that does not threaten anyone.

LIFTING SANCTIONS BECAME THE LOGICAL NEXT STEP

Even before Trump arrived in Riyadh, Syria and Israel were already in indirect talks with the United Arab Emirates acting as mediator. Talks are focusing on security and intelligence matters and confidence-building. Sharaa acknowledged these talks publicly during his May 7 press conference with French president Emmanuel Macron.

What Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Turkish President Erdoğan, and other Middle Eastern leaders said to President Trump to persuade him to lift sanctions is not yet public. Watching Trump's speech in Riyadh, it was clear that the warmth of Saudi diplomacy and the many commercial deals signed or announced during Trump's visit had a strong impact on Trump. Clearly, President Trump listened to what Arab officials were telling him.

Lifting of sanctions is an important step but further steps are needed for lasting peace. For example, in rebuilding its air force, Syria could opt not to purchase fighter-bombers that would pose a threat to Israel. Syria could also decide not to purchase or build surface-to-surface missiles or rocket launchers such as Hizbullah once had in Lebanon. If Sharaa wants Israel to relinquish control of some Syrian territory, he needs to recognize that this will happen only by Syria not being a threat to Israel. If Syria becomes a threat, Israel will apply the lessons of Lebanon and Gaza and be even less likely to pull back. Syria will need to make choices that give its neighbors confidence that the new Syrian leadership is committed, beyond words alone, to peace and reconstruction.

With the lifting of sanctions, Syria's physical reconstruction can now begin. Further steps are needed to bring about peace between Syria and all its neighbors, including Israel. The 1978 Nobel Peace Prize marked the end of the state of war between Egypt and Israel. The Nobel committee will no doubt mark the day when Syria and Israel do the same. ✳

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Alawite family returns to their home in Latakia, Syria from sanctuary at the Russian air base, March 2025. Photo credit: Reuters/Khalil Ashawi

THE REGIONAL MINORITIES OF SYRIA AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH THE NEW REGIME

by Yusri Hazran

The popular uprising that erupted in Syria in March 2011 was largely limited to the Sunni Arab majority and was eventually led by Islamist activists. It confronted the country's religious and ethnic minorities with existential challenges. Caught between the anvil of anarchy and the hammer of Islamism, they feared for Syria's future as a secular state, one where their communities could comfortably live.

The fall of the regime in December and the rise of former jihadists to power have not allayed these concerns. Three minorities in particular – the Kurds, Druze and Alawites – are regionally concentrated and seek some form of autonomy in Syria. The Druze and Alawites are Arabic-speaking heterodox sects whom fundamentalist Sunni Muslims regard as heretics. The Kurds are Sunni Muslims with a distinct ethnicity and their own language and cultural traditions.

Each of these three minorities had a different relationship with the Ba'ath regime. Their relationships with the new government in Damascus are yet to be finalized.

THE ALAWITES

The Alawites in Syria constituted nearly 12 percent of the country's population before the civil war. They are mainly located in the mountainous coastal region of northwest Syria. During the French mandate, they were granted autonomy and only gradually integrated into the new Syrian state following independence.

The most significant turning point in the history of the community came after the coup d'etat in 1963 led by the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party. The Ba'ath and the army were the two main channels through which Alawites from the rural periphery were able to upgrade their status. The rise of the Ba'ath Party in 1963, and even more so the rise of the Neo-Ba'ath Party in 1966, strengthened the position of Alawite officers within the upper echelons of power.

Hafiz al-Asad's rise to power in 1970 signaled more than anything else that the center of gravity of Syria's national politics had shifted to a rural elite that entirely displaced the urban elite. As a result, in its early years, the new regime encountered strong opposition from Syria's urban centers, for example, in the regime's secularization policy expressed in a 1973 constitutional amendment and in

its socioeconomic policies that benefited the masses and the periphery. This resistance developed into a violent conflict by the mid-1970s, with the Muslim Brotherhood leading a jihadist rebellion in some cities, only decisively defeated in 1982. This defeat of the Brotherhood marked the beginning of a partnership, albeit unbalanced, between Alawite military officers and the Sunni civilian elite, which became a pillar of the regime's longevity.

President Hafiz al-Asad's regime did not support the rule of the Alawite minority over the Sunni majority, despite tight control by individual Alawites of the regime security apparatus. The regime did not pursue a policy of exclusion towards the Sunni majority, nor did it direct all economic resources to the Alawite areas. For three decades, Asad's regime remained open to the urban elites, largely Sunni, although the partnership was necessarily unequal, because in keeping with the nature of totalitarian regimes, the security and military arms of the government always maintained an upper hand over civilians.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring uprising in early March 2011 presented the regime with an existential challenge. As the uprising developed into a rebellion, and then a civil war, Alawites rallied to defend the regime. Tens of thousands of young Alawites were killed during the long years of conflict (2011-2018). The rise of rebel jihadist organizations only strengthened communal mobilization behind the regime, increasing the perception that regime downfall would pose a threat not only to Alawite ascendancy in the army but also to the entire community. President Bashar al-Asad fueled these existential fears, among the Alawites and other minorities.

With the demise of the Asad regime in December 2024, the Alawite community has been left without national-level leadership. Local dignitaries and religious figures are now trying to carve out a path for the community in the shadow of the new regime, which identifies the community with the Asad era and excludes Alawites from the government, and especially from the new military and security institutions.

THE DRUZE

Despite only forming approximately three percent of the population, the Druze have played a significant role in Syria's history. The Great Syrian Revolt against French rule broke out in Jabal al-Druze ("Mountain of the Druze") in southwest Syria led by Sultan al-Atrash between 1925 and 1927.

The Ba'ath Party's coup d'état in 1963 and rise to power in Syria was a watershed moment in the country's internal politics, paving the way for minority groups—in particular the Alawites and Druze—to play a formative role in governing the country and leading in the army. The Druze became far more involved in internal Syrian politics, holding high posts in both the army and the Party.

Bashar al-Asad's rise to power in the year 2000 had no significant effect on the Druze's relationship with the regime. The popular uprising that erupted in the southern city of Dara'a in March 2011 did not extend to their stronghold in Houran. The vast majority of the Druze remained loyal to the regime, though several intellectuals and elite figures – Rima Flehan, Muntaha al-Atrash, Jaber al-Shufi – supported the uprising. Hence, the rebel leaders found it very difficult to recruit Druze, and the vast majority of Druze soldiers in the Syrian army remained loyal to the state.

The increasing Islamization of the opposition, the rise of jihadist organizations, and the disintegration of state authority drove many Druze into the arms of the regime during the first years of the uprising. The community's fear of jihadist Islam was validated in June 2015, when dozens of Druze were massacred in a small village close to Idlib city in northern Syria by Islamic jihadist militants from the Jabhat al-Nusrah organization. The 2015 massacre was followed by raids on Druze villages carried out by the Islamic State in July 2018, which resulted

in the deaths of about 260 Druze and the kidnapping of 30 women and children. Asad's forces made no effort to prevent the attacks.

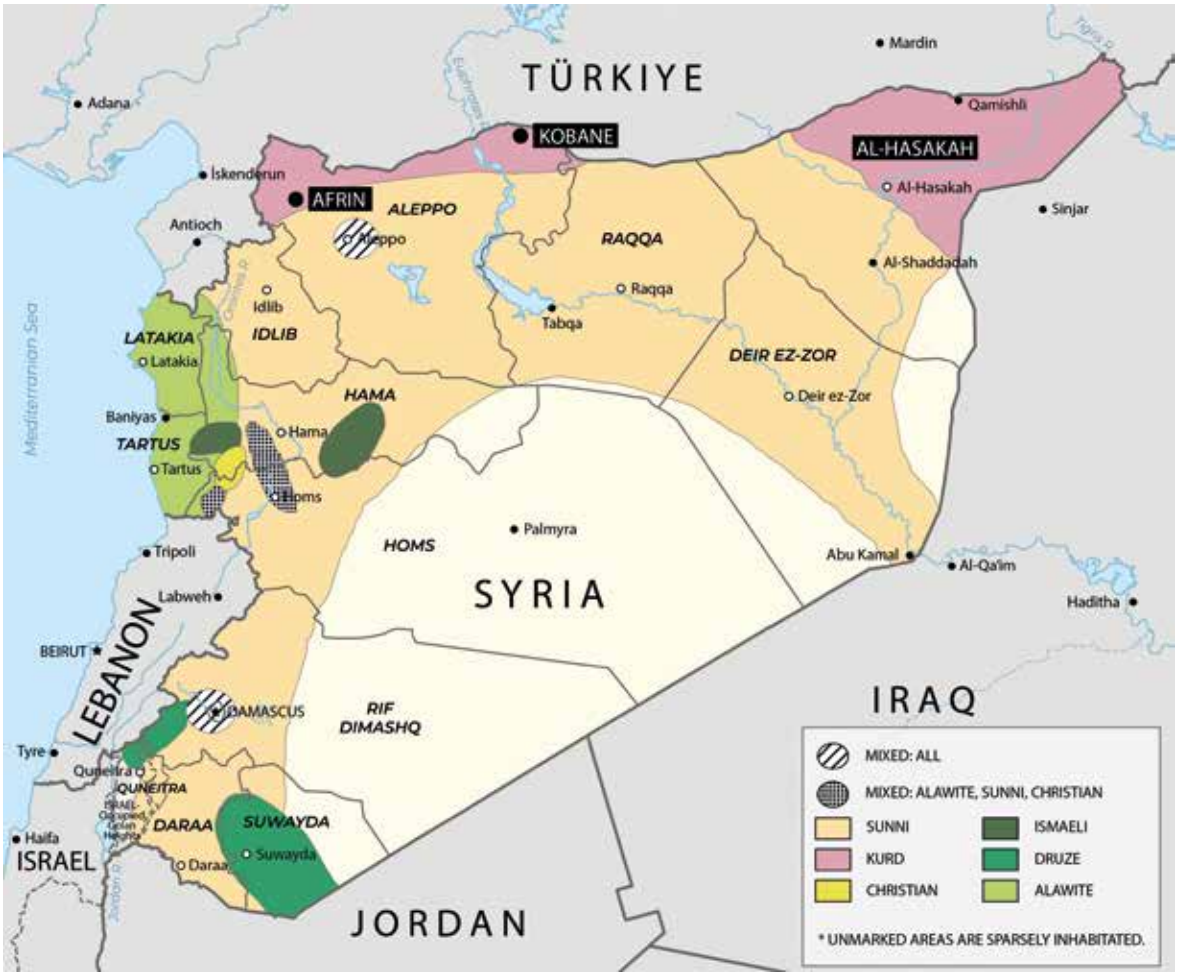
Until recent years, the Druze spiritual leadership, known as Mashyakhat al-Aql (Sheikhdom of the Druze), remained committed to the regime. Many Druze concluded during the civil war that the regime remained the least of all evils. However, Sheikh Wahid al-Bal'us, a popular religious leader, organized an armed protest movement that sought to defend Jabal al-Druze during the civil war. When he was assassinated in September 2015, apparently by agents of the regime, his death failed to trigger any immediate shift in the Druze attitude against the regime.

The year 2015 marked the beginning of a change in the relationship between the Syrian Druze and the Ba'ath regime. Great numbers of Druze avoided enlisting in the Syrian army, unless the regime would agree to station them in their native region. The Druze realized that their existence as a legitimate minority was an idea not embraced by all, which deepened the Syrian tragedy for them, and the outcome of the war proved just how much their existence depended on the same Syrian regime that had led them into poverty. Despite civil protests against the economic and social crises caused by the war, however, they did not rebel against the regime.

The Druze welcomed the collapse of the regime in December 2024, but that does not mean they showed any enthusiasm for the arrival to Damascus of Ahmad al-Shara'a. They do not allow the new regime's militias to gather in their area, and they are unwilling to hand over their weapons. In the words of Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajri, the Druze declare that they do not trust the new regime owing to its jihadist background.

Events in early 2025 only increased the anxiety of the Druze: the establishment of an army whose officers are all former jihadist commanders, a government with no representation of minorities, and a supposedly five-year transition period. Worst of all are the

Syrian security forces patrol the village of al-Soura al-Kubra, following clashes between Sunni Islamist militants and Druze fighters in Sweida province, Jabal al-Druze, May 2, 2025. Photo credit: Reuters/Karam Al-Masri



Map source: Wikipedia / Tanvir Anjum Adib.

massacres of Alawites, which the Druze fear might happen to them.

Two factors have to date discouraged the new regime from interfering with the Druze areas: the Druze have not handed over their weapons and Israel has warned that it will act if the new regime moves against the Druze.

THE KURDS

The Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in Syria, and the Kurdish issue returned to political center stage after the uprising in 2011. Most of the Kurdish population of Syria resides in three regions located along the northern and northeastern borders adjoining Turkey and Iraq.

Syria gained control over these regions through the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence, which was signed in 1936 but never ratified by France. Nevertheless, it constituted an important stage of Syria's road to independence and consolidation, leading to the imposition of the authority of the Syrian state over territory that included Jabal al-Druze, the Alawite region along the Mediterranean coast, and the Kurdish-populated al-Jazira (the "island" of fertile land in upper Mesopotamia between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers).

The Syrian state has never recognized the Kurds as a national minority. The "Kurdish

problem" has accompanied the country since its independence and, under the hegemony of the pan-Arab ideology of the Ba'ath regime that took over Syria in 1963, the Kurdish citizens of Syria were denied national, cultural, and civil rights.

The policy of discrimination against the Kurds intensified after the Ba'ath came to power in 1963. The Kurdish language was not recognized as an official language, and Kurdish culture did not receive any assistance from the state. The Ba'ath in Syria encouraged Arab citizens to settle in the Kurdish areas, especially the al-Jazira region, a policy similar to that pursued by the Iraqi Ba'ath regime towards the Kirkuk region in northern Iraq. Beginning in the mid-1970s, dozens of Arab villages were established in the north of al-Jazira where thousands of Arab families settled, while the local Kurdish population was expelled.

However, in spite of all this, the Ba'ath regime's relationship with the Kurds was not always confrontational and conflictual. The regime used Kurdish militia from time to time in actions against the Muslim Brotherhood in the north. In a sense, the struggle against jihadist organizations created the basis for a certain modus vivendi between the Ba'athists and the Kurdish militia in the years leading up to the regime's fall.

This reality of exclusion and deprivation of the Kurdish population continued until the outbreak of the popular uprising in Syria in March 2011. The uprising and the deterioration caused by the civil war in Syria gave the Kurds a historic opportunity to establish de facto autonomy in northeastern Syria. They established a significant military force with the help of the US during the war against ISIS, and forged a new relationship with the central government in Syria. Moreover, the collapse of central authority allowed the Kurds to control Syria's oil reserves in the northeast, providing financial resources to support autonomy.

The fact that Turkey has to some extent tolerated the existence of an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq does not mean that it will agree to the existence of such a region in Syria. An autonomous Kurdish region seems to stand in complete contrast to Turkey's political strategy for the post- 2024 new Syria.

CONCLUSION

The civil war in Syria may be the bloodiest conflict the Middle East has known in the twentieth century. It resulted in nearly half a million dead, about six million refugees and seven million internally displaced, a shredded social fabric, a collapsed infrastructure and a debilitated economy.

The Ba'ath regime never backed a political hegemony of minorities over the Sunni majority, yet the regime's adherence to the secular Ba'athist ideology provided a certain degree of security for minority communities. Concerns with the new regime among Syria's minorities have only grown, especially after the recent massacres of Alawites in the coastal region. Modern Syria has always relied on the integration of minority communities into the public and political spheres, where minorities have played an outsized role. But it is now uncertain whether this new regime guarantees a continuation of this policy.

In light of all this, some analysts doubt whether it will be possible to revive Syria as a unitary state. Perhaps the country's most optimistic scenario involves some form of federal government, with autonomy for the three regional minorities and a central state under the patronage of Turkey. ✳

YUSRI HAZRAN

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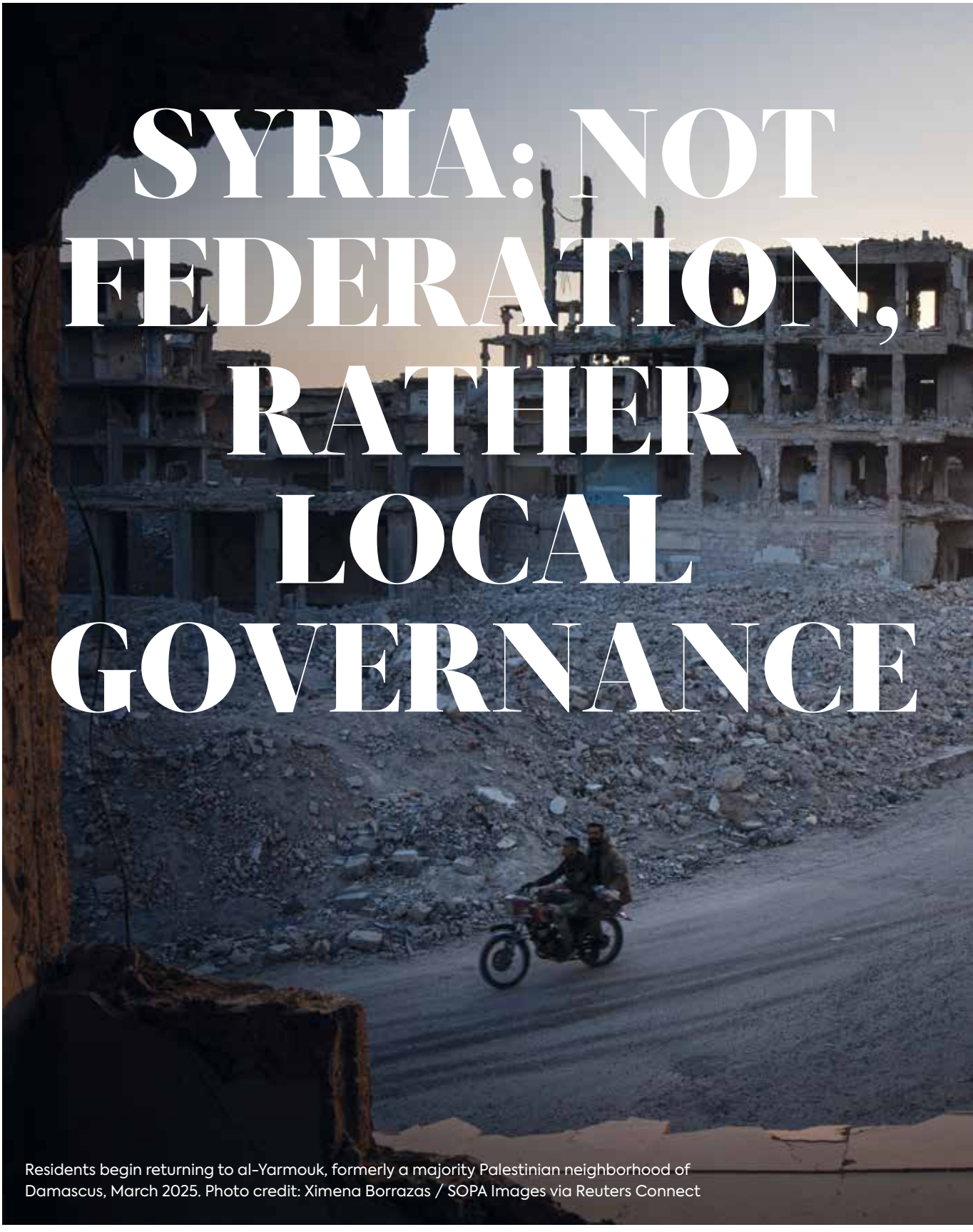
SYRIA: NOT FEDERATION, RATHER LOCAL GOVERNANCE



Residents begin returning to al-Yarmouk, formerly a majority Palestinian neighborhood of Damascus, March 2025. Photo credit: Ximena Borrazas / SOPA Images via Reuters Connect

by James Jeffrey

Yusri Hazran, writing in the May *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune,* has raised important questions about the future of Syria, for many reasons critical to the security of the rest of the region as well as to the US and Europe. However, his suggestion of a federated Syria may not be feasible, although elements of such a structure are possible if the international community can unite on specific steps.

Dr. Hazran is on target stressing the magnitude of the Syrian tragedy from 2011-2024, "the bloodiest conflict the Middle East has known in the twentieth century." And he is correct in asserting that this tragic history offers a compelling argument for Syrians, and the region, to get things right now that the civil war has ended with a victory by opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leader al-Shara'a. But the Syrian tragedy did not just affect, terribly, the Syrian people. The conflict threatened to pull the entire region into war by drawing in Russia, Iran and its proxies, notably Lebanese Hizbullah, and by fueling terrorist groups from the Islamic State and HTS (before it "transformed" into a pure opposition force) to the PKK offshoot the YPG (renamed the Syrian Democratic Forces), pushing twelve million people from their homes, and even generating a regional drug crisis with massive captagon drug exports.

Fortuitously, the end of the civil war has opened opportunities for equally dramatic regional change in the opposite direction, towards stability and peace, with Iran and its proxies permanently driven out, and with the Islamic State facing final defeat. It is thus critical that Syria, and the region, forestall either a return to disorder and chaos, or the return of Iran and Russia to make new mischief.

COULD A FEDERATION WORK?

While Dr. Hazran is right about the need to both protect, and provide rights to, Syrian minorities, his recipe, a federal state, may not be feasible. It would necessarily favor separate internal armies, staked-out territory, local majority rule, and a permanent temptation for more autonomy or even independence, possibly supported by foreign powers. A better approach would be agreements to balance central authority with a certain degree of local governance between the government and the various groups (many still armed), reinforced eventually with constitutional provisions.

But before sketching possible such local governance models, it may be helpful to outline the problems with federalism, starting with regional history and culture, moving to historical analogies, and then to international reactions.

It is correct, but unfair, to argue that the Middle East is inhospitable terrain for federal states. Correct, as no federal states of significance have arisen since the breakup of empires eighty to one-hundred years ago, with two exceptions, the UAE and Iraq since 2005. Furthermore, the special problems of Arab states—most of them initially artificial creations from a larger Arab identity—strengthen the bias against further burdening these already challenged national identities. But also unfair, as there is little precedent beyond the Middle East for federal states. The few of significance, including Germany (both imperial and post-World War II), the US, Yugoslavia, and to a lesser extent the UK and Belgium, were the products of unions of pre-existing sovereign states or other geopolitical entities. Under stress, the former three collapsed or nearly collapsed: the German empire after World War I, Yugoslavia after the fall of communism, and the US over slavery.

The decade of turbulence in Yugoslavia, spreading throughout the Balkans following its collapse in 1991, illustrates well the dangers of federalism if not fully accepted by populations, by neighbors, and by great powers.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is a Middle Eastern exception. It emerged from unique circumstances: an oppressed minority in a discrete (and largely defensible) region; supported by two powerful outside states, the US and (eventually) Türkiye, with goals to balance other forces, be it Saddam's Baghdad or indirectly Teheran. But Ankara and Washington's support was limited; neither backed independence for the KRG, given the possibility of internal and regional conflict, the desire of both states to maintain reasonable relations with hydrocarbon rich Iraq as a whole, and in the case of Ankara fear of impact on its own Kurdish population. Nevertheless, survival of the KRG's very liberal federal characteristics, including its own military forces, internal administration and governance, rests on both the Iraqi constitution and the forbearance of those outside states.

One practical problem with a federal system for Syria is the attitude of the international community. The Arab world, Türkiye, Europe, the UN, and important humanitarian and development assistance NGOs all support a unified Syria at this point, and recently have been joined by the Trump administration. One lesson of the Syrian civil war is that any Syria policy, even if it be mediocre or deeply flawed, if supported by most of the international community is better than two or three wiser policies that split the international players. An added problem with any federal initiative is that it would require a powerful, self-confident outside power, with a taste for internal tweaking, to convince the current Syrian state, various minorities, and the international community to enlist in such an effort. The US for better or for worse long played that role in the region, but President Trump has dramatically buried that instinct in his Riyadh remarks, and all indications are he meant it.

FEDERALISM "LIGHT"

A possibly more feasible alternative to a federal system could be practical and constitutional steps to allow a certain degree of local government and in particular core rights by religious and ethnic minorities. Moreover, such an approach if agreed upon by the international community could be tightly linked to development assistance, needed investment, and diplomatic reintegration. It would follow the generally successful diplomatic model: a unified international position using significant skin in the game for limited, feasible demands, with in this case three specific approaches: constitutional and national provisions; local government; and international ties.

The Syrian interim constitution provides for freedom of belief but also tilts towards Sharia law. The eventual permanent constitution needs stronger language on religious freedom and the use of their language by the Kurdish population in education and administration in areas where they are in the majority. More important will be the practical steps taken now by the regime vis-à-vis ethnic and religious minorities. While the outbreak of fighting in recent months with Alawites and Druze is regrettable, the government's response so far has been commendable, seeking compromise and de-escalation.

To the extent feasible at present under the interim constitution, Damascus could allow self-administration for the various provinces. This could involve establishing their own local police, selecting municipal and provincial leadership, and a certain degree of executive, legislative and judicial control over issues better managed locally than nation-wide. It would be important to eventually anchor such arrangements in the permanent constitution. Above all, such provincial self-administration should be adopted uniformly country-wide on the basis of geographical units, not piecemeal based on specific ethnic and religious groups, who would likely then soon see those provinces as "their" territory.

Finally, Türkiye, the US, and Israel have to end, or at least modify, their sponsorship of specific groups and especially their military forces. One possibility is to add Syria formally to the global Defeat-ISIS Coalition, similar to Iraq's status, with Turkish and US counter-terrorism forces officially present through agreement with Damascus. Israeli troops and their relationship with the Druze would have to be handled differently, as this is a longer-term issue related to the 1974 Syria-Israel agreements, the Golan Heights, and other issues. But as the Druze are but a small minority, and the geographic spread of the Israeli military is quite limited, such a special "handle later" status should be feasible. ✳

JAMES JEFFREY

James Jeffrey was deputy national security advisor of the United States from 2007–2008. He also served as US ambassador to Iraq, Turkey and Albania, as Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, and as a US infantry officer in Vietnam. He is currently the chair of the Middle East Program at the Wilson Center.

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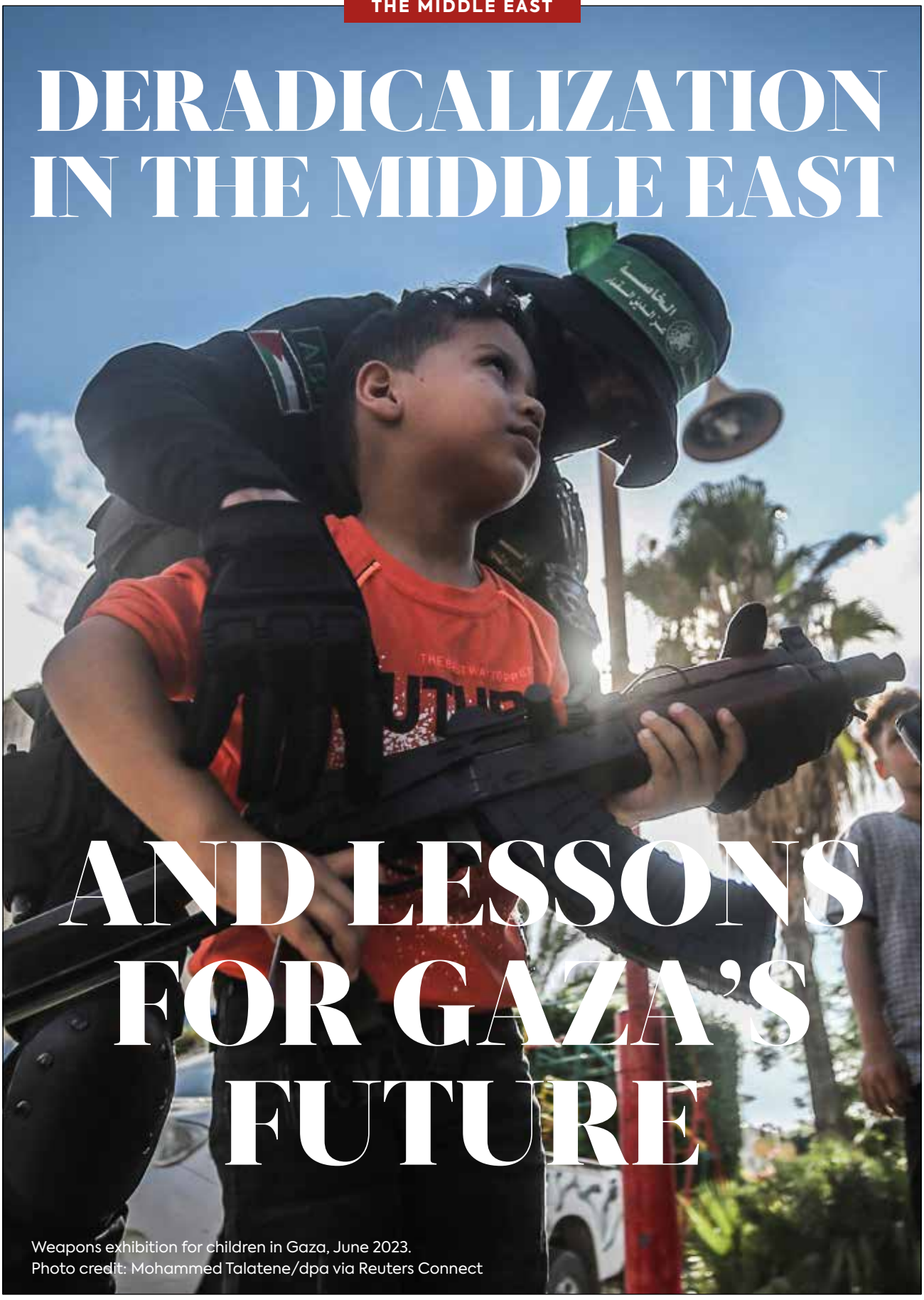
DERADICALIZATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND LESSONS FOR GAZA'S FUTURE



Weapons exhibition for children in Gaza, June 2023.
Photo credit: Mohammed Talatene/dpa via Reuters Connect

by Ksenia Svetlova

As Israel continues its military campaign against Hamas in Gaza, policymakers in Jerusalem often use the term "deradicalization" when discussing Gaza's future, mentioning it as a condition for the end of hostilities and calm. Yet Israeli politicians have not proposed concrete plans for its implementation,though everyone agrees Hamas's murderous ideology (and the organization itself) must be eradicated.

Other Middle Eastern countries have extensive experience with deradicalization, with varying degrees of success. In Iraq, for example, the process of de-Baathification was rapid and the remnants of the regime were quickly removed from power, but soon, one kind of extremism was replaced by another one. Could these regional experiences offer meaningful lessons for Gaza's eventual reconstruction and social healing?

REGIONAL APPROACHES TO COUNTERING EXTREMISM

Three countries – Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan – have distinctive long-term deradicalization strategies that combine security measures with religious, educational, and socioeconomic initiatives.

Following the 2003 Casablanca bombings, Morocco implemented a counterterrorism strategy combining aggressive security operations with socioeconomic development and religious education oversight. Beyond active security measures, Morocco established the Mohammed VI Institute for Training Imams in 2015 to promote moderate interpretations of Islam based on the Maliki school of jurisprudence, reformed religious education curricula, and created the Mosalaha (Reconciliation) program for rehabilitating extremist prisoners.

In Saudi Arabia, the Mohammed bin Naif Counseling and Care Center claims an 80 percent success rate in rehabilitating extremists. The Saudi approach separates extremist and non-extremist prisoners, provides extensive post-release incentives including marriage support and employment assistance, and emphasizes family involvement in the rehabilitation process.

Aziz Algashian, Saudi researcher and policy fellow at Israel's Mitvim Institute for Regional Foreign Policy, recalls the role of extremist rhetoric in his own education: "I remember in my childhood there were independent preachers who used to go to our schools, they would express all the anger about US and Israel, Afghanistan and Iraq, and I even remember people saying that it was a way to recruit the people."

He explains that this situation prompted Saudi authorities to implement comprehensive

oversight of educational institutions, as part of Ministry of Interior deradicalization programs that combine religious re-education by moderate scholars, psychological counseling, family involvement, and extensive post-release support.

Jordan's strategy centers on religious legitimacy. The 2004 Amman Letter brought together 180 Muslim scholars to build consensus against extremist interpretations of Islam. In 2006, the government introduced laws that regulate who can issue religious rulings or fatawa. However, Jordan's prison-based programs have faced challenges, with many inmates rejecting dialogue with government-appointed religious scholars. Despite these difficulties, Jordan has pioneered online counter-radicalization through its Sakina program and claims a relatively low recidivism rate for rehabilitated extremists.

Israel has yet to adopt a deradicalization strategy for Palestinian terrorists. Alon Eviatar, a former advisor to the Israeli military's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, notes that Israel never attempted such efforts. Israel has tried to work with the Palestinian Authority to change Palestinian textbooks and to halt the incitement in Palestinian media, but these efforts were not successful, per Eviatar. Palestinians in Gaza are not under Israeli sovereignty, and Israel has neither the legal authority nor the institutional capacity to implement deradicalization programs.

CHALLENGES FOR GAZA

What will it take to deradicalize young people who celebrated the October 7, 2023 attack and kidnapping of Israelis and who may have even joined the attackers when the border between Gaza and Israel was opened on that day?

The regional experiences show that it is possible to build schools for imams and preachers, introduce counselling programs for families, change the school curricula and decrease the level of radicalization in society. But the specific challenges of deradicalization in Gaza are more grave, owing to the ongoing conflict with Israel and the strong influence of Hamas.

How was Gaza radicalized in the first place? One can start with a local branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood raising its head there during the 1970s, later morphing from charitable associations led by Sheikh Ahmad Yassin into Hamas, an armed terrorist organization with both political and charitable arms. Or, one can go back to 1948 when tiny Gaza was overwhelmed with Palestinian refugees from nearby Jaffa, Majdal (now Ashkelon), Asdud (now Ashdod) and other towns and villages now in Israel. Gaza's population swelled rapidly while poverty spread. The refugees were crammed in the camps, they lacked land or possessions, and their desperation and rage were soon exploited by those who propagated violence.

Islamist movements have been influential in the Strip for decades, but for the last 18 years Gaza was directly run by Hamas. A whole generation studied its curricula at schools, listened to Hamas-appointed imams in mosques, and joined Hamas ranks for lack of other options. Hamas military leaders, such as Muhammad Deif or Yahya Sinwar, were admired.

Young Palestinians in Gaza today have had no direct contact with Israelis – unlike their fathers and uncles who had worked in Israel – and their lives played out in streets dominated by Hamas imagery and messaging. This generation was both heavily radicalized and traumatized before and during the current war, losing homes, relatives, and friends. They stopped attending school nearly two years ago. It's unclear when they will go back.

Two interconnected factors appear to drive radicalization in Gaza: Hamas's indoctrination that glorified the terror, and the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Any effective deradicalization strategy would need to address both aspects simultaneously. Hamas

has systematically embedded radical ideology throughout Gaza's educational system, religious institutions, media outlets, and social services, creating a comprehensive ecosystem that normalizes extremist viewpoints from early childhood and recruits Palestinian youth to its ranks.

This ideological framework is constantly reinforced by the ongoing conflict, which provides tangible grievances that extremist narratives can exploit. The combination of personal hardships, collective trauma, restricted opportunities, and political frustration creates fertile ground for radicalization, especially among young Palestinians who have known nothing but the Hamas narrative and intermittent warfare.

A PATH FORWARD

After the war, physical reconstruction must be accompanied by social rehabilitation, including reformed educational institutions, religious discourse, and economic opportunities. In addition, a plan that offers Palestinians a long-term political solution would be essential to undermine extremist narratives. One cannot happen without the other. But who should lead and supervise this effort? The answer is clear: the drive for that should come from within and it must be supported and guided by regional powers with records in combatting radicalization.

Arab countries with deradicalization experience, including Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, could play roles in such efforts. They could share best practices with Gaza's future governors and work with Israel, the Palestinians, and international partners to advance political solutions.

Obstacles remain. Palestinian society would need to openly reject violent extremism and its proponents who led Gaza into the abyss (the protestors who demonstrate against Hamas in Gaza today are saying that out loud). Israel has yet to adopt or articulate a coherent postwar Gaza plan, including paths toward economic reconstruction and non-Hamas governance tied to deradicalization.

And regional powers would need to engage more constructively in Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, and work together with Palestinian future government on deradicalization and society building — something they have been reluctant to do in recent decades.

Without addressing these fundamental challenges, deradicalization or more precisely de-Hamasification efforts in Gaza will likely offer limited results. The path to a deradicalized Gaza remains difficult but not impossible— provided all stakeholders are willing to learn from both successes and failures of previous efforts across the Middle East. ✳

KSENIA SVETLOV

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THE TWILIGHT OF PALESTINIAN "ARMED STRUGGLE"?

Photo credit: Reuters/Ammar Awad.

by Ehud Yaari

"Armed Struggle" was the main pillar, the tallest banner, the essence of the ethos of the Palestinian national movement since the last years of the 19th century. The conviction that the Zionist movement can be confronted only on the battlefield gave rise over the decades to many Palestinian military groupings. It became the ultimate narrative of the organizations which emerged in the late 1950s with the establishment of Fatah and the creation in the 1960s by the Arab League of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Yasser Arafat, who captured the leadership of the PLO, summarized this approach saying that, "freedom and justice come from the barrel of the gun."

This slogan was nurtured by all Palestinian factions across the political spectrum through massive indoctrination campaigns, recruitment of youth in their early teens to take part in paramilitary summer camps, and creation of patronage systems and funding networks that allowed tens of thousands of young Palestinians to be equipped with weapons and the promise that they will become glorified martyrs in the event of death.

THE PAST AND PRESENT OF "ARMED STRUGGLE"

Many analysts expected the Oslo Accords of 1993 to represent a turning point by the PLO away from "Armed Struggle" towards a search for gradual peaceful reconciliation with Israel. Those hopes were dashed in less than two years when Arafat secretly sanctioned the Hamas suicide bombers campaign. Indeed, the rhetoric of the PLO became more ambiguous, veiled and less defiant. But cadres in the Tanzim (a Fatah militia) were quietly provided with weapons and Arafat kept indicating to his followers that the Oslo process was merely a truce, a temporary armistice until "millions of martyrs will march on Jerusalem."

In 2000, Arafat unleashed the murderous Second Intifada. Contrary to the wishes of many, Oslo did not constitute a turning point, only a diplomatic breakthrough into a continuing bloody deadlock. In late 1995, Prime Minister Rabin himself was contemplating a re-assessment of Oslo. He planned a stern "bend or break" message for Arafat in their next meeting scheduled for January 1996, though he was tragically assassinated before the meeting took place.

To his credit Mahmoud Abbas was the first high-ranking Palestinian leader who had the courage to question, during the Second Intifada of 2000-2005, the wisdom of adhering to "Armed Struggle," calling to replace it with diplomatic and legal warfare against Israel. Abbas failed to convince many within his own Fatah movement. He faced great difficulty in influencing the other Palestinian armed organizations to change course even after he assumed the leadership from Arafat in 2005. Thus, numerous members of the Palestinian Authority's security organs under his command remained involved in terrorist activities, disobeying his explicit orders.

The absolute primacy of "Armed Struggle" in Palestinian discourse has discouraged any serious attempt to discuss or plan for a future Palestinian state. Palestinian political literature is devoid of any substantial debate over what kind of a state they aspire to create. What would be its economic, foreign and social policies?

One significant exception was a seminar held by Hamas in Gaza – under the auspices of the late Yahya Sinwar – prior to October 7, 2023. The main focus of what was described as a brainstorming session was the question of how to deal with the Jews in the land to be liberated. A broad consensus between the participants was reached that most Israeli Jews should be eradicated or expelled while those contributing to Israel's success in high tech and other critical domains would be forced to serve the new Palestinian authorities.

Yet, the ongoing aftershocks from the ongoing war in Gaza are posing questions among Palestinians concerning the viability of "Armed Struggle." So far this trend is reflected mainly in stormy exchanges on social media platforms and internal controversies within Hamas. There is mounting criticism leveled at the late Mohamad Deif and Yahya Sinwar for embarking upon an uncoordinated offensive that is resulting in a "Second Nakba" – a repeat of the defeat and mass displacement caused by launching the war in 1948.

To be sure, "Armed Struggle" is still being preached daily to the Palestinian communities by Iran and Iranian proxies, and at least half the Palestinian public – according to various polls – believe it remains indispensable. But doubts are being heard. We may be reaching a point where the Palestinians will feel compelled to make a choice between the road which led to past failures and an attempt to chart a new route. It will certainly require time and is bound to cause fractures and divisions, perhaps even a violent split, among the Palestinians.

Currently, a handful of Palestinian intellectuals suggest that "armed struggle" should be discarded because of the consequences of the ongoing war. The main criticism of Hamas is over timing and planning. The Hamas leadership in Gaza recklessly launched the "Al-Aqsa Flood" attack, acting independently without securing in advance coordinated offensives from Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and other parts of the Tehran-sponsored "Axis of Resistance" and with no direct involvement of Iran itself early on. They argue that a multi-front surprise attack could have produced a different result.

This claim may sound sensible but is unrealistic. Iran, Hizbullah and Bashar al-Asad were not ready on October 7, 2023 to launch an all-out campaign. Even more important is the fact that this line of thinking subordinates Palestinian "Armed Struggle" to the strategy imposed by non-Palestinian partners. Arafat emphasized from his first day in politics that the Arabs have betrayed the Palestinians and Palestinian "armed struggle" should be based exclusively on the principle of independence of Palestinian decision-making.

THE REGIONAL OUTLOOK FOR "ARMED STRUGGLE"

At present, adherence to the primacy of "Armed Struggle" faces a long list of impediments brought about by the war that Hamas launched on October 7, 2023. Together they form an unfriendly regional environment for Palestinian armed groups. Their forces are decreasing, their geographic spread is shrinking, their arsenal is degraded, tolerance by Arab governments is

receding and a constant threat of IDF operations against their commanders and bases has become an integral part of the equation.

In the Gaza Strip, the military wing of Hamas – the 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades – has been severely decimated. About 20,000 of its fighters were killed, including almost all of the first and second echelon commanders, most of its tunnel network demolished or cemented, most of its large arsenal of rockets and anti-tank weapons destroyed. Hamas is currently under attack by five IDF divisional task forces and has growing difficulties improvising a chain of command and imposing discipline on the rest of its combatants.

Hamas has indicated a willingness to give up administration of Gaza and hand it over to a committee of technocrats linked to the Palestinian Authority. Hamas negotiators have conveyed to US envoys that they are ready for a five-to -ten year armistice with Israel. Furthermore, some senior leaders have privately hinted at the possibility that Hamas may agree to the deportation of its commanders and an unspecified number of lower ranking operatives. Growing international pressure is gradually being applied to accept disarmament. President Abbas has proposed storing Hamas's heavy weapons under supervision of his officials. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Egypt have made it clear that Hamas has to be disarmed before reconstruction funds can flow into Gaza. In short, whatever would be the arrangements to conclude the Gaza war, Hamas can no longer pose a military threat to Israel.

In the West Bank, the IDF has conducted a less publicized series of operations against the Kataib (battalions), which Hamas and Islamic Jihad established in the northern refugee camps and some neighboring villages with Iranian funding and weapons smuggling across the Jordan River. Most Kataib gunmen have been arrested or surrendered to the Palestinian Authority or were killed during Israeli incursions. Others went into hiding. The fortified strongholds established in refugee camps in Jenin and Nablus have been demolished. Hamas appears unable to re-establish its underground network in the area and has so far failed to mobilize for clashes with the IDF in the southern West Bank, including the city of Hebron generally regarded as supportive of Hamas.

As for the 35,000-strong Palestinian Authority security organs in the West Bank, they have undergone in recent weeks what amounts to a purge of most senior officers, veterans of Arafat's day, together with retiring others and recruiting new young members. This comes in the wake of the failure of the two top elite battalions, the 9th and 101st, to restore law and order in the northern refugee camps.

In Lebanon, President Joseph Aoun and the new government have successfully applied pressure to Hamas to stop lobbing rockets into Israel and have arrested some of its operatives. Hamas's local allies in Lebanon, the Jama'a al-Islamiya, face pressure to both withdraw from cooperation with Hamas and disarm its own military wing, the "Fajr Forces." The veteran leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in Lebanon is also pressing for the removal of Sheikh Taqush as leader of the movement in view of his close cooperation with Hamas.

Above all, Hamas as well as other Palestinian armed factions are facing the demand of the Lebanese authorities for disarmament in the twelve Palestinian refugee camps. President Abbas has accepted this demand on behalf of Fatah and the PLO, and he may prove able to convince those bands loyal to him to disband. On the other hand, Hizbullah may urge Hamas to refuse to disarm, seeing it as a prelude to the effort to complete the disarmament of Hizbullah itself, even after they have surrendered most of their positions south of the Litani River. There a few thousand armed Palestinian personnel in the refugee camps and the plan is to start the process in the camps of the capital Beirut and then move north and east and finally attempt to reach a deal for disarmament of the strongest Palestinian camp, Ein al-Hilweh near Sidon, largely controlled by Hamas. Several bases of minor Palestinian armed groups outside the camps have

already been taken over by the Lebanese army.

In Syria, the post-Asad regime under President al-Shara'a has been taking actions to put an end to Palestinian military activity, arresting some elderly commanders and even reportedly dismissing two long-time Palestinian leaders of the regime militia, Hayat Tahrir al-Shams, in Idlib province.

The Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan do not allow a Palestinian military presence. Turkey and Qatar allow Hamas to keep headquarters, directing operations from afar, but so far do not allow the stationing of military units.

In Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces, part of the Iranian proxy network, express great sympathy for Hamas and "Armed Struggle" in general but so far no Hamas military presence has been detected there.

The bottom line is that Palestinian armed groups are under growing pressure both inside the territory of mandatory Palestine and outside of its borders. In the foreseeable future a revival of armed struggle on a substantial scale – as opposed to sporadic terrorist actions – seems impossible.

The big question is whether or not Palestinians will be prepared to bid farewell to their old battle cry. ✳

EHUD YAARI

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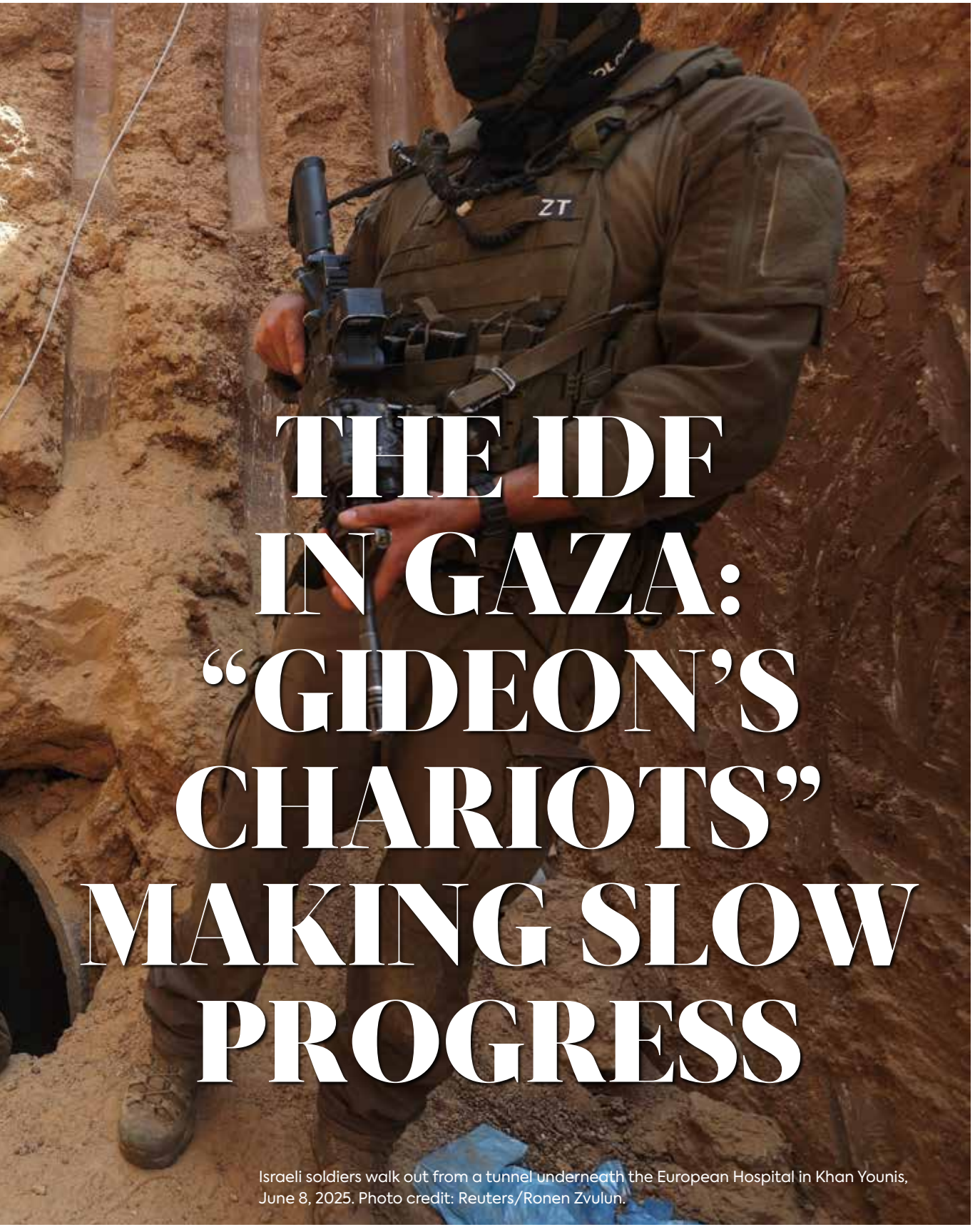

THE IDF IN GAZA: "GIDEON'S CHARIOTS" MAKING SLOW PROGRESS

Israeli soldiers walk out from a tunnel underneath the European Hospital in Khan Younis, June 8, 2025. Photo credit: Reuters/Ronen Zvulun.

by Seth J. Frantzman

The Israel Defense Forces have been on the offensive in Gaza since March 18. This offensive faces the same challenges the IDF encountered throughout 2024. Israeli commanders appear reticent to enter some key urban areas in Gaza, including the Central Camps area of Gaza. This may be due, inter alia, to concerns that hostages are held in these urban areas. The result is Hamas remains in control of around half of Gaza as of mid-June.

The initial phase of the new operation beginning in March concentrated on securing a new corridor across southern Gaza – the Morag corridor – named after an Israeli settlement evacuated in 2005 as part of the general disengagement from Gaza. The IDF likes corridors, usually in open areas, to control areas between the cities in Gaza. This is an old habit from the 1990s and 2000s when the IDF preferred holding open areas or key road junctions rather than patrolling the cities of Gaza.

In March 2025, the IDF also returned to part of the Netzarim corridor in central Gaza, also named for a former Israeli settlement. This area separates Gaza city from the Central Camps. It sits astride the key north-south road, Salah al-Din, and prevents Hamas from moving between north and south Gaza. April was spent conducting very limited operations and clearing and demolishing damaged structures in areas the IDF was operating.

On May 4, the Israeli Security Cabinet approved a new operation, code-named Gideon's Chariots, which was supposed to unleash the IDF to take control of all of Gaza with up to five divisions.

Why hasn't the IDF already moved over the past 18 months to occupy Gaza? First, the Biden administration throughout 2024 put pressure on Israel regarding operations in Gaza, including the US building an ill-conceived temporary pier to be attached to Gaza. Second, there are still 55 hostages and throughout 2024 endless ceasefire talks aimed at a hostage exchange. By the time US President Donald Trump came into office in January, the talks were finalized and a ceasefire took place from January 2025 to March. Third, until late 2024 a significant percentage of IDF forces were deployed to the north.

When Israel resumed fighting in March, most of the military brass who had been in charge on October 7, 2023 had resigned, including the Chief of Staff, the head of military intelligence, and the commanders of Southern Command and the Gaza Division. The Defense Minister and the head of the Shin Bet (Israel's FBI) had been fired. The IDF troops entering Gaza in May were led by a different group of officers.

Many of the division commanders were new as well, not because of resignations but because commanders normally rotate out of their positions every few years.

Gideon's Chariots has not been marked by the rush to conquer Gaza that the name implies. The IDF says this time they intend not just to raid and depart but to stay

IDF units have moved forward slowly, taking control of areas near Khan Younis and northern Gaza, slowly expanding the envelope they control. In northern Gaza the IDF's 162nd Division, with its 401st Armored Brigade and Givati Infantry Brigade, was sent to fight in Jabaliya. Meanwhile the Golani Brigade and the 36th Division have been operating in southern Gaza. In Khan Younis, the 98th Division returned to areas previously encountered from December 2023 to April 2024. The 252nd IDF Division has been fighting primarily in the Netzarim corridor. All of these units know the areas of Gaza they are fighting in from prior engagements.

The overall picture in Gaza is complex. The IDF is moving slowly forward, mostly replicating tactics from earlier in the war. The units move with air support and eliminate threats as far from the soldiers as possible. Improvised explosive devices killed three soldiers on June 3 and a civilian contractor on May 29.

As the IDF inches forward a new humanitarian initiative has begun in southern Gaza. The Gaza Humanitarian Foundation began delivering food to people on May 26. It has distributed more than seven million meals in eight days as of June 3, according to its interim director. The organization wanted to have four sites off the ground for delivering aid. These include three sites in southern Gaza and one in the Netzarim corridor. The goal is to rapidly expand the number of trucks moving aid to these sites from dozens to more than a hundred a day. The UN and other NGOs estimate Gaza needs more than 600 trucks of aid a day. Therefore the GHF initiative is a start to help feed half of Gaza or more. It began when Israel agreed to let aid back into Gaza, after having cut it off since March 1.

Now that the new aid sites are in place, there is an opportunity to move fast to exploit this new initiative. In addition, the military leader of Hamas in Gaza, Mohammed Sinwar, is dead from a mid-May airstrike. Among Gazans anger against Hamas is mounting, according to Arabic media reports. All this could also give a push to changing IDF tactics.

The challenge in coming months is to see if the IDF will change tactics and try to remove Hamas from the roughly 50 percent of Gaza it has held throughout the war. But so far such a change is not evident. For instance, after four IDF soldiers were killed in a building collapse in the first week of June, IDF Chief of Staff Eyal Zamir "ordered a tightening of operational procedures" and reinforced a key directive for all forces: "advance as slowly as necessary to ensure troop safety and prevent further casualties."

Settling in for a war of attrition may not be in Israel's interests. Hamas is weakened but there are diminishing returns. At some point Israel will be the one paying the higher cost for a long war. As the war approaches its second anniversary there will be more questions about what the new offensive is accomplishing. It was supposed to be different from the 2024 campaign by holding ground. But holding half of Gaza and slowly demolishing infrastructure there may not be the solution. Even if Hamas does collapse it will leave behind chaos that will require the IDF to continue to control much of Gaza for the near future.

Gideon's Chariots have not been fully unleashed in Gaza. If they remain idling the war will continue to resemble much of what has come before. ✳

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Houthi supporters protest against the US and Israel in Sanaa, 9 May 2025.
Photo credit: IMAGO/Hamza Ali via Reuters Connect

WHAT'S NEXT FOR THE HOUTHIS?

by Yaakov Lappin

Israel launches extensive retaliatory airstrikes against the Houthi economic heartland in northern Yemen, while the US pivots to announce a ceasefire with the Houthis. This divergence in approach between the superpower and a regional ally raises questions over whether momentum for an anti-Houthi ground offensive has been lost.

An intensified American-led air campaign, "Operation Rough Rider," initiated in mid-March, appeared to temporarily disrupt their attacks on Israel and international shipping. By April 27, the campaign had struck over 800 Houthi targets, killing hundreds of operatives, including leaders, and targeting radars, missile launch positions and port infrastructure (used to import Iranian weapons).

Nevertheless, on May 8, Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi said that despite 53 days of consecutive strikes, US forces "did not affect our military capabilities, nor did they stop our operations. The goal of the American aggression was to support the Israeli enemy, but it failed miserably."

The US air campaign had ignited hopes for an anti-Houthi Yemeni ground offensive. Israeli analyst Kobi Michael of the Institute for National Security Studies believes only a decisive ground campaign by Yemenis to "reimpose the south over the north" would eliminate the Houthi threat long term.

A report in mid-April by the Wall Street Journal described preparations for an anti-Houthi offensive targeting the Red Sea port of Hudeida, with figures of up to 80,000 soldiers being mobilized. But tangible evidence of such a large-scale preparation remains elusive.

As noted by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the anti-Houthi Yemeni forces lack unity and coordinated command. The anti-Houthi Presidential Leadership Council Vice President Tariq Saleh, who leads the National Resistance Front active on the Red Sea coast, met with Yemeni Defense Ministry officials around April 14, 2025 in Mokha, Yemen, according to the Institute for the Study of War, to discuss cooperation, reflecting efforts to coordinate disparate anti-Houthi elements.

The primary challenge to any anti-Houthi ground success lies in the fragmentation and internal rivalries among these forces. The internationally recognized Presidential Leadership Council struggled to unify northern elements with southern secessionist groups like the Southern Transitional Council.

Ultimately, it was Israel that has caused the most dramatic damage to the Houthi regime to date.

On May 4, a Houthi ballistic missile struck near Ben Gurion Airport. An initial IDF probe suggested a technical failure in an

Arrow interceptor, causing temporary airport closure and suspension of air service by many international carriers.

On May 5 and 6, the Israeli Air Force attacked Hodeida port and disabled Sanaa International Airport, striking runways, the control tower, and aircraft allegedly used for arms smuggling. Strikes also hit power stations near Sanaa and a cement factory in Amran province, identified by the IDF as crucial for Houthi economic revenue and military construction, including tunnel building.

The IDF spokesperson's unit on May 6 emphasized that these civilian sites were systematically exploited by the "Houthi terrorist regime for terrorist purposes." The damage was significant, with the Sanaa airport director claiming $500 million in losses.

This strategy of targeting dual-use infrastructure signaled a clear intent to cripple the Houthis' economic assets and warn Tehran of the similar vulnerability of assets that dot the Islamic Republic. These long-range, complex missions also served as invaluable operational experience for the IAF.

The direct Israeli engagement coincided with a concurrent US-Houthi ceasefire, commencing May 7. Announced by US President Donald Trump and mediated by Oman, the deal focused on ensuring freedom of navigation for international commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb, with a mutual cessation of attacks between US forces and the Houthis.

Houthi officials, however, immediately stressed that the agreement did not extend to their attacks against Israel or Israeli-linked shipping, vowing to continue these attacks in their support of Hamas in Gaza. Shipping headed to Israel's southern port of Eilat remains at high risk from Houthi attacks.

Since the US truce was announced, the IDF intercepted, on May 7, an unmanned aerial vehicle – likely Houthi. On the same day, a Houthi missile targeting Israel fell short in Saudi Arabia.

The Houthis, despite losses from Israeli and American air strikes, have proven to be resilient, with years of combat experience in difficult terrain. Kobi Michael notes that the Houthis are "a very determined religious-ideological group, which fought against the Saudis for eight years. More than one hundred thousand people were killed there, and they succeeded in demoralizing the coalition that fought against them."

Iran's material support has been crucial to the Houthis' advanced missile and drone capabilities, allowing Tehran to project power, threaten vital shipping lanes, pressure Saudi Arabia, and open another front against Israel.

Further complicating the Red Sea's strategic chessboard are Iran's recent activities in Sudan. Reports indicate that Tehran is actively supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces in that country's civil war, aiming to establish a strategic foothold, possibly including naval access at Port Sudan. Such a development would grant Iran another vital position from which to threaten maritime security and further destabilize the region.

Israel is poised to continue robust offensive actions as necessary. But so long as Yemeni anti-Houthi forces in the south remain divided and the Americans and Israelis diverge, the Houthi regime will remain intact, and the terrorist threat from Yemen will likely expand beyond Israel when the opportunity arises. ✳

YAAKOV LAPPIN

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RUSSIA'S DEFENSE TIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST POISED TO REBOUND

Russian President Vladimir Putin visits the Kazan Aviation Factory, February 2024. Photo credit: Sputnik/Kristina Kormilitsyna/Kremlin via Reuters

by Anna Borshchevskaya, Matt Tavares

Russia's defense relationships in the Middle East and North Africa have been gravely weakened as a result of its war in Ukraine. However, a peace deal, sanctions relief, or even a lengthy ceasefire could provide Russia with an opportunity to resume arms sales and security assistance to the Middle East, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific. The West may be surprised at the speed with which its traditional partners in the Middle East and North Africa will seek such normalization with Russia. Washington should prepare now to block Russia's potential return.

THE MIDDLE EAST REMAINS INTERESTED

Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow was the second largest arms supplier to the Middle East. It is now third. Russia faced a number of constraints to its ability to supply arms: Western sanctions, export controls, Russia's exclusion from the SWIFT payment system, and Russia's own shift towards supporting its forces in Ukraine. As a result, in a region already prone to diversifying defense sales among multiple great powers, the Middle East and North Africa increasingly seek alternative suppliers for their stocks of Russian manufactured defense equipment. The fall of Syria's Bashar al-Asad last December further weakened Russia's defense sales in the region.

Nevertheless, countries in the region remain interested in Russian weapons. In private, senior officials in the region note that Western sanctions and Russia's inability to deliver on existing contracts is what has reduced Russia's arms exports. In other words, demand for Russia's arms hasn't disappeared. Some might point out that Russian weaponry performed poorly in Ukraine, but the weapons Russia exports to the region – chiefly aircraft, aircraft engines and missiles – continue to perform well, or well enough to satisfy their price point.

RUSSIA'S DEFENSE INDUSTRIAL BASE REMAINS DURABLE

Russia's entire economy is now geared towards military production. In private, Western officials acknowledge that Russia now produces more munitions than all NATO members combined. Over the last two years, the Russian defense industry has built entire new supply chains to overcome sanctions while in conflict. Russia shifted production internally, and found new subcontractors in China to rapidly ramp up production of drones and precision-strike munitions such as the Geran 2 and 3, hundreds of which now attack Ukraine every day. Indeed, sanctions have hurt the Russian economy, but not enough to force the Kremlin to make concessions to end the war.

Russian soldiers at the frontline continue to be trained and equipped, supported by an increasingly diverse array of communications equipment, and defended from drone attacks by electronic warfare systems. The majority of the Russian armed forces remain relatively untouched by the war, and have learned valuable, if costly, campaign lessons that will be applied to future warfare. Despite the loss or damage of nearly half of the Russian Black Sea fleet, the Russian Navy remains quite capable, and even continues to produce new ships and modernize while simultaneously embroiled in conflict.

RUSSIA WILL BE ABLE TO OFFER MORE POSTWAR

Russia has a real opportunity to emerge from the war with Ukraine with far more to offer to potential arms buyers in the Middle East than before the war. It will have a strong industrial base oriented towards external customers. In a post-war scenario, Russia will likely be one of the top countries in the world for inexpensive one-way attack drones and precision-strike munitions, and with a defense industry ramped up and hungry for new contracts abroad after years of continuous warfare and associated defense industry surges to increase capacity.

The downturn in Russia's global arms sales won't last once the fighting ends or takes a pause. Based on production rates, over the last two years of war, Russia's defense industrial base has only grown stronger and is now capable of churning out certain weapon systems at even higher rates than pre-war, while developing entirely new classes of arms to support Russia's military operations. For example, Russia is now able to produce more missiles than pre-war and to produce tanks in excess of their attrition in combat. Russia has transformed Iranian one-way attack drones into the Geran 2 and now Geran 3 at a blistering clip. Furthermore, a variety of Russian weapon systems that failed during the initial stages of the war have been continuously tweaked to improve their success in combat.

Potential arms buyers in the region have taken notice. Multiple African countries continue to consider a broader relationship with Russia; countries like Algeria will need Russia to maintain their largely Russian-supplied military hardware. Recent improvements in Russia's relationship with Sudan's Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, after jettisoning their previous preferred Sudanese partner, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as "Hemedti"), have allowed Russia to keep a toehold in Sudan, and reportedly secure the long sought goal of a Russian naval port in the Red Sea. Libya is reportedly a target for Russia to replace its Mediterranean naval base in Syria.

A US POTENTIAL COUNTER

There is also an opportunity for the US at present: Ukraine is well positioned to counter Russia in the region. Prior to the war, Ukraine's military industry was arguably the most competitive replacement to Russian sources of arms in the world. Like Russia, Ukraine will likely emerge from the war with one of the most innovative arms industries in Europe and with significant expertise in modernizing and maintaining Russian equipment. Given European and American investments, Ukraine will have increased capacity in its defense industry. For countries with significant Russian equipment but hesitant to renew relations with Russia, Ukraine provides a ready alternative that avoids some of the regulatory and end-monitor burdens inherent in purchasing Western equipment.

To be sure, the Kremlin shows no interest in ending the war, the Ukrainians won't simply capitulate, and the war is unlikely to end anytime soon.

But the US can act now to better position itself in the Middle East arms markets by facilitating a push for Ukrainian technology and preventing further Russian profit-making for its arms industry. As the US defense industry adapts to the revolution in military technology created by Russia's war against Ukraine, particularly at the low-end of the technology spectrum, it should free the US defense industry to compete against Russian suppliers in difficult markets. Regardless of how the war in Ukraine plays out, taking action now to compete with Russia will only serve US interests. ✳

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THE PUTIN PROBLEM

by Michael Mandelbaum

The Trump administration entered office with two complementary goals concerning Russia. The first, the humanitarian goal of ending Russia's war with Ukraine, does not seem close to being achieved. The administration proposed a ceasefire between the two countries as a first step toward terminating the conflict, but while Ukraine accepted the proposal, Russia did not. Meetings between representatives of the Trump administration and Russian officials have made no apparent progress.

The second goal, a geopolitical one that the achievement of the first is intended to make possible, is to flip Russia from its close connection to China to a friendlier relationship with the United States. This makes eminent good sense for America. The Trump administration's initial approach to Russia, however, will not bring it about. To the contrary, the conciliatory attitude toward Moscow that it adopted upon taking office is precisely the opposite of what is needed.

Because China poses the principal challenge to the United States, weakening it by depriving it of its major ally, Russia, would serve American interests. Such a development has historical precedents. The reversal of alliances in Europe in 1756, sometimes called the Diplomatic Revolution of that year, saw the Austrian Habsburg Empire switch its allegiance from Great Britain to Britain's chief adversary, France, changing the balance of power on the continent. More recently, the Nixon administration's diplomatic rapprochement with the People's Republic of China in 1972, conducted by President Nixon's national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, had a similar impact on a global scale, moving China away from the camp of America's then chief adversary, the Soviet Union, and toward the United States. A prospective shift of post-Soviet Russia from China to America has thus come to be known as a "reverse Nixon-Kissinger."

The hope of persuading Russia to realign itself geopolitically is not groundless. The Russian people have traditionally identified more with Europe than with Asia. Russians and Chinese have never regarded each other as natural friends or partners. Indeed, mutual suspicion has marked their relations. In the half-century since 1972, moreover, the relationship between the two countries has changed dramatically: China has gained in wealth and strength while Russia has become relatively poorer and less powerful. China has become very

much the senior partner and Russia the junior. If present trends continue, the gap between them will grow, to Russia's increasing discomfort.

All this suggests that Russia has an interest in distancing itself from China and moving closer to Europe and the United States. Unfortunately, Vladimir Putin himself has no such interest. To the contrary, his personal goals require a continuing, indeed ever-closer, alignment with China as well as ongoing hostility to the United States and the West. Putin, with his tight control over Russia's relations with the rest of the world, is the reason that the initial Trump strategy of conciliation as a way of flipping Russia cannot succeed.

Like other dictators of his kind, Putin wants, above all, to remain in power. This makes it possible for him to channel Russia's wealth to himself and his circle of cronies. Close association with the West, with its emphasis on democratic politics, free markets, and the rule of law, would make both more difficult. In fact, Western values and practices pose a mortal threat to him and his core personal interests. Those interests also require that Russia remain at war. The Ukraine conflict has enabled him to concentrate power in his own hands and has given him a pretext to jail or drive out of the country anyone who might object to the political order he has established. An end to the war would be good for the Russian people, and of course for Ukrainians as well, but not for Mr. Putin; and for Russia to align with the West, the war would have to end.

The Russian leader not only needs the war to continue in order to secure his own power, he needs for the Russian people to believe that they are engaged in a life-and-death geopolitical conflict with NATO, the United States, and Europe. As the Russia expert Leon Aron of the American Enterprise Institute put it in his 2023 book Riding the Tiger: Vladimir Putin's Russia and the Uses of War, "a perennial war with the America-led West became integral to the regime's legitimacy." Putin and his henchmen bombard those they rule with the message that the West is seeking to destroy Russia and that only Vladimir Putin can protect them. He portrays the Ukraine war as but one battle in a cosmic struggle in which Russia's very existence is at stake.

For these reasons, the conciliatory approach to Russia that the Trump administration has initially attempted will neither end the fighting in Ukraine nor effect a twenty-first century diplomatic revolution. It is far more likely to follow the pattern of President Barack Obama's policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Obama believed that offering the hand of friendship to the ruling mullahs would reduce their hostility to the United States. It did no such thing. The Iranian regime took advantage of the concessions the United States made in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, signed in 2015, to sustain and expand its campaigns of terror and subversion against America's friends and allies in the Middle East. With its initial approach to Russia, the Trump administration risks following a similarly futile, indeed counterproductive, course.

In short, as long as Vladimir Putin holds supreme power in Moscow, Russia will be a friend of China and an adversary of the West. The necessary condition for the geopolitical realignment that would bring considerable advantages to the United States is the end of the Putin regime. How might that come about? The United States and its allies do not have the power to cause it to happen, and there is no guarantee that whatever government comes after Mr. Putin's will abandon his foreign policy. Logic and history do, however, suggest an indirect way in which the West might help to push him out of power.

In Russian history, military failure has sometimes led to political change. Russia's poor performance against Britain and France in the Crimean War of 1853 to 1856 helped to create the conditions in which serfdom was abolished. The humiliation that the Russian Empire suffered in its war with Japan in 1905 compelled the tsar to create a Russian parliament. The battlefield

defeats of the tsar's armies in World War I triggered the collapse of his government and the subsequent Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. The inability to subdue Afghanistan in the 1980s contributed to the events that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The war in Ukraine could have similar consequences, providing that Vladimir Putin fails to emerge as the victor. The war has already put the country's economy under severe strain and caused, by some estimates, more than 800,000 casualties among the Russians whom the Putin regime has conscripted into the army. At some point, the accumulated costs could prove greater than the Russian people, and even some of the people in Putin's coterie, are willing to pay.

Russian failure, of course, requires Ukrainian success — in defending the territory it still controls and thereby retaining its independence. The United States has the means to increase the chances that the Ukrainians will be able to do so by continuing, and even increasing, its military support for Ukraine. Ukrainian success on the battlefield enhances the prospects for the geopolitical realignment that the Trump administration seeks; the administration ought therefore to be doing everything it can to train and equip the Ukrainian armed forces. It is they who hold the potential to flip Russia. ✳

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Archive photo: US Destroyer Sails Through the South China Sea, March 2023. Photo credit: ABACA via Reuters Connect

IS THE PIVOT TO ASIA FINALLY HAPPENING?

by Drew Thompson

Trump has stunned Europe by following through on his pledge to force an end to the fighting in Ukraine, and making European allies take more responsibility for their own security. The Pentagon has reportedly been instructed to prepare to withdraw US forces deployed in Syria. Is the Trump administration in the early stages of actually pivoting to Asia?

The pivot to Asia was first articulated around 2010 during the Obama administration, with Kurt Campbell, then Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, one of its most passionate advocates. Campbell's book, The Pivot: The Future of American Statecraft in Asia was published in 2016. The Obama administration was uncomfortable with the label, feeling that "pivot" implied withdrawing from Europe and the Middle East. The semantic compromise was to call it a rebalance, which undermined the premise of prioritization and failed to acknowledge that scarcity of resources necessitated hard choices. In the Biden administration, Kurt Campbell returned as a senior National Security Council official and then as Deputy Secretary of State, sparking speculation that the pivot would actually happen. But Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine dragged Washington back to the business of defending Europe.

On the campaign trail, Trump derided America's endless wars and promised to end the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. Many of his foreign policy supporters argued that America's real threat is its near-peer competitor in Asia, China, and that US attention should focus on support for Asian allies building their capabilities to defend themselves.

Once in office, Trump has invested considerable political capital and attention on ending the Ukraine and Gaza conflicts. But is the administration actually pivoting to Asia, or will America retreat from Asia as well? The jury is still out. Trump has not committed, leaving his appointees to jockey for position and make their respective cases.

RISE OF THE ASIANISTS?

Trump appointees are a mix of right-wing libertarians, Wall Street capitalists, and Asianists, each with competing foreign policy ideologies. (Some refer to the libertarians as "isolationists," "restrainers" or "realists," while the Asianists have also been described as "prioritizers.") The libertarians and Asianists have the strongest influence on foreign policy and the contest between the two will shape whether or not the US successfully pivots to Asia.

The libertarians oppose foreign development assistance and seek to avoid wars, counselling restraint. Some argue that China and Russia are nuclear powers that deserve a degree of deference, and that it is not in the national interest to go to war with big powers over minor American interests on their peripheries. Essentially, Taiwan and Ukraine are not worth fighting China or Russia over. They ultimately support the reduction of spending on defense concurrent with the decoupling of security commitments around the world.

The Asianists agree with reducing European and Middle Eastern security commitments, but diverge from the libertarians in prioritizing national security policy resources on China as the primary threat to the United States, with Taiwan as the battleground for conflict. They believe that US alliances in the region should support that priority, and that Taiwan and Japan should bear a greater part of the burden in defending themselves.

If the Asianists prevail, the pivot could become reality. For the first time, the Deputies Committee – the key forum where national security issues are brought for senior-level discussion and initial decision – will be led for the first time by three Asianists. They are Deputy National Security Advisor Alex Wong, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy-nominee Bridge Colby, and Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs-nominee Alison Hooker. These Asia experts will put critical choices before the President for decision. This does not assure that the administration ultimately doubles down on the defense of Taiwan and whole-hearted competition with China. But personnel is policy, and we have experienced Asia hands running defense and foreign policy at the key agencies.

President Trump has not backed either school of thought, however. He is not ideologically driven. He keeps his own counsel, keeps his cards close to his chest, and revels in his own unpredictability and the leverage it gives him when negotiating with foreign counterparts, and perhaps his own advisors as well. This makes for uncertainty, as well as a lack of clarity, and perhaps even our awareness of whether a pivot is actually happening. Barring a clear speech or Truth Social post, observers may struggle to perceive that a pivot is underway.

CONTOURS OF A TRUMP PIVOT

If America does finally pivot, what might it look like? Certainly, decoupling from European security would be sustained. The administration would need to succeed in extracting troops from Syria and avoid putting boots on the ground in the Eastern Mediterranean or Yemen. There will be sustained bilateral engagement with capable allies in the Pacific, and enhancement of security cooperation with select partners. There are indications that is already occurring. Taiwan and Philippines foreign military assistance was approved just days after a declared freeze on all military aid. Prime Minister Ishiba's visit to the White House in February exceeded expectations and resulted in a joint statement that reflected Tokyo's security concerns, not just Washington's.

A Trump pivot to Asia would likely not manifest itself as an embrace of Asian multilateral networks, or a comprehensive strengthening of bilateral relationships. Trump believes multilateral architectures dilute US power. He finds multilateral engagements socially awkward and is more comfortable engaging counterparts bilaterally, where he can choose to either dominate a counterpart,

as Zelensky discovered, or bestow goodwill, as Ishiba received.

ASEAN is unlikely to feature prominently in a Trump pivot, but there are opportunities for strengthened bilateral relations in both North and Southeast Asia. The Quad (Australia, India, Japan and the US) may feature in a pivot, but that would likely reflect Trump's personal preference for the individual leaders in that group. Bilaterally, economic competition and Trump's insistence on economic reciprocity and reindustrialization of America will still be a feature of US relations in Asia, even with concurrent strengthening security relationships.

Singapore, Australia, and Mongolia are the only countries in Asia that have a trade deficit with the US (Hong Kong, the Special Administrative Region of China, also has a deficit), leaving the rest of the region to accept Washington's economic coercion as a part of the pivot.

CONCLUSION

The volatility of an administration fuelled by Trump's outlook and leadership style, coupled with competing schools of thought amongst his advisors, makes it impossible to conclude with certainty what the future holds for American foreign policy. Contradictions and unpredictability will undoubtedly define US foreign relations, much as Trump imposes tariffs on friend and foe alike. There are nevertheless indications of a shift in US focus towards Asia, as the competing foreign policy visions are debated within the Administration. ✳

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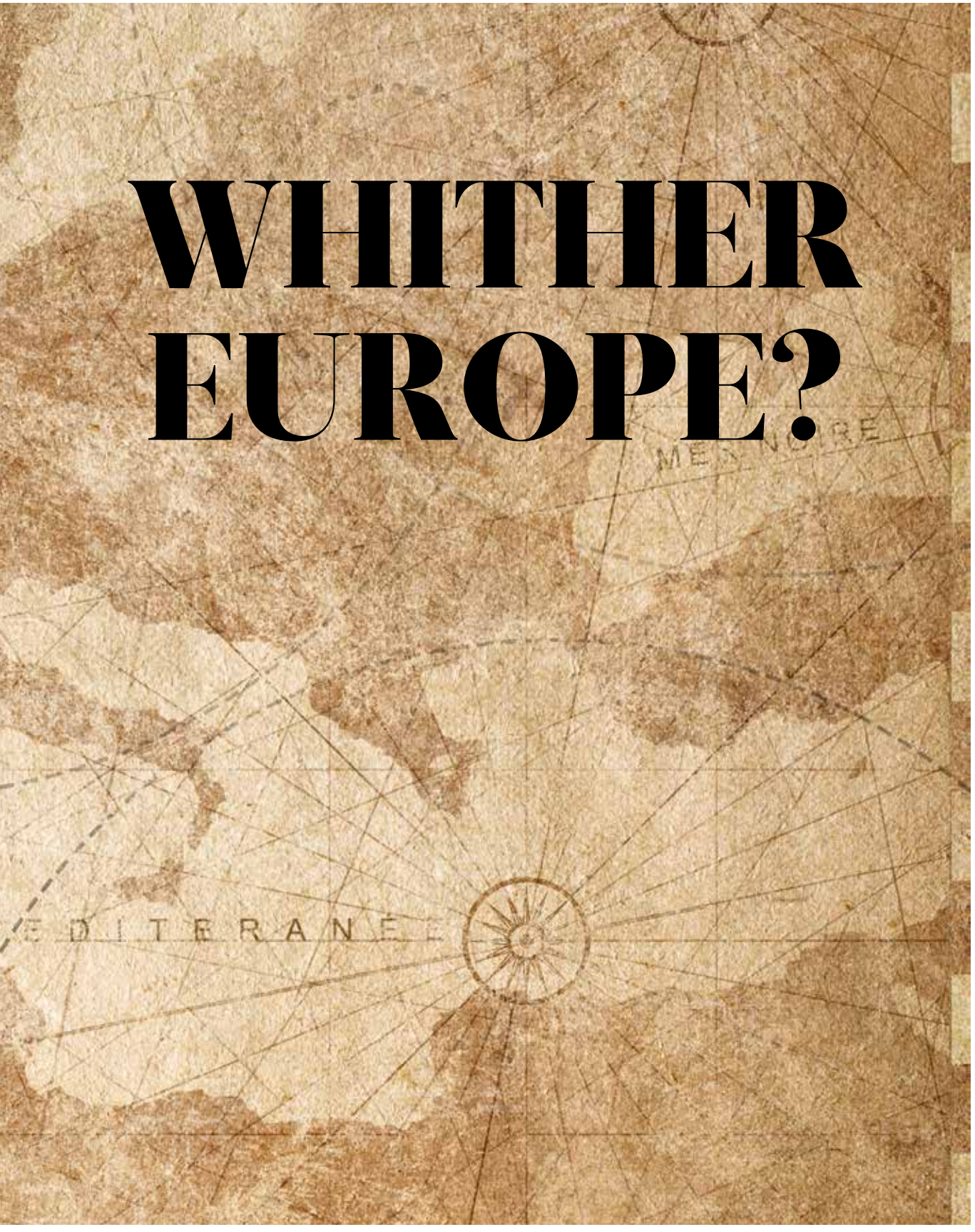

WHITHER EUROPE?

by Jacob Heilbrunn

The six chords, each spaced with a rest of about a second, came crashing down in the resplendent home of Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. The audience sat transfixed. Seated in the rear balcony, I was listening to Santtu-Matias Rouvali conduct Jean Sibelius' 1919 fifth symphony based, like Beethoven's, around a four-note motif. The opening of Beethoven's fifth has been called "the knock of fate" and the conclusion of Sibelius's—with its six thunderbolts—evoked it. At a moment when Europe is at a crossroads, the conclusion of Sibelius' symphony seemed to represent as much of a challenge as a declaration.

While spending a week in the Netherlands, I pondered the question of whether Europe will rouse itself to meet the challenges of a new era or slip back into its cozy bourgeois habits. There's plenty of evidence either way. Amsterdam itself remains an oasis of calm with its lovely canals and extrusion of cars from the city center. If you want to get around, you can hoof it, jump on a tram or join the bevy of bicyclists. In Thomas Mann's novel Buddenbrooks, Amsterdam functions as a haven for the young Gerda Arnoldsen, a violin virtuoso who announces to her schoolmate Toni Buddenbrooks that she's not eager to get married: "I don't see why I should. I am not anxious. I'll go back to Amsterdam and play duets with Daddy and afterwards live with my married sister."

The Amsterdam town hall, built in 1648 after the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War and the Eighty Years' War with Spain, features a woman bearing a staff of Mercury and an olive branch. Trade, not war, has been the raison d'être of the Netherlands for several centuries (though it remained a colonial empire through a good part of the 20th century).

Overt reminders of a darker European past are also present. One comes in the form of the Anne Frank house which is located on a canal in central Amsterdam called the Prinsengracht. The spareness of the Secret Annex to the house, where the Frank family and several friends hid for several years before they were betrayed to the Gestapo in August 1944, underscores the abyss that the Nazis created in their fanatical quest to destroy European Jewry. Otto Frank, who survived Auschwitz and ensured that his daughter Anne's diary was published, decreed that the furniture and other goods that the Nazis had stripped from the house not be returned to it after World War II ended.

Then there is an ambitious two-part anti-war exhibition of the German artist Anselm Kiefer's work at the Van Gogh Museum and neighboring Stedelijk Museum. Kiefer, who was born in 1945, has long been preoccupied with confronting the

Nazi past. "Kiefer's work," Simon Schama has observed, "seems to share the historian's version of the Hippocratic Oath, to wage war against forgetfulness." At age eighteen, he traveled across the Netherlands, Belgium, and France to retrace the footsteps of his hero Vincent van Gogh. "Every single one of his forceful brushstrokes," writes Kiefer in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, "is an eruption, a manifestation of defiance."

The exhibition deftly traces Kiefer's indebtedness to van Gogh and is called "Where have all the flowers gone?" It focuses on warfare, ranging from several enormous canvasses called "Field of the Cloth of Gold" (which evoke the 1520 meeting between Francis 1 of France and Henry VIII of England) to military uniforms hanging around the staircase of the Stedjelik museum. To slot Kiefer in as an artistic propagandist, though, would be to do violence to his own vision–his focus on decay and rebirth, not to mention his fusion of the ambiguous traditions of German mythology and romanticism into his monumental paintings.

Those traditions were misused, or at the very least exploited, by the Nazis. Kiefer offers a reminder of the dark past but also leaves open-ended just how German myths should be interpreted today, something that comes through in a mesmerizing painting called *Waldsteig*, or forest path, that is based on a romantic novel published by the Austrian writer and painter Adalbert Stifter in 1845.

At a press opening for this new exhibition, Kieger observed that he wasn't trying to proselytize about the Ukraine war. In viewing Kiefer's canvasses with their focus on wheat fields and looming conflict, however, it's hard not to think about the carnage taking place in Ukraine, where Russia has embarked upon a revanchist war to extirpate Ukrainian culture and sovereignty. Russia's assault offers a potent reminder that the most effective anti-war measure is to possess an adequate deterrent, a lesson that Poland and the Baltic States never needed to relearn and that Western Europe must.

Both the war and the rise of Donald Trump have upended Europe. Unlike the Alternative Party for Germany, which remains close to Russia, both Geert Wilders, the leader of the far right PVV party in the Netherlands, and Marine Le Pen, the head of the National Rally party, are backing Kyiv. This past week, Wilders said, "The PVV naturally supports Ukraine with conviction."

But the real action is taking place in Germany. The incoming chancellor Friedrich Merz is seeking to shuck off the caution, even timidity, that has characterized Germany since 1945. "Germany is back," Merz announced on March 14 after the Greens joined the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats to pass a historic funding proposal of 500 billion euros for infrastructure and the Bundeswehr, or German army. It also permits the current chancellor Olaf Scholz to distribute three billion Euros in additional aid to Ukraine. Merz has also stated that he intends to talk with France and the United Kingdom about creating a wider European nuclear umbrella. Already Merz is demonstrating that, in contrast to the hapless Scholz, he intends to become a consequential German chancellor.

The stakes could not be higher. As David Brooks observes in the *New York Times,* "Europe will either revive or become a museum.... Europeans know that that this is their moment to cut the security cord with America and revive their own might." They do indeed.

If what I heard at the Concertgebouw is anything to go by, more thunderbolts may be in the offing in Europe. ✳

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PETE HEGSETH'S NINE LIVES

by Dov S. Zakheim

When the abuse of inmates at Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib prison broke into the open in 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld offered to resign. Twice. Both times President George W. Bush rejected Rumsfeld's offer; he only fired him after the Democrats took both the House and the Senate in the 2006 mid-term elections.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has made no such offers. Confirmed by the Senate with only the thinnest possible margin – with Vice President J.D. Vance casting the tie-breaking vote in his favor – Hegseth remains firmly in his post despite a series of missteps that, in aggregate, could be viewed as far more damaging to his reputation than Abu Ghraib was to Rumsfeld's.

As is well known, Hegseth was a participant in the Signal messaging app scandal, now widely termed "Signalgate." At issue was a major leak of a discussion that National Security Advisor Mike Waltz had convened for his senior national security colleagues to discuss an impending American military operation against the Yemeni Houthi rebels. Waltz erroneously included in the call a journalist, Jeffrey Goldberg, editor of *The Atlantic magazine*. Goldberg promptly revealed the general contents of the discussion, though he declined to provide specifics regarding the attack. When the Trump administration claimed that Goldberg was reporting 'fake news," he responded by revealing those elements of the discussion that he had previously not reported because he felt their release would undermine national security.

During the course of the call, it was Hegseth who provided the participants with details of the imminent American airstrikes. These included specifics regarding which aircraft and missiles American forces would employ, as well as launch and attack times. Yet when challenged regarding what seemed to be a breach of classified information, since the Signal app is not fully secure from penetration by an adversary, Hegseth vehemently denied that he had released any sensitive information relating to the fight against the Houthis. As he put it, "Nobody was texting war plans. And that's all I have to say about that."

What Hegseth did not say was that the information that he did offer to his colleagues was to all intents and purposes the operational plan regarding the impending attack. In any event, President Trump did not fire Hegseth, nor did the Secretary follow Rumsfeld's example and offer to resign.

Shortly thereafter, yet another story broke regarding the planned attack on the Houthis. Several media outlets reported that prior to the operation the Secretary had revealed many of its details in a separate Signal chat with his wife, his lawyer, and his brother, an employee of the Department of Homeland Security detailed to DoD. Both Hegseth's brother and lawyer have security clearances, though whether their clearances were high enough to enable them to join a discussion of operational plans is uncertain. Even less clear is whether Jennifer Hegseth had any clearance; she is not a DoD employee. In the event, none of the three appear to have had what is termed a "need to know," which overrides whatever security clearance they might have held. Once again, however, Hegseth denied having revealed any classified information, and again there was no reaction from the White House, other than statements of support.

It subsequently was reported that Mrs. Hegseth had also attended so-called "bilateral" meetings that the Secretary holds with his foreign counterparts. These meetings are invariably classified, as are the materials and talking points that staff provides to prepare the secretary for them. Mrs. Hegseth did not yet have a security clearance, however. Nevertheless, once again there was no negative reaction coming from the White House. To the contrary, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt asserted that Hegseth is doing "a tremendous job... bringing a monumental change to the Pentagon." She characterized the reports of his alleged misdoings as nothing more than a "smear campaign."

In the event it was Mike Waltz who lost his job, not Pete Hegseth. Waltz has been nominated to serve as ambassador to the United Nations, a position that often, but not always, carries with it cabinet rank. As for the Secretary of Defense, he is unlikely to leave his post anytime soon. Leavitt's assertion of a smear campaign against Hegseth reflects White House antipathy toward what it views as Left-leaning outlets such as the *New York Times, the Washington Post, Politico, Axios,* and *The Atlantic,* all of which have been the primary sources for reports regarding Hegseth's alleged missteps involving Signal, which they continue to reveal. There is no way that President Donald Trump, or his immediate staff, would tolerate the impression that it was these outlets that drove Hegseth from office. For that reason, and rather ironically, the more the liberal mainstream press finds fault with the Secretary, the more secure his position is likely to be with the White House.

President George W. Bush only accepted Rumsfeld's offer to resign immediately after the 2006 election when Democrats won the majority in the House of Representatives and were poised to take the Senate as well (which they ultimately did). Perhaps Hegseth will offer to resign if the Democrats repeat their sweep of two decades earlier; in any event, there is always high administration staff turnover after a mid-term election. But the 2026 election is still a long way off, and in the meantime, Hegseth will continue to serve at the pleasure of the President, who has until now shown no indication that he has decided to seek a new leader for the Department of Defense. ✳

DOV S. ZAKHEIM

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US Marines fire missile during Formidable Shield exercise in Norway, May 2025.
Photo credit: ZUMA Press Wire via Reuters Connect.

PROGRESS IN US–EUROPE BALLISTIC MISSILE DEFENSE

by James Foggo

The proliferation of drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles contributes to a dangerous threat environment today. These threats are not concentrated in any one area but range from the Russia-Ukraine conflict to the Middle East and the Asia Pacific. In the past two decades, expensive but effective integrated air and missile defense systems like Patriot, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), Aegis Ashore or at sea, Arrow, and Iron Dome, just to name a few, have been deployed around the world.

All of these systems are necessary, but none is sufficient to address the holistic nature of the threat. One need only look at the two recent and massive strikes by Iran on Israel (April and October 2024) to realize that it is only a matter of time before any modern nation's air defenses could be overwhelmed by a swarm of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. In fact, harkening back to the Reagan era concept of "Star Wars," President Trump recently declared that his administration would champion a $175 billion "Golden Dome" project to create an impervious shield of air defense for the United States before the end of his term – an extremely costly and lofty goal that some pundits have proclaimed to be unachievable. In the meantime, what are we to do?

We must move forward with deliberate measures to provide collective solutions to the problem of ballistic missile defense. One such effort is the continuation of Exercise Formidable Shield which just celebrated its tenth anniversary in May 2025. A collaboration of the US Sixth Fleet in Naples, the NATO Striking and Support Forces in Lisbon, the US Missile Defense Agency at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and the European Maritime Theater Missile Defense Forum, this exercise brings together allies and partners to test and employ their integrated

air and missile defense systems in a live-fire demonstration at sea.

The "big idea" for the inaugural Exercise Formidable Shield in 2015 was to launch one of the most sophisticated ballistic missile interceptors in the world—the Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) from a US Aegis-class destroyer against a ballistic missile target on the instrumented Hebrides range off the coast of Scotland. The SM-3 gained notoriety when the US shot down one of its own National Reconnaissance Office satellites during Operation Burnt Frost in 2008 before it posed a hazmat threat to the homeland upon re-entry in the earth's atmosphere.

While the United States Navy had conducted several SM-3 test shots in the Pacific, until 2015, it had never done so in the European theater. This exercise was a proof of concept for the US role in the ballistic missile defense of Europe, called the European Phased Adaptive Approach. Four US Aegis-class destroyers arrived as forward deployed forces in Rota, Spain, and the construction of Aegis Ashore facilities in Deveselu, Romania and later Redzikowo, Poland.

There is nothing simple about a ballistic missile intercept at Mach speed in the upper tier of space (greater than 100 miles into space) with a kinetic only (non-explosive) warhead. It's like an outbound bullet hitting an inbound bullet. To make it even more challenging, the scenario allowed the high value unit that launched the SM-3 interceptor to come under attack by opposing warships of the red cell. Friendly forces had to detect, track, and destroy incoming cruise missiles that threatened the high value unit and the mission.

A secondary goal of the exercise was to encourage allies and partners to join the Maritime Theater Missile Defense Forum and do more to support their own ballistic missile defense. In other words, the US Navy's goal was to put itself out of business through the European Phased Adaptive Approach, and turn the mission over to our European allies. After over a year's worth of planning and a month at sea, it was a smashing success.

The big question after the conclusion of the first exercise was, will we do it again? With the overwhelming support of and high demand from allies and partners and the continued threat of the proliferation of ballistic missiles, it was determined that Formidable Shield would happen on a biennial basis. With each subsequent demonstration, the scenarios became more complex, the number of missiles shot and targets destroyed increased and the number of participants grew over time. Formidable Shield 2025 was no exception.

Throughout May, the demonstration at sea of Formidable Shield 2025 was planned by the US 6th Fleet and executed by Combined Task Force 64 and the Naval Striking and Support Forces NATO. It was the largest ever at-sea live-fire demonstration in the European theater. There were 11 participating nations contributing a record 6,900 personnel this year, including Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, the UK, and the US. Australia also participated this year by providing a radar sensor for data collection and evaluation. NATO allies and partners successfully conducted 45 live-fire events.

Formidable Shield 2025 included several firsts. It's no longer an exclusive maritime forces event, with the participation of the US Air Force 147th Attack Wing and US Army Air and Missile Defense Command. Along those lines, the next iteration of the exercise should incorporate elements of US and allied Cyber and Space Commands in order to take full advantage of the tools required in a multi-domain joint force operation. Additionally, unlike the past whereby the serials and events were all confined to a single range, this year's exercise started on the firing range in Andøya, Norway before continuing to the Hebrides Range in Scotland. Finally, NATO's Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft forward deployed to Ørland in Norway to provide command and control capabilities for the exercise.

Not every scenario was perfect this year and thus we must continue to adapt and train.

Formidable Shield 25. Photo credit: James G. Foggo

However, one of the biggest takeaways was the commitment and resolve of the allies, a message not lost on our adversaries.

The proliferation of long, medium and short-range ballistic missiles has captured our collective attention. Whether it be from the Houthis, Iran, North Korea, Russia, or the highly developed and sophisticated rocketry from the People's Republic of China, we all face the same threat. We must not only continue to participate in live-fire demonstrations like Formidable Shield but also collaborate in research and development of new integrated air and missile defense systems that can be shared for the common good. Only in that way can we be stronger together. ✳

JAMES FOGGO

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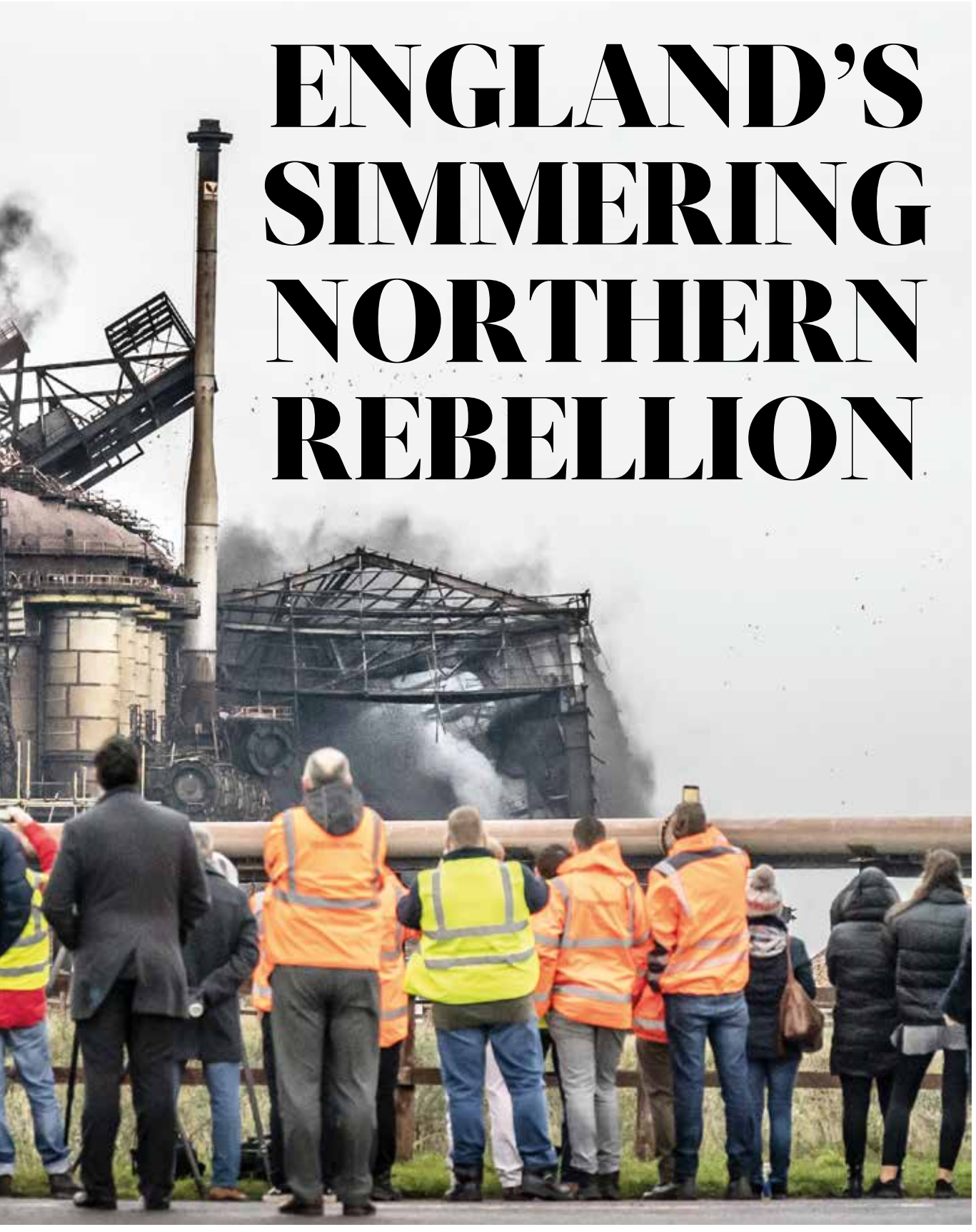
The demolition of Teesside Steelworks' Redcar Blast Furnace, November 2022.
Photo credit: PA Images via Reuters Connect

ENGLAND'S SIMMERING NORTHERN REBELLION



by Antonia Ferrier

In northeast England, an hour south of Newcastle next to the beautiful Yorkshire Dales, sits the post-industrial city of Middlesbrough. Its story is that of the country's industrial rise and fall.

250 years ago, Middlesbrough was a speck on the map. Coal mining and steel and iron production propelled its rapid ascent into a thriving hub of British industry 100 years later. Like many cities and towns of England's north, it transformed the country's economy from an agricultural to an industrial one. It employed millions and served as the furnace of the imperial engine.

It's also where my mother was born and raised. Her father, Alfred Shaw, left school at age 12 to work. A mechanic with the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, he went on to serve as a foreman in a dairy, and then to British Steel until retirement. My grandmother cut hair for extra money and raised my mother and aunt. She wanted to get out of council housing in Middlesbrough into a privately-built home in nearby Martin in Cleveland.

My grandparents were modest members of a community. Men would go to the factories together, their children to school together and, on Sundays, families to church together. Their stories are testament to a quiet northern resolve.

London, southern England and Britain's aristocrats were another world to them. What these northern working-class families sensed, and perhaps still do, is that England's south and upper class viewed them with snobbery and even disdain – if they thought of them at all.

ECONOMIC CONTRACTION

The situation for the average family in Middlesbrough since the end of World War II remains dire. The humming sounds of Teesside Steelworks where my grandfather and his father before him worked have long been silent. Real income adjusted to 2015 pound sterling is revealing: in 1949, the average family earned just over 150,000 pounds a year compared to nearly 21,000 pounds today. Drug use and drug mortality rates are among the highest in the United Kingdom. The city's unemployment rate is above the national average.

The 1970s were catastrophic for the United Kingdom. The Second World War didn't just bankrupt the country; the dissolution of its empire meant that Britain's access to those former colonial markets came to an end.

Meanwhile, militant trade unionism continued to make demands for higher wages that wholly uncompetitive industries, like British Steel, could not support. The country was roiled by significant unemployment, strikes and power outages – even the trash wasn't picked up. Britain needed radical change which came in the form of the now famous shop-keeper's daughter, Margaret Thatcher. She promised to clean house and fix the economy. She accomplished that goal. But while those market reforms were needed, they did little in the short term to provide relief in the north or endear the north's working class to the Conservative party.

DRAMATIC POLITICAL SHIFTS

This decades-long economic contraction has altered the quiet, northern resolve into a loud scream and rebellion that has turned into political power. Today parts of the north are seen

as the most important voting blocs in the United Kingdom. Once reliably Labour, these regions have changed as their economy, way of life and place in the future Britain have changed.

Since the Thatcher revolution and the ensuing "new Labour" years of Tony Blair (which saw no real attempt to change things in the north, despite Tony Blair having a seat in Sedgefield), the region has in recent years started to move away from the traditional Labour-Tory paradigm of British politics, opening the door to a new, different breed of political cause.

In the early 2010s, cracks in Labour's hold over the region began to spread. The UK Independence Party – or UKIP – under the leadership of Nigel Farage began to flourish, fueled by European skepticism and questions over mass migration. Former steelworkers and miners and their families, who felt long abandoned by London politicians after decades of false promises, made their anger clear in a sequence of regional elections and referendums – moving away from Labour and towards new upstart causes.

That simmering anger played into the UK's decision to leave the European Union. In the 2016 referendum, the north overwhelmingly voted to leave. The slogan – "Take Back Control" – resonated with millions from Newcastle to Bradford. In Middlesbrough, 65.5 percent voted to leave. Labour's demand – "Remain" – failed and the party's hold over the region, known as the Red Wall, broke.

In 2019, the north backed Boris Johnson and his pro-Brexit Conservative Party, gifting the newly radicalized Tories dozens of seats in Parliament. It was no surprise then that this was the first time a Tory won the Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.

After five years of failure to change, the Tories are – at least for now – not trusted with the north's vote. And the quiet revolution shows no sign of abating. In 2024, the newly named Reform Party – formerly UKIP – for the first time was elected to Parliament. Fueled by anger over the state of Great Britain, Reform surged to second place across the country, notably in the north. A Survation poll conducted ahead of the soon-to-be held May 2025 local elections found that 68 percent of "Red Wall" regions believe Britain is broken. Both the Labour and Conservative parties are under threat.

The Labour government's recent decision to take over the last remaining operational steel mill in Scunthrope shows the political potency of steel to England's identity. Its closure would have been an ignoble end to Britain's once proud industrial past. The government action is a direct appeal to working voters, a key constituency for Labour, Conservative and Reform parties alike.

Maybe this rebellion is in character for a region with a different identity dating back to the Viking settlement in the 9th century. Indeed, in the 16th century, the Pilgrimage of Grace rose up out of Yorkshire against Henry VIII and his split with the Catholic Church and the subsequent dissolution of the monasteries.

While Henry VIII could dispatch forces to crush the rebellion, in today's Britain, the powers of Westminster and Parliament will have to find another way. Either they will seek to address the real economic hardships that people are facing in Middlesbrough and across the region or they will be supplanted – and this time by a political party that is well outside of the mainstream.✳

ANTONIA FERRIER

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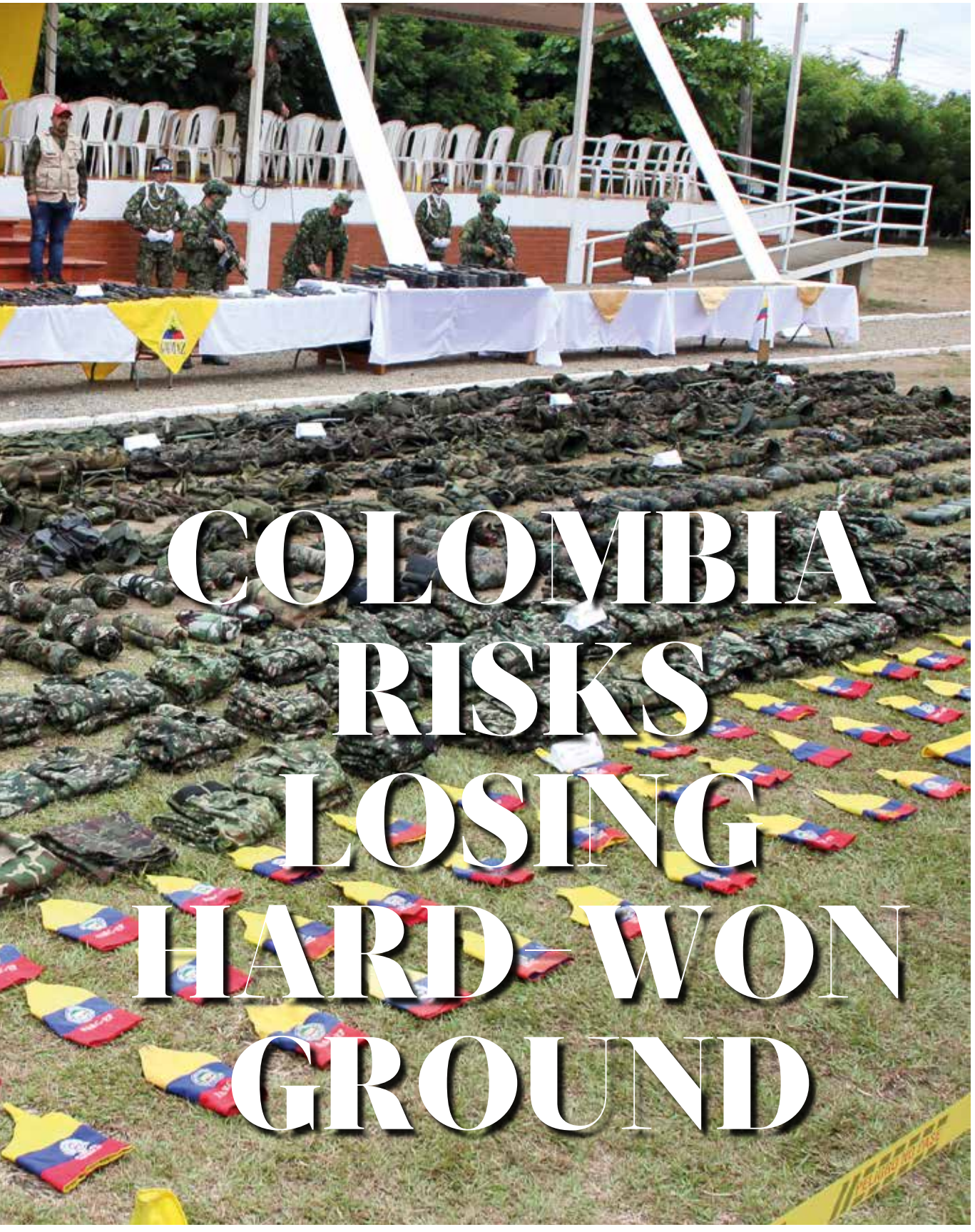
War material seized from a dissident group of the FARC, in Cucuta, Colombia, January 2025. Photo credit: Reuters/Carlos Eduardo Ramirez



COLOMBIA RISKS LOSING HARD-WON GROUND

by Richard M. Sanders

Colombia seems to be moving backwards. A recent series of attacks by one of the remaining guerrilla forces, the National Liberation Army (Spanish initials ELN) has left 85 persons dead. Other armed groups are expanding, leaving ever greater areas of rural Colombia in shambles and undermining the hopes of President Gustavo Petro, who took office in 2022 seeking "total peace" with all armed groups.

Colombia remains in better shape than it was in 25 years ago, when a descent to "failed state" seemed a real possibility. The economy has been performing decently if not spectacularly. But Colombia may have to do without the boost it once had from massive US assistance, as Latin American (indeed global) policy under President Trump moves away from long-term foreign assistance.

DECADES OF FIGHTING, THEN A PEACE ACCORD

The roots of bloodshed in Colombia go deep. In the late 1940s, fighting broke out in much of the countryside and continued well into the 1950s. This brutal internal conflict, *"la violencia,"* lacked ideological content and was ultimately resolved by a power-sharing agreement among political elites. But the disturbed rural environment proved to be a breeding ground for what became the FARC, a Marxist (indeed Stalinist) rebel group.

The FARC insurgency persisted at a relatively low level for decades, aided by Colombia's rugged geography which makes it hard to maintain state presence in much of the country. But the rise of the cocaine industry in the 1980s and 1990s dramatically shifted the balance of power. The FARC acted as a protector of narcotics traffickers, and indeed directly entered the business, gaining wealth and power to the point of challenging the Colombian state. Negotiations undertaken by successive presidents went nowhere.

A major American assistance package termed "Plan Colombia," created in 1999, together with a commitment not seen before by Colombian leaders, put the FARC under sufficient pressure that it entered into peace talks.

The agreement of 2016 included provisions for disarmament and "transitional justice" under which guerrilla fighters who had committed human rights abuses would give themselves up in exchange for reduced sentences. Land reform and rural development programs were promised. Seats were reserved in Congress for the FARC which was to convert itself into a political party.

On a separate track, an agreement was reached with the principal rightwing paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Spanish initials AUC), which had evolved from a protective police force created by rural landlords into a powerful rural army closely tied to the drug cartels. It, however, was never granted the same political status as the FARC, and was offered less generous terms. Nonetheless, pressed by Colombia's US-backed military and by the threat of extradition, it too agreed to disarm.

As the peace agreements took hold, violence dramatically decreased. But the seeds of further conflict were sown. Colombia remained a major producer of cocaine, and the money which this generated was available to those, both leftist guerrillas and former paramilitary fighters, who did not want to come in from the cold. Also, implementation of many elements of the peace accord progressed slowly.

A RANGE OF GROUPS STAY IN THE FIELD

The far-left National Liberation Army, always smaller than the FARC, preserves more revolutionary élan and demands more social and political restructuring than Colombia's democratically elected leaders have ever been prepared to concede. In January and February 2025, it attacked police stations in the town of Cúcuta close to the Venezuelan border, which resulted in 85 deaths and the displacement of 80,000 persons, leading President Petro to end peace talks and order a military offensive.

The National Liberation Army engages in narcotics smuggling and benefits from close ties with the Maduro regime in Venezuela. And it is more decentralized than the FARC, with individual regional fronts acting independently. It is unclear how much control its negotiators who have repeatedly met in Havana with Colombian officials really have.

Other armed actors have been equally frustrating for Petro. Talks with FARC dissidents, elements which either never accepted the 2016 peace agreement or broke with it afterwards, have followed the same pattern of temporary ceasefires which have failed to hold, aggravated by divisions within these groups. These dissidents and the National Liberation Army have fought each other over control of territory in rural areas throughout the country.

Colombia has also had to face the return of drug-linked paramilitary organizations, which are successors to the former AUC, but which have also recruited former leftist guerrillas. They are a powerful force in northwestern Colombia close to the Panamanian border through which northbound narcotics flow. Known as the "Gulf Clan," they have sought to give themselves a political veneer, calling themselves the "Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia," after Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a populist figure from the 1940s.

A PRESIDENT UNDER PRESSURE

In the face of resurgent violence, President Petro's governance has become ever more erratic. He himself is a former guerrilla, having belonged to the "April 19 Movement" (Spanish initials M-19), a leftist-populist urban terrorist group active in the 1970s and 1980s. He later entered electoral politics, becoming mayor of Bogotá and running repeatedly for the presidency. His 2022 victory made him the first unabashed leftist to hold that office in Colombia.

He succeeded Iván Duque, a conservative who had gained office in large measure because of public skepticism regarding the implementation of the 2016 peace deal. (He saw the FARC dissidents as a reconstituted armed wing of the now-legal former guerrilla organization, rather than a breakaway faction.) By the end of his term Duque had lost popularity, with the economy sputtering in the wake of the COVID crisis and the security environment deteriorating.

Petro, running on a campaign of economic reform and the pursuit of total peace, initially included figures from a range of political parties

President Gustavo Petro. Photo credit: Reuters/Luisa Gonzalez

in his cabinet. Despite a fragmented Congress, he was able to gain passage of a revenue-enhancing tax reform which he saw as crucial to financing rural development in support of his peace efforts.

But Petro grew impatient with constant negotiation with Congress over his reform proposals. His confrontational style and grand plans for change have shaken business confidence. Economic jitters have been aggravated by his environmentalist agenda that would end further exploration for hydrocarbons (at a time when Brazil, Argentina and Guyana are ramping up production). He has even gone so far in his anti-oil crusade as to order state oil corporation Ecopetrol to withdraw from a joint venture in Texas with US firm Occidental.

NEXT STEPS FOR COLOMBIA

Still, Colombia's budgetary situation remains relatively sound, inflation is under control, and most observers predict steady if unspectacular growth for 2025-2026. This is in keeping with the country's historical pattern, in which decent economic performance helps maintain political stability despite rural violence.

With his dream of total peace frustrated, Petro seems ready to take a harder line against the violent groups. He named a military officer as defense minister. But renewed aggressive military action will lead to civilian casualties and to population displacement at a time when Colombia is coping with huge refugee flows from Venezuela. And, given that insurgents have access to narcotics funding and, in the case of the far-left National Liberation Army, a safe haven in Venezuela, a renewed military effort will be at best a costly long-term proposition.

Some observers urge that the armed forces confine themselves to a "violence reduction" strategy in which they take only targeted action, while efforts at regional truces continue. This, of course, is not so different from what the Petro administration has tried during much of its time in office. It may lead to fewer civilian casualties

but leave ever larger areas in the hands of the illegal armed groups.

Since much of the violence and displacement is the result of fighting among these groups, a "violence reduction" approach by the government is unlikely to be effective. In the absence of genuine will on the part of these groups to negotiate, Petro or his successor will be forced to choose between difficult alternatives.

AND FOR THE UNITED STATES

US assistance has continued at a lower level than under Plan Colombia but remains important. Would such support be forthcoming for a renewed Colombian military effort against armed groups? The arguments in favor remain the same. Colombia is a country of 50 million people, close to the United States. A worsening situation there will lead to increased narcotics and immigration flows.

Trump and Petro have already had one conflict over Colombia's initial refusal to accept deportees. Although this was ultimately resolved, Petro engaged in harsh criticism of Trump, not likely to help bilateral relations. And Petro has shown little enthusiasm for counternarcotics efforts, calling for legalization of cocaine (although he has kept up extraditions of major traffickers, always a US priority).

Trump has taken a tough line on narcotics, but his attention seems focused on fentanyl coming from Mexico, where the issue has been framed in terms of both hardening the border and possibly making unilateral strikes against narcotics laboratories. The traditional US approach in Colombia has focused on strengthening the police and military, but it does not seem to fit current administration policy, even as the future of the capacity-building programs maintained by the State Department's International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau remains unclear.

Equally uncertain is the future of bilateral commercial relations. The US-Colombia free trade agreement, which entered into effect in 2012, was another pillar of the effort to stabilize the country but its fate is hard to predict. With the US government now wary of international engagement, be it on security or economics, Colombia, once a close partner, may find that it faces a growing internal crisis on its own. ✳

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