The Interview

2020

Fair Observer°

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Fair Observer

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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Naomi Wolf Talks Homophobia, Feminism and "Outrages"

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Naomi Wolf
January 8, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to author Naomi Wolf.

The year 1990 witnessed several revolutionary changes, one of which was the release of "The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women," written by Naomi Wolf. The "Beauty Myth" highlighted how male dominance is maintained by holding women to certain standards of beauty, and it became an instant hit with readers worldwide.

Wolf is now known as one of the world's foremost feminists, who is vocal about issues that affect not just women but various marginalized communities.

Last year, Wolf's latest book, "Outrages: Sex, Censorship and the Criminalization of Love," came under severe criticism after a BBC broadcaster called out two misinterpretations of a legal term. Since then, "Outrages" has received severe criticism from readers in the UK. Wolf has herself been targeted and accused of gross inaccuracies in all her previous works.

The issue that gets lost in these discussions is the reason Wolf wrote the book in the first place. "Outrages" seeks to highlight the historical marginalization of gay men, particularly the protagonist of the book, the poet John Addington Symonds. Even with its flaws, the book is a detailed historical representation of the life of gay people in Victorian England.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Naomi Wolf about "Outrages," her reasons for writing the book, the life of John Addington Symonds, and how "The Beauty Myth" is still relevant today.

The text has been lightly edited for clarity.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: Your latest book, "Outrages: Sex, Censorship and the Criminalization of Love," has been the target of immense criticism in the UK. Why do you think that this situation has been blown out of proportion? Lawyer Helena Kennedy — who also proofread your book — has said that the criticism reflects the "legal and homophobic legacy of British colonialism." Do you think this connection has affected the reception of your book?

Naomi Wolf: After the incident, I have had a chance to reflect on the criticism. Right before this incident, which eventually translated into a viral attack, I was talking to British audiences about Britain's vulnerability if it ever faced a coup. I was also talking about building a searchable database for UK law. Daily Clout, my civic data company, has a searchable database for US law. On Daily Clout, anyone can look up any law and lobby. This project has been very effective.

The thing "Outrages" does — and this was my argument to the British public right before the incident happened — when you are vulnerable to a coup, you can see what laws underpin decisions such as Brexit, for instance. However, access to information complicates the lives of everyone in power. Daily Clout has complicated the lives of legislators in the US who wanted to lie about law. The platform makes it much more difficult for people on either side of the spectrum to say things like, "This health bill covers cancer care." Daily Clout enables people from places as far off as Tennessee to tweet and say, "No, this bill doesn't cover cancer care." I can see why that's problematic for anyone who wants to a country to move left or right.

You bring up the question of colonial law. I totally agree with you. But I am not going to say that A caused B. It may well be that this is a weirdly viral, unprecedented relentless attack on my reputation because people disagreed about a poet. However, following the incident with my book, there has been opposition research to take me off the chessboard. Despite agreeing to

correct the two references in the book, I am now facing difficulty in even getting "Outrages" published in the US!

The reason I wrote "Outrages" is because I didn't want people to just sit around and believe that the British government hasn't made terrible mistakes. There's a lot of good scholarship on postcolonial law, but it's not usually written for a broad audience. If you want people to trust the British government to not make horrible mistakes, then "Outrages" is not a comfortable book.

One of the calling cards of the conservatives is the mythology of an unblemished past in relation to the rest of the world. For example, a lot of people in America don't want to hear [Noam] Chomsky talk about the role of the American government in undermining popular leaders of the world.

The story of "Outrages" categorically confirms that homophobia was exported to several places in the world by the British government. It was exported to cultures that didn't have homophobia built into their own traditions and practices. We feel the legacy of that today, particularly in the former colonies. In India, it took a Supreme Court ruling to undo that law that was created for purposes of social control. There are countries like Egypt, where men are still tortured and arrested effectively by the police and agents of the state using the narratives that have been exported to the rest of the world in the 19th century.

The bigger picture is not just restricted to colonial law. I am seeing homophobia and transphobia being weaponized in current struggles for power in Britain. This is a narrative separate from former colonial countries. If you read "Outrages," it's harder to take in this whipping up of hysteria by the state and media on LGBTQ+ issues. My argument — and it's a strong one — is that these "moral panics" around homophobia were used cynically in the past by governments to attain agendas that have nothing to do with the fear of gays, lesbians and transgenders.

Mukhopadhyay: I would like to know a little more about "Outrages," since that discussion has got lost in the euphoria around the historical and legal inaccuracies. What is the book about, and what motivated your decision to focus on homosexuality? Why did you choose to tell your story through the character of John Addington Symonds, a rather unknown poet?

Wolf: I decided to write about Symonds because my thesis adviser at Oxford is an expert in that field. He knew that I was interested in Victorian sexuality. He gave me giant copies of Symonds' letters and I was captivated when I read them. They start as the letters of a teenager, who was born at a time when laws in Britain criminalized speech and same-sex male intimacy in new ways. It's this voice of a young man, who is only searching for true love.

He renounces his teenage love for a young man, as his father explains to him that there's no future for the relationship. He has written a long love poem to his beloved but has to go back and write an apology, because when he renounces his love affair in 1862, one is awarded life imprisonment for performing sodomy.

All Symonds wants is to be a British poet, critic and cultural essayist, but over and over the institutions turn on him. Fellows of his college at Oxford call him in to examine him because a fellow student turned in some of his personal letters, and now he has to justify his character and moronic interests. He barely manages to save his fellowship and later, when he wants to be a professor of poetry at Oxford, which is a high honor, there's public shaming for who he is, and he knows that has no chance of being a professor. There are several scandals that he has to face in his lifetime. He compels himself to marry a woman because his dad dictates to him that he has to do it. The woman he marries respects him a lot and they form a bond, but he writes in his letters painful accounts of what it is like to be married to someone and have a honeymoon but have no desire. He was completely honest about documenting his earliest life and the organic

nature of same-sex desire because at that time it was described as a vice. He observed himself to document his notes.

He argued that this was ennobling, and love shouldn't be criminalized. He had four daughters who loved him. He was a beloved husband and father although he was a gay man. This was true of most gay men at that time.

Even if he was living his double life, he kept having love affairs with men. When he got older, he went to Venice to be with a community of gay men. Throughout his life, he just wanted to write the truth about love, but it was getting more and more dangerous as British law was inventing more and more laws on obscenity and free speech, for example, the Obscene Publication Act of 1857. Britain's invention of obscenity got exported around the world to justify cracking down on colonial populations.

The Obscene Publication Act made it dangerous to publish anything that could be considered obscene. In addition to all this, Symonds' friends were being arrested in France for soliciting sex. This act destroyed Symonds' career in Britain. Symonds tried to tell the truth about love, but it was illegal. He wrote in ways so that he could escape the law. He wrote allegories, historical biographies of gay men in the past, he would publish love poems changing the pronouns of lovers. All this while, he was secretly keeping a secret memoir and sodomy poems locked away in a metal box.

There were these romantic poems where he imagines gay marriage 150 years before it actually happened. At the end of his life, he had a very beautiful and provocative relationship with the American poet Walt Whitman, which prodded him to be brave and address same-sex love. Toward the end of his life, he wrote a manifesto in English for gay rights — the first, at least as far as anything I have read. The manifesto had a sustained argument for the legal rights of gay men. After his death, it was published and handed secretly from hand to hand. It created a modern understanding in more developed countries of how one could see sexual variation as a spectrum of natural behavior rather than a moral failing or vice.

He won after his death, but in his lifetime, he didn't know that he would win. Symonds never stopped believing in love and the love he experienced. In his work, he left instructions to the future generations on how to decode his secret memoirs so that a secret story would emerge that he couldn't tell in his lifetime about his great love. That's John Addington Symonds, and that's why he's such a great character. And his story brings forth so many important themes in the LGBTQ+ movement.

In my book, I point out that newspapers reported death sentences and arrests for sodomy during Symonds' time, and in the case of two they weren't carried out. People were being transported overseas for life sentence and hard labor.

Mukhopadhyay: Gay sex and sodomy were a political issue in Victorian England, and it continued to be an issue long after that.

Wolf: British historians contesting my argument in "Outrages" argue that laws against sodomy and same-sex relations did not get worse in and after 1835, but they don't address colonial law in their argument. I just had an argument with a historian who said that there was no evidence of things worsening for men in Britain in the 19th century. I pointed out to him his omission of colonies. Gay men were being transported to the colonies, and Britain's interpretation of sodomy was exported there as well.

As a former political consultant and someone who visited Guantanamo, I am interested in this consensus of British historians who are saying that nothing got worse for gay men in Britain. If you look at their data sets, they are only counting England and Wales, they are not counting Scotland, where there was a death sentence for sodomy for many years after it ended in Britain. They are also not counting Ireland, all of the colonies and New South Wales, where men were transported for sodomy. It is very standard

practice that if you want a political problem to go away, you just imprison them or transport them elsewhere. I find it notable that these data sets are not included when British historians say that the situation didn't get worse.

Mukhopadhyay: Do you think there's more retaliation against "Outrages" because it addresses a topic — discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community — people are generally uncomfortable with?

Wolf: This is an incredibly important history (of the LGBTQ+ community) to tell and it's obviously suppressed. I studied literature for 25 years. In literary studies, the high point for persecution of gay men in Britain in the 19th century was Oscar Wilde's trial. I was shocked to discover this in my historical research.

In my research, I came across works by three scholars, namely H. G. Cox, Charles Upchurch and Graham Robb, that confirmed that 55 men were executed in Britain for sodomy. There were decade-long sentences or life sentences for gay men several years before the Wilde trials. In the 19th century, people treated news of the arrest for sodomy with amusement.

There was also a concerted campaign by the Victorian state to present people cross dressing as a threat to the rest of society. It's shocking that there's a narrative about how transgender people are threatening to the rest of society. "Outrages" has a whole section on dressing femininely. What is too feminine? People need to question why the state regulates masculinity levels of an attire in order to really appear as a "man." How did the state abrogate to itself the right to police people, not just in bed, but also how they present themselves? And these thoughts were exported across borders to the colonies.

The theory in "Outrages" is that these claims of the state to manage our intimate lives, to manage our speech and our self-presentation are clever ways to control large populations and suppress them in situations where they are otherwise clamoring for their rights. An absolutely perfect illustration of that is colonial history because you have a small number of people tasked to control large numbers of people. These laws were very effective in controlling and subduing populations and then they were brought home.

Mukhopadhyay: A thing many people miss out, particularly in history, is the state subjugation of women. How did Victorian England's laws intrude on the female body?

Wolf: There's actually wonderful scholarly work done on this. There was an effort by British colonial powers to control and examine sex workers or women accused of being sex workers. This was first tried out in a colonial context and then brought home to become the Contagious Diseases Act. There is some documentation of how laws intrude on the female body and how women colonial subjects were experiments.

Mukhopadhyay: This context ties in with my next question. A gynecologist recently called Twitter out for censoring her publisher's usage of the word "vagina." There is still a stigma around the word. Why is there so much backlash when a person talks about something that makes many people uncomfortable?

Wolf: The portrayal of female sexuality is all about agency. Showing a million pornographic images of some trafficked woman or someone who is struggling to feed her kids isn't really about female sexual agency. It's not. When women start claiming the right to own their bodies without shame, then agencies start to turn around, and people become uncomfortable.

It's not vaginas that make people uncomfortable if they are properly packaged. It's when the owners of the vaginas start talking about what happens to them — that is when they get censored. This doctor's title was censored, my book, "Vagina," was briefly censored by Amazon, although there was an outcry.

Why is it considered radical when women start naming what happens to them? The state uses intrusion on bodies to control populations the way that women as a gender are controlled,

and sexual assault and domestic violence are a huge part of that control. The judiciary colludes in not doing anything about it. India is a perfect example of this. I am always blown away by news stories of India where there is a massive radical feminist awakening, women are mobilized, aware, talking, trying to legislate and creating networks. It's unbelievably effective — more effective than America, I would say, kind of a very fast arising of women around feminist issues, especially around sexual assault.

At the same time, you see egregious, horrific public demonstrations of male power over women's bodies. A perfect example is the backlash and struggle over who owns the vagina and how that struggle is demonstrated. It's a vicious cycle to control women's desires, and the demonstration against this takes different forms. Over and over, patriarchy demonstrates to women that they are not going to escape their subjugation through sexual violence and sexual assault — which is just a way to subjugate us in general. When women start naming their bodies and are not ashamed of saying "vagina," and they take a stand over issues like genital mutilation and molestation, it sparks a revolution.

I was ashamed to talk about what my professor did to me when I was 19, and I was afraid of speaking out until I was in my 40s, even when I had two children, been married, and had a lot of social validation. One reason I was afraid was because we are trained to not name what happens to us sexually because we are so afraid that we will be labeled a slut if we have ever had sexual agency in a context that maligned us. When women are able to say "vagina," they can stand up in front of the court and say, "This is what he did — he raped me, he touched me here" — and they can do so articulately without being silenced. It's really not a struggle of who owns the vagina, but who owns history, who will be believed.

Mukhopadhyay: It's been more than 20 years since you wrote "The Beauty Myth." Do you feel that issues around women's bodies and their beauty have escalated because of social media?

Wolf: That's a great question and I get asked this quite frequently. Many things have changed since I wrote "The Beauty Myth," but many things have also not changed. I think women of your generation, all over the world, are much more empowered to ask the questions that you're asking and even theorize, position yourselves as critics of social norms. The mere idea of criticizing beauty ideals or other social norms was scary and not encouraged among young women when I was writing "The Beauty Myth." And that's so powerful.

When I went to India on my last visit, I was blown away by the hundreds and hundreds of highly mobilized, organized, determined passionate feminists I met. Not just women from urban areas, but women from rural areas and first-generation women going to college, which was astonishingly inspiring. The willingness to critique has gotten better globally. However, other things are not so great.

Anorexia and bulimia statistics haven't changed. I think that young women feel a lot of fears around Instagram and looking perfect on social media, which is causing anxiety. I also think that fears around beauty are extending to boys and young men. The increasing accessibility of plastic surgery is making some people feel more dissatisfied.

Mukhopadhyay: I can't fail to notice that criticism around your work has increased in the past few years. Why do you think that this happened? What motivates you to keep writing?

Wolf: If I gave up that easily, I wouldn't be much of a feminist! When I was writing about how hard it is for Western middle-class women to go on a diet, I was the darling of the media. The issues I talked about earlier are important and I am glad I talked about them, but they are not central to dismantling more serious forms of power. Since I became a democracy activist, the criticism has gotten more intense. I guess that's

because I stopped being a cultural critic and commentator and got interested in offering people actual tools to change laws. That generates a different level of antagonism.

But why do I keep writing? Being 56 years old helps because I have lived through a lot of these attacks. "The Beauty Myth" was attacked viciously. I remember calling my mom and saying, "Why do I keep going on these book tours, because people are so mad at me! Feminists are mad at me. I was attacked on national television!" My mom said, "Don't you dare think about stopping." And I knew I was right, and it was important that I keep going on. Now, "The Beauty Myth" is in college and high-school curricula.

In 2012, people attacked me on "Vagina." Now there are half a dozen books that are clearly influenced by that book, and women are a lot more comfortable talking about their sexuality and sexual abuse. I like to think that I had a bit of role in that. I don't think the book will be received as critically today.

Now my critics are so mad about "Outrages," and yet I know that it's accurate, and those two misinterpretations are corrected. I know it's an important book, it says things that need to be said, and it's about a lost and forgotten pioneer of LGBTQ+ history. I am not going to give up on bringing his voice to the people. It's my business to take on board constructive criticism and factual errors and fix them, but I can't make people smarter than they are. I can't make people evolve faster than they are willing to.

I know that "Vagina" was an important book. I know that "Outrages" is an important book, and Symonds was an important figure who changed history. I have also received a lot of praise and support, which you will not see on Google, over the last couple of years. A women's museum in Italy is dedicating a permanent space to me, and I got an invite from Trinity College to be awarded and honored for contributing to feminist philosophy — this was after the attacks. I am not treated specially on Twitter, but a lot of people appreciate my work.

Mukhopadhyay: Does the current political situation have anything to do with the rise in criticism?

Wolf: I can't stop you from noticing a direct link. One can clearly see a geopolitical alignment of oligarchic states such as Russia, the United States, the UK, ancillary Brazil and Saudi Arabia. I would also put Israel in there. These countries have anti-democratic leadership now, and what I know as a former political consultant is that a lot of these countries are being advised by a lot of the same conservative and anti-democratic leaders/political consultants and think tanks.

What we are seeing is that the nation-state is becoming less and less important. What's becoming important is that oligarch forming common cause. They don't like democracy and they don't like the nation-state because you need a strong nation-state to have a strong democracy. You see the same tactics in country after country to divide people, whip up hatred of immigrants, LGBTQ+ people and Muslims. We are now seeing the rise of the paramilitary just like I predicted in one of my earlier books, "The End of America."

How does it play out in my criticism? I have no idea. I don't know if there's a direct connection, but I do know that a lot of people who are pro-democracy and environmental activists are being phoned. There are a lot of smear campaigns going on. People are having their employers called, people are being controlled on Twitter, journalists are being harassed and threatened. I am not drawing a conclusion of who is doing it any why, but I do know that there's more bullying and harassment. I don't have any other insight on why this is happening. Maybe I am just more annoying than usual!

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*__Ankita Mukopadhyay__ is a journalist based in New Delhi. __Naomi Wolf__ is the author of eight bestselling works of nonfiction, whose focus is on contemporary gender issues, censorship and democracy.

Immigrants Provide a Net Gain to the US

Kourosh Ziabari & Kwame Anthony Appiah
January 16, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to prominent British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.

The coming to power of Donald Trump has reignited the debate on immigration and multiculturalism in the United States. His stringent policies and the efforts to slash both legal and illegal immigration to the US have been at the forefront of controversy since he took office in January 2017, leading some to assert that Trump is heading "the most immigration-restrictive administration since the 1920s."

Immigration and race relations are expected to be major areas of focus in the 2020 election, once again highlighting a longstanding challenge the United States has been grappling with. In September 2019, the State Department announced that the US will only admit up to 18,000 refugees in the next fiscal year, marking a historic low after the 2019 cap of 30,000 refugees, which was itself the lowest level since 1980.

Although an anti-immigration stance has become a hallmark of the Trump administration, reflecting the president's desires to appeal to his nationalist base, it is beyond doubt that the United States has historically benefited from immigration. Research by the London School of Economics and Political Science suggests, for example, that US counties that admitted more immigrants between 1850 and 1920 enjoy higher average incomes, less poverty and lower employment today. The findings show that the "long-run benefits of immigration can be large, and need not come at high social cost."

According to the testimony by the Center for American Progress to a congressional budget committee last year, in 2017 immigrants made up almost 30% of all new entrepreneurs despite representing just 13.7% percent of the US population, being the backbone of the small-business sector and propping up communities across the country. The testimony also cites the New American Economy fund figures showing that of the Fortune 500 companies in 2018, 44% were started by children of immigrants, which altogether added $5.5 trillion to the US economy in 2017.

Kwame Anthony Appiah is a prominent British-Ghanaian intellectual, cultural theorist and professor of philosophy and law at New York University. In October 2018, the University of Edinburgh awarded an honorary doctorate to Professor Appiah in recognition of his global influence on philosophy and politics. His latest book, "The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity," was released in 2018.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Kwame Anthony Appiah about immigration, race relations in 21st-century America, the rise of white nationalism, and how we can build trust in a diverse society.

Kourosh Ziabari: After President Trump assumed power, an extensive debate emerged over the alleged harm immigrants bring to the United States and the exigency of tackling immigration. The president introduced his controversial Muslim ban, and Muslims, Mexicans and other minorities have been constantly vilified in the right-wing media and by the president himself. Do you think it is the immigrants who are undermining cohesion and security in the United States?

Kwame Anthony Appiah: Obviously not! Immigrants, wherever they come from, provide, on average, a net gain to the United States economy. And there surely wouldn't be so many of us if we didn't. Low-skill migrants often accept jobs that native-born Americans don't really want to do at wages many natives wouldn't accept. High-skilled migrants give us human capital that we haven't been able to produce here.

Both are more law-abiding than natives on average and make a positive social contribution in other ways, not just to the economy.

There are indeed some, especially low-skilled natives, who lose their jobs to immigrants, though it's worth pointing out [that] low-skills migrants also create jobs because natives are better placed to help manage people unfamiliar with our customs. But many more are losing their jobs to robots and to the transfer of tasks to cheaper labor markets elsewhere. So, the fact that immigration is a net plus doesn't mean that there aren't native-born Americans who have been disadvantaged by it. Something can be a huge net plus and also have significant downsides for particular people.

This is a problem we should care about as their fellow citizens, of course. Well, I say "of course," but the small-government types may not think this is as obvious as I do. But the net gains from migration to the US and the world would make it foolish to deal with this problem by stopping immigration rather than by helping those people get new training and new opportunities.

Lots of things in the US would be much more expensive if we slowed migration, or abandoned robots or global trade, for that matter. So, most of us benefit from immigrants as consumers as well as benefiting from the general increase in wealth created by a successful global economy. And that's not to mention the obligation we have to do our fair share to look after legitimate asylum-seekers.

The largest domestic threats to security — if by that you mean acts of terrorism — at the moment come, as the FBI has recently insisted, from right-wing white nationalists. We have not been subjected to much terror by immigrants, Muslim or otherwise — 9/11 was not carried out by immigrants, and the largest threats to cohesion come from their non-violent sympathizers. Societies that are diverse face challenges, particularly in the realm of trust, but we can manage them, and, as I say, the benefits to the US of relatively large immigrant flows far outweigh these and other costs.

It's perhaps worth saying, too, that the deepest divisions in the United States today seem to me to be partisan: between devoted Republicans and committed Democrats. While some of these divides are associated with different views about immigration, they are not caused by immigration.

Ziabari: Different US presidents in the past, including Harry Truman, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama, have referred to the United States as a "nation of immigrants." In sharp contrast to his predecessors, President Trump has railed against immigrants, pejoratively calling them "rapists," "killers" and "invaders." Where does this animosity toward immigrants come from? Is this sort of discourse he is promoting something that appeals to his base?

Appiah: President Trump's very evident racism and Islamophobia are representative, as we well know, of a part of the US population. And these attitudes are present all around the world. There are interesting psychological theories about what sort of personality traits are conducive to bigotry, and some of them, I suppose, might help explain the president's attitudes. But it's a long-standing racist culture that provides the largest explanation, I think, not the individual traits of the specific people who turn out to be racists. And the president's significant personal moral deficiencies wouldn't matter much if his views didn't receive an echoing reflection from a part — mostly a white part — of the population.

So, yes, the racist nonsense evidently appeals to some of those who voted for him. Still, let's remember, it has alienated others, including both some — like Congressman [Joe] Walsh — who are on the right, and many moderate Republicans toward the center, like Governor [Bill] Weld.

This sort of rallying of the nation against foreigners and their domestic allies — the un-American Americans — is a feature of populism

in many places: Hungary, Italy, Britain, India. It's a cheap and irresponsible way to get support by appealing to sentiments that are always present below the surface and can easily be brought into the light by demagoguery. Responsible leaders — of whom we have a distressing dearth at the moment — don't do it.

So, I think it's more important to give a political account of the rewards of demagoguery than to speculate about the president's psychology. We are just unfortunate that Mr. Trump's pathological narcissism means we cannot appeal to his better nature: He doesn't have one. He appears to care about almost nothing but short-term advantage for himself. But that doesn't mean that's true of all his followers, so I wouldn't give up on all of them as I have on the president.

Ziabari: Critics of President Trump believe his rhetoric and policies have emboldened white nationalists and alt-right extremists, whose nefarious ideology has been manifested in incidents like the El Paso shooting, which claimed 20 lives. President Trump offered thoughts and prayers, and described the perpetrator as a person with a serious mental illness. I imagine his response would have been totally different if a Muslim American or an Arab immigrant was behind such an atrocity. What is your take on that?

Appiah: We don't have to speculate about that. His response to both the San Bernardino and the Orlando nightclub murders, which were carried out by people who were Muslim, did not mention the evidence that the murderer in the latter case was mentally unbalanced. People have noticed — as part of the evidence that the president is a bigot — that he responds differently to acts of terror committed by people from groups he is hostile to. That's not very surprising, of course.

Ziabari: You once said in an interview that all forms of nationalism, including American nationalism, tend to "blind people into willed ignorance about the dark side of the national story." I assume nationalism goes against patriotism in this context. Do you agree with the argument that successive US administrations in the modern time have fomented blind nationalism, and this is what has made the many wars initiated by the United States across the world palatable and easy to sell to the American public?

Appiah: I don't know that this is a helpful way of putting things. Because I don't think there's anything wrong with nationalism when it's regulated by morality. My father was a Ghanaian nationalist and contributed to the struggle against British colonialism as such. Nothing wrong with that. True, he called himself a patriot, too, in the title of his autobiography, "The Autobiography of an African Patriot," but the movement he joined was a nationalist one. You could keep the word "patriotism" for good nationalism, I suppose, but that will just defer the question of which forms of nationalism are good.

I don't think you have to be a "blind" nationalist to support a war. I would have supported entering World War II, but I don't think my American nationalism is blind. The thing that's dangerous in the lead-up to war is the demonization of the potential enemy; it's not the caring for your own country that does the damage. Our many wars in this 21st century have largely been morally disastrous. They have wasted blood — American and even more foreign blood, and treasure — ours and other people's, again, and they haven't made us much safer — arguably less safe, while at the same time they've contributed to the ruined lives of millions of Iraqis, Libyans and Afghans, just to pick the worst cases.

Ziabari: Are the mainstream media in the United States deliberately stifling debate on race relations and the plague of racism in American society? Or do you see adequate coverage of these topics in the US media?

Appiah: There's lots of coverage of racism in the mainstream media. The New York Times just

ran a special issue in its 1619 Project, exploring the legacies of racial slavery. Depressingly, instead of recognizing the long shadow of racial slavery and granting that we need to do something about it, a bunch of conservatives declared this was left-wing propaganda. We shouldn't measure American media by looking at Fox News.

Ziabari: How have US policies toward the Muslim world, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, influenced the Muslim nations' perceptions of the United States and their feelings about America? Do you think the US needs a thorough restructuring of its relations with the Muslim world?

Appiah: Well, since 9/11, the United States has gone out into the world with its allies and devastated a bunch of countries in the Muslim world. It's not surprising that there's a feeling in many Muslim quarters that Americans are indifferent to Muslim suffering. Of course, at the same time, we have had relatively good relations with the Emirates, Qatar, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf area, and also with Indonesia and Malaysia in the east, and Morocco — our oldest ally — in the west. So, the picture is complex.

But the real problem is that when Muslims conclude that many Americans are Islamophobic, they're not wrong. We need to get rid of a whole raft of false ideas about Muslims and to build a better understanding of the vastly diverse world of Islam. That's the place to start and it will take a lot of hard work.

Ziabari: You have written about the moral obligations of individuals and communities, and the responsibilities we all have toward our fellow citizens in detail, particularly in your 2005 book, "The Ethics of Identity." Do you agree that the difficulties societies experience nowadays — including poverty, illiteracy, food insecurity, conflict and racial discrimination — originate from the apathy of those in power who fail to understand and fulfill their moral obligations properly?

Appiah: Well, there's plenty of blame to go around. Those leaders, in many countries, are voted in by the people. If ordinary citizens cared more about these things, at least in the democracies, their leaders might do more. Of course, it's part of the responsibility of leaders to recognize these duties and persuade people to support action on them. But it's a two-way street.

Ziabari: You talk about cosmopolitanism and conversation, and why meaningful, erudite dialogue between people with varied identities is needed and important. We live in a world where people with different religious, racial and national backgrounds are pitted against each other and divided across ideological and political lines. How is it possible to facilitate the dialogue that brings the divided populations together and helps them understand each other better?

Appiah: It's hard. But it's also intensely rewarding. I've learned so much in recent years about philosophy — my professional field — by opening up to Muslim and to Confucian traditions in ethics, for example. And it's essential. We face so many global problems — climate, health, economic inequality — that can't be solved without transnational collaborations and global agreements.

One starting point, I think, is with the great cross-national identities, like Islam and Christianity, which already draw people into interactions with people in other societies. But we have to begin at home, too, by recognizing how essential it is to get to know our fellow citizens, the people with whom we share the responsibility of running the republic. I tried, in my book, "Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers," to talk about some of the ways in which the arts can contribute to understanding across groups as well.

Sports is another place where we can spend time with people of diverse identities and build the kind of trust that can then be taken into

political collaboration. We have to start by doing things together, getting used to one another. That's the trick.

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Can Telling Stories Through Data Help Fight Misinformation in India?

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Govindraj Ethiraj
January 23, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Govindraj Ethiraj, the founder of IndiaSpend and DataBaaz.

Over the past five years, India has seen several changes around the creation and dissemination of data. The Indian government has come under fire for withholding data on crucial issues like unemployment, as well as changing statistical methodologies to ascertain key metrics, calling into question the reliability of the source data itself.

In a country of 1.3 billion people, over half a billion internet users and more than 400 TV channels, a lack of reliable information is a serious problem. Not only do poor journalistic standards and ethics drive mass disinformation along political lines, but the increasingly widespread use of social media exacerbates the country's social and sectarian divides.

According to a report by IndiaSpend, at least 24 people have been killed in 2018 alone by lynch mobs angered by fake social media stories. Analysis by the BBC has similarly documented a sharp increase in fatal mob attacks in 2018.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that the number of WhatsApp users alone is predicted to reach a whopping 450 million this year — up from 200 million in 2017. According to Digital Trends, WhatsApp "dominates India's digital channels of communication," spanning e-commerce, entertainment, news and more, and has become a breeding pool for misinformation. While the company has started putting measures in place to curb the spread of fake news, launching radio campaigns to alert users to the potential consequences and shutting down 2 million accounts each month, but so far these efforts have not had any significant effect.

At a time when distinguishing news from misinformation is difficult or even impossible, and source data is under attack, projects like IndiaSpend and DataBaaz aim to challenge the status quo through data-based journalism. Supported by the Google News Initiative, they address critical issues like gender, health care and education through data-based stories and videos.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Govindraj Ethiraj, the founder of IndiaSpend and DataBaaz, about how the two companies use data to tell stories that matter, and how Indians can learn to spot fake news.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: Can you tell us a bit about IndiaSpend and DataBaaz?

Govindraj Ethiraj: I launched IndiaSpend.com to tell stories through data, while DataBaaz is a video platform. Our focus is primarily gender, health, education and environment, as these issues underpin the economic and social development of any country. We believe that if there is a basic understanding of issues like health and gender, then we can make these issues our focus when we interact with our elected representatives and press for change where it's necessary.

IndiaSpend has been around for seven years and is a business-to-business [B2B] service. Our content goes to publishing partners like newspapers, online dailies, wire services and television. It's also read by people in academia

and government, which is an influential audience, but not a large audience.

We want to reach out to more people, particularly young people. With young people, we face the challenge of making them data-aware. The India Fact Quiz is a device to tackle this challenge. The quiz, which creates a gamified environment, will reach out to more people and get them engaged. Young people also get an opportunity to win prizes.

Mukhopadhyay: What is the objective of the India Fact Quiz? Why is there a focus on individuals between the ages of 17 and 25?

Ethiraj: The India Fact Quiz aims to create awareness among India's youth about data literacy. The quiz also aims to encourage fact-checking of information on India, against the backdrop of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The idea is to test and challenge the mental biases and myths around India, by providing correct data and facts to participants. We want to encourage our youngsters to have a more factful view of the world. The India Fact Quiz will identify India's curious and most factful minds, who value the importance of data in public discourse and create a new wave of factful citizen-engagement.

India Fact Quiz will be a pan-India quiz and is designed in a digitally gamified quizzing format which connects with today's youth. The digital quiz will run online for 30-45 days, followed by physical rounds, which will be held at five colleges at different parts of the country … and broadcast on television. Subsequently, there will also be weekly online quizzes on the India Fact Quiz website to continue encouraging the practice of learning and fact-checking.

Mukhopadhyay: Your primary focus over the last few years is to bring data-based insights and journalism to the Indian masses. Why did you make the shift from broadcast journalism to data-based storytelling?

Ethiraj: My last job was with Bloomberg. I have spent about 10 years in print, 10-11 years in television and then moved to digital. I have been a financial journalist all my life, analyzing companies and their performance. I always felt that there was an opportunity to apply my skills of analyzing data to issues of larger public interest.

That's why I made the shift to data-based journalism. I was also partly influenced by the Anna Hazare movement in 2011. The movement was counterintuitive to what people in my generation assumed about millennials — that they are not interested to be part of the active political process. The Anna Hazare movement showed us that young people are not dismissive of politics. The point was made. At that time, I thought, If there is emotion about change, then can we bring data into the equation? If you blend data with emotion, then people will hopefully ask the right questions and demand higher quality of governance and accountability.

Mukhopadhyay: A challenge students, journalists, companies and other enterprises in India face is both the lack of, and slow access to, information. How do you tackle this?

Ethiraj: Over the last five years, the data landscape has changed. There is an oversupply of data, but not much demand for the data. But a problem that's arisen in the past few years is that the government is revisiting data sets and pulling them back. This has happened with employment data and consumption data, which is going back and forth. It's a new kind of problem which wasn't there earlier. We are still figuring out how to respond.

At the end of the day, only a government can collate such a huge chunk of data. Private players can't do it, so you depend on the government. But if the source data is being changed, what do we do? To respond to that, we first need to wrap [our heads] around data that exists, how to use it effectively to ask questions.

Mukhopadhyay: You mentioned that some of the data is being revisited. How do you tell the stories in this scenario?

Ethiraj: We don't. We avoid writing on topics like consumption or unemployment. Our primary focus is health, environment and gender. We don't write on issues like job creation. We touch on different aspects of the issue, like women dropping out of the workforce. We are not set up to court controversy or take on the government. Our mission is to tell stories through data. In circumstances where data is pulled out for political reasons, we avoid getting involved in those topics.

Mukhopadhyay: Indian journalism is currently undergoing a transition following the rise of digital media. How has the role of Indian media changed, particularly in disseminating information to the public?

Ethiraj: I don't think the role of Indian media has changed, but it needs to change. I would frame the statement in that way. As a media executive, one constantly asks, What is my role? My role is to inform, educate and make people aware of what is happening around them in an objective way. I am not sure if a lot of journalistic organizations fulfil that basic tenet — and that's because they operate like any other business. But if you operate media like a business, the product suffers.

Take television for instance. Owing to oversupply and competition, TV channels do essentially anything to orient their product so that it appeals to audiences. Such viewpoints are usually extreme or champion a certain viewpoint over others. The executive producer sitting in a TV room has a single objective — to beat last week's ratings. Which is not philosophically wrong, but it is what you do to get that rating that makes everything a game. Most people lose sense of their moral compass.

Television is a soft power, but it causes far more damage than good in India. It's a business-model failure because of oversupply. You have over 400 channels when there should be 40, which causes everyone to go berserk.

Mukhopadhyay: At a time when misinformation spreads rapidly, particularly on social media, how can Indians access the facts and distinguish between information and misinformation?

Ethiraj: This is a tough question. There is no way to say that the data you're giving is more accurate than the data that I am giving. And it's tougher to make that distinction, as most of us have our prejudices and therefore only trust some things because we like the look of it. The only thing people can do is be more vigilant and alert and careful about how they form opinions from the information they get. One should try to form specialist resources of their own.

For example, if you like to follow what's happening in medicine, then follow the American Journal of Medicine, or Science Daily. At least you know that if there's research that's being talked about, then there are people who know what they are talking about. People have to be more vigilant, do their own research and not let emotion drive them. It's a tough call, and it's not easy.

I think we should create a culture of appreciation of data and where data comes from. For example, if I quote the second most populous state, that data will come from the census. Whichever side you're on — left or right — when you use data, debates become rational.

Mukhopadhyay: In the past few years, public faith in data provided by news organizations has fallen. Media organizations also quote different figures for the same story. Why has this happened, and how can it be tackled?

Ethiraj: Until last year and the year before that, we had no problem with base data. We never faced a situation where basic data like the gross domestic product growth was questionable. For the first time, the source data is being discredited by the government itself. We are in a strange territory. If one organization says that India is doing well, another one is saying it is not — and both are using the source data. This puts the reliability of the source data into question.

For example, India's former chief economic adviser has said that our GDP growth is 2.5% lower than what is being reported in the media.

Other countries have also gone through such a situation, where their source data was considered unreliable. There was once a lot of suspicion on China's data. The loss of trust in India's core data sets is now a fundamental problem. To rectify this, one needs to use a multilateral approach. We have to collectively figure out the best way to create source data sets that people trust.

Mukhopadhyay: How can Indian citizens leverage data to hold politicians accountable for their work?

Ethiraj: If and when Indians imbibe a culture to use data to ask questions, they should hold politicians accountable at a more local level. Do I know the budget of my local member of parliament? What has that person achieved in the last five years? If there is a focus on work at the local level, then the outcome Indians can see from using data is considerably more and precise.

Mukhopadhyay: You mentioned earlier that one of the core topics of IndiaSpend is gender. How can one achieve political change for women through data, when the problems are more deep-rooted within the society and human psyche?

Ethiraj: Our focus is to generate awareness. And awareness leads to greater gender equality. For example, most of us are now aware that if girls are educated, then that fixes a lot of problems in society. Children of educated women are healthier and receive better education. Our objective is to report on issues that are related to gender to better gender outcomes because gender is a foundational thing.

Mukhopadhyay: You recently launched a Hindi version of your website, IndiaSpend.com. Why did you decide to venture into the vernacular medium? What benefit do you see from this diversification?

Ethiraj: We diversified into local languages as we wanted to cater to a larger audience. We also wanted to reach south India, so we started a Tamil version of our website recently. If we get more resources, we will launch another version in the south as well. The idea is that more and more people should read our stuff. I know our stuff in Hindi goes to news desks in Jagran and Dainik Bhaskar [top Hindi-language newspapers in India].

Mukhopadhyay: IndiaSpend has a business-to-business model. Do you plan to convert to a business-to-customer (B2C) model anytime soon?

Ethiraj: Our work is accessible by everyone on our website and social media. However, we haven't come up with a B2C strategy, as IndiaSpend is not a B2C product by definition. You don't come to read IndiaSpend unless you're academically inclined or a public policy enthusiast. In addition, our stories are difficult to read as they use a lot of data and they are not about happy issues. B2C products have to be higher on emotion or entertainment. I have worked at the Times Group for five years, so I have some understanding of what works, and what doesn't, for consumers. It makes sense if IndiaSpend's work appears in the Times of India, rather than if it competes with the Times of India.

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Talking African Literature With Chigozie Obioma

Kourosh Ziabari & Chigozie Obioma
March 5, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to the acclaimed Nigerian writer Chigozie Obioma.

African literature has attracted immense international interest in recent years, and a number of "Afropolitan" icons and rising stars have won acclaim from critics and literary festivals.

Yet most reading lists released by major newspapers and journals are still disproportionately Western-centric, and African literature lacks enough media attention. Despite this, more avid readers across the globe are getting to know names such as Nuruddin Farah, Alain Mabanckou, Ben Okri, Aminatta Forna and Chigozie Obioma, marking the diversification of the literary taste of millennial bibliophiles.

Literature originating from Africa often delves into the legacy of colonialism, sheds light on the tyranny of capital over labor, recounts the identity crisis that many Africans battle with, and represents the unheard voices of ordinary people and unsung heroes.

Chigozie Obioma is a 33-year-old Nigerian novelist and writer who has earned global recognition after publishing three books at such a young age. In 2015 and 2019, he was nominated for the Man Booker Prize. Time magazine described his novel "An Orchestra of Minorities" as a "mystical epic" that confirms his "place among a raft of literary stars." The Guardian referred to him as the "heir to Chinua Achebe" who is "a good writer whose work has a deeply felt authenticity, combined with old-fashioned storytelling." Obioma is currently an assistant professor of literature and creative writing at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the US.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Obioma about his career, novels and the representation of colonialism in African literature.

Kourosh Ziabari: In "An Orchestra of Minorities," you depict the ordeal of an unassuming poultry farmer who falls in love with a pharmacy student hailing from a prosperous family. In order to impress the parents of his beloved woman, he sells his entire belongings to take up a position at a northern Cypriot university and fund his studies. Shortly after arriving in Cyprus, he realizes that the middlemen who had promised him a university placement had tricked him and that there was no position available for him at the college whatsoever. Is this suffering a situation that many young Nigerians go through? While crafting the novel, was it your intention to raise awareness of this challenge faced by Nigerians?

Chigozie Obioma: Yes, I always say that fiction is a medium that takes lived experience and molds it into something that can become so new [that] those who have lived the experience may not even recognize it. Even more so, this novel covers how African migrants are treated in the West quite a bit, but people rarely talk about how we are treated in countries outside of the west.

It is, of course, a shame that the selfish culture of African politicians leaves their states in catastrophic states, but when these migrants go to places like India, Turkey, Cyprus, Mexico and other places, they face inhuman treatments. I myself lived in North Cyprus for five years and the travails of Chinonso, the protagonist of the novel, are similar to what I and others experienced. I wrote about my own ordeal in an essay earlier this year for the Paris Review.

Ziabari: In an interview, you said you wanted to chronicle the landmarks of Igbo history and civilization in the "Orchestra," including the encounter with the Portuguese in the 15th

century and the Nigerian Civil War. Do you think your readers have been able to absorb the historical messages you planned to share with them or is it that this pedagogic effort has been overshadowed by the supremacy of the storyline and the ups and downs of the life of Chinonso, his quest for excellence and his love journey?

Obioma: I think that this being a work of fiction rather than non-fiction — I could, for instance, have elected to simply write a historical book — I had to layer the historical portions around a particular story. So, both of them, I hope, go together. The historical portions of the novel are organic to the narrator, for it is the voice of a god. Thus, through its testimony about itself and its host, it also describes the world as it has experienced it over these many centuries.

Ziabari: You consider yourself an ontologist interested in the metaphysics of being and existence. The themes of fate, destiny and sublimity are often missing in the majority of novels written today, but you explore these territories in your fiction extensively. Do you think this approach to existence is what is winning you popularity and helping your work stand out among hundreds of novels by major literary figures?

Obioma: I am not sure why my novels have received some recognition, but I agree that the themes I have focused on are mostly marginal and not often what many writers consider. One of the reasons why I have focused on fate and destiny is because my people, the West Africans, think mostly in these terms. I want to capture the essence of their common worldview.

It is also because Nigeria to me is a paradox. This is a country that could be rich but is poor. There are, of course, deep philosophical reasons why this is so. But on the surface, that paradox stings and stares at you in the face, and it haunts my mind. This makes one ponder things that are subterranean to the consciousness — things that seems to lie beneath the surface and have no easy answers. The meaning of life, the "metaphysics of being and existence" as I always put it, is one such quandary.

Ziabari: You've implied on a number of occasions that your relationship with your homeland of Nigeria is a capricious one. On the one hand, it is the home that sends you away because of its lack of provisions and opportunities. On the other, it is the home that embraces you when you return from the US. Is it realistic to say your novels are partly inspired by your own story and your special connection with "home"?

Obioma: Capricious indeed! But I am wedded to it. The truth is that I am a reluctant exile in America. I wish I could live in Nigeria, frankly. That is my home. That's where I live untrammeled, without any fear of being an immigrant or a racial minority. It is where my ancestors lived and died, and the place whose food I love to eat. But yet, I feel I cannot live there.

There is a wall that has come between my home and me, and it is a wall I do not have the courage to scale. [In a recent interview, I talked of] how this shapes the tone of my fiction in that it often leads to a sort of "tragic vision" which comes about out of the sadness of writing about Nigeria. I said there that such writing is a masochistic act because "Nigeria riles me, wounds me, and heals me at the same time. I love it entirely and loathe it at the same time, and in that kind of relationship, a certain form of despair often gets hold of the mind. My writing is sometimes an effort to rid myself of that despair through the joy of artistic creation. The witness borne then, if I might say, is a witness to my own surrendering to a light that emerges from my own darkness, and in that light, I am refreshed and made alive."

Ziabari: Why do you think so few prominent writers have shed light on chi in Igbo cosmology and that old African cultural heritage is neglected by the youth? Do you

consider the postcolonial influence of the West on Nigeria to be a negative one?

Obioma: I think many African writers and thinkers have tried to encourage an embrace of our heritage. There was Chinua Achebe, for instance, but also, to some extent, Wole Soyinka. The purpose for me is to reassure our identity as people who had some culture and civilization prior to the coming of the West. I think because of colonialism and slavery, followed by the underdevelopment of most African countries, there has set in this self-damaging inferiority complex — the idea that we are no good.

I was in Abuja around two years ago and some people were debating on national radio whether we should be recolonized. Now, this is a mistake. We only need to learn history, to look back at the sophisticated sociopolitical systems we had, the economic systems, the egalitarian political structures to see that precolonial Africa was not one night from which the West rescued us. I think without this reassurance, this strengthening of our identity, this solving of our identity crisis, we cannot recover.

Ziabari: Your debut novel, "The Fishermen," was acclaimed by critics and shortlisted for a 2015 Man Booker Prize. Why do you think the novel captured so much attention and elicited positive reactions globally, considering that it was your first novel? Many aspiring writers, who happen to write captivating novels, struggle for years to win publicity for their work. What was the key to the success of "The Fishermen" as a debut?

Obioma: If I knew the reason why anyone enjoyed my work, I would be very glad. I think, humbly, it is simply to work hard and believe in the vision you have for a particular project and to be true to that vision. I have always wanted to write a novel about siblinghood and that celebrates family and consanguinity. I think that is what "The Fishermen" does well above anything else.

In that sense, it has universal appeal and touches on aspects of humanity that are recognizable and relatable. I also often think that there is something profoundly human about the relationship between the four brothers and how, just by speaking words, a stranger could cause an irreparable fracture between them. I think this is what many readers — across the 30 or so countries where the book has been published — connect with.

Ziabari: You once said that you wouldn't have written "The Fishermen" if you hadn't moved to Cyprus to study. How did being based in Cyprus influence your understanding of Nigeria? Do you ascribe the creation of "The Fishermen" to homesickness that possibly invigorated your sense of belonging to Nigeria?

Obioma: An Igbo proverb says that we hear the sound of the *udu* drum clearer from a distance rather than from being close by it. This is very true of writing. When I am in a place or close to a place, it is often difficult to imagine it fully. But when I am separated from a place and have distance from it, I am better able to see it, to fully conceive it imaginatively. Since fiction is all about creativity anyway — the invention of the nonexistent — trusting in hindsight.

If I sat across from you at a cafe and I was to describe that moment on the spot, I would write about the obvious things you did. But if I lie down in my bed later that night and the light was off and I closed my eyes, the fine-grain details will trickle in. I will remember the unobvious things, the person scratching their wrist, or hawking into a napkin — those fine details that enrich fiction. It is when the person is gone and the meeting has ended and the day is forgotten that things become closer, clearer.

Ziabari: Many critics have compared you to the legendary Chinua Achebe and called you his successor. Does it make you feel proud to be compared to Achebe in the eyes of noted literati and authors? Do you personally admire Achebe's work?

Obioma: In some ways, "The Fishermen" shares an affinity with "Things Fall Apart," Achebe's seminal work. Achebe wrote "Things Fall Apart" to document the fall of the Igbo civilization, the African civilization or culture. I am looking at a more specific fall of Nigeria — of our civilization, too, but in relation to Nigeria specifically. So, it's a similar project. And in the ways in which Achebe tried to reveal the Igbo civilization to his readers, and "An Orchestra of Minorities" does a similar job.

Ziabari: A final question. Where do you think African literature, in general, and the literature of Nigeria, in particular, are heading? Should we expect more Man Booker and Nobel nominations?

Obioma: Ah, I hope so of course. I think African literature is in good shape. There are wonderful writers popping up here and there, and I won't be surprised if we have more nominations and wins.

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* **Kourosh Ziabari** is an award-winning Iranian journalist. **Chigozie Obioma** is a Nigerian novelist and writer, and an assistant professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

What the "Deal of the Century" Means for Israel and Palestine

Kourosh Ziabari & Antony Loewenstein
March 26, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Jerusalem-based journalist Antony Loewenstein.

On January 28, US President Donald Trump unveiled his long-awaited peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he hailed as the "deal of the century." This is the latest attempt by the US to mediate between the Israelis and Palestinians and end the seven-decade-old dispute.

The deal sparked outrage by the Palestinians but was praised by the Israelis. Even though the plan addresses controversial issues such as Israeli settlements, Palestinian refugees and the status of Jerusalem, many observers have rebuffed it as one-sided.

The plan sets out both political and economic steps for peace. For the Israelis, Jerusalem would be the undivided capital of Israel. They would also have full control over Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Israel would retain most of the territories it captured during the 1967 war. For the Palestinians, the West Bank would be connected to the Gaza Strip via a tunnel or highway. However, the Palestinians would have to relinquish almost 40% of the West Bank and would have their capital in Abu Dis, a Palestinian village in the Jerusalem Governorate. The framework also contains economic advantages that are offered to the Palestinians, including an investment of $50 billion and 1 million jobs.

In a televised statement shortly after the deal went public, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas reacted to it by stating: "[W]e say one thousand times no, no, no to the Deal of the Century." In a joint communique, the Arab League emphasized that it would not cooperate in the enforcement of the plan. The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, welcomed the peace plan and said: "[T]he deal of the century is the opportunity of a century, and we're not going to pass it by."

Antony Loewenstein is a Jerusalem-based Australian journalist. His latest book is "Pills, Powder and Smoke: Inside the Bloody War on Drugs." Loewenstein has written extensively on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is a frequent commentator on TRT World, CNN and Al Jazeera.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Loewenstein about the "deal of the century," Israeli settlements in the West Bank

and the role of international organizations in settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This interview took place before the recent Israeli elections. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Kourosh Ziabari: No Palestinian official attended the White House announcement on the "deal of the century." The attendees were evangelicals and the entourage of President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Does it matter to Trump if the Palestinians perceive the deal as disproportionately biased?

Antony Loewenstein: I think the aim is to show that. It is quite clear that, for a long time, the close coordination between the Israeli government and the American administration is to almost guarantee that the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, for that matter, will reject it. So, they can then turn around and say: You see, we gave them a deal and it was a great deal, but they didn't want it. Now we have to go on and continue with our plan which is annexation, indefinite apartheid, etc.

So, to me, in fact, the idea was that Palestinians would reject it — they knew that they would, almost certainly. It's hard to see how they could ever imagine that the Palestinian leadership would accept this deal — and it's not really a deal, it's more of a gun to the head. It's basically saying that you have no choice but to accept this. And if you don't accept this so-called deal, then you will not be treated with respect.

And to actually launch a peace deal in which one of the two sides are not present and have not been involved in drafting the process, and the key people who drafted it were all Orthodox Jews who support the illegal settlements in the West Bank, says all you need to know about what kind of absurd deal this is.

Ziabari: You said the Americans knew from the beginning that Palestinians would reject the peace plan. In the interim, the White House published a map, delineating the future composition of Palestinian lands and Israeli territory. The Palestinian response has been stringent, saying they'll not accept this deal under any circumstances. Considering the map has been published, do you think that is the green light for Israel to annex more Palestinian lands, including the Jordan Valley, and to build more settlements in the West Bank?

Loewenstein: I think it's almost inevitable and, in fact, one of the things that is important to remember is, in some ways, that Israel doesn't even need this deal. I mean they're annexing territory to an extent now anyway. There's currently in Israel and Palestine a "one-state" solution. It's an apartheid state for Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza and the Jordan Valley, but what it means practically on the ground is that Israel has the freedom to do what it wants. There is one civilian law for Israeli Jews in the West Bank and one law for Palestinians, which is a military rule, and that's discriminatory and apartheid by definition.

So, does the map guarantee Israel will continue on its part? I think the answer is: yes. But Israel doesn't need the Trump plan or the Trump map or the Trump deal to do that. They're doing it anyway and, frankly, they've been doing that for years.

The problem with this issue is not Donald Trump. Donald Trump is a terrible, racist president, but he has only accelerated the trends that were happening here already. These problems were created long before Trump — for decades, in fact — by the Republican and Democratic presidents who allowed Israel to occupy and discriminate against Palestinians without any punishment, including Democratic presidents such as [Barack] Obama. So, Trump is really not the problem here; Trump has merely made the problem worse, for sure, but when he leaves office, Israel would almost certainly continue behaving as it does because there's literally no international pressure on them to stop them.

Ziabari: Do you think the economic incentives of Trump's "vision for peace," including tripling Palestine's GDP, investing $50 billion in the new state and creating 1 million new jobs for Palestinians over the next 10 years, are attractive enough to satisfy the Palestinians and compel them to accept the plan?

Loewenstein: Well, I've read not one Palestinian who's accepted it. That's pretty much all you need to know. I can't say there's not one Palestinian amongst 5 million in the West Bank or Gaza who do accept it, but I've read no one who says they accept it. And, to be clear, the offer that Trump has apparently put on the table is not actually that amount of money — it's an aspiration for that amount of money, maybe down the track if Palestinians accept a demilitarized, weak, broken-up state.

So, frankly, I'm not surprised Palestinians won't accept it and reject it, and if you're a logical, sensible person, you would as well. So, I think really that the issue here is Israel and the US can throw money at the problem but, ultimately, unless you make a political deal and you actually imagine what an equitable solution will be, this problem will continue to get worse.

And that will happen if Netanyahu loses the upcoming election because it's the third Israeli election in a year happening in early March; he might win or he might lose. We don't know yet, of course, but the likely alternative, the opposition leader, thinks pretty much in exactly the same way. He supports annexing territory. He's a right-winger in Israel. He doesn't see Palestinians as equal human beings.

So, the sad reality politically here, in Israel at least, is that both major sides of politics think exactly the same way. In fact, even before Trump's plan, Benny Gantz, the leading opposition leader, flew to Washington to essentially meet Trump and give him his blessing for the plan, essentially saying that if I win the election in March and I become prime minister, I'll move forward with that plan as Netanyahu will if he wins. So, this is a very elaborate but sick game that the Israeli elites are playing, because Palestinians are simply seen as irrelevant and viewed as subhuman and it's not surprising, therefore, that every sane Palestinian would 100% reject this deal.

Ziabari: The Organization for Islamic Cooperation has rejected President Trump's peace plan and called on its 57 member states not to cooperate in the implementation of the deal. Does the refusal of major Muslim countries to work on the enforcement of the deal affect its prospects for success?

Loewenstein: Well, the short answer is it has no impact. I mean, that's the sad reality. There are many dozens of Muslim countries around the world, I know, but they have virtually no influence or impact on Israel or the US, and it's important to know that a number of Muslim, Arab states are, in fact, looking to maybe make a deal with Israel. They may not accept the Trump peace plan, but they are increasingly close with Israel; they are very keen to isolate Iran; they are keen to share defense arrangements; they are keen to get Israeli weapons and surveillance technology.

That's the reality of what's happening in the Middle East. And of course, Israel is very happy about that. For decades, the Arab world was particularly united against Israel. That has radically changed in the last 10 years. On paper, yes, many leaders came out and they are opposed to the peace plan, but in practice, it actually is very different. It's very conceivable that either some will accept the peace plan or a version of it because they're so keen to become close to Israel because of their fear of Iran.

Ziabari: Again, on the peace plan, Jared Kushner, the main architect of the deal, has said Palestinians have repeatedly missed opportunities for peace, and that they should accept the deal if they want a viable state of their own. Do you think this plan is genuinely what will guarantee an independent Palestinian state and bring an end to the

seven-decade-old conflict, or was Kushner simply trying to sell his deal by saying so?

Loewenstein: Jared Kushner was being a typical colonial master saying how his misbehaving subjects, the Palestinians, were not behaving nicely. I mean it's basically the agenda of Kushner. He has spent his entire life around Israeli settlements. His family supports the settlements. Kushner is a right-wing fundamentalist and so the idea that someone like him and all the other people around him who drafted this plan — David Friedman and others — have any real intention or understanding or care about Palestinians, the answer is no because what's suggested is not a viable Palestinian state.

If Palestinians have a choice between the status quo and the prospect of some kind of state, which is not really a state — with no independence, no army, no freedom of movement really, no ability to go in and out as you please — because Israel ultimately is the master of that state, it's very reasonable that they will reject it, which is what they've done.

At the moment, there is no viable alternative on the table, but the challenge now is for Palestinians as a mass movement, both within Palestine and globally to devise a new strategy which could involve, for example, a "one-person, one-vote" campaign, to say that the two-state solution is dead, it's been dead arguably for 20 years, and now we demand equal rights in the state — which is, to me, an international law requirement and also a very legitimate claim. And that's something, I think, that growing numbers of Palestinians do support, are talking about it and that has to be emphasized with the leadership, namely the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

But let's be clear: The leadership in Palestine is part of the problem as well. They are corrupt and they've been in power for far too long. They've not had free and fair elections for a very long time. Many Palestinians treat them with contempt because they mostly are very old men who don't speak for Palestinian people, and that's a problem. And, of course, that situation is what makes Israel and America very happy. They're very content with that situation because the Palestinian Authority today is essentially the policemen for the occupation. They are armed and trained by Israel and international forces to essentially go around the West Bank, suppressing the opposition to their rule and keep calm. But keeping calm means keeping Israel happy, and a lot of Palestinians are very upset and angry about that [and] rightly so. So, to me, until the Palestinian Authority is either abolished or radically reformed, which I'm not convinced is actually possible, and we have free and fair elections, they are also part of the problem.

Ziabari: Benjamin Netanyahu recently said that Trump is the "the best friend that Israel has ever had in the White House." The Trump administration has strived to promote itself as the most pro-Israel in the country's modern history. Why is Trump so persistent in appealing to the Israelis? Does he gain domestically?

Loewenstein: I think he thinks that it does. I think there are a few reasons: One, the Republican Party is very pro-Israel. He's got a very strong evangelical Christian base who are also very fanatically pro-Israel. The majority of Jews in America have always voted Democrat, so they wouldn't vote for Trump anyway. There are obviously some Jews who do vote for Republicans or Trump, but they are very few. So, he sees that his base is quite pro-Israel. He doesn't see any downside because the Palestinians as a people and as a lobby group are very weak as opposed to the pro-Israel lobby in America, which is very strong and powerful.

So, he does see it as beneficial for him and, obviously, we will see this year in the US whether it helps him win reelection. I mean the Israel issue on its own will not win reelection, but we need to see whether this issue becomes a serious one during the campaign once we know who Donald Trump is facing, whether it's Bernie Sanders or somebody else. So yes, I think Trump sees it as beneficial to his agenda and outlook.

Also, frankly, Trump and many people around him hate Muslims, hate Arabs, hate Palestinians. It very much fits into their worldview. There is contempt, open contempt to people who are not white, who are different to them, who are brown, who have different skin, who have a different religion and who have a different background, and the Palestinians are simply part of that, unfortunately.

Ziabari: Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank are considered illegal, according to the UN Security Council's Resolution 2334. However, the US recently shifted its position on the settlements, no longer considering them a violation of international law. What will be the effects of the new US approach? Will it encourage Israel to construct more housing units in the West Bank while the UN Security Council still sticks to its stance?

Loewenstein: Well, one of the key problems with this conflict is that international law and the United Nations are toothless and often powerless. They're choosing not to exercise their power because, ultimately, the settlements have been illegal since the beginning in 1967; virtually the entire world agrees with that except for Israel and the US. The United States did change its position recently, but to be honest, it had that position unofficially for decades.

Israel has been building settlements for 52-53 years, and there are now 750,000 Jewish settlers all living illegally in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. No one seriously thinks they're going to be removed; they're there permanently, the occupation is now permanent. That's the reality which Israel has created.

So, one of the really disappointing aspects of this whole issue is that the International Criminal Court, which has been really weak on many global conflicts for many years including this one, just recently announced that, possibly, they're going to move forward with an investigation into some of the issues around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But even if they do, and it's not clear that they will, the ICC has shown on this issue, amongst other issues, that they're very toothless and powerless and the United Nations is exactly the same. So, ultimately, the resolution of this issue will not come through the UN. With the Security Council, there are obviously various countries that have veto power. Then there is just not really any viable way to see the situation changing that way unless the global makeup shifts.

And with the international law, there have obviously been a number of attempts over the years to bring justice to the Palestinians, by trying to prosecute Israeli prime ministers or defense minsters or army generals. Virtually none of them ever succeeded in many countries, including in Europe, which may be more open to such things. I think that will change eventually, but I think we're a long way away from that still, sadly.

Ziabari: By saying that international organizations such as the United Nations and the Security Council are powerless and unable to come up with a panacea for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are you implying that the settlement of the crisis is merely contingent upon the will and determination of any US government, or is it a matter of having a reliable broker in the White House?

Loewenstein: Well, ultimately, the US has never been that reliable broker because they've always been what I would call "Israel's lawyer." They've always been on Israel's side. This has been pretty much the case in the last 50 years. So, there's never really been an American government, Democrat or Republican, that has viewed Palestinians as having equal rights to Israeli Jews.

The only possible change to that view is if someone like Bernie Sanders wins the presidency. He has talked about seeing Palestinians as human beings, talking about a peace deal and trying to negotiate, which may or may not happen, because there'll be a huge amount of pressure on him to either back down or to not make it the focus of his presidency. He will

be so busy trying to undo years of damage done by Trump if he wins this year.

So, someone like him is a possibility but, ultimately, I think the US has placed itself at the center of global negotiations. What the United Nations should have done, and the European Union particularly should have done years ago but did not, was to make themselves a viable alternative power source to the US. And the European Union has failed in doing that, and now as Europe increasingly becomes politically fractured, there is no consensus; there are growing numbers of Eastern European states particularly that are very pro-Israel, including Hungary and Poland. There are some Western European nations that are more critical of Israel, like Belgium, France and others, but they're quite weak and the EU works on consensus, but there's simply no consensus there.

So, apart from the US and the EU, where is this alternative global broker going to come from? It's not going to be the Arab states. I don't know where that comes from right now. That's the problem. And until there is a viable alternative, this situation will continue to be managed badly by the more powerful forces which are Israel and the US.

Ziabari: A 2019 survey by the Van Leer Institute found that 71% of Jews in Israel believes there is a moral problem with the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Israel appears to be highly divided on the issue of occupation. Is there any chance these fissures might lead to a change of policy on the part of the Israeli government?

Loewenstein: I wish there was. But the truth is that most people I speak to here who are looking for change — I'm talking about on the Israeli Jewish side — have accepted many years ago that that change will not happen. In other words, it will not happen within the country. There are definitely people within Israeli Jewish society who are very opposed to what's going on, and they are very outspoken and they are very brave, but there are very few of them. And even though many Israeli Jews, when they're asked in studies, will say the occupation is not their ideal outcome, they continually vote for politicians that are making the settlements permanent.

It's interesting that it's definitely a minority of Israeli Jews who are very pro-settler. That is true, but that shows in some way the strategic brilliance of the settler movement that a minority population in Israel have spent 50+ years being able to be the key drivers of Israeli government policy where the majority of Israelis are either paralyzed, blind or deaf, including willfully blind to what's going on.

And it's amazing how you can have an occupation down the road from your house if you live inside Tel Aviv or West Jerusalem where a lot of Israeli Jews live. And they are never going to the West Bank; they never meet Palestinians; they often express incredibly racist views.

Obviously, I'm generalizing. There are many Israeli Jews who don't think like this, but a lot of public opinion polls of Israeli Jews find racism very strong against Palestinians. They wouldn't share an apartment block with a Palestinian; they wouldn't want to send their child to the same school or kindergarten as a Palestinian Muslim or Christian child. There's very deep racism here. And there's racism on the Palestinian side, too, but most studies have shown that Israeli Jews are much more racist to Arabs than the other way around, despite decades and decades of conflict with the Palestinians who are the occupied people, not the other way around.

So, I think without outside international pressure, either from the government or other places, it's very hard to see the Israeli Jewish population rising up because, ultimately, people don't give up power by choice. They don't give up their privileges by choice. We saw that in South Africa during apartheid. White South Africans didn't one day wake up and say: Gee! I really want to give blacks equal rights.

No. They realized it over years of international pressure and, obviously, a very strong black movement led by the ANC [African National Congress] and Nelson Mandela who

showed them that South African whites had a choice: you either accept blacks as equals or you become an increasingly global pariah and outcast society. And at the moment, Israel is a long way away from that, but that's the future potentially unless there's growing international pressure against Israel to change its policies.

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The BJP Rejects the Idea of a Hindu Rashtra

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Sudhanshu Mittal
April 7, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Sudhanshu Mittal, the vice president of the Indian Olympic Association.

Since December 2019, India has witnessed a series of protests against the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the government's decision to create a National Register of Citizens (NRC). The CAA proposes to give fast-track citizenship to religious minorities of three neighboring countries, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. However, it blatantly excludes Muslims while failing to address the persecution of minorities in other neighboring nations like Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has come under fire for forcefully detaining protesters, attacking innocent people and clamping down on all forms of opposition toward the new legislation. The government also came under public scrutiny by placing the capital Delhi under the National Security Act that allows the police to detain anyone for 12 months without trial.

According to a recent survey by India Today, 43% of people believe that the CAA and NRC are concerted attempts to divert people's attention away from more important issues, such as the country's economic slowdown. India is facing its slowest growth in years, with unemployment at its highest level in over four decades. The government is reportedly withholding data on issues such as unemployment and is revising economic growth numbers upwards.

The BJP-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi faces several challenges, of which the most important is addressing concerns around the CAA, the NRC and the violation of secular tenets of the Indian Constitution. The government's silence on critical issues is creating more anxiety among the public and, despite assurances from senior political leaders, fear that legal residents may face deportation is still widespread.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Sudhanshu Mittal, the vice president of the Indian Olympic Association, president of the Kho-Kho Federation of India and a member of the BJP, about the public's concerns over the controversial legislation and the BJP's image as a Hindu nationalist party.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: The National Register of Citizens will be registering all Indian citizens. Many fear that some citizens could be excluded from the NRC. These excluded citizens would largely be Muslim because Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians can claim citizenship through CAA. What do you have to say about such fears?

Sudhanshu Mittal: Let us understand why there is the need for an NRC in the first place and whether there is opposition to it. In Assam, agitation against illegal immigrants began once the population doubled. In normal conditions, within 10 years, the population should increase

by approximately 20%. In 1971, 2 million [to] 2.5 million people had immigrated to Assam. However, the rate of population growth since then isn't even close to 20%; it is a staggering 43%, which shows that several illegal immigrants have entered India after 1971.

When the NRC was conducted, the total number of identified illegal Bangladeshis was between 7-8 million. These folks were scared that they can be identified anytime. The NRC gave them the opportunity of faking their documents and becoming Indian citizens. So, Badruddin Ajmal [the head of the All India United Democratic Front in the state of Assam] welcomed the final list of the NRC because all of his brethren who feared identification got the time to become legitimate citizens of India.

How is the experience of the NRC against Muslims? I believe there has been a deliberate attempt to spread misinformation and play on fear psychosis.

Mukhopadhyay: Systems have loopholes, and the NRC is one of them. A legal citizen can be identified as illegal under the NRC. What is the remedy in such a case?

Mittal: There are remedies for an error like that. When the first list of the NRC was out, it had identified 4 million people as illegal immigrants. The final list has 2 million names. There were startling cases of exclusion, and the mistake was rectified by including these people. In systems that have inadequacies, there is the possibility of abrasion. But should one use the abrasion to completely discredit the system? I believe that the system should be evaluated on its norms, not its exceptions or abrasions.

Let us understand what the NRC is. The NRC is merely a database of all Indian citizens. It is an exercise which identifies and records for the country who its citizens are. Every country must know who its citizens are. I fail to understand the opposition to this. I understand that there is an apprehension that it will leave out a lot of people. But we must understand that there are multiple documents to prove one's citizenship in order to be included in the NRC. The apprehensions and fear psychosis that has been created around the NRC is unfounded because in the NRC, what is true for a Muslim person is true for a Hindu, Christian or Parsi. The documentation required for the NRC doesn't look at religion — it only looks at documents that prove Indian citizenship.

Mukhopadhyay: There is a lot of confusion around the documents that need to be furnished to be included in the NRC. Why is the government silent on the guidelines of the NRC?

Mittal: There can be over 100 documents to prove one's citizenship. When the NRC was conducted in Assam, there were some 17-18 documents that were declared valid to prove one's citizenship. It's not about possessing one card — it is multiple evidences that can establish your citizenship. If anyone has a problem with the process, there is an appellate authority to resolve the issue. It's not a bureaucratic exercise that leaves no remedy in case of an error.

The eruption of fear around the NRC was largely fueled by some people with political interests. They spread false information to accentuate fear in the minds of Muslims, convincing them that this will be discriminatory to them, whereas facts are contrary to that. The NRC was welcomed by the Muslim leadership in Assam.

Mukhopadhyay: What will happen to those who are identified as non-citizens? Where will they go?

Mittal: Identification will not lead to deportation. This is a fact that must be understood by everyone. Every country takes decisions based on a few facts and makes decisions based on the practicality and desirability of the solution.

Identification has been misconstrued as deportation. You have to understand that if we deport people, the other country must accept them, right? I can push you out, but if the other country doesn't take you in, then the entire

exercise is fruitless. Once we identify that you're not a legal citizen of India, we will disenfranchise these people. The fate of Indian democracy must be decided by its citizens and not by non-citizens. This is similar to a restriction on owning property in India. For example, a foreigner can't own property in India without the permission of the Reserve Bank of India. There are various implications of the identification. Deportation isn't the only implication.

Mukhopadhyay: Why has the government not explicitly mentioned this anywhere?

Mittal: As I said earlier, we haven't explicitly mentioned this because that's not been the experience of those who underwent the exercise of the NRC. Has anyone deported the people identified as illegal in Assam under the NRC?

Mukhopadhyay: There are reports of detention camps in Assam for those identified as illegal under the NRC. What is the purpose of the detention camps?

Mittal: Assam had detention camps … before the NRC was implemented. There were tribunals that decided the fate of a person who was presumed to be an illegal immigrant, and those identified were sent to detention camps. These camps were not made specifically for the CAA and NRC. This is also misinformation being spread by those with political interests.

Mukhopadhyay: There is a lot of confusion between the National Population Register (NPR) and the NRC. How is NPR different from NRC? Are they related?

Mittal: There's a lot of unnecessary fear about the NRC, and everything is being linked to it. This situation reminds me of the days when the Aadhaar card, India's biometric ID system, was made a mandatory identification. People thought it would be an indirect route to conduct an NRC. But Aadhaar is merely an identification of residents, not citizens of this country. There is a distinction between a resident and a citizen of this country. Similarly, the NPR is a list of usual residents who have lived in a local area for the last six months or more.

Mukhopadhyay: The BJP has been criticized intensely for excluding Muslims under the Citizenship Amendment Act. What does your party aim to achieve through the CAA?

Mittal: I will reiterate what senior members of the BJP have said: That the CAA aims to give citizenship to people who are already in India, but on the ground of religious persecution.

Mukhopadhyay: What about those minorities like the Rohingya, who are persecuted in countries like Myanmar? Why were they excluded?

Mittal: Myanmar isn't a theocratic state. India didn't take the Rohingya in because they came to India via Bangladesh. And the Rohingya wanted to enter India for economic reasons, not because they were persecuted religiously. When Myanmar expelled them, the Rohingya felt the heat and went to Bangladesh. From there, they entered India. They are not people who migrated to India from Myanmar, they came from Bangladesh.

As I said, the persecution of one community in Myanmar is not equivalent to the persecution of religious minorities in Bangladesh, because Bangladesh is a theocracy and Myanmar is a non-theocratic state.

Mukhopadhyay: The BJP could have simply solved the illegal immigration issue by tightening the borders.

Mittal: Border fencing is being pursued strictly by this government. Earlier governments thrived on illegal immigrants. Why is Mamata Banerjee [the chief minister of West Bengal] opposing border fencing in Bengal? Because her largest vote bank today is the illegal immigrants from Bangladesh who are settled in West Bengal. It's the vote-bank politics that compromises with the national interest to prevent illegal immigration in this country.

Mukhopadhyay: How is the BJP planning to implement the CAA and NRC even amidst opposition in several states?

Mittal: As per the constitution, citizenship is the sovereign function of the center. A state doesn't have any say on matters of citizenship. Indian states don't have locus standi to prevent any exercise to identify illegal citizens of this country. We will go ahead with it as it's the function and responsibility of the center.

Mukhopadhyay: The Delhi Police is under public scrutiny after policemen beat up protesters in Jamia Millia Islamia university and Seelampur. What happened? Do you think the police went overboard and has to be held to account for its actions?

Mittal: I have one question for you: Was there violence preceding the police action? Fundamental to law and order is the presumption that nobody is permitted to take law into their own hands. If order has to be maintained, law has to be enforced. If buses are burned, if violence is perpetrated, if public property is damaged, what is the police expected to do? Is it expected to be a mute spectator or go after the rioters?

The Delhi police beat up the mob when it started to commit violence. The Delhi Police entered the premises of Jamia Millia Islamia after the mob entered the campus. Jamia's administration had a responsibility to prevent outsiders from entering the campus. If outsiders are rioters who belong to the mob and damage public property, then they have to be held up, right?

Mukhopadhyay: There are reports of innocent students who were beaten up by the police in Jamia Millia Islamia. What do you have to say about that?

Mittal: If any excess has been committed, an inquiry will be conducted. The police has no right to beat up an innocent student. An inquiry will determine whether the students were innocent or not, whether they were part of the rioters or they were themselves perpetrators. Police has acted only when violence has taken place and public property has been damaged. In Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), the police had to become a silent spectator as they weren't allowed inside the campus. On one hand, people say things like, Where is the police when violence is taking place? On the other hand, you say the police shouldn't enter a university campus. You can't have double standards.

Mukhopadhyay: Why did the police choose to be a mute spectator when students were beat up in JNU?

Mittal: The police are not allowed to enter the JNU campus unless the vice chancellor allows them [to]. You can't have rules of engagement suiting your convenience.

Mukhopadhyay: There is a lot of negative news coverage on the JNU incident and police violence against protesters. How does the BJP plan to address this negative image?

Mittal: Why is no one talking about the violence which took place during the protests? Why is everybody silent on that? Do we endorse rioting? Do we endorse damage to public property? Do we endorse the beating of innocent people by rioters? Do we endorse the burning of buses?

Mukhopadhyay: Who are these rioters?

Mittal: Either political activists or people who have been misled into believing that they will be discriminated against by the CAA and NRC. There are political outfits which have successfully created false campaigns and inculcated fear psychosis to the extent that at the slightest of bidding, violence can be instigated in India.

Mukhopadhyay: Recent government actions such as the passing of the CAA, the construction of the Ram Mandir temple in Ayodhya and the abrogation of Section 370 in the state of Jammu and Kashmir have caused

unease among Muslims. Is the BJP anti-Muslim?

Mittal: Let us analyze each issue. Jammu and Kashmir is not a Muslim issue. It's a regional issue. How is the abrogation of Section 370 in Kashmir an anti-Muslim issue? This move was an administrative one. Jammu and Kashmir also has Kashmiri Pandits, who are as passionate about Kashmir as the Muslims. It's a regional issue, and not an issue of Islam.

The other thing you talked about is the judgement on the Ram temple. That is not the handiwork of this government. It was a judicial process and, in the process, the judgement was delivered. How can this be attributed to the BJP?

The CAA too has nothing to do with Muslims. A certain political section is frustrated and fears complete annihilation, owing to which they are creating false propaganda and distilling fear in the public.

We are nationalists. We perform what we think is our national duty. The BJP doesn't do things for electoral gains. The electoral gain is incidental. Any government that has done good work will inform people about their work. And we like to be judged on our work.

Mukhopadhyay: Why has the Indian media been critical of these measures?

Mittal: After a long time, the media has got an opportunity to lash out against the government. If you remember, most of Indian media is left-dominated and hostile to the right wing. This hostile media was on the receiving end after their doomsday seers incorrectly predicted a loss for Narendra Modi in the 2019 election. Now, reeling under that onslaught, the media got an opportunity to lash back, and they have exploited it to the full.

Another example is the violence that was showcased by the media in the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). In UP, the violence was actually contained by the state government, as it was very forthcoming and strict, particularly toward those who damaged public property and took law into their [own] hands. Sporadic protests in the state were deliberately shown out of proportion to create an impression that this is an all-India phenomenon, which is quite unfortunate, in my opinion.

Mukhopadhyay: There are parallels being drawn between the BJP government and that of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The UPA government didn't undertake any harsh or violent measures when a national anti-corruption movement was organized against the government by Anna Hazare in 2011. The term "state oppression" is being used for the Modi government. Does the BJP want to suppress any form of dissent?

Mittal: If the way Anna Hazare was picked up from Ramlila ground and his supporters were lathi-charged — if that was not state oppression, then what is state oppression? In 2011, the anti-corruption movement was completely silent and non-violent, but violence was carried out against innocent protesters by the UPA government. Today, there is violence being perpetrated on sites of protest. We are trying to contain violence by acting against it. There's a qualitative difference.

Mukhopadhyay: India is currently facing an economic slowdown. Many attribute it to the BJP's 2016 demonetization policy. Do you agree?

Mittal: I completely disagree. To date, nobody has been able to give me the analogy of how demonetization has affected the economy. Please understand that the money was not taken away by the government. What affects the economy adversely is a lack of liquidity. During demonetization, there was no lack of liquidity. The public was only inconvenienced for a month, when they faced problems in withdrawing money and conducting financial transactions. In fact, [all the] money that came into the economy following demonetization went to the banking channel. If the money [was put back into] the economy, I fail to understand how it has affected the economy. This baffles me.

India is seeing an economic downturn because the kind of foreign direct investment (FDI) we anticipated didn't come into the economy. An infusion of capital is fundamental to economic growth. There are multiple reasons for low FDI, including trade tensions between the US and China. In addition, a lot of judicial orders have created discontinuity in business, like the cancellation of licenses. India has also become riskier for investors.

Mukhopadhyay: What is the plan to get the economy back on track?

Mittal: Stable government is critical for economic growth. In the last five years, the Congress [India's main opposition party] acted irresponsibly by opposing for the sake of opposing. They snowballed all reforms we attempted because they had a majority in the Rajya Sabha [upper house of Parliament].

The reaction to the goods and services tax (GST) by the Congress is a testimony of irresponsible politics. Instead of bipartisanship, they have chosen to play politics with the future of this country, which is unfortunate. Today, we have the majority in both Lok Sabha [lower house] and Rajya Sabha, I think we will see a lot of reforms and initiatives and lot of speed which were earlier blunted by the obstructionism of the Congress using their majority in the Rajya Sabha.

Mukhopadhyay: Under the BJP, the idea of a Hindu Rashtra has become prominent. Does the BJP plan to create a Hindu religious identity for India?

Mittal: The BJP has always rejected theocracy. We have rejected the concept of the Hindu Rashtra as the BJP doesn't believe in theocracy. If that is the core stance of the BJP, then where is the fear of a Hindu Rashtra coming from?

Mukhopadhyay: Why is this fact not out in the public?

Mittal: This depends on media coverage. Although senior leaders of the BJP have stated this clearly, the Lutyens' media has underreported this aspect.

Mukhopadhyay: However, your government is viewed as draconian owing to measures like the implementation of Section 144 that prohibits public gathering of more than four people, and directives being issued to the media for reporting on the protests over the CAA. Your government is also being labeled as fascist in the media.

Mittal: I fail to understand where this is coming from. In India, the media is free. Your independence to write has never been under challenge. The fact that so much is written against the government shows that the media is free. The evidence is out there, as the media freely and continuously writes against the government.

This kind of news is being propagated by the opposition that has chosen to become irresponsible in their lust for power. No low is low for the opposition. Once upon a time, national interest was paramount. When the Kargil War between India and Pakistan was going on in 1999, the Congress remained silent and never criticized the government.

In fact, they supported the endeavor. Contrary to that, when the Pulwama attack took place, the way the media acted indicated the lust for power of the opposition, which has discarded sensibility.

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India's Health-Care System Is in Shambles

Nilanjana Sen & I.P. Singh
May 18, 2020

In this guest edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Dr. I.P. Singh, a senior surgeon with more than five decades of professional experience.

India has an abysmally low percentage of people with access to decent health care. About 300 million Indian citizens live below the poverty line and, for them, medicine is prohibitively expensive. For decades, serious medical conditions have pushed families into poverty and destitution.

From 2000 to 2015, the annual national health-care expenditure averaged around 4.00% of GDP; the Indian government spent only around 1% of GDP, with families largely chipping in with the remaining 3.00%.

In 2018, the government launched Ayushman Bharat, a health insurance scheme for the bottom 40% of India's population. Access remains patchy. Furthermore, health-care infrastructure remains pitiable, acute poverty persists and so does lack of education or awareness. This leaves millions vulnerable to exploitation or neglect, or both. A 2018 study by The Lancet found that 2.4 million Indians die of treatable conditions every year. Of the 136 nations examined in this study, India was in the worst situation.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Nilanjana Sen talks to Dr. I.P. Singh, a senior consultant in plastic and reconstructive surgery at the Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi, about the state of the health-care system in India, the role of the private sector and the challenges faced by professionals in the field.

This interview was conducted prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nilanjana Sen: Is corruption a big issue in India's health-care system?

I.P. Singh: Corruption has been all pervasive in every sector and every walk of life right from the early 1960s. Unfortunately, it has spread to the health-care sector as well. In health care, corruption takes myriad forms such as unnecessary procedures, overcharging for necessary procedures and not providing treatment or services that have already been paid for. The mentality that pervades the environment outside the medical profession has finally seeped into health care too, and it is not possible to insulate the profession from the outside environment.

Quacks and unqualified practitioners abound and comprise between 57% to 58% of India's so-called doctors. I remember a case from some time ago when some quack claimed that he had removed a dead serpent from the abdomen of a lady. He probably removed a necrose intestine and claimed to have found a snake. In another famous case, a doctor in Assam claimed to have transplanted a pig's heart into a male patient. This doctor wanted to be recognized for his achievement even though the patient died.

Doctors and quacks also prescribe fake or substandard drugs in remote areas. We have to realize that 70% of our population lives in far-flung rural areas, and it is very difficult to monitor what happens there. Most people are barely literate, so a lot of unethical practices go unnoticed and unchecked. Corruption is now endemic in India's health-care system.

Sen: In such an unequal country, what is the real state of health-care coverage? Can the new government-backed insurance system be a success?

Singh: There are two main reasons for poor health-care coverage. First, we don't have enough trained medical personnel. The World Health Organization recommends a ratio of 1:1,000, i.e., we should have one doctor for every thousand persons. For India, the doctor-population ratio statistic is unclear and murky. We do not know whether we have one doctor for 1,700, 1,500 or

1,000 persons. We lack clarity because we do not know how many doctors are registered medical practitioners, how many practitioners are still active, how many are out of practice and how many are quacks. The government admits that more than 75% of the primary health-care system is managed by people who are not qualified to practice medicine. This is one of the major reasons for poor health care in India.

Second, most of the trained medical personnel are not willing to serve in rural areas, which lack basic facilities and infrastructure such as electricity and roads. Even though basic amenities have improved in recent years, working at rural medical centers is often demoralizing. There is rampant pilfering of drugs, malfunctioning equipment and terrible waste management. Further, there is a lack of professional development opportunities, poor management and a lack of transparency at all levels.

The new insurance backed system of Ayushman Bharat is a very good idea to start with, but I hope that the people who have planned it have done their math correctly. It is an extremely difficult and arduous task to plan health care for roughly 500 million people. If you look at health care across the world, uniform and fairly good health coverage is limited to Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and some other countries in Europe.

Health care is fairly decent for most people in the US, but the American health-care system has its share of major flaws. Approximately 33% of the American population does not have adequate medical insurance and is left at the mercy of God. Many more Indians find themselves in a similar situation. India's large population means that the government has to provide health care at scale and, therefore, must get its mathematics right for the program to be successful.

Ayushman Bharat must not only sort out finance but also build a team of dedicated staff. Only then can they plug gaps and leakages in the system. Last year, I was reading the newspaper and was shocked to learn that 338 hospitals were practicing fraud. Of these, the government barred 97 hospitals from its insurance scheme. This year, it barred another 171 hospitals. Such fraud will derail Ayushman Bharat.

Sen: The present government seeks to involve the private sector in the health-care system. Will this help improve accountability and reduce malpractices?

Singh: The intention behind this idea is good, but one man or one agency with good intentions cannot set everything right. There has to be a tectonic cultural shift. Many unscrupulous people will claim benefits at the cost of voiceless people who will lose out. There will be cases of wrong billings, overcharging or charges for investigations that are simply not done. So, auditing the system and holding fraudsters accountable is crucial. However, I am not sure the government would be able to find so many auditors or be able to prosecute most fraudsters. Besides, there is an acute lack of basic infrastructure.

Sen: What exactly is this lack of infrastructure you are referring to?

Singh: As I mentioned earlier, there is an acute shortage of medical facilities in the rural areas. Having said that, we must remember that health-care infrastructure doesn't mean medical facilities such as a hospital or a primary health center alone. It also includes good training institutions, laboratories and research facilities.

There are hardly any such facilities in this country except for the Central Drug Research Institute in Lucknow, the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences and a handful of other places. Even existing facilities lack funds for research, which is dominated by foreign pharmaceutical firms who have the money to invest in research. They market, advertise and sell their drugs, equipment and medical devices at astronomical prices to make large profits. Sometimes, these drugs are hyped up and private

hospitals become willing partners in prescribing them because they get a share of the profit.

One drug called Xigris was used for septicemia. A single dose of Xigris cost more than $8,000, and I know of no patient who survived after being given this drug. Later, Eli Lilly withdrew this drug from the market. Big pharmaceutical companies often sell such drugs in developing countries like India to make a killing.

Sen: Are you saying big pharmaceutical companies are taking advantage of patients?

Singh: Yes, big pharmaceutical companies spend huge sums on advertisements and rope in doctors through various inducements. Take the case of knee and hip implants in India. Many implants, which were stopped in developed countries a good two or three decades ago, were being used in India until very recently. If this is not taking advantage of patients in poor countries, I don't know what else is.

Sen: If there are so many malpractices by big pharmaceutical companies, what can the government do to control them?

Singh: It is very difficult to exercise control over these companies because most of them are multinational. They do not lie under India's jurisdiction. Furthermore, India depends on other countries for active pharmaceutical ingredients. In fact, 66.69% come from China alone.

Foreign players are not prepared to negotiate with the government on price. The drug controller of India has tried to control prices of some drugs such as antibiotics, anti-tuberculosis medicines and antimalarial tablets, but this has led companies to stop production of many life-saving drugs when their profit margins have gone down.

Sen: Is that not sheer blackmail and profiteering?

Singh: Yes, it is. Once the companies stop production, there are shortages and panic often grips the market. People start to hoard essential medicines and sell them in the black market. Once the trade goes underground, prices become very difficult to control, further aggravating the original problem. So, companies know that they have bargaining power over the government.

Sen: What are the other issues facing Indian health care?

Singh: Medical education has declined precipitously. When I studied at King George's Medical College, my professors were extraordinary. Today, medical colleges are run by politicians, bureaucrats and property dealers along with corporate houses. It is bizarre that people who ran sweet shops or dairy farms have suddenly started medical colleges. Many students who graduate from such institutions are doctors only in name and are really little better than quacks.

The Medical Council of India is deeply compromised. Ketan Desai, one of its past presidents, was found guilty of corruption. He was convicted of taking bribes to approve shady institutions as recognized medical colleges. With the fox guarding the henhouse, it is no surprise that regulation is utterly ineffective in safeguarding the interests of citizens.

There is another major issue. During British rule, the Indian Medical Service (IMS) and state medical services provided the backbone of health care to a limited population. After independence, the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and the Indian Police Service continued, but the IMS was discontinued. Health care was now the responsibility of the states, but they were not given taxation powers to fund it.

India never planned its health-care system properly. Politicians and IAS officers had no domain expertise. Doctors, nurses and medical professionals were cut out of policymaking. Unsurprisingly, India's health-care system is in shambles.

***Nilanjana Sen** is a former associate editor at Fair Observer. **Dr. I.P. Singh** is a senior plastic

and reconstructive surgeon who has been a leading pioneer in his field.

Will Qatar Succeed in Hosting the First Carbon-Neutral World Cup?

Kourosh Ziabari, Mohamed Abdallah & Yusuf Bicer
May 26, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Dr. Mohamed Abdallah and Dr. Yusuf Bicer, of Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Doha, Qatar, about the country's transition to clean energy.

The 22nd FIFA World Cup in 2022 will be hosted by Qatar, meaning that for the first time in history the international association football bonanza will be held in the Arab world. Football aficionados are waiting to see how a Muslim-majority country that beat the United States as host will deliver on what is arguably the most watched sporting event in the world.

The government of Qatar is investing phenomenal sums of money into making the tournament a success. Between $100 and $220 billion is going into propping up infrastructure, stadiums, roads and hotels. For the first time, an integrated electric bus system connecting different parts of the country will be set in motion to actualize what experts say may be the first carbon-neutral World Cup.

In line with its National Vision 2030, Qatar aspires to become a "pioneer in eco-friendly transport services," and the Ministry of Transport and Communications is working on finalizing strategy and legislation to initiate the use of electric buses across the nation. Aside from slashing carbon dioxide emissions, the use of electric vehicles protects the transportation system from fluctuations in global oil prices, reduces maintenance costs and has the benefit of generating less noise and vibration.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Dr. Abdallah and Dr. Bicer of Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Doha, Qatar, about the country's transition to clean energy, the advantages of electric vehicles and the hopes for the first carbon-neutral World Cup.

Kourosh Ziabari: Does the electric bus project have the potential to open up new business opportunities? Aside from cutting carbon dioxide emissions, what are some of the benefits it can offer?

Mohamed Abdallah: Bus transportation networks around the world are mainly powered by fossil fuel derivatives such as gasoline, diesel or even compressed natural gas. Components used in conventional buses therefore operate along combustion theory lines and utilize different types of combustion engines. Electric buses not only help to reduce carbon dioxide emissions but also other pollutants attributed to conventional vehicles. These include particulate matters, especially in diesel vehicles, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxides and sulfur oxides. In electric vehicles, these emissions are eliminated during operation. The use of electric motors in buses and other transportation also brings smarter components into vehicles such as batteries, intelligent power control units, diverse sensors and self-driving algorithm developments.

The electrification of Qatar's public transportation sector will provide many new business opportunities including the manufacturing of spare parts for electric motors and development of electronic circuit elements. Vehicles aside, this initiative will provide further opportunities for charging station enterprises. As the world gradually makes the transition from centralized to distributed power generation, there will be several local prosumers in the electrical grid. These include companies and individuals with onsite power generation and the ability to sell electricity to specific consumers, such as charging stations. Charging station owners can

then generate electricity onsite from renewables, store it and supply to electric buses or vehicles on demand. This enables energy trading business opportunities among prosumers and charging stations.

Ziabari: Qatar will be hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2022 — the first time such a major international sporting event will be held in the Middle East. How will the integrated electric bus project contribute to the facilitation of transportation during the games?

Yusuf Bicer: Qatar wants to implement and host the first carbon-neutral World Cup. This environmentally-focused ambition necessitates sustainable approaches to the construction and operation of the country's infrastructure, including its football stadiums. Electric public transportation also has an important role to play in enhancing the sustainability of the event. Since buses are associated with frequent stop and start cycles, they are more emission-intensive than cars. Conversely, electric motors are more efficient than combustion engines, making them vehicles of choice for reducing emissions and preserving finite natural resources.

Additionally, charging stations for electric buses are easy to install, making refueling an efficient and straightforward process. Once parked near stadiums, buses can be charged during games, thereby creating the conditions for more frequent services and reduced waiting times after and between matches.

Ziabari: Some experts say training drivers and technicians to operate electric buses is one of the challenges of utilizing such vehicles. How do you think Qatar will cope with this?

Abdallah: The principle behind electric buses is not much different than their conventional counterparts. Both have similar components such as steering wheels and pedals, which means they operate in pretty much the same way. Given that Qatar has already started to integrate electric buses into its fleet, training of new drivers is well underway. As the company responsible for public transportation, Mowasalat (Karwa), has created special driving schools for teaching the new curricula for electric buses. All drivers will be ready for the World Cup.

Ziabari: What are the environmental benefits of using electric buses in cities? To what extent does electric mobility decrease the quantity of greenhouse gas emissions linked to transportation?

Bicer: As mentioned, conventional buses release significant amounts of greenhouse gases and other contaminants including carbon dioxide, sulfur oxide, nitrogen oxide and particulate matters. Since most buses are used in urban areas, this creates more polluted air and health challenges. For example, breathing difficulties are among the main consequences of fossil fuel-driven buses.

On the other hand, electric buses do not release any of these emissions during operation, making them a cleaner, carbon-neutral alternative. Compared to the operation phase of conventional buses, there is a 100% reduction in the quantity of greenhouse gas emissions. It should be noted that electricity production also causes emissions. However, when the whole life cycle emissions are accounted for, from production to disposal, there is the potential for decreasing greenhouse gas emissions by about 25% to 45%, depending on the electricity mix, compared to conventional buses under the existing grid mix. In this respect, emissions associated with the power generation phase can also be minimized when renewable energy sources are utilized, implying that the emission reduction potential can even go beyond 50%.

Another important point to note is that power plants are mostly located outside urban areas in rural locations, which reduces the emission intensity within crowded public places such as stadiums.

Ziabari: The world's major oil producing countries, including Qatar, are the biggest emitters of greenhouse gases. In 2017, Qatar

had the highest per capita emission in the world, at 49 tons per person. Does the country have plans to change this pattern and minimize its contribution to air pollution by building up its use of renewable energy?

Abdallah: It is important to emphasize that the given emission value accounts for the exported oil and gas-associated emissions as well as being based on calculation methodology, which is not a fair comparison. Therefore, the emission per capita yields a high value compared to other countries.

That said, Qatar has a very comprehensive national plan for minimizing air pollution. As set out in Qatar National Vision 2030, the country is focused on developing sustainable oil and gas operations and minimizing environmental emissions. In order to achieve these targets, Qatar is planning to build several renewable energy power plants. The first large-scale renewable project was tendered by KAHRAMAA for Al Kharsaah Solar Power Project with Siraj Energy, Marubeni and Total under the build, own, operate and transfer (BOOT) model for a period of 25 years. The solar power plant is expected to be fully commissioned in April 2022 and, once completed, will be able to meet 10% of peak electricity demand in the country.

In addition, there are multiple small-scale distributed solar energy applications across Qatar that are used for lighting, stations, air conditioning, to name but a few. There are also plants that develop biomass power using waste, which significantly contributes to Qatar's waste reduction strategies.

Ziabari: Is electric mobility an option that will transform the future of transportation, including in countries that lack adequate and high-quality transportation infrastructure? Do you think more countries will turn to this alternative because they will soon realize that traditional modes of transportation are too costly to run and maintain?

Bicer: Electric mobility will definitely play an important role in future transport initiatives. Put simply, it offers higher quality infrastructure and more intelligent transportation systems. That's because future transportation architecture is not only about travel but also the smart management of cities through intelligence, sensors and other technologies.

The main cost element of electric mobility concerns the charging of vehicles. However, once countries switch to distributed power generation, this challenge will be overcome and issues of access to electricity in non-developed countries eliminated.

It is now a fact that renewable source-based electricity generation is becoming cheaper day by day, even beating the price of fossil fuels in many parts of the world due to abundant availability. This includes solar photovoltaic and wind turbine power generations. In several solar photovoltaic projects recently conducted across the Middle East and North Africa, the cost of electricity was significantly lower than fossil fuel-based electricity. Once the technology is even more developed, electricity supplies will be even cheaper and easily used in electric mobility. In this way, electric transportation can become more affordable to the public.

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* **Kourosh Ziabari** is an award-winning Iranian journalist. **Mohammed Abdallah** is an associate professor at the Information and Computing Technology Division of College of Science and Engineering at Hamad Bin Khalifa University (HBKU) in Doha, Qatar. **Yusuf Bicer** is an assistant professor of sustainable development in the College of Science and Engineering at HBKU.

Three Scenarios for a Post-Coronavirus World

Valerio Alfonso Bruno & Vittorio Emanuele Parsi
June 4, 2020

In this guest edition of The Interview, Valerio Alfonso Bruno talks to Professor Vittorio Parsi about the possible state of the post-pandemic world and the various vulnerabilities COVID-19 has exposed within the existing system.

As the COVID-19 crisis is gradually slowing down, the world is bracing itself for a very likely second wave of the pandemic. While the shortcomings of the global response and the preparedness of individual countries will be open for debate and analysis for a long time to come, attempting to forecast what architecture the international system will assume after the immediate health crisis is over may prove to be even more challenging. While experts offer a wide variety of perspectives, the debate on the post-coronavirus world is characterized by some recurring themes, such as the future of globalization, the fraught relationship between the United States and China, the challenges facing the European Union or the future role of populism and the radical right.

Vittorio Emanuele Parsi, professor of international relations at the Catholic University of Milan and author of "The Vulnerable: How the Pandemic Will Change the World," proposes three possible alternative scenarios on the international system after COVID-19. Two are rather gloomy, with the international order characterized by a cynical return to "business as usual" or a turn toward self-centered nation-states, ruled by populist, nationalist leaders. A third scenario does give some hope, provided we recognize and effectively protect the most vulnerable members of our societies that form the most fragile part of the system.

For Parsi, the real turning point for understanding what a post-pandemic international system may look like is the upcoming presidential election in the United States. Currently, both the ongoing pandemic and the countrywide protests following the death of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, at the hands of Minneapolis police, dramatically demonstrate how the most vulnerable elements of society are the most exposed and the least protected. If the US government fails to effectively protect its citizens from both the health threat posed by COVID-19 as well as its socioeconomic fallout, the result will be catastrophic, with a consequent redistribution of power domestically that will echo at the international level.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Valerio Alfonso Bruno talks to Professor Vittorio Parsi about the possible state of the post-pandemic world and the various vulnerabilities COVID-19 has exposed within the existing system.

Valerio Alfonso Bruno: Professor Parsi, in your latest book, "The Vulnerable: How the Pandemic Will Change the World," you argue that the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly exposed the fragility and weakness of the current international system that for long had been latent. You do so by using the evocative image of a vessel: Why did you choose this image?

Vittorio Emanuele Parsi: I like the image of the vessel, and I used it in previous books as well. The vessel represents our globalized world. It is important that we start considering ourselves as a crew, being a part of the very same vessel while navigating the oceans. It is important to understand that this vessel cannot be replaced, it is the only one that we have. The vessel is vulnerable, and the crew is its most vulnerable element. If there is no solidarity among the members of the crew or its security is at risk, there is no future and no sailing.

For a long time, we have considered, erroneously, the vessel as safe and invincible, and the safety of the crew as a "cost" to be squeezed, only to find out lately that nobody was actually at the rudder and that it was in a rather bad condition. Now, the catastrophic event of the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly requires that mankind, as the members of the crew, learns from its mistakes and takes on the responsibility of our world by leading the vessel. We should never forget that a vessel is conceived, built and operated from the awareness that its crew is vulnerable. After all, what is a vessel without its crew? A ghost ship.

Bruno: You propose three possible scenarios that may await us post-COVID-19. It is interesting that you name each of those scenarios after a specific historical event — Restoration, after the Congress of Vienna of 1814-15, the fall of the Roman Empire and, lastly, the Renaissance. Again, you use images, this time historical images. Do you mean history may repeat itself?

Parsi: I do consider the use of images and metaphors to be important in helping us understand the reality we are living, but it is important not to fall into anachronisms, being tempted to link completely different historical contexts. Images and metaphors can be extremely useful, but their danger lies exactly in the risk of being carried over and ultimately lost during the transfer between the two terms put in contact by the image.

Bruno: The first post-coronavirus scenario you propose is the most plausible, at least in the short term. Why did you name it Restoration? In 1815, European kingdoms and empires were trying to put history back to right before the French Revolution of 1789. Do you suggest countries and their executives may be tempted to act as if this pandemic had never happened?

Parsi: Exactly, I mean precisely to return to the "business as usual," as nothing had happened. Globalization will resume its wild ride, however, with an increased number of the poor and the discontented, proposing again a now more than ever precarious and unstable process, with the US and China continuing their geopolitical confrontation for the global leadership, and the European Union keeping its marginal role. In particular in the EU, the domestic institutional settings of the member states will see an increased role of technical bodies and authorities, leaving less and less space to the participation of citizens to the public debate. As with the Congress of Vienna and the Restoration of 1815, this attempt will eventually show its limit to appear as an illusion.

Bruno: The second scenario you propose is the fall of the (Western) Roman Empire. Different to the first scenario, here globalization would slow as the result of the pandemic, with multilateral governance and international institutions becoming obsolete. Do you foresee a comeback of strong and powerful nation-states?

Parsi: If the impact of COVID-19 will be heavy, limiting international trade and the economic interdependence based on the current global value chains, then national-states will see their relevance growing again. The international system will be fragmented into several different areas of economic and political influence, substantially closed to each other. There will be no countries capable of expressing global leadership, with a relative decline of the United States and a proportionate rise of China. The European Union may fall apart, under the blows of nationalist, populist and radical-right parties that successfully mobilize a growing number of citizens.

Bruno: In the third scenario, Renaissance, you introduce an element of hope, betting on the possibility that we can actually learn from our mistakes in order to build a new international system by protecting its most fragile element

— human beings. Do you think something positive may derive from the pandemic?

Parsi: Let's make it clear: The pandemic is a huge, devastating defeat, which caught the world completely unprepared. But as I said, we should learn from our mistakes, as in every crisis there is an element of change and improvement — if we are able to recognize and grasp it. Historically, mankind has been able to rise stronger and more equal after catastrophic events, also in recent times, such as the crisis of 1929 and World War II. This could be a good occasion to build a more fair society by reconciling politics and economics, democracy and the free market. The European Union in particular may see the post-pandemic [period] as a possibility to relaunch the integration project by supporting member states hit more severely by the virus, such as Italy and Spain.

In order to achieve a real renaissance, a change in our behavior is paramount, a change based on the awareness that the fight against the coronavirus was a collective effort. This is the real lesson we got from the pandemic.

Bruno: In light of the current protests in the United States following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police, do you think this may represent a turning point in defining a new US leadership, starting from the next presidential election?

Parsi: I believe the irresponsibility, the insensibility but also the carelessness expressed by [President Donald] Trump's statements do concur in fueling violence. On one hand, this clearly signals that a change of leadership at the White House is necessary. On the other hand, it is also revealing of how far this president can go in order to keep power. He is fueling a war against the American people — the same people he vowed to defend, together with the Constitution. Trump's game is clear: focusing on chaos and on the fear of chaos in order to hide the continuous slaughter provoked by his bad management of COVID-19, fueling the internal divisions of American society to avoid a united common front against his politics. *Divide et impera*.

Bruno: Recently, the Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden tweeted that "When 100,000 Americans died because of his incompetent leadership, this president golfed. When Americans peacefully protested outside the White House, this president tear-gassed them for a photo-op. Donald Trump was elected to serve us all — but he only looks out for himself." The issues of incompetence and narcissism are growingly used to describe Trump's presidency. Do you think there are connections between the pandemic and the protests?

Parsi: Yes, at least two. The first one is the role of unfairness and inequality. The pandemic has hit everybody, but not in the same way. African Americans and Hispanics, and people on low incomes, paid the highest prices to the virus. In the Bronx, the mortality of the pandemic was double that of Manhattan. Similarly, the chances that an African American may become a victim of violent behavior by the police are definitely higher than for a white person.

The second connection has to do with the Trump presidency itself. The unfit management made the consequences of the pandemic worse, just as with the consequences of Floyd's murder. Not only that: The president fanned the flames of the protests to provoke a rally- around-the-flag effect in his electoral base around the fear of violence by the protesters. Trump is trying to make people forget about his responsibility in the disastrous management of the pandemic. What is most striking is the ruthlessness and the cynicism this president is using to jeopardize the US constitutional order to win reelection.

Bruno: In conclusion, it is possible to say that you see both the pandemic and the brutality of the police as affecting the most vulnerable in the US. So, rather curiously, we go back exactly to the title of your latest book, "The Vulnerable."

Parsi: Either in an exceptional event (the pandemic) or a tragic, although common, practice (unprovoked police violence), if you are "expendable" — a black person, a Hispanic, an outcast at any level — your life is worth less than the lives of others. The injustice and the inequality discriminate always and in every case. Not only can't the system to protect them from threats, but the system itself is a threat. What to some sounds as "law and order," for others is "caprice and violence." Paradoxically, the rhetoric of "we will win together against the virus," recalling the unity of the society against the pandemic, was dramatically and suddenly denied by the usual divisions within the country. Disillusionment is a powerful accelerator.

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*__Valerio Alfonso Bruno__ is a senior fellow at the Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR). __Vittorio Emanuele Parsi__ is an international relations professor and the director of the Advanced School of Economics and International Relations (ASERI) at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy.

Why Has Islamophobia Risen in America?

Kourosh Ziabari & Arun Kundnani
July 8, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Arun Kundnani, the author of "The Muslims are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror."

Islamophobia in the US has increased ever since the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Discrimination and hate crimes against American Muslims skyrocketed immediately after the deadliest assault on US soil took place. Despite sporadic efforts by former President Barack Obama to bridge the religious and racial divides, anti-Muslim prejudice was further heightened after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, leading to what the Council on American-Islamic Relations described as a "sharp rise" in a campaign against "innocent Muslims, innocent immigrants and mosques."

Robert McKenzie, a senior fellow at New America, a Washington-based think tank, said in 2018 that "political rhetoric from national leaders has a real and measurable impact." McKenzie led a data visualization project that logged anti-Muslim incidents.

A survey by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding shows that 62% of Muslims in the United States, including 68% of Muslim women, experienced religious discrimination in 2019. The Pew Research Center reported that an overwhelming majority of US adults (82%) agree that Muslims are subject to at least some form of discrimination in America. This includes 56% who believe Muslims are discriminated against "a lot."

In 2018, the last year for which the FBI released official data on hate crimes committed across the US, anti-Muslim offenses accounted for 14.5% of 1,550 cases motivated by religion. Yet the actual number is believed to be much higher as many incidents are often unreported. President Trump's comments and policies regarding Muslims — most notably his executive order in 2017 banning immigration from several Muslim-majority countries — are linked to the spike in Islamophobic attitudes.

Arun Kundnani is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Media, Culture and Communication at New York University. He is the author of the book "The Muslims Are Coming! Islamophobia, Extremism, and the Domestic War on Terror."

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Kundnani about the rise in Islamophobia and President Trump's views toward Muslims.

Kourosh Ziabari: Bretton Tarrant — the alt-right terrorist who killed 51 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 — had described US President Donald Trump "as a symbol of renewed white identity and common purpose" in a manifesto. Is Trump's position on Muslims and his rhetoric on immigrants emboldening white supremacists and racists within the US and beyond?

Arun Kundnani: Most activists in racist, nativist and neo-Nazi movements around the world have seen in President Trump a fellow traveler, if not someone who completely shares their political agenda. His choice of advisers such as Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon confirms for them that he is an ally. His racist policies, such as the Muslim travel ban and his mass separating of children from their migrant parents, are seen as the first steps in the creation of an "ethno-state," in which Jews, Muslims and anyone not considered white will be violently eliminated.

Trump's presidency, along with the election in various European countries of racist political parties, is taken to be a sign that racist nationalism is on the rise. In fact, the rise of the far right in the US and Europe is rooted in the crisis of racial capitalism that has unfolded since the 2008 financial crisis. But Trump's presence in the White House has emboldened organized racists everywhere.

Ziabari: As you said, one of the most controversial decisions President Trump made shortly after taking office was to introduce a travel ban against citizens of several Muslim-majority countries. Was the "Muslim ban" constitutional and reflective of the values that the United States stands for?

Kundnani: Liberals in the United States often assert that policies of racial or religious exclusion are incompatible with American values and the constitution. This ignores the more fraught relationship between American national identity and principles of racial equality and justice. The US Constitution expressed the values of a class of slave-owning settler colonists in the 18th century seeking to overthrow an older regime. It considers the right to bear arms important, for example, because of the need for settler citizens to eliminate indigenous populations from captured territory. Private property is sacrosanct because the American Revolution was carried out by a capitalist class which owned slaves.

Trump's Muslim ban is, from this angle, not an aberration but consistent with the long history of US racism and colonialism. From another angle, there are indeed values of equality and religious freedom expressed in the Constitution. But for them to be valid today, they need to be unstitched from narratives of American exceptionalism and woven together in new ways for the 21st century.

Ziabari: In March 2016, President Trump appeared in an interview on CNN and claimed that "Islam hates us … there's a tremendous hatred there." Do you think what he said is true? Do Muslims hate the United States?

Kundnani: What many Muslims and, for that matter, many others around the world hate is not the United States as such but its imperialism. The Middle East is a region where resistance to the US is especially strongly felt, largely because of America's deep support for Israel. After the Cold War, US foreign policy planners mistakenly interpreted this resistance as signaling Islam's cultural incompatibility with modernity and imagined "radical Islam" as the new threat that was to replace communism.

Trump's comments repeat the Washington foreign policy establishment's tendency to regard resistance to the US as rooted in a clash of cultures, rather than a political desire for freedom. But the Palestinian movement is not ultimately a fight for religious or cultural values; it is a struggle for political liberation from Israel's military occupation.

Ziabari: Many media people and scholars believe Trump built on anti-Muslim sentiment, among other appeals, to please his support

base — mostly white Americans in Southern states — and boost his popularity. Will he intensify his anti-Muslim rhetoric in the run-up to the 2020 elections as a campaign tactic?

Kundnani: In 2016, Trump styled himself as the brave outsider willing to speak truths that no one else in the establishment would do. There were two kinds of "truths." He was willing to defy political correctness and make explicit in his rhetoric about Muslims and Mexicans what had previously only been implicit in counterterrorism and immigration policymaking; and he was willing to attack "globalist" elites who he said had abandoned "ordinary" Americans.

The dilemma for his 2020 reelection campaign is that running as an outsider won't work after being in the White House for three years. He will have to stand on his record. Were it not for the COVID-19 pandemic, his campaign would have focused upon lower taxes and an improving economy. Alongside that, he would have presented himself as a victim of a liberal establishment that tried to use the "deep state" to weaken him and attack the Democrats as now dominated by socialists in league with Muslim extremists.

With the economy devastated, that second part will be more significant. Anti-Muslim rhetoric will be used again, therefore, but in a different way from 2016. It won't be about terrorists crossing into the US through weak borders but about accusing the Democratic Party of pandering to radicals — from Congresswomen Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib, who will be portrayed as anti-Semites and radical Muslims, to the "left-wing mobs" of Black Lives Matter.

Ziabari: Moving away from Trump, why do you think the acceptance of anti-Muslim bigotry in the United States and the broader Western world has become normalized? Are anti-Muslim bigots held to the same standards that other racists, including anti-Semites, are held to?

Kundnani: All empires require violence to sustain themselves, and the US empire is no different in this respect. In the modern era, imperial violence has to be legitimized and rationalized. The main way this happens is through racism. When empires confront resistance, they typically frame it as the expression of an inferior culture that does not appreciate the "benefits" that empire brings. The normalization of anti-Muslim racism in the US is driven by this dynamic; its impetus comes from the need to provide an interpretation of conflicts that are the result of US foreign policy. Since the 1990s, the US public has been repeatedly told that Muslim populations harbor a religio-cultural threat that can only be met through war, torture and the suspension of human rights (anti-Muslim racism at home has been the necessary correlate of the US' imperialism abroad).

But all racisms are, in the end, connected. For example, today's Black Lives Matter activists are monitored by the FBI as constituting a threat of terrorism, building on the language and institutional apparatus that was established after 9/11 to target Muslims. Likewise, the conspiracy theories that anti-Muslim propagandists have circulated over the last 10 years — which hold that Muslims secretly control the US government and the European Union — are structurally similar to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that emerged in Europe a century ago. And their circulation today has helped create the space for anti-Semitic tropes of Jewish manipulation to return again to conservative political rhetoric.

Ziabari: What is the role of mainstream media in perpetuating and spreading fear of Muslims and antipathy toward them? Do you think the corporate media are to blame for the rise of anti-Muslim prejudice in the United States?

Kundnani: The conservative corporate media have mainstreamed the most blatant racism against Muslims, giving credence to every stereotype and fear. To read and watch conservative media is to be presented with a view of Islam as violent, deceptive and hateful. The liberal corporate media is different but has also, in the end, enabled Islamophobia. Take, for

example, an incident in 2019 involving Congresswoman Ilhan Omar. After she gave a speech in Los Angeles encouraging Muslims to be more politically active in asserting their rights, a few words were taken out of context and misrepresented in conservative media such as The New York Post, to give the impression that she did not take 9/11 seriously — an obvious Islamophobic slur. The liberal media condemned the attack on her. But the way it framed its response was to say that conservatives were wrong to characterize Omar as un-American and that her family had, after all, chosen to come to the US as Somali refugees.

What this does is set the terms of Omar's acceptance by liberals: Were she to criticize US foreign policy in Somalia, for example, and — instead of expressing gratitude to the US— highlight America's complicity in forcing her family to flee, she would then be cast as no longer worthy of defense. For liberals, the problem is one of conservative intolerance of a different religious identity held by a fellow American. But that means that victims of racism have to pass a national loyalty test before receiving support. And it erases from view the roots of anti-Muslim racism, not in religious difference, but in US foreign policies — such as drone strikes — that liberals have been eager to defend.

Ziabari: A 2018 report by The Washington Post asserts that the majority of mass shootings are carried out by white males. This confirms the findings of a 2015 research study by the Northeastern University scholar Emma E. Fridel, who revealed that most mass shootings in the US are perpetrated by African American and white males, not immigrants and Muslims. When a Muslim citizen carries out an act of violence, the entire religion is blamed. When a white American kills several people in a shooting spree, the assailant is referred to as a "lone wolf" with a mental illness. Why is it so?

Kundnani: The reason for this obvious divergence is the prejudice that everything Muslims do is driven by Islam, as if it is a monolith that mechanically drives people who believe in it to acts of barbarism. But no religion works like that. We are all shaped by a complex mix of social, cultural and political conditions, and then from those conditions [we] attempt to mold ourselves according to our own personality. Acts of violence are individual decisions, products of culture and laden with political meanings.

It makes little sense to think of cultures in grand terms like "Islam" and the "West" but, if we do, there is evidence that Islam is less prone to violence. Polls of global public opinion suggest that whether one thinks that violence against civilians is legitimate has more to do with political context than religious belief; and such violence is considered more acceptable in the US and Europe than everywhere else in the world. In fact, "Islam is violent" is a false belief that has been used to legitimize US wars which, since 9/11, have caused the deaths of over 800,000 people.

Ziabari: What do you think needs to be done so that the gaps between American Muslims and the general public are bridged and anti-Muslim prejudice is eliminated? Are academics and advocacy organizations doing a good job in tackling Islamophobia?

Kundnani: Overcoming anti-Muslim racism in the US requires that we face up to the devastation that US foreign policy has inflicted in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen and Palestine. We have to look squarely at the human consequences of war, torture and economic destabilization. We must not erase from these episodes in our history the victims themselves, their agency, their voices, their existence. Advocacy organizations and academics have spent too much time thinking of Islamophobia as a matter of individual attitudes and beliefs influenced by fringe publicity campaigns or right-wing politicians. The focus

instead needs to be on the deeper drivers of anti-Muslim racism within the policies of US empire and the racial fractures of neoliberal capitalism.

The demand should not be for better cultural understanding of Islam or a more tolerant attitude toward religious differences. Instead, the argument should be that anti-Muslim racism is the means by which imperialist wars are legitimized and that these wars are not in the interests of working-class Americans. Ultimately, the issue of Islamophobia is inseparable from the question of how resources are distributed in the US: ending anti-Muslim racism means creating a US in which we use our resources to ensure the health, education, and well-being of everyone who lives here rather than to fund a military machine that serves the interests of corporate elites.

Ziabari: What do you make of President Trump's response to the recent killing of an African American man, George Floyd, in Minnesota while in police custody and the ensuing protests against police brutality and racism? Does the president's handling of nationwide protests and his reaction to Floyd's death reveal anything about his broader worldview on the rights of minorities, including Muslims?

Kundnani: Historically, the role of the president in moments of what is euphemistically called "racial tension" is to deploy old clichés of overcoming. His function is to speak somberly of the "difficult" history of "racial animus" before uplifting us with pleas for "reconciliation" and "renewal" of basic values. Such narratives of "moving on" have enabled US white supremacy to survive to the present day by disguising itself as the past. No one will be surprised that Trump has chosen a different approach, painting the Black Lives Matter protests as acts of extremism and hatred.

One could be tempted to say that, in not expressing the usual establishment pieties, Trump is doing anti-racists an unintended favor: undisguised racism is perhaps easier to expose and challenge. But we should not ignore the extent to which Trump's open defense of racist police violence empowers forms of racist oppression across US society, not least in law enforcement itself.

What's more, the danger of Trump's rhetoric is that, in our outrage at his statements, we fall into the trap of narrowing our focus to him alone. When that happens, we forget that the Black Lives Matter movement is about the need for deep-seated change to the whole way we deal with issues of safety and violence in our communities. We should not allow Trump's statements to sidetrack us from pursuing this agenda in every way possible.

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The One-State Reality to the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Kourosh Ziabari & Ian Lustick
July 13, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Ian Lustick, an American political scientist holding the Bess W. Heyman Chair in the Political Science Department of the University of Pennsylvania.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been raging for over seven decades, and the prospects for peace have never seemed more distant than today. The two-state solution, which was once the most widely-accepted remedy for the impasse, has lost traction, and efforts by the United Nations and other

intermediaries to resolve the dispute have got nowhere.

In 2018, a survey by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research and the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research at Tel Aviv University found that only 43% of Palestinians and Israeli Jews support the establishment of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel. This was down from 52% of Palestinians and 47% of Israeli Jews who favored a two-state concept just a year prior.

In October 2019, the UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, Nickolay Mladenov, described the situation in the occupied Palestinian Territories as "a multi-generational tragedy." He said to the Security Council that Israeli settlements — which are illegal under international law — on Palestinian land represent a substantial obstacle to the peace process.

US President Donald Trump, who is seen by some observers as the most pro-Israel president since Harry Truman, has billed himself as Israel's best friend in the White House. Trump has overturned the US position on many aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the dismay of the Palestinian people and leadership. His administration has recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and no longer considers Israeli settlements in the West Bank to be inconsistent with international law.

In January, the Trump administration unveiled its long-awaited peace plan. Dubbed the "deal of the century," the 181-page document was promoted by Washington as the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Palestinian factions have rejected the proposal as overly biased and one-sided in favor of Israel.

Ian Lustick is an American political scientist holding the Bess W. Heyman Chair in the Political Science Department of the University of Pennsylvania. He is an advocate of what he calls a "one-state reality" to solve the conflict. His latest book, published in October 2019, is called "Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality."

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Lustick about the ongoing skirmishes between the Israelis and Palestinians, the declining traction of the two-state solution, the BDS movement and the US support for Israel.
The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Kourosh Ziabari: In your 2013 article in The New York Times titled "Two-State Illusion," you note that Israelis and Palestinians have their own reasons to cling to the two-state ideal. For the Palestinians, you write that it's a matter of ensuring that diplomatic and financial aid they receive keeps coming, and for the Israelis, this notion is a reflection of the views of the Jewish Israeli majority that also shields Israel from international criticism. Are you saying that these reasons are morally unjustified? Why do you call the two-state solution an illusion?

Ian Lustick: I do not argue they are morally unjustified. I am seeking to explain why they persist in the face of the implausibility if not the impossibility of attaining a negotiated two-state solution. I am trying to solve the puzzle of why public agitation for it continues by these groups, one that wants a real two-state solution and one that does not, even though the leaders of each group know that the two-state solution cannot be achieved. The key to the answer is a "Nash Equilibrium" in which both sides, and other actors as well — the US government and the peace process industry — can get what they minimally need by effectively giving up on what they really want.

The mistaken idea that Israelis and Palestinians can actually reach an agreement of a two-state solution through negotiations is an illusion because so many people still actually believe it is attainable when it is not.

Ziabari: As you've explained in your writings, the favorable two-state situation envisioned by Israel is one that ignores Palestinian refugees' "right of return," guarantees that Jerusalem will be the capital of Israel and controlled by

Israel, and fortifies the position of Jewish settlements. On the other side, the Palestinian version of the two-state solution imagines the return of refugees, demands the evacuation of Israeli settlements and claims East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. Do you think the two sides will ever succeed in narrowing these stark differences?

Lustick: No. The elements of the two-state solution that would make it acceptable to Palestinians are those that make it unacceptable to the majority of Israeli Jews who now have firm control of the Israeli government and of the Israeli political arena. But once a one-state reality is acknowledged, then both sides can agree that Jerusalem should be united and accessible to all who live within the state, that refugees within the borders of the state, at least, should have a right to move to and live in any part of the state, and that owners of land and property seized illegally or unjustly anywhere in the state can seek redress, or that discrimination in the right to own and inhabit homes anywhere in the state must be brought to an end.

Ziabari: You are an advocate of a one-state solution to the decades-old Israeli–Palestinian conflict. What are the characteristics of such a country? Do you think Israelis and Palestinians will really agree to live alongside each other under a unified leadership, share resources, abandon their mutual grievances and refuse to engage in religious and political provocation against the other side while there are no geographical borders separating them?

Lustick: I do not advocate a "one-state solution" in the sense that I do not see a clear path from where we are now to that "pretty picture" of the future. I instead seek to analyze a reality — a one-state reality — that is far from pretty, and thereby not a solution. But that reality has dynamics which are not under the control of any one group, and those dynamics can lead to processes of democratization within the one-state reality that could produce a set of problems in the future better than the problems that Jews and Arabs have today between the river and the sea.

The substantive difference I have with advocates of the "one-state solution" is that they imagine Jews and Arabs "negotiating," as two sides, to agree on a new "one-state" arrangement. I do not share that view as even a possibility. But within the one-state reality, different groups of Jews and Arabs can find different reasons to cooperate or oppose one another, leading to new and productive political processes and trends of democratization. That is how, for example, the United States was transformed from a white-ruled country with masses of freed slaves who exercised no political rights whatsoever into a multiracial democracy. Abraham Lincoln never imagined this as a "one-state solution" — it was the unintended consequence of the union's annexation of the South, with its masses of black, non-citizen inhabitants, after the Civil War.

Ziabari: Several UN Security Council resolutions have been issued that call upon Israel to refrain from resorting to violence against Palestinian citizens, safeguard the welfare and security of people living under occupation, halt its settlement constructions and withdraw from the lands it occupied during the 1967 war. Some of the most important ones are Resolution 237, Resolution 242 and Resolution 446. There are also resolutions deploring Israel's efforts to alter the status of Jerusalem. However, Israel has ignored these formal expressions of the UN and seems to face no consequences. How has Israel been able to disregard these resolutions without paying a price?

Lustick: The short answer to this is that the Israel lobby has enforced extreme positions on US administrations so that the United States has provided the economic, military, political and diplomatic support necessary for Israel to withstand such international pressures. The reasons for the Israel lobby's success are detailed in my book and can be traced, ultimately, to the hard work and dedication of lobby activists, the

misconceived passion of American Jews and evangelicals to "protect" Israel, and the fundamental character of American politics which gives a single-issue movement in foreign policy enormous leverage over presidents and over members of Congress.

Ziabari: You've worked with the State Department. How prudent and constructive is the current US administration's policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? What are the implications of decisions such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, cutting off funding to UNRWA and closing down the PLO office in Washington, DC? Will the "deal of the century" resolve the Middle East deadlock?

Lustick: US policy has, for decades, been unable to realize its foreign policy interests in this domain for reasons I explained earlier. Now that the opportunity to do so via a two-state solution has been lost, the policies of the Trump administration hardly matter, except that by not emphasizing America's emphasis on democracy and equality, it postpones the time when Israelis and Palestinians will begin the kinds of internal struggles over democracy and equal rights that hold promise of improving the one-state reality.

Ziabari: Is the Trump administration working to silence criticism of Israel by painting narratives that are unequivocal in censuring Israel's policies as anti-Semitic? Do you see any difference between Trump's efforts in protecting Israel against international criticism with those of his predecessors?

Lustick: Yes. The Trump administration has sided in an unprecedentedly explicit way with the extreme wing of the Israel lobby and with extreme and intolerant right-wing forces in Israel.

Ziabari: The proponents of the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement, who believe that denying Israel economic opportunities and investment will serve to change its policies regarding the Palestinian people, are widely smeared as anti-Semites. Is the BDS movement anti-Semitic?

Lustick: There may be some anti-Semites among BDS supporters, but the movement itself is no more anti-Semitic than the Jewish campaign to boycott France during the Dreyfus trial was "anti-French people." In fact, as it becomes clearer to everyone that successful negotiations toward a two-state solution will not occur, the significance of the BDS movement will grow rapidly.

It is an effective way to express, non-violently, an approach to the conflict that emphasizes increasing justice and quality of life for all those living between the river and the sea. Its focus is not on the particular institutional architecture of an outcome, but on the extent to which values of equality, democracy and non-exclusivist rights to self-determination for Jews and Arabs can be realized. Nor do BDS supporters need to agree on which forms of discrimination, at which level, they focus on. Some may target sanctions against every Israeli institution, but many will target the most blatant forms of discrimination, such as radically different rights and protections accorded to Arabs vs. Jews in the West Bank, in the Jerusalem municipality or in southwest Israel, including the Gaza Strip.

Ziabari: The settlement of disputes between Palestinians and Israelis requires a reliable and effective mediator, one in which both parties have trust. Which government or international organization is most qualified to fulfill this role?

Lustick: The time for mediation or negotiation between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs, as two groups, has effectively passed. That is no longer what is crucial. What is crucial are political processes within each group and across them. African Americans became empowered over generations, not because an outside mediator helped arrange an agreement between whites and blacks, but because gradually

self-interested whites saw opportunities in the emancipation of and alliances with blacks.

This approach does imagine a long-time frame, but when states with democratic elements are confronted with masses of formerly excluded and despised populations, that is the kind of time it takes to achieve integration and democratization. In addition to the American case vis-à-vis blacks, consider how long it took to integrate Irish Catholics into British politics after Ireland was annexed in 1801, or how long it took South Africa to integrate and democratize its long excluded and oppressed black majority.

Ziabari: And a final question: Will the unveiling of President Trump's "deal of the century" change anything for the reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? Some Middle East observers say it is just a green light for Israel to go ahead with annexing more Palestinian territory. Others believe Israel doesn't need such an endorsement and has been annexing Palestinian lands anyway. What do you think about the deal and how it will transform the demographics and political calculus of the region?

Lustick: The Trump plan is a hoax. In the pages it devotes to its own justification appear all the Israeli government's favorite propaganda lines. The "negotiations" that produced it were between the most ultranationalist and fundamentalist government in Israel's history and a group of "Israel firsters" in the White House who are just as extreme, though substantially more ignorant. Advanced originally as a plan to give Palestinians a higher standard of living instead of a real state, it actually proposes no money for Palestinians until they become Finland. Only after that will Israel be empowered, if it wishes, to grant them not a state, but something Israel is willing for Palestinians to call a state but existing within the state of Israel.

If realized as written, the plan would be an archipelago of sealed Palestinian ghettos. By awarding Israel prerogatives to patrol, supervise, intervene and regulate all movement to and from those ghettos, the plan affirms the one-state reality while offering Israel at least temporary protection against having to admit and defend apartheid by describing itself as a two-state solution. This is Palestine as Transkei or Bophuthatswana. As a plan, it has no chance of being implemented. Its real function is to give temporary cover to the deepening of silent apartheid.

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Kashmir's History and Future Meet in Literature

Vikram Zutshi & Rakesh Kaul
September 24, 2020

In this guest edition of The Interview, Vikram Zutshi talks to author Rakesh Kaul.

For as long as one can remember, the stunningly beautiful valley of Kashmir has been a tinder box of clashing ideologies and religious beliefs. In the not too distant past, it was known as the land of Rishis, holy seers who combined the profound philosophies of Hinduism, Buddhism and Sufism to create a uniquely syncretic spiritual tradition.

Today, it is the site of a bitter territorial dispute between India and Pakistan, a conflict that has resulted in scores of casualties and the forced expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Pandits, as Kashmir's Hindus are commonly referred to.

Author Rakesh K. Kaul's first novel, "The Last Queen of Kashmir" (Harper Collins India, 2015), tries to shed light on the roots of this conflict by going back in time to explore the

dramatic life of Kota Rani, the last ruler of the Hindu Lohara dynasty in Kashmir. Kota ruled as monarch until 1339, when she was deposed by Shah Mir, who became the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir.

His most recent work, "Dawn: The Warrior Princess of Kashmir" (Penguin India, 2019), is an unexpected foray into the far distant future. Set in 3000 AD, the book combines artificial intelligence, genetics and quantum theory with the ancient wisdom of Kashmir's traditional Niti stories, which inspire Dawn to overcome seemingly impossible odds to save humanity from impending destruction.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Vikram Zutshi talks to Rakesh Kaul about the inspiration behind his two novels, childhood memories of his strife-torn homeland and how his grandfather, the famed Kashmiri mystic Pandit Gopi Krishna, guides the trajectory of his life and work.

Vikram Zutshi: You have written what is possibly the first science fiction novel set in Kashmir. What inspired you to choose the genre of science fiction to tell this story and how does it adapt itself to Kashmiri history and culture?

Rakesh Kaul: I wish I could claim the honor of being a pioneer with "Dawn: The Warrior Princess of Kashmir." But much as I admire them, I have many literary ancestors who are the equals of Joseph Campbell, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. I am a mere upholder of a literary tradition that is over 2,000 years old. Western science fiction imagines possibilities like time travel, space exploration, parallel universes, extraterrestrial life. There are robots who are more advanced in their intelligence than humans.

But all these themes were part of the stories in Kashmir, plus more. "Dawn" has in it an ancient story about a robot city with a remarkable safety override. The Puranic story of Indra's net holds within it the concept of recursive universes. The pinnacle of these stories is of course the collection of stories in the Yoga Vasistha.

The word "sahitya," which means "literature," was coined by Kuntaka in Kashmir. Within sahitya, there was a genre which dealt with all the above-mentioned themes but went beyond. One could say that if science fiction's domain was all the possibilities within the bounded universe, then in Kashmir specifically — and India generally — the stories explored all the possibilities within the unbounded inner-verse.

So, if you like "1984" or "Brave New World," which are sci fi classics, then "Dawn" is going to take you to a whole new level. Even more than Joseph Campbell, the stories that I have brought are not mere myths or fantasies; they reveal a cognitive organ and knowledge acquisition capability which unlocks the deterministic laws of nature in a manner that science is just beginning to grapple with.

Zutshi: What does the story arc of the central character, Dawn, tell us about the state of the world today?

Kaul: All science fiction stories in the West and their Indic counterparts, the Niti stories, deal with the existential question of the arc of one's way of life. The mind is seduced by utopia and yet ends up in dystopia. One ignores at one's peril the addictive narrative wars happening today that are shaped and served by technology. The world, whether global or local, is heading toward a duality of monopolistic cults that fiercely demand total obeisance. Non-conformity results in a flameout at the hands of troll armies.

Artificial intelligence is the omniscient eye watching over us. What we cannot ignore is that computer power is doubling every 20 months, data every six months, and the AI brain every three months. The champions of AI are promising that we will have sentience in 30 years. That is a close encounter of the third kind. That is within the lifespan of the readers. The danger to you as an individual has never been greater. One cannot take lightly the rising depression and suicide graphs coupled with desperate drug usage. Hence, the vital necessity for Dawn.

Dawn is the last girl left standing on earth in 3000 AD. She is facing an army of weaponized AIs and mind-controlled automatons; they rule over a deadly world where men have lost their souls and women have been slain — all heading to Sarvanash, the Great Apocalypse. This is a story of a close encounter of the seventh kind. How does Dawn arm herself? Can she win? Great Niti stories remind us that if the mind is a frenemy, then the need to nurture what is beyond the mind that one can turn to and trust is paramount. The Dawn lifehack that is presented is time-tested but oh so amazingly simple, yet powerful.

Zutshi: Is the characterization of the main protagonist based on a real-life person?

Kaul: "Dawn" in Sanskrit is "usha." Usha is the most important goddess in the Rig Veda, the oldest extant text in the world. By contrast, none of the goddesses that we think about today are even mentioned there. Dawn is the harbinger of the rebirth of life each morn. She is the only Indian goddess who has spread around the world. Usha's cognates are Eos in Greek, Aurora in Roman and Eostre in Anglo-Saxon [mythology], which is the root of the word Easter —the festival of resurrection. Interestingly, Usha is also the name of the sanctuary city where the Sanhedrin, [Israel's] rabbinical court, fled to in the 2nd century. She is also the goddess of order, the driver away of chaos and darkness. She is dawn, she is hope, she is the wonder leading to resurrection.

Humans recognized her wonder a long time ago. They imagined Dawn born at the birth of the universe, whose one-pointed mission is to make darkness retreat and drive ahead fearlessly.

But Dawn is also a tribute to the warrior princesses of Kashmir, a land which was celebrated for its women in practice and not just poetry. They were not merely martial warriors, nor just holy warriors or ninja warriors, but much more. The Kashmiris enshrined the dawn mantra within themselves, men and women, and repeat it to this day. In my novels, the protagonists repeatedly draw upon it.

Zutshi: You have spoken about Niti, the traditional storytelling technique of Kashmir. Please elaborate on Niti for the lay reader and how it informed your work.

Kaul: "Niti" means "the wise conduct of life." The first collection of Niti stories from Kashmir is the 2,000-year-old celebrated Panchatantra, which is the most translated collection of stories from India. Kashmiri stories have found their way into the Aesop and Grimm fairy tales, Chaucer and Fontaine.

The Kashmiris maintained that one is born with only one birthright, namely the freedom to achieve what is one's life quest. So, the existential question is, What is the "way of life" by which one can maximize one's human potential? The Kashmiris defined life's end goal in heroic terms as unbounded fulfillment while alive, not limited by the physical and encompassing the metaphysical. But how does a mere Niti story enable you to achieve fulfillment and consciousness? Niti's cultural promise is that it enables one to face any threat, any challenge in reaching one's goal as one travels through time and space.

How does Niti work? Let us start with the Western perspective first. Descartes famously said that wonder was the first passion of the soul. Kashmir spent a thousand years studying this phenomenon and helps us penetrate deeper here. When we have an experience that is a total surprise, we go WOW — an acronym for "wonder of wonder." When we go wow, it is expressing, How can this be? We not only accept the limited capacity of our senses and the mind, but we also have a profound moment of self-recognition that there is an unlimited capacity in us to experience what lies beyond our knowledge.

The wormhole between the two brings the relish of the state of wonder which in India was described as "adbhuta rasa" in the text "Natyashastra," written by another Kashmiri illuminati, "adbhuta" meaning "wonder" and

"rasa" meaning "juice." So, in the wow moment you momentarily taste the wonder juice. All Niti stories are written in the adbhuta rasa literary style, and so is Dawn.

Zutshi: Your first novel, "The Last Queen of Kashmir," inspired by the story of Kota Rani, was a hit with Kashmiris in India and the diaspora. What would you like readers to take away from the book and how is it relevant in our times?

Kaul: Yes, much to my surprise the novel received critical acclaim and sold out! The second edition will be coming out worldwide in a month or so, with another beautiful cover of Kota Rani! "The Last Queen of Kashmir" is a historical epic about a great queen from India who informs and inspires. It engages audiences while serving as a cautionary tale for today. It was a precursor of what is now being called fail-lit. Much like Icarus, Kashmir's humanist civilization of oneness and inclusivity flew too close to the Sun.

The story provides lessons on the importance of protecting, preserving and perpetuating our social freedoms in a unified society from being divided by religious and cultural conflict. Kota Rani's story shows that we should look for leaders who protect freedom and defeat the pied pipers within who threaten us with tyranny in the guise of offering utopia.

Yet, "The Last Queen of Kashmir" is eventually a resurrection story to show us how the light of knowledge and the power of freedom can conquer all enemies. Kota was described as always captivating, never captive. It is a highly recommended read for all women because its notion of femininity and feminine power may surprise them. Kota Rani is memory and Dawn is imagination. Both are reflections of the same double reflexive power. Memory is what makes who you are, and imagination is what makes who you can be.

Zutshi: As a Kashmiri Hindu who moved to the United States fairly early in life, what are your earliest memories of your ancestral homeland? What do you hope to see in Kashmir's future?

Kaul: My earliest memories are of the journey that we would take to my homeland from Delhi, where my parents had migrated to after the Kabali raids in October 1947. I remember my mother dropping a coin into the raging river Jhelum and praying for a safe journey as the bus would slowly creak across the hanging bridge in the hill town of Ramban.

Once there was portage across the old Banihal tunnel, where a section had caved in, only small, open jeeps could ferry us with our bags from our buses across to the waiting buses on the other side. The old tunnel was dark with a few small lamps that only accentuated the shadows. There were sections which were deliberately left bare in the older tunnel so that the massive water flow inside the mountain could rush out. They did not have the technology in those early days to divert the water. The sound of the rushing water still resonates inside me.

Kashmir was a place of sensory overload. I would sip the nectar endlessly from the honeysuckles, pluck the cherries growing in our garden. My cousin would rent a boat, and much like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn we would paddle through the water canals in our neighborhood raiding the mulberry trees growing by the banks of the river. We would wake up early in the morning and go for a hike to Hari Parvat, walking through the Shia neighborhoods with the graveyards. Once we saw a crowd of [Shia] self-flagellate as part of their religious observances, and we hid until they passed by. There would be other mob gatherings, but we were culturally trained to avoid them.

Once a year, we would go to my grandfather's retreat overlooking the Nishat. It was a huge apple orchard. Evening time we would scurry back to the cabin because then the bears would come from the other side of the hill. Night was their foraging time.

Nothing compared, though, to the experiences when the family would rent a houseboat,

technically a doonga. We would go to the shrine of Khir Bhavani for a week. The boat would move slowly, and there would be endless tea poured from the samovar accompanied by the local breads. Family life seemed to have kith and kin as an integral part. There was a feeling of intimate connectivity. At night, all the cousins would gather. We would spread the mattresses on the bottom of the boat and share the blankets. Then it was storytime. The girls would cry that we were scaring them when the boys would share the monster stories. But they would not leave the group because they did not want to miss out. I have brought some of these Kashmiri monsters and their stories into "Dawn."

But, ultimately, Kashmir was about the mystic experience. I would sit in the inner sanctorum of our small temple at the end of the bridge on our little canal. There was barely space for a few. I would watch the water drops drip endlessly on the lingam. The small trident would be by the side. I would look at the paintings on the wall, each one a story and wonder about it all. The best, of course, would be the nighttime aarti at Khir Bhavani. It seemed that all of humanity was there with a lit lamp in their hands. The faces of the devout women and girls would be luminous, the moonlight would give them a sheen. There was beauty, love and innocence in the air.

As a Kashmiri, I would want the lakir ka fakir (blind ideologues) to disappear and the artist to reign supreme. Translation: Those who police others either morally or ideologically or religiously or by force of arms should go bye-bye. The rest will follow naturally, and the valley will emerge from its long, deep darkness.

Zutshi: You are the grandson of famed Kashmiri mystic, Pandit Gopi Krishna. In what way have his work and teachings informed and influenced the trajectory of your life?

Kaul: The Pandit was the last rishi of Kashmir, a lineage that goes back to the formation of the valley by Rishi Kashyapa. Deepak Chopra said of him, "Pandit Gopi Krishna was a pioneer in the land of spirituality. His insights into the quantum nature of the body predate the scientific discoveries of today. I salute this great sage and scientist of the twentieth century." Dr. Karan Singh, the crown prince of Kashmir who gave the eulogy at his funeral said, "In the 19th century, India gave the world Ramakrishna; in the 20th century it has given the world Gopi Krishna."

I suppose he shaped me even before I was born. He made the decision that he was going to marry my mother without giving any dowry to break that pernicious social custom. His father-in-law begged him, [saying] that they had bought a priceless wedding sari the day that my mother was born. But to no avail. My mother was married in a simple cotton sari. My inception was in simplicity.

He was my first guru, and he continues to guide me. I learned from him the critical importance of being a family man, of community service, especially toward widows and destitute women, of being a fearless sastra warrior, of words being bridges, about poetry and the arts and, best of all, about the worlds beyond. I treasure his letters. I can never forget the talk that he gave at the United Nations where 600 Native American elders attended. It was a prophecy come true for them where it was stated that a wise man from the East would come and give them wisdom in a glasshouse.

Would I have dared to embark on a 12-year journey to bring the story of a hidden Kota Rani without the inspiration of what it took him to bring his story to the world? No. Especially when writing "Dawn," his work was invaluable in steering me in describing the close encounter of the seventh kind. What is the biotechnology of the evolutionary force within us? And then in the epilogue for "Dawn," it is all him because only he has traveled there. Even now as I write this, his beaming face smiles at me. I smile back.

***Vikram Zutshi** is a cultural critic, author and filmmaker. **Rakesh Kaul** is a New Jersey-based

business leader and the author of two bestselling books.

What a Serial Traveler Thinks of Iran

Kourosh Ziabari & Kamila Napora
September 30, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Polish travel writer Kamila Napora.

Iran's unpopular quest for nuclear energy has dominated news headlines for decades. This has left little room for reporting on less-discussed topics about the country. One of these is tourism.

At a time of a pandemic, Iran continues to face grueling international sanctions and domestic divisions. But it is an uncontested fact that the country has a long revered civilization, and getting to know the nation with all its intricacies and complexities is a challenging task. Universities around the world offer Iranian studies courses so students can learn about Iran and its history. In recent years, growing demand to explore Iran has led to more travelers visiting the country, which is not a popular tourist destination.

Today, much of what the global public knows about Iran comes through the prism of the media. Most of this reporting is negative and focuses on political crises. Many people may not know that Persians — long before the advent of Islam — practiced the world's first monotheistic religion. It's even unknown to many that Iran is home to 24 UNESCO World Heritage Sites and that there's literally a cultural, historical or natural attraction in every corner of the country worthy of visiting.

Kamila Napora is a Polish travel writer and traveler whose adventurism has taken her to more than 70 countries worldwide. She is passionate about getting to know other cultures, meeting people from different backgrounds and learning about new places. In 2015, Napora traveled to Iran alone. She documented her experiences of traveling in the country in detail on her blog and provided recommendations for those who are tinkering with the idea of visiting Iran.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Napora about her experience in Iran, her observations of Iranian society and her views on the portrayal of the country in the media.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. This interview took place before the outbreak of COVID-19.

Kourosh Ziabari: Where did the idea of traveling to Iran come from? Given the international isolation that Iran suffers from, it's not a very popular destination for many globetrotters and, at best, it received some 8 million tourists in 2018, which is still a low number compared to regional countries like Turkey and the UAE. What did you know about Iran before going there, and what motivated you to choose the country as one of your stops?

Kamila Napora: I remember reading about Iran and seeing pictures from there as a kid, and those images were so beautiful that they stayed with me this whole time and eventually made me want to visit Iran really badly. In the meantime, some of my friends have traveled there and shared some beautiful stories not only about the amazing places but especially hospitable people. These stories sold me on Iran and, shortly after, I booked my flights. Unfortunately, due to work, I had to cancel my initial trip, but my desire to visit Iran was so strong I ended up traveling there a few months later.

But indeed, before my trip in 2015, there was not much about Iran in the media or online, and most of the news stories were about politics. It was not easy to find many good travel resources about visiting Iran. I feel it has improved a lot since then.

Ziabari: What were the first reactions when you first told your family and friends that you were planning to visit Iran? Were they surprised or scared that you had made such a decision?

Napora: I've been traveling to less-known places for a while, so people around me weren't really surprised I chose Iran as my next destination. I got a lot of positive reactions, although there were some concerns that came mostly from the lack of information about traveling in the country.

Back in World War II times, Iran had helped Polish refugees a lot and some people still remember it here [in Poland]. I think that helped a bit too in the way people perceive Iran in Poland. Before my trip, the situation in the Middle East and the refugee crisis in Europe wasn't so serious yet, so I didn't [receive] any concerns based on that — unlike my trip to Lebanon a year later. I think I went to Iran at the right time, when there were still not so many tensions. I'm afraid right now, the reaction of my family and friends would be totally different, but this would come only from the unfamiliarity of the region and the bad press Iran gets.

Ziabari: There is a strong stereotype that Iran is an unsafe place, especially for an independent, solo female traveler. Is the cliché close to reality? How was your personal feeling while traveling across the country?

Napora: To be honest, Iran was one of the most difficult countries to travel around as a solo female traveler. This concept wasn't very well known back then; in the 10 days I spent in Iran, I didn't meet any other woman traveling alone. I had to do a lot of explaining that I was traveling on my own and that's fine, I chose it to be that way.

But Iran was the only country where I had to deal with men trying to touch me, getting too close and asking for sex. This all happened usually in the middle of the day, in the middle of popular cities. On one hand, [being in a city meant] I didn't feel too afraid as there were people around but, on the other, it made me feel uncomfortable and, eventually, I just avoided going outside after dark.

While I hated all these situations, I think I know where they were coming from. Just like people outside of Iran have some stereotypes about Persian people — who are often confused with Arabs — local people might have their own stereotypes about Western women traveling alone.

I would say that 95% of my time in Iran was incredible, but that uneasy 5% made me think twice before recommending Iran as a destination for inexperienced female solo travelers.

Ziabari: In a blog post about your trip to Iran, you wrote that many people confuse Iran and Iraq, believing that it's a war-torn country and under the rule of ISIS. Where do you think this confusion and misunderstanding originates from?

Napora: The lack of knowledge about the world. But, at the same time, I don't expect people to know about every single territory in the world and what's happening there. I expect maybe 5% of the people to be really interested in current affairs and geography. So, even if these comments about Iran and Iraq made me roll my eyes about that, I quickly remembered that if I'm interested in the region, it doesn't mean everyone has to be.

I also come from a country that people, especially from outside of Europe, confuse with other destinations or have a completely false image of. Over the years, I just learned not to take these opinions too personally. And I think in the case of Iran, it wasn't the realistic image of the country, just the lack of knowledge about the Middle East and what was happening there. After all, these two names [Iran and Iraq] are similar.

Ziabari: There is often worrying news about Iran in the media, which is mostly the result of the country's dismal foreign relations and regional policies. However, those who visit Iran assert that the reality of Iranian people

and the culture of Iran are totally detached from its politics. Did you also come to this understanding after concluding your trip?

Napora: Definitely! In every country, we should separate politics and people, as politicians don't always represent their nation fully. It's very accurate in Iran, too. The majority of people I met in Iran were warm, hospitable, welcoming and curious, and there was not a single moment when I felt they are not fine with tourists visiting their country. Quite the opposite, actually.

Ziabari: You wrote in one of your travel blogs about Iran that you had countless encounters with people on the streets, restaurants and public places who approached you to offer help or ask where you came from and what you thought of Iran. Why do you think this experience happened so frequently? Did it ever make you feel uncomfortable?

Napora: No, I was very happy to talk to local people as that's what makes traveling so special too. Since there are still not too many independent travelers visiting Iran, those who venture there are somehow an attraction. I think locals were just curious [about] how I like their country and wanted to make me feel welcome there. All these friendly encounters were one of the reasons why I enjoyed my trip to Iran so much.

Ziabari: As you noted, Iranian people are known for their hospitality and friendliness. Tell us more about your experiences with Iranian people and the treatment you received in different cities. Have you had similar experiences in other countries?

Napora: I had a similar experience in other countries too, like New Zealand or Georgia, but Iran is among the top places I've met the most hospitable people. Except for the few uncomfortable situations I encountered as a solo female traveler, everyone was friendly and welcoming. I was invited to people's houses for dinner, I was invited to join them in restaurants, and locals bought me Iranian dishes so I could try them out. It was one of the experiences I will never forget.

Ziabari: What's the most attractive thing about Iran that you observed and experienced during your trip?

Napora: Even if I experienced similar hospitality in other places, I think the incredible hospitality of Iranian people is one of the best things about the country and it can make every traveler feel special. I felt all these friendly encounters were genuine. Also, Persian culture and history are very interesting to learn about and should be more promoted.

Ziabari: Iran is the 17th largest country in the world in terms of territory. It has a population of more than 80 million people, the majority of whom are youths. It boasts 24 UNESCO World Heritage Sites and a history dating back some 7,000 years. Why doesn't Iran receive many international visitors? What should the country do in order to become a popular tourist destination?

Napora: Unfortunately, the bad press Iran receives affects its tourism. The visa procedure isn't also the easiest and might make some people doubt if it's worth going through the hassle. With so many interesting places in the world, Iran doesn't get enough attention as it is not very present in the media, including travel media, and people simply don't know how beautiful and worth a visit the country is.

There is a lack of proper promotion of tourism in Iran, and all we learn is from other travelers who have visited the country. Opening up for travelers and making traveling to Iran easier should be a priority. A lot has changed for the better in the years since my visit, but there are still many things that can be done to attract tourists.

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*__Kamila Napora__ is a Polish solo traveler and travel writer. __Kourosh Ziabari__ is an award-winning Iranian journalist.

Governments Must Recognize the Importance of the Youth

Kourosh Ziabari & Kristeena Monteith
October 7, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Kristeena Monteith, a 2018 UN Young Leader for the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2015, world leaders attending the United Nations General Assembly agreed to 17 goals for a better world. Known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the aim is to meet these objectives by the year 2030 in a bid to end poverty, achieve gender equality, ensure access to quality education, promote economic growth and do much more.

Today, there are 1.2 billion people aged 15 to 24 years, making up 16% of the world population. So, to achieve the SDGs, countries around the world probably need the support of young people. The youth can build on their creativity, dynamism and talents to make the world a better place to live and to tackle the challenges faced by the international community.

Young people would benefit from the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as the SDGs are officially known as. However, they are also active contributors in the development of the goals. The engagement of young people in sustainable development efforts is pivotal to achieving inclusive and stable societies.

In September 2016, the Office of the UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth introduced the first class of the Young Leaders for the Sustainable Development Goals. Their mission is to advocate for the UN SDGs, promote creative ways of engaging youth in fulfilling the goals and working with different UN departments toward accomplishing the 2030 Agenda.

Kristeena Monteith, a young Jamaican, was one of the UN's Young Leaders of the Sustainable Development Goals for 2018. She is also the creative producer of the Talk Up Radio show run by young people and broadcast nationally in Jamaica.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Monteith about the role of young people in the realization of the SDGs, the challenges ahead of democratic institutions and the media portrayal of youths.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. This interview took place in 2019 at the 3rd International Youth Forum on Creativity and Heritage along the Silk Roads in Changsha, China.

Kourosh Ziabari: What skills and abilities do you think young people need in order to be able to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals?

Kristeena Monteith: We need to develop a sort of social awareness of the issues affecting the world. I feel like sometimes we are, even in our own societies, unaware of what is affecting the people, but then on a global level, we're even less aware of the different issues.

So, first of all, develop an appreciation for the fact that people deserve dignity, people deserve a level of quality of life right across the board — regardless of whether they are or they're not like you — and then from there, you can start to really invest in understanding what exactly these people need. So, one thing that the Sustainable Development Goals give you is a framework within which to understand what quality of life could mean to people right across the board — whether it's access to health services, access to quality education, or whether it's on a bigger policy level being able to support themselves and their families and having financial stability in their countries.

All of these things matter because we're trying to build a world where people feel comfortable, [and] feel like they can live to their best ability. So, once you pass the cultural understanding,

then you need to be able to leverage your own skills, whether that is your writing or your talent as a business person. It's about turning the things that interest you and the things that you are innately passionate about into putting them at the service of the world on a larger scale.

So, whatever skills it is, it doesn't matter what exactly your skills are. It's about framing a way to turn that into helping to build a more equal society and a world where everybody has the potential to live fully.

Ziabari: What organizations or entities do you think are responsible for giving young people these skills and capabilities in order to be able to work for the SDGs?

Monteith: That's actually a very important question because you [need] to have support for developing this sort of mindset at every single level. So, every major institution in a young person's life — whether it's their family, school, church or religious institution — as you go along each and every one of these institutions, must have a sort of mindset of what we're doing. [That is] building a better, more equal world for everyone. And so each and every one of them will put their power into different people from the standpoint of trying to embrace them and trying to help them to understand what skills they need to develop to contribute.

So, if it's a multi-sectoral, multi-angle interest in creating that sort of sustainable future, then that's where you'll get the sustainability from because all of us are working towards a joint goal. So, at every single level, every stakeholder, every business, every church, every mosque, every synagogue, each and every one of us has to achieve if not all of the goals, [then] at least one you feel passionately about. Understanding how they interrelate with the other ones is all people really need to support young people along that journey.

Ziabari: Do you think that governments, especially in developing countries, are properly listening to young people and addressing their concerns on employment, education, social justice, health and wellbeing, equality and other similar concerns?

Monteith: I think there are some governments that are trying. I know for a fact that the government of Jamaica is trying. They're trying to listen, they're trying to balance this really politically diverse and complicated world that we live in and the region that we are in — with the global superpower, the USA — and the fact that we need money from China to build and to improve infrastructure. So, there's a lot of tension going on.

Then, you have to balance that with being a sovereign nation, having to put your citizens just at the forefront of what you do. And so, you have very complex geopolitical issues that are playing out, and within that, you have a growing world population of young people who don't necessarily know how they fit in the process of how much our issues should be prioritized — how much the things that we want and we need in order to live fully and to participate should be prioritized.

And I think a lot of times, governments don't recognize the power of the youth voice. If you're building sustainability, the people who are going to be here [the] longest are the youth. So, you have to find ways to incorporate them into what you're doing and to also facilitate them in developing a voice that, first of all, they can support you and your agenda. Because if you want sustainability, if you want longevity, if you want to produce policy that outlasts your administration, you have to invest in young people. That's the only way to do that.

Ziabari: Right, that's interesting. You are a [2018] young leader for the Sustainable Development Goals and have worked closely with different international organizations. Do you think the United Nations specifically as well as other international bodies are doing enough to make sure that the voices of the young people are heard? Can you give us examples?

Monteith: Well, I think with the UN at the moment, from what I'm seeing from my perspective, there's a lot of capacity-building happening. So, they're creating pathways for meaningful interaction. You have the SDG Young Leaders, you have Generation Unlimited, and they're creating these pathways where empowered young people who are creative and passionate can have that sort of platform from which they can launch projects and they can call upon other young people in their societies.

But on the other hand, I feel like they have a very massive platform, and there are some ways in which it could be utilized even to a greater extent, whether it's beyond just the SDGs or the UN youth strategy. I think we need to send a greater message to governments [and] to businesses of the power of the youth voice.

And we have a youth envoy, Jayathma Wickramanayake, whose platform is very important, She is in direct touch with the UN secretary-general, and I know she uses her platform very well. But I would love to see more than one UN youth envoy. I mean, she has a very much a global perspective [and] she has a whole team behind her informing her, but this is still one young person out of the population.

Then you look at the head of the UN and the heads of the UN [agencies]. They are always, without fail, very old people, and right across the board it's always the case. And I know with age comes experience and they've built long careers of long service and very good service, but I feel like as we go along the lines, we have to be pulling young people up with us and helping them to develop capacity.

So, you need to see more visibility of young people at the decision-making levels at the top of some of these UN boards. I think it would send a greater message if we saw more young people there.

Ziabari: Please tell us more about your work on Talk Up Radio. I know you offer opportunities to young people to have conversations with governments, leaders and authorities and ask them questions. How have been the reactions on both sides? Have these conversations generated concrete results, including changes in government policies?

Monteith: What we're trying to do is to bring government leaders and young people together in more tangible ways, beyond just voting. We need to create more avenues so young people can make their voice heard and also to access accurate, youth-friendly political information. Because as [I said] throughout the [2019] International Youth Forum on Creativity and Heritage along the Silk Roads in China, a lot of the times, communication that [comes] from the government is hugely in legal and political speak, and we don't speak like that and don't understand that language.

So, we've been trying to bridge that sort of gap, but also, we've been trying to get politicians to use social media more often to be more accessible on a one-to-one basis. So, even on Talk Up Radio, when we bring the ministers of government into the studio to talk to young people, it's not just the four or five young people in the room. Usually, for the two weeks leading up to that event, we'll be putting up calls on social media for young people to send in questions via WhatsApp, via Facebook, etc. So that we have a body of questions that have come from all over the island, and then we pose those questions in the room to the minister.

Change at the political level is often a very long process. It's never just, OK, this is a very good solution and let's get it into parliament right now. Oftentimes, it has to be vetted and investigated and there needs to be some academic backing to it. But what we've seen is that, especially in the case of one minister in particular — i.e., the minister of health in Jamaica — he has changed his language in some sense in how he approaches issues. So since we spoke to him about issues like period poverty, we've seen period poverty enter the political landscape as a term.

And then you've heard from business leaders and people in society saying that they're going to

develop solutions to this — even from across the other parliamentary body, the PNP [People's National Party], that's the other party. They've actually different ministers and different opposition leaders that have come up with ideas as well. So, it's that kind of change that we're noticing where once an idea gets to the mainstream, then more people start to engage with it.

And I feel even that is a level of success. Obviously, we would love to see more tangible results, but we have to admit that political change is a very long process. And we're hoping that as we go along and a new budget is stabled and new discussions are being held, these things would also come up and from this forum [in 2019]. I'm hoping to go back and have a conversation of that kind with the minister of culture, trying to get her into the studio to actually talk to young people about issues that were raised, like cultural preservation, incorporating young people and their energies and their creativity into cultural practice in a more tangible way. So, we would push the issue beyond, whether or not they bring it up.

Ziabari: Let's get back to the SDGs. You may admit that the Sustainable Development Goals are not a priority for some or many governments, especially those with less-democratic and more repressive regimes. How do you think these countries should be involved in efforts to contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals and make it a priority for the benefit of their own people?

Monteith: Well, you know, it's a very complex, political situation because even as we [go] along, we recognize that nations are sovereign — they have all rights over what they do within their borders. Even if what they do will have negative repercussions for the globe, we still cannot impose our will on them. So, the best thing to do is really to sensitize the people of that country to what the SDGs are and why they're important, and [then] hope that you can spark behavioral change. There is a level of respect and diplomacy that has to be maintained as we go along because we have to recognize state powers [as] that's what they are. They were elected by the people — [though] sometimes not. But within those borders, we don't really have jurisdiction over how the government behaves.

So, with people, you can reach out heart to heart, mind to mind and change them or sensitize them, give them the information in order to put pressure on their own government, and in that sense, you do empower them politically to advocate for the things that they want. Because if they see that the SDGs are important and their government doesn't, it's upon them now to rise upon perhaps and elect another government or to reach out to the world for help in more tangible ways.

There are structures in place, for example, when coups are happening or when countries are calling for liberation or that kind of thing. There are policies in place across the UN, across different bodies in order to support such movements. But especially in regimes that are less democratic, I feel like the real change will have to come from the people. They will have to be the ones that will lead it because we literally cannot impose any sort of power on them. So, it will have to come from the people.

Ziabari: What do you think, as a young leader, can be done to help young people affected by war and conflict in the Middle East and North Africa to regain their confidence, reassert their identity and become proactive, involved members of their societies, especially if they are suffering from trauma and distress?

Monteith: I have two ideas about this. First of all, I come from a small country in the Caribbean, and I see that we do not have any clue — especially the young people — about many things, including what's happening in these regions because we're so far removed and it's so different from our reality that it almost doesn't make sense to us. So, the first thing I think we need to do is to ensure that information is flowing from these areas and is accessible to youth.

Young people in Jamaica need to understand what's happening in Syria, what's happening in Lebanon, what's happening in Egypt, what's happening in Libya. We need to be aware of that because we're global citizens. No longer [do] our people [live] in one area for their entire lives, and [no longer do] issues that are happening elsewhere [not] affect them. Increased migration to Europe comes with restrictions for who else can go there.

So, these issues will affect us, as these governments in Europe have to spend more on accommodating people from these areas, and they'll have less in terms of international aid to send to our country. We need to understand the connections in terms of what's happening and that issues happening in one place are not necessarily divorced from what we will experience in our place.

Let's be honest: Anybody can enter war at any time. Conflict does not take much to kick off — it really is something that's fragile. Peace is fragile. Peace has to be worked on constantly and being able to understand the issues that lead to the rise of certain instabilities in certain areas can only help us to make our own democracy safer and stronger.

But on another level, I think we need to be able to support people from these regions in telling their own stories. They need to be the ones that are leading how these stories are told, and we need to hear their authentic voices at the UN. At every level, we need to make space for them.

In our organizations, we have SDG young leaders who are from the Middle East. We need to ensure that we have that voice there so that we're not getting an outside interpretation of the issue — so we're getting the actual, accurate depiction from within. And I think that's how you bridge the gap [and] that's how you create the change that can be lasting.

Ziabari: Do you think the media are doing a good job when it comes to relaying information from the Middle East, North Africa, this part of the world to the other parts of the planet and are making people aware of the realities of the region? Or do you think the coverage is distorted and is not helpful for young people across the world to understand what's happening in conflict zones?

Monteith: In general, I think Western media are not paying enough attention to what I said before, which is to give people opportunities to tell their own stories. So, I think we have one understanding of how politics flows and we don't necessarily give these people the opportunity to speak for themselves. So, even on Talk Up Radio, we've interviewed young people from Egypt, from Lebanon and what we did was just give them the opportunity to speak and tell their own stories and to interpret the conflicts and what's happening from their own perspective.

So, in Western media, I don't think we do a good enough job of doing that, and I don't think we understand the importance of doing that. I remember being at a journalism conference in 2015, and the issue raised with the heads of CNN and BBC was that the news from outside of the dominant north tends to be one-sided — we only get reported on when we're in conflict. We only get reported on when there are massacres and people are dying and there are natural disasters. I never hear in the news that Jamaica is doing financially well or something good has happened. I imagine that the same thing happens to different areas around the world, whether it's the Middle East or Africa, for example, especially sub-Saharan Africa.

The media has an opportunity to set an agenda in terms of how people understand issues. When you don't see something in the media, you tend to not think it's important. I'm not seeing enough coverage of the aftermath of the Arab Spring, [and] I'm not seeing enough coverage of what's happening right now on the ground and how people are feeling. The only place to get that information is [to] form our independent media, and you have to seek those sources because they don't ascend to the mainstream. So, if you're not, for example, a journalist, you might not be really

interested in going to look for that information. And I think with social media, we do have some opportunities to do that, but I know it doesn't have the same power — it doesn't have the same reach or the same legitimacy as mainstream media.

Mainstream journalists have to do a better job, whether it's bringing people from these areas into the actual platforms that they own or even going there and giving [the people] the voice. We have to do better.

Ziabari: There are many stereotypes and cliches attached to different cultures and countries, and there are many people who buy into such narratives. What do you think young people can do to bridge the gaps between cultures and civilizations, debunk the myths and make sure that stereotypes do not prevail?

Monteith: Let's speak from my Jamaican perspective. We know what the world has said about us. We know how we're perceived in a lot of places. I mean, governments make it quite clear in whether or not they give us visa-free access or how we're treated in airports or the ways in which the media and movies and music depict us.

To be honest, we do have a generally positive perception of our own world as fun and creative people, but there are some political issues to do with violence in our country and biased ways we're perceived, and we have to counteract that with our own knowledge of who we are and being confident in who we are as we go throughout the world.

And so you will find Jamaicans living in every single country you go to because we're not afraid to venture beyond our borders and represent ourselves as a sovereign nation of power and history and legacy. But beyond that, we also have to advocate at every single level for the reassertion of our power as a country. It's not enough for governments to simply be biased in how they deal with us or for the media to be biased in how they treat us and for us to say nothing about it. No! Jamaicans will always be calling out when there's been negative portrayals of us in the media.

We have to actively fight that perception. So as young people in different regions, I think yes, you can use social media and put out a more nuanced, more accurate version of who you are as a people and your culture and your country. But when there has been negativity, when it's been maligned by people, you have to call that out.

You have to speak truth to power at every level. So do both: Try to reassert a positive image and be confident in who you are, but also when there's negative and when there's a slant, call it out, talk about it and really say to these media organizations that no, you're doing a disservice to my culture when you do this.

Ziabari: Racism and racial discrimination are plagues that are affecting many modern societies currently. Can you think of practical ways to combat racism, and do you think there's anything that young people can do in this fight?

Monteith: First of all, we have to understand racism. I think too often, racism is reduced to discrimination, it's reduced to prejudice and it's reduced to micro-aggressions. While those things are bad, they're not necessarily racism. Racism is a system, it's a structure, it's an ideology. It's a huge undertaking that is across societies, that is bigger than individual nations and it's asserted in policy. It's asserted in how we interrelate as countries. It's asserted in this sort of hierarchy that we have with Europe at the top and Africa at the bottom. It's asserted with white people, light-skinned people being portrayed in positive ways and then the darker you get, the worse off you are in every single society.

When I look at Myanmar and I look at the Rohingya people, they are darker-skinned a lot of the time. When I look across the world, wherever you go, you have dark-skinned people. They tend to be at the bottom of the totem pole. And I need for countries that may not necessarily have black people per se to understand how they are

perpetuating racism when they create this class division between the lighter-skinned people, the fair-skinned people in their societies and the darker ones. The same thing happens in India — the same thing happens in a number of countries around the world. So, we have to understand the global flow of racism and the ways that we perpetuate it. To practically fight it, there are a number of ways.

One, you have to think about media representation of people of darker skin. Too often we are villains. Too often we are stupid. Too often we have no agency, no power. Too often our countries are portrayed in ways that do not give us any agency and so you perpetuate racism, you perpetuate human indignity when you do that.

We have to make it very apparent that these things are very violent. You know, when you portray people this way, you're not just hurting their feelings, you're doing actual violence against them — you're sanctioning their murder sometimes. You have to do better. We have to call it what it is. Because a lot of times, we're not talking enough about it and we're not doing enough about it. We are brushing it under the rug. And we need to do that on a larger scale.

So, when companies have poor advertising campaigns, the backlash has to go beyond social media opprobrium. It has to go into them actually losing money because we as people stand for something greater than commercialism. We're not going to support your business if you're portraying black people and people of color in a bad way. We're not going to patronize you at all. We're not going to do anything with you because that kind of value is completely against what we stand for. So, we have to make a great stand in what we do. Sometimes, we talk a big game but we don't actually take proper actions. And as young people, we have to do that because we are one of the largest economic blocs. We pay for a lot of things, we buy a lot of things. So, we have power in commercialism in that sense.

Ziabari: And a final question: We live in the age of social media and super-quick connections online. How can young people use these platforms to promote peace, understanding and intercultural dialogue?

Monteith: Talk to each other, first of all. Forums of this nature [the International Youth Forum] are very unique in that we meet a lot of people from a lot of different countries and then we get to add each other on Facebook and on Instagram, and so we get to understand how each person perceives their own nation and the issues that are happening.

So, we need to take up the mandate of investigating what's happening in these countries and consuming media from these countries in more tangible ways.

Young people have the opportunity to even see, very literally, what's happening in different countries right away. If you go on Instagram and if you search the hashtag for Kingston, you'll see our culture, you'll see our national heritage, you'll see our natural environment, you'll get a real perception of who we are. And that helps to break some of the barriers. That helps to break some of the stereotypes. So, we need to do that on a greater scale.

I feel like more of us need to understand the importance of international solidarity, of understanding what it means to be a global citizen, of understanding the fact that our countries are not far apart, they're not so divorced from each other in terms of issues.

So, as we use social media to access that kind of content, we have to really internalize it as a way of living where we look at each other and we don't see somebody from a foreign country who means nothing to me. We see people and we understand that the same wishes and wants, interests and passions that we have, those people have their own as well.

Those people are experiencing a life in very similar ways sometimes. You know, they have similar passions, and as long as we can relate on a human-to-human level through social media, I

think we'll be slowly moving in the right direction.

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What Explains Donald Trump's Foreign Policy?

Kourosh Ziabari & Stephen Zunes
October 20, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Stephen Zunes, a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco.

Ever since his inauguration in 2017, US President Donald Trump has placed an emphasis on unilateralism and the rejection of international organizations and treaties as the hallmarks of his foreign policy.

Trump has assumed an aggressive modus operandi in dealing with US partners worldwide and alienated many allies. He repealed US participation in the UN Human Rights Council, UNESCO, the 2015 Paris Climate Accord, the Treaty on Open Skies, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Even in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, he pulled the US out of the World Health Organization.

The president has pledged to draw an end to the "forever wars" the United States has been involved in over the past couple of decades, and he has challenged the view that America should be the world's "policeman." At the same time, his Middle East policy has been nothing short of hawkish, and he has dragged the United States to the brink of war with Iran.

Some observers explain Trump's overseas agenda by noting that he has been hellbent on scoring political points by hurling out of the window the foreign policy legacy of his predecessor, Barack Obama. Others say he has been focused on pulling off his "America First" policy, premised on putting US commitments and global leadership on the backburner and emphasizing the empowerment of the national economy.

Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco. A leading scholar of US affairs in the Middle East, he is a senior policy analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus and an associate editor of the Peace Review journal. His latest book is "Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution."

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Zunes about Trump's foreign policy challenges, his relationship with autocrats and his strategy in the Middle East.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. This interview took place in summer 2020.

Kourosh Ziabari: In a recent article on Foreign Policy, the former undersecretary of state for political affairs, Wendy Sherman, claimed that President Trump — after three and a half years in office — has "developed no foreign policy at all" and that his approach to foreign affairs has been one "without objectives, without strategy, [and] without any indication that it protects and advances US interests." Is Trump's foreign policy as disastrous as Sherman describes, or is she saying so merely as a former Obama administration official with partisan interests?

Stephen Zunes: This is a reasonably accurate statement. Indeed, many Republicans feel the same way, believing Trump has wasted an opportunity to further a more active foreign policy advancing their more hegemonic and militaristic agenda by failing to fill a number of

important State Department positions and failing to articulate a clear policy.

By all accounts, Trump is profoundly ignorant of even the most basic facts relevant to foreign policy — the names and locations of foreign countries, modern diplomatic history and other things which most reasonably well-educated Americans know. His refusal to even read policy briefs his advisers have written up for him has made it impossible for him to develop any kind of coherent foreign policy agenda. His view toward foreign relations is largely transactional — what you can do for me will determine US policy toward your country — and therefore not based on any overall vision of advancing US interests, much less international peace and security.

His efforts to push foreign governments to pursue policies designed to help his reelection led to his impeachment earlier this year, but the Republican-controlled Senate refused to convict him despite overwhelming evidence of illegal activities in this regard.

Ziabari: Some of the major foreign policy challenges of the Trump administration emanated from the threats apparently posed to the United States by Iran, North Korea, China and Russia. How has Trump dealt with these challenges? A June 2020 poll by Gallup found that only 41% of US adults approve of Trump's performance in foreign policy. Is there a yardstick by which we can measure the president's success in his overseas agenda?

Zunes: Virtually every administration, regardless of party, has tended to exaggerate overseas threats to varying degrees, and this is certainly true with Trump. There have been real inconsistencies, however. For example, he has been far more tolerant toward North Korea, which has violated previous agreements and pursued its nuclear weapons program, than he has been toward Iran, which had dramatically reduced its nuclear capabilities and was scrupulously honoring its nuclear agreement prior to the US withdrawal from the Iran [nuclear] deal. Similarly, he has tolerated a series of provocative actions by Russia while obsessively targeting China.

While hypocrisy and double standards is certainly not a new phenomenon in US foreign policy, Trump's actions have taken this to a new extreme and have severely weakened US credibility in the international community.

Ziabari: How has foreign policy historically influenced the prospects of politicians winning elections in the United States? Do you expect President Trump's divisive foreign policy decisions to derail his chances of being reelected in November?

Zunes: Foreign policy is even less of a factor in this year's election than usual, so it is unlikely to determine the outcome. Ironically, as in 2016, Trump may run to the left of the Democratic nominee, so, despite Trump's impetuous and problematic foreign policy leadership, foreign policy issues may actually weigh to his advantage.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump successfully, if somewhat disingenuously, was able to portray himself as a president who would be more cautious than his Democratic opponent regarding unpopular US military interventions overseas. Despite having actually supported the invasion of Iraq, Trump was largely successful in depicting himself as a war opponent and Hillary Clinton as a reckless militarist who might get the United States in another round of endless wars in the Middle East. An analysis of voting data demonstrated that a significant number of voters in northern swing states who supported the anti-Iraq War Barack Obama in the 2008 and 2012 elections switched to supporting Trump in the 2016 election over this very issue, thereby making possible his Electoral College majority.

Already, the Trump campaign has begun targeting Joe Biden on this very issue. Biden played a critical role as head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in pushing the war authorization through the Democratic-controlled Senate, limiting hearings and stacking the witness

list with war opponents. He has also repeatedly lied about his support for the [Iraq] war — even after inspectors had returned and confirmed the absence of the weapons of mass destruction that he and President Bush falsely claimed Iraq still possessed — giving the Trump campaign an opening to press this issue even more.

Meanwhile, Biden has alienated many rank-and-file Democrats by pushing through a party platform calling for tens of billions of dollars of unconditional taxpayer-funded arms transfers to Israel while not even mentioning, much less condemning, the Israeli occupation and settlements. It criticizes efforts by both the United Nations and civil society campaigns to end the occupation as somehow unfairly delegitimizing Israel itself. This comes despite polls showing a sizable majority of Democrats oppose the occupation and settlements and support conditioning aid.

Neither candidate appears willing to reduce the United States' bloated military budget or end arms transfers to dictatorships. However, Biden has promised to end support for Saudi Arabia's devastating war on Yemen and the longstanding US backing of the Saudi regime, as well as reverse Trump's escalation of the nuclear arms race, both of which are popular positions.

Meanwhile, Biden has won over the vast majority of the foreign policy establishment, including quite a few Republicans, who have been appalled by Trump's treatment of traditional allies and cozy relations with the Russian regime. How much impact this will have on swing voters, however, remains to be seen.

Ziabari: Trump's pullout from the Iran nuclear deal was one of his major and contentious foreign policy decisions. In a poll conducted shortly after he announced the US withdrawal, CNN found 63% of Americans believed the United States should stick with the accord, while only 29% favored abandoning it. Last year, a Pew Research Center poll revealed 56% of the respondents did not have faith in the president's ability to handle the crisis with Iran. Has the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign against the Islamic Republic yielded the results it was expected to achieve?

Zunes: Iran already made enormous compromises in agreeing to the JCPOA required it to destroy billions of dollars' worth of nuclear facilities and material while neither the United States nor any of Iran's nuclear-armed neighbors — namely Israel, India and Pakistan — were required to reduce their arsenals or any other aspects of their nuclear program. Iran agreed to these unilateral concessions in return for a lifting of the debilitating sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council.

Despite full Iranian compliance with the agreement, the United States not only re-imposed its own sanctions, but it effectively forced foreign governments and countries to do the same at an enormous cost to the Iranian people. Hardline elements in the Iranian government, who opposed the agreement on the grounds that the United States could not be trusted to uphold its end of the deal, feel they have been vindicated, and moderate elements in the government are on the defensive.

Some fear that the goal of the Trump administration in tearing up the agreement was to encourage the Iranians to resume their nuclear program, which is exactly what happened, in order to provoke a crisis that could give the United States an excuse to go to war.

The mistake the United States made in Vietnam was seeing the leftist revolution against the US-backed regime in Saigon in terms of its communist leadership rather than the strong nationalist sentiments which propelled it. Washington could not understand why the more troops we sent and the more bombs we dropped actually strengthened the opposition.

Similarly, looking at the Iranian regime in terms of its Islamist leadership misses the strong nationalist sentiments in that country. While a growing number of Iranians oppose the authoritarianism, conservatism and corruption of the clerical and military leadership, a large

majority appear to support the regime in its confrontation with the United States. Iranians, like the Vietnamese, are among the most nationalistic people in the world. Iran, formerly known as Persia, has been a regional power on and off for the past 2,500 years and does not appreciate being treated in such a dismissive way. The more pressure on Iran, the greater the resistance.

Concerns raised by the Trump administration about the Iranian regime — its repression, discrimination against women and religious minorities, support for extremist groups, interference in other countries, among other points — are indeed valid. Yet each of these issues are also true, in fact, even more so, when it comes to Saudi Arabia and other close US allies in the region. The problem the United States has with Iran, therefore, is not in regard to such negative behavior, but the fact that Iran is the most powerful country in the greater Middle East that rejects US hegemony. Iran was willing to compromise on its nuclear program, but it is not going to compromise when it comes to its sovereignty.

Ziabari: One of the critical points President Trump's opponents raise about him is his affinity for autocratic leaders and dictators. He has — on different occasions — praised, congratulated or invited to the White House President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines; President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt; President Vladimir Putin of Russia; the far-right leader of the French party National Rally, Marine Le Pen; and the supreme leader of North Korea, Kim Jong Un. Why is Trump attracted to these unpopular leaders? Can it be attributed to his desire for becoming a president for life?

Zunes: Most US presidents have supported allied dictatorships. Under both Republican and Democratic administrations, US arms have flowed to autocratic regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other repressive Arab regimes as well as dictators in Africa, Asia and, in previous years, Latin America as well.

What makes Trump different is that while previous administrations at least pretended to support improved human rights in these countries, and often rationalized for arms transfers and other close relations as a means of supposedly influencing them in that direction, Trump doesn't even pretend to support political freedom and has even praised their repressive tactics.

There is little question that Trump himself has autocratic tendencies. The US Constitution prevents him from becoming president for life and other more overt autocratic measures, but he has certainly stretched his presidential authority in a number of very disturbing ways.

Ziabari: Rescinding international agreements, reducing the commitments of the US government abroad and embracing unilateralism have been the epitome of Trump's foreign policy. This is believed to have created rifts between the US and its traditional allies, particularly in the European Union and NATO. Some observers of US foreign policy, however, say the gulf has been exaggerated and that the United States continues to enjoy robust relations with its global partners. What are your thoughts?

Zunes: Due to the United States' economic and military power, most foreign governments have little choice but to work closely with Washington on any number of issues. However, the United States is no longer looked at for leadership in ways it had been previously. This decline has been going on for some time, accelerating during the George W. Bush administration and pausing during the Obama administration, but it has now plummeted under Trump to a degree that it is not likely to recover. The rejection of basic diplomatic protocols and other traditions of international relations repeatedly exhibited by Trump has alienated even some of the United States' more conservative allies.

While Joe Biden is certainly far more knowledgeable, experienced and diplomatic in his approach to foreign policy than the incumbent president, his support for the Iraq invasion, the Israeli occupation and various allied dictatorships has also made him suspect in the eyes of many erstwhile allies. And many allies have already reset their foreign policy priorities to make them less dependent on and less concerned about the United States and its priorities.

Ziabari: President Trump appears to have taken US-Israel relations to a new level, making himself known as the most pro-Israel US president after Harry Truman, as suggested by several commentators and pundits, such as the renowned political analyst Bill Schneider. Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, defunded UNRWA, closed down the Palestine Liberation Organization's office in Washington and unveiled the "deal of the century," a much-hyped peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that Palestinian factions rejected outright on account of being overly biased in favor of Israel. Why has Trump prioritized pleasing the Israelis and advancing their territorial ambitions?

Zunes: The right-wing coalition governing Israel shares Trump's anti-Arab racism, Islamophobia and contempt for human rights and international law, so this is not surprising. While Democratic administrations rationalized their support for Israel on the grounds that it was a liberal democracy — at least for its Jewish citizens — what draws Trump to Israel is the right-wing, anti-democratic orientation of its current government.

Though Trump has brought US support for Israeli violations of international legal norms to unprecedented levels, in practice — at least for Palestinians living under occupation — it has made little difference. For example, previous administrations did not overtly recognize Israeli settlements and annexation as Trump has, saying such issues should be resolved in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. However, this policy ignored the gross power asymmetry between the Palestinians under occupation and the Israeli occupiers, an imbalance compounded by the fact that as the chief mediator in negotiations, the US has also served as the primary military, economic and diplomatic supporter of the occupying power.

By refusing to condition the billions of dollars' worth of unconditional military aid to Israel on Israeli adherence to international law and human rights norms and blocking the United Nations Security Council from enforcing — or, in some cases, even passing — resolutions calling for Israeli compliance with its international legal obligations, it gave Israel's right-wing government no incentive to make the necessary compromises for peace. In many respects, Trump's policies have simply codified what was already going on under previous administrations.

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The American Empire: Maintaining Hegemony Through Wars

Ankita Mukhopadhyay & Peter Kuznick
November 3, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Peter Kuznick, director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University.

In January, the US assassinated Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds force, in an airstrike on Iraqi soil. General Soleimani was seen as the main pillar of the regional resistance bulwark in Iran. He was revered by many Iranians as a brave defender of the nation and a

mastermind of asymmetrical warfare — the cornerstone of Iran's security doctrine.

His death sparked frenzy and unrest in the Middle Eastern country, further straining the US and Iran's delicate relationship. The assassination of Soleimani revealed that the US was willing to go to any extent to prove its military might over its self-declared enemies.

Under President Donald Trump, the US has used several measures for the last few years to demonstrate American power over the world. From Soleimani's killing to the imposing of tariffs on China to pulling out of the Paris climate agreement, the US has disrupted the world order and threatens to continue doing so.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to Peter Kuznick, director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University in Washington, DC. Kuznick speaks about the most important foreign policy areas for a US president, America's raging desire to wage war, why the US has a fraught relationship with Iran, and how the US can mend its relationship with North Korea.

The transcript has been edited for clarity. This interview took place in early 2020.

Ankita Mukhopadhyay: With the US elections looming on the horizon, what should be the key areas of focus in foreign policy for the US president?

Peter Kuznick: The danger is that the new president of the US will be the old president. Trump will get reelected. However, Trump has not been as catastrophic when it comes to foreign policy as we feared he might be. He started off with a good idea, that the US and Russia should be friends. No one understands why he took that position, given that he is mostly wrong on everything else. Most of my Russian colleagues and friends were supporting Donald Trump during the 2016 election. I asked one member of the Russian Senate why did he and everyone else support Trump. He said because Trump wants to be friends with Russia.

I told him he was being naive as what Trump says and does usually has no connection. Hillary Clinton was terrible too in her own way. She was very hostile to Russia and too hawkish for my taste. But I believe she's a reasonable, rational actor. Donald Trump is potentially quite reckless. If we see what he's done — with the recent confrontation with Iran, be it the tearing up of the Iran nuclear deal (the JCPOA), which Obama negotiated with the help of several other countries like Russia and China.

Trump wasted little time in tearing that up. He's been pushing for a confrontation with Iran ever since. The danger is: Trump's advisers didn't agree on a lot of things, but what they agreed on is that they hate Iran. It was striking to me that Jim Mattis, who had been demoted by Obama because he was such a hawk when it came to Iran, was actually a restraining influence in the Trump administration. Rex Tillerson, the former secretary of state, said when he was fired that he was sick and tired of trying to be stopped on what [he] wanted to do against Iran. Tillerson referred to Trump as a fucking moron because of his hawkish policies.

Let's be optimistic that Trump is winning again. Whether he will lose depends on who the Democratic candidate is. My priorities are number one, the New START [Strategic Arms Reduction] treaty. The New START treaty is set to expire in February 2021. That would be a disaster. It will dismantle the world's nuclear arms control architecture. It began with the US leaving the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] treaty in 2002, it accelerated with the US pulling out of the INF [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces] treaty last year. The only thing in place is the New START treaty that puts limits on the number of nuclear warheads and delivery systems that both sides are allowed to maintain.

Trump intends to end this treaty. This is evident from his phone conversation with Putin. The Russian leader said to Trump, we should renew the New START treaty. Trump said hold on, he put down the phone and asked people in the room, what's the New START treaty? He didn't even know what it was. He got on the phone and said: It's not a good treaty, we don't

want to renew it. Putin has been pushing ever since for the renewal. The US and Russia have about 93% of the world's nuclear weapons between them. In March 2018, Putin revealed [Russia's five most powerful] nuclear weapons, all of which can circumvent US missile defense. China has only 290 nuclear weapons, and China has a no-first-use policy. China is not a threat to the world order like the US and Russia. Now Trump says, we should rip the START treaty up.

In February 2018, the US released its nuclear posture review to expand the role of nuclear weapons. The problem of using nuclear weaponry goes back to the era of Barack Obama. Obama had implemented a trillion-dollar modernization program to make nuclear weapons more deadly. Trump inherited this, but he's added more insanity.

Another area where Trump has been criminally reckless is global warming and climate change. The second thing the new US president should do is convene a new international conference on climate change. We have to do this as we can't go along with the Paris Climate Accord — it's far too minimal. We got to have a crash program to deal with this crisis.

If the new president doesn't want to keynote the conference, let's get Greta Thunberg to do it, but we need to take it as seriously as she takes it. There's a lot more we can do beyond that. We have to deal with the militarization of the planet. We have to deal with the fact that the richest eight [people] of the world have more money than 3.8 billion people. There's a crisis of epic proportions.

As a US president, I want to see the US military footprint drastically cut back. The US has 800 military bases in the world. Other countries have maybe 29 overseas military bases combined, while China has one. Right now, we have Trump saying make America great again, Putin saying make Russia great again, Xi Jinping saying make China great again, Narendra Modi saying make India great again. We have got nobody who thinks and speaks for the planet.

Mukhopadhyay: The US has been particularly stern with Iran's nuclear policy, despite building its own nuclear arsenal. Trump has already torn up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). What will happen if Iran doesn't rein in its nuclear program?

Kuznick: It was absolute insanity on Trump's behalf to tear up the JCPOA deal. It was a good deal and it would have constrained Iran's nuclear program for 15 years. During that time, we could have done many things to bring Iran back into the international community. They were supposed to get economic benefits as a result of the JCPOA, but Trump imposed more sanctions. The Europeans were furious because not only did Trump impose sanctions on Iran, but Trump threatened very harsh penalties on any country — including India — that continued to trade with Iran, especially for oil. The Europeans eventually tried to set up an alternative international banking system to trade with Iran outside of the US orbit. The US goes around sanctioning everybody. It's out of control. The sanctions against Russia, Europe, Iran, China — it's crazy. People need to be sanctioning the US. When the US acts like a rogue power, the rest of the world needs to stop being cowards and hypocrites and employ the same standard the US applies on other countries.

Countries need to be standing up to the US. The US can't be a pariah as much as it wants because it's so powerful. I don't like this cowardly behavior. In the US, TV commentators say Russian interference in the 2016 election was an act of war. It's such hypocritical behavior. I don't approve of Russia's interference in US politics, but the US interferes in everybody's elections. They have been doing so since 1947 when the CIA was founded. The commentators condemn what's happening to the US, but they don't see what the US is doing on a global scale.

On the Iran deal, we don't get as much criticism as necessary for tearing this up and creating havoc. The US in the early 2000s, under George W. Bush, was itching for a war with Iran and wanted to take down Iran's nuclear facilities using nuclear weapons. When that got exposed,

the joint chief of staff threatened to resign and they took that proposal off the table.

Let's back up a little bit to understand Iran. I will go back to 1990. In 1990, Charles Krauthammer, a leading neoconservative thinker, in the Henry Jackson address, called it America's unipolar moment. He said that after the collapse of the Soviet empire, nobody can challenge the US — economically, geopolitically. The US must recognize that and assert itself everywhere.

Krauthammer said this unipolar moment could last 30-40 years. In 1993, neoconservative thinkers came up with defense planning guidance so that no country should be allowed to emerge in any region to challenge the US globally. They walked back when this was released in The New York Times.

The neoconservatives cheered the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Krauthammer revisited his article and said that he underestimated the strength of the US. It's the unipolar era. It's going to last indefinitely. The neoconservatives were ecstatic. Even before the invasion of Iraq, on January 5, 2003, the NYT headline was, "American empire, get used to it." Then we invade Iraq. Now they are saying, well we have got to have regime change in a lot of places. Start with Syria, Libya, Somalia and Lebanon.

Iran was always on everyone's hitlist. Iran did abandon its nuclear weapons program in 2003. But the US never abandoned its dream of overthrowing Iran.

Mukhopadhyay: Is the dissatisfaction with Iran and the JCPOA to do with overthrowing the government?

Kuznick: For that, we need to understand the American mentality. The Americans accuse Russia of interfering in the 2016 election. In fact, the Israelis interfered more than Russia in the 2016 election. Benjamin Netanyahu openly campaigned for Trump, opposed the JCPOA and addressed a joint session of Congress. Obama knew that he couldn't even get the JCPOA passed through Congress as a treaty, with a two-third majority, so he had to say that it was a deal to get it through with a simple majority.

Once the Republicans got in there, one of the first things we wanted was to tear it up. Trump knew nothing about the deal, and he is an idiot. It's a crisis of America's own making. Trump said he will negotiate a better deal. He's a disaster when it comes to negotiating, as we see with North Korea.

Then Iran responded, we got a couple of incidents in the Gulf there, shooting down an American drone — things were heating up already. The reason the US wanted to take the Korea issue of the table is to focus on Iran. The killing of Soleimani on January 3, 2020, was very dangerous and very reckless.

I am glad that some people acted with diplomatic aplomb and eased the crisis there because many of us feared that we would go to war [with Iran]. It was a disaster for US policy and a disaster for the world.

What kind of principle do you establish that you can go around killing anyone with our drones (shame on Obama for legitimizing that) and even killing American citizens without due process. But to take out a leader of another country — the second most powerful and respected person in Iran, a top general — was to force Iran to take military action. Fortunately, Iran didn't take Trump's bait. Iran had a measured, limited response when they hit two American bases in retaliation.

At that time, had Iran retaliated in any other way, the US was set to strike. Iran has capabilities throughout the region — they can hit Israel, they can hit American bases, they can use Hezbollah, they have proxy bases in Syria. Fortunately, they didn't do that. However, like India and Pakistan, this can erupt at any point.

Iran is going to retaliate at some time. Iranians were out on the street asking for military action against the US after the death of Soleimani. Americans need to understand that Iran is not Iraq. We underestimate what a war with Iran would mean. A war with Iran will be 10 times costlier than the war in Iraq was militarily and in

terms of human lives. Iran is a bigger country, with 80 million people, much bigger capabilities and a much more competent military. If someone thinks that Iran is going to be like the "cakewalk" in Iraq (which we are still not out of, 17 years later), they are terribly mistaken.

Iran has increasingly abrogated its own part of the nuclear deal. It was a great deal. They shipped 97% of their nuclear material outside of Iran. They mothballed most of their centrifuges. They shut down the Iraq plutonium facility. Now, they are increasingly bringing more centrifuges, raising the level to which they can enrich, and this is a crisis of Trump's making. It's off the headlines in the US recently — that's not going to last forever. There are people in this cabinet, in this administration, who believe that a war would be good for Trump's reelection.

They might miscalculate that this may help them. This is why people were suspicious when Soleimani was assassinated. Why did Trump do this? Why did he do it now? Bush and Obama had looked into knocking off Soleimani and decided to not do it because the repercussions would be horrendous. The speculation around Trump is that he is trying to distract the people from the other crisis.

Mukhopadhyay: Why is waging war so important in American foreign policy? How does this war-centric mentality affect the US' relationship with other countries?

Kuznick: The American empire is based on military presence everywhere. India would not define something that happens in Central America as part of its national security concerns. The US does. In January 2018, the US changed its national security strategy. Before that, the US said that global terrorism was the main threat to American national security. In January 2018, the US announced that Russia and China posed the greatest threat to national security.

The US under Trump sees the world as a zero-sum game. Anything that Russia or China gains anywhere is a loss to the US, in terms of trade, geopolitics or military. The US wants to maintain this global empire through Boeing, BAE, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin and the American defense contractors.

For example, they make billions of dollars in weapon sales to India. India is a country that should not be spending billions of dollars in weapon sales when they have so many social needs. This is what [Dwight] Eisenhower warned about the military-industrial complex in 1961, that it has a disproportionate influence on American policymaking. Every drone shot is money in someone's pocket.

One of the things we were hearing in the US Senate in the 1930s was to nationalize the defense sector. Why should people make money off killing? It makes no sense to me. The second level is American hegemony and American global domination. Look at America's wars. The US wants to control the economy all over the world. Why are we involved in Central America and Afghanistan? It is estimated that Afghanistan has mineral resources worth a trillion dollars. Look at the rare earths, the pipelines that go through that region. On one hand, it's just naked economics and that's always a factor.

Trump wants Iran's oil, Syria's oil and Iraq's oil. He said that we should maintain our control over Syria's oil. Which is why he shifted the American troops from the western part of Syria to the eastern part of Syria — to the oil-rich zone. That's the way he feels. A lot of American policymakers feel the same way.

During the Iraq War, one of the most popular signs was, "what is our oil doing under their sand?" We wanted the Iraqi oil, we thought we deserved it. And this goes back to [Franklin D.] Roosevelt. In 1944, he said to Lord Halifax, the British ambassador, that Saudi oil will belong to the US, Iranian oil will belong to the British and we will share Kuwaiti and Iraqi oil. So, when Mohammad Mosaddegh nationalizes the oil industry in Iran, the British freak out and Americans freak out.

The problems with Iran run back to 1953, when the Central Intelligence Agency ran a coup to overthrow Mosaddegh. Why? Because the

Anglo-Iranian oil company, which had 100% of Iranian oil, was giving the Iranians 16 cents on the dollar. The British were keeping 84 cents on the dollar. The Iranians were very impoverished as a result. Saudi Aramco in Saudi Arabia negotiated a new deal and they got 50 cents on the dollar. That infuriated the Iranians even further. They did what the British had done a few years earlier — they nationalized the oil industry. The British were outraged and decided they had to overthrow Mosaddegh.

Mosaddegh was immensely popular. He was featured as Time magazine's man of the year in 1951. The US ambassador in Tehran wrote back to Washington that Mosaddegh had the support of 95 to 98% of the Iranian people. He was a hero throughout the Middle East for standing up to the imperialists. [Harry] Truman hesitated, but in 1953, when Eisenhower took office, he ran Operation Ajax and overthrew Mosaddegh. They had terrorist gangs, the CIA bought out the military leaders — it was outrageous — and then they brought the shah.

The shah ruled for another 25 years through a brutal dictatorship. He used SAVAK, the Iranian intelligence agency, in order to impose domination in Iran, and then in 1979, the Iranians finally overthrew the shah and imposed their religious-nationalist regime under [Ruhollah] Khomeini. The people of Iran will obviously retaliate against the CIA. Especially after the US allowed the shah into the US for medical treatment.

[Jimmy] Carter had proposed that the Iranians should develop their own nuclear power industry. The US was giving them nuclear fuel and wanted to build 12 nuclear reactors in Iran. And then we say it's outrageous, why do they need nuclear power when they have all this oil? We pushed them to do that.

The history of US-Iranian relations goes back further than 1979. If you look at the American media, when all this was happening, some people who were sensible traced it back to 1979. Any Iranian would trace it back to 1953. How would the Americans feel if Iran came here to depose a popular American president and replace him with a brutal dictator? The Iranians have got legitimate grievances against the US, not the other way around, obviously.

Americans don't know history. Which is why we have a low attention span. Talk about America and the endless wars. Start with the two big ones. Americans don't know anything about the Korean War. It's called the forgotten war in the US. Americans don't know that millions of people died in that war. The Americans bombed the crap out of both Koreas. In 1951, the British annual military yearbook said that because of America's bombing, South Korea doesn't exist as a country anymore.

We burned down almost all cities in South Korea and North Korea — and people were living in caves. It was horrific what the US did there. It was four times the number of bombs dropped in Japan and the Pacific in World War II. That was a nightmare for the Koreans and they remember it. The Koreans have a very different historical memory. The North Koreans have drilled the war into their heads. There are billboards, museums about what the US did during the Korean War. It is a very different historical memory as compared to the Americans. The Americans have no historical memory.

Let me give you another example. The American and Russian understanding of World War II is completely different. For the US, World War II starts with Pearl Harbor. Then there's a hiatus and we get involved a little in North Africa.

But the real war for the Americans begins on June 6, 1944, with D-Day and the invasion of Normandy. The Americans bravely take the beaches, which we did. The Americans march to Berlin, defeat the Germans, win the war in Europe and the Americans are the heroes of World War II.

The Russian narrative is quite different. The war there begins with the German invasion [of the Soviet Union] on June 22, 1941, when they looked at the US for economic support for war material, which the US promised but couldn't

deliver. The US couldn't deliver it because we thought that Europe is built on military industries and partly because of sabotage.

We promised them the second front in late May 1942, but we didn't open it up till 1944. The Russians know who won the war in Europe.

The Germans lost 1 million on the western front, 6 million on the eastern front. I once did an anonymous survey with college students and I asked them: How many Americans died in World War II? The median answer I got was 90,000. OK, so they were just 300,000 off. I asked them: How many Soviets died in WW2? The median answer was 100,000. Which means they were only 27 million off.

Which means these kids know nothing about World War II, they can't understand what the Cold War was about, they can't understand Ukraine now. That's what Americans suffer from — a complete lack of understanding of history. In 2007, the national report card found that American high school seniors performed the worst in US history. Only 12% of high school seniors were found to be proficient in US history. Not outstanding, just proficient.

What we found out from that survey is that even that number is bogus because only 2% could identify what the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court case was about, even though it was obvious from the way the question was worded. It's obvious that Americans are historically ignoramuses. That's why Oliver Stone and I did the "Untold History" project to educate people about their own history.

Americans know nothing about the Korean War, they don't even remember Vietnam anymore. When Robert McNamara, the former US secretary of defense, came into my class, he told the students that he now accepts the fact that 3.8 million Vietnamese died in the war. But common Americans have no understanding of that.

Mukhopadhyay: Not just Vietnam, even Laos and Cambodia saw a heavy death toll in the Vietnam war, right?

Kuznick: Laos, Cambodia — the whole region was a disaster. The Vietnam War memorial in Washington has got the names of 58,280 Americans who died in the Vietnam War. The tragedy of Vietnam is that 58,280 Americans died. What they should have on that memorial is the name of 3.8 million Vietnamese, along with millions of Cambodians and Laotians, British, Australians, South Koreans — everyone who died. Right now, the wall is 492-feet long. If they include the names of everyone who died, the wall would be eight-miles long.

The scary thing is that in a poll, 15-20% of students said that the Vietnam War was necessary to fight. These are 18 to 29-year-old people who love Bernie Sanders. These are the ones who are opposed to war generally, but they don't know history.

Mukhopadhyay: Why do people have such contradictory views about war in the US?

Kuznick: Part of the reason you have these wars is: one, they are profitable; two, they allow the US to maintain hegemony; three, Americans are historically ignorant; four, they happen over there. Lindsey Graham had once said that if there's war, they are dying over there, not here. Americans don't get touched by these wars.

The wars are fought by a very small tiny fraction of the population of professional soldiers, who are not from the middle classes. They come from mostly poor, rural backgrounds. They are mostly young people who don't have good prospects in life. They are not my college students, they are not people I know — that's the case for most of the middle class in the US.

It's always another war, in another place, with very few American casualties. A lot of Afghans die, a lot of Iraqis die. These wars allow the US to maintain its hegemony and there's a lot of profit. We have got 800 bases around the world. In 2009, Chalmers Johnson called it the empire of bases. We justify that in part by finding enemies. Alexei Arbatov, the Russian-Soviet strategist, once said the Soviet Union did the worst possible

thing to the US by collapsing because they left them with no enemy.

Once the Soviet Union collapsed, what did we do? We immediately intervened in Panama, overthrew the government there, we militarily intervened in Kuwait and Iraq. There is no enemy. We defined new enemies and we created them after the Soviet Union collapsed. There was a call to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, that was the goal. There was nothing to do with the nonsense about weapons of mass destruction which many people later exposed as a lie before the US invaded. This was just part of the US' global agenda. The US doesn't win these wars.

The US has not won a war since 1983 when the US invaded Grenada, which was Operation Urgent Fury. We were able to defeat a couple of Cuban construction workers, after which [Ronald] Reagan said, America is proud and standing on its feet again. We can destroy things, we blow them up, but we don't win. We have been fighting, not winning, in Afghanistan for almost 20 years. Iraq is finally wanting to throw the US out. We have a military meant for destroying things, for killing people, for blowing things up, but not for creating what is really needed.

Mukhopadhyay: A parallel I can draw is that both the US and India have not learned from history.

Kuznick: India has such a rich history. How Gandhi and [Jawaharlal] Nehru led the global fight against the Cold War. They led the fight against the nuclear arms race. It was Nehru who said that American leaders are self-centered lunatics who will blow anybody up who gets in their way. Do we see Modi standing up or welcoming world peace in any way? War can happen anytime.

Especially with these extreme nationalists in India and with the Pakistani military and intelligence community. Fortunately, both sides decided to hit each other in a way that wasn't going to hurt last year, but the issue in Kashmir isn't getting any better. The Indian army is twice as big and powerful as the Pakistani army. Indians would overrun the Pakistani army in the event of a war. Will Pakistan sit back and say, OK, you're stronger and we surrender? No, they can use nuclear weapons. India will retaliate. We don't know. There's a real risk that it can escalate.

Latest studies show that a limited nuclear war between India and Pakistan in which 100 Hiroshima-size nuclear weapons were used would create a nuclear winter, cities would burn, it would send 5 million tons of carbon and soot into the stratosphere.

Within two weeks, it would encircle the globe, destroy global agriculture, temperatures on Earth would plummet to freezing; this would last for 10 years and that alone could cause up to 2 billion deaths. We [the US] have 4,000 nuclear weapons in the world, 80 times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb. We are risking the future of our planet. We are dealing with that and the insanity of global warming. We have an existential crisis which requires real leadership right now. It's too dangerous a world.

Mukhopadhyay: You criticized Trump's policy on North Korea. What should the president have done instead, and what can be done to diffuse the tension in the Korean Peninsula?

Kuznick: North Korea is a difficult problem that requires diplomacy, not military action. I take it back to the 1994 deal that [Bill] Clinton had negotiated with North Korea. In 1994 and 2002, North Korea produced no plutonium and they abided by the nuclear deal. There was some suspicion about their nuclear program, but it wasn't proven or confirmed. They deny it. That deal was very effective.

The George W. Bush administration blew that up. Bush announced the "axis of evil" — Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Rather than deal with North Korea diplomatically, he put it in crosshairs. North Korea was very nervous about the US overthrow of their government.

John Bolton, who is hated by North Koreans, said that the accusations against North Korea's nuclear arsenal gave him the leverage to destroy the nuclear deal in 2002. He was happy that it happened. The North Koreans call Bolton human scum and a bloodsucker — and rightly so.

Then, in 2006, North Korea tested their first nuclear weapon. They have had six since then. Last year, they tested their nuclear bomb, which was 17 times more destructive than the bomb thrown on Hiroshima. The North Koreans said it wasn't a fusion bomb but a fission bomb, a hydrogen bomb — it just blew up an entire mountain. Then they tested an inter-continental ballistic missile that seemed like it could hit the US. That gave Trump the excuse to give the threat to start fire and fury.

In 2017, it did seem like we were going to nuclear war and we seemed desperate to want to stop that. I was considering going to go to North Korea to interview Kim Jong Un and walk this back a little bit. We didn't have to, as Trump decided to take a different tack. But I approved that Trump wanted to talk. I was glad that they met in Singapore. However, Trump has no diplomatic skills. That's another powder cake ready to blow.

North Korea has enormous military capabilities and missiles poised to strike Seoul, a city of 25 million people, 35 miles from their border. The US is running these war games with decapitation drills to overthrow the government in North Korea — which is insane. The US has 28,500 troops stationed in South Korea. I was upset with Trump for creating a crisis when it didn't have to exist.

North Korea isn't going to give up its nuclear arsenal. The North Koreans know that the only thing standing between them and being overthrown by the US is their nuclear weapons. When the US invaded Iraq, North Korea's main newspaper said that Saddam made one big mistake: not having weapons of mass destruction. It was clear that North Koreans understood that and didn't want to give up their weapons.

From the very beginning, when Trump is talking about denuclearization, it's absurd and the wrong thing to demand from North Korea. The first thing we should do is foster an atmosphere of trust. How do we do that?

The Korean War has never ended. Instead of having a peace treaty at the end of the war, they signed an armistice. That war is still going on. One thing the North Koreans desperately want is a peace treaty to end that war. The second thing they want is for the US to stop their military exercises with South Korea.

The US is overmilitarized. We don't need 28,500 troops on the Korean Peninsula — we don't need all the military exercises that we do. The third thing they need is sanctions relief. The US is heavily sanctioning North Korea. Even the UN.

After the North Korea tests, China and Russia also supported the sanctions against North Korea. Everybody thinks that North Korea's nuclear program is dangerous and that we should have a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. I obviously support that. But the North Koreans are not going to do that — until they are integrated in the global system and they have a measure of trust that they are not under attack.

Would I like to see a different government in North Korea? Yes, I would. Do I want to see more freedom in North Korea? Yes, absolutely. The Korean people will have to do that. My friends in the South Korean embassy tell me the gross national standard of living, per capita gross domestic product in South Korea is 42 times as high as it is in North Korea. Vladimir Putin once said the North Koreans would rather eat grass than give up their nuclear program. Putin is right. It's still a dangerous situation. We have to ease the sanctions. Nothing else has worked. The US program of maximum pressure has not worked. When something doesn't work, you don't double down on it, you try a different direction.

You lift the sanctions on North Korea, say for six months, and see how they respond. Stephen Biegun, who is the US negotiator, was getting nowhere with the negotiations. The North

Koreans don't trust him and they don't trust the US. Trump says absurd things like Kim Jong Un writes me love letters, we are in love. Trump doesn't know what the term love means, he isn't capable of love or empathy. But he wants to be flattered.

The meeting in Hanoi is pointless. To get North Koreans to reciprocate, you do need the pressure from Russia and they do need assurances that the US won't do a regime change there. At least UN sanctions need to be lifted so that North Korea's economy responds. There isn't mass starvation there, but they are under economic hardship and duress.

It doesn't make sense to me that a country where people barely spend time eating spend[s] so much money on weapons of mass destruction. It's the insanity of our planet. Someone coming from another planet, looking at the Earth would say it's insane to have a world where the richest eight [people] have more money than the poorest 3.8 billion. It's insane to have a world that spends such a vast amount of resources on perfecting the means of killing.

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*__Ankita Mukopadhyay__ is a journalist based in New Delhi. She holds a postgraduate degree from the London School of Economics. __Peter Kuznick__ is a professor of history and the Director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University. Along with filmmaker Oliver Stone, he coauthored the book and documentary film series, "The Untold History of the United States."

The Rapper Breaking Down Borders With Dreams

Sophia Akram & Potent Whisper
December 3, 2020

In this guest edition of The Interview, Sophia Akram talks to British rapper and spoken-word artist, Potent Whisper.

British rapper and spoken-word artist Potent Whisper is known for his socially conscious rhyming guides that have broken down the world's problems into three-to-five-minute explainers. Over the last few years, his projects have included a lauded book, "The Rhyming Guide to Grenfell Britain," which was given a mention in the chambers of the UK Parliament.

His take on the refugee crisis has taken a different spin, however, through a fictional narrative of a couple from Sudan, torn apart by conflict and who reunite in the dream world. It's an audiobook called "Lucid Lovers," which collaborates with producers ToneO and Essence, starring actors Mustafa Khogali and Hind Swareldahab, who were involved with the Sudanese uprising and have some experience of navigating the British asylum system.

What follows is the gripping, outlandish and also very real-to-life tale of Sameh and Ahlam. Facing barriers in the form of the European and UK immigration systems, they defy powers keeping them apart using the practice of lucid dreaming — having dreams where the dreamer is aware they are in a dream and even gaining control over some of the dream's elements.

Potent explains the concept as part of the book using his signature rhyming-guide format, the "The Rhyming Guide to Lucid Dreaming," and in which he offers another perspective on dreams: "They won't let us dream, / They want us living their illusion. / That's why dreaming is a radical act. / Dreaming is resistance."

It's a fascinating take on the politics of freedom of movement through the metaphysical and genre of romance, set against hip hop and poetry. And the project has led Potent to do workshops on lucid dreaming and the freedom of movement with young marginalized people. Without a doubt, the project is timely. As the peak summer period for migration has seen record numbers of people crossing the English Channel on flimsy boats, hostile anti-asylum rhetoric has stepped up.

In this guest edition of The Interview, Sophia Akram talks to Potent Whisper about the inspiration and the concepts behind "Lucid Lovers."

Sophia Akram: A lot is going on in the final output: storytelling, poetry, music, politics, metaphysics intertwined with love and human-interest genres. What made you feel this was the best way of telling a story that is fundamentally a lesson on migration?

Potent Whisper: Somebody will tell you they oppose freedom of movement until they fall in love with somebody from another country and become separated by borders.

It seems to me that people only care about stories that reflect or benefit their own lives in some way. By introducing leading themes of love and dreams, I am speaking to experiences that people share all around the world.

Hopefully, by using this common ground, I have, in some way, provided a non-politicized audience with the space to venture beyond their own lived experiences; to recognize their shared humanity with the characters and begin to care about them beyond the book.

Akram: A passion and compassion for the subject of freedom of movement and the plight of asylum seekers come through. What galvanized you on the issue?

Potent Whisper: The idea that immigrants and asylum seekers are problematic is one that has been relentlessly smashed into the consciousness of the general public by politicians and the mainstream media. This is not only a lie that causes the suffering of immigrants and asylum seekers — which is more than enough reason to write this book — but it is also a lie that simultaneously enables the suffering of the average "English" person who was born in this country.

If you were to ask a random Brit why their grandmother couldn't get the operation she desperately needed, they may well point to immigrants. If you were to ask a young family why they can't get a council house, they wouldn't complain about the demolition of or lack of provision for social housing — they would point to immigrants.

The average British person who is struggling to make ends meet does not feel angry with a government that needlessly chose to implement austerity measures. Instead, they would point to the vulnerable and desperate asylum seeker who came to this country in the simple hope of finding safety.

I am not exactly the smartest guy in the world, but it doesn't take a genius to see that the scapegoating of immigrants (and Muslims) is one of the major enablers of the transferral of public wealth into private hands, via government, in this country and around the world. To quote a passage from "Lucid Lovers," when Ahlam asks Samer to explain Brexit:

"The British government decided to give bankers hundreds of billions of pounds after the financial crisis in 2008, crippling the British people through austerity measures. They had ten years of misery and the country saw a genocide of the poor but the government managed to redirect their anger away from the powerful people who are consciously killing them and instead towards immigrants and Muslims. This was coupled with the notion that leaving the European Union aka 'Brexit' would stop immigrants from entering the country and thus improve living conditions in the UK. The truth, however, is that the effects of Brexit will worsen their real situation. But when the leader of the opposition tried to warn everybody, he was

portrayed as a racist and terrorist sympathizer and so the British public voted for an actual racist terrorist and now they're all screwed."

Akram: Lucid dreaming sounds wild. Is it real, and how did you come to know about it?

Potent Whisper: Lucid dreaming is 100% real, scientifically proven and well established as a practice. I was introduced to it by my brother after our grandmother passed away last year, and it gave me meaningful hope that we might exist beyond our bodies after we die. After all, if we can exist without our bodies in dreams, perhaps we can exist without our bodies after they decompose.

Akram: I sometimes know when I'm dreaming — is that the same thing? You also touch on dream sharing — is that possible? How would someone find out more about lucid dreaming and what are its benefits?

Potent Whisper: To become lucid means that you are aware that you are in a dream. With some practice, you can then learn to control or direct elements of your dream, which not only allows you to do things that are impossible when awake — like flying — but can enrich your life and improve your wellbeing in the waking world too. For example, lucid dreaming can be used to practice and develop skills whilst we are asleep: If you are learning to play the piano, you can use lucid dreaming to practice playing and, when you wake up, you will have improved accordingly.

Lucid dreaming can also be used to help us process emotional traumas, heal our bodies, consolidate and memorize new information, and so much more. On a more spiritual level, many people have reported that they use lucid dreaming to communicate with ancestors or seek guidance from their spirit guide.

Certainly, I have found that when I face a difficult challenge in life, a solution can often present itself to me whilst contemplating the problem in a lucid dream. The practice also has huge creative potential with many iconic artists and inventors pointing to the dream world as the source of their work. Believe it or not, I actually wrote parts of the audiobook whilst I was in a lucid state. My "The Rhyming Guide to Lucid Dreaming," which features in the audiobook, explores the benefits of lucid dreaming in more depth.

In terms of dream sharing: It is important for the audience to understand that the character's ability to share a dream and inhabit the same dream space is very different to lucid dreaming. Unlike lucid dreaming, sharing a dream is not widely reported or scientifically recognized as being possible in real life. Though that doesn't mean it hasn't been or can't be done!

***Sophia Akram** is a journalist and researcher specializing in human rights and forced migration, particularly across Asia. **Potent Whisper** is a British rapper and spoken-word artist.

Climate Change Will Impact the Human Rights of Millions

Kourosh Ziabari & Ashok Swain
December 15, 2020

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to professor Ashok Swain, UNESCO Chair of International Water Cooperation at Uppsala University in Sweden.

While the international community's attention is consumed by the COVID-19 pandemic and a myriad of crisis, from the wars in Syria and Yemen to the Middle East peace process, Brexit and a severe global economic downturn, climate change continues to wreak havoc on societies around the world, putting into question the very survival of future generations.

Greenhouse gases produced as a result of anthropogenic activity such as the burning of fossil fuels and industrial processes are being emitted at rates higher than at any point in the past 800,000 years. The resulting greenhouse effect is destabilizing the planet's climate in hazardous ways. Extreme weather events are now more frequent and violent than ever. Heatwaves, droughts, blizzards, hail storms and floods are occurring with greater intensity, exacerbating poverty and forced migration. 2019 was the hottest year on record, with nearly 400 unprecedented instances of high temperatures reported in the northern hemisphere last summer alone.

Aside from the loss of biodiversity, the disappearance of small island nations and the proliferation of new diseases, climate change is currently responsible for the death of 150,000 people annually, and will expectedly produce 250,000 fatalities per year between 2030 and 2050. This is a wake-up call for societies, lured into complacency by technological advances, that our lifestyle and consumption patterns are not sustainable.

In this edition of The Interview, Fair Observer talks to professor Ashok Swain, UNESCO chair of International Water Cooperation at Sweden's Uppsala University, about the human rights impacts of climate change, the ensuing conflicts over resources, and the interplay between global warming and poverty.

Kourosh Ziabari: According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, nations "have an affirmative obligation to take effective measures" to mitigate the impacts of climate change on human rights. With political, economic and security concerns that are consuming resources, coupled with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, do you think enough is being done to address climate change and its human rights implications? If states have an "obligation" to combat climate change, how is it possible to make sure they are living up to those commitments?

Ashok Swain: Both climate change and COVID-19 are global crises and [are] interconnected. Degrading ecosystems, unsustainable lifestyles and declining natural resources have led to a pandemic like COVID-19. Thus, the world should not forget the threats of climate change while confronting the pandemic. Adding to these two serious crises, human rights are increasingly under threat, and civil and political rights of people are growingly compromised in a world that is witnessing a democratic decline. Climate change has multiplied the human rights crisis in a more unequal and undemocratic world by causing threats to human health and survival, food and water shortages, and weather-related disasters resulting in death and destruction of property. A healthy and robust environment is fundamental to the enjoyment of human rights.

The world has been committed for 72 years to the observation and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and these principles have been at the heart of international agreements.

Unfortunately, there is a huge gap that exists between the international commitments on human rights and climate change, and the national policies adopted by the countries. Climate change and policy responses to meet its challenges will have a significant impact on the human rights of millions of people.

The world is also witnessing the climate justice movement in a big way. Only comprehensive and collaborative actions by the states in line with protecting human rights will make it possible for the planet to meet these unprecedented challenges. Countries must commit to ambitious climate mitigation targets to keep the global average temperature increase within a manageable limit. Countries providing climate mitigation assistance and those receiving the support must commit to protecting human rights.

They must incorporate human rights norms into their domestic legal frameworks. While countries need to take important steps toward fulfilling their obligations at home, they need to work cooperatively with other countries to combat climate change and ensure the protection of the human rights of people across the world.

Ziabari: As reported by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, more than 60% of the world's population depends on agriculture for survival, and 12% of the total available lands are used for cultivating crops. In what ways does climate change impinge on the development of economies that are centered around agriculture?

Swain: Though the impact of climate change is very comprehensive, its effects on the agriculture sector are easy to notice. Changing rainfall patterns and rising average temperatures due to climate change affect agriculture and those who are dependent on it in a very big way. Floods, droughts, new pests and weed problems add more to their woes. Climate change brings food insecurity through its impacts on all aspects of global, regional, national and local food production and distribution systems. It severely affects the people who are already poor and vulnerable, and dependent on an agriculture-based economy, but the risk and vulnerability are gradually going to shift to other economies.

However, while most tropical, arid and semi-arid regions are likely to experience further agricultural production losses due to rising temperatures, food production in the temperate developed part of the world is expected to benefit in the short term from a warmer climate and longer growing seasons.

With climate change, increasing natural disasters, recurring droughts, salinity intrusion into water systems and massive floods are invariably affecting agricultural production and resulting in food shortages in developing countries. Increasing agricultural production for a growing population while facing climate change has become a major challenge for these agricultural economies as they already face serious shortages of freshwater supply and arable land. High concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere reduces the number of nutrients such as zinc and iron in rice and wheat, and bring harmful effects on people in the countries whose diets are highly dependent on these crops.

The adverse effects of climate change on food security, health and economic wellbeing in the agriculture-dependent countries are undermining their ability to achieve their sustainable development goals in a big way.

Ziabari: Small size, remoteness, insularity and susceptibility to natural disasters are some of the challenges faced by island nations. Last year, the Maldives' environment minister warned that for small island nations, climate change is not only a threat, but its impacts are already being felt. What is at stake for the island nations as a result of global warming and extreme weather conditions? Do you agree that for these regions, climate change poses an existential threat?

Swain: If the present trend of greenhouse gas emission continues, the UN climate science panel warns against the possibility of sea-level rise up to 1.1 meters by 2100. The rise of the seawater level to this magnitude will not only inundate large areas in the highly populated low-lying countries but also can potentially submerge many small island states in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

Way back in 1987, the then-president of the Maldives, Maumoon Abdool Gayoom, made an emotional appeal at the UN General Assembly that a sea-level rise of only one meter would threaten the life and survival of all his countrymen. More than three decades have passed, and the threat of several small island countries disappearing from the global map altogether looks more real than ever before.

While they are not underwater yet, these small island countries are already facing the impact of climate change in various ways. In these countries, most human settlement and economic

activity take place in coastal areas. Climate change-induced coastal erosion has already brought significant changes in their human settlement patterns and socioeconomic conditions.

Coral reefs play a big role in the wellbeing of the small island countries by supplying sediments to island shores and restraining the impact of waves. Unprecedented coral bleaching due to increased water temperature and carbon dioxide concentration are adversely affecting the reef systems, which is critical for these small countries. Changing rainfall patterns, decreasing precipitation and increasing temperatures have also presented critical challenges for the freshwater supply on these islands and to their food security.

Frequent climate change-induced natural disasters like hurricanes and floods are also bringing devastation to their economy and infrastructure. And also, these severe weather-related events affecting their key tourism sectors. Climate change will affect every country in the world, but small island nations are most vulnerable to its impacts.

Ziabari: Is it accurate to say that climate change effects are disproportionately burdening the developing and low-income countries, and that nations in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia are making up for the shortcomings of the developed, industrialized world in reducing their greenhouse gas emissions to achieve the goals set by the Paris Agreement?

Swain: Despite disagreement and debates, science is now unequivocal on the reality of climate change. Human activities contributing to greenhouse gases are recognized as its primary cause. It is a serious irony that people and countries that suffer most from climate change have done the least to cause it. The 52 poorest countries in the world contribute less than 1% of global carbon emissions.

The poor and the powerless have very little say in the actual climate negotiation process. Several disagreements had kept the countries of the world away from a global treaty. The primary contentions had been over how much and how fast countries were going to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions and, upon reaching an agreement, who would monitor it. However, to address global climate change, 194 countries of the world have finally come to an agreement at the Paris Climate Conference on December 12, 2015. [To date, all of the world's 197 nations have signed the accords, with the US set to rejoin the agreement after the Biden administration assumes office next year. — Fair Observer] In Paris, industrialized countries also promised to mobilize $100 billion to support carbon emission cuts and climate adaptation.

The Paris Agreement signals the turning point for the world on the path to a low-carbon economy — not only to cut the carbon emission but also to provide financial and technological support to poor developing countries for climate mitigation. However, the withdrawal of the USA from the Paris Agreement has been a serious setback, but, hopefully, it will return to it soon after the change of administration.

Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, in which only rich industrialized nations had climate mitigation targets, the Paris Agreement includes every country. Though the ratifying countries to the Paris Agreement enjoy independence on how to lower their carbon emissions, it is binding on them to report their progress. It is true that developing and low-income countries are asked to do their part to mitigate climate change even if they had no role in contributing to climate change. However, the global fund [created] by rich industrialized countries is going to somewhat address this injustice by providing financial support to the most vulnerable countries and also helping them with clean environment technologies for climate change mitigation.

Ziabari: Water stress levels are high in parts of northern Africa, Iraq, Syria, Iran and the Indian subcontinent. How can the lengthy periods of drought and variability of water

supply in these regions lead to conflicts and violent uprisings? Can we think of water as a determining factor in the political stability of nations in the 21st century?

Swain: The world is already experiencing a serious global water crisis. More than 40% of the global population is suffering from water scarcity and, by 2050, an additional 2.3 billion people from Asia, Africa and the Middle East are expected to live in serious water stress. Climate change is expected to seriously aggravate the water scarcity problem in these regions. Moreover, the increase of global surface temperature due to the greenhouse effect is expected to lead to more floods and droughts due to more intense, heavy precipitation. Not only floods and droughts are going to be frequent in the future, but even recent studies have also confirmed that climate change is already contributing to more intense precipitation extremes and the risk of floods.

As climate change brings changes to water supply and demand patterns, the existing arrangement of sharing water resources between and within countries in arid and semi-arid regions are likely to be more and more conflictual. There is no doubt that the projected impacts of global climate change on freshwater may be huge and dramatic, but they may not be at the same intensity and follow a similar periodic pattern in each region.

Climate change is also likely to cause extreme weather events, changing sea levels or melting glaciers that can generate serious threats to existing freshwater management infrastructure. It is easy to foresee that climate change will force comprehensive adjustments in the ongoing water management mechanisms as they need to have the flexibility to adjust to the uncertainties.

The emerging unprecedented situation due to changes in climatic patterns requires countries and regions to cooperate and act collectively. There is no doubt that climate change poses extreme challenges to water sharing, and it has all the potential to create political instability and violent conflicts. Thus, climate change requires countries to have more flexible, hands-on politically smart management of their water resources.

Ziabari: Walk us through the interplay between climate change and poverty. Does the current pattern of the Earth getting warmer and extreme weather episodes unfurling more frequently have the potential to tip more people into hunger, unemployment and poverty? What do scientific forecasts say?

Swain: With sea-level rise, the world is also expected to witness serious storm surges in regular intervals as tropical cyclones will combine with higher sea levels. This is likely to enhance the risk of coastal high flooding, particularly in the tropics. Climate change also threatens to change the regular rainfall patterns, which can potentially lead to further intensive flooding, drought and soil erosion in tropical and arid regions of the world. Food production is going to be further affected due to extreme weather, unpredictable seasonal changes and wildfires. The Fourth National Climate Assessment Report of the US Global Change Research Program in 2018 warns that heatwaves, drought, wildfire and storms will increasingly disrupt agricultural productivity, bringing serious food insecurity and loss of farming jobs.

Different countries and societies are responding to and will cope with climate change-induced food insecurity and economic decline differently. Existing cultural norms and social practices will play an important role in formulating their coping mechanisms. Some countries and societies are better at planning and implementing adaptation strategies to meet the hunger and unemployment challenges posed by climate change. The effectiveness and coping abilities of existing institutions of the countries also play a significant role.

No doubt that the adverse impact of climate change will be more severe on the people who are living in the poor and developing economies. Climate change will not only force more people back to poverty, but it can increase the possibility

of more violent conflicts, particularly in societies and countries affected by poor governance, weak institutions and low social capital.

Ziabari: Since 2008, nearly 24 million people have been displaced annually on account of catastrophic weather events. One of the concerns scholars raise about these climate refugees is that they lack formal recognition, definition and protection under international law. What is the most viable way to help them?

Swain: Global warming leads to sea-level rise and that is taking away the living space and source of livelihood of millions of people. There are many estimates regarding the size of the climate-induced population migration the world is going to witness in the future. For the last two, three decades, several forecasts have been made, but there are no reliable estimates of climate change forced migration as the future forecasts vary from 25 million to 1 billion by 2050. Not only there is a lack of any agreement over the numbers on climate migration, there is also no clarity on how many of them will move beyond their national borders. But there is no doubt that climate change will displace a large number of people and will force them to move to other countries in search of survival.

However, climate or environment-forced migration is not included in the definition of a refugee as established under international law, which are the most widely used instruments providing the basis for granting asylum to persons in need of protection. International refugee agencies in the past have not been able to save the lives of many environmentally displaced people in the south due to the absence of their mandate.

In this context, the recent ruling of the Supreme Court of New Zealand is quite significant. Though the court recognized the genuineness of a Kiribati man's contention of being displaced from his homeland due to sea-level rise, it could not grant him refugee status, reasoning that he wouldn't face prosecution if he would return home. So, there is a need for the definitional fiat of "refugee" to be expanded to address the increasing challenge of climate-forced population displacement and possible international migration.

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