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Jared Kushner: The Quiet Architect of Courage

by Ahmed Charai

There are moments in history when quiet determination achieves more than thunderous rhetoric. Jared Kushner belongs to that rare category of individuals whose influence stems not from spectacle, but from substance, not from noise, but from an unyielding calm that conceals immense strategic power.

Kushner's ambition is of a particular kind—disciplined, understated, and oriented toward results rather than applause. He carries himself with quiet confidence, rarely loud but always thoughtful. He prefers to act behind the scenes, yet the imprint of his judgment is visible in the most consequential decisions of recent years.

In an era where many seek the spotlight, he has chosen to illuminate others. His demeanor—measured, analytical, and almost meditative—reflects a rare understanding: true influence is not shouted, it is earned through clarity, composure, and endurance.

This self-presentation is not accidental. It reflects an inner philosophy built on humility

and long-term vision. Kushner does not chase headlines; he builds legacies.

To understand Jared Kushner, one must look beyond his political or business achievements and into the moral architecture that shaped him.

His family's story is a chronicle of survival and rebuilding. His grandparents survived the Holocaust, carrying with them the indelible lesson that adversity is never the end, it is the beginning of renewal. His father, too, faced difficult challenges and rebuilt his life with strength and dignity. From those experiences, Jared inherited a conviction that setbacks are temporary, that character, not circumstance, defines destiny.

Raised in a business-driven household with high expectations, he learned early the virtues of discipline, calculation, and adaptability. His academic excellence, Harvard and NYU, gave him theoretical mastery, but his true education came in the markets, the media, and the corridors of power, where pressure reveals authenticity. Each crisis he has faced, personal, financial, or political, became a crucible that forged resilience. Where others saw walls, he saw doorways. Where others lost faith, he found purpose.

THE STRATEGIC MIND BEHIND PEACE

Kushner's intelligence is not merely intellectual; it is strategic, integrative, and deeply human. He sees connections where others see contradictions.

That was evident when he quietly, patiently, and courageously steered the historic Abraham Accords – an act of diplomacy that defied decades of cynicism and division. He crossed barriers once thought immovable, speaking to leaders in the language of respect rather than ideology. Each clause, each handshake, each gesture was crafted through persistence and empathy.

His approach to negotiation was simple yet profound: listen deeply, act firmly, and honor the dignity of all parties. It was not the diplomacy of slogans, it was the diplomacy of endurance, built point by point, detail by detail, until a new chapter of coexistence emerged.

COURAGE IN THE FACE OF CRISIS

In moments of conflict, Kushner displayed a rare blend of firmness and humanity. We remember his words in Tel Aviv, on the eve of the hostages' release, a moment that will remain etched in memory.

Standing before thousands, his eyes wet with emotion, he spoke not as a politician, but as a man of conscience, extending reassurance to the grieving and the hopeful alike. It was an address that combined empathy with resolve, a reflection of a man who knows that leadership without compassion is hollow.

In his private meetings with adversaries, he was unwavering: Disarm and live, or embrace your end. This was not a threat, but a moral boundary, a declaration that the era of radical violence must close.

He convinced all stakeholders through clarity of purpose and moral conviction, culminating in the historic summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, where signatures transformed vision into reality.

FROM VISION TO CONSTRUCTION: THE BUILDER OF PEACE

We will remember the historic visit of President Donald Trump to Israel and later to Sharm el-Sheikh, where a new page of peace was

turned. Behind the grandeur of the moment, Jared Kushner worked with humility and precision, preparing every detail of that encounter.

He built bridges of trust, drafted the frameworks, and created an atmosphere in which peace could breathe.

Yes, there were others who contributed – men of conviction and experience such as Steve Witkoff, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio – but the touch of Jared was singular and decisive. His patience, his ability to inspire confidence, and his moral clarity transformed diplomacy into something deeply human and enduring.

When President Trump was the peacemaker, Jared Kushner was the peace builder. One envisioned, the other constructed. One opened the door, the other built the bridge.

Together, they defied decades of fatalism and reminded the world that leadership, when grounded in conviction and courage, can still change the course of history.

Kushner's journey reveals that true power lies in composure, not aggression; in vision, not vanity. He represents a model of leadership rooted in intellect, faith, and quiet moral confidence. His resilience is not a product of privilege; it is an inheritance of struggle, discipline, and belief in renewal.

In an age of division and noise, Jared Kushner reminds us that greatness does not always arrive with fanfare. Sometimes it comes softly, measured in patience, in purpose, in the ability to listen when others shout. *

AHMED CHARAI

Publisher

Ahmed Charai is the publisher of the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune and the CEO of a Morocco-based media conglomerate. He is on the board of directors of the Atlantic Council, the International Crisis Group, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Foreign Policy Research Institute, the Center for the National Interest, and the International Advisory Council of United States Institute of Peace.

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USA: 2700 Woodley Road NW
Washington DC 20008
ISRAEL: 14 Aminadav Street
Jerusalem 9354914
editor@jstribune.com

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WHERE WE ARE HEADED WITH THE TRUMP PEACE PLAN





by Robert Silverman

It was a holiday like no other in recent memory. On the eve of Simhat Torah 2025, exactly two years to the day on the Jewish calendar after the Hamas attack of 2023, the 20 remaining live hostages were released to ambulances. Watching from a respectful distance, Israeli crowds on the Gaza border cheered. Later that day, President Trump arrived in Israel and spoke to the nation from the Knesset podium. Israel, Hamas and the main regional states had all agreed to his 20-point Gaza Peace Plan.

That night, in my neighborhood synagogue in Jerusalem and, I suspect, throughout the country, Israelis both secular and religious alike sang and danced with the Torah, celebrating the annual conclusion of its public reading and this once in a lifetime joyous occasion. Now, a week later, as the national mood of elation begins to fade, let's pause to recall that we live in historic days when miracles of redemption are real, witnessed collectively by whole nations.

How did Trump and team pull off this Gaza Peace Plan, and where is it headed from here?

THE DEAL

The full story of the negotiations, with all the juicy details, will have to await the future memoirs of Trump himself, since he personally led much of the talks with Prime Minister Netanyahu and then with regional leaders. But three points seem clear.

First, the 20-point plan met all of Israel's war objectives, as Prime Minister Netanyahu has publicly declared.

Israel would get back all of the hostages, alive and dead, within 72 hours of its agreement to the deal, while withdrawing to a position inside Gaza that retains Israeli control of all the border crossing points into Gaza, including Rafah on the southern border with Egypt. In exchange, Israel would release 250 Palestinian prisoners convicted of terrorist crimes in Israel and another 1,700 Gazans detained since the start of the war on October 7, 2023.

Gaza would undergo a "process of demilitarization under the supervision of independent monitors" with Hamas and other militant groups surrendering their weapons.

Hamas would also surrender governance to a "temporary transitional" committee composed of "qualified Palestinians and international experts" with oversight from a Board of Peace

chaired by President Trump (including other heads of state) and supported by a temporary International Stabilization Force that would deploy to Gaza and begin training a Palestinian police force.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would begin to withdraw from its positions inside Gaza and hand over control of territory to the International Stabilization Force as it establishes stability and based on milestones linked to Hamas demilitarization, leaving the IDF in a security perimeter inside Gaza “until Gaza is properly secure from any resurgent terror threat.”

Finally, neither the 20-point plan nor its global endorsement in the Sharm al-Sheikh declaration (signed by both Qatar and Turkey) calls for a Palestinian state. Instead there is conditional language in the plan that “conditions may finally be in place for a credible pathway to Palestinian statehood” once Gaza is reconstructed and after the Palestinian Authority reform “is faithfully carried out.”

Netanyahu could not have measurably improved on these terms had he instead rejected them and continued the IDF operation of retaking all of Gaza City. That alternative would have carried its own risks, including further Israeli casualties and continuing loss of international goodwill, and would have saddled Israel with sole responsibility for more than two million Gazan civilians.

So second, the question is not why Netanyahu agreed to the Trump plan but rather why Hamas agreed to it, especially agreeing to give up the hostages, its sole leverage against Israel? Herein lies the major innovation of Trump and team. They have the good sense, perhaps learned from years of sharp-edged business dealings, of understanding the other side’s weaknesses.

Palestinian leaders, both the PLO and Hamas, have always required intensive outside support simply to survive. This comes traditionally from Egypt, the Gulf and more recently Turkey (and previously from the Soviet Union in the case of the PLO). What Trump did – which no other US

negotiator had even tried to do – was secure the prior agreement of Palestinians’ outside patrons (in Hamas’s case, Qatar and Turkey).

The main negotiation focus, with Netanyahu on board, was Qatar, which got a pre-arranged apology from Netanyahu (for his airstrike on Hamas headquarters in Doha that killed a Qatari security guard) and a US security guarantee in the form of an executive order. Turkey seems to have gotten a soft promise to be approved to purchase the F-35 stealth fighter plus benefits to be named later. With its patrons already in agreement with the Trump deal, Hamas had nowhere to hide.

One might ask: why didn’t the Biden team try to do this? For that matter, why didn’t President Clinton and team similarly try to gain the support first of the PLO’s outside support before convening the Palestinians and Israelis at Camp David in the year 2000, leading to the Clinton parameters for peace (which an Israeli government accepted but Arafat’s PLO rejected)?

There are several possible explanations, including the Washington peace processors’ predilection to focus pressure for concessions on Israel, which has a certain logic given that Israel has the closer relationship with the US and the most to give.

However, I think the real answer is that Trump’s targeted demonstration of force in the region, in particular the June 22 B-2 bombing of Iran’s nuclear facilities, put the US in a commanding position. The only equivalent time of regional influence I can recall was following the First Gulf War in February 1991 when George H.W. Bush led a coalition to liberate Kuwait. Other presidents lacked that level of influence, either with the traditional patrons of the Palestinians or with Israel. In short, a combination of willingness to use targeted force at the right time and the ability to offer incentives got all the parties on board an impressive plan that forced a ceasefire and laid the groundwork for reconstruction of Gaza.

There is a third take-away: Hamas is a terrorist group and doesn’t honor deals. Once the IDF withdrew from Gaza City, Hamas

released the 20 live hostages but has been dribbling out the dead bodies of hostages by twos and threes (many of them were killed on October 7, 2023 and their bodies taken into Gaza for future trading leverage).

Hamas states it will not disarm or agree to a demilitarization process. Instead it now calls the Trump plan a “hudna” or truce (a likely reference to the Hudeibiyah truce that the Prophet Muhammad entered into with his tribal rivals, a truce that can be broken at any time). Indeed Hamas on October 19 shot an anti-tank missile at the repositioned IDF forces, killing two Israeli soldiers and triggering an Israeli retaliation.

“Israel Violates Ceasefire” ran a Guardian headline on October 19, without mentioning the prior Hamas missile strike or that Hamas has declared it won’t allow a demilitarization process, as required by the plan it agreed to. One weapon remaining in Hamas arsenal is the support of some international news media complemented by the voluminous social media postings of Hamas supporters, with a flood of anti-Israel messages pushed out immediately after the Trump Peace Plan was announced.

THE BEGINNING OF POSTWAR GAZA RECONSTRUCTION

The American political elite has been forced to recognize the achievement of the Trump peace plan; the most graceful recognition came from former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton who had personally invested considerable political capital in the Israeli-Palestinian project and thus appreciates the Trump achievement.

But with Hamas doubling down on its control over roughly half of Gaza, including through street executions of potential rivals, the pundits are proclaiming that the plan is fragile and likely to fail. That prediction is flawed for two main reasons.

First, Israel remains in control of all border crossings into Gaza. The amount and kinds of weapons that Bedouin smugglers in Sinai can

fly into Gaza via drone is limited. Furthermore, while Israel is allowing in humanitarian supplies, it can prevent cement and other reconstruction materials into the Hamas-controlled parts of Gaza.

Second, it appears that the transitional governance and reconstruction parts of the Trump plan will soon begin in the 53 percent of Gaza under Israeli control, which once in place will allow for gradual IDF withdrawal. One initial sign of progress is the deployment of a “civil-military operations center” from the regional US military command in the Middle East, Central Command. These 200 US soldiers are based just outside of Gaza in Israel, starting the necessary coordination work leading eventually to staged IDF withdrawal in favor of the International Stabilization Force (ISF).

Which countries will send troops to the ISF? To date, there are only rumors, but it appears that the US is working with a combination of regional countries (Egypt in particular) and others (including Indonesia, Azerbaijan and Italy, the last having well trained and equipped military police forces, the Carabinieri).

In short, I would not discount the prospects of success in postwar Gaza of the team that delivered the Trump Peace Plan.

And I would not discount the future prospects for Gaza’s reconstruction. These are resilient people sitting on a traditional international trade crossroads, which for millennia was the main port in the southern Levant. If the Trump team succeeds, those days could return sooner than people think. *

ROBERT SILVERMAN

A former US diplomat and president of the American Foreign Service Association, Robert Silverman is a lecturer at Shalem College, senior fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, and president of the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance.

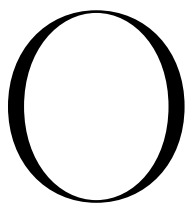


Photo credit: Allison Bailey via Reuters Connect

A NETANYAHU VISIT LIKE NO OTHER



by Eran Lerman



n July 7, Prime Minister Netanyahu will have his third Oval Office meeting with President Trump in six months. But this will be a visit unlike any before it.

Netanyahu arrives in Washington as the man who won the Twelve Day War with Iran. He will also be there as President Trump's (occasionally difficult) wartime partner, following a swift and effective American intervention in the war – that brought about none of the terrible consequences so graphically predicted by the aides to Trump's predecessors and echoed by the pundits. A sense of celebration is bound to be there.

And yet this won't be a mere victory lap. In the run-up to the visit, Netanyahu's language has changed: from a forceful focus on existential threats from Iran he has now turned to the vocabulary of regional opportunities which need to be fully explored. Trump and Netanyahu will likely focus on five of these.

First comes the question of what needs to be done to ensure that the regime in Iran does not try to revive its nuclear project. Can it be encouraged (with the help of voices such as Putin's) to come to the negotiating table from a position of obvious weakness? This would be difficult for any leader but especially so for an

obstinate, ideologically and eschatologically driven old man like Khomeini. Alternatively, the US and Israel should combine close intelligence surveillance and penetration with operational readiness and international coordination aimed at intensifying "maximum pressure," until Tehran turns around.

Second, and very much at the focus of Israeli attentions (with the public powerfully locked on to the drama of the remaining hostages) is the possible ceasefire in Gaza. The release of 10 or fewer living hostages, in return for some 60 days of ceasefire to be used for further negotiations, may seem sub-optimal but there are reasons why neither Hamas nor the current Israeli government can commit to much more than that now. Still, President Trump is clearly eager for the war to end, not least because of its toll on Israeli – and American – standing and the way it is viewed by his friends in the Gulf. Israel has accepted such a deal, as long as the agreed mechanism provides for an end to Hamas rule, its disarmament, the departure of its surviving Gaza leaders to exile, and an alternative governance for a long transitional period.

Third, and closely related, is the question of "the regional dimension" (and especially normalization with Saudi Arabia) attending any such deal. A new grouping of Israeli military, intelligence and diplomatic ex-practitioners (disclosure – of which I am one) is advocating for this, and Netanyahu himself speaks about it.

But it is a safe bet that no White House signing ceremony is in the offing. A much more likely scenario would involve – if the language from Israel on the Palestinian future is sufficiently vague and does not preclude the option of (limited) statehood – a return to the pre-7 October 2023 pattern of economic ventures, open visits at the ministerial level, and a growing degree of discussion and mutual cooperation on regional issues such as Lebanon and Syria.

Fourth is the possibility of relations with Syria, paradoxically given the ideological background of Ahmed al-Shara'a, but realistic in light of reconstruction needs of this devastated country (all the more destitute once the Asad clan's main source of income, the massive production and export of Captagon, has been cut off). Both Israel and Saudi Arabia want to see Syria focused on its domestic needs – and as much as possible, free from the powerful grip of Turkey. It remains to be seen whether the Trump Administration, with its soft spot for Erdoğan, will do its part.

Fifth, with different dynamics than those in Syria (where Iran's agents have been hunted and destroyed), the future of Lebanon is also at stake. There have been highly encouraging signs that the present government is willing to put pressure on Hizbullah, whose strength has been greatly degraded. Even the UN peacekeeping mission in the south, UNIFIL, is more willing to do what it was designed to do. Still, Israel feels obliged to strike at Hizbullah targets almost daily (notably, with no response so far) and to maintain five strongpoints across the border in Lebanon necessary for the protection of Israeli communities in the north. With Saudi, Emirati, American and French support, the new government in Lebanon may prove strong enough to prevent Hizbullah's reemergence. But a long and complex "road map" is needed, and this is the time to start designing it.

Added to this regional agenda are three bilateral US-Israel issues. On trade, Israel still has to negotiate its tariffs with the US. Israel enjoys at present a trade surplus with the US

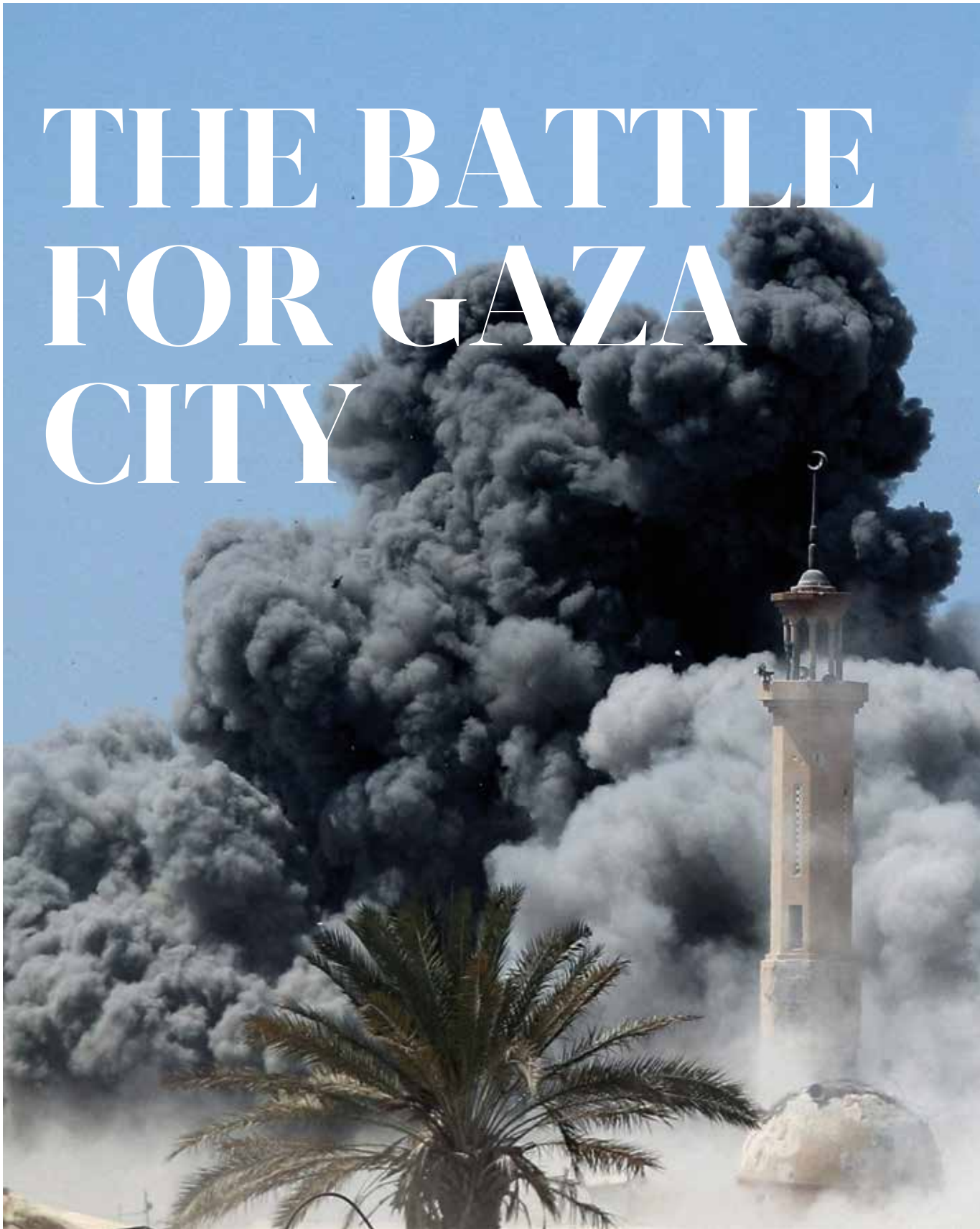
(Ben Gurion would have fainted from joy). On military ties, with the ten-year memorandum of understanding on aid set to expire next year, Israel and the US should begin planning the transition from aid to partnership over the next ten years. Finally, in other meetings in Washington and perhaps also with Trump, the positions and concerns of American Jews will come up; Netanyahu is bound to have some listening to do.

A visit like no other, at a time like no other. Much of Netanyahu's legacy – and his future campaign platform (Knesset elections are scheduled for October 2026 but may be moved up) – may hinge upon his management of this intense agenda. *

ERAN LERMAN

Col. (ret.) Dr. Eran Lerman is a former senior intelligence officer. He served as Israel's deputy national security adviser (2009–2015), and prior to that as director, AJC Israel and ME office (2001–2009). He is currently the vice president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security and a lecturer at Shalem College.

THE BATTLE FOR GAZA CITY



Israeli air strike in Gaza City, September 5, 2025. Photo credit: Reuters/Mahmoud Issa





by Seth J. Frantzman

Gaza City, one of the last two Hamas strongholds, is the target of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in an ongoing operation. It is a large metropolitan area stretching from Shati, the historic refugee camp on the beach, through the wealthy neighborhood of Rimal, around to Zeitoun and the old quarter of historic Gaza. In addition, the neighborhoods of Shuja'iyya and Jabalia radiate out to the east and Sheikh Radwan to the north.

This large urban area is now mostly empty of its civilian population. Around 700,000 people have fled to the south part of the Gaza Strip since Israel approved the operation in August. In mid-September, the IDF launched a wave of airstrikes targeting high-rise buildings in Gaza City. While Defense Minister Yisrael Katz boasted that the battle would change the skyline of the city, the IDF said more accurately that the objective was to neutralize sites which Hamas had used for observation and for terrorist purposes.

When the IDF initially invaded Gaza, in response to the terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023, it assessed that Hamas had 24 battalions, of which around half were in northern Gaza. The IDF also assessed that by late November 2023 the Hamas battalions in northern Gaza were largely broken and dismantled. By January 2024, the IDF believed Hamas had been destroyed in northern Gaza. This was an illusion bred of underestimating Hamas and inflating success, a problem that has plagued IDF assessments of Hamas for two decades.

Now, in September 2025, 23 months later, the IDF has to re-conquer Gaza City, with three divisions. In addition to the 36th and 162nd

Divisions, which include armored units and the Golani infantry brigade, the IDF has the 98th Division that includes commandos and paratroops. The 98th has also been provided with armor from the 7th Armored Brigade during the course of the war so its elite infantry units can fight with tanks. This gave the 98th the muscle to take Khan Younis in the first months of 2024 and also enabled it to fight in several neighborhoods in northern Gaza. The IDF called up around 60,000 reservists for the battle.

The ground attack has been slow, in order to enable civilians in and around Gaza City to evacuate. Now with tall buildings destroyed, the IDF is inching forward street-by-street, neighborhood-by-neighborhood. This is the way the IDF fights today, discarding its Momentum Plan of 2020. That plan called for Israel to return to “short wars, decisive victory, and removal of the main military threat to Israel.” But this 23-month war has not been either short or decisive.

The IDF has had to retake a bunch of ground in northern Gaza to get to the gates of Gaza City, completed in Operation “Gideon’s Chariots” that began in May 2025. But Israeli divisions have repeatedly conquered areas and then mostly given them back.

Gaza City is a key example. It was surrounded and parts of its outlying neighborhoods were captured in October and November 2023. In October and November 2024, the IDF once again went into northern Gaza and largely destroyed Beit Lahiya and Jabaliya. However, Hamas continued to recruit. For instance, Beit Hanoun, a town in northern Gaza, had to be completely destroyed during Gideon’s Chariots in summer 2025. The IDF has retaken Zeitoun for the sixth time.

The weapons the IDF is finding are mostly old or in bad condition, according to some recent photos. It doesn’t appear Hamas has much of its



armory left. Nevertheless, the terrorist group continues to inflict casualties. On September 25, the IDF named Staff Sgt. Chalachew Shimon Demalash, an Ethiopian Jew from Beersheva, as the latest casualty.

The other remaining Hamas stronghold is the Central Camps. This is the name for the city of Deir al-Balah and three adjacent refugee camps that have evolved into built-up urban areas over the years. This area has largely been spared heavy fighting and now some two million Gazans reside in either the Central Camps or Mawasi, with the latter designated initially as a safe zone in Gaza, though Hamas fighters have established there and attracted IDF attention. Hamas may continue to rebuild some capabilities by controlling the civilians in these two areas.

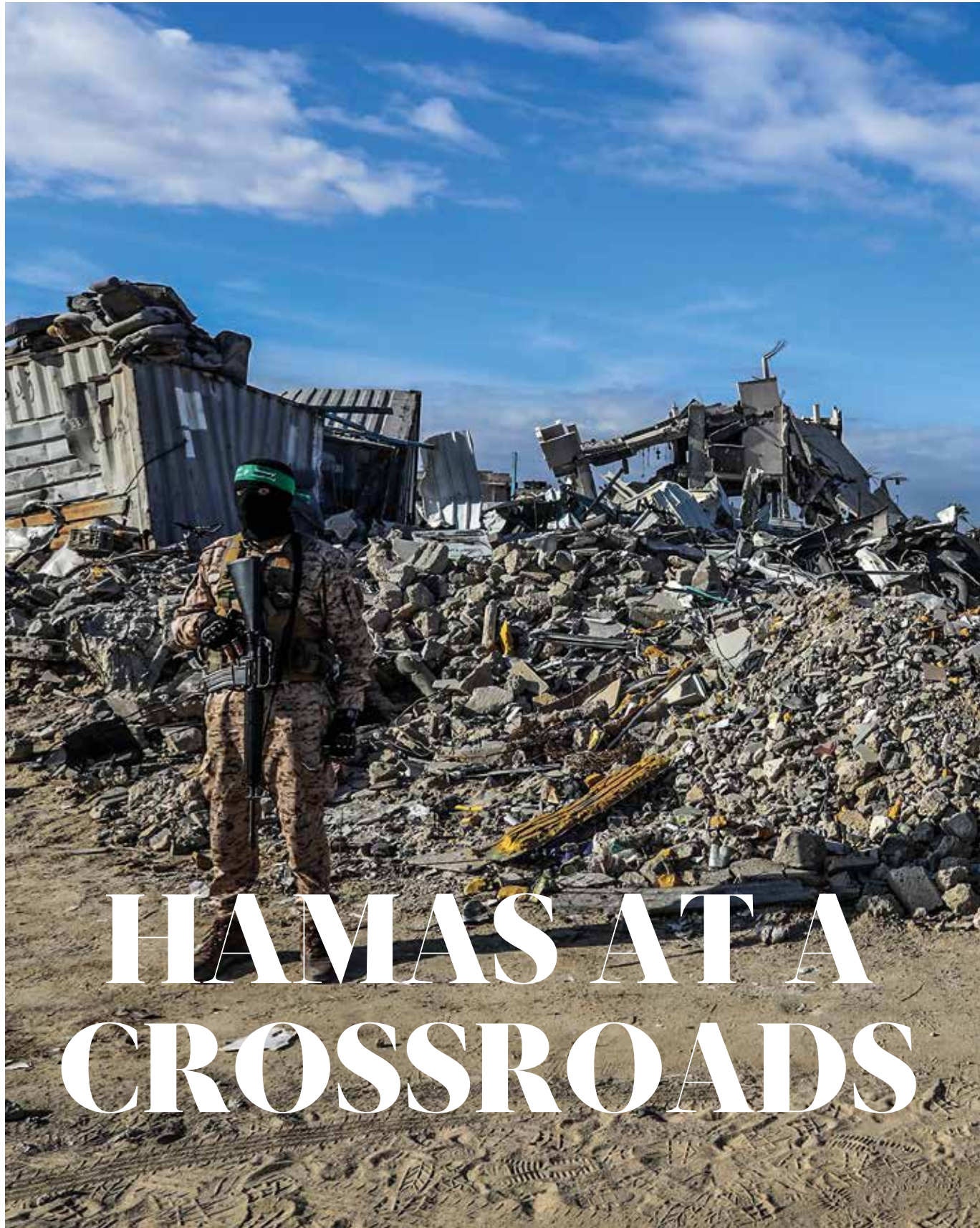
Hamas is weakened but still seeks to control the 2.1 million people in Gaza. Meanwhile, IDF reservists, the bulk of the forces, have done an unprecedented amount of duty; reports over the last six months portray units as fatigued

with fewer people showing up for reserve unit call-ups. Still, the great majority of reservists continue to serve when needed.

With Hamas refusing to surrender, an open question is whether its remaining units can simply melt away from Gaza City and re-emerge in the Central Camps, to fight another day. If so, then the Gaza City operation now underway will not lead to PM Netanyahu's goal of total victory over Hamas. *

SETH J. FRANTZMAN

Seth J. Frantzman is an Adjunct Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and the senior Middle East correspondent for The Jerusalem Post. He is the author of *The October 7 War: Israel's Battle for Security in Gaza* (2024).



HAMAS AT CROSSROADS



Photo credit: Abed Rahim Khatib/dpa via Reuters Connect



by Ehud Yaari

Today's Hamas is a very different organization from the one we knew from its formal establishment in December 1987 through its surprise attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Yet many politicians, members of the intelligence community and media commentators still insist on viewing the Palestinian "Islamic Resistance Movement" [the translation of the Arabic acronym "Hamas"] through the same lens they have been using for decades.

Hamas is no longer a cohesive organization with a clear chain of command and a formidable armed wing. It lacks an agreed-upon policy for the near future and encounters major difficulties in trying to chart a new course. Rival groups around Khaled Mash'al and Khalil al-Hayeh squabble fiercely among themselves, seeking to fill the vacuum created by the demise of well-entrenched leaders. The organization is at a crossroads.

The repeated bombastic slogans, the old battle cries and threats are, of course, still in daily use but they are gradually becoming less frequent and slowly being replaced by efforts to display an image of pragmatism and realism.

The internal debates focus on conclusions to be derived from the aftermath of October 7,

the disintegration of the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance and the catastrophe that befell the population of the Gaza Strip. There are heated arguments – which have yet to spill over into the public – about their potential to play a future role in the Palestinian arena and restoration of relations with the Sunni Arab states.

ASSESSING THE OCTOBER 7 ATTACK

At the core of the internal power struggle lies a simple issue: Was the "al-Aqsa Flood" attack of October 7 a well-calculated bet or a reckless gamble? And if it was the wrong move, then how to minimize losses?

The decision to mount the offensive was taken by the chief military commander Muhammad Deif and the man he got elected as chairman of the Gaza Political Bureau, Yahya Sinwar. This decision was shared with only a handful of trusted lieutenants in their tight inner circle. The five territorial brigades of Hamas with their 24 battalions preparing to storm into Israel were informed of zero hour only three to four hours ahead of time. Hamas leaders abroad, including the nominal head of the movement, Ismail Haniyeh, were aware of the consultations held since late 2021 with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Quds Force and Hizbullah, aimed at drafting an outline for a future joint attack. But they too were not notified of the date and scope of attack chosen by Deif and Sinwar.

Neither Deif nor Sinwar tried to obtain a green light from Tehran or Beirut. Indeed, the Iranians and Hassan Nasrallah strongly resented being taken by surprise, slamming phones (and cursing) when contacted by Hamas envoys once the offensive started. The first reactions of both Hamas leaders in Qatar and Lebanon and top Iranian and Hizbullah officials can be summed up as a mixture of furor and disbelief. Hence, it took 24 hours for Nasrallah to order opening a limited “supporting front” from Lebanon. Iran simply sat out.

From Hamas’ perspective in hindsight, the sudden attack managed to cause horror and shock in Israel, exacting a huge loss of lives and the abduction of 255 hostages.

But the brutal assault failed to achieve its other objectives. The Iranians and their proxies didn’t join in with all their capabilities, allowing the IDF to concentrate on defeating Hamas. Hamas fighters failed to reach the West Bank, only 40 kilometers away, as instructed. The West Bank population didn’t rise up in arms against Israel and the Palestinian Authority. The Hamas Nukhba (“elite”) units failed to capture several IDF bases, as planned, including an airbase and an important intelligence facility, and proved incapable of barricading themselves for weeks inside Israel, as ordered. In short, despite initial success, the war did not unfold as planned.

EFFECT ON CEASEFIRE AND HOSTAGE NEGOTIATIONS

These ongoing controversies among Hamas leaders, primarily those residing in Qatar, affect their decision-making in the current negotiations over a ceasefire and release of the remaining Israeli hostages (in exchange for Palestinian prisoners convicted of acts of terrorism). The split between “pragmatists,” who are prepared to accept a phased process of IDF withdrawal, and “radicals,” who insist on the IDF’s complete withdrawal, has produced frequent obstacles in the bargaining and caused shifts in Hamas positions and tactics.

A few months before he gave the order to attack Israel, Sinwar sent out of Gaza his friend, Ghazi Hamad, whom he tasked with “watching over” the outside leadership and serving as his point man for communications with all other parties. Khalil al-Hayeh, who was Sinwar’s deputy in the Gaza Political Bureau, had already left Gaza via Egypt and subsequently became Hamas’ chief negotiator in the indirect talks with Israel.

RIFTS IN HAMAS LEADERSHIP OLD AND NEW

Sinwar had little respect for the old Hamas leadership in Qatar, Turkey and Lebanon. Some were his bitter rivals and for others he had nothing but contempt. His plan was to make sure he had the final word every step of the way. He knew in advance that once hostilities broke out, he would shelter in underground bunkers and deep tunnels, deprived most of the time of cellular communications, though he would have some access to a point-to-point telephone. He would have to rely on written notes passed by couriers, often young teenagers. This meant that conveying instructions to Hamas leadership outside would take days.

Sinwar was especially worried about the former chairman of Hamas, Khaled Mash’al, and his faction that has been gradually sidelined in recent years. Sinwar and the commander of the Palestine Division of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, General Hussein Ezzedi (known as Haj Ramadan) kept reminding each other to make sure Mashaal and his colleagues were kept out of the loop.

Mash’al had always been skeptical of the alliance with Hizbullah and Iran. He vehemently objected to Hamas’ fateful decision to support the Asad regime and its Iranian patrons in the Syrian civil war that erupted in March 2011. He argued that Hamas – the Palestinian wing of the Muslim Brotherhood – should not take sides against the Syrian and other branches of the Brotherhood supporting the rebels. This led to the departure of Mash’al and dozens of other

operatives from Damascus and left Hamas pitted against the Arab states and Turkey who either aided the revolt or sympathized publicly with the effort to topple Asad.

Sinwar and the new chairman Ismail Haniya decided to place their bets on Hizbullah's Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, with whom they concluded a memorandum of understanding on military cooperation, and with the Iranian regime which became their main source of support, military know-how and generous financial help.

Since the elimination of Deif, Haniyeh and Sinwar together with almost all the high echelon of command in Gaza, players outside the core leadership have emerged. Muhammad Ismail Darwish, the "treasurer," who resided for years in Beirut and nominally headed the Shura Council, became the acting successor to Haniyeh since the rest of the leaders were unable to vote on a permanent appointment. Nizar Awadallah, who was beaten by Sinwar, with Deif's backing, in the 2017 elections for chairman of the Gaza Political Bureau, also reappeared to claim a role as the main opponent to Sinwar's "adventurism."

THE CHOICE AT THE CROSSROADS

With the demise of the hardline Gaza leadership and the rise of previously marginalized figures, Mash'al has increased pressure for a "reassessment" of the movement's track record, gaining support among the cadres, mainly in the West Bank but also among surviving junior commanders in Gaza.

His principal argument, in closed-door deliberations, is that Hamas must withdraw from dependence on Iran and Hizbullah, both substantially weakened by the IDF. He calls for a "sincere" effort to "return to the Arab fold" – to seek rapprochement with Gulf states (other than Qatar), Egypt and Syria. This will require Hamas to acquiesce in Saudi, Emirati and Egyptian conditions on funding reconstruction: that it give up governing post-war Gaza and disarm and dismantle the military wing. Furthermore, according to Mash'al and his disciples, Hamas



must moderate its terms for intra-Palestinian reconciliation, agree to join the PLO and adhere to its platform of rejecting "armed struggle," upholding the two-state solution and prohibiting weapons not under the Palestinian Authority.

Mash'al argues that Hamas is no longer capable of ruling over the impoverished, displaced two million people living in the rubble of Gaza. It does not have the money, donors will not rush to assist, and the Gazans are turning against it. Therefore, the organization should seek a secondary role as a political party, waiting for an opportunity in general elections. In short, Mash'al's prescription is to recognize the failure of Sinwar's endeavor and pay the price now in the hope of recovery later.



Searches for deceased hostages in Khan Yunis, southern Gaza Strip, October 19, 2025.
Photo credit: Reuters/Ramadan Abed

The other faction, represented by al-Hayeh, angrily rejects these proposals. They argue that playing the “hostages card” smartly will allow Hamas to achieve the full withdrawal of the IDF and ultimately to maintain its exclusive control over Gaza. They believe that Qatar, Turkey and many non-governmental donors will devise ways to provide significant aid to them, with Iran doing its best to help. Furthermore, they say that the Palestinian Authority is very fragile and there is no benefit in accommodating it.

This fierce controversy has not yet developed into a public debate. It may take time before we learn which direction Hamas will take from the crossroads. *

EHUD YAARI

Ehud Yaari is the chief Middle East commentator of Israel television Channel 12 and the Lafer International Fellow of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He has covered the Palestinian-Israeli conflict for over five decades and authored *Fatah* (1971), *The Year of the Dove* (1979), *Israel's Lebanon War* (1984) and *Intifida* (1990) among other books.



Photo credit: Planet Labs Inc./Handout via Reuters

POSTWAR GAZA — WHAT WILL IT LOOK LIKE?



by Thomas Warrick, Robert Silverman

Two years after October 7, 2023, governments are finally recognizing the need to adopt a plan for postwar Gaza, even while fighting is ongoing. On August 27, President Donald Trump asked Jared Kushner, an architect of the Abraham Accords, and former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair to develop a serious plan.

In parallel with this effort, an international consensus is starting to emerge: a pragmatic approach that focuses on responsibilities and authorities to deal with a destroyed landscape and a destitute population. This consensus would put Gaza under international governance for a transitional period, provide security against Hamas, and start Gaza's physical and social reconstruction.

Several such plans exist, including one proposed by the United Arab Emirates in July 2024, and another by Blair's team in September 2025. A third one, Plan for Postwar Gaza, was developed by a group of former senior US officials, with input from others, and updated in September 2025 (disclosure: we were among its authors).

Any postwar Gaza plan must address four issues.

HAMAS DISARMAMENT

Hamas said months ago it would turn Gaza's governance over to Palestinian technocrats, but it refuses to give up its weapons. Hamas apparently wants to be like Hizbullah in

Lebanon, able to dictate policy without running the government. That would be a recipe for continued conflict: no Israeli government would accept an armed terrorist group on its border and no foreign government would invest in rebuilding Gaza with an armed Hamas present.

Thankfully there is international consensus on this issue. Hamas's disarmament has been a core requirement for both Israel and US President Donald Trump. Arab and European governments have come down on the side of Hamas's disarmament in a September 12 non-binding UN General Assembly resolution that endorsed a July 2024 call for Hamas to give up its weapons.

How will Hamas be disarmed? That is clear: Israel must be allowed to finish the job of militarily defeating it while providing for humanitarian aid. That does not mean killing every last armed member of Hamas, just like the US coalition that defeated the ISIS caliphate in Trump's first term didn't kill every last member of ISIS. But the remaining Hamas battalions (an estimated four out of an original force of 24) must be dismembered and the Hamas government dismantled. In the meantime, the postwar force that will take over Gaza must be assembled. At present, parts of Gaza are relatively secure from Hamas or under the control of clan-based forces opposed to Hamas.

MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE UNDER UNIFIED COMMAND

A lesson learned from other post-conflict operations: Security, reconstruction, aid, and governance all must be under the unified control of a single civilian executive (not a committee)

supported by a military leader with command authority.

It would be ideal to have a UN Security Council mandate, and that should be sought, but it is not required. Under the plan we drafted, an international compact would be signed by a coalition of nations and deposited with the UN. That coalition would then authorize and oversee the Multi-National Authority that would govern postwar Gaza during a transitional period.

The Multi-National Authority would move into the parts of Gaza now controlled by the IDF or by tribal elements opposed to Hamas; it could be implemented in phases over the entire Gaza Strip. Its police force would provide security to Gazans, keeping weapons off the street in neighborhoods that are free of organized Hamas units. This would allow the IDF to withdraw from those areas, recognizing that the IDF will continue to go after Hamas remnants in parts of Gaza where Hamas wants to keep fighting.

Which countries would sign this International Compact and contribute forces and resources? As described below, US leadership is a *sine qua non*. But in addition, some governments have already indicated interest in such a force (the United Arab Emirates, among others).

Another lesson learned is that security and reconstruction are inter-linked. An adequate level of security is essential for governments to commit money and personnel. Otherwise, Hamas and criminal gangs will exploit any weaknesses.

US LEADERSHIP BUT NOT US OWNERSHIP

President Trump has repeatedly made clear that he opposes putting US boots on the ground in Gaza but believes the United States should have a leadership role in helping Gaza and Israel achieve a sustainable peace.

Here is the problem: Other governments have said they will not contribute troops or resources unless the United States is committed to this mission.

First and foremost, solving this problem requires the leadership of President Trump in personal contact with allies and partners.

Second, the US can take on the essential “back-office” functions of logistics, airlift, intelligence and, perhaps most important, liaison with the IDF commanders who will want to engage in counter-terrorism strikes as needs arise. These functions would be done from locations just outside Gaza in Israel and Sinai.

President Trump has also made clear the United States expects to be reimbursed for its costs. Frozen and seized Iranian and Hamas assets should be used to reimburse governments, including the United States, for running the Multi-National Authority and providing aid and reconstruction for Gaza’s people.

The transitional nature of the Multi-National Authority ensures against an endless “nation building” operation. “Nation building” will have to be done by the Palestinians after the Multi-National Authority’s mission is done.

WHICH PALESTINIANS?

The United States will also need to bridge differences among its allies and partners on a future Palestinian state.

Arab and other countries want a “political horizon” for postwar Gaza: a Palestinian state that is governed by the Palestinian Authority after it has undergone a thorough (but never thoroughly defined) process of reform. The Israeli people, on the other hand, are opposed to such commitments having experienced a series of attacks, aimed principally at their civilians, whenever they turn over territory to a Palestinian entity, including to the Palestinian Authority.

This bridge can be constructed by artful diplomats. The likely solution is language on a “political horizon” sufficient to satisfy US allies while recognizing two unavoidable facts.

First, the Palestinian Authority must be reformed, but the fate of postwar Gaza cannot wait for that years-long process. This is not

an ideological viewpoint but a simple fact: the Palestinian Authority is not competent at present to govern postwar Gaza. The last time Israel turned over Gaza to the Palestinian Authority, in 2005, it led to Hamas and years of war. Turning over Gaza directly to the Palestinian Authority would fail.

Second, the Multi-National Authority will need time to dismantle the economic and social government that Hamas built up over the past twenty years to fund its fighters and tunnels. Working with Palestinians in the five local government districts that comprise the Gaza Strip, providing them reconstruction budgets and security, will over time develop governance capability among local Palestinians in Gaza – as laid out in the US officials’ plan. That will take time to develop.

Of course, the transitional Multi-National Authority in Gaza will need to consult with the Palestinian Authority on many issues of day-to-day governance. Many non-Hamas Palestinians who can usefully contribute to postwar Gaza will have connections with the Palestinian Authority. If the Multi-National Authority succeeds, the options for Gaza’s final status will be broadened and improved and its relationship with Israel will be fundamentally different.

A final note: Details are important. For instance, setting up a unified command of the transitional authority is critical to success, but the Blair Plan includes an unmanageable rule by multiple levels of committees. Any plan must address deradicalization of postwar Gaza’s population through school and media reforms. Plans that focus concretely on current needs of the population in Gaza (and not just humanitarian but also governance and reconstruction needs) – while recognizing future aspirations with appropriate future language – are more likely to work.

Nuance is also important. The US role is critical but after Iraq and Afghanistan there can be no US ground forces. The Palestinians’ future aspirations must be acknowledged up front. And Israel can no longer be forced to accept political

compromises with its security. Those in the think tanks and international community that see pressure on Israel as the solution need to give up that illusion.

Let’s be optimistic. Israel is in the final months of its war on Hamas (keep in mind the US-led war on ISIS took four years; this will be much shorter). President Trump is actively engaged and ordering his team to have a plan. Gazans are starting to put distance from Hamas, despite the dangers. It’s time for the international community to step forward. *

THOMAS WARRIC

Thomas Warrick is a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative. He served as the deputy assistant secretary for counterterrorism policy at the US Department of Homeland Security (2008–2019) and as a senior State Department official working on Middle East and international justice issues (1997–2007), including as the lead on the “Future of Iraq” initiative from 2002–2003.

ROBERT SILVERMAN

A former US diplomat and president of the American Foreign Service Association, Robert Silverman is a lecturer at Shalem College, senior fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, and president of the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance.



J.D. VANCE: THE GEOMETRY OF POWER



by Ahmed Charai

In the Oval Office, power breathes in gestures as much as decrees. President Donald Trump, re-cast by history as a peacemaker, governs in broad strokes — intuitive, dynamic, and commanding. Beside him, yet never overshadowing him, stands Vice President J.D. Vance: younger, disciplined, and disarmingly direct. The chemistry between them has become one of the defining features of this new American moment. It is not imitation; it is counterpoint. Their partnership gives the administration both momentum and method.

Vance's genius lies in his instinct for balance. He knows when to stay silent and when to distill the president's energy into form. Those who sit in the Situation Room describe a kind of choreography — Trump shaping vision, Vance translating it into executable sequence. "I love your socks," the president once quipped mid-briefing, and the room dissolved in laughter. It was humor, yes, but also hierarchy transfigured into trust. In that instant, Trump affirmed that Vance was not a subordinate mind but a complementary one.

This synergy extends into the heart of statecraft, the renewal of America's Middle East diplomacy. The Abraham Accords, conceived during Trump's first term under Jared Kushner's stewardship, laid the foundations of a new regional order. When Vance joined the ticket in 2024, he embraced those accords with conviction, seeing in them a model for pragmatic coexistence. Since then, he has worked to strengthen and expand that structure, supporting new normalization efforts and ensuring the Accords evolve into a durable framework for collective security. His approach

is pragmatic idealism: a belief that moral outcomes require structural realism.

During the tense spring of 2025, as the Gaza conflict threatened to reignite old divisions, Vance emerged as a careful persuader. He reassured Israel that restraint would not mean vulnerability and convinced key Arab capitals that participation in reconstruction was partnership, not concession. He often invoked what he called the "Abraham logic": security must be mutual, or it will be temporary. His method was conversational rather than coercive, precisely the tone that rebuilt trust while deepening the legacy of the accords Kushner had pioneered.

The Sharm el-Sheikh Accord bore his fingerprints even where his signature was absent. Trump announced the peace; Vance refined the scaffolding—border mechanisms, humanitarian corridors, financial guarantees. Diplomats later noted that without his insistence on shared implementation, the summit might have produced headlines but not endurance. In that sense, Vance functions as Trump's internal stabilizer, translating charisma into coherence.

Nowhere is this duality clearer than in the administration's posture toward Iran. Vance's phrase — "We are not at war with Iran, only with its nuclear program" — has entered the lexicon of responsible deterrence. It encapsulates firmness without fatalism, allowing Washington to project strength while signaling restraint. Regional observers understood it as the philosophical spine of the new strategy: confront capability, not identity. The formulation reassured allies and quieted markets; it was the rhetoric of a man who has read history, not just headlines.

Inside the White House, the Trump-Vance relationship has matured into a model of creative loyalty. The President delegates sparingly, yet he has twice handed Vance the floor in moments of high visibility—most memorably during that



awkward early meeting with Ukraine's leader. "Go ahead, grill him," Trump said, half amused, half proud. Such public empowerment signals confidence bordering on affection.

Vance, for his part, returns that trust with disciplined empathy. He brings freshness, not rebellion; analysis, not dilution. In meetings with generals or Gulf envoys, he radiates an unshowy authority, the kind that persuades through listening. His presence assures interlocutors that behind the President's intuitive command stands a mind devoted to follow-through.

For allies, this duet projects continuity; for adversaries, unpredictability bounded by intellect. It is a governing formula few nations manage: leadership that is simultaneously kinetic and considered. Trump provides the thunder; Vance ensures the storm rains where intended.

In the broader narrative of American renewal, J.D. Vance personifies a generational shift: from idealism unmoored to realism infused with moral clarity. He gives the administration not just discipline but depth, embodying the lesson that power, to be legitimate, must be both felt and understood.

If Donald Trump is the Peacemaker, Jared Kushner the Architect, then J.D. Vance is the Interpreter. Together, they compose a living presidency: energetic, coherent, and profoundly human.

In that harmony of strength and steadiness, the world rediscovers a familiar sound, the cadence of American leadership, refreshed but unmistakably resolute. *

— AHMED CHARAI

Ahmed Charai is the Chairman and CEO of World Herald Tribune, Inc., and the publisher of the Jerusalem Strategic Tribune, TV Abraham, and Radio Abraham. He serves on the boards of several prominent institutions, including the Atlantic Council, the Center for the National Interest, the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and the International Crisis Group. He is also an International Councilor and a member of the Advisory Board at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

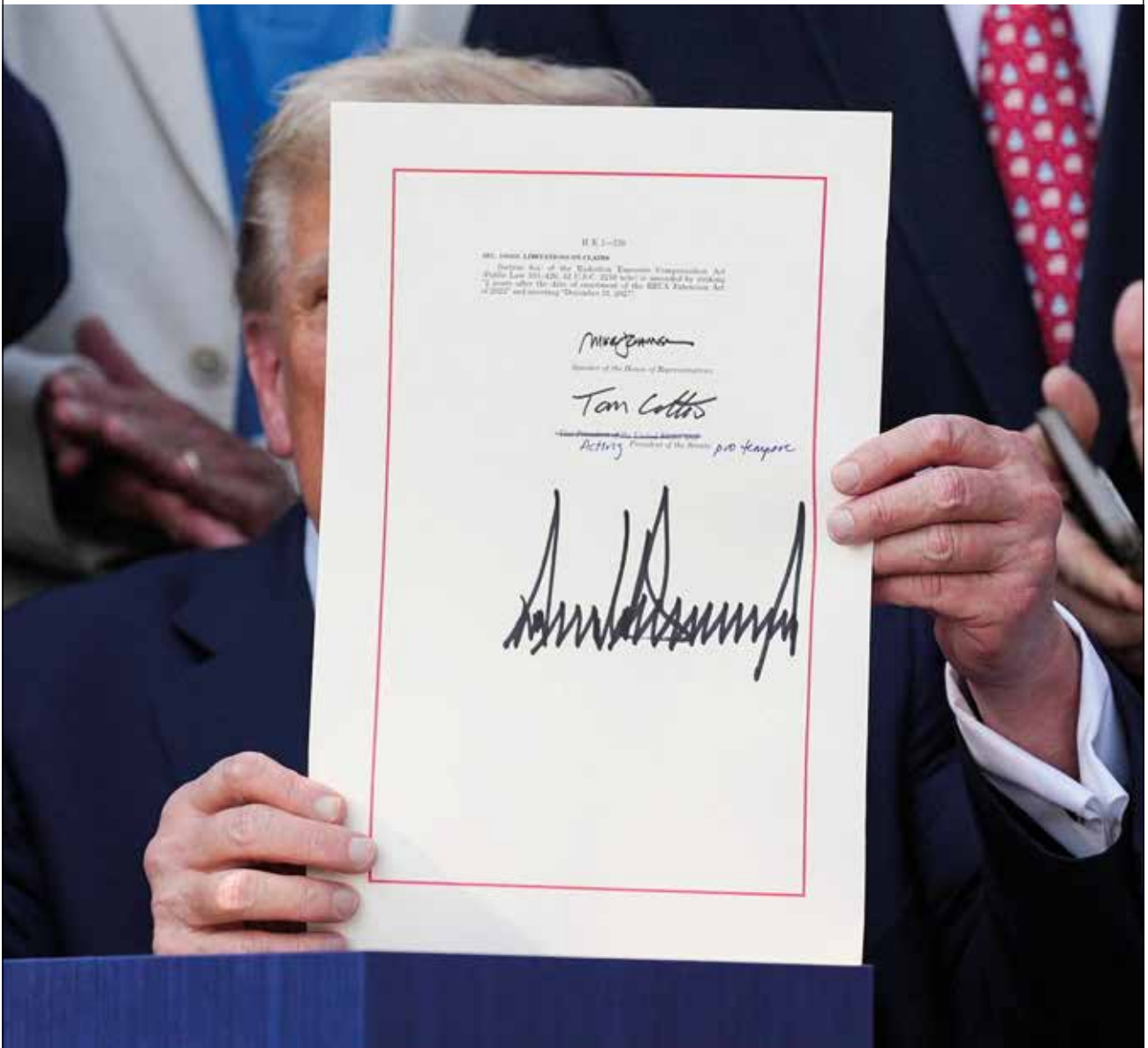


Photo credit: Reuters/Leah Millis

RECONCILIATION BILLS AND THE DEFENSE BUDGET



by Dov S. Zakheim

Both during his presidential campaign and since taking office, President Donald Trump has repeatedly echoed Ronald Reagan's famous phrase "peace through strength," while emphasizing the major emerging long-term threat from the People's Republic of China. Despite Trump's pronouncements, however, his fiscal year 2026 budget falls short of the defense spending levels that the Biden administration projected. The Biden projection for fiscal year 2026 called for just under \$877 billion; the corresponding Trump request was only \$848 billion, a significant constant dollar decline.

It is often the case that an outgoing administration artificially inflates its final defense budget, as Biden did, because it will never have to press Congress for its approval. Nevertheless, Trump's budget request for 2026 belied the President's promise of a trillion-dollar defense budget. What allowed the President to make good on his claim that he would propose a trillion-dollar defense budget was the congressional procedure known as "reconciliation."

Reconciliation is a special procedure that was first introduced in the 1974 Congressional Budget and Impoundment Act (which also created the Congressional Budget Office, which I joined the following year). Reconciliation speeds up the budget process by aligning the budget, and laws affecting the budget, with a budget resolution that Congress passes earlier in the fiscal year.

Unlike ordinary legislation, notably appropriations that set spending levels for an upcoming fiscal year, reconciliation does not

permit Senate filibusters; Senate debate can only last 20 hours. Moreover, reconciliation does not require a 60-vote majority, which in recent years has become the norm for most legislation. Instead, a simple majority of 51 votes is all that is needed for a reconciliation bill to pass. Finally, the reconciliation process does not permit attaching non-budget related amendments to the legislation, which is often the case with appropriations that require passage under "regular order."

Reconciliation allows Congress to pass highly controversial legislation that might otherwise die on the Senate floor. In general, it is only feasible when one party controls both chambers of Congress. The Democrats controlled both the House of Representatives and the Senate when they employed the reconciliation process to pass the 1993 Deficit Reduction Act that the Clinton Administration had sponsored. The Republicans controlled both chambers when they passed the second round of the Bush tax cuts in 2003 as well as the Trump tax cuts of 2017. The Democrats controlled the House in 2021 and, with an evenly split Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris cast the tie-breaking vote to pass the Biden Administration's American Rescue Plan for COVID relief.

With Republicans currently controlling both Houses, they successfully employed reconciliation to enact the Trump administration's so-called "One Big Beautiful Bill," which provides an additional \$113.3 billion to the Department of Defense budget and, together with related Department of Energy nuclear weapons programs, increases total national security spending to just over the trillion dollars that was Trump's target.

The reconciliation bill's additional defense funding provides a massive \$29 billion add-on

for shipbuilding and naval expansion, to include two additional missile defense destroyers and a second submarine, in addition to the ships that are funded in what is termed the “base budget.” The reconciliation package also calls for \$16 billion for unmanned surface ships, subsurface ships and drones; and about \$5 billion for a variety of programs to enhance the capabilities of forces in the Indo-Pacific. All these efforts are aimed at deterring an increasingly powerful China.

The Golden Dome missile defense program constitutes another significant portion of the add-on to defense spending. The legislation allocates a total of \$25 billion to Golden Dome, though the details of how the money will be expended have yet to be fully fleshed out.

One might wonder why legislators chose the reconciliation route rather than simply to increase the base budget. The reason lies in the political stand-off that for the past several years has undermined Congress’ ability to pass appropriations bills in a timely fashion. Each year Democrats have demanded that, for every dollar in increased defense spending, Congress should also increase non-defense spending. Republicans have rejected this approach, demanding instead that more funds be spent on defense and that domestic programs either be held constant or reduced from prior year spending levels.

The result of this annual impasse has been what are termed “continuing resolutions” that have delayed the initiation of new programs and budgets for months, and in fiscal year 2025 did so for the entire year. Indeed, many budget analysts believe that there will again be a year-long continuing resolution for fiscal year 2026. On the other hand, the “One Big Beautiful” reconciliation bill has enabled the Republican-controlled Congress to avoid having to make any concessions on non-defense spending and indeed has reduced non-defense spending levels while increasing defense spending and making permanent the first Trump administration’s 2017 tax cuts.

What reconciliation inherently does not do, however, is to increase the base budget. It is essentially a bonus and as such, once it is fully spent, most likely over the next two years, defense spending will significantly decline

unless there is either a major boost to the base budget or Congress passes another defense-related reconciliation package.

Failure to increase defense spending will have a major impact on the Golden Dome project in particular. It is highly unlikely that America will realize Trump’s vision of a missile shield over the United States, a project that could easily cost well over \$600 billion and possibly more than a trillion, without consistent long-term funding in the defense baseline. And unless base spending significantly increases, the only way to fund Golden Dome will be to impose massive cuts on other elements of the defense budget. For a similar reason, it will also be difficult to fund other programs such as those related to Indo-Pacific deterrence; again, the only solution may be to reduce spending elsewhere within the budget baseline.

Roger Wicker, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has called for a level of defense spending amounting to five percent of America’s gross domestic product. The 2024 Commission on the National Defense Strategy recommended real growth of 3-5 percent above inflation.

The “One Big Beautiful Bill” only provides one big beautiful band-aid for a defense program that has not grown commensurate with the threats not only from China, but also from its increasingly close allies, Russia and North Korea and, even after the strike on its nuclear facilities, Iran as well. Both Chairman Wicker and the Commission’s recommendations were directed at the base budget. As for the reconciliation process, it is not, and cannot be, the long-term answer to America’s national security needs. *

DOV S. ZAKHEIM

Dov S. Zakheim is Chair of the Board of Advisors of the JST, a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and Vice Chair of the Foreign Policy Research Institute. He is a former US under secretary of defense (2001–2004) and deputy under secretary of defense (1985–1987).



NO REAL ALTERNATIVE: WHY THE GULF WILL RELY ON THE US

President Donald Trump visits al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, May 15, 2025. Photo credit: Daniel Torok/White House/ZUMA Press Wire





by James Jeffrey, Elizabeth Dent

Israel's attack on Hamas leaders in Doha, Qatar, on September 9 jarred the region and spurred a new outburst of skepticism about the value of US security commitments. The US has long sought a stable regional environment in which American partners do not attack one another, which the Doha attack obviously disrupted.

Nevertheless, the Middle East simply has no viable alternative to US regional security efforts for the foreseeable future. Qatar and other Gulf states have been subject to other attacks that the US could neither deter nor immediately punish (such as the drone and missile strikes on Saudi Aramco's oil facilities in 2019 and 2020). Regional moderates have no plausible alternative patrons or policy approaches that would keep them out of the line of fire, and American security commitments remain both valid and vital in important ways.

THE NATURE OF US GUARANTEES

Some of the confusion here is inherent to the collective-security system the US developed after World War II, which now encompasses

some 70 countries. Given the huge span of responsibility and the American people's reluctance to get bogged down in foreign conflicts, policy makers have prioritized decisive responses to only the most destabilizing conflicts: Korea in 1950, Kuwait in 1990, and Ukraine today, leaving less significant or one-off military challenges to diplomacy or the victims' own agency.

This American approach is best seen in the capacious language in NATO's Article V, dictated by Washington at the inception of the alliance: in the case of an attack on a NATO member state, each NATO member shall take "such action as it deems necessary including the use of armed force."

Thus the US has not spelled out what will generate a US military response and what will not. Whether US security commitments are treaty-based or non-legally binding (like all its Middle East arrangements except with NATO ally Turkey) or just implicit (such as Korea, Kuwait, or Ukraine), they have proven trustworthy when a nation's survival is threatened by military attack. But Washington generally does not respond with hostilities to one-off acts.

All this should not be a surprise to America's Gulf friends. Since 1953, the US has had a legally-binding defense treaty with South Korea, backed by 28,000 troops in country. Yet the US has



Aftermath of an Israeli attack on Hamas leaders in Doha, Qatar, September 9, 2025. Photo credit: Reuters

never responded to the many North Korean attacks far more serious than Israel's strike in Doha, including a huge commando attack on the South Korean president's residence in 1968, the killing of four South Korean cabinet members in Burma in 1983, or the sinking of a South Korean corvette with 46 killed-in-action in 2010.

Indeed, the US often does not respond militarily to attacks on its own personnel and installations, including the capture of the USS Pueblo in 1968, the attack on the USS Liberty in 1967, the Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, the attacks on the Marine barracks and the US embassy in Beirut in 1983 and 1984, and the Iranian seizure of US sailors in 2016.

Such reluctance does not mean that US security guarantees are worthless. They are geared to deter and, if deterrence fails, to contain and defeat major international aggression.

US security commitments generally include commitments to joint diplomatic effort, consultations, and in some cases military actions by the parties to promote regional or international peace and stability. Such language characterizes US commitments beginning with the North Atlantic Treaty and most every US security agreement since then (for example, the 2008 US-Iraq Strategic Framework Agreement contains such language in four different locations).

Events such as the Qatar attack are exactly the sort of destabilizing behavior the US is supposed to deter, including by our friends. (The tripartite British, French, and Israeli campaign in Suez in 1956 is an historic example; US actions in 2006 to halt the Israel-Hizbullah war in Lebanon is another.) Contracting states, including the US, accept a responsibility to promote predictability and stability as one non-military means to contain and deter threats to the international order or the security of the partnered states. Inevitably, the bulk of this burden falls on the United States, given its wealth and might.

THE BEST OF AVAILABLE ALTERNATIVES

This growing frustration has prompted some Gulf states to consider diversifying their options, as seen in 2021 when the Biden administration sought to resize its presence in the Middle East. But so far, no viable alternative has emerged.

The American military presence is huge and diversified, and any replacement is difficult to imagine. It consists of key bases like al-Udeid in Qatar, which hosts the Combined Air Operations Center; Naval Support Activity Bahrain, which hosts the US Fifth Fleet; and Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, which houses a US Army forward base. The US also drives regional integration based on intelligence-sharing, missile defense, command-and-control infrastructure, arms sales, training exercises, and a whole atmosphere of deterrence – none of which could easily or quickly be replaced.

The most discussed alternative is China. It has become a prominent partner in the region, signing deals with Gulf governments to expand trade, energy, and technological collaboration. Beijing has also dipped its toe into diplomatic initiatives in the region, such as the Iran-Saudi rapprochement in 2023. But China continues to maintain its longstanding and strict policy of nonintervention. Moreover, China's military footprint in the Middle East is minimal. Beijing has thus far lacked both the capabilities and the

will to provide the kind of security guarantees the US offers its partners in the region. For all its ambitions, China is neither prepared nor willing to become a security guarantor for the region.

Another potential alternative is Russia. Moscow has been opportunistic in its regional engagement while defense sales and trade ties remain its focus. However, the war in Ukraine has stretched Russian resources thin. Its long-term regional credibility remains unproven or illusory, as shown in Syria in 2024 and Iran in 2025. Russia's largest military presence in the Middle East, in Syria, fell apart during the collapse of the Asad regime last year. That presence will take time to rebuild. Russia is determined to grow its influence in the region, but it is too constrained by its current obligations to become a robust security partner anytime soon.

Some in the Gulf look at the European Union or individual European countries as potential contenders. The Europeans are viewed as more balanced on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and they maintain very strong ties with countries in the Middle East, including a recent EU initiative to bolster relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council. But the EU is too fractured as an entity to be a reliable security guarantor. Both the organization and its member states are heavily reliant upon the US security footprint in the region to offer a viable alternative. More fundamentally, the EU has neither the military resources nor the "strategic culture" to begin to satisfy regional security needs.

Finally, some have floated the idea of a regional "NATO-like" organization. Many of the Gulf countries, namely the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are working hard to modernize their militaries and to build out their own defense industrial developments through new national strategies. These efforts will go a long way toward security independence, but they remain nascent at best. Regional coordination is both limited and heavily reliant upon US defense systems and infrastructure.

Decoupling from the U.S. would require not just finding new partners but rebuilding the region's defense infrastructure from scratch. And the first question would be: who can take over the job the Americans did in 1990 after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait? Who could lead, organize, and provide most of the muscle for a successful response to major aggression? And second: who else could have managed the Gaza ceasefire?

GULF RESPONSES – MORE ABOUT LEVERAGE THAN LOYALTY

Arab and Islamic country leaders held an emergency summit in Doha to address the Israeli strike, but the outcomes consisted largely of rote condemnations of the strike and pledges of solidarity. The Gulf Cooperation Council pledged to form a “defense pact” and to build up the region's “deterrent capabilities,” though we do not yet know what these ambitions mean or how it will address the fact that the US is at the center of the Gulf states' military integration.

Gulf and regional states are likely to continue to take tactical steps to convey their ire with Washington, including the recent Saudi-Pakistan security agreement and Egyptian-Turkish military exercises. Some countries may choose diplomatic hedging, including taking public visits to Beijing or Moscow or conducting joint military exercises with Russia and China.

These moves are more about leverage than loyalty. They will be designed to remind Washington that the Gulf states have other options and will increasingly use them if the US will not rein in Israel. Trump's recent position on no West Bank annexation, a forced Netanyahu apology directly to the Qataris, additional security guarantees enshrined in an executive order, as well as meeting with top Islamic state leaders during the UN General Assembly, all suggest the US is getting the message.

Despite growing frustration, Gulf leaders know that the US remains the only actor

with the scale, capability, and long-term commitments to provide security guarantees, though they are still looking to recalibrate the partnership. Israel's Doha strike has reinforced their desire for more transparent coordination, stronger security guarantees, and above all, a durable and credible commitment that a crisis like this will not happen again. *

JAMES JEFFREY

James Jeffrey is a Distinguished Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a former deputy national security adviser, and a former US ambassador to Albania, Iraq, and Turkey.

ELIZABETH DENT

Elizabeth Dent is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute and a former director for the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.



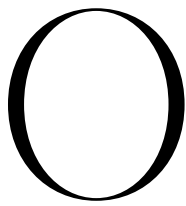
Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Syrian Foreign Minister Asa'ad al-Shaibani in Moscow, July 31, 2025. Photo credit: Reuters



RUSSIA'S RETURN TO SYRIA



by Ksenia Svetlova



n July 31, Syrian Foreign Minister Asa'ad al-Shaibani met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow, the same city where deposed President Bashar al-Asad now lives in exile. Shaibani was carrying an unexpected request. According to sources familiar with the meeting, Damascus asked Russia to resume military police patrols along Syria's southern border with Israel. The reasoning was stark: "Russia's return to its previous positions could prevent Israel's interference in Syrian affairs."

This overture represents a remarkable diplomatic reversal. Just months earlier, Russia had abandoned Asad with surprising ease. Today Moscow finds itself courted by the very rebels it once branded as "bloody al-Qa'ida terrorists." Putin invited the interim Syrian president, Ahmed al-Shara'a (formerly known by the nom de guerre Abu Muhammad al-Jolani), to a Russia-Arab summit scheduled to be held in Moscow on October 15. Syria in turn has contracted with Russian firms to print Syria's new currency, the first Syrian banknote

in decades that won't have an Asad family member's portrait.

Both Moscow and Damascus have compelling reasons to reset their relationship, reasons that extend far beyond their shared animosity toward Western influence.

THE LOGIC OF RUSSIAN PRAGMATISM

Swift recognition of Syria's new government reflects a Russian cold-eyed pragmatism that includes counter-terrorism policy. ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood are on Russia's terrorism list, but Hamas and Hizbullah are not. The Taliban, who regained control of Afghanistan, were removed from the list. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, al-Shara'a's organization, technically remains designated as a terrorism organization yet this classification has not prevented Moscow from pursuing diplomatic ties with Damascus.

This pragmatic flexibility stems from Russia's unchanged strategic imperatives in the region. Despite the Ukraine war's enormous demands on Russian resources, Moscow is not willing to abandon its Middle Eastern foothold. The Mediterranean naval base at Tartus and the Khmeimim airbase remain vital for projecting Russian influence not only across the Levant but throughout Africa, serving as an airbridge for



Russian operations from Libya to the Central African Republic. Moreover, Russia faces a new strategic challenge: containing Turkish regional expansion. Ankara's growing influence in Syria directly threatens Russian interests, making the new government in Damascus a natural, if unlikely, partner in this regional balance-of-power game.

SYRIA'S STRATEGIC CALCULUS

Syria's outreach to Moscow may appear counterintuitive given the influx of Gulf investment and the lifting of Western sanctions. Multibillion-dollar reconstruction deals with Saudi Arabia and Qatar promise a prosperous future, while normalized relations with much of the international community offer opportunities for economic recovery.

Yet Syria's new leadership faces immediate challenges that wealthy Gulf partners cannot easily address. Food security remains precarious following years of drought and conflict. The country needs military equipment to rebuild its armed forces and fight ISIS cells. Perhaps most critically, Syria requires counterweights to its powerful neighbors, Turkey and Israel, both of whom have since Asad's fall expanded their presence on Syrian soil.

Russia's grain shipments, while controversial (reports suggest some may be stolen Ukrainian wheat), have provided crucial food security. Moscow resumed these deliveries in April as a "one-time gesture," but subsequent shipments suggest a more systematic arrangement. For a country where 16 million people face food insecurity, such assistance carries significant political weight.

THE UNLIKELY ISRAELI CONNECTION

An intriguing aspect of this triangular relationship involves Israel's role in preserving Russian influence in Syria. Reuters reported in March that Israeli officials have quietly lobbied Washington to maintain Russian military bases in Syria, viewing Moscow as a preferable alternative to expanded Turkish control along Israel's northern border.

This convergence of interests creates a delicate balance. While Russia publicly condemns Israeli airstrikes on Syrian territory as violations of sovereignty, both Moscow and Jerusalem share concerns about Syria's internal stability. During recent sectarian violence in southern Syria that killed thousands of Alawites, Druze and Sunnis, both Russian and Israeli officials and media heavily criticized Damascus's handling of the crisis.

Russia's ambassador to Israel Alexander Viktorov recently acknowledged this complex relationship, in a public comment following discussions between Netanyahu and Putin regarding Syria. Viktorov noted that "the stabilization of Syria will contribute to improving the situation throughout the entire Middle East region. Such a development fully corresponds to the fundamental interests of both Russia and Israel."

MOSCOW'S INSURANCE POLICIES

Russia's re-engagement with Damascus extends beyond official channels. Moscow maintains ties with traditional Syrian allies, particularly the Alawite community that formed the Asad family's political base. These relationships provide potential leverage should negotiations with the al-Shara'a government deteriorate.

Currently, Russia awaits Syria's nomination of officials to head an interministerial committee tasked with reviewing all previous bilateral agreements. While Moscow's primary objective remains securing its naval and air bases in

Syria, any arrangement will likely come with a price tag, such as renewal of Russian patrols in sensitive areas, such as the Golan Heights border or the Qamishli area in Syria's northeast.

This emerging Russian-Syrian partnership faces significant constraints. The al-Shara'a government must balance competing regional pressures while establishing legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Too close an association with Moscow risks alienating Western partners crucial for reconstruction financing. Meanwhile, Russia's capacity to project power in Syria remains limited by Ukraine war demands that depleted its financial and military resources.

IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL ORDER

Russia's calibrated return to Syria reflects a fundamental reality of contemporary Middle Eastern politics: even the most bitter enemies can find common ground when circumstances demand it.

For Syria, engaging Russia represents both an insurance policy against domination by neighbors and a hedge against over-dependence on any single patron. For Russia, maintaining Syrian influence provides crucial leverage in the Middle East.

The question remains whether this rapprochement can evolve into something more durable, in light of Russia's limited resources and America's simultaneous re-engagement in Syria. For now, Moscow appears determined to remain relevant in post-Asad Syria, even if it means embracing leaders it once sought to destroy. *

KSENIA SVETLOVA

Ksenia Svetlova is the Executive Director of ROPES (The Regional Organization for Peace, Economics & Security) and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Middle East Programs. She is a former member of the Knesset.



Syrian President Ahmed al-Shara'a attends the signing ceremony of a memorandum between the Ministry of Energy and Qatar's UCC Holding in Damascus, May 2025. Photo credit: Reuters

THE SAUDI-QATARI COMPETITION FOR INFLUENCE IN SYRIA



by Ahmad Sharawi, Natalie Ecanow

With the Syrian state still in its formative stage, lacking a defined political identity, two Gulf monarchies – Qatar and Saudi Arabia – are seeking to dominate Syria. This competition will only intensify as the interim Syrian government of Ahmad al-Shara’a grapples with state-building.

Qatar provided a cash infusion on August 6, when its UCC Holding inked a \$4 billion agreement with the Syrian government to construct a new airport in Damascus. The agreement, one of a dozen foreign investment deals signed that day, came on the heels of a \$6.4 billion pledge from Saudi Arabia to support tourism, construct housing, factories, and skyscrapers, and develop the medical, telecommunications, and entertainment industries in Syria.

Saudi Arabia and Syria signed an “investment promotion and protection agreement” on August 19, which was followed by a second Saudi-Syrian investment conference on August 24 and the arrival of a Saudi business delegation in Damascus on August 26. The Saudi investments were followed by humanitarian relief projects sponsored by Riyadh that include “61 initiatives

in the health sector, rehabilitation programs, orphan care, and overland aid convoys delivering essential supplies,” announced on September 8.

These recent announcements of financial commitments (not all of which will necessarily be realized, if past is prologue) are part of a larger international effort to rehabilitate a Syrian economy decimated by civil war and international sanctions. In May, Saudi Arabia and Qatar paid off Syria’s \$15.5 million debt to the World Bank, paving the way for the World Bank Group “to reengage” with Syria and “address the development needs of the Syria people.” Weeks later, Qatar and Saudi Arabia announced “joint financial support” for public sector employees.

While Qatar and Saudi Arabia are cooperating on short-term priorities, their collaboration in Syria mustn’t be mistaken for a lasting partnership. The two monarchies have each sought to expand their regional influence politically and economically, often at each other’s expense.

The point of contention between them is political Islam. Qatar has actively promoted Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood as a core part of its foreign policy, while Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman considers the Brotherhood to be a threat to his kingdom’s stability, condemning the Brotherhood for fostering extremism.



Syrian President Ahmad al-Shara'a meeting a delegation of Saudi Arabian businessmen in Damascus, July 19, 2025. Photo credit: IMAGO/APAimages via Reuters Connect

Within days of Bashar al-Asad's ouster, Qatar began reengaging with Damascus, working with Turkey to bolster the new Syrian government. Turkey and Qatar were the first and second countries, respectively, to reopen embassies in Syria. In January, Qatar's Emir made the first visit by a foreign head of state to Damascus.

Qatar has followed up this diplomatic outreach by financing infrastructure projects in Syria, focused on restoring electricity. Qatar got the greenlight from Washington in March to begin pumping natural gas to Syria via Jordan. In May, Syria signed a \$7 billion agreement with Qatar's UCC Holding, Power International USA, and two Turkish energy companies to construct four power plants and a solar farm in Syria. The latest energy deal launched on August 2, when Qatar began financing natural gas deliveries to Syria from Azerbaijan via Turkey.

This summer has seen Damascus sign close to \$2 billion in additional deals with Qatari companies. In June, the Syrian government signed a \$1.5 billion agreement with a Qatar's Al Maha International to establish a hub for "media, film, and tourism" in Syria called "Damascus Gate." Qatari telecommunications firm Ooredoo is also in the running to build out Syria's fiber optic communications network. The project's price tag is roughly \$300 million.

Qatar's investments outweigh Saudi Arabia's to date, but Riyadh has also provided key political support. In May, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, joined by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, successfully lobbied President Trump to lift sanctions on Syria.

In July, a Saudi delegation met with interim Syrian president Ahmad al-Shara'a and hosted an investment forum, where the

delegation announced significant infrastructure investments. This visit took place as sectarian clashes roiled southern Syria, signalling Riyadh's support for Syria's territorial integrity and positioned Saudi Arabia as a key protector of Syria's interests, despite atrocities by government-aligned forces in southern Syria. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Barhan told Secretary of State Marco Rubio that Saudi Arabia supports the deployment of Syrian troops in the predominantly Druze province of Suwayda.

Saudi Arabia wants a stable Syria free of the Iranian influence that led the country to become a hub for both transnational terrorism and drug trafficking. Captagon from Syria placed a significant strain on Saudi Arabia. Its investments also aim to curb Qatari and Turkish influence and to prevent Syria from becoming a client state of either country.

Shara'a is currently playing both sides to extract maximum financial and political benefits. He understands that siding too heavily with one camp risks alienating the other—and losing valuable investment. This risk is particularly acute in the case of Saudi Arabia, which has a track record of withdrawing support when a country's trajectory conflicts with Riyadh's. For example, Lebanon fell out of Riyadh's favor after failing to curb Iran's influence. To prevent a similar fallout, Damascus has carefully distributed projects between both countries to sustain the competition between them.

The key question now is which ideological path Shara'a will embrace. Will he foster closer ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and align with Qatar? Will he distance himself from political Islam to reassure Saudi Arabia and prevent Riyadh's potential withdrawal? Or will he continue to delay choosing an ideological path and play both sides?

Recent statements suggest Shara'a seeks to distance himself, at least rhetorically, from the Brotherhood despite his Islamist background. Shara'a may be aligning more closely with Riyadh, but that is unlikely to push Qatar out of

Syria; instead, Doha will likely continue to invest in Syria, hoping to tilt Shara'a back into its orbit.

What should the US do? In the short term, it must monitor investment flows in Syria. The risk of investments enriching terrorist groups is high given that the Syrian government has integrated groups into its military that maintain active ties to foreign terrorist organizations such as al-Qa'ida. The military has also committed human rights abuses since coming into power, and Syria continues to host several designated terrorist organizations, including Katibat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad.

Despite removing most sanctions on Syria, Washington has not clarified whether there is a monitoring mechanism in place designed to track and prevent terror financing. Washington should press Syria to put such a mechanism in place and cooperate with groups such as the Financial Action Task Force, the intergovernmental watchdog for money laundering and terror finance.

Washington should also make clear to Shara'a that there is a window of opportunity for historic improvements in US-Syria relations. If he takes meaningful steps to protect minorities from abuse, holds perpetrators accountable, and restrains extremists, a new era can begin. *

AHMAD SHARAWI

Ahmad Sharawi is a research analyst at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, focusing on the Levant.

NATALIE ECANOW

Natalie Ecanow is a senior research analyst at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, focusing on the Gulf states.



Photo credit: EYEPRESS via Reuters Connect

ERDOĞAN'S LONG GAME IN SYRIA



by Sinan Ciddi

When Bashar al-Asad's regime abruptly collapsed in December 2024, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan saw more than just a regional upheaval. He saw a long-awaited opportunity.

With Iran's influence waning and Russia distracted by internal instability and foreign entanglements, a rare power vacuum emerged in Syria. Erdoğan moved swiftly. For over a decade, Ankara had supported Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the al-Qa'ida offshoot that ultimately toppled Asad's regime, under the leadership of Muhammad al-Jolani (who would drop this nom de guerre in 2025 and re-assume his birth name, Ahmed al-Shara'a). HTS was just one of several Sunni Islamist factions that Turkey had backed since the earliest days of Syria's civil war, beginning in 2011.

For Erdoğan, the war in Syria was never simply about toppling a brutal dictatorship. It was a generational chance to reshape the Middle East, fulfilling a vision rooted in establishing a neo-Ottoman regional order with Turkey at its helm.

Beginning in 2012, Ankara openly aligned itself with the Syrian opposition, betting that Asad's days were numbered, much like the authoritarian regimes that had fallen in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia during the Arab Spring. Erdoğan miscalculated. Asad endured, thanks to backing from Tehran and Moscow.

It would take another twelve years for Erdoğan's vision to find traction. By March 2025, a new interim government led by Ahmed al-Shara'a had taken charge in Damascus. This political outcome was the culmination of Turkey's long-standing efforts to influence Syria's post-Asad trajectory. And yet, this strategy marked a profound evolution

in Erdoğan's approach to Damascus. Before the civil war, between 2004 and 2011, he had in fact pursued a pragmatic detente with Asad, signaling a very different strategic calculus.

The notion that Erdoğan and Asad once embraced as allies may now seem surreal, but it reflects a brief window of diplomatic realignment. To understand that moment, one must consider the deeper ideological fault lines that have long defined Turkish-Syrian relations.

Turkey's hostility toward the Asad regime predates Erdoğan. Ideologically, it is rooted in the worldview of the National View Movement, the Turkish Islamist tradition from which Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) arose. Since the rule of Hafiz al-Asad (1971–2000), these Turkish Sunni Islamists regarded Syria's Alawite-dominated Ba'athist regime with suspicion and disdain, as secular socialists who were dangerously close to the Soviet Union. They supported the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, especially after the Ba'athists banned the group in 1964.

Among the most vocal critics of the Syrian Ba'ath was Necmettin Erbakan, founder of the Islamist Welfare Party and Erdoğan's political mentor. Erbakan deeply resented the Ba'athist crackdown on Sunni Islamist forces and privately cheered the Brotherhood's calls for jihad against Damascus. Although he refrained from open confrontation with the Syrian state, Erbakan's ideological hostility was clear. Following this line, Erdoğan and his foreign policy architect Ahmet Davutoğlu, saw the Asad regime as secular tyrants and, in the words of one Turkish analyst, as "illegitimate elites of a minority sect that had done more damage to Islam as a religion than had the West."

That historical resentment fueled Turkey's antagonistic posture during the Cold War, when Ankara and Damascus frequently found themselves on opposite sides of geopolitical and ideological divides. Most explosively, Syria

served as a patron for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), offering sanctuary to its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and providing logistical support for the group's separatist campaign inside Turkey. The PKK's operations from Syrian soil brought the two countries to the brink of war in 1998, a confrontation only defused when Damascus expelled Ocalan under Turkish pressure. As a result, it is worth pointing out that Turkish elites' suspicion of Syria was not limited only to the Islamist camp: it was shared across Turkey's political spectrum.

Yet when Erdoğan assumed office as prime minister in 2003, he temporarily shelved those long-standing grievances in favor of a pragmatic reorientation. Early in his tenure, Erdoğan cultivated a reputation in Western capitals as a capable leader willing to sideline ideology for realpolitik. This image was embodied in the "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine, a cornerstone of Davutoğlu's foreign policy vision. Its aim was to normalize relations with regional adversaries, including Syria.

Erdoğan's pivot toward Damascus was also driven by his deepening disillusionment with Europe. After the European Union effectively stalled Turkey's accession process in 2007, Ankara's foreign policy began to shift decisively toward the Middle East. The 2008 global financial crisis further weakened Turkey's economic alignment with Europe, accelerating Erdoğan's pursuit of new trade and political alliances in the Arab world, with Syria at the center of this new orientation.

Between 2004 and 2010, bilateral relations between Turkey and Syria improved dramatically. The two countries formed a high-level Strategic Cooperation Council and signed a series of free trade and visa liberalization agreements. Trade volume more than doubled — from \$800 million in 2003 to \$1.8 billion in 2010. Syrian tourists flocked to Turkish cities such as Gaziantep, spurring local economic booms and the construction of shopping malls tailored to Syrian consumers. For a brief moment, Syria served as a critical land bridge for Turkish truckers bringing goods to Jordan and the Gulf, an economic artery that gave substance to the improving relations.

The warm rapport between Erdoğan and the Asad family during this period led some observers to question whether ideologically

committed Islamist leaders like Erdoğan could, in fact, evolve into pragmatic statesmen once in power. Until 2012, there was reason to believe that Erdoğan might subordinate ideology to the imperatives of national interest.

So, what changed?

The answer lies not only in the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, but in Erdoğan's strategic recalibration. By 2011, the Arab Spring had dramatically altered the political landscape across the region. Erdoğan, emboldened by the downfall of Arab autocrats, assumed Asad's regime would follow suit. His support for oppositionist forces, including jihadist groups like HTS, was less about democracy and more about engineering a Sunni realignment in Syria that would align with Ankara's regional ambitions.

The Syrian war became, for Erdoğan, both a proxy conflict and a proving ground for a new Turkish sphere of influence. The fall of Asad in 2024 vindicated a long and risky bet. The rise of Ahmed al-Shara'a, a former jihadist handpicked and mentored by Ankara, now in power in Damascus, signals the culmination of a strategy that began not with the first shots of civil war, but with decades of ideological suspicion and a fairly brief, ill-fated experiment in pragmatism.

In the end, Erdoğan preferred a Syria that would be closely aligned with his Islamist worldview, rather than one that was merely aligned with Turkey's national interests. He would spend over a decade attempting to overthrow Asad in pursuit of this goal. Since the founding of Turkey as a republic in 1923, no Turkish leader had ever engaged in a process of regime change in a foreign country. Erdoğan would defy this trend. When Asad eventually fell, Erdoğan did not merely react to Syria's collapse. He had prepared for it, waited for it, and helped shape it. *

This is Part I of a series of reports by Sinan Ciddi on Turkey's role in Syria.

SINAN CIDDİ

Sinan Ciddi is a non-resident senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies where he contributes to its Turkey Program and Center on Economic and Financial Power.



Syrian migrants arrive at Turkey's Cilvegözü border gate to cross into Syria, December 2024.
Photo credit: Reuters/Dilara Senkaya



TURKEY IN SYRIA: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW



by James Jeffrey

Sinan Ciddi has written recently in the *Jerusalem Strategic Tribune* a multi-part analysis of Turkey in Syria (“Turkey’s Quiet Relationship with ISIS” and previous). His bottom-line argument is that Erdoğan’s Syria policy was driven largely, first, by his desire to spread and eventually lead, political Islam throughout the region, and, second, as a means to that end, to support jihadist groups, the Islamic State (ISIS) in particular.

Ciddi’s facts and to a certain degree his analysis are accurate. This writer can attest to the Islamic or neo-Ottoman nature of Turkish foreign policy thinking from 2008 onward, with Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Davutoğlu as its public advocate. Further buttressing Ciddi’s argument is the orientation of Prime Minister and later President Erdoğan, by his background in the Millî Görüş Turkish Islamic movement of his mentor Necmettin Erbakan, and by his support for Egyptian President and Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Morsi and Hamas.

But Ciddi leaves unmentioned trends and facts that either refute or significantly modify his arguments. These include growing animosity, then hostility, between ISIS and Turkey, over-identification of Syrian terrorist organization Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) with ISIS and al-Qa’ida, and Erdoğan’s recent good relations with Arab states, in particular the UAE, that are fiercely opposed to Muslim Brother offshoots.

A more serious underlying problem with Ciddi’s analysis is the failure to inventory Turkey’s goals in Syria beyond supporting, deliberately or implicitly, jihadists, a failure seemingly based on an unwillingness to look at a

multitude of regional security threats, centered in Syria, through Ankara’s eyes.

This is not an unimportant failure. One state in the region, Israel, largely shares Ciddi’s view. If it is erroneous, however, there is a risk of a Syria-related blowup between the region’s two strongest states.

Coming to the substance of the charges, Ciddi asserts Turkish collaboration with two terrorist groups, ISIS and HTS. The first assertion is overdrawn and the second is correct, although its underlying premise – that such collaboration supported a terrorist agenda – is false.

Turkey, to be sure, allowed many thousands of foreign fighters, many of them Islamists, to transit Turkey to Syrian battlefields during the Syrian civil war. But these were recruits not only for ISIS but also for various forces in the Turkish-supported Free Syrian Army and even groups the US was backing. Trying to sort out which recruit was going to which organization was largely impossible: terrorist organizations did not issue IDs to recruits. The worldview of most of the foreign fighters was generally similar, regardless of group loyalty, and that loyalty often shifted as fighters moved from group to group for various reasons. (The US experienced similar problems with foreign fighters entering Afghanistan in the 1980s.)

Ankara did at times, as Ciddi notes, deal with ISIS. This included negotiating for return of almost 50 Turkish personnel in its Mosul Consulate whom ISIS took hostage, cooperating on the transfer out of the war zone in Syria of the tomb of revered Turkish medieval leader Suleiman Shah, allowing oil exports through middlemen, and coordinating, as in the Adana incident he cites, with ISIS for movement of weapons, money and other supplies.

But even in this early phase up to late 2014 there were a series of clashes between Turks and ISIS, including in Turkey. This animosity grew



in late 2014, reaching a crescendo of conflict in the years 2016-17. By 2014, ISIS had lost most of whatever utility it may have had for the Turkish-backed campaign against Asad. ISIS was focusing its attacks more on Iraq and the Kurdish areas of northeastern Syria under the control of the PKK offshoot, YPG, which had stayed neutral thus far in the civil war.

Turkey joined the Defeat-ISIS international coalition in 2014. It allowed Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga to transit Turkey to support Syrian Kurds defending Kobane against ISIS, and it trained Peshmerga in Iraq fighting ISIS. In 2015, it opened the Incirlik airbase close to the Syrian border to US and other coalition states' air operations against ISIS, increasing sortie rates. ISIS reacted with a dramatic set of terrorist attacks inside Turkey, killing by 2017 some 300 people.

Then in 2016, Turkey launched a major ground operation against ISIS positions west of the Euphrates River in Operation Euphrates Shield. Turkey's goals were initially less to fight ISIS than to block the PKK offshoot YPG (by then renamed the "Syrian Democratic Forces") from extending its control throughout the northwestern Syria border, with the seizure of the Manbij pocket. But the Turkish

operation around Jarablus and al-Bab saw major conventional fighting with eventual ISIS defeat and retreat.

Turkish support for HTS was real, but so was US indirect support. HTS was initially in the Syrian civil war an al-Qa'ida offshoot known as Jabhat al-Nusra, listed by the US and UN as a terrorist organization. But under leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani by 2015 it had renounced its terrorist (if not Islamist) identity, and operating out of its citadel in Idlib province in Syria's far northwest, proved itself an effective force against Asad, and at times against ISIS. Turkey did not "long mentor" al-Jolani, but maintained a growing, informal liaison with HTS, reportedly through Turkish intelligence, while the US acknowledged the organization's ideological shift by ruling out striking HTS targets.

HTS and Idlib became critically important in September 2018. While not part of the official Syrian resistance due to its terrorist designation, it was one of the last major forces fighting the Asad-Iran-Russia alliance. Moreover, by that time some 15 percent of Syria's population, some three million, had fled from Asad to Idlib.

The US received intelligence that the Asad alliance was planning to wipe out the Idlib

enclave and HTS. The anticipated results were dire: flight of displaced masses from Idlib to Turkey, overwhelming a country already dealing with three million plus refugees, with many fleeing onward to Europe, likely generating another refugee crisis analogous to that of 2015; and defeat of HTS, spelling military victory for Asad, thereby scotching Washington's Syria goal, over three administrations, of a ceasefire and compromise resolution of the civil war.

In response President Trump issued a clear public warning to Asad to stand down, and Secretary Pompeo delivered the same message to Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. The Asad regime then called off the offensive, and in an Istanbul summit in October Putin accepted a ceasefire in Idlib and with Turkish army outposts nearby.

Eighteen months later Asad and allies violated the ceasefire. But both HTS and Turkish forces responded effectively, while the US sent senior officials to the Idlib border and NATO headquarters to underline support for Turkey, HTS, and the millions of displaced caught in the crossfire. Asad consequently called off the offensive, freezing the conflict until his December 2024 overthrow.

The larger point here is that HTS was seen by both Ankara and Washington (somewhat less in the Biden than the first Trump administration) as part of the solution, holding off the Asad alliance while caring for the three million displaced persons in their midst, with much international humanitarian assistance. It was a policy for which Ankara and all others involved should be commended, not condemned.

Turkey has been a largely status quo state since Atatürk, able to defend itself in a tough neighborhood but basing national strength and progress on economic power and diplomatic skill, particularly integrating with the American-led Western order. Such a status does not preclude ambitious adventuresome policies such as Davutoğlu and Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman approach, just like America's traditional status quo nature did not preclude George W Bush's "democratization by the sword" agenda.

Whatever Turkey's initial goals were for Syria and beyond, by 2015 it was facing multiple threats: Asad allied with an ever more aggressive Iran with thousands of Quds Force and proxy fighters

shipped to Syria, a Russian military buildup, a PKK-led "Syrian Democratic Forces with 100,000 fighters, and a potential refugee influx exacerbating the domestic impact of the three million refugees already in Turkey. ISIS, despite its many terrorist attacks, was not of the same order of threat, and Turkey focused its Syria policy on this reality.

If the US expects its partners to ignore what they consider existential threats on their borders in order to prioritize Washington's threat perspective (which in the case of Syria is constantly changing, from Asad to ISIS to Iran to, under Biden, a confusing mix), then Washington will have few partners.

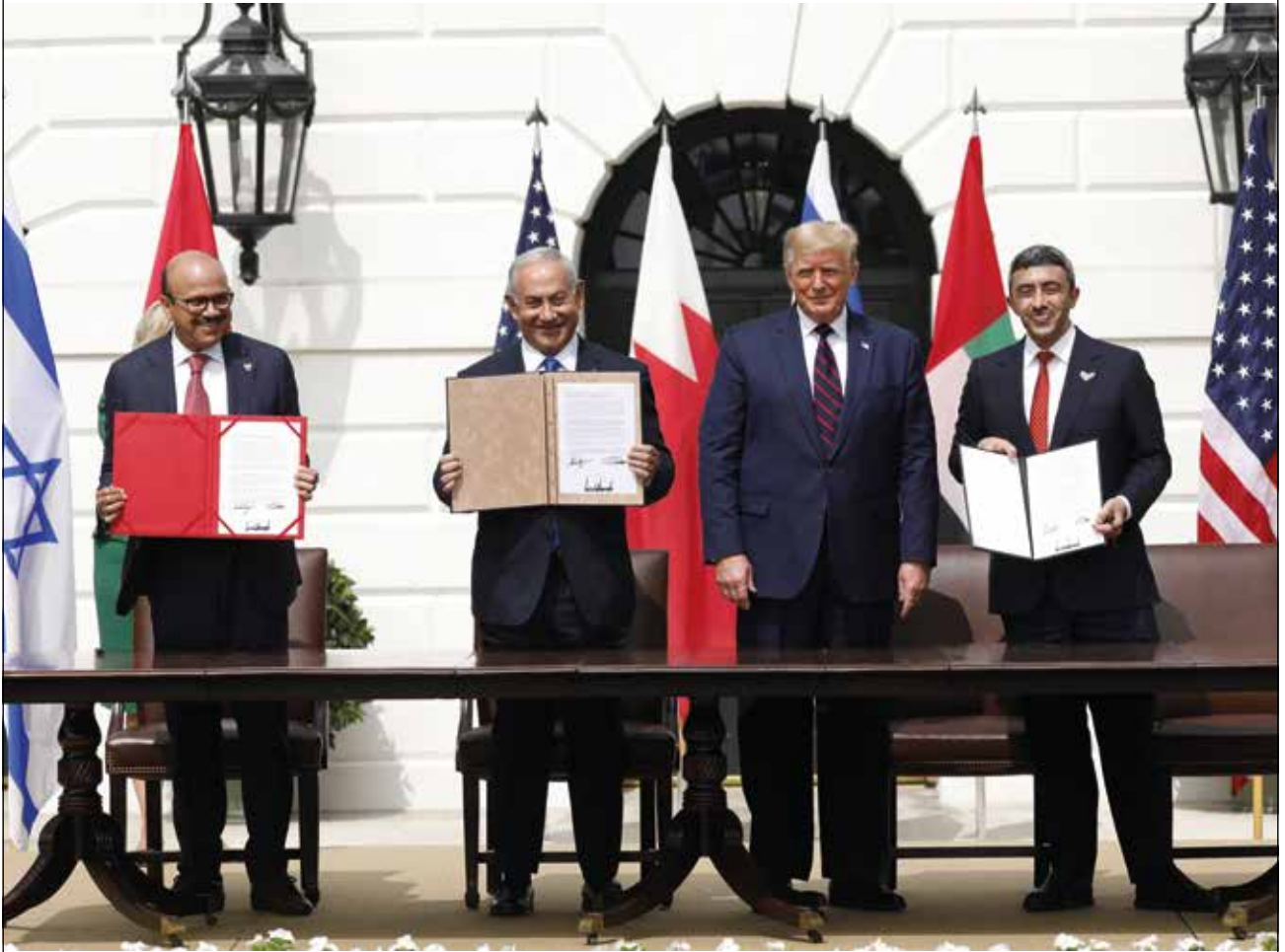
Perhaps the most concerning aspect of Ciddi's analysis of Turkish policy towards Syria is the absence of any judgment about the Asad regime, the center of the whole issue. Ciddi is right that Erdoğan sought at various points to overthrow the Asad regime, but he had a lot of company, from the Obama administration to leading Gulf states and, implicitly, the Arab League in suspending Syria's membership.

And for good reason. That regime's murderous assault on its own people produced over 600,000 deaths and 12 million citizens fleeing the regime, half the population, not to speak of the Syrian civil war's myriad threats to all its neighbors and regional stability as a whole, especially given Asad's link to Iran.

What does Ciddi think of all this? Is it a good thing that Asad fell and Iran lost much of its "Shia crescent" — a development unlikely without Turkish pressure and support for HTS? Is some accretion of Turkish regional power and influence, and an HTS-led government in Damascus, too high a price to applaud the fall of Asad and collapse of most of the Iranian proxy network? *

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.



Abraham Accords Signing Ceremony, September 2020. Photo credit: Gripas Yuri/ABACA via Reuters Connect

ON THEIR FIFTH ANNIVERSARY, STEPS TO EXPAND THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS



by Jason Isaacson

There is much to celebrate as we mark the fifth anniversary of the Abraham Accords, the historic agreements mediated by the first Trump administration and signed on September 15, 2020 by Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain, and later by the Kingdom of Morocco.

Long isolated from, and regularly vilified by, much of the Arab world, Israel today enjoys normal diplomatic relations – though not without strains – with five Arab states, open official contact with at least three others, and a range of economic and military-to-military engagements with other countries short of formal relations, all of which makes the volatile Middle East safer and more prosperous.

The process of Israel's regional integration has a long history. For decades before the Abraham Accords, Israeli diplomats, entrepreneurs, and political figures found ways of connecting with Arab counterparts – often, but not always, in third countries – pitching the mutual benefits of bilateral ties (see for example, Jeremy Issacharoff's "Four Decades of Talks with Arab Diplomats").

The American Jewish Committee played an active role as well, and continues to play that role, advancing the argument in Arab capitals that openness to Israel will serve their countries' interests in a range of fields, win favor in the United States, and equip bold leaders with political capital to promote a fair resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet, five years after the Abraham Accords, their potential remains unfulfilled – the exact objective of the Hamas terrorists and their Iranian supporters. The October 7, 2023 massacre and mass kidnapping in southern Israel, which they knew would draw an overwhelming Israeli response, froze momentum toward a Saudi-Israeli agreement reportedly nearing conclusion. That agreement, a senior Saudi official observed to me privately, would have effectively ended the Arab-Israeli conflict – an intolerable outcome for an Iranian regime that weaponizes anti-Zionism and antisemitism.

With searing images of destruction and deprivation in Gaza saturating the media, and with Israeli forces pressing the battle against Hamas – throughout the coastal enclave and in Doha – as they seek to liberate the remaining hostages, the region today is in no mood to celebrate the Abraham Accords, despite their achievements.

To alter that mood will require action by multiple stakeholders. On this fifth anniversary, reviving the vision and promise of the Abraham Accords will demand the openness, commitment, and courage of Israeli and Arab leaders – as well as the continued high-level support of Washington, and a pragmatic approach by the international community.

For Israel, still deeply scarred by the atrocities of October 7, restoring progress toward full regional integration will require bringing the war in Gaza to the earliest possible end. This will require the return of all hostages both living and dead, the replacement of Hamas by a Palestinian administration with international legitimacy and the active support

of moderate Arab states, and the withdrawal of Israeli forces to the periphery to assure security and block weapons smuggling.

Beyond that, as my meetings, public and private, with Arab leaders over many years have made clear, reviving the spirit of the Abraham Accords will require a signal from Jerusalem – however challenging in the current political context – that Israel is committed to a fair, pragmatic resolution of its territorial conflict with the Palestinians, with recognition that the antidote to Palestinian rejectionism and extremism is a political horizon for the Palestinian people. Whether that signal leads eventually to a demilitarized Palestinian state, or to an alternative political construct, will be a matter for negotiations between the parties – but opening the door to a change in the poisonous status quo will have profound resonance across the region and around the world.

For Arab governments, expanding the circle of peace and cooperation will require encouraging the trust and the risk-taking they expect of Israel by demonstrating to the Israeli public, the ultimate decision-makers in that democratic state, true acceptance, a commitment to true partnership. As President Sadat did when he flew to Israel to address the Knesset in 1977 and set Egypt on the path to peace, and as King Hussein did in 1997, three years after Jordanian-Israeli peace, when he flew to Israel and knelt in grief before the families of schoolgirls killed by a Jordanian soldier, the physical presence of Arab leaders on Israeli soil will change hearts and minds in Israel – and change the country's politics.

In addition, countering rejectionist voices and silencing those that enoble violence against Israel and against Jews, continuing the school curriculum reform process that has spread across the region and reduced incitement to hate, and demonstrating to the Arab public the benefits of engaging Israel will make it clear that the region is embarked on a new and more hopeful path.

For the United States, the opportunity to lead for peace in the Middle East presents benefits as well as demands. A more stable,

integrated region will lessen the US defense burden, completing the multilateral security architecture already beginning to take shape. It will ease the opening of new trade and energy transfer routes, including the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, advantageous to American commercial interests. The balance sheet should include an enhanced memorandum of understanding with Israel providing new security safeguards and assurances, reducing the risks inherent in the pullback of Israeli forces in Gaza and the West Bank, and a US role in coordinating stabilization in Gaza, and facilitating, as needed, the next wave of negotiations between Israel and its neighbors.

For the international community, increasingly drawn to the empty symbolism of recognition of a yet-nonexistent Palestinian state, investment in the expansion of the Abraham Accords, coupled with insistence on the delivery, not just the promise, of Palestinian Authority reforms, will yield tangible returns – including the restoration of political capital that the recent announcements from European capitals will have squandered.

After 23 months of the crisis triggered by Hamas on October 7, the survival of the Abraham Accords, thanks to the endurance of the strategic decisions made in 2020 by the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco – is cause for celebration as the region marks the agreements' fifth anniversary. It is also a summons to all stakeholders to take the next steps to realize the promises made at the White House on that September afternoon. It is time to make history again. *

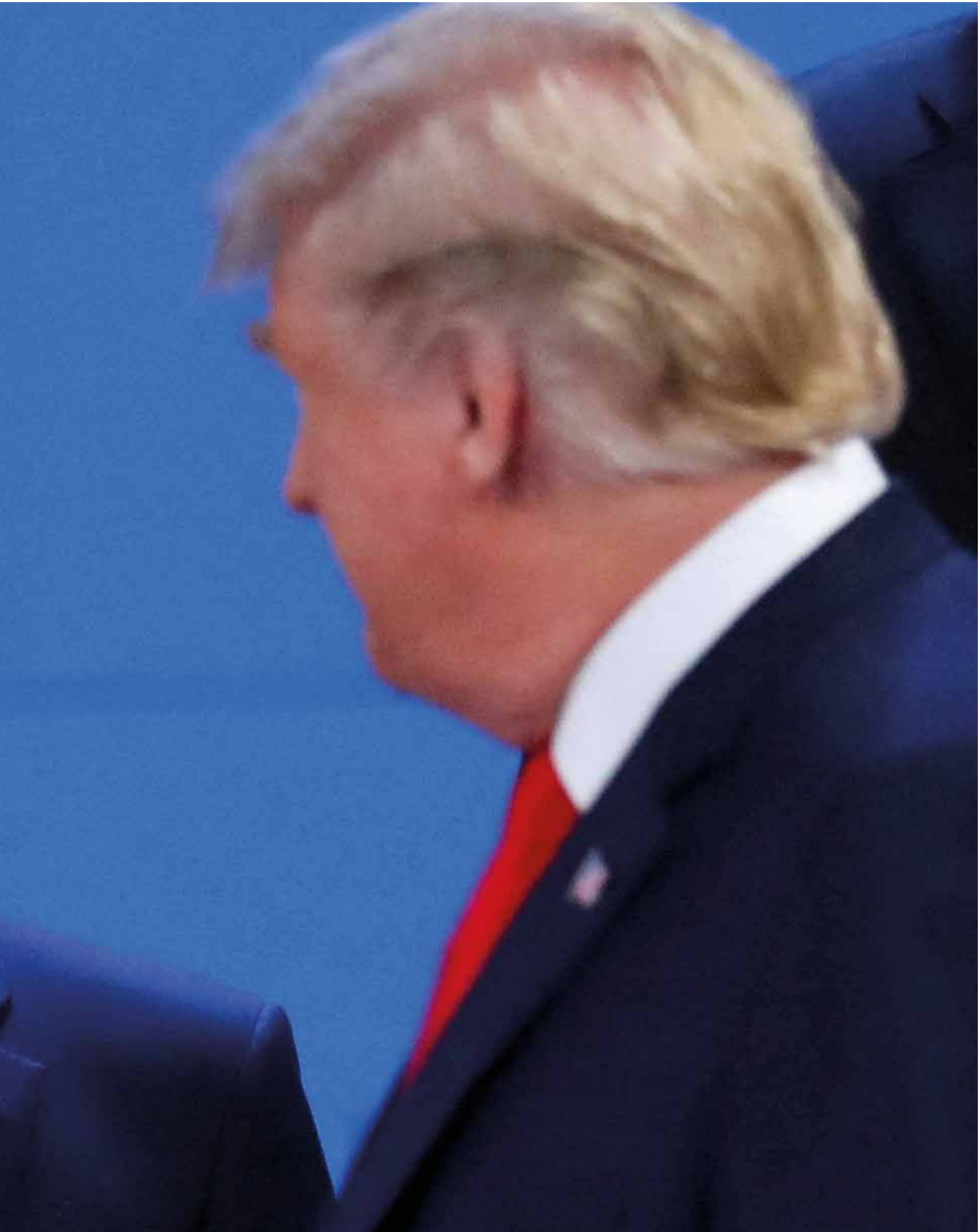
JASON ISAACSON

Jason Isaacson is Chief Policy and Political Affairs Officer of the American Jewish Committee.

THE LESSON OF RUSSIAN HISTORY



Photo credit: Reuters





by Andreas Umland

The German military historian Carl von Clausewitz, writing about the Napoleonic Wars, once commented on military aggressions more generally: “The conqueror is always peace-loving; he would much prefer to march into our state calmly.”

After the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and covertly invaded the Donets Basin (Donbas) of eastern Ukraine, Clausewitz’s basic idea was ignored by European states. Until 2022, much of European diplomacy assumed that the Kremlin’s public insistence on the peacefulness of its intentions towards Kyiv implies that one can and should negotiate and moderate Russian aims and behaviour in Ukraine. But Putin merely preferred a non-violent take-over to an uncertain military campaign against Kyiv.

The last three and a half years of Russia’s full-scale military invasion of Ukraine have changed European understanding of Moscow. Most European politicians, diplomats and experts now have few illusions about Putin’s putative love for peace.

In the second Trump administration, however, several months of American shuttle diplomacy and mediation attempts have achieved little. There are no tangible outcomes

of the intense trilateral negotiations between Washington, Moscow and Kyiv, or of the direct interactions between the US and Russian presidents. Putin made clear that there will not be a ceasefire anytime soon. Trump announced that there should be direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, though the two countries have already been negotiating on and off with each other, in different formats, for more than eleven years.

In a public comment after a May 2025 telephone talk with Trump, Putin trolled Ukraine, the US and the entire West in two ways. First, Putin said the upcoming negotiations aimed to achieve a “memorandum.” Of course there exists such a document signed by Moscow and Kyiv (as well as Washington and London), the infamous Budapest Memorandum undertaken in connection with the Ukraine’s accession to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons in December 1994.

In the Budapest Memorandum, Moscow guaranteed, in exchange for Kyiv’s agreement to hand over all of its nuclear warheads to Russia, that it will not attack Ukraine. Washington and London also assured Kyiv that they respect the Ukrainian borders and sovereignty. After Moscow has been demonstratively trampling the letter and spirit of the Budapest Memorandum for eleven years, the Kremlin is now offering to sign another memorandum.

Second, Putin added that, even “if appropriate agreements are reached,” a

“possible ceasefire” would only be “for a certain period of time.” In other words: If the negotiations are successful, the armistice will be only temporary.

The Russian economy and population are now militarized to such a degree that they cannot be easily reoriented. Moscow is no longer able to abruptly discontinue warfighting permanently. What would happen to Russia’s hundreds of thousands of enlisted soldiers, large-scale weapons production, and intense anti-Ukrainian campaigns in many spheres of Russian social life (education, media, culture), if suddenly there is a permanent peace?

These and similar signals from Moscow allow only one conclusion: To end the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russia needs to experience a humiliating defeat on the battlefield.

The lesson of history is that Russian military failures have triggered domestic liberalization, such as Tsar Alexander the Second’s Great Reforms after the Crimean War of 1854-1856, or the introduction of semi-constitutionalism under Tsar Nicholas the Second following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. One of the determinants of Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika was the disastrous failure of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979-1989.

Russian imperialism will not be neutralized by negotiations, compromises, or concessions. Instead, such approaches only promote further foreign adventurism in Moscow and military escalation along Russia’s borders. The Kremlin will one day end Russia’s expansionist wars. For that to happen, the Russian people first need to start believing that such behaviour cannot lead to victory, may trigger internal collapse, and will be resolutely punished. *

— ANDREAS UMLAND

Dr. Andreas Umland is an analyst at the Stockholm Centre for East European Studies (SCEEUS) at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI).



The bridge connecting south and north Mitrovica.
Photo credit: Reuters/Ognen Teofilovski



EUROPE FACES A THREAT BIGGER THAN RUSSIA: ITS OWN BALKANIZATION



by Dalibor Rohac

Bridge construction in the Western Balkans may be a microcosm of Europe's fragmented, post-American future.

During the Kosovo War of 1998-1999, the main bridge over the river Ibar in the ethnically divided town of Mitrovica was an important focal point. "On one side, sitting in chairs outside the Dolce Vita bar and listening to Italian music, are the Serbs," one reporter wrote. "At the other, young ethnic Albanians mill around – each group warily eyeing the other."

Twenty-five years later, simply reopening the bridge to traffic is still a controversial matter – as is the ongoing construction of new bridges over the river, launched by the government of Kosovo, to connect the Serbian-majority in the north with the Albanian-majority south of the town. In recent days, Serbian nationalists accused the authorities of "scoring political points on Serbian backs...No one consulted the Serb people in any way when they decided to start building these bridges," one leader said as a petition was launched on the Serbian side to halt the construction.

Frictions between groups living in ethnically mixed areas of Europe are a fact of life. But such frictions can take on a new bitterness outside of multinational structures providing for common security and prosperity, such as NATO and the EU.

As the United States rethinks its long-

standing commitments to Europe – from the Pentagon's planned troop reductions in Europe through President Trump's equivocation over NATO's mutual defense guarantee to the administration's ambivalence over Ukraine – many are worried that the vacuum will embolden Russia to test the alliance's conventional defenses. It is a reasonable concern, but it is only one of many that such a scenario would entail.

Another dangerous possibility is the prospect that many parts of Europe would start to resemble Mitrovica, driven by ethnic hatreds actively egged on by outside governments.

A US withdrawal would certainly encourage some, perhaps most, European countries to work more closely together, as we are already seeing with Europe's 'coalition of the willing.' Perhaps a core of EU countries would join forces to create a common fiscal capacity to pay for defense – something that European federalists have been calling on for decades. Yet, it is also clear that there will be some EU countries that will decide to stay away from such efforts. Some of them – think Slovakia and Hungary – risk drifting even further away as Europe's core makes irreversible decisions about further integration.

Some may formally leave the EU – if that sounds absurd, consult David Cameron – others may just linger on the bloc's outermost periphery while the core moves ahead with a tighter form of integration. What happens to NATO in the case of a US withdrawal from Europe is anybody's guess but Slovakia's prime

minister, Robert Fico, has been floating the idea of the country's "neutrality," i.e. its withdrawal from the alliance.

It is perfectly possible that the geopolitical turmoil set in motion by the absence of US leadership could turn the currently observed democratic backsliding in parts of Eastern Europe into a story of broader regional decline. That would reduce some of the once-successful post-communist nations to poverty and geopolitical irrelevance. Hungary, after all, is by some metrics already the poorest nation in the bloc.

To see what happens next in countries such as Slovakia, Hungary, or Romania, one needs to realize that Eastern Europe's integration into NATO and the EU has been a singularly effective tool in neutralizing the many grievances and hostilities existing between countries of the region. The counterfactual may well look like the Balkans, with its border and name disputes, breakaway regions, and constant efforts at mutual destabilization – periodically exploited by outside powers.

Hungary, which lost two-thirds of its territory and population in the post-World War I settlement, is a case in point. At no point has Viktor Orbán abandoned the idea that this fate must be reversed. "We will be there at the funeral of those who wanted to put us in the grave," he said in 2020, pointing at Western powers and accusing them of having "raped the thousand-year-old borders" of the country. "The decisive battle must be fought by the generation following us, the fifth generation after Trianon [the 1920 treaty creating modern Hungary]. They must take the final steps."

Ominous as it sounds, such rhetoric could be dismissed as overwrought, if only Orbán had not long been laying the predicate for such a "decisive battle." For years, his party, Fidesz, has been holding its summer retreat in neighboring Romania, in the Hungarian-speaking town of Băile Tușnad. This year, Ukraine exposed a Hungarian spy ring operating in Transcarpathia, among its ethnic Hungarian minority. For fifteen years now, Orbán's government has funneled

money into soccer clubs and other organizations in Hungarian-majority areas in Slovakia, buying up real-estate, and even meddling in election campaigns.

Should some countries of the region become unmoored from the EU and NATO, and should Russia's war against Ukraine succeed in some form, such tensions will rise, fueled by Budapest. Whether or not they stop short of violence is hard to predict. Yet, seeing Hungarian versions of Bosnia's Republika Srpska set up on territories of its neighbors is plausible. This would be the definitive nail in the coffin of the idea of Europe whole, free, and at peace.

In places such as Kosovo or Bosnia, adverse geopolitical outlooks, dysfunctional governance, and ethnic tensions are mutually reinforcing, creating a vicious cycle from which countries find it hard to escape – up to the point where local governments can't make trivial decisions about building bridges without inflaming ethnic passions.

What can policymakers in Europe do against such catastrophic scenarios? For one, they must exercise prudence in toying with ideas of transAtlantic disintegration – as opposed to toying recklessly with the idea of "neutrality" (as Robert Fico does) or "hussar's cuts" (an idea of balancing advanced by Viktor Orbán's advisors). Secondly, they must ensure that their countries are at the table with the big players such as Germany, France, and Poland when the critical decisions about the EU's future are made.

One can only hope that their choices will be better than those taken by their predecessors the last time Europe faced similarly seismic geopolitical shifts. *

DALIBOR ROHAC

Dalibor Rohac is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC.

WHY SPAIN REJECTED NATO'S DEFENSE SPENDING HIKE

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez at the NATO summit in The Hague, June 2025.
Photo credit: Reuters





by Richard M. Sanders

At the June 25 summit at The Hague, all but one of NATO's 32 member states agreed to raise defense spending to five percent of gross domestic product (GDP) by 2035. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez rejected the increase, insisting that his country's current plans to raise defense spending to two percent of GDP were sufficient. To preserve unanimity other leaders swallowed hard and exempted Spain from the commitment.

Current domestic politics, together with the context of history and geography, help explain this Spanish difference.

SHOW ME THE MONEY

For decades the US has pressed its European allies for greater "burden-sharing," following the declines in European defense spending after the fall of the Soviet Union. When Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, NATO member states responded at the Wales summit by affirming the goal of spending two percent of GDP on defense by 2024.

Implementation of the Wales commitments

has proceeded sluggishly, and some (including Italy, Canada and Spain) have simply failed. As of 2024, Spain's defense spending remained at 1.28 percent of GDP, the lowest level in the alliance.

Of late, the pressure on NATO's European members has become more intense. On one hand Russia continues to prosecute its war in Ukraine despite massive casualties and expense. At the same time President Trump has pressed the Europeans hard for additional spending. The alliance took a leap forward at The Hague with the 5 percent commitment, although it should be noted that only 3.5 percent must go towards "core" defense spending. The remaining 1.5 percent can go to adjacent areas such as infrastructure, resilience, and civil defense.

SPAIN GETS A PASS

While there was resistance to this ambitious goal, ultimately all the leaders of the member states agreed to it with the exception of Spain's Sánchez. (The Prime Minister of Belgium, another low defense spending state, reluctantly agreed to the five percent target after initially expressing hope only to increase spending "at our own pace, as a sovereign country.")

Ahead of the conference Sánchez had made it clear that Spain would not accept this increase, stating explicitly that he was not prepared for

greater defense expenditures at the expense of social spending. (Previously he had committed to raising defense spending to two percent of GDP by 2029 and in April said that this goal would be achieved in 2025 “without touching one cent of the welfare state.”)

To preserve unanimity it was ultimately agreed that Spain would be exempted from the requirement, based on its assertion that it would be able to meet its obligations based on the capabilities which it is committed to provide under NATO's planning processes.

Spain's defense spending is indeed modest given the size of its economy, but its military does participate in a range of NATO activities. Its active-duty armed forces number 120,000 individuals, with 72,000 in its army. It has an air force of 68 Eurofighter Typhoon and 45 older EF-18 Hornet fighter aircraft, and a navy with destroyers, frigates, submarines, and one aircraft carrier. Spain also has a defense industry of some note with strengths in aerospace and shipbuilding, which looks to participate in Europe-wide rearmament efforts.

The far left parties are unenthusiastic about Spain's military, suspicious of both NATO and the US, and uninterested in confronting Russia over Ukraine. They seek to defend and even expand Spain's extensive welfare state.

Spain has provided training to Ukraine's military. Its forces serve as the headquarters element for troops stationed in Slovakia under NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence program, and it has participated in air patrols over the Baltic and Black Seas. All told, Spain has used its limited resources in ways that seek to underscore its commitment to the alliance.

ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

Why then did Sánchez choose to highlight Spain's unwillingness to stay in step with allies, especially in light of the ten-year horizon of The Hague commitments and his recently announced increase in current military spending?

The answer lies in a combination of Spanish politics, history and geographic realities. Sánchez' Spanish Socialist Workers Party, a moderate leftist social democratic formation, lacks a congressional majority, governs in coalition with various groups further to the left, and needs support from regionalist parties, including Catalan separatists.

The far left parties are unenthusiastic about Spain's military, suspicious of both NATO and the United States, and uninterested in confronting Russia over Ukraine. They seek to defend and even expand Spain's extensive welfare state. The regionalist parties share some of these characteristics, while seeking the maximum of financial support from the central government with the minimum of oversight. Portraying himself as defending social spending against any raid on it to pay for a military buildup was thus good coalition politics for Sánchez.

And the NATO summit came at a time of particular vulnerability for him. He has had to deal with a series of scandals involving embezzlement of public resources that have reached cabinet members, Socialist Party leaders, and even his own wife. These scandals had led the far leftist and regionalist parties to consider whether it was in their interest to

continue to support his government. Sánchez thus was reluctant to insist on a commitment to major increases in defense spending.

On the heels of its refusal to participate in the agreement to increase defense spending, Spain announced that it was no longer considering the purchase of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II fighter aircraft, but would instead either purchase more Eurofighter Typhoons or wait for the Future Combat Air System to be produced by a European consortium, presumably by 2040. The timing of the announcement suggests that here too Sánchez was looking to shore up his coalition.

THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY...

Spain may still have some ambivalence regarding the Western alliance—and relations with the United States. In the aftermath of the Second World War, Spain under Francisco Franco was seen as a pariah state, led by a dictator who had been close to Hitler and Mussolini. (Spain was formally non-belligerent, but supplied Germany with raw materials, allowed German submarines to clandestinely resupply at its ports, and sent volunteers to fight against the Soviet Union.)

Spain faces issues of illegal immigration, drug trafficking and other criminal activity from North Africa. NATO has largely stayed away from these issues.

Spain was barred from joining NATO upon its founding in 1949 and from receiving Marshall Plan reconstruction financing. But the United States nevertheless offered financial assistance and in turn was allowed to build several air and naval bases that continue to remain important for the projection of American power into Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Spaniards, especially on the left, recall that during the Cold War the United States normalized relations with the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco.

Actual NATO membership was opposed by the European members as long as Spain remained under Franco. After his death in 1975 the country began a transition to democracy which culminated in the election of the socialist Felipe González as Prime Minister in 1982. Initially an opponent of Spain's joining NATO, he reversed course, seeing it, along with joining the European Union, as solidifying Spain's consolidation as a member of the democratic West. Shortly after taking office he held a referendum which approved Spain's entry.

Spain now has over four decades of participation in NATO. But the alliance simply does not hold the same existential place in the Spanish public as it does in the founding states which feared a Soviet advance into Western Europe, let alone in the former Warsaw Pact countries which gained their freedom in 1989, or in Finland and Sweden which joined in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

... AND GEOGRAPHY

Sheer distance between Spain, at Europe's far west, and Russia, beyond NATO's eastern edge, plays a role in public attitudes. Spain's immediate security concerns come from the south rather than from the east. The North African shoreline is only a short boat ride from its coast. Indeed, Spain has two enclaves on it, Ceuta and Melilla, which Morocco claims and which NATO has determined are not covered by its security guarantees.

Spain faces issues of illegal immigration, drug trafficking and other criminal activity from North Africa, and behind it the Sahel countries and West Africa, all of which gives it particular concern for the stability of these states. NATO, focused on the military rather than the police dimensions of security, has largely stayed away from these issues, which, of course affect all of the countries of its southern tier, leaving them largely to the European Union to address.

NATO does have a “Mediterranean Dialogue” with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Mauritania, but its sole major military action in North Africa was the 2011 intervention in Libya, the consequences of which are still felt today, and which, given the continued chaos there, are not likely to encourage a repeat.

It has been suggested also NATO will try to work more with sub-Saharan states to counter Russian and Chinese influence. Spain, which has been active in EU and UN stabilization missions in several of these countries, might favor such engagement, but given other demands on the alliance as well as African states’ suspicions of former colonial powers, it remains to be seen if NATO will do more there.

NATO does have some outreach to the broader Middle East through the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative in which the Gulf states of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and United Arab Emirates participate. Spain has long given considerable attention to this area, both diplomatically and commercially (including military sales). But NATO remains focused on defense against the threat from the east, three and one half years into Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

One of Napoleon’s diplomats is said to have asserted: “Europe ends at the Pyrenees.” Spain’s commitment to NATO has been solid enough that it would be counterproductive to revive this line.

But in refusing to join NATO allies in committing to the five percent of GDP defense spending increase, Sánchez demonstrated his

coalition’s internal weakness. He also played into historical and geographic factors that distinguish Spain from its NATO allies. In the 1960s the Spanish tourism authority launched a successful advertising campaign using the slogan “Spain is different.” On this issue at least, that slogan still holds true. *

RICHARD M. SANDERS

Richard M. Sanders is Senior Fellow, Western Hemisphere at the Center for the National Interest in Washington D.C. A former member of the Senior Foreign Service, he had assignments in Spain and in countries throughout Latin America and also served as Foreign Policy Adviser to the Chief of Staff, US Army.

A photograph of a middle-aged man with glasses, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus, showing some architectural details and a statue's arm.

THE GERMAN — POLISH RELATIONSHIP, SOFT BIGOTRY AND LONG GRIEVANCES





by Antonia Ferrier

Germany and Poland are European Union and NATO members, neighbors committed to the fight against an expansionist Russia with a combined massive economic might. They should be the closest of natural allies, but something is amiss.

On my way to Warsaw for the first time this summer, I listened to a podcast about the Nazi invasion and occupation of Poland. One of the co-hosts explained that at the time Germans used to view Poles like the English once saw the Irish – uneducated, unsophisticated and backward.

Warsaw is an impressive city. Humming boutiques and chic restaurants line the streets. Poland today is in the G-20 club of wealthy nations. Many who once left to work for better pay in Germany or England have returned home to thrive in a growing economy.

But this promise of a bright future is interspersed with plaques and monuments detailing Nazi barbarism from a horrible past, namely the Warsaw Uprising launched by the Polish underground in August 1944 to overthrow German rule. Barbarism doesn't begin to describe the atrocities. The Germans killed around 200,000 Poles – around the same

number of Japanese who died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined. The Nazis burned patients alive in hospitals, shot children in orphanages, and hung corpses around the city for all to see.

Every Pole, every family has a story from the war. The memory is deep. An estimated six million or one-fifth of the population died. About half, three million, were Jews and the Germans murdered about 90 percent of Poland's Jews (tragically sometimes with the collaboration of Christian Poles). But suffering pervaded every corner of the country. The Nazis viewed the Poles and Slavic peoples as subhuman and treated them with corresponding brutality.

Poland remembers other horrors as well. Russia has excelled at subjugating its western neighbor for centuries. Not only did Stalin carve up Poland in collaboration with the Nazis in 1939 but he also extinguished the country's military elite and sent hundreds of thousands of Poles east to the gulags between 1939 and 1941. The Polish underground, led by its labor unions and supported by its Catholic church, challenged and broke Moscow's yoke until the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980s. But any window for Polish hope on its eastern border quickly came to an end with Vladimir Putin's rise to power.

Germany would much rather move on from the war. And they have done a commendable amount to confront their brutal past.

Many Germans say we are not the same people or country. That was our grandparents or

great grandparents. We are a modern democratic state with no territorial ambitions outside our borders. We recognize our brutal past, honor the victims, and forward we must go. We signed a binding international border treaty in 1990 with Poland. The four victors of the war resolved any outstanding international issues when Germany reunified in 1991. Moreover, we have paid compensation to victims of Nazi crimes. Our support for Israel is unwavering. We proudly put up Israeli flags across the country after the Hamas attacks of October 7th and the Israeli flag flew next to those of Germany and the European Union on top of the Bundestag. Case closed as far as Berlin is concerned.

But it very much remains open in Poland.

Poland's recently elected President Karol Nawrocki campaigned in part on German reparations for the war. He and his conservative Law and Justice party predecessors argue that Germany owes Poland 1.3 trillion Euros. He traveled to Berlin in September with that demand in hand and got a stern NO from Berlin, as expected. A press conference between German Chancellor Frederick Merz and Nawrocki was cancelled even as both nations pledged to continue to work against the common Russian threat and the largest war in Europe since 1945.

Meanwhile, Chancellor Merz and his Christian Democrat-led coalition government is undertaking the largest shift in German security policy since the end of the Cold War. The limit on German debt spending was lifted in the spring, to allow for increased defense spending without significantly cutting social welfare spending. The country is on track to be the fourth largest defense spender in the world after the United States, China and Russia, if plans and promises are implemented. It has committed to the NATO goal of 5 percent of GDP on defense by 2035. German troops are stationed in Lithuania for the first time since World War II.

The Chancellor visited Washington where he was warmly welcomed by President Trump, negotiated with the British and the French

on a path forward with Ukrainian President Zelensky, and creatively worked to purchase American weapons systems for deployment in Ukraine. All a welcome change.

In early September, at the annual gathering of German ambassadors in Berlin, Merz spoke powerfully of a robust German and European national security posture, about standing up for European values, and of Germany's vital relationship with the United Kingdom, France, and Ukraine.

But something was missing; he didn't once mention Poland.

That should not happen given Poland's geographic position between Germany and Russia, its sizable army, and its defense spending at 5 percent of GDP – well ahead of “old Europe,” in the words of the late American Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Thinking back to that podcast and after talking to German and Polish friends, I have the distinct impression that this might well be driven by both a deep-seated German belief that they have paid for their sins and a residual sense of superiority.

I can't help but be reminded of residual English elite condescension towards the Irish. But the divide between the English memory of empire and dominance of a century ago and the economic reality of today's Celtic Tiger is massive. Today Ireland's per capita GDP is second in the EU only to Luxemburg and double that of the United Kingdom. Life in Ireland today is not that of the stereotypical peasant potato farmer of the 1800s.

Similarly, life in today's Poland is not what it was 20 or 50 years ago. Poland's economy is not that of its western neighbor, but its achievements are impressive. A prominent American banking executive told me that Poland is a leading growth market for his industry. Multinationals dot the Warsaw skyline.

German and Polish economic interconnectivity is significant. In the first half of 2025, bilateral trade between Germany and Poland reached a record €90 billion, a 5.4

percent increase over 2024. With the United States changing economic course, the European bloc needs to work together more than ever to survive. The Poland-German relationship is important because they need each other to provide a secure and prosperous future for their citizens.

Regarding bilateral political relations, German reparations may be off the table, but Berlin needs to reassess the lasting impact of its Nazi past on contemporary Polish politics and find a reasonable means of trying to heal those wounds. Sharing some of the financial burden that Poland bears as a frontline state against Russia might be a reasonable place to start discussions.

For Poland, it is also important to hear Churchill's words from 1946. The grand European experiment was designed to override historic feuds with economic and political ties and a collective European future. Germany has consciously chosen its European identity and has become the largest net contributor through the Union to other member states. This experiment has worked, despite many challenges.

Russia is threatening the European order that is integral to both countries. Heightened internal and external economic pressures across the continent are a real challenge to a prosperous future. Too much is on the line for these two countries not to chart a productive future together. Berlin must address its soft bigotry against Poland by recognizing it as the power it is, and Warsaw must work to move past the deep wounds and memory of war. *

— ANTONIA FERRIER

Antonia Ferrier, born in England and raised in Massachusetts, served in senior leadership roles for former Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Speaker John Boehner. She recently founded En Avant Strategies, a global advisory firm.



The Moscow Format on Afghanistan met on October 7, 2025 and included Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Afghan Taliban's acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.
Photo credit: Russian Foreign Ministry/Handout via Reuters

AMERICA'S OPTIONS IN AFGHANISTAN



by S. Frederick Starr

Four years have passed since the United States withdrew in chaos from Afghanistan, abandoning important projects, leaving behind billions of dollars of equipment and handing the Taliban many other assets in that country.

The Taliban still rule Afghanistan. They face a mountain of unresolved problems yet are ready to employ as much force as necessary to contain them. An exhausted and in some respects relieved population struggles to go about its business. No external power or group, including the thousands of educated Afghans abroad, possess any realistic projects to overthrow the Taliban regime.

Many countries have serious, ongoing concerns with the regime's human rights record in general and women's rights in particular. At a conference on Afghanistan held in Tashkent in July 2022, officials from both China and Russia joined counterparts from Europe, America, and dozens of other countries in declaring that their governments would withhold recognition until the situation had improved. Yet in the past three years, most of these countries have received informal envoys and *chargés d'affaires* from Kabul. Some are also now exchanging ambassadors with Kabul.

Meanwhile, Islamic terrorist groups are once again operating on the territory of Afghanistan. It is possible but unlikely that training camps for suicide bombers in the remote mountains of Badakhshan somehow escaped the notice of the Taliban rulers or are beyond their ability to suppress them. However, the fact that mid-level al-Qa'ida operatives are living in Kabul itself confirms that the new authorities either passively or actively support their presence. Afghanistan-based extremists are once again operating in parts of Tajikistan; ISIS recruited Tajiks from both sides of the border to carry out the bombing of the Crocus City entertainment complex in Moscow on March 24, 2024, killing 140 people.

In reviewing US options in Afghanistan, let's begin by taking stock of what other countries are doing there.

CHINA AND RUSSIA

Washington views China as the most eager aspiring hegemon in Afghanistan. Beijing had long worked to prevent Afghanistan-based Islamists from supporting Uyghur separatists in its province of Xinjiang and had provided aid, trade, and investments to Kabul during Hamid Karzai's presidency. Now, in addition to reviving its old contracts and projects, it is also eager to connect Afghanistan's long projected internal transport network with its Belt and Road initiative (discussed in the Pakistan section below).



China, which already had bought rights to Afghanistan's huge copper deposits at Mes Aynak, seeks other resources and especially rare earth minerals. Meanwhile, the Chinese Khawar Construction Company contracted to revive the former regime's vast Kabul New City project, planned as a modern metropolis adjoining ancient Kabul.

In the summer of 2025, Beijing hosted a meeting with Afghanistan and Pakistan. In addition to transport issues, the session helped resolve the border issues between Afghanistan and Pakistan. A crisis had erupted with Pakistan's forced repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees to Afghanistan. An armed conflict had also occurred on the Afghan border over a deadly incursion into Pakistan by Afghan Taliban fighters in support of their kindred group, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan. This session refurbished ties between Kabul and Islamabad and affirmed Beijing's role as peacemaker.

Russia is still smarting over the Soviet Union's failed invasion and occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 and remains eager to reclaim its place at the table in Kabul. Having already built an impressive Russian Cultural Center in the heart of Kabul during Ashraf Ghani's presidency, it was one of the few countries to keep open its embassy after the Taliban takeover. It has provided 1280 tons of flour to Afghanistan's northern provinces and opened its doors to some 80,000 unemployed Afghan workers. Meanwhile, Russia's NTC Protei Company contracted with the Taliban government to install 4H telecommunication systems in four Afghan provinces. In July 2025, Russia became the first country to extend formal recognition to the Taliban government.

Moscow now seeks to reassert its presence across the entire region to its south, beginning with the five former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the three former Soviet states of the Caucasus. It views Afghanistan as an integral

part of the road and rail network it seeks to build from its southern border clear to the Gulf of Oman at the Iranian port of Chabahar. During the pro-American government in Kabul, Russia's trunk route deliberately skirted Afghanistan but now, like China, it is eager to incorporate Afghanistan into its north-south network.

Russia would like to incorporate Afghanistan into its Eurasian Economic Union, just as China would like to bring it into its Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which already includes Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian states.

PAKISTAN, INDIA, TURKEY AND THE ARAB GULF STATES

Afghanistan has long-term cultural affinities with Pakistan, India, Turkey, and the Gulf states.

Pakistan's goals range beyond border-related issues (discussed above). Its paramount concern is to prevent Pashtuns in Afghanistan from using Pashtuns in Pakistan to destabilize the country. A second goal is to support a new railroad line from Peshawar to Kabul to link with the Chinese railroad line from Kashgar, thus connecting China by rail to Pakistan's proposed new Indian Ocean port at Gwadar, which China is also funding and building. Islamabad sees Gwadar as in competition with Iran's expanding port at Chabahar. No wonder, then, that delegations have bustled back and forth between Islamabad and Kabul to deliberate on this project.

Iran maintains close links with Afghanistan's Hazara ethnic minority, with whom it shares the Shi'ite faith. The official languages of Iran and Afghanistan, Farsi and Dari, are so close as to obviate the need for interpreters. Iran also has an interest in the welfare of their ethnic cousins, Afghanistan's ethnic Tajiks, who for centuries dominated the government in Kabul. When the US fled from Kabul, Tehran kept open its embassy in the hope that Tajiks would not be marginalized under Taliban rule. Meanwhile, a host of Iranian businessmen flocked to the western Afghan city of Herat, which they now

use as a base for expanding their enterprises to the rest of Afghanistan.

Several factors constrain Iranian influence in Afghanistan. The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns, dominate the Taliban government, leaving the Persianate Tajiks, with only 27 percent of the population, as junior partners at best. Both the Pashtun and Afghan Tajiks are Sunni. Iran's war with Israel crippled its economy, forcing it to send half a million Afghan refugees back home, which the Taliban view as a hostile act. A rapid improvement in this relationship is not anticipated.

India, by contrast, while long opposed to the Taliban, has opened a budding relationship with Afghanistan's new rulers. Brushing aside human rights issues, it boldly reopened its Kabul embassy in 2022. India has expanded its humanitarian aid and medical assistance to Afghanistan, with Indians helping with its distribution. Mindful of the three billion dollars of Indian investment in the port at Chabahar, India's foreign secretary Vikram Misri met with Afghanistan's foreign minister pro tem Amir Khan Muttaqi in January 2025. Misri stressed India's continuing support for Iran's port of Chabahar, as opposed to the aspiring Pakistani-Chinese project at Gwadar. India's emerging ties with Afghanistan might be seen as an extension of its broader conflict with Pakistan.

Turkey was among the first to call for the recognition of the Taliban government, though it followed ten other countries in establishing relations. The Turkish Red Crescent, the Turkish government's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority, and diverse Turkish NGOs all provide humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, a Turkish firm with strong government backing rushed to restore the generating capacity of the important Kajaki hydroelectric dam in the Pashtun heartland of Helmand province.

Ankara has three goals in Afghanistan: first, to check the large and destabilizing flow of Afghan immigrants to Turkey; second, to reopen Afghanistan to Turkish firms; and third and most important, to absorb Afghanistan into its Turkic



Afghan Taliban's Minister of Internal Affairs and de facto national leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani.
Photo credit: Reuters/Ali Khara

world strategy. As announced in President Erdoğan's "Vision 2040," Turkey aims to link all Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia and the Caucasus in a single regional "Organization of Turkic States" under Ankara's umbrella, integrating businesses, media, and security organs. Though Turkey is reopening Turkish language schools in Afghanistan, the total number of speakers of any Turkic language there does not exceed one eighth of the population. Thus, either Erdoğan will have to soften the ethno-linguistic definition of his project in order to include Afghanistan (and Tajikistan as well).

Finally, the six Gulf Arab states have cautiously opened their doors to the new Taliban government by providing food, medical aid, and other forms of humanitarian assistance. Qatar's role in the Afghan-US negotiations in 2019-2021 positioned it to take an active role in assisting

Kabul's new government. The United Emirates established an air bridge to deliver aid, while Abu Dhabi's GAAC Holdings signed a contract to manage Afghanistan's main international airports. Formal Gulf state recognition of the Taliban government has been slow in coming, but investors help fund infrastructure and other projects in Afghanistan.

THE CENTRAL ASIANS

Three Central Asian peoples have co-nationals living in Afghanistan. Tajiks number one quarter of Afghanistan's population, Uzbeks account for six percent and Turkmen three percent, together more than a third of Afghanistan's population. Since most of these minorities are concentrated in Afghanistan's relatively developed north, they enjoy a

somewhat magnified economic and political influence in the country. Family and commercial links across the border are constant and intense.

Afghanistan's Islamic extremists have posed a series of security threats to Central Asian states, including involvement in Tajikistan's civil war in the 1990s, and support for an uprising in the Uzbek city of Andijan and an attempt on the life of Uzbekistan's president.

But Central Asia's leaders also see Afghanistan as their single most important and undeveloped economic opportunity. Throughout the ages, Central Asia's most significant and uninterrupted trade was with what are today Pakistan and India. This corridor, called The Great India Road, rivaled the so-called Silk Road between Europe and China and far surpassed it in cultural and religious impact. Though rarely interrupted by invasions or wars in medieval and early modern times, tsarist Russia and then the USSR closed it tight, forcing Central Asians to trade only through their northern neighbor. Now their highest priority is to reopen this corridor, which they seek to do by building road, railroad, and telecommunication systems by the shortest route available, i.e., through Afghanistan.

Largely neglected in Washington, Central Asia's corridor project through Afghanistan is making solid progress. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan both expect to conduct three billion dollars-worth of trade with Taliban-ruled Afghanistan by the end of 2025 and both countries are working with Kabul to complete the planning and financing of the proposed new railroad lines. Several countries with which Washington maintains or seeks positive relations will benefit from expanded trade across Afghanistan, including India, Turkey, the Gulf states, and Japan, and would welcome US efforts to advance it.

As realists, the Central Asians know this corridor requires the consent of China and Russia, which control the routes leading to the southern ports that now skirt Afghanistan on both sides and to which new Afghan lines must be connected. Beyond Afghanistan, sections

of the railroads leading to these ports in both Pakistan and Iran are beset by grave problems, namely, an armed separatist movement in Pakistan's Balochistan province and serious technical bottlenecks in Iran. However, Central Asian states see this project as allowing them more independence from Russia while creating a more internally coordinated trading region.

The World Bank and Asian Development Bank had earlier supported these initiatives but both are withholding support until the Taliban government gains international legitimacy. Even though the United Nations remains engaged with Afghanistan and provides international assistance there, it has suspended the Taliban government's voting rights. In July 2025, the General Assembly overwhelmingly adopted a resolution expressing concern over what its members consider the further erosion of human rights there.

Today the relatively stable countries of Central Asia stand in sharp contrast not only to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran but also to both Russia and China, both of which today face destabilizing domestic international and domestic challenges. The "arc of instability" that Zbigniew Brzezinski saw in Central Asia in the late 1970s has vanished and shifted instead to its powerful neighbors, a reality that Washington would ignore at its peril.

LEADERSHIP IN KABUL: A WILD CARD

There is an unacknowledged duel between the grim and reclusive fifty-eight year old leader of the Taliban faithful, Haibatullah Akhundzada, who works from his base in the impoverished southern city of Kandahar, and the more accessible forty-six year old Minister of Internal Affairs and de facto national leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, who resides in relatively modern Kabul.

Washington is well aware of Haqqani's sinister past. As heir to the leadership of the Haqqani terrorist network he organized a heavily armed attack in 2008 on the Serena

Hotel in Kabul, which killed eight people, including an American. Built by the Aga Khan, imam of the moderate Ismaili sect, the hotel was a natural target for extremists. Haqqani also tried to assassinate former Afghan president Hamid Karzi. The US government offered a ten-million dollar bounty for his death or capture, but in a conciliatory move Washington lifted the bounty in 2025.

Nowadays Minister Haqqani eagerly engages in interviews with American and other international reporters and foreign leaders, promotes economic development, and confidently declares that in time there will be progress on women's education and employment. In several of these interviews he has professed to seek good relations with the United States and all other Western countries.

One cannot predict how this face-off will be resolved, but the odds-on favorite is Haqqani. In a recent sermon Akhundzada railed against worldliness and tensions between Afghan citizens and their government, which many see as an indication that his influence is waning.

THE UNITED STATES

During the Biden administration, the US maintained a diplomatic boycott of the Taliban regime. The US either ended or suspended support for infrastructure projects such as Turkmenistan's 1100 mile-long TAPI gas pipeline across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, the World Bank's project to transmit electricity from Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, and the trans-Afghan transportation corridor that Washington itself had initiated. The US has frozen seven billion dollars in Afghan assets held by a New York bank, which the Kabul government wants returned.

US humanitarian aid to Afghanistan continued during the Biden administration. In addition, an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 Afghans entered the US illegally but the Taliban have refused to accept their return.

Early in his second term, President Trump ordered an almost complete cessation of American support for humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, including funds for the World Food Program. Also, the temporary protected status of thousands of Afghan emigres in the United States was cancelled.

Then, Trump sent former US envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, along with Adam Boehler, the US Special Representative for Hostage Affairs, to Kabul to meet with acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi about the release of detailed American citizens. The Taliban's official spokesman declared that the discussions had opened a path to further positive interaction. President Trump has also recently asked the Taliban to allow the US to reclaim a presence at the Bagram airfield, which his predecessor abandoned in 2021, though that appears unlikely.

Whether the United States remains disengaged from today's Afghanistan or instead chooses some level of gradual involvement will have serious implications that extend far beyond that country's borders. Engagement might strengthen the possibility of the Islamic Emirate evolving over time into a less tyrannical entity. Engagement might also support discrete efforts of the other countries of Greater Central Asia to link arms in some kind of alliance that protects their individual sovereignties and keeps them open to America and allied countries.

The former states of Soviet Central Asia long suffered from a double isolation, first from each other and second from access to southbound routes that are essential if their politics and economies are to escape from the continuing pressures from Russia. Central Asia remains the least integrated and most isolated world region. The extent and character of America's future engagement with Afghanistan will directly impact this important project on Russia's and China's borders.

The entire region, including Afghanistan, wants to expand links to the economies of India and southeast Asia and hence diversify

their commercial and cultural relations in a manner that will expand their freedom of action and undergird their sovereignty. If that expansion only occurs in a manner that meets the geopolitical demands of Russia or China, Washington could face the prospect of a vast belt of closed economies and authoritarian societies extending from China's border with South Korea clear to the Persian Gulf.

Washington should consider a more active approach to Afghanistan. Economic disengagement comes at a cost. A study by the U.S. Geological Survey of Afghanistan's copper, gold, cobalt, lithium and rare earth minerals estimated their total value at one trillion dollars. The China Metallurgical Group Corporation is activating its three billion dollar investment in the Mes Aynak copper deposit, one hour's drive southeast of Kabul, and other megaprojects are in planning.

Here are two steps that Washington could undertake to gradually engage Afghanistan. First, open regular communication with the five Central Asian states on Afghan affairs generally, including economics, human rights, politics, social conditions, and prospects for trans-Afghan transport. Washington should approach this not as a back-door path to extending diplomatic recognition to Kabul but as a means of gaining insights beyond those provided by its own intelligence agencies, which have often fallen short in their analyses of Afghan affairs.

Second, continue direct dialogue with Kabul and expand the agenda to include investors' rights and trans-Afghan transport. Simultaneously open discussion with relevant American and foreign banks, international financial institutions and foreign governments regarding the financing of trans-Afghan transport.

As the US shifts resources to engagement in Asia, policy makers should not neglect Central Asia. Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld disagreed on many issues. But they were both convinced that the fate of what

we might call Greater Central Asia, of which Afghanistan is a part, would be of significant strategic concern to the United States. Active but prudent strategic engagement offers a responsible path forward. *

S. FREDERICK STARR

S. Frederick Starr is Distinguished Fellow for Eurasia at the American Foreign Policy Council and founding chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. His books include *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* and *The New Silk Roads*. He is also a research professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and has served as President of Oberlin College and the Aspen Institute.



Containers at the China-Kazakhstan Logistics Cooperation Base in Lianyungang, China, March 2025.
Photo credit: CFOTO via Reuters Connect

HOW KAZAKHSTAN CAN BECOME THE HUB OF THE NEW SILK ROAD



by Andrew D'Anieri

The Trans-Caspian International Transit Route or “Middle Corridor” is Central Asia’s best bet for increasing connectivity and economic ties to the West. But Kazakhstan, the corridor’s hub, faces internal challenges like price competitiveness and external threats like climate change and geopolitics.

The Middle Corridor stretches from western China across the vast Kazakh steppe and the Caspian Sea, then across the mountainous South Caucasus countries, and splits in two on the way to Europe via Turkey and the Black Sea. The route is a shorter distance than the northern rail corridor across Russia or the southern maritime route that sails through the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. Yet the trans-Caspian’s relatively numerous transshipment points—from rail and road transport to maritime back to rail and again back to maritime—make trade logistics challenging.

Moscow’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine made the Middle Corridor a more popular transport route for shippers who wanted to avoid moving goods through Russia. From 2021 to 2022, container volumes increased 33 percent across the Caspian Sea. Demand so far exceeded capacity in 2023 that high costs and wait times due to logistical inefficiencies actually caused a slight dip in 2023 cargo volumes.

Kazakhstan in particular was able to mitigate the shipping bottlenecks, resulting in more than 4.5 million tons of container cargo across the Caspian in 2024. Perhaps most significantly, the Kazakh government claims its ports have capacity to handle 6.1 million tons, plenty of headroom in which to process greater container volumes. As volumes have picked back up, transit times are now down across the entire route. A recent study found it took 30 days to

transit goods from central China to Germany via the Middle Corridor. That’s down from the 2022 peak of 50 days it took to transit between eastern Kazakhstan and southern Romania, a considerably shorter distance.

Increasing capacity and decreasing transport times, combined with a major uptick in Western interest in critical minerals and supply chain security, have added further momentum to the Middle Corridor’s development. Kazakhstan is rich in rare earth elements and critical minerals necessary for the next generation of energy transition. Indeed, the transport of minerals and metals from Central Asia to Europe may be the best use case for the route as an Asia to Europe conduit, rather than a regional hub for China-to-Europe trade. Kazakhstan exports could reduce Beijing’s influence on Middle Corridor throughput. A win-win for the West and for Caspian countries like Kazakhstan leery of an overreliance on China.

Nevertheless, the challenges to the Middle Corridor are significant. Climate change is disproportionately affecting Central Asia. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev noted at the Astana International Forum that temperatures in Central Asia are rising twice as fast as the world average; water reserves are lower and Caspian Sea levels are receding at a startling rate. These put direct pressure on the viability of the Middle Corridor. Falling Caspian Sea levels make it more difficult for larger ships to dock and transport volumes at scale. Mining, too, is an exceedingly water-intensive industry, meaning Kazakhstan will have to balance attracting natural resource investment with the water needs of its growing population.

Another risk to the Middle Corridor is if the United States (and possibly the EU) removes sanctions on Russia and capricious European companies consider returning to the Northern corridor for inputs and cheap goods from China? In that scenario, demand for trans-Caspian trade on the whole would very likely decrease, including even some seaborne oil shipments that are a useful



The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (Middle Corridor).
Source: Wikimedia Commons / Tanvir Anjum Adib

hedge for Kazakhstan against instability affecting the CPC pipeline that runs through Russia.

Kazakhstan and its Middle Corridor partners can mitigate against external shocks by competing on shipping prices to increase the viability of Asia-Europe trade across the Caspian in the immediate term.

In 2023, shipping costs along the length of the Middle Corridor ranged from \$2,500–\$3,250, roughly equivalent to those along the Northern Corridor. According to the World Bank, shipping across the Caspian alone cost between \$230–460, quite expensive compared to a \$1,349 tariff from Beijing to Rotterdam along the Southern Maritime route. But the recent expansion of Aktau—Kazakhstan’s largest Caspian port—has seen throughput more than triple in the first quarter of 2025.

Getting shipping costs down is a natural element of attracting investment in critical minerals development. Mining deals must make economic sense for companies to invest in long-term projects and lowering transport costs for exporting mineral products increases overall project viability. This is especially true if Kazakhstan wants to develop the processing capabilities to export semi-finished mineral and metal products, not just raw ore. Refined mineral products are often more expensive to ship than raw materials, so costs must be lower elsewhere.

Astana recognizes the need to address infrastructure bottlenecks. It should improve

logistics quality to make shipping more efficient and secure. This should include further training for port operators as volumes increase, integrating digital technologies at transshipment points, and closer adherence to international logistics standards and regulations to avoid overburdening infrastructure. The external risks to the Middle Corridor place a premium on high-quality, cost-effective logistics if the route is to reach its potential.

Fortunately for Kazakhstan, international interest in its natural resource wealth is at its highest point since the country’s hydrocarbon boom began in the 1990s. Western companies and governments have the capital and motivation to help develop the country’s mineral resources—and by extension the Middle Corridor—if they believe such investments will be profitable.

It is therefore in Kazakhstan’s interest to continue streamlining its trade logistics capabilities to help turn opportunities into bankable projects. By competing on price and logistics quality, Kazakhstan and its Middle Corridor partners can both attract foreign investment and mitigate external risks to this growing transcontinental trade route. *

— ANDREW D’ANIERI

Andrew D’Anieri is the associate director of the Atlantic Council’s Eurasia Center.

HOW A BAD DEAL IN THE INDIAN OCEAN UNDERMINES THE WEST





Protest against the UK handover of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius, June 2025.
Photo credit: ZUMA Press Wire via Reuters Connect



by Paul du Quenoy

On May 22, the UK government of Labour's Keir Starmer signed a treaty with the island nation of Mauritius, a former British colony in the Indian Ocean, to cede sovereignty over the Chagos Islands, a seven-atoll archipelago that includes the Diego Garcia military base. Though the deal contains protections for this base, it also raises questions about Labour's ability to preserve Western strategic interests.

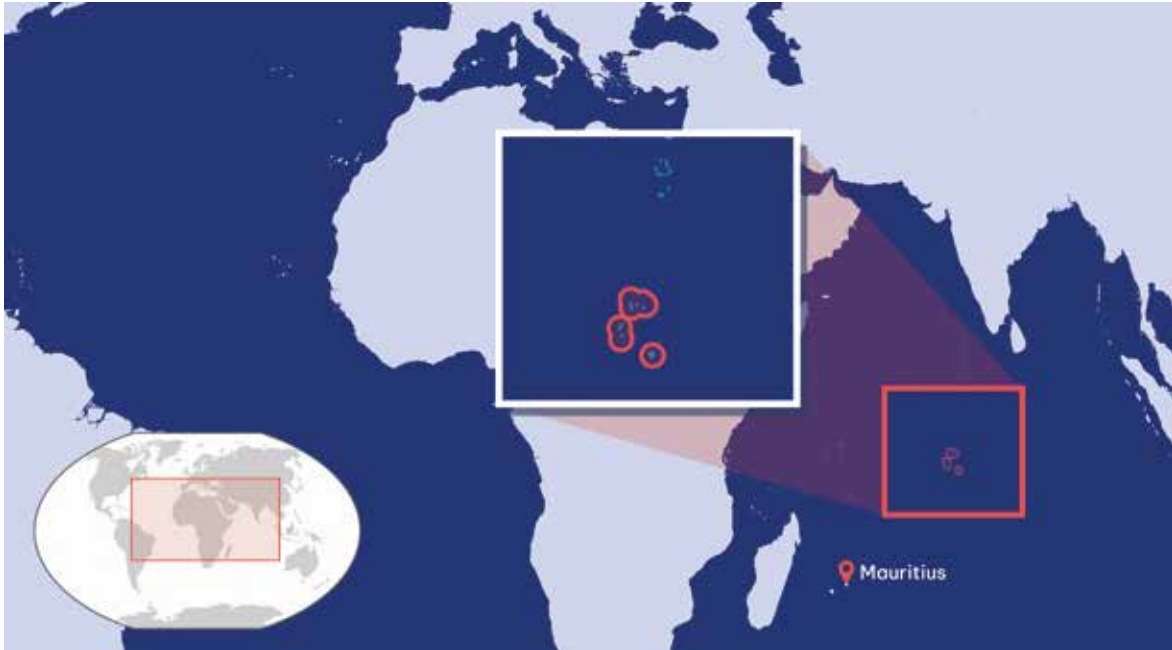
BACKGROUND ON DIEGO GARCIA AND THE CHAGOS ISLANDS

Historically, the Chagos Islands had no connection to Mauritius, which lies 1,361 miles away. Their connection is a legacy of recent British colonialism: the British Empire governed both as one jurisdiction. The Chagos Islands have no indigenous population. The British imported contract plantation laborers from elsewhere as civilian residents. The plantations had become unprofitable by the 1960s and its civilian employees were compelled by the British to leave by 1973.

During World War II, Britain established a small naval base in the Chagos Islands to monitor Axis submarine and surface raider sorties. The base closed in 1946 and Britain granted usage rights to the US military for Cold War strategic purposes.

When Mauritius gained independence in 1965, the UK paid it three million pounds sterling to leave out the Chagos Islands, with no recorded objection from Mauritius's government at that time. A year later, the British granted the US a 50-year lease for base rights on the largest island, Diego Garcia, in exchange for a \$14 million discount on submarine-launched Polaris missiles. Due to expire in 2016, the lease carried a special provision for automatic renewal for an additional twenty years – through 2036 – so that US base rights remain intact for at least another eleven years.

Diego Garcia is remote enough from the nearest coastlines in the Indian Ocean basin to be safe from attack, but close enough to support military operations in an arc extending from South Africa across the Middle East and Indian subcontinent to Southeast Asia. Over time, facing rising security challenges and strategic setbacks that deprived it of forward positions in mainland Asia, the US expanded Diego Garcia to a massive naval and air base, including port facilities capable of docking the largest



British Indian Ocean Territory. Map source: Wikimedia Commons / TUBS

American warships, huge runways to receive the most powerful aircraft, and accommodations for thousands of personnel and supply facilities.

Diego Garcia survived the wave of post-Cold War base closures in the Pacific region. It supported operations during the Gulf War, the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan, and the recent military actions in the Red Sea. If conflict with Iran renews, the base will certainly support operations there as well. Diego Garcia is also well situated to disrupt Chinese maritime routes to Africa, where Beijing has carried out an ambitious policy to support development in exchange for base rights and access to raw materials. Mauritius, which has had a free trade agreement with China since 2019, is no exception. Commerce between the two countries has increased tenfold since 2000 and nearly doubled in just the last three years, with China enjoying a massive trade surplus with the island nation.

Diego Garcia today functions with some 400 active military personnel – almost all Americans – and about 2,000 civilian contractors. Access to the entire territory is restricted, with no commercial activity or tourism permitted, and with limits on spousal deployments to Diego Garcia and marine recreation.

THE STARMER GOVERNMENT DECISION

“Another surrender and a handover in all but name. This government consistently undermines Britain, and it is absolutely unforgivable. The Falklands will be next,” posted former Conservative British Home Secretary Suella Braverman recently, after it was reported that the Starmer government intends to cede Gibraltar’s border controls to Spanish and European Union officials. That agreement has not been finalized, and government spokesmen insist that Gibraltar will remain British. On the

other hand, the Chagos transfer of sovereignty is expected to become official later this year.

The Chagos deal will allow Britain to lease the Diego Garcia base territory for 99 years at an average annual cost of about 101 million pounds sterling. The agreement also creates an exclusion zone that prohibits any outside military presence within a 24-mile radius of the base, bans foreign military stations in the outer Chagos Islands, and permits the US and the UK to veto any Mauritian initiatives that could affect base operations. The US will continue to bear the costs of Diego Garcia's operations, but there are no provisions to enforce the terms restricting foreign military access and Mauritius maintains no standing armed forces.

Throughout the process, Starmer has proclaimed Diego Garcia “absolutely vital” and spun the sovereignty transfer as the only way to preserve the base in the face of Mauritian opposition. Mauritius has claimed since the early 1980s that the Chagos Islands carve-out in 1965 was illegal under international law. In 1984 Mauritius also declared an exclusive economic zone that controversially included the Chagos Islands. Led by Margaret Thatcher, who launched a war to preserve British control over the Falkland Islands at around the same time, Britain made shows of strength over the Chagos but also offered an empty gesture, suggesting that it might hand them over to Mauritius if they became militarily unnecessary. In addition, displaced Chagos Island residents and their descendants have won multiple British legal rulings supporting their right to return to the islands or receive financial compensation for their removal.

In February 2019, the International Court of Justice, having been requested to issue an advisory opinion by the UN General Assembly, advised that “the United Kingdom is under an obligation to bring to an end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible.” In 2021, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the Universal Postal Union also issued administrative rulings stating

that Britain has no sovereignty over the islands.

None of these judgments is legally binding. Mauritius has wisely limited assertions of sovereignty to a few symbolic gestures like planting a Mauritian flag on one of the uninhabited outer Chagos islands in 2022.

Once Labour was back in power in London, the UK folded, at a time when Diego Garcia remains of great importance. Farther afield, strategic planners in Beijing – and perhaps in Madrid and Buenos Aires (where nearby British outposts are also vulnerable) – have undoubtedly taken note. *

PAUL DU QUENROY

Paul du Quenoy is President of the Palm Beach Freedom Institute.



A view of the damaged exterior of the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation in Melbourne, Australia, July 5, 2025. Photo credit: via Reuters

AUSTRALIA'S NOT SO QUIET CRISIS



by Philip Dalidakis

Australia, for decades a global example of peaceful multicultural coexistence, now finds itself confronting a deeply uncomfortable truth. Beneath the sun-soaked optimism of our cities lies a rising tide of tension and disharmony, triggered not by homegrown animosity, but by foreign agendas exploiting the freedoms of a Western liberal democracy.

At the center of this turbulence is a sophisticated campaign masquerading as grassroots solidarity with Palestinians but which, in reality, is almost certainly being funded by actors linked to Iran and Qatar. In universities, on the streets, and increasingly within the arts and creative sectors, this movement has sowed confusion, fear and social division, targeting Australia's Jewish community, a group already familiar with the dangers of being both hyper-visible and politically marginal.

A DISTORTED ECHO OF DISSENT

Pro-Palestinian encampments and mass demonstrations give the impression of an overwhelming public consensus. But that view is superficial. It is more akin to a loud minority. However, the scale and coordination of these protests suggest something far more organized than organic student protests.

Intelligence sources and policy analysts have noted the presence of external funding, messaging support, and ideological steering from entities misaligned with Australia's democratic values.

This includes Iranian-affiliated groups known for their disinformation campaigns and Qatari-backed networks, often tied to Islamist

organisations operating under the guise of charitable or educational causes. Their goal is not simply to criticise Israel, a legitimate endeavour in any open society but to erode trust in democratic institutions, inflame community tensions and establish a climate of fear, mistrust and ultimately political and social instability.

What begins as a poster on the lawns quickly becomes a test of institutional support for freedom of speech and thought and then morphs into investigations of student and academic intimidation. For Australia's Jewish community, small in number but a part of the Australian story since arriving as convicts on the first fleet, this has become an existential crisis.

PERCEPTION AS REALITY: THE CHILLING EFFECT

In a nation of over 26 million, Australia's Muslim population exceeds one million and continues to grow. This contrasts with a Jewish population estimated at fewer than 150,000. The disparity is not just demographic, it is political and cultural as well. The amplification of anti-Israel sentiment across campuses and social media platforms, especially when couched in the language of decolonization and liberation, creates a distorted perception of societal consensus.

The truth is far more nuanced. While the overwhelming majority of Muslim Australians seek peaceful coexistence and shared prosperity, a vocal and radicalized minority is using the Israel-Hamas war to further an ideological pursuit contrary to Australia's values. Add people from both the far left and the far right who are using the conflict to further their own agendas and the result is a local Jewish community that feels increasingly under siege, unable to distinguish between those acting in bad faith and genuine protest.



Anti-Israeli protesters outside Israeli restaurant Miznon in Melbourne, July 4, 2025.
Photo credit: AAPIMAGE via Reuters Connect

This fear is not theoretical. It is lived every day through online harassment, workplace harassment, hate mail, graffiti, doxing of Jewish creatives, and the ostracization of students who dare identify with the State of Israel or who simply wear a kippah or a Magen David. What makes this particularly insidious is that the perpetrators often use anti-Zionism to cloak their antisemitism, exploiting progressive language to mask regressive intentions.

THE GOVERNMENT RESPONSE: LATE BUT NOT LACKING

To its credit, the government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has recognized the rising threat and responded to increasing antisemitic incidents and security concerns expressed by Jewish leaders. Legislative changes to strengthen protections against hate speech, the bolstering of community safety grants,

and closer coordination with state based law enforcement agencies are all welcome measures.

But much of this response has been belated. It took the public outcry after the fire bombing of the Adass Synagogue in Melbourne, along with sustained media attention, for the government to step in. A troubling pattern is emerging: antisemitism often goes unrecognized until it can no longer be ignored. Indeed, the most recent attempted arson on the East Melbourne Hebrew Congregation on the same night that the Israeli restaurant Miznon was violently attacked by pro-Palestinian protestors meant that the government and public could no longer look away. These were no longer isolated incidents, they were violent crimes that shocked the broader community.

Nowhere was this delay more painfully felt than in the arts sector. Jewish philanthropists and creatives, long celebrated for their contributions and support to the Australian arts

and literary world, found themselves named, shamed, and professionally blacklisted through orchestrated online campaigns. In several cases, private information was leaked, leading to real-world threats and police involvement. These acts weren't mere protests, they were targeted acts of intimidation and bullying.

A TURNING POINT

The government recently released the 2025 Action Plan of the Australian Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism, authored by Special Envoy Jillian Segal. It offers a comprehensive strategy to tackle antisemitism across Australian society, from education and digital platforms to law enforcement and cultural institutions.

Prime Minister Albanese lent his authority to the launch of the report by being present. Though he did not commit to implementing all the recommendations, he nevertheless acknowledged the need to take action:

"There's a number of things in here that we are doing. There's a number of things that can be implemented quickly. And a number of things that will require work over a period of time. Part of the recommendations is that we will receive an annual report, including an assessment of progress on these issues."

This commitment to ongoing review and accountability is essential and the report maps out practical interventions; curriculum development, digital literacy, incident reporting frameworks, and expanded police training.

It is a serious document, but the challenge now is implementation.

The time for talking is over and the time for action was yesterday.

SOCIAL COHESION ON THE LINE

Australia's multicultural model has always depended on mutual respect and trust between communities. That model is now under genuine visible strain as moderates on all sides are being drowned out by the voices of extremists. When segments of society no longer feel safe expressing their identity, walking to synagogue, sending their children to a Jewish school or camp, the problem is no longer theoretical. It is structural.

Equally, when foreign funded actors can operate freely within our borders, financing protests, intimidating students, and undermining social cohesion under the guise of activism, we are witnessing more than a free speech issue. We are witnessing a national security issue.

The Jewish community, despite its size, has long played a vital role in Australia's intellectual, commercial, legal and cultural life. To allow it to be marginalized or made afraid is to betray the very ideals that built modern Australia: tolerance, decency and acceptance.

LOOKING FORWARD: VIGILANCE AND VALUES

The Albanese Government, having now received the recommendations of the 2025 Action Plan, has the opportunity to lead not just with policy but with moral clarity. It must continue to reinforce its message that both antisemitism and anti-Zionism have no place in modern Australia, whether it comes from the far right, the far left, or from ideologically-motivated foreign proxies.

That also means challenging institutions such as local governments, universities, media outlets and arts councils who have been too quick to retreat into false equivalence or policy paralysis. Equally, silence is not abstention from the fight; it is complicity in it.

Above all, it requires us to restore a foundational principle of Australian life: that no group should live in fear because of who they are.

In this moment, we are reminded that security is not just about borders and budgets. It is about belonging. And it is the responsibility of every government not just to protect its citizens from threats but to protect them from the corrosive lie that they are alone. *

PHILIP DALIDAKIS

The Honorable Philip Dalidakis is a former minister for trade and innovation and former member of parliament of the Australian State of Victoria. He represented the Southern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne, home to Australia's largest Jewish community.



Photo credit: Reuters

LESSONS LEARNED FROM FIGHTING NARCOTERRORISM IN SOUTH AMERICA



by Richard M. Sanders

The fight against narcoterrorism has returned to the vocabulary of American policymakers. The Trump administration has deployed Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps assets to the Caribbean and destroyed several drug-carrying vessels, just the beginning of a campaign according to the President. This time the US effort is centered on Venezuela, but it is nevertheless relevant to revisit the results of an earlier fight in Venezuela's neighbor Colombia.

Twenty-five years ago, under the rubric of Plan Colombia, the US began providing massive military, police, and economic assistance to the Colombian government then facing Marxist insurgents enriched by controlling cocaine trade. Let's revisit the US record of results from Plan Colombia, to date America's largest and longest narcoterrorism fight.

INITIALLY A SECOND-TIER CONCERN

During the 1980s, the United States supported Colombia's counternarcotics efforts as part of the "war on drugs." The Drug Enforcement Agency worked with local counterparts against the powerful Medellín and Cali cartels in response to the surge of cocaine entering the United States. Additionally, the State Department led an effort to train and equip the Colombian National Police. Aerial spraying of cocaine fields with the herbicide glyphosate formed a key part of this strategy.

This police-led counternarcotics effort was largely separate from Colombia's struggle, carried

out principally by its military, against the Marxist guerrilla groups which had emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. The two largest were the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Spanish initials FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) although there were others, notably the People's Liberation Army (EPL) and the April 19 Movement (M-19), a populist urban guerrilla group which was eventually crushed.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the government in Bogotá did not regard the FARC and ELN as serious national threats since they operated largely in remote rural areas. They were similarly ignored in Washington, where the Latin America focus was on El Salvador's civil war and on Nicaragua with the rise to power of the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

THE ORIGIN OF PLAN COLOMBIA

As the 1990s progressed, the police-led approach towards Colombia's security became untenable. The guerrilla groups used military muscle first to exact tribute from narcotics traffickers and then to participate directly in the narcotics business. At the same time, rural property owners sponsored private vigilantes to combat the Marxist guerrillas, and over time vigilantes morphed into "paramilitaries" forces tied to the narcotics trade.

And narcotics money increasingly penetrated Colombian political life. The administration of President Ernesto Samper, 1994-1998, was marked by accusations that narcotics traffickers financed his campaign, which led the United States to "decertify" Colombia as not fully cooperating on combating narcotics, severely restricting US assistance. Colombia's security forces, under-financed, demoralized,

and plagued with corruption, did not take on guerrillas who had gained effective control of large swaths of Colombia's countryside.

By the end of Samper's term both the local political and economic elite and US policymakers had become alarmed at the deteriorating situation. The prospect of guerrillas entering Bogotá in triumph, just as Castro had done in Havana in 1959 and the Sandinistas in Managua in 1979, was not unthinkable. Samper's successor Andrés Pastrana, in office 1998-2002, reached out to the United States in search of a major assistance package to stabilize his country.

His initial request to the Clinton administration was principally for economic development assistance to wean rural Colombians away from cultivating coca. However, in discussions with the United States, greater emphasis was placed on regaining government control of the countryside from the guerrillas, paramilitaries and drug trafficking organizations. An initial package of \$1.3 billion in assistance, dubbed Plan Colombia, gained bipartisan support in the Congress, where it was sold largely as a way to stop the flood of cocaine into the United States rather than as a counter-insurgency effort.

SOME SUCCESS AGAINST THE GUERRILLAS

Initially, Plan Colombia most visibly involved helicopters for the military and the police, which included upgrading bases for them to operate in remote areas. Training and equipment also came for Colombia's ground forces, police and navy, enabling it to operate riverine patrols in roadless jungle areas. Intelligence support was also provided.

While the bulk of its funding was security-related, Plan Colombia also funded "alternative development" for coca farmers to switch to other crops, even as aerial spraying of coca fields continued. Separately, the United States bolstered Colombia's broader economy with the negotiation of a free trade agreement which supported employment-generating sectors such as Colombia's cut flower and garment industries.

Pastrana was succeeded by Álvaro Uribe, 2002 to 2010, a hardline opponent of the guerrillas and enthusiastic supporter of Plan Colombia. He

ended peace talks with the FARC and abolished the so-called "demilitarized zone," a large, lightly populated area in which the military and police had been prohibited from undertaking operations while desultory talks took place.

Uribe passed a tax increase to pay for the enhanced security effort, showing that Colombia's middle and upper classes were willing to make sacrifices to support what he termed "democratic security." US support totaled over \$10 billion from 2000 to 2018 and, although decreasing in recent years, it has remained substantial, with \$377.5 million in fiscal year 2024.

Plan Colombia was successful against the Marxist guerrillas. In the face of near constant pressure from the newly mobile, better trained and equipped security forces, the FARC and the ELN lost their grip on many areas of rural Colombia. The FARC's strength was reduced from 20,000 to 7,000 fighters and the ELN from 5,000 to 1,500, according to estimates.

In 2015, under Uribe's successor Juan Manuel Santos an agreement was reached with the FARC requiring it to disarm and convert itself into a legal political party. Its leadership was to submit to specialized courts which would impose reduced sentences for crimes committed. Land reform and economic development programs were to be instituted to reintegrate FARC fighters. The accord was hailed internationally, including by the United States, which pledged to continue supporting Colombia, while tilting assistance towards social and economic development.

Parallel talks with the ELN did not lead to agreement. Their negotiators insisted on far-reaching changes to the country's political and economic structures that were unacceptable to the government. And, since the ELN is more decentralized than the hierarchical FARC, it was unclear if any peace agreement could have been sold by its leadership to all of its regional commanders.

... BUT NOT AGAINST DRUG TRAFFICKERS

The campaign to reestablish security in rural Colombia initially disrupted cocaine production, as the amount of land dedicated

to raising coca plants dropped. However, the huge profit margins enjoyed by narcotic exports incentivized producers to find new ways to continue their operations. New transportation routes were found. Coca plants were grown in new regions beyond those in which they had traditionally been raised, thus maintaining overall production levels. In the face of growing health concerns about its use, aerial eradication was severely restricted by Colombia's courts and ultimately abandoned, while efforts at manual eradication flagged.

Initially, there was also success in demobilizing the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Spanish initials AUC), the principal paramilitary organization, which was in effect a well-armed security force for the drug cartels. Some of its leaders submitted to the judicial system and some members surrendered their weapons.

Nevertheless over time, cocaine production has returned to pre-Plan Colombia levels, even while efforts at interdicting shipments and extraditing narcotics traffickers to the US have continued. The coca-connected paramilitaries have reconstituted under different names. The nexus of narcotics and terrorism has re-emerged. The so-called "FARC dissident" factions have been able to establish themselves, resulting in new rural violence as these groups and the ELN dispute coca-growing territory.

Colombia's current president, the leftist Gustavo Petro, shares some of the blame for this backsliding. He has reverted to the pre-Plan Colombia approach of limiting the security forces' resources and freedom of action while fruitlessly pursuing new negotiations in the search for what he has termed "total peace." On September 15, the Trump administration "decertified" Colombia in a message to Congress criticizing Petro's leadership for "having failed demonstrably to meet its drug control obligations."

This marks the first time the US government has "decertified" Colombia from assistance programs since the mid-1990s, though it has been able to continue assistance by invoking a waiver on national security grounds.

THE FIGHT CONTINUES UNDER TRUMP

As the Trump administration has raised anew narcoterrorism as a national security threat, the center of gravity has moved to Venezuela, which has become a sanctuary for guerrillas. The Venezuela-based "Tren de Aragua" criminal group has become an important player in narcotics trafficking. Solid evidence connects Venezuela's military and political leadership to drug trafficking. That said, 60 percent of worldwide coca production takes place in Colombia. Thus, despite the difficulties of working with President Petro, the US cannot overlook the need to continue intensive narcoterrorism work in Colombia.

Plan Colombia enjoyed real, if only partial success. Drug traffickers are inventive and persistent in finding new ways to produce coca and get refined cocaine to market. At a minimum we can expect new routes through Central America or the Pacific to be used more frequently.

A lesson from Plan Colombia: Marxist guerilla groups can be weakened and defeated by targeting their access to narco-profits while strengthening local militaries. Such campaigns also hit the supply-side of the narcotics trade. But they can require sustained, massive outside assistance to the local government. For the foreseeable future, a mix of counternarcotics and counterinsurgency operations aided by US support will be needed and permanent, definitive success against narco-terrorists is a long-term fight that has only just been renewed. *

RICHARD M. SANDERS

Richard M. Sanders is Senior Fellow, Western Hemisphere at the Center for the National Interest. A former member of the Senior Foreign Service of the U.S. Department of State, he served at embassies throughout Latin America, including in Colombia and Venezuela. He also served as Foreign Policy Advisor to the Chief of Staff, U.S. Army.



President Donald Trump meets with Congolese Foreign Minister Therese Kayikwamba Wagner (R) and Rwandan Foreign Minister Olivier Nduhungirehe (L), June 27, 2025. Photo credit: Sipa USA via Reuters Connect

THE MISSING PEACE IN AFRICA'S GREAT LAKES REGION



by Michael Rubin

The Great Lakes region that encompasses Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo is among Africa's most beautiful regions. Cloud-covered volcanos, terraced fields, lush jungles, and lakes dot the landscape. It is also among the most violent.

The June 2025 peace agreement signed at the White House between two of the region's countries (Rwanda and Congo) is positive but follow-up, especially with Burundi, will be necessary.

BACKGROUND ON THE GREAT LAKES REGION

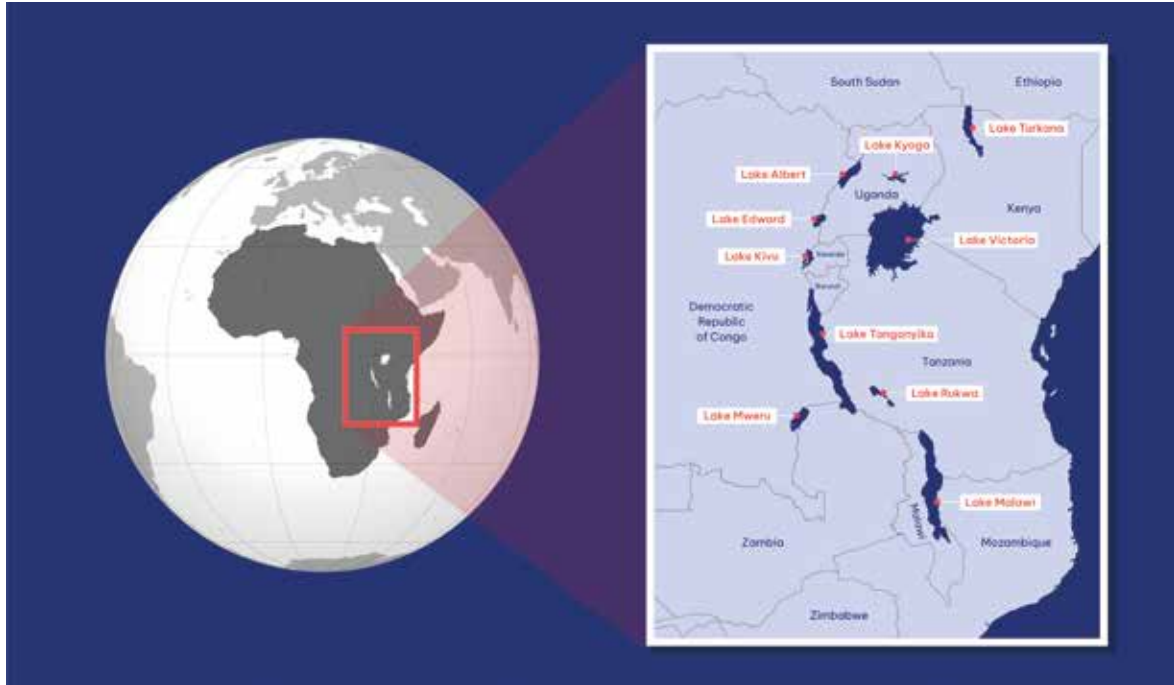
Following the 1994 anti-Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, the Rwandan Patriotic Front led by Paul Kagame drove the Hutu génocidaires across the border into the Democratic Republic of Congo, forced the Hutus' French advisors to decamp for Paris and began Rwanda's transformation into the Singapore of Africa.

But the Hutu extremists found fertile ground in UN refugee camps across the border in Congo. Burundi, too, allowed in Hutu insurgents intent on renewing the genocide. The UN not only

did not disarm the Hutu terrorists, but allowed them to take over education in their camps, perpetuating their extremist ideology across generations.

Beyond Rwanda, more than six million people have died in successive Congo wars over the past three decades. The UN refugee camps along Rwanda's borders became epicenters for instability. The UN peacekeepers in Congo rival only the employees of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA, which administers Palestinian refugee camps) in corruption and involvement in violence. The UN's Congo personnel, for example, often work in tandem with génocidaires and Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR) terrorists to stage cross border attacks into Rwanda. The Great Lakes region shows that the United Nation's venality with the Palestinians is the rule, not the exception.

Rwanda and Burundi are similar in size to the US state of Maryland, and both were Belgian colonies. Hutus, Tutsis, and a small population of Twa (pygmies) populate both countries, as well as the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of Congo. After the anti-Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, the discrepancy between the two countries grew sharply. Kagame embraced self-sufficiency in Rwanda; he curtailed corruption, avoided debt traps, and grew local industry. The World Bank believes Rwanda could become a



Africa's Great Lakes Region. Map source: Wikimedia Commons / MellonDor

middle-income country by 2035 and a high-income country by 2050. Burundi, meanwhile, is the second poorest country in Africa and the world after South Sudan. The average Burundian makes just over \$40 per month.

Meanwhile, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, President Félix Tshisekedi's first term was coming to a close in early 2024, with a record of self-enrichment and nepotism, and no infrastructure improvements to justify re-election. He responded with incitement against not only Rwanda but also his own country's centuries-old ethnic Tutsi community. He declared Tutsis were aliens and interlopers, and encouraged attacks. Terrorist groups proliferated. While European diplomats accepted Tshisekedi's denial of responsibility, this never passed the smell test. How could Tshisekedi suppress militants in southern Congo (where Chinese mining companies operated) but not do the same in eastern Congo?

PRESIDENT TRUMP INTERVENES; WHAT SHOULD COME NEXT

In his first term, President Donald Trump was engaged behind-the-scenes to bring calm to the Great Lakes region. Ambassador J. Peter Pham, his special envoy to the region, cajoled Democratic Republic of Congo President Félix Tshisekedi and Burundian President Pierre Nkurunziza to cease allowing Hutu insurgents to utilize Burundi's territory to strike at Rwanda. For a time, both Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo constrained Hutu terrorists on their territories.

In the first months of his second term, on June 27, Trump hosted the foreign ministers of Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo at the White House. "Today, the violence and destruction comes to an end, and the entire region begins a new chapter of hope and opportunity, harmony, prosperity and peace,"

Trump declared at an Oval Office meeting. The Rwandan and Congolese ministers then signed a peace agreement in a ceremony presided over by Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Trump's peace efforts were a life raft for Kinshasa's failing kleptocrat. He got to save face, though the promise of megadeals over minerals and rare earths will go nowhere if Tshisekedi continues to loot his country and treats commercial law with disdain.

The real missing piece is lowly Burundi. On January 11, 2024, Burundi shut its land border with Rwanda, cutting itself off from trade and leaving its citizens impoverished. Its president Évariste Ndayishimiye rules his country as a fusion of Saddam Hussein and Marie Antoinette. Freedom House ranks Burundi only marginally freer than Russia. Meanwhile, when Burundians complain about food shortages, Ndayishimiye responds by telling them he has avocado trees on his palace grounds and, if they lack food, they should plant some themselves. Burundian journalists I interviewed describe a society spiraling out of control where sycophancy reigns supreme and criticism means years in prison.

What lights the fuse in Burundi is the fact that Ndayishimiye no longer trusts his own army. In 2023, he sent 10,000 Burundian troops to eastern Congo. In theory, they were peacekeepers; in practice they preyed upon local villagers. Just as Cubans do with their international doctors corps, Ndayishimiye appears to have pocketed the peacekeepers' salaries. In February 2025, M23 forced their withdrawal, leaving dissatisfied, angry armed men extorting their own increasingly hungry people at home.

The Burundian dictator now has three choices. First, he can deploy the army against his own people. This buys time, but the military cannot loot empty pantries. Second, he can again send Burundian troops abroad. Some remain in Somalia, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic, but they are ill-disciplined and ineffective. In an era of decreasing budgets, the UN cannot afford yet

another scandal involving peacekeepers abusing locals. Third, Ndayishimiye can seek asylum abroad. Just as Congo's Tshisekedi spent his exile years in Belgium delivering pizzas, so too might Ndayishimiye head to Belgium to allow competent management to raise Burundians out of their morass.

Peace in the Great Lakes of Africa will never last if Burundi remains a haven for militants and terrorists.

Trump deserves praise for seeking to extinguish a wildfire that consumed millions of lives when it last burned out of control. But by ignoring Burundi, the missing piece, he essentially walks away with the conflagration only 90 percent contained and a wind storm on the horizon. *

MICHAEL RUBIN

Michael Rubin is director of policy analysis at the Middle East Forum and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.



THE VIETNAM WAR IN RETROSPECT

LBJ and McNamara: The Vietnam Partnership Destined to Fail
by Peter L.W. Osnos, Rivertowns Books, 2024

McNamara at War: A New History
by Philip Taubman and William Taubman, W.W. Norton & Company, 2025

BY MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

Fifty years after it ended, the American war in Vietnam remains controversial. That is because it turned out very differently than had been anticipated when it began. It did not achieve its goal of preserving a non-communist South Vietnam, but it did sharply divide the United States, damaging the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon and dramatically increasing the public distrust of the American government that has persisted five decades later. Because its costs were so high and the gains from it, such as they were, so meager, a widespread retrospective judgment has taken hold that it should never have been waged in the first place. This raises the question of why the responsible American officials decided to go to war in the first place.

Now, two books have appeared that address that question by exploring the role of Robert S. McNamara, the secretary of defense in the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and the man who came to be regarded as the principal architect of that war.

LBJ and McNamara: The Vietnam Partnership Destined to Fail, comes out of the experience of its author, Peter L.W. Osnos, as the publisher of McNamara's 1995 memoir, *In*

Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam, as well as his time as a wartime correspondent in Vietnam for *The Washington Post*. He has produced a concise, useful overview of the course of the war when McNamara was in office and of the secretary's role in directing it. *McNamara at War*, by the brothers Philip and William Taubman, the first a longtime reporter for *The New York Times* as well as the author of several books, the second a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian at Amherst College, have written a penetrating full-scale biography. It follows its subject from his years growing up in the San Francisco Bay area to his student days at the University of California at Berkeley and the Harvard Business School, his experience in World War II and his career as an executive at the Ford Motor Company, his ultimately tormented seven years at the Pentagon, and finally his life thereafter, the highlight of which was his thirteen years as president of the World Bank. They devote considerable attention to McNamara's personality traits and connect them to his public career.

Why does McNamara hold such interest? After all, during those years Presidents Kennedy and Johnson made the major decisions about Vietnam. Their secretary of defense, however, was their most trusted advisor, the person with responsibility for managing the American side of the conflict, and the most visible public spokesman for it and thus a lightning rod for the

public dissatisfaction – and ultimately anger – that the war provoked in the United States. Moreover, early on he harbored serious doubts about whether the war could be won, and in his memoir he revealed those doubts and expressed his regrets, indeed his anguish, at not having done more to stop it while he was in office. This makes him a tragic figure to some, although, as both books make clear, others regarded him as a despicable character to the end of his life. Either way, his brilliance as an administrator and his early reservations about the course of American policy in Southeast Asia make him a logical focal point for the question that haunts retrospective consideration of Vietnam: how could it have happened?

McNamara's character and background, as portrayed by the Taubmans, surely had something to do with the American misadventure with which he was so closely associated. He belonged to the generation that had fought and won World War II and took from that experience the lesson that the United States was capable of meeting any challenge. His managerial background gave him confidence that all problems could be quantified and then solved; but in Vietnam, the numbers fed into the analyses he commissioned, the total of enemy killed for example, were not always accurate and the most important factor of all – the communists' will to fight despite suffering enormous losses – could not be translated into numbers at all.

Yet neither book imputes what happened in Vietnam solely to the shortcomings of the officials responsible for American foreign policy at the time. Neither overlooks the framework of ideas about the world and the American role in it in which they operated and that exerted powerful pressure to follow the course that they chose. The distinguished historian Ernest May wrote in 1973 that "[g]iven the assumptions generally shared by Americans in the 1960s, it seems probable that any collection of men or women would have decided as did the members of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations."

Those assumptions came into play at the two major turning points in American policy toward Vietnam: Kennedy's decision, in 1961, to increase the number of American military advisors in the country from 900 to 3200; and Johnson's decision, in 1965, to dispatch American ground troops there in large numbers, both initiatives undertaken in order to preserve a non-communist South Vietnam.

In both cases, what came to be known as "the domino theory" had a powerful influence. Originating with President Eisenhower, the term refers to an analogy between the countries of Southeast Asia and a row of standing dominoes. Just as the fall of one domino would lead to the toppling of all the others, so, American officials believed, the loss of South Vietnam to communism would lead to the communist conquest of the other countries of Southeast Asia and perhaps beyond.

McNamara said, years after he had left the Pentagon: "I believed in a sense, Eisenhower's statement in 1954 of the 'dominoes' and in 1961 President Kennedy and me that if we lost Laos and Vietnam, we'd lose all of Southeast Asia. If we lost all of Southeast Asia, we were very likely to lose all of Asia, including India. If we did that, the power of the communists against Western Europe and against this nation would increase."

Three consecutive American presidents believed, that is, that defeat in Vietnam had the potential to inflict a catastrophic setback on the United States in the struggle with the Soviet Union and global communism in which it was engaged.

Although McNamara, and especially Johnson, came to have little confidence that the United States could prevail in Vietnam, they were also convinced, given what they believed about geopolitics, that it could not afford to lose. They thus confronted a painful, insoluble dilemma. As Johnson put it, "I can't get out, I can't finish [the war] with what I have got, so what the hell can I do?"

In the end, America lost the war but did not suffer the consequences that its leaders had

feared. Johnson had worried about a powerful domestic backlash against those responsible for conducting the war; but when South Vietnam fell to the communists in April 1975, the American public accepted that outcome, albeit not happily. Vietnam's neighbors Cambodia and Laos did come under communist control, but the falling dominoes stopped there. The loss of South Vietnam did not fatally undercut the global standing of the United States. The fact that the dire predicted consequences of failure in Vietnam did not materialize is an important reason that the war itself has come to be seen a misbegotten misadventure; and that, in turn, has triggered retrospective inquiries, such as those of Osnos and the Taubmans, into the decisions that embroiled the United States there and the assessment of the officials who made them.

In evaluating the war and the men responsible for it, it is important to bear in mind that while history is written backwards, it is lived forward; and those who are involved in the making of history always have to proceed while enshrouded in uncertainty. In retrospect, it seems difficult to dispute that McNamara and the presidents he served made the wrong decisions; but it is also difficult to conclude that they should have known – that is, that almost anybody else in their positions *would* have known – that they were making a terrible mistake. The relative placidity with which the American public accepted failure in Southeast Asia came after fifteen years of active, costly engagement there, and more than 55,000 American deaths. (By the estimate of the Vietnamese government, more than three million Vietnamese lost their lives.)

After all that time, Americans wanted finally to be done with Vietnam, but that had not been their dominant attitude in 1961 or 1965. As for what turned out to be the entirely manageable consequences for the United States of the loss of South Vietnam, this was due in no small part to the rapprochement with China that the Nixon administration engineered, which took place in 1972, well after McNamara had left office.

Which had the greater responsibility for Vietnam: the particular characteristics of the people who sent American troops there or the ideas to which they and many others subscribed? The question can never be finally settled. Moreover, while a consensus has formed that the United States could never have prevailed on the battlefield, this has received a vigorous challenge in two volumes – with a third to come – by the Hillsdale College military historian Mark Moyar. So the controversy surrounding America's Vietnam War, to which *LBJ and McNamara* and *McNamara at War* are notable contributions, will surely continue. *

MICHAEL MANDELBAUM

Michael Mandelbaum is the Christian A. Herter Professor Emeritus of American Foreign Policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and the author of *The Titans of the Twentieth Century: How They Made History and the History They Made*, a study of Woodrow Wilson, Lenin, Hitler, Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt, Gandhi, Ben-Gurion and Mao, published by Oxford University Press (2024).



Photo credit: Image Press Agency via Reuters Connect

MOVIE REVIEW: “MAKING THE RUBBLE BOUNCE”

A House of Dynamite
directed by Kathryn Bigelow, available on Netflix

BY JACOB HEILBRUNN

Nuclear weapons were at the heart of the Cold War. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union ever sought to attack each other directly because each wanted to avoid triggering a nuclear cataclysm. Instead, they waged a proxy war in the Third World as the fear of mutual assured destruction loomed over the atomic age.

That fear seeped into almost every arena of American life and culture, not least Hollywood. By the early 1960s, a new genre of films about nuclear war began to emerge. In 1962, for example, the science fiction film *Panic in Year Zero!* appeared. It depicted the Baldwin family embarking upon a road trip into the Sierra Nevada mountains, gaping helplessly as a mushroom cloud erupted over Los Angeles. The film traces the almost instantaneous breakdown of society that follows a Russian strike on major American cities. The Baldwins set about procuring provisions so that they can hide away in a cave in the Sierra Nevadas until order is restored in America. “When civilization gets civilized again, I’ll rejoin,” the family patriarch Harry Baldwin explains to his wife and two children.

Two years later, three new and more ambitious movies about nuclear combat appeared. The most famous one is *Dr. Strangelove*, a political satire written and directed by Stanley Kubrick. In its most memorable line, a crazed Air Force Brigadier General named Jack D. Ripper authorizes a preemptive attack on the Russian homeland on his lonesome. “I can no longer sit back and

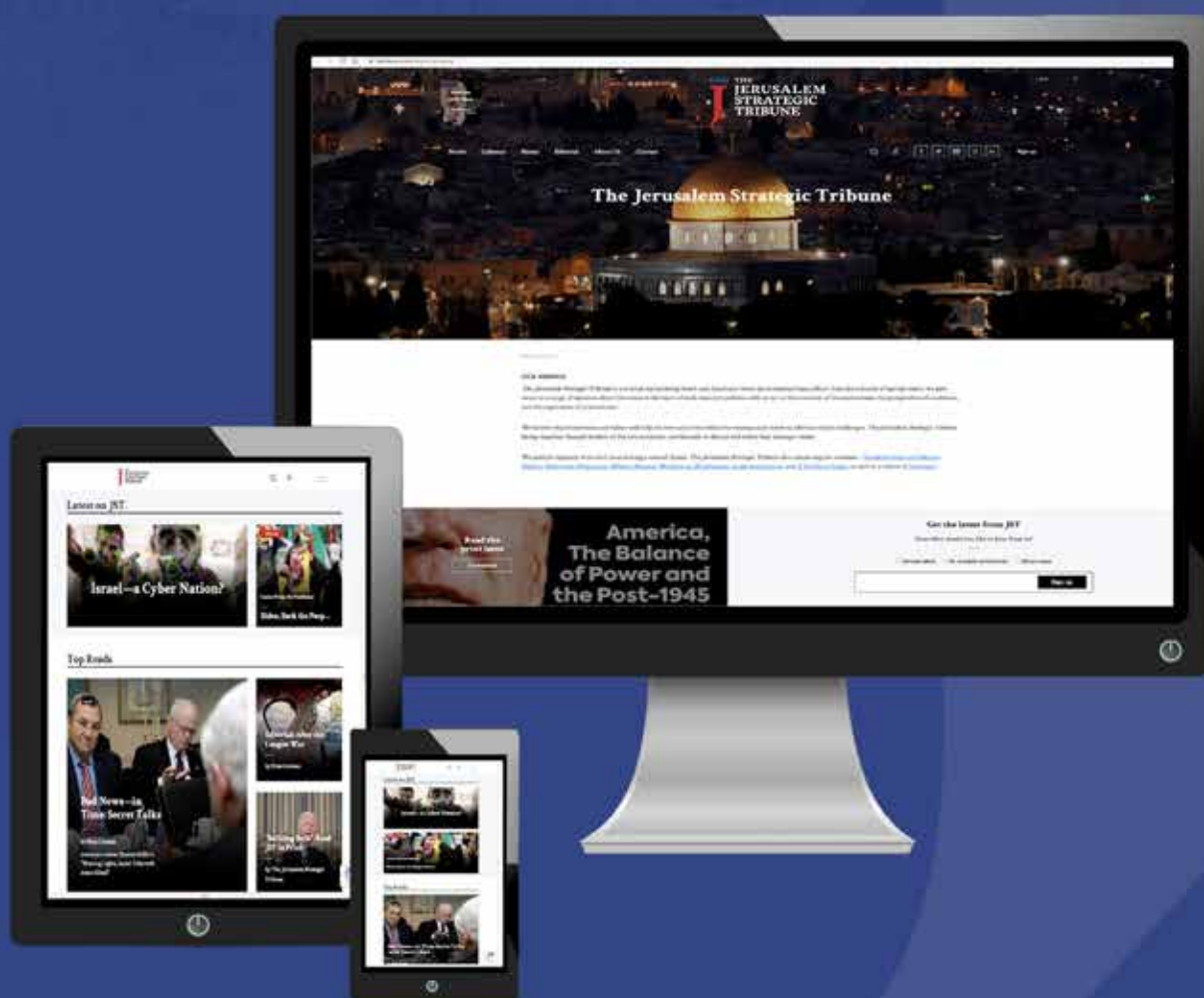
allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids.”

As B-52 bombers loaded with thermonuclear bombs fly towards the Soviet Union, Dr. Strangelove, a former Nazi played by Peter Sellers, exults in the prospect of the destruction of Western civilization. President Merkin Muffley, by contrast, seeks to recall the bombers but cannot reach one of them. The film concludes with nuclear annihilation in the offing and Dr. Strangelove hailing Muffley as “mein Fuhrer.”

Another film that appeared that year but has received somewhat less attention is *Fail Safe*. It featured Henry Fonda as the American president who is advised by a nutty German egghead, Professor Groeteschele. An anti-communist fanatic, Groeteschele, played by Walter Matthau, revels in the chance to fulfill political science game theories about waging and winning a nuclear war by launching a preemptive strike against the Soviet Union. “Every minute we wait works against us. Now, Mr. Secretary, now is when we must send in a first strike.” The President disagrees. But as in *Dr. Strangelove*, a single American bomber crew ignores frantic orders to abandon its mission and drops its payload on Moscow. In exchange, the President tells the Soviet leadership, he will destroy New York to avert a wider war.

Then there was *Seven Days in May*, a thriller about a military coup to topple an American president named Jordan A. Lyman who is intent on concluding a sweeping arms-control treaty with the Kremlin. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Air Force General James Mattoon Scott has devised a plan called ECOMOCON to create a military junta, but is tripped up by his Marine aide “Jiggs” Casey, who opposes the

A new magazine bringing a fresh take on Israel-US relations



treaty but is unprepared to connive at treason. Scott is based on the fire-breathing General Curtis LeMay, who resented John F. Kennedy's refusal to provide air cover during the Bay of Pigs, and General Edwin A. Walker, who is explicitly mentioned in the film.

The movie's irenic credo is summed up by President Lyman. "Scott, the Joint Chiefs, even the very emotional, very illogical lunatic fringe: they're not the enemy. The enemy's an age – a nuclear age. It happens to have killed man's faith in his ability to influence what happens to him. And out of this comes a sickness, and out of sickness a frustration, a feeling of impotence, helplessness, weakness."

These very sentiments animate the latest Hollywood production about nuclear war, *A House of Dynamite*. Unlike its predecessors, it does not feature coups, lunatic generals or nefarious German academics. Instead, the strength of the film resides in its quiet plausibility, showcasing the palpable tension and duress that government and military officials are under as they realize that the incoming missile that they've detected isn't a drill. It's the real thing—an intercontinental ballistic missile about to detonate over Chicago.

Who actually lobbed the incoming missile at America is unclear. North Korea? China? Russia? The president, played by Idris Elba, has only minutes to make a decision about whether and how to respond. He faces an agonizing choice, as one official tells him, between "surrender or suicide." Others take a more phlegmatic view. "If we do not take steps to neutralize our enemies now," General Anthony Brady observes, "we will lose our window to do so." But Brady has no clue about why the missile was launched or if it was even an accident. The message the movie wants to convey is clear — the doctrine of MAD, or mutual assured destruction, remains a form of madness.

New York Times film critic Manohla Dargis contended that the film does not have a central character, but actually it does. It's the incoming missile which is never pictured but whose presence is never less than ominously oppressive.

A nuclear cataclysm may have receded from the public mind, but this past May India and Pakistan aroused apprehensions of a nuclear exchange during their military clashes. China is embarking upon a vast expansion of its nuclear force and recently simulated the effects in a laboratory of firing three nuclear missiles in succession on a target. North Korea showcased its hypersonic missiles and new intercontinental Hwasongs-20s ballistic missiles at its celebration of its 80th anniversary of the Workers' Party in October. Meanwhile, Russia is threatening a nuclear response should Washington send Tomahawk missiles to Kyiv.

One leader who regularly talks about the dangers posed by nuclear weapons is President Donald Trump. In January 2025, Trump said that "Tremendous amounts of money are being spent on nuclear, and the destructive capability is something that we don't even want to talk about So, we want to see if we can denuclearize, and I think that's very possible." One obvious starting point would be to extend the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty with Russia, which currently expires in February 2026. Trump also carried out a form of denuclearization by bombing three Iranian facilities this past June.

If *A House of Dynamite* serves any purpose, it will be to remind Americans and others of the perils of nuclear war. There are no grounds for complacency. As Winston Churchill put it at the dawn of the atomic era, "If you go on with this nuclear arms race, all you are going to do is make the rubble bounce." That is not a prospect anyone should welcome. *

JACOB HEILBRUNN

Jacob Heilbrunn is a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center, editor of *The National Interest* and editor-at-large of *The Jerusalem Strategic Tribune*. His book, *America Last: The Right's Century-Long Romance with Foreign Dictators*, was published in 2024.



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