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

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

Anna Pivovarchuk (Co-Founder & Deputy Managing Editor)

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

www.fairobservers.com | info@fairobservers.com

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Without Fundamental Reforms to the Education System, Indians Will Not Innovate

Akash Pallath, Ansh Joshi & Deepak Dhariwal

June 3, 2019

The education system, with terrible teaching that programs Indians to focus on tests, must change and put a focus on learning instead.

In 2018, Apple's co-founder, Steve Wozniak, visited India and made some fascinating observations on the country. He was humble enough to admit he knew little about India, but he remarked that he did not see "big advances in tech companies" in the country. He blamed the culture, which he saw as "one of success based upon academic excellence" and "having a good job."

Wozniak observed that Indians are a lot like Singaporeans in this regard. They study, work hard and get an MBA. They may buy a Mercedes, "but where is the creativity?" Wozniak takes the view that creativity gets lost when behavior becomes too predictable and structured.

His observation on India might be harsh, but it is not far from the truth. Hard figures back Wozniak's argument. In 2017, the UN's World Intellectual Property Indicators (WIPO) reported that foreign nationals dominated the patents granted in India. They accounted for more than 85% of the newly-filed ones. According to Oxford Economics, Indian

startups lack technological innovation and mimic successful businesses that begin elsewhere. When it comes to big players, only one Indian company, Hindustan Unilever, notably a subsidiary of the London-based Unilever group, made it to the top 75 in the Forbes list of the World's Most Innovative Companies.

Just north of the Himalayas, another story is emerging. A country with more than a billion people is now at the forefront of cutting-edge technology. While China has built, perfected and scaled up its own high-speed rail technology, India's high-speed version will run on 20th-century engines built through Japan's tech know-how and its financial generosity. While China is innovating in quantum communication and computing, India is taking symbolic baby steps by awarding paltry sums that are unlikely to lead to significant results.

And while Chinese startups account for 26% percent of the world's unicorns, Indian startups form a mere 4%. Is this because Indians are less innovative than the Chinese?

THE NEW TRIANGULAR TRADE

In the US, Indians are considered incredibly innovative. A fifth of patents filed by foreigners in America are by people of Indian origin. Vinod Khosla, Vinod Dham, Ajay Bhatt, Sanjay Mehrotra and Sabeer Bhatia are among the thousands of great Indian innovators. A simple question arises: What do they have in common?

It turns out that most Indian innovators tend to pursue advanced graduate or business degrees from American schools before beginning their technological ventures. Indians are a key component of Silicon Valley success. They produce much of the intellectual property that produces wealth for the US.

In fact, a curious phenomenon is taking place these days. Talented Indians leave for the US to study. Then, they work for American companies or start something on their own. They tend to write software and design hardware. The software Indians write powers Chinese mass-manufactured hardware. The hardware they design is produced in the Middle Kingdom as well. Eventually, this software and hardware comes back to India in the form of OnePlus, Xiaomi, Huawei and even Apple phones.

This phenomenon is the modern-day equivalent of the infamous trans-Atlantic triangular trade of the past. For four centuries, colonial merchants purchased molasses, tobacco and cotton from plantations in the Americas.

These products were produced by slaves. Then, they were shipped to Europe for factories to convert them into finished products. Ships took some of these goods to Africa where they were exchanged for slaves. Then, they sailed off to the Americas with these Africans who slaved under the simmering sun to grow sugarcane, tobacco and cotton for factories in Europe.

Today, Indian professionals have taken the place of African slaves, computer chips have replaced molasses and smartphones are the new rum. In this 21st-century formula, India has taken the place of Africa, China of America and America of Europe. Importantly, many Indian professionals, such as Sundar Pichai of Google and Satya Nadella of Microsoft, are captains of American ships that power this triangular trade. If Indians are talented enough to run the new triangular trade, why can't they create new technologies and great businesses at home?

NONSTOP TESTS PRODUCE GOOD PARROTS

India is fixated with exams. There are easily over 400 entrance exams in India at undergraduate, graduate and professional levels for every field ranging from engineering to hospitality. In the vast majority of cases, entrance exams are the sole parameter for admission into prestigious institutions. The most famous example is the notorious Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for the highly-selective Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT). Less than 1% make it through the JEE into IIT.

Getting in is a relentless rat race. Any experimenting or going off the beaten path can be fatal. Unlike Americans, Indians rarely get second chances. So, students have no incentive to go beyond the syllabus. Their relentless focus is to crack the entrance exam. A huge private coaching industry of ruthless cram schools has emerged to prepare

students for success in JEE. Ironically, these private players prepare students to get into the taxpayer-funded IIT. In 2016, these cram schools were estimated to be worth \$40 billion. They are worsening India's already deep and wide class divide.

There is another phenomenon at play these days. Now, many creative Indian students are leaving the country for undergraduate degrees immediately after school. Unlike the Khoslas or Pichais of yore, they are bypassing India's brutal entrance exams. The story of Malvika Raj Joshi has captured much public attention. A fantastic programmer, she was a three-time medal winner at the International Olympiad for Informatics. Yet she was not eligible for even the lowliest of IITs. Joshi had not taken the national school exams, a compulsory requirement for writing the JEE. While IIT was hung up on exams, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) swooped in and offered Joshi a scholarship.

Joshi's story is an exception. Most creative students are crushed by India's brutal exams. The nonstop testing environment that Indians grow up in stifles creativity or critical thinking. It rewards rote learning and conformity. As a result, Indians are very good at parroting what examiners want of them, but are unable to think for themselves.

SCHOOLS KILL CURIOSITY

In 2009, 15-year-old students from India participated in the Programme for

International Student Assessment (PISA) that evaluates reading, math and science abilities. Students from 73 countries participated and Indians were second from the bottom with Kyrgyzstan achieving last place. There is a catch, though. Indian students who took the test were from Tamil Nadu and Himachal Pradesh, two states considered showpieces of education among India's 29 states and seven union territories. Unsurprisingly, India decided not to participate in PISA evaluations till 2021 to avoid losing more face.

Since 2009, the situation in India's government-run schools has turned worse. The data from the 2016 annual report on rural education shows that high school students of the eighth grade who could not do basic three-digit by one-digit division rose from 32% in 2010 to 57% in 2016. Such figures make a mockery of claims that "New India" will be an innovation hub.

China might lag behind the US in technological innovation, but its performance is much better than India. The Economist points out that more Indians might be attending school than ever before, but they are not learning much. Part of the problem might be that the country has too many schools. "India has 35% more students than China," but it has four times the number of schools as China. India's terribly-drafted Right to Education Act mandates primary schools within a kilometer of every village. It has resulted in 5,000 schools having no pupils at all.

Unlike India, China has not relied on a token legalistic solution to education. Instead, it has nurtured academic talent and promoted research with iron political will. In the early years of the 21st century, India and China were comparable in terms of the number of top-ranked universities and gross enrollment ratio. Since then, China has left India trailing behind far in the distance. It has spent more on research, hired better teachers and improved access to education for most of its young people.

There are many reasons for India's pathetic educational record. It spends a paltry 2.7% of its GDP on school education, trailing behind other many developing countries, including dysfunctional ones such as Brazil. India spends this little money unwisely. And corruption is an ever-present phenomenon. Many become teachers through bribery and are utterly unqualified. A quarter do not even show up to teach. The Economist rightly argues that India's 70,000 teacher training institutes are nothing but "low-grade degree shops."

When teachers do turn up to teach, they invariably use outdated pedagogy. Rote-based learning is still the name of the game and tests determine cleverness. Few students observe animals or plants around them. Even fewer use their hands to build objects or create art. The government-run school system is so broken that even creative teachers are kneecapped by lack of funds. Primary school teachers get a measly 500

rupees (less than \$8) per year for teaching and learning material. So, they are forced to rely on school textbooks, which have multitudinous errors, are infrequently reviewed and are of poor print quality apart from being frequently understocked.

As mentioned earlier, teacher quality is terrible in India's government-run schools. Once they start collecting their salaries, they have little incentive to teach. No one holds them accountable. KPMG, a leading consulting firm, blames it on lack of output-based incentives or monitoring. The problem is deeper than that. Bureaucrats with no interest in or experience of education systems are in-charge of forming education policies. They leave the education departments in three years and have no long-term vision. The entire system is rotten.

Poor teacher quality and issues with textbooks also affect private schools. In fact, these schools invariably tend to pay teachers less than their public counterparts. Therefore, they attract low-quality teachers. Private schools are often better administered, though, and teachers do turn up to teach. Like the government-run system, the quality of teaching tends to be poor and students have no option but to rely on the parallel education industry to prepare for university entrance examinations.

The fact that Indian students attend both schools and cram schools means that they have little time left for themselves. This busy schedule leaves little space

and time to think. This kills their creativity even further. The entire purpose of education is reduced to jumping through hoops in a Kafkaesque system instead of to learn, think or innovate.

SHATTERED DREAMS AND BROKEN LIVES

The ills of the schooling system are amplified when students go to colleges, institutes and universities. More often than not, they choose schools and colleges based on popular social perception instead of genuine interest. Misinformation by cram schools often skews their judgment.

These authors, who have gained their Bachelor of Technology degrees from IIT Gandhinagar, can comment firsthand about the popular beliefs of the fabled IITs. “Ek crore ki naukri aur dher saari izzat” (a salary of 10 million and extraordinary prestige) is what many students expect when they step foot in IIT.

The fixation with placement, an Indian term for finding a job or getting placed, in a top company drives most students. It is the reason they choose computer science because it the gateway to Google. Subjects such as materials science or bioengineering are perceived as poor choices because they are unlikely to lead to high salaries. Similarly, electrical engineering is equated with power plants, chemical engineering with petroleum and civil engineering with toilsome road-building.

Too many students think of IIT colleges as mere launching pads for MBAs at the famous Indian Institutes of Management (IIM), the counterparts to the IITs. Some others prepare for the Indian Civil Services Examination that opens to door to elite bureaucratic positions. “Ek crore ki naukri nahi to ek crore ki dowry” (if not 10 million as salary, then 10 million as dowry) is the aim for many students as well as parents.

Sadly, such high salaries and dowries are a mirage for most students. Gargantuan salaries are scanty, jobs at Google are few and prospects after fashionable majors are not quite what they are made out to be. As the authors have seen firsthand, many students make wrong choices. Even when they realize their mistake, the Indian system makes it almost impossible to rectify their errors. Students are often stuck studying for degrees they have little interest in. However, due to parental and social pressure, they soldier on. This comes at the price of exploration, innovation and “risky” entrepreneurial pursuits. In the end, most people end up in a rat race for a high-paying job, which the perceptive Wozniak diagnosed as the major reason for a lack of creativity.

FUNDAMENTAL CHANGES ARE THE NEED OF THE HOUR

India’s system is so broken that it needs fundamental changes, not cosmetic reforms. The authors have three suggestions.

First, India must centralize and decentralize at the same time. Under

the Indian Constitution, education is a concurrent responsibility of both the central and state governments. Schools are affiliated with either central or state boards that determine curricula and conduct examinations. Both central and state governments run schools in similar locations. There are no common standards across India's many school boards and no accountability.

In contrast, in China the entire education system is run by the Ministry of Education, imposing common standards across the country. Federal and democratic India cannot adopt the Chinese system. Yet it can certainly bring in a creative reform. It can let state school boards decide curricula and conduct exams for subjects such as local languages, local history and local culture, while the Ministry of Human Resource Development at New Delhi that is currently responsible for central school boards takes over subjects such as math, physics, chemistry and English. This creative mix of centralization and decentralization might allow India to impose a common standard of education while preserving its rich diversity in culture.

Second, India must adopt a performance-based appraisal system for promoting teachers. There must be incentives for them to teach well and promote creativity. A good example for India is Ghana, another former British colony that is in West Africa. Notably, Ghana won its independence a decade after India. Its national teachers' standards lays down well-defined

principles and metrics for evaluating teachers' progress. These metrics incorporate evidence such as lesson plans, evaluations, testimonials, research and participation in professional development programs. Unsurprisingly, Ghana's educational standards have risen over the last few years.

Third, Indian students must be able to make more informed choices when choosing their majors. To do so, schools must disseminate better information about various majors. Counseling must be an integral part of the educational experience. And the practice of admitting students into specific majors at the age of around 18 must go. Universities could allow students to choose their majors after a semester or year of study. This choice could be based not only on exams, but on hands-on projects.

Lest we forget, recent education reforms in Delhi indicate that major changes are possible. The authors hope that fundamental reforms come soon so that the best Indian minds can innovate not only in foreign lands, but also at home. It is high time for the new triangular trade to end.

Akash Pallath is a senior undergraduate in chemical engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar. Having conducted research in computational materials science at universities in India, Japan and the United States, he is interested

in understanding and conceptualizing solutions to the economic and systemic problems of higher education and research, particularly in India. In his free time, Pallath reads books and articles on diverse topics such as Indian politics, Asian culture and economic history.

Ansh Joshi is a senior undergraduate in electrical engineering. He is enthusiastic about Indian politics and economics. He plans to pursue a career in chip design after graduation.

Deepak Dhariwal is a young researcher. He graduated with BTech (Hons.) in Materials Science and Engineering from the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IIT) and is interested in pursuing doctoral studies. During his time at IIT, he served as the academic secretary in the Students' Council where he introduced initiatives to make academics more enjoyable for his peers. Dhariwal is an explorer and thinker who cares deeply about education.

A War with US Will Destroy Iran's Reformist Movement

Maryam Nouri
June 4, 2019

The portrayal of the United States as a hostile adversary has helped hard-line conservatives to maintain their position within Iran's political system over the past 40 years.

In the first week of May, the Trump administration accelerated the

deployment of an aircraft carrier strike group to the Persian Gulf, based on what it called "troubling and escalatory indications and warnings" regarding Iranian threats toward US allies and military personnel in the region. This move has been perceived as a threat by the Iranian side, prompting it to allegedly start mobilizing forces in response. These recent developments have caused widespread concern regarding an imminent war between the two countries.

Despite these recent escalations, however, the Trump administration has publicly announced that its campaign of "maximum pressure" aims to promote a change of behavior from the Iranian regime, and that the United States is not pursuing a full-fledged war against the Islamic Republic. With the memory of the Iraq War still vivid for many Americans, coupled with Iran's obvious military superiority compared to Iraq under Saddam Hussein, it is unlikely that Washington would initiate a full-scale invasion of Iran. The Trump administration is also facing international skepticism regarding the accuracy of its recent allegations against Iran, and international powers have called for self-restraint on both sides.

Although currently chances of a full-fledged war between the two countries might be low, the increasing presence of the US military in the Persian Gulf and the mobilization by Iran in response does serve to heighten the possibility of a dangerous confrontation. Such a

confrontation might be limited, and not necessarily a doorway to annihilation. However, even a small-scale conflict between the two countries would not only negate any possible behavior change from Iran, but would also give Iranian hard-liners a chance to further pursue an anti-American agenda and establish political dominance over the country's reformist government. This will threaten short-term American interests in the region and put the two countries on an irreversible course toward more bloodshed, endangering the stability of the region for years, or even decades, to come.

SHADOWS OF A BITTER PAST

To understand the current state of affairs, one must note how Iranian conservatives frame their animosity toward the United States, to the point that it constitutes a *raison d'être*. This hostile relationship could be traced back to the 1953 CIA-led coup d'état, in which the democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, was overthrown right after he attempted the nationalization of Iran's oil industry.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, anti-American sentiment was further aggravated when the Carter administration agreed to allow the overthrown shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, into the United States for medical treatment. The fact that the US had refused to extradite the shah to the newly established Islamic Republic motivated an angry mob to attack the US Embassy in Tehran, holding

American diplomats hostage for over a year.

It is important to note that in contemporary conservative dialogue in Iran, the memory of the American-led coup is used to rationalize the fear of future American meddling in order to crush the Islamic regime, and the hostage crisis is justified as a heroic act of saving the revolution. The hostages were finally released after 444 days, but the relationship between the two countries never recovered. As William Beeman mentions in his book, *The "Great Satan" vs. the "Mad Mullahs,"* "in a myopic, almost dogged manner, the United States persisted in digging into a ready-made villain's role within the symbolic structure of Iranian society."

Conservative rhetoric that pictures the US as the "Great Satan" finds another defining factor for anti-American sentiment during the Iran-Iraq War. Conservatives blame America not only for financially supporting Saddam Hussein, but also for providing Iraq with intelligence and weapons that were used to kill Iranians.

Once again, the fact that the actual adversary was the Iraqi regime, in the eyes of the conservatives in Tehran Saddam was merely a puppet, and it was actually America that Iran was fighting. This view was solidified when the United States shot down an Iranian passenger plane in July 1988, killing 290 civilians on board. Consequently, when Iran finally managed to take back its occupied territories from Iraq the

same year, it was also cheered as a victory against the United States.

This image of the US as a hostile adversary has helped the conservatives to maintain their position within Iran's political system over the past 40 years. The state-supported right-wing media has also contributed to the cementing of this narrative by using religious symbolism and emphasizing the sacrifices made by millions of Iranian people in their fight against the evils of the United States.

A BREEZE OF CHANGE

However, with the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, and after a period of reconstruction and stabilization in Iran, a new political movement emerged. It aimed to reform the political and social status quo and bring change by expanding individual freedoms and renovating the country's strict social structure. Iranians welcomed this ideology and, in 1997, Mohammad Khatami became Iran's first reformist president. Khatami supported and implemented relatively progressive changes within the traditional structure of the country that caused backlash from the conservative political figures. Internationally, President Khatami's greatest legacy was his attempt to revive Iran's position in the international community. In a speech at the UN General Assembly in October 1998, Khatami emphasized the need for "dialogue among civilizations" as an anti-thesis to avoid a "clash of civilizations."

Although far from perfect, especially considering Iran's involvement in regional conflicts, the ideology of avoiding war through negotiation has become the most defining aspect of the reformist movement in Iran, even more characteristic than its initial steps toward expanding social and individual freedoms. The reformist coalition lost the 2005 and 2009 elections to the conservative Mahmud Ahmadinejad, during whose administration Tehran took a hard-line position against the international community regarding its concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Iran's non-compromising attitude not only caused a set of crippling UN sanctions on the country's oil-dependent economy, but also heightened the risks of confrontation between Iran and the US, with American officials threatening that "all the options are on the table."

However, in 2013, amidst escalating tensions, the Iranians used their ballots as a way to prove to themselves and the outside world that they wanted negotiations, not war, by electing the moderate reformist Hassan Rouhani as president and supporting his parliamentary coalition known as the Fraction of Hope. Through the work of President Rouhani and his team, Iran managed to come to an agreement regarding its nuclear activity and sign the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), commonly known as Iran nuclear deal, in 2015 to ensure a better and safer future.

The nuclear deal was also a way to counter the hard-line conservative

narrative of history, which portrayed the United States as an enemy that cannot be trusted. It would revive the Iranian people's hope toward a future without the fear of war with the US. It could also revitalize the country's economy and bring back prosperity to everyday life in Iran. At least that is what President Rouhani and other reformist figures emphasized vigorously during and after the negotiations.

This political performance altered the relationship between the Iranian reformists and conservatives in an odd way. Conservatives were skeptical about any profitable outcome from the very beginning of the nuclear negotiations, and believed the United States to be untrustworthy. They were convinced that the country's economic problems can only be solved from within the country and not with the help of the West, which in their view had only betrayed Iran, shed Iranian blood and destabilized the Middle East. In other words, during the nuclear talks between Iran and the 5+1 countries, an obvious political polarization occurred that would focus solely on the country's behavior toward the United States.

MISCALCULATIONS

Whilst by signing the JCPOA President Rouhani and his administration scored a win for the reformist narrative, they were not given the opportunity to celebrate their achievements. President Donald Trump's hostile actions regarding the Islamic Republic, especially his move to unilaterally withdraw the US from the

agreement, has helped Iran's conservatives to regain their already lost popularity. It is important to notice how Trump's decision is fully in line with the conservative's view of America as untrustworthy.

The conservatives used this chance to attack the reformist administration as harshly as they could, blatantly turning every shortcoming in the country into attack on reformist ideology. This strategy, coupled with the current economic difficulties, which are also heavily affected by the Trump administration's decision to reimpose economic sanctions on Iran, has caused a decline in the reformist movement's popularity.

On the other hand, the conservative forces in Iran have pursued the Shia crescent policy, expanding their sphere of influence in countries with large Shia Muslim populations. Iran's involvement in Iraq to fight the Islamic State and its support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria are significant cases in which the Iranian military directly participates in regional conflicts to maintain and further expand Tehran's influence. Iran also provides financial support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Such regional interventions are also widely supported by the conservative political forces in Iran. Once again, the conservative narrative depicts alarmed regional rivals such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as mere minions of the "Great Satan" and

emphasizes the need to confront these evils. Iranian conservative newspapers and state-run television use the exact rhetoric that was in place during the 1980-1988 war with Iraq. By magnifying the lives lost in the wars in Iraq or Syria, for example, Iran's conservatives focus on the concept of martyrdom in Shia ideology to picture the country's meddling as a holy task.

Consequently, the victory against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is salvaged as a sign to show that an agenda of "resistance" has been successful. At the same time, conservatives marginalize their reformist counterparts as naïve and gullible for attempting to keep Iran in compliance with an already dead deal, which has further heightened tensions between Iran and the West.

HOLY CAUSE

In the current political atmosphere in Iran, even a small confrontation with the US would give the conservatives an excellent opportunity to divert the public's attention from the devastating economic situation and the rampant abuse of human rights in the country. This is already visible in a set of nonsensical and sometimes even contradictory statements made by Iranian conservative figures and disseminated by their followers on social media.

On the one hand, the conservatives are promoting the idea of a strong Iran in terms of military superiority and the

country's ties with international superpowers, which in their view would scare the Americans off. However, a second argument exaggerates Iran's victory against "American puppets" in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Based on this view point, war with America is an inevitable destiny for the country and will eventually lead to Iran's glorious victory, considering the fact that the loss of life does not necessarily work as a deterrent for those who support the war.

Moreover, conservatives would use any such bloodshed to manufacture a holy cause against the Americans, and through their own framing of the situation play the role of heroes who are defending the victimhood of the Shia ideology. Therefore, just as the Iran-Iraq War is framed as a blessing that helped unify the country against foreign adversaries, a confrontation with the United States would also consolidate a polarized political atmosphere inside Iran.

On the reformist side, however, even a small confrontation with the US would have irreversible consequences on the reputation and the popularity of the reformist narration. With the extreme polarization of policy regarding the relationship with the United States, the Iranian reformists promoted dialogue, negotiation and cooperation as an instrument to avoid war and boost the country's economy. A goal that was briefly achieved by the Iran nuclear deal once again seems out of reach following the US withdrawal and the reimposition of economic sanctions.

As has been suggested by the former US Secretary of State John Kerry, the Iranian reformists are desperately trying to wait Trump out, and hope for a better relationship with the next president of America.

This dramatic hope, however, would wane if war, even in the form of relatively minor clashes, breaks out. This would provide hard-line Iranian conservatives with the necessary momentum to wipe out not only the reformist movement itself, but also the ideology of change and reform within Iran.

From a short-term viewpoint, a show of power through limited military campaigns might appear to be an option to force “behavioral change” on the Iranian regime. In the long run, however, due to the fundamental ideological hostility toward the West among Iran’s hard-liners, military confrontation would possibly lead to a more serious clash between Iran and the United States.

If America is truly hoping for change in Iran, it should let its people follow the same path of electing relatively West-friendly reformists, and wait for the change to come gradually while trying to control Iranian intervention in the region through diplomatic channels.

Any kind of confrontation between the Iranian and US troops would likely further discredit the reformists’ viewpoint toward Washington and its intentions, and help an anti-American hard-line narrative to solidify its dominance in

Iran. This would be, without a doubt, the end of hope for the Iranian people.

The **author** would like to remain anonymous and has used a pseudonym.

D-Day at 75: Is It Time to Reconsider Britain’s “Special Relationship” with the US?

Gavin E.L. Hall
June 5, 2019

The overall picture of Britain’s so-called special relationship with the US since the D-Day landings 75 years ago is not one of mutual respect and cooperation between equals, but rather one of dominance.

As the 75th anniversary of the incredible feat of cooperation that began the liberation of Europe, D-Day or Operation Overlord, approaches on June 6, it is worth reflecting on the nature of the relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States, and indeed whether such a relationship can be constituted as “special.”

The D-Day landings were the product of a partnership of equals. The plans were conceived by a British general, Frederick Morgan, and supported by a British-dominated staff in control of the Allied forces: General Bernard Montgomery in charge of land troops, Air Chief Marshall Trafford Leigh-Mallory

responsible for aerial support, and Admiral Bertram Ramsay the sea. Furthermore, the deputy supreme Allied commander, Arthur Tedder, was British, leaving Dwight Eisenhower, as supreme Allied commander, the only non-British person in a strategic command position. Given that the plans for the operation had been developed by the British, and that senior command positions were held by British officers, it strongly suggests that Eisenhower's appointment was more rooted in politics than ability, not to say that he wasn't a capable general.

The picture of cooperation is further reinforced by the participation of forces. Britain supplied 892 out of the 1,213 warships taking part, and 3,261 of the 4,126 landing craft, with the Royal and Merchant Navies providing more than double the personnel level of the United States. The Royal Air Force supplied around half of the 11,590 Allied aircraft involved, whilst on land British and Canadian forces had responsibility for three landing beaches (Gold, Sword and Juno), with 75,215 troops and 7,900 paratroopers, while the US covered the remaining two beaches (Omaha and Utah) with 57,500 troops and 15,500 paratroopers.

Furthermore, the intelligence operations at breaking the German Enigma codes were led by Alan Turing at Bletchley Park, and the substantive disinformation campaign, including the fictitious First United States Army Group designed to trick the Germans into believing the invasion would take place at Calais, was

led by Colonel David Strangeways, a Brit. Therefore, the bulk of forces involved in D-Day were provided by the British Empire. This is not to say that the American participation should be overlooked. But a reversal of the common perception put forward by Hollywood films that the United States led the salvation of Europe is in order, when the operation was, in fact, planned by the British, based on British intelligence, British-led and involved a majority of British troops.

AFTER THE WAR

The so-called special relationship of the Second World War was, therefore, one of military parity in terms of command, personnel and capability, with intelligence arguably dominated by the British. Political relationships were largely dependent on the respective personalities of the individual leaders at any given time and, as such, can't be considered to be part of a special relationship. However, the lend-lease programs and the postwar Marshall Plan aid demonstrated the economic dominance of the United States, which was further reinforced by the Bretton Woods system, based on linking the dollar to gold reserves.

Furthermore, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are both effectively controlled by the United States, as the voting percentages in each organization are dictated by the levels of contribution. Since the Bretton Wood system collapsed in 1971, the

dollar has operated as a global reserve currency.

Until the Gulf War broke out in 1991, the United Kingdom and United States had been unwilling to support each other, directly, in military terms. The UK did not engage in combat operations alongside the US in Vietnam, nor did the United States get involved in the legacies of empire, like the Suez Crisis of 1956 and the Malayan Emergency 1948-60, for example, or indeed when the territorial integrity for the United Kingdom was undermined with the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982.

Beyond the mutual support offered as members of NATO and the P5 of the UN Security Council, where the interests of both countries were arguably aligned, there is little evidence of a special relationship between Britain and the US during the Cold War period. Indeed, it could be argued that the only reason the notion of a special relationship has such prominence in the mindset is down to the positive relationship between President Ronald Reagan and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s.

The Gulf War saw combined operations to overthrow Saddam Hussein, with the British providing a number of specialist roles. Notably with special-forces and low-level runway denial missions, which the Royal Air Force was the only air force in the world capable of performing. (The Tornado GR1 was the only supersonic low-level bomber and utilized the JP-233 Low-Altitude Airfield

Attack System.) However, the bulk of the coalition forces, around 700,000 out of a total of approximately 950,000 troops were provided by the United States. Furthermore, every command position was held by an American officer. It can be argued that as this was ostensibly an American operation, this is unsurprising. However, it is also worth noting that the United States didn't feel obligated to make a political appointment, as in the case of Eisenhower on D-Day, to reinforce the special relationship.

LACKING THE MEANS

The nature of the relationship is stark when operations to defeat the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan from 2006 onward, but especially following the 2009 surge under President Barack Obama, are considered. The US provided over 75% of the troops deployed to Afghanistan, even with a coalition of 43 partner countries participating in operations during the course of the 11-year International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission.

American troops consistently took part in riskier combat operations, despite the common perception of the increased risks to British troops operating in Helmand province. Once again, all the senior command positions were maintained by American officers after 2007, following the establishment of the ISAF countrywide command under a British general, David Richards, and NATO's Allied Rapid Reaction Corps.

The initial period of the ISAF mission that saw the mandate expanded outward from Kabul between 2003 and 2006, was run on a rotational basis from contributing countries. A number of deputy commanders were British, and the regional commands involved a rotational system between Allies, though none were specifically British.

Despite the United Kingdom supplying the most troops after the United States and operating in one of the most dangerous areas of Afghanistan, no special dispensation was given in terms of providing the command structure for the mission. Therefore, the argument that Britain is just another US ally and not in any way special gains credence.

The change over the course of recent history in the widely-hailed special relationship between Britain and the United States is difficult to miss. Politically, the relationship is dependent on the respective leadership personalities at a given time. Economically, there is no special relationship, and, as seen in the Gulf War and Afghanistan, militarily, the United Kingdom is lacking with regards to the ability to contribute relative to the United States.

The only area that could be considered special is in the field of intelligence, where the UK, as part of the Five Eyes alliance, does enjoy a privileged status based on capability. The overall picture, thus, is not one of mutual respect and cooperation between equals, but rather one of dominance. Therefore, when we

remember the bravery of those involved in the Normandy landings of June 6, 1944, and the associated costs, both in terms of human lives and resources, it could be worthwhile to also contemplate just what should Britain's role in the world — and its relative power within the international system — be going forward given that it is no longer an equal partner in a special relationship.

Gavin E.L. Hall is a doctoral researcher at the University of Birmingham focusing on the institutional transformation of NATO in the post-Cold War era, especially in relation to emerging security challenges such as the provision of security in the cyber environment. He holds an MA in Terrorism, International Crime and Global Security from Coventry University and a BA in War Studies from King's College London.

Not All Terrorists Want to Claim Responsibility for Attacks

Barbara Manthe

June 12, 2019

Why would right-wing terrorists decide not to claim responsibility for their crimes?

In Germany, there has been an ongoing public debate as to whether radical-right terrorists take responsibility for their crimes, particularly after the radical-right terrorist group Nationalsozialistischer

Untergrund (the National Socialist Underground, NSU) was uncovered. This group did not claim credit for its attacks before 2011, when its existence was revealed.

Security forces like the police and the domestic intelligence services often assumed from insights into the communication strategies of left-wing terrorism that a terrorist attack requires a communicative act claiming responsibility.

Since this was not the case with the NSU attacks, authorities concluded before 2011 that there could be no political basis for the crimes committed against minorities, suspected minorities and a German policewoman between 2000 and 2007, in what became known as the Česká murders. Other observers, particularly NGOs and critical journalists, argued that right-wing terrorists would (almost) never write letters of responsibility.

This take is only partially true. Generally, it can be stated that most radical-right terrorist groups in Germany do not declare responsibility for their crimes, but there were exceptions. For example, the Deutsche Aktionsgruppen (German Action Groups), which committed several attacks in 1980, claimed credit for its crimes via phone calls and letters to the media, even though they were neither detailed nor well elaborated.

Therefore, ever since the group carried out its first attack, the public was aware

that there was a neo-Nazi group called Deutsche Aktionsgruppen that committed terrorist attacks.

Other actors, such as the Hepp/Kexel Group (1982) and the NSU (1998-2011) serve as example for radical-right terrorist organizations that deliberately did not claim responsibility for their deeds. Besides these two, there are many other examples of groups or lone actors who did not admit their perpetration: the Otte Group and the Kühnen/Schulte/Wegener Group in the late 1970s; those responsible for the Oktoberfest bombing in 1980; the murderer of the Jewish publisher Shlomo Lewin and his partner Frieda Poeschke in 1980; as well as numerous attacks on immigrant homes in the early 1990s.

In the cases of the Hepp/Kexel Group and the NSU, both the police and the general public made false assumptions with regard to the background of the attacks. While the bombings carried out by the Hepp/Kexel Group against US Army personnel deployed in West Germany were thought to be left-wing terrorist attacks committed by the Red Army Faction (RAF), the NSU murders and bombings were misattributed to conflicts within differing factions inside the Turkish community.

Why, then, would right-wing terrorists decide not to claim responsibility for their crimes and miss the chance to transmit their messages to a wider audience? First, practical aspects should be considered. The leaders of

the Hepp/Kexel Group took the view that letters or pamphlets always involved the risk of leading prosecutors on the right track. If the investigators initiated an active search for the actual perpetrators, the terrorists would probably soon be detected. This assumption may also apply to the NSU, since a significant bonus for terrorists in hiding was that the police never seriously investigated within the radical-right scene.

Assuming that terrorism is a communication strategy, following Peter Waldmanns' analysis, a second aspect needs to be taken into account. One primary goal of terrorism — to produce a state of fear through the use of violence — is fulfilled when the victim group is intimidated.

This was the case both with the attacks carried out by the Hepp/Kexel Group and the NSU, which managed to unsettle the target groups (US military personnel in the former case and the Turkish community in the latter). Furthermore, in the eyes of the terrorists, the attacks should speak for themselves. The NSU produced a DVD in which a text panel was shown, reading: "The National Socialist Underground is a network of comrades with the principle — deeds instead of words." According to this logic, the attacks themselves, rather than letters, give a hint of the underlying motive.

A third aspect deserves attention. The terrorists may have intended to leave the police and general public ignorant of their true motives. It was a strategy by

West German right-wing terrorists to blame the left for their attacks in the 1970s and 1980s. This was also the case in Italy, where numerous radical-right motivated attacks were committed in order to blame the communists, the idea being to win the population over to the far-right cause through a so-called "strategy of tension."

For example, members of the Otte Group posted a letter after a bomb attack in Hannover in 1977, in which the RAF allegedly took responsibility for the bombing. The Hepp/Kexel Group did the same. When German authorities suspected left-wing terrorists of the attacks, Odfried Hepp, one of the leaders of the group, even considered encouraging this with a fake letter of confession. It was, in the eyes of the terrorists, not necessary to enlighten the public about the truth.

This strategy might also have been pursued by the NSU. It is a matter of fact that the group was well informed about the police investigations into the Turkish community. For example, it collected newspaper clippings about the Česká murder series.

Therefore, it is fair to state that the terrorists not only tolerated the lack of knowledge about the background of their deeds, but may even have approved of it. The fact that the victims of the attacks were victimized for a second time through the police investigations must have been welcomed by this racist group.

The NSU might have been inspired by the racist American novels *The Turner Diaries* and *The Hunter*. These books point to a supposed necessity for a “race war” sparked by terrorist attacks. The white population is expected to join this war on the side of the racists and bring the conflict to an end.

Political involvement is implied to be nonessential and sometimes even counterproductive. In the 1990s and 2000s, the violent German neo-Nazi scene not only translated and disseminated the novels, but also regarded them as a welcome inspiration for their strategies.

The NSU’s strategy of killing citizens and planting bombs without leaving any indication that this was a politically motivated crime strikingly resembles the discussed conceptions of starting a “race war,” albeit in a covert and indirect fashion.

Barbara Manthe is a historian and an expert on the history of radical-right terrorism and violence in Germany since 1945. She is a senior fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and a principal investigator at the University of Applied Sciences in Düsseldorf, Germany, where she examines right-wing terrorism in the FRG between 1970 and 1990. For more than 10 years, Manthe has written, taught and conducted research on the radical right, as well as applied her expertise as a research officer in

parliament and in the field of political education.

The Dismal State of #MeToo in India

Akshata Kapoor
June 17, 2019

A dismissed case of sexual harassment in Bollywood shows just how behind India is in its journey toward gender equality.

The past days have seen a whirlwind of accusations and emotions surrounding the #MeToo movement in India that are truly representative of the abysmal state of women’s rights in the country. On June 13, a sexual harassment case was closed by the police under the pretext of a lack of evidence, becoming the “first official #MeToo case that has reportedly collapsed.” The case, filed by actress Tanushree Dutta against actor and film writer Nana Patekar for harassing her during a film shoot, is now being deemed as having been given a “clean chit.”

Dutta immediately responded that she intends to challenge the decision as well as alleging that the case was closed in a hurry before all witnesses had had the opportunity to testify; she also accused the police of witness intimidation.

The conviction rate for crimes against women is just 19%, as compared to an average 47% conviction rate for all crimes — a regrettable statistic that clearly contests the idea that the police

decision in this case was either reliable or unbiased. Yet many decided to ignore Dutta's challenge and jumped to conclusions about the actress being "malicious," and deemed Patekar deserving compensation for all the "humiliation" he faced. The response to the "clean chit" and to Dutta's reaction has been disheartening, to say the least, and gives several indications as to just how far behind India is in its journey toward gender equality.

Just hours after the case was closed, film producer Mukesh Tyagi came on national television as part of a panel to discuss the police decision. The panel consisted of Tyagi and four women, all four having some expertise in or experience with issues surrounding sexual harassment. In what can only be seen as the epitome of India's patriarchal tendencies, Tyagi had the audacity to drop misogynistic remarks, including terming certain sexual harassment allegations as "frivolous" and insinuating that Dutta was responsible of "castigating evidence."

Ira Trivedi, an author who had previously filed a complaint against sexual harassment, spoke about her experience of being an accuser. She argued as to why the negative energy surrounding sexual harassment accusations and the inefficient handling of complaints by the police makes it extremely unlikely for women in India to make false allegations. Tyagi's response to this, and to the statements made by other panelists, was that despite feeling "the power of the

matriarchy," he believed that the #MeToo movement was wrong to "hijack" the system, and that fake accusers deserved to be punished. This dismissive attitude, where sexual harassment and gender equality are viewed as a "matriarchal" issues rather than a human one, is emblematic of inherent sexism in India's society.

FEMINIST CHALLENGE

This interaction brings to light the context in which Indian women are fighting against sexual harassment and other forms of misogyny. The little trust put in the women who have the courage to step forward, and the readiness to deem an accusation as fake, point to the insecurity among men in India who feel their dominant position being challenged by feminist movements. There is resistance to investigating or punishing alleged sexual harassers, especially celebrities, and yet there is an unbounded enthusiasm to take strict action against any woman who makes so-called fake accusations. The very fact that a man in India is able to come out in public and make sexist, insensitive statements in the face of clear injustice against women shows the power that men hold in society.

Tyagi's audacity paid off, for there was little public outcry at his statements on social media, nor was he visibly condemned or called out by any public figures other than the women on the panel. The fact that Tyagi felt no remorse for his comments that were met with less backlash than Dutta's

accusations against Patekar is truly shameful. Not only does this show the derisory attitude of Indian society to feminist causes such as the #MeToo movement, but it serves as a frightful reminder of what influence men still enjoy in India. Epithets like “frivolous” thrown around on national television in conjunction with #MeToo exhibit a dangerous, long-standing practice of deriding and trivializing female achievements while sensationalizing their “flaws.”

Former Bollywood actress Pooja Bedi also reacted in a disappointing manner, putting complete confidence in the actions of the police and calling for strict punishment for women who are responsible for false accusations. Her attitude symbolizes that of hundreds of Bollywood actors and actresses who Tanushree Dutta has called out as “hypocrites” for turning their backs on victims of sexual harassment. An example of this is the actor Alok Nath, who has been cast in films despite being accused of rape and inappropriate behavior toward women. Despite allegations, male celebrities like Nath and Patekar are not losing either face or popularity, while the women speaking up against them are blacklisted and shamed.

An equally horrific reaction to this event was displayed by the Indian public on platforms like Twitter. An important thing to note here is the unique nature of Bollywood, where not only are acting careers controlled by powerful film dynasties that don't care much for

feminism, but also one where actors like Nana Patekar are worshipped as heroes for their roles. This devout fan following is quick to defend celebrities from attacks, and contributes to the burden of proof in such cases being placed on the accuser rather than the harasser. In this case, the decision by the police to not charge Patekar was met with celebration and relief amongst his fans, which quickly turned into a rage-filled denunciation of Tanushree Dutta, feminism and the #MeToo movement.

There were numerous tweets sympathizing with Patekar, whose life was apparently “destroyed” by Dutta's accusations. Ironically, people turned a blind eye to Dutta's resolute defense of her allegations, instead insulting her “disgusting” character, as well as attacking her acting skills and her appearance — aspects of Nana Patekar's image that were never questioned, even when allegations against him were pending. Some called her a “fatso” and “harasser,” and her allegations a publicity stunt. The criticism of #MeToo and of feminists in general that followed showed the lack of seriousness with which women's rights are regarded. Many headlines and discussions in the news surrounded the idea that the #MeToo movement has been “killed.” This rush to demonize feminists and be done with #MeToo is a clear manifestation of India's unwillingness to change and an ingrained sexism that refuses to be challenged by logic or basic humanity.

CHANGE IN CONSCIOUSNESS

Besides the colorful display of India's patriarchal mindset, this latest event has brought spotlight on a handful of courageous feminists, undeterred by all the backlash and hate that they receive on a daily basis for standing up against sexual harassment. In the face of frustratingly inefficient institutions that have denied them the justice that they deserve, women like Ira Trivedi and Tanushree Dutta, along with hundreds of others, have managed to power through. Yet these women will not be able to go far as long as the government and the public continue to turn a blind eye to gender inequality.

Bollywood is the one industry that has the power to influence millions of its dedicated viewers. As long as there remains a culture of tolerance toward actors accused of sexual harassment, people will continue to worship perpetrators of sexual violence and dismiss the #MeToo movement as frivolous and harassment allegations as false. While Hollywood is by no means perfect, Bollywood has much to learn from its reaction to the #MeToo phenomenon that tore open the culture of abuse in the film industry two years ago, including cancellations of shows and movies starring actors accused of sexual harassment.

The past few days have shown how little change there has really been in India's attitude toward women's rights. There is only so much of a change in consciousness that social media can induce, and it is now up to the government, its institutions and

influential establishments such as the film industry to take forward what was successfully launched online and implement it offline for a lasting and effective shift toward equality. India needs to recognize that the primary need is for strict, efficient and transparent action to be taken against perpetrators of sexual harassment, not women who step forward to fight for their basic human rights.

Akshata Kapoor is a student at the Cathedral and John Connon School in Mumbai, India. She is an avid debater who also enjoys reading and writing about global politics, gender issues and cultural changes. She is currently a social media intern at Fair Observer.

For Iran, Options Are Few and Prospects Are Grim

Gary Grappo

June 18, 2019

After last week's tanker attacks in the Gulf of Oman, Tehran will need to undertake a sober assessment of its options, which are few, and its prospects, which only get worse.

Last week's attacks on two oil tankers outside the Strait of Hormuz show that for now Tehran is choosing from a very limited playbook in responding to America's increasingly painful sanctions on the Islamic Republic. If indeed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps naval forces are responsible for these

recent attacks as well as those on four tankers last month, then Tehran's reasoning seems clear. Attacks on tankers exiting the Gulf will lead to speculation about the future dependability of Gulf-sourced oil, responsible for nearly one-third of the global oil supply. Such thoughts are hardly comforting to markets, inevitably leading to higher prices. That's what Tehran wants.

Iran can't be the only one to suffer the consequences of Washington's sanctions. The rest of the world, including those who don't necessarily source their oil imports from the Gulf, must also pay a price for Washington's actions. Predictably, markets reacted to both attacks with prices spiking in the immediate aftermath. But perhaps because armed conflict is seen as unlikely for the time being — both President Donald Trump and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have said they do not want war — prices have fallen back to nearly pre-attacks levels.

The stronger trend in oil markets is lower demand as a result of slowing economies. That could change if real conflict follows, and we confront another "Tanker War" as was the case during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, when Iraq attacked an Iranian oil facility in 1984, sparking an all-out second front to the one raging on their common border. Tankers carrying both countries' oil became each other's prime targets, with the West, including the US, the UK and the USSR, flagging and escorting

tankers in an attempt to discourage both sides — especially Iran — from going after tankers protected by nations with substantial navies capable of striking back.

Prices spiked back then as well, but then also fell as markets adjusted. So, history and current circumstances suggest that Tehran's strategy will likely have little lasting impact, especially given the limited number of attacks.

MAYBE A BLOCKADE?

Tehran could move to blockade the Strait of Hormuz as it did during the Iran-Iraq conflict. But that too had little lasting impact in oil markets. More importantly, it led to confrontation between the US and Iran, including an Iranian rocket attack on a US Navy ship and an accidental downing by a US naval vessel of an Iranian commercial airliner that killed all 270 passengers aboard. The Iranians would be well advised to heed history and avoid such provocations this time. Under President Trump, who is influenced by war hawks like Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, the US response would not be proportional.

The Tanker War is additionally instructive of the uncertain escalatory nature of tit-for-tat actions between the two feuding countries. As was with the case of the Iranian airliner, the escalatory ladder is unpredictable and very unstable. Anticipating an enemy's response is dangerously inexact,

especially when factoring in public emotions.

So, if Iran wants to trigger higher oil prices, it has few options other than continuing its current strategy of occasional tanker attacks that temporarily rile markets. Even targeting more tankers — unless it's on a massive scale that is beyond its capability short of declaring all-out war on Gulf tanker traffic — will probably have little medium-to-long-term impact. Moreover, such an all-out tanker war strategy would expose Tehran to worldwide condemnation and loss of whatever public high ground it may have after Washington's abandonment of the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in May 2018.

There is one other potentially deniable tactic — employing its proxy forces like Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen or Iraqi Shia militias to go after American or allied targets. Such attacks, like the one on Monday against the Saudi airport in Abha in the Western part of the kingdom, also carry high risk. The potential killing of large numbers of civilians, and especially of an American, would almost demand a prompt and forceful response from Washington or a US ally. Furthermore, such proxies cannot always be relied upon to do precisely what Iran may direct. The kind of control necessary to contain the risky set of consequences is lost.

Finally, Iran can resume its nuclear weapons program as it has already threatened. While that might lose it the

support of the remaining signers of the JCPOA, it might also give Tehran more sway in getting Washington to back off and consider rejoining the nuclear agreement, albeit under different criteria. Under Trump, the Americans seem impervious, however, to the pleadings of even their closest allies. Even they would be reluctant to go to the US administration without some concrete incentives to get them back into the JCPOA.

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Despite the apparent futility of its playlist, Tehran has achieved some modest success. Donald Trump has stated he doesn't want war with Iran, does not seek regime change and wants to talk with the Iranians. These options may appear meager, but collectively could be used by Iran's leadership to signal to the Iranian public that its strategy has worked and it is now ready to begin talks with the Americans. That would be the smart approach, and Americans, Iranians and the rest of the world would breathe a great sigh of relief.

The perfect opportunity for that occurred last week when Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Tehran and met with the supreme leader to seek some lessening of tensions between the two sides. Khamenei indicated he wasn't interested in talking to Washington, however.

Tehran will need to undertake a sober assessment of its options, which are

few, and its prospects, which only get worse. It can never hope to match Washington's abundant arsenal of economic and military options to make life in Iran and political leadership in Tehran ever more difficult and fraught. Iranians certainly have an extraordinary capacity for enduring suffering, as they amply demonstrated during the devastating Iran-Iraq War and 40 years of onerous American sanctions before 2015. But does the supreme leader really want to impose that on his people and subject his leadership to inescapable criticism?

In fact, if Khamenei wants to end this and allow his richly endowed nation to benefit from the global economy, then the decision seems clear. Sit down with Washington and negotiate. So why can't he? The answer lies simply in the course those negotiations are likely to take. The US agrees to lift all sanctions and perhaps make some commitment not to attempt to remove the regime. There are no ideological or existential reasons preventing Washington from doing its part.

But Tehran would have to agree to release Americans it currently unjustly holds; to severely curtail its medium-range missile testing; extend the time horizons for development of its nuclear program, doubtlessly surrendering the possibility of having a nuclear weapons capability for the foreseeable future; and cease all support for Iran-allied terrorist organizations to include Hezbollah, et al. For Tehran and the Islamic Republic, these are obstacles that extend far

beyond the political or even military considerations. They are existential in that to forever foreswear nuclear weapons and support for its proxies is tantamount to a repudiation of the Islamic Revolution. Indeed, options are few and prospects are grim in Iran.

Gary Grappo is a former US ambassador and a distinguished fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at the Korb School for International Studies, University of Denver. He possesses nearly 40 years of diplomatic and public policy experience in a variety of public, private and nonprofit endeavors. As a career member of the Senior Foreign Service of the US Department of State, he served as Envoy and Head of Mission of the Office of the Quartet Representative, the Honorable Mr. Tony Blair, in Jerusalem. Grappo is chairman of the Board of Directors at Fair Observer.

Who Can Beat Trump in 2020?

S. Suresh
June 19, 2019

For Democrats, the issue of paramount importance is identifying the person best suited to defeating Trump in November 2020.

The United States of America is facing a constitutional crisis of an unparalleled magnitude. The Founding Fathers of the nation wisely created the executive,

judicial and legislative branches of government to ensure checks and balances between them. Should the executive branch blatantly overstep its boundaries, they had provisions for the legislature to rein it in, under the auspices of the judiciary. They probably did not foresee a situation where the Senate shamelessly colludes with the president, while the House of Representatives gets mired in its own political incompetency against the backdrop of the Supreme Court that is in danger of losing its neutrality.

Chief Justice John Roberts tried to convince the country that ideological differences in the Supreme Court are not due to political affiliation of the judges, telling an audience at the University of Minnesota last October that “we do not serve one party or one interest, we serve one nation.”

Yet Justice Roberts does have the right to vote, which he can exercise every two years and, in the process, align himself with a political party. If one were to look into the leanings of the Supreme Court justices, it is clear that all five judges nominated by a Republican president fall under the conservative spectrum, and the remaining four judges nominated by a Democratic president fall on the liberal side.

The intersectionality between religious, political and ideological beliefs is hard to escape, notwithstanding Justice Roberts’ assurances that the Supreme Court is immune to it.

The challenge to the democratic institution in America comes not from the ideological underpinnings of the Supreme Court, but rather from its imbecile president and the spineless Republican senators marshaled by their hypocritical majority leader, Mitch McConnell.

After successfully sabotaging President Barack Obama’s Supreme Court nomination of Merrick Garland in 2016 after insisting that it is improper for a departing president to fill any judicial vacancy, McConnell asserted that in 2020 he would allow President Trump to fill such vacancies, including the Supreme Court, should one arise. The lengths to which McConnell will go in order to shift the judicial landscape to a decidedly conservative one ought to scare anyone who believes in a fair democratic process.

A CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS

Assured of the unwavering support and protection from a Republican Senate, Donald Trump’s behavior is turning increasingly authoritarian. Fancying himself an emperor, Trump has floated the idea of extending his presidency to more than two terms in violation of the Constitution. He also wants two years added to his current term to account for the time lost on the Mueller investigation.

Already taking for granted a win in 2020, Trump is laying the foundation for a potential civil unrest in the country should he lose his reelection bid. In a

tweet, he stated that his supporters might “demand that I stay longer.” In the same tweet he also discredits media that he disagrees with, specifically calling out The New York Times and The Washington Post.

In order to secure a second term, Trump unabashedly stated in an interview with ABC that he would accept dirt on his opponents from foreigners, tacitly extending an open invitation to Russia and any country that may want to interfere in the 2020 election.

It is not only unethical, but unprecedented for the president of the United States to solicit dirt on his political opponents from a foreign power. Unfortunately, ethics and decorum are concepts that do not exist in the world of Trump, the most unscrupulous president America has seen in recent times.

In the midst of this remarkable crisis facing the nation, 24 Democrats have thrown their hats in the ring for a chance to unseat Trump. Let us not forget that Trump had methodically dismantled more than 20 Republican candidates and the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, during the 2016 election to win the presidency. Going through a traditional nomination process, Democrats would lose valuable time in identifying the candidate to take on Trump and devising a strategy to defeat him.

Twice in recent times a Democrat who won the national popular vote failed to

win the presidency: Al Gore against George W. Bush in 2000, and Hillary Clinton against Trump in 2016. Representative democracy and the convoluted nature of the Electoral College provides a means for a person to lose the popular vote and become president. Fully cognizant of this fact, only eight candidates endorse the need for Electoral College reform, while three are against it, and the remaining ones dance around the issue.

Without waiting for the improbable abolition of the Electoral College, 15 states and Washington DC have joined the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact — an effort to ensure that every vote in every state counts in deciding who gets to be America’s president.

In a reflection of the dysfunctional politics among Democrats, Nevada refused to join this coalition when its Democratic governor, Steve Sisolak, vetoed the bill that would have made it possible for the state to join the group. That the Democrats cannot get their heads around an issue as important as Electoral College reform, even after losing the 2016 election to a reprobate like Trump, is most disconcerting.

GETTING THEIR ACT TOGETHER

America faces a plethora of issues that need to be addressed urgently to restore balance and decency in the country. Some of the Democratic hopefuls have centered their campaign around a specific issue they are

passionate about. Julian Castro's People First Policing is a comprehensive plan reforming how policing is done, the only candidate as yet to present such a complete proposal. Beto O'Rourke has reignited the issue of congressional and Supreme Court term limits in his comprehensive voting rights plan aimed at improving participation in and functioning of American democracy.

Unafraid of being labeled a socialist, Bernie Sanders' campaign is centered around economic, social and racial equality. In addition to embracing some of the issues Sanders espouses, Elizabeth Warren highlights a bold foreign policy that is not anchored in military conflicts and bloated defense budgets, but rather friendly collaboration with allies and peace with everyone. When it comes to gun control, Cory Booker goes the furthest by supporting a federal registry of gun owners, making gun ownership much like having a passport.

Health care, affordable housing, voting rights, free college education, gun control, immigration, climate change, women's rights, LGBTQ equality, racial justice and more feature in the long list of issues all these various candidates highlight. Each and every one of the issues is important; some more critical than others.

But the issue that is of paramount importance is identifying the person best suited to taking on Trump and beating him in November 2020. In a recent

survey conducted by Ipsos, 82% of Democrats and independents polled said they want a candidate who can beat Trump, even if that means not nominating a woman or a minority candidate.

Ideally, the 24 Democratic hopefuls should get together in a closed room and emerge with a candidate and his/her running mate with unconditional support, along with a well thought out plan on how to tackle the constitutional crisis being precipitated by Trump and McConnell.

Identifying that candidate should not turn into a reality show circus that the Republican nomination process was in 2016. It is imperative Democrats get their act together soon, lest 2020 becomes yet another unlearned lesson and an exercise in hindsight.

S. Suresh is a product executive with more than 25 years of experience in enterprise software. He is also a writer who devotes much of his time analyzing socioeconomic issues and shares his viewpoints and experiences through his blog, newsletter and Fair Observer. He is a volunteer at HealthTrust, a nonprofit that works towards building health equity in Silicon Valley. Suresh holds graduate degrees in Computer Science and Chemistry from Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani, India.

Iran Has Learned How to Play Trump

Ian McCredie

June 19, 2019

Iran's attacks on oil tankers in the Strait of Hormuz were a sacrifice to lure Washington into a draw.

Iran's botched operation in the Strait of Hormuz, in which the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) navy nearly got caught in the act of mining two tankers, brought the world to the brink of an accidental war. President Donald Trump's policies have pushed Tehran to desperate measures, but Iran has shown that its long-term strategy is more than a match for Washington's ill thought out campaign.

In a rare expression of faith in the CIA, President Trump said he agreed that Iran was behind the recent tanker attacks. The concurrence of other independent Western intelligence assessments with this conclusion indicates that it is almost certainly true. Why would Iran recklessly provoke the US when tensions are already high?

The answer is that Iran has learned how to play Trump. The Persians have been playing chess for over 1,000 years and know a thing or two about gambits. The Iranians are aware they cannot win an all-out war with the US and its allies — Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE — but they can prevent one. Iran's strategy is sophisticated and nuanced. The tanker attacks were a sacrifice to lure Trump into a draw.

Trump reneged on the Iran nuclear deal because the president was seduced by the narrative that the Iranian regime, nuclear armed or not, is an existential threat to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel, and has to be overthrown. Pulling out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was a pretext for new aggression.

Iran was abiding by the JCPOA and, among other stringent controls, had already exported 98% of its enriched uranium stockpile to Russia, guaranteeing its remaining uranium was enriched to no more than 3.67%. In others words, Iran neither presents a nuclear threat at the moment, nor in the foreseeable future.

The aim of the Trump-led alliance is to overthrow the Iranian regime, not to improve the nuclear agreement. Iran's strategy is correspondingly simple: to preserve its security and thwart its enemies' ability to overthrow it.

The first part of Tehran's strategy is to underline how costly any confrontation with Iran might be. Iran cannot match US firepower, but it can fight asymmetrically. The IRGC has trained, armed and empowered a wide swath of proxy groups: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, Shia fighting groups in Iraq (particularly Asaib Ahl al-Haq and the Katab Hezbollah) and the Houthis in Yemen. The IRGC Quds Force also has a global capability to mount terrorist style attacks in third countries and, as we have seen, can attack ships in the straits.

The second part is Iran's deployment of its diplomatic expertise to split Trump and his Middle Eastern allies from the European Union, China and Russia. This is where the skill of President Hassan Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif shows. They present a face of reason, moderation, peacefulness and wanting to normalize relations. Rouhani gives speeches about Iran's unwillingness to go to war and has engaged with the Qataris, Omanis and the Japanese to open back channel negotiations with the US to de-escalate the situation.

Iran's diplomacy has a forward strategy in the region too. In addition to cementing alliances with Syria and Iraq, it has also sought to exploit the deep unease on the proverbial Arab Street about Trump's "deal of the century" with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This attempt to bribe the Palestinians to give up hope for an independent state and live on a reservation with borders drawn by Israel will not run. This is an Achilles heel for the dictators of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, and Iran will seize it to drive a wedge between them and their subjects.

Which brings us to why Iran authorized the attack on the tankers. The reason was simple: to demonstrate that Iran can easily cripple shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. However, Iran did not want to give the US an immediate *casus belli* or trigger a shooting war by accident. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, authorized the

IRGC navy to mount a covert and plausibly deniable operation, one to demonstrate Iran's capability but leave no actual proof that Iran was the perpetrator — in other words, an operation Iran could deny without being proved a liar.

This did not go according to plan, as the IRGC made two errors: One of the limpet mines attached to the Japanese vessel *Kokuka Courageous* did not explode, and US overhead surveillance (which the US claimed was a helicopter in the area) was able to record footage of them retrieving the device. This was an error and could have resulted in an immediate attack on the IRGC team with unintended consequences. However, the lack of indisputable IRGC identification meant the Iran could still deny responsibility, although few believe them.

In fact this almost botched operation may have highlighted in bolder colors the danger of a military confrontation with Iran. Even Trump is now worrying that the march to war called for by UAE and Saudi crown princes, Mohammed bin Zayed and Mohamed bin Salman, Benjamin Netanyahu and the zealots in the Trump administration, National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, would lead to disaster — and his own electoral suicide.

Five of Trump's top military and diplomatic advisers, General Jim Mattis, Rex Tillerson, General HR McMaster, General John Kelly and now Patrick

Shanahan, have already resigned or been sacked, with the defense secretary position vacant since last December. The US public is not prepared for war, and, after the sacrifices in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is no stomach for another. The UAE and Saudi Arabia could not and would not fight without the US. They too will have to rethink. Iran may be weakened, but it has played this game to a draw.

Ian McCredie is a former senior British foreign service official. Most recently, he was Head of Corporate Security for Shell International. He now focuses on helping companies navigate the complexities and manage the risk of frontier markets. He is a mathematics graduate and speaks Farsi, French and Danish.

What If Michael Jackson Had Lived?

Ellis Cashmore
June 21, 2019

Michael Jackson, who died on June 25, 2009, has become one the most castigated figures in recent history. What if he'd lived to see it?

What if, on June 24, 2009, the paramedics had arrived at Michael Jackson's home in Los Angeles at 12:24pm — two minutes earlier than they actually did when responding to the 911 call from Jackson's security people? Imagine: After finding that Jackson isn't

breathing, the paramedics attempt CPR on him, compressing his chest and delivering mouth-to-mouth ventilation until, after 4 minutes, he revives. He's then rushed to the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, with fractured ribs and internal bleeding, but no brain damage. Surgeons say they expect a complete recovery. After a few weeks, the 50-year-old Jackson resumes rehearsals for his 50-concert comeback tour, *This Is It*, at London's newly opened O2 Arena. What if?

Nearly 10 years later, *Leaving Neverland*, a documentary directed by British filmmaker Dan Reed, is released after all manner of legal obstacles are overcome. The documentary features two men, James Safechuck and Wade Robson, both of whom claim that they were sexually abused by the star from their childhood into their teens. Jackson had repeatedly denied allegations of sexual abuse and was acquitted on pedophilia charges after a trial in 2005. The documentary renews suspicions about Jackson. Again, he denies the allegations and tries in vain to stop transmission, the stories that haunted him 20 years before returning to torment him again. What if?

Jackson died a decade ago. In life he was regarded, variously, as a wunderkind, the King of Pop, an eccentric and a freak. He's been posthumously disgraced, dishonored and stigmatized as a child molester. It's possible that the past would have caught up with Jackson if he'd lived. The blizzard of hearsay, rumor and malicious

tittle-tattle combined with the millions of dollars in unobtrusively settled legal cases would have presented formidable challenges for Jackson. But he'd fended off scandals and emerged with his reputation if not intact, then with enough structure for him to sell out his vaunted London concerts and, perhaps, produce more bestselling albums.

DEATH IS A GOOD CAREER MOVE

Michael Jackson's death undermines the barbed observation that dying is a good career move, which has been circulating ever since Elvis departed from this world in 1977. Had Jackson lived, there is a chance he would still be performing and recording like his contemporary Madonna, now 60, her 14th studio album released earlier this year. The accusations would have probably surfaced, but Jackson would have repudiated them. Would anyone believe him? And, if they didn't, would they forgive him? It's a fascinating duel between the known and the unknown.

Would the open-and-shut case have ever reopened had Jackson lived? After all, both Safechuck and Robson have for years denied he had ever touched them, having testified under oath to this effect. Safechuck didn't testify during Jackson's 2005 trial, though he claims to have lied in a statement given to the 1993 investigation. Robson claims to have lied during his testimony in the 2005 trial at which he was a witness for the defense. He had earlier unequivocally defended Jackson during the 1993 investigation. In 2013, four

years after Jackson's death, Robson reversed his claim and filed a lawsuit alleging abuse. The change of heart suggested undisclosed, perhaps unworthy motivations, but neither he nor Safechuck was compensated for participating in the documentary.

In *Leaving Neverland*, Robson claims the prospect of Jackson's imprisonment prohibited him from revealing the truth earlier, suggesting the depth of attachment between the victim and the abuser, a sort of Stockholm Syndrome perhaps. Were Jackson still alive, presumably he would still not wish him ill.

We don't even know how Jackson will be thought of in the years to come. Perhaps as a spooked Richard Nixon-type, someone who was hailed triumphantly when elected to the US presidency, but later vilified as the most notorious American leader in history. Or a Tiger Woods, perhaps, once disgraced, embarrassed and written off, but now fully restored and acclaimed as a conquering hero. At the moment, the needle points toward the former.

Jackson's life could be an allegory of a violent, tribal, conflict-torn America still trying to rid itself of its most obdurate demon. Jackson was a singer, a dancer, an idiosyncratic collector, a quirky obsessive, a sexual enigma and many other things besides. He didn't fight or assuage racism or position himself as an icon of black struggle. Jackson was such a uniquely divisive, yet historically significant figure, that he will continue to

command argument in much the same way as Muhammad Ali, Billie Holiday and Martin Luther King Jr., inspire discussion. In many senses, Jackson was a presence as relevant and challenging as any African American. Or was he?

COMFORT OR MENACE?

There is a theory that the integration of blacks into American society was and remains conditional: They were permitted to manifest excellence in two realms, sports and the entertainment industry — both areas where they performed for the amusement and delectation of white audiences. They still do, of course. Historically, the fears of slave rebellions and anxiety over civil rights were assuaged by flamboyantly talented entertainers who were too grateful to be concerned with bucking the system. Whites were able to exorcise their trepidation by rewarding a few blacks with money and status way beyond the reach of the majority.

Worshipping someone like Michael Jackson was an honorable deed. It meant whites could persuade themselves that the nightmare of historical racism was gone, and that they were contributing to a fair and more righteous society in which talented African Americans could rise to the top. It seems paradoxical that Jackson was momentarily influential in encouraging a mainstream enthusiasm for black popular music even as his own skin became mysteriously fairer, and his

face, particularly his nose, altered dramatically.

Or perhaps it isn't such a paradox. It's possible that Jackson's global acceptance as an entertainer nonpareil came at least partly because he was a black person with the world at his feet and could have anything he wanted apart from the thing he seemed to desire most — to be white. The consummate purveyor of a cool funk that made his African American roots audible in every note, Jackson was so evidently uncomfortable in his own skin that he wanted to shed it.

"I am a black American ... I am proud of my race," proclaimed Jackson in a 1993 television interview with Oprah Winfrey. But it sounded implausible. For years, he seemed to be transmogrifying. Since 1979 — when he was 21 — in fact, when he had an accident during rehearsals and had plastic surgery that left him with a narrower nose. It was the first of several procedures: His lips lost plumpness, and his chin acquired a cleft. Combined with his chemically treated hair, his blanched skin (he apparently had vitiligo, a condition that affects skin pigmentation) and the signs of dermal fillers, the overall impression he gave was of a man trying to escape his natural appearance and replace it with that of a white man.

CRASHING COMET

If this made Jackson interesting, the allegations that emerged in late 1993 made him gripping. Accused of abuse,

Jackson settled out of court in the excess of \$20 million. His next album *HIStory: Past, Present and Future, Book I*, sold 20 million (and counting) copies, seeming to confirm his substantial fan base was unfazed by the imputations. It seems unlikely that any star today would be treated as leniently by the public as Jackson has been. Combined with proliferating stories of his eccentricities and the secretive goings-on at his well-protected Neverland estate, the Jackson mystique could have taken on a thoroughly unwholesome character. In the event, this rumor-within-rumors became the single most compelling reason for his lasting attractiveness.

In many entertainers, moral deficiencies can be ruinous; but not in Jackson's case. The singer appears to have operated untrammelled as a serial child abuser — in 2015, it was claimed Jackson had silenced up to 20 accusers with payoffs totaling \$200 million — often with the tacit, if unwitting, complicity of the victims' parents, as *Leaving Neverland* shows so well. The reason it didn't damage him may be that audiences, especially white audiences, found his flaws reassuring. Here was a man-child with blessings in abundance and arguably more adulation than any other entertainer. He could have reaped the wonders of the world. But he was defective, grotesquely so. And, in a black man, this made him more of a comfort than a menace.

Once a dazzling comet that flashed across cultural skies, only to crash spectacularly and devastatingly to earth,

Jackson was a reminder that black men, even those gilded in virtuosity, can be deceptively dangerous.

A decade after his death, Michael Jackson draws the admiration and perhaps respect of an unknown legion of devotees, music aficionados and perhaps cynics who have witnessed black men symbolically emasculated many times before. For them, he is a falsely disparaged hero. He also incenses a sharp-clawed public who believes it was taken in by his depraved subterfuge; it will denounce him as an unforgivably malevolent villain. In his afterlife, Jackson will be a fugitive soul destined to remain somewhere outside heaven, but on the threshold of hell.

If he had survived, an embattled Jackson might have found himself marooned without friends or devotees, and possibly even in prison. Or he might have completed his longest and most successful series of concerts in London, released a new album and rivaled Beyoncé as the most important black entertainer in living memory. We can impose a narrative on the unknowable survival of Jackson, but speculation is just that, of course. We can only conjecture on what might have happened had Michael Jackson lived. But one thing is certain: His life may be gone, but his influence, beneficial or maleficent, will endure.

Ellis Cashmore is the author of "Elizabeth Taylor," "Beyond Black" and "Celebrity Culture." He is honorary

professor of sociology at Aston University and has previously worked at the universities of Hong Kong and Tampa.

A Delicate Balance of Power in Syria's Last Opposition Stronghold

Theodore Karasik & Maya Yang
June 24, 2019

The politics of Idlib are extremely complicated, particularly with respect to outside powers that have vested interests in the outcome of the fight for the province.

The delicate balance of power in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib appears unsustainable and, to say the least, it is difficult to predict how events will unfold. The Russian-backed Syrian regime offensive to take over the country's last remaining "de-escalation zone" seems to have lost some steam. Notwithstanding the Syrian Arab Army's (SAA) capture of Kafr Nabudah and Qalaat al-Mudiq, President Bashar al-Assad's forces haven't been able to retake more than a small percentage of Idlib. Within this context, the governments in Damascus and Moscow have embraced collective punishment to achieve their goals in what remains the last bastion of the Sunni-dominated anti-regime rebellion.

The politics of Idlib are extremely complicated, particularly with respect to outside powers that have vested

interests in the outcome of the fight for the province. Although Turkish-Russian ties are complicated, and the war in Syria is only one factor in this bilateral relationship, Ankara and Moscow's disagreements over Idlib have fueled a notable degree of tension between the two capitals. This is notwithstanding the overall improvements between them since the failed coup plot against Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on July 15, 2016, and pending Ankara's acquisition of the Russian S-400 missile system.

As is so often the case in the Middle East, this question of which groups are in fact terrorist organizations is a sensitive one, and at the heart of major disagreements between various governments regionally and internationally. Currently, Turkey and Russia are not on the same page when it comes to definitions of terrorism in Syria.

Formerly known as the Jabhat al-Nusra Front, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is a relatively local jihadist insurgent group, which is often compared to the Islamic State. HTS operates in northern Syria, predominantly in Idlib province. Since its split from al-Qaeda in 2016, it has effectively become one of the most powerful militant factions in Syria and a major source of contention in Ankara-Moscow relations.

To understand HTS's struggle to survive in Syria's last rebel-held province, three key questions require examination. First, how has its 2016 split from al-Qaeda

affected the group's modus operandi and power consolidation goals? Second, exactly what is its place in the Syrian "insurgency?" Third, and most important, how will its complex relationship with Turkey play a role in the country's overall peacemaking efforts?

IN THE INTEREST OF JIHAD

In 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Qaeda's Syrian branch) was formed in Syria as part of the opposition against Bashar al-Assad's government. Specifically, it was created out of the central command from both al-Qaeda elements and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq. Jabhat al-Nusra's leader, Abu Muhamad al-Jolani, effectively established the extremist group through donors in several Gulf states, revenue collected from taxation and asset seizures in areas under its control, adeptly conducted insurgent attacks and the influx of foreign fighters from countries around the world.

A year later, upon the split between al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra pledged its loyalty to al-Qaeda. At this point, Jabhat al-Nusra's primary strategy was immersing itself within the Syrian opposition for the sake of survival. However, it gradually "crowded out more moderate groups and came to dominate it." Despite the pledge of loyalty, however, cracks were beginning to surface as the group sought to rebrand itself as Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in mid-2016. Eventually, in 2017, Jabhat al-Nusra rebranded itself with various

anti-government Sunni coalitions and formed what is now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Al-Qaeda, headed by Ayman al-Zawahiri, saw the breakaway as an act of betrayal and described it as a "violation of the covenant."

There are speculations surrounding the group's 2017 breakaway from al-Qaeda. One of the theories include HTS's long-standing notion and prioritization of "unity" across the insurgency groups. According to HTS officials, the breakaway from al-Qaeda for the sake of unity was "in the interests of the jihad" and thus came before any sorts of organizational ties and fealties. This unity comes not from a perspective of grouping all factions across the insurgency, but rather one group consolidating power via a single military and governing body, which in this case became the HTS-formed National Salvation Government (NSG).

That said, this split from al-Qaeda has resulted in a shift in HTS's strategies toward regional expansion over time. Unlike al-Qaeda, which has long preached the broader and long-term goal of creating a global caliphate and countering Israel and the West, HTS's rhetoric has largely rested on a more immediate and regionalized expansion. According to HTS leaders, the group's primary goals include overthrowing the Assad regime and ejecting Iranian influence from Syria, thereby effectively establishing Islamic rule in the country.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's power consolidation efforts have largely been

successful, as seen through its capture of major portions in Idlib after battling other insurgency groups. Despite handing over various liberated areas in the Idlib and Aleppo provinces to the NSG's administrative rule, many critics argue that NSG is just a front for HTS to continue monopolizing authority in the region.

BALANCED RELATIONS

Another point of contention between al-Qaeda and HTS has been the latter's complex relationship with Turkey, which has not only strained efforts between the two groups but has also complicated the region's peacemaking efforts. Despite Washington designating HTS as a terrorist organization, the group has still sought to position itself on the international playing field, essentially to create "balanced relations" with other actors. This is the inflection point where definitions of terrorism come into play between Russia and Turkey.

This activity comes at an especially crucial time as other major actors, including Russia and Turkey, seek de-escalation and demilitarization efforts in the region, which may effectively mean the dismantling of all armed groups, including HTS. Looking ahead, as some experts have opined, HTS would suffer immensely as a result of a major falling out with the local civilian population writ large.

Yet by the same token, HTS wants to avoid appearing weak or vulnerable to either its armed enemies or unarmed

civilians. Therefore, the jihadist force will be forced to balance its interests in potential serving in a governing role in Idlib. This requires obtaining legitimacy through appearing to be a defender of local Syrians while also maintaining its ability to fight off enemies and, according to the group's thinking, beyond Syria's borders while asserting its power in the northwest of the country.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's efforts at leveling the playing field and legitimizing itself have been most exemplified through its accommodation toward Ankara's strategies and Turkish military operations across Syria. For instance, in attempts to curb the flow of incoming refugees to Turkey, Ankara has set up various military posts across Idlib to prevent any Syrian government offensives from taking place. According to Qatar's Al Jazeera news network, Turkey has done so through cooperation with HTS in which the group has also agreed to accompany Turkish military patrols. In turn, this deal, struck in September 2018, allows for HTS to continue launching various offensives without Turkey's intervention.

The complexity of the situation comes not from the fact that al-Qaeda views Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's seemingly amicable relationship with Turkey as a betrayal of jihadist principles, but rather from Turkey's designation of HTS as a terrorist organization. Despite such a designation, Turkey's military operations on the ground have indicated otherwise. As Ankara launches full-scale offensives against the Kurdistan Workers' Party

(PKK) and, at times, the Islamic State, HTS has essentially remained unscathed.

Ultimately, there appears to be a symbiotic relationship in play. HTS is attempting to maintain its northern strongholds and a somewhat cooperative relationship with Turkey to keep itself alive, especially with its international designation as a terrorist organization. At the same time, knowing that HTS is by far the most powerful rebel group in northern Syria, for Ankara to launch a full-scale offensive against the group would undermine Turkey's national interests for several reasons.

First, Turkey's buffer zone (set up with HTS's assistance) against the Syrian government in Idlib province may become jeopardized. Second, to launch a full-scale military confrontation against the most powerful rebel group in northern Syria would result in a significant depletion of Turkey's own resources and efforts. Third, Ankara's perceived ability to influence HTS provides Turkey with greater leverage in the Astana negotiation process.

So what will the future look like for Hayat Tahrir al-Sham as the war in Syrian winds down? At this point, given its complex relationship with Turkey and its deterrence strategy of maintaining authority, this remains unclear. Russia will likely help determine the outcome. Moscow is very likely to clash with Ankara more publicly over Turkey's support for the group. This "outing" may lead Moscow toward other tactics to

influence Turkish actions in Syria. (It is noteworthy that Vladimir Putin has previously labeled Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his family Islamic State enablers.)

However, what is clear is that HTS has no intention of letting go, especially as it seeks to establish its own Islamic statelet in Idlib province. If that comes to be, the security situation will continue to be a challenge for all parties seeking to bring the Syrian Civil War to an end.

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

Maya Yang is a freelance journalist currently based in New York. She graduated from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).
