

Fair Observer

Monthly

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CITY OF WESTMINSTER

Fair Observer Monthly



July 2019

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International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

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Is Europe Ready to Do More on Security Matters?

Orsolya Raczova

July 17, 2019

Brexit creates challenges as well as opportunities for the European security landscape.

The notion of a stronger European security framework is gaining momentum again. While the history of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) goes back to the Western European Union, more recent initiatives include 11 member states calling for a new defense policy and a more majority-based decision-making procedure to be put in place on defense matters to prevent individual members obstructing initiatives through their veto power.

Recently, doubts about the United States' willingness to defend the European continent if needed have arisen when President Donald Trump has publicly questioned the relevance of NATO, Europe's financial contributions to the alliance and the fact that American soldiers have to sacrifice their lives in NATO missions.

In the meantime, external security threats — for instance related to Russia — are causing concerns among many European states. With the historical ability to rely on US support now in question, European leaders are rethinking regional military capabilities and know-how. Many have doubts that the EU is able to defend itself

against an unforeseen attack in the potential absence of fulfilling the Article 5 guarantees of the North Atlantic Treaty.

European Security Landscape

Defense and security are a complex issue to discuss when it comes to the EU. The union is made up of 28 member states (pending Britain's exit), with institutions on both EU as well as national levels. Security and defense related decisions are up to each member state, which reflects on how developed national military capabilities are or how high defense expenditure across the member states is. Although many among the allies have increased their defense spending in the past years, currently just six European Union countries are meeting the NATO requirement of 2% or more of national GDP. It is fair to say that there has been development on a national level, but there is more to be done.

According to official estimates, member states' defense spending amounts to more than €200 billion (\$224 billion), while their armed forces amount to 1.4 million soldiers. Due to lack of coordination and cooperation, duplications and fragmentations are unavoidable, while the effectiveness of spending has also been questioned. New EU-level initiatives aim to overcome such problems and allow for better coordination and cooperation on defense matters.

The idea of a European Defence Fund was announced by the president of the European Commission at the time, Jean-

Claude Juncker, in 2016, and although it is still subject to further approval during the upcoming negotiations concerning the 2021-27 EU budget, a partial agreement on the fund was already adopted by the European Parliament in April, amounting to €11.5 billion (in 2018 prices). The fund, together with the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), will allow member states to cooperate on defense projects and develop capabilities or invest in shared projects.

When it comes to matters related to security, decisions are either taken unanimously on the EU level or left entirely to individual member states. In such decision-making procedures, countries skeptical of deeper European defense cooperation or those fearing potential decoupling, discrimination or duplication of existing efforts by NATO, have the opportunity to intervene. The UK has used its veto power over the past years when it came to key security questions. However, Britain is set to leave the EU, possibly as early as October, which will ultimately have an impact on European security matters.

A Window of Opportunity

Brexit creates challenges as well as opportunities for the European security landscape. The UK is arguably the strongest military power in the bloc, and its loss will be reflected on the EU's total military capability. However, the focus should not be primarily on what capabilities and know-how the country has, but how much it is willing to contribute. The reality is that

Britain's personnel contribution to CSDP missions has been rather small compared to the fact that it has the largest defense budget in the EU, reaching the 2% target.

The UK contributes 2.3% of total member state personnel across missions, but it plays a more significant role when it comes to intelligence sharing, providing expertise and equipment, as well as financial contributions to the EU budget.

Just like a coin has two sides, so does Brexit. The UK's departure means the exit of an influential but skeptical country and so an opportunity for those who wish to do more on security. For instance, Britain vetoed the creation of the European Operational Headquarters in 2011, opposed to increase the European Defence Agency's budget on a number of occasions, and opposed the creation of a single European army.

Now, pro-integration countries such as France and Germany have a chance to establish a more united Europe and aim for consensus in areas where cooperation has so far been elusive.

Moreover, apart from Britain, France is the only European country with a nuclear deterrent, and while losing the UK has an ultimate impact on Europe's deterrence capabilities, it gives a potential opportunity to France to emerge as a leader on security issues.

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that key security initiatives came shortly after Britain's 2016 EU referendum. In 2017,

Germany and France announced the development of common capabilities to strengthen the EU as a European Security Union. Apart from the announcement of the EU's Global Strategy in 2016 calling on the EU to become a global security actor, concrete initiatives include the launch of PESCO and the European Defence Fund, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence and the European Defence Industrial Development Programme. For example, PESCO was agreed upon in December 2017, with the exception of only Malta, Denmark and the UK.

Germany is a strong proponent of doing security cooperation and ensuring that Europe speaks with one voice. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has pointed out that the unanimity that applies to security and defense issues should not apply to every security decision.

On the other hand, differences in strategic culture and approaches to integration are already visible between the two countries, while domestic political uncertainties further obfuscate future cooperation opportunities.

Challenges Remain

The reality is that in the absence of strong supranational institutions, domestic politics will continue to impede EU integration in the long run. Nevertheless, new initiatives on funding, institutionalization or cooperation structures can only succeed with the support of other member states outside of the French-German nexus.

There is no doubt that doing more on security has been challenging. Potential legal complications arise when it comes to talks on deployment of a common army. This initiative depends on the strategic culture and the different regulation frameworks of member states. For example, while in France the president's approval is required for troop deployment, in Germany it is up to parliament. Moreover, defense and security related information is sensitive and often classified, so increasing sharing channels is not favored by many for a reason.

Every region and each country has different strategic priorities, and the size of defense budgets varies. There is no question that the future of European security also depends on how much member states are willing to spend on defense. It is a good sign that, for instance, Germany's downward trend was reversed, from 1.18% in 2015 to 1.23% in 2018.

It is fair to conclude that many countries recognize the rising threat from Russia and have concerns about the future of the continent's safety in light of recent political developments in the US. The questions on Europe being able to defend itself and the frustration over individual member states' weakness compared to global actors like China or the US are being discussed.

With Brexit looming large and transatlantic relations strained, Europe has a window of opportunity to do more on security. The question remains as to what extent

member states will be able to overcome their differences to reach a common goal.

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Will Boris Johnson Be the New Face of Britain?

Peter Isackson
July 17, 2019

Boris Johnson's march to Downing Street is becoming a surreal, even psychedelic, cartoon hovering between tragedy and farce.

Boris Johnson, the former UK foreign secretary who is expected to replace Prime Minister Theresa May, earned his right to reign over the presumably final act of Brexit by becoming a media superstar. Adept at multiple roles to keep his audience entertained, in a recent performance he even donned the mantle of a contemplative

spiritual leader preoccupied with the notion of mortality.

Like a 14th-century monk troubled by the arrival of the plague that had suddenly thrown Europe into a panic, the former journalist and current politician, preacher and occasional snake-oil salesman offered us the macabre fruit of his meditation, not just on Britain's fate, but also on the cruel inevitability of death that looms over politicians who sin against the logic of history — a logic that he, the seer and visionary, alone understands.

A growing faction of Tory "remainers" — those who voted to stay inside the European Union in the 2016 Brexit referendum — appears to be plotting to thwart Johnson's grand plan. This consists of emulating the current US president by fomenting chaos and exploiting it as his trump card (pun intended). This should serve to neutralize all other outcomes and secure the power that Johnson needs to be free to act in the only way he knows how: with no sense of accountability.

Referring to the impending initiative of the Tory dissidents who seek to mobilize Parliament to ban a no-deal Brexit — in which the UK would crash out of the EU — the prophet Boris drew on a Biblical metaphor to illustrate his personal reading of one of the great principles of democracy: "I think if we now block it as parliamentarians we will reap the whirlwind and face mortal retribution from the electorate."

Boris Johnson's Political Theology

Despite his nod to the Bible (Hosea 8.7), Johnson defines himself as a secular democrat ever attentive to *vox populi* (the voice of the people). The whirlwind of mortality he mentions is simply a future election, not an act of God.

This contrasts refreshingly with the theocratic George W. Bush, the former US president, who claimed to follow *vox dei* (the voice of God) in his acts of retribution against real and imaginary evildoers. It also contrasts with Bush's ever accommodating and perennially moralizing sidekick, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who, guided by his Christian faith, never believed in the outdated nonsense of turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:38-40). Johnson steers clear of explicit theology, preferring to let the (whirl)wind of popular opinion guide his political thinking.

As a populist (i.e., narcissistic) leader, Johnson has committed himself to a unique cause: using his declared service to his voters to serve himself. This means his whole philosophy is founded on what is increasingly emerging as the central principle for modern Western democracies, the key to getting elected and holding onto power: understanding and exploiting the undifferentiated mob's spiteful thirst for vengeance and retribution, even when there is nothing in particular to avenge. Vengeance, after all, is the kind of emotion that motivates people to come out and vote without being troubled by nuance.

Like Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte, Jair Bolsonaro, Victor Orban and Matteo Salvini, Johnson sees the anger of the people (*ira populi* or democratic retribution) as the safer and reassuringly secular equivalent of divine justice. It conveniently removes direct responsibility from the politicians who know how to respect (and then hide behind) the clamor of the mob. Instead of judging them for the destruction they inevitably perpetrate, the god of history can put the blame on the people whose sovereign will they have democratically agreed to serve.

When challenged on his abusive, racist-tinged, culturally patronizing language, such as his remark that Muslim women wearing burkas "look like letterboxes," Johnson summoned the deepest resources of his natural humility to reply: "I'm sorry for the offence I've caused but I will continue to speak as directly as I can because that's what I think the British public want." That was days before explaining that his remarks consisted of "a strong liberal defense of women's right to wear the burka," while affirming it's all about the fact that "we love each other in a Christian spirit ... or a non-Christian spirit ... whatever."

This last remark, despite — or rather thanks to — his deliberately confused and confusing hesitations, drew peals of what some might interpret as cynical and complicit laughter from his partisan audience. Only Boris could affirm in public that an obvious racist insult was an act of cross-cultural love. (US President Donald Trump might be tempted to try the same

thing, but he hasn't learned the art of getting people to laugh in complicity, only to cheer at his impudence).

Boris the penitent will not change his ways. He responds to a higher calling, the voice of the people, the ultimate arbiter of morality, as he in return provides the people — Christians and non-Christians alike — with the message they so desperately want to hear. Although he may never have visited the state of Alabama, he has clearly integrated into his moral code and mindset the motto of that American state's Army National Guard: *populi voluntati subsumus* ("to the will of the people we subordinate ourselves"). Like the good soldiers of the American South, Boris Johnson is all about obedience and personal sacrifice.

Johnson cites another reason for us to believe that, despite his reluctance and sincere sorrow for offending people (especially those less likely to vote), he must not forsake his sacred responsibilities. He has been called upon to fulfill his democratic duty and never fail to produce the kind of provocative, injurious language that he believes "the British public want." To refuse would be to betray his democratic vocation. As he explains, people are unhappy with politicians because "we are muffling and veiling our language." Boris prefers to muffle and veil his ideas.

Paradoxically — and this is something Friar Boris might want to meditate on — recent polls show that "just 14% of the public believe he is honest and has a 'good moral character.'" For someone who believes in

vox populi, this could be a problem. Even if elected by his Conservative Party and confirmed by Parliament (which itself is uncertain), he will take office as the least trusted and most unpopular British prime minister ever. If you thought Brexit was a picture of chaos, wait till you see Boris at 10 Downing Street.

Following in Julius Caesar's Footsteps

Boris Johnson has a sense of his historical mission. Interviewed on talkRadio, Johnson confirmed his preoccupations with mortality as he cited the inevitability of the latest of a series of ever prolonged Brexit deadlines, this one scheduled appropriately for the night of Halloween: "We are getting ready to come out on 31 October." Asked to confirm this, he added: "Do or die. Come what may."

Could the author of "The Dream of Rome" be thinking or even dreaming about Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon in 49 BC? Didn't Caesar say something along the lines of "the do or die is cast" (*alea jacta est*, to be literal, since we're in the mood for quoting in Latin)? Caesar's defiant, come-what-may act in 49 BC launched a civil war, which could become the case for Britain if a no-deal Brexit under Johnson's watch takes place. The Rubicon might then be the Northern Irish border (or even the Scottish border).

"Do or die" — an expression originally penned by Robert Burns in his ode to Scottish hero Robert Bruce, battling the English — expresses an attitude of political

and military defiance. It also conveys a belief in fatality. Boris may even be anticipating his own Ides of March. In one of his radio interviews, Johnson complained of the injustice he is subjected to: "People are trying to stop me achieving what I want to achieve." He also insisted: "The longer we spend on things extraneous to what I want to do, the bigger the waste of time." He hasn't quite attained Caesar's level of hubris, who famously defied the dire warnings of the soothsayers, though that could change once he has reached his goal. He does make it clear that it's all about "what I want to do" and anything else can only be a distraction.

The media unanimously expect Johnson to emerge victorious on July 23 as his lead over his opponent, Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, among the Tory electorate is unlikely to fade. A former boss of Johnson's, when he was still a journalist, predicts that his election to lead the Conservative Party "will signal Britain's abandonment of any claim to be a serious country."

Despite a high level of dissatisfaction, if not dread, across the political spectrum at the prospect of seeing Johnson in Downing Street, Hunt, who could have profited from the various controversies and scandals around Johnson's behavior, has led an inept campaign in his futile attempt to discredit the Boris brand. Instead of opposing his rival's controversial policies designed to seduce Tory voters while running the risk of upsetting the rest of Britain, Hunt has followed the strategy of affirming that if it works for Boris, it will work for Jeremy.

Hunt has promised to do exactly the same thing as Johnson, but more seriously. He failed to realize that simply affirming that he, Jeremy Hunt, isn't a public clown whereas Johnson obviously will convince no one. Imitating a clown but not knowing how to draw laughs makes one not just a clown, but an unfunny one. The one thing that works for Johnson is the fact that, being such an oafish comedian, people (erroneously) attribute to him the innocence of a clown. That alone explains why he refuses to comb his ragged blond mop.

After Jeremy Hunt publicly announced his intention to follow Boris Johnson's lead and accept a no-deal Brexit at the next deadline on October 31 if no new EU withdrawal treaty could be negotiated, his BBC interviewer asked him "if he would be willing to look the owners of family businesses in the eye and say they should be prepared to see their companies go bust." Hunt replied: "I would do so but I'd do it with a heavy heart precisely because of the risks." When the journalist asked him to explain his reasoning concerning the risks, Hunt explained "that a no-deal Brexit was necessary to maintain the UK's image abroad as 'a country where politicians do what the people tell them to do.'"

Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, it's difficult to know from reading it on the page which one is speaking, especially since, on their own admission, they have no thoughts of their own but only know how to apply what the people have told them to do. The two Tory candidates to succeed

Prime Minister May see themselves — as May herself insisted she also did — as slaves of the people, robots programmed to apply a decision the people made in June of 2016.

Following Johnson's expected election, one major question will remain (since remaining in the EU is no longer an option). What mortal retribution is awaiting not just the Conservative Party but also the nation that, a little over three years ago, bought into Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage's comedy act built on what they later admitted were lies?

As Jeremy Hunt has rather realistically pointed out, that retribution will most likely come not from a democratic whirlwind, but from the economy itself as businesses falter, Scotland revolts, chaos reigns on the Northern Irish border and the vaunted trade deals fail to materialize. What message will the people then have for their new leader, if any? And will it be in a language they can understand? (Presumably they only understand binary choices: yes or no, leave or remain).

Of course, in the great British political tradition, Parliament itself has been the institution called upon to play the role of not just expressing, but especially of interpreting the will of the people. The first battle Boris Johnson will face will be with Parliament itself. And the real suspense for the nation and the outside world will be about seeing and feeling the shift of forces that will inevitably take place, leaving everyone guessing about where it may lead.

Three years of guessing obviously wasn't enough.

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Africa's Long Road to Democracy

Swaleh Ochieng

July 18, 2019

Across Africa, politics has been turned into a do-or-die trial, accomplished in a vacuum of democracy amidst rampant human rights violations.

The violation of human rights across the African continent began as a struggle for self-rule in the mid-20th century. Except for Liberia, which European countries assumed was an American colony, and Ethiopia, which was never colonized due to Haile Selassie's resistance to Italian invasion, Africans waged bloody guerrilla warfare against the colonial powers scrambling to keep control.

Africans yearned for self-rule in order to be free to practice their local religions, take control of their land and live under their own leaders. By the end of the 20th century, all the countries that had been colonized had attained freedom and established republics across the continent. Africans were suddenly left in an experimental phase where they were left to administer for themselves.

Yet this brief moment of liberation and hope was quickly overshadowed by the emergence of Africa's own colonizers — totalitarian leaders like Mobutu Sese Seko, living lives of opulence at the expense their citizens. Mobutu has been accused of massive plunder during his reign as the ruler of what was then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to The New York Times, he is alleged to have embezzled up to \$5 billion during his rule. Mobutu is said to have chartered private jets to go shopping in Paris, accompanied by his friends and family.

Mobutu, who seized power through a bloodless coup in 1960, was behind the execution of his predecessor, Patrice Lumumba, in 1961. According to Executed Today, in 1966 four members of his cabinet, including Prime Minister Evarisite Kimba, were executed before 100,000 people for plotting against the president.

The Ghosts Keep Coming Back

Another leader who rose to power at the early days of Africa's transformation was Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, a freedom

fighter-turned-tyrant who introduced drastic land policies that saw white settlers lose their land to his cronies. Leaders of Zimbabwe's ruling party, Zanu-PF, routinely raped female guerilla fighters during the Chimurenga Wars. Entire families and communities were also subjected to rape as punishment for disloyalty in the 1980s.

During Mugabe's rule, which lasted nearly four decades, from 1980 to 2017, when he was ousted by the military in favor of his former aide, friend and vice president, Emmerson Mnangangwa. Zimbabwe's agriculture-based economy never recovered after the shock of land reforms followed by isolation from the international community caused by Mugabe's poor relations with most Western leaders. This led to economic sanctions being imposed on Zimbabwe in 2001 and 2002 by the European Union due to concerns over human rights violations, restrictions on the media and political violence.

At the same time, the United States sanctioned Zimbabwe for its involvement in the Congo conflict and violent land takeovers from the white settlers. The country's currency became weak and almost useless due to poor economic policies, corruption and uncontrolled printing of money.

Inflation rates had risen from 17% in 1990, 48% in 1991 231,000,000% in 2008, meaning a banknote of 10,000,000 Zimbabwean dollars could buy no more than basic commodities like bread. The introduction of multiple denominations of

the currency meant people had to carry bags of cash just to buy food.

In East Africa, Ugandans had to put up with a bellicose Idi Amin Dada Oumee, whose eight-year rule between 1971 and 1979 rivaled the colonial abuses. According to reports from numerous international human rights groups, by the time Idi Amin went into exile in Saudi Arabia in 1978, he had caused the death of close to 300,000 people Uganda.

According to The New York Times, Amin used death squads and the military police force of about 18,000 men to murder shopkeepers, clerks, farmers and students who were either shot dead or forced to cudgel each other to death as police watched. These henchmen were mostly recruited from Idi Amin's home region near the border with Sudan that is dominated by the Kakwas ethnic group.

The 1972 failed coup attempt by supporters of the first president of Uganda exiled in Tanzania, Milton Obote, was met with a retaliatory massacre. It later emerged that civilian lives had been lost, including many disappearances. Among those killed by Amin's army included religious leaders, members of other ethnic groups, journalists, artists, bureaucrats, judges, students, lawyers, intellectuals, foreign nationals and petty criminals. When Amin died in July 2003 in Saudi Arabia, where he had been exiled since being deposited in January 1979, no charges had been brought against him.

Follow the Footsteps

Most African countries have since gotten rid of their founding fathers like Omar Bongo of Gabon, who led the country for four decades until 2009, when he died in office, and Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, who was overthrown in 2015.

It is natural to expect Africa to have made strides and learned from these past political missteps, but that has not been the case. Most current African leaders have followed in the footsteps of leaders who came before them in suppressing the rights of their constituents in line with the famous phrase in East Africa, "fwata nyayo" — follow the footsteps — coined by Kenya's second president, Daniel Arap Moi, who vowed to follow in the footsteps of founding president, Jomo Kenyatta.

According to Kenyan economist Martin Oduor's biography of Moi, "Beyond The Shadows Of My Dream," his presidency almost brought Kenyan economy to its knees, thanks to massive looting and corruption in his government and poor international relations. A "dream team" consisting of six professionals in the fields of economics, tourism and finance had to be formed with supervision of the World Bank in 1999 to repair Kenya's damaged human rights image and the economy. Unfortunately, the team never achieved its goals due to sabotage from President Moi's inner circle whose interests were threatened by its activity.

As most of the African countries are marking half a century since attaining self-rule, political opponents continue to die or disappear. Across Africa, a rise to power has been turned into a do-or-die trial, accomplished in a vacuum of democracy amidst rampant human rights violations. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's 2017 Democracy Index, Mauritius is the only country in Africa with a full democracy. The country has managed to put up strong democratic structural governance through observation of a parliamentary democracy.

However, just Cape Verde, Botswana, South Africa, Senegal and Ghana are considered to have a flawed democracy, while the rest of the countries are split between so-called "hybrid regimes," like Mali and Kenya, or outright authoritarian rule, like the DRC and the Central African Republic.

These democratic flaws are manifest across the continent, often in violent ways. Just weeks before the 2017 general election in Kenya, the director of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission's (IEBC), Christopher Chege Msando, went missing. Msando, who was mandated with overseeing the electronic transmission of the polls, was later found dead, his body dumped in a thicket in Kikuyu, 22 kilometers outside the capital Nairobi. According to Kenya's chief government pathologist, Johassen Oduor, Msando died from strangulation.

The country had resorted to electronic voting process following disputes in

previous polls following widespread voter fraud, denying citizens their democratic right to free and fair elections. Msando's murder added tension to an already highly contested election. Speaking on national television hours before his disappearance, Msando had assured the country that the system was a 100% temper-proof. At his funeral, former Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga alleged that Msando was killed because he refused to surrender the password that was used to rig the elections.

Unfortunately, he was not the last to die during this election period. Many lives were lost following the announcement of the results by the IEBC chairman, Wafula Chebukati, on August 10. According to the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, 37 were killed due to excessive use of force by police during the quelling of protests against Uhuru Kenyatta's reelection.

Among those killed were two children. Six-months-old baby Pendo was beaten on the head with a baton when the police raided a house in the opposition stronghold city of Kisumu, few hours after the announcement of the election results. In Nairobi's Mathare slum, 9-year-old Stephanie Moraa was killed while playing on the balcony of her parent's apartment. Moraa was killed by a stray bullet fired by anti-riot police following run-ins between the police and opposition party supporters.

This was not the first time Kenya was experiencing election violence. According to Human Rights Watch, over 1,000 people

died and 500,000 were displaced following a two months-long political crisis during the 2007-08 election.

Kenya has had a high record of disappearances and murder dating back to the earlier days of self-rule following independence from Britain in 1963. The most notable was the murder of Kenyan Tom Mboya — trade unionist, educator, pan-Africanist, author and independence activist — who was murdered on July 5, 1969, in broad daylight in Nairobi's business district.

Confusion and Uncertainty

On February 15, when Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) pushed forward the general elections citing logistical difficulties, a large part of the electorate was affectively denied its constitutional right to vote. People had to reschedule their travel plans as one is only eligible to vote at the polling station within his/her registration location. Owing to the high level of poverty in Africa's largest democracy, most couldn't afford to either stay the week or return a week later.

When the elections finally came, they turned bloody. According to civil society organizations, at least 35 Nigerians were killed in the violence that was inflamed by politicians and their aides inciting supporters. The elections, which were won by the incumbent president, Muhammad Buhari, left citizens divided along regional, ethnic and religious lines.

Suspicious have also circulated that attacks by the armed group Boko Haram could be politically motivated due to their alignment to some politicians and political parties who have funded the Islamist militia's activities. Speaking during a press conference on January 6, Alhaji Mohammed Imam, who lost in the February polls after running for the Borno state governorship, said that there was an urgent need to set up an inquiry into the attacks. Following President Buhari's inauguration on May 29, the government is yet to follow up on claims of Boko Haram's interference in the February elections.

Boko Haram is not the only militia on the continent with political connections. In April 2015, the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab carried out its attack on the Garissa University in northeastern Kenya that killed 148 and left at least 70 students injured. Aden Duale, National Assembly majority leader, warned that he was going to reveal the names of politicians and powerful people in Kenya who fund or sympathize with the group — a promise which four years down the line Kenyans are still waiting for. The al-Qaeda-affiliated group has been terrorizing Kenya since its forces deployed as part of the African Union Mission to Somalia in a bid to flush out al-Shabaab.

From Bad to Worse

Since the government of president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi took power in Egypt after overthrowing the democratically-elected President Mohamed Morsi in 2013 after just two years in office, the North African

country has been hostile to press freedom and put in place strict internet censorship rules. Morsi died in court on June 17, provoking an outcry against his alleged mistreatment in prison and denial of medical care.

On December 20, 2016, an Egyptian national and journalist for the Qatari network Al Jazeera, Mohammed Hussein, was arrested when he returned to Egypt for his annual leave. Hussein, who remains detained to this day without trial, was accused by Egypt's interior ministry of "disseminating false news and receiving monetary funds from foreign authorities in order to defame the state's reputation." Despite a court order for his release being upheld in May, Egyptian authorities have opened a new investigation against him.

On February 18, an American journalist, David Kirkpatrick, was held for seven hours without food or water before being sent back on a flight to London. According to Al Jazeera, Kirkpatrick, the former New York Times Cairo bureau chief, was held at the airport where his mobile phone was confiscated. The government is yet to offer any explanation on the grounds of his blocked entry.

Since coming to power, Sisi instituted a regime with an even more appalling human rights record than that of Morsi's predecessor, Hosni Mubarak, who ruled Egypt from 1981 to 2011, before becoming one of the most prominent leaders to fall in the Arab Spring.

Sisi's government has been accused of detaining at least 60,000 political prisoners either without a fair trial or no trial at all. According to Human Rights Watch, the president has used counterterrorism laws to prosecute peaceful dissidents, while the police and the national security agency have systematically used torture and enforced disappearances.

On April 20, Egyptians voted in a referendum to amend the country's constitution that will allow Sisi to stay in power until 2030 if he wins the next elections in 2024. The amendments, approved by the electoral body on April 23, also give the military vast powers to intervene in the political process without being accused of overstepping its role, as well as giving the president powers over judicial appointments.

In a country with extensive censorship restrictions on social media and independent news sites being shut down for criticizing the government, many see these amendments as paving the way for outright dictatorship.

Crop of New Visionaries

Young Africans who have yearned for change or showed signs of rebellion have been met with a robust response. In 2017, when 37-year-old Rwandan businesswoman and women's rights activist Diane Shima Rwigyira announced that she would be running for office against veteran politician and current president, Paul Kagame, she was arrested alongside her mother and

sister. Rwagara and her mother were charged with forgery and tax evasion.

Rwagara, a fierce critic of Kagame, was earlier barred by the Rwandan electoral authorities citing her use of names of deceased people on her list of signatures as well as the names of others who belong to a rival political party. She was unlawfully detained along with her mother for over a year and charged with treason, facing 20 years in prison had the court found her guilty.

Her story could well be related to that of Ugandan pop star-turned-politician Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, better known as Bobi Wine. The ardent critic of long-serving President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, was detained following a political campaign in the northwestern town of Arua last August. Ugandan authorities said Wine was among the group who threw stones at the president's convoy, charging him with treason. Upon his release, Wine, who visibly struggled to walk during his court hearing and alleged he was tortured in detention, had to seek medical treatment in the United States.

Wine was again arrested on April 29 and held for three days in a maximum-security prison. He was charged with incitement and leading anti-government protests, which the court said he committed in July 2018. But Wine is popular among the youth and has just announced he will be running for president in the elections due in 2021.

Uganda is one of many African countries where demonstrations are often met with the use of teargas, water cannon, rubber bullets and, in some cases, live bullets to disperse crowds despite most of the countries' constitutions allowing for peaceful protest. The Ugandan government has also gone as far as tracking down social media activists who use the internet to advocate for change. Despite continued public outcry and pressure from the international community, there are no signs political detentions across Africa will be stopping any time soon.

Not Enough

In March this year, Congo's newly elected president, Felix Tshisekedi, freed 700 political prisoners who were detained by his predecessor, Joseph Kabila. In Sudan, former President Omar al-Bashir ordered, on International Women's Day, the release of women political prisoners detained during protests that have rocked Sudan since December 2018.

That was not enough to quell public unrest as protest continued. Giving into pressure, the military suspended the constitution and arrested al-Bashir on April 11. But talks between the opposition and the military stalled after the two parties failed to reach an agreement on the transition to civilian rule. The opposition has accused Egypt, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia of interfering.

On May 13, Sudan's prosecutor announced that Omar al-Bashir had been charged with

the killing of protestors. This came few weeks after the prosecutor had ordered al-Bashir to be interrogated for money laundering and financing terrorism. Al-Bashir is also wanted by the International Criminal Court for genocide and war crimes and genocide in Darfur, where some 300,000 were killed.

June 3 marked the worst violence in the crisis as the country's infamous Rapid Support Forces — formerly the Janjaweed militia that brutalized Darfur — attacked and burned down the protesters' camp, killing at least 30.

As a result, the African Union suspended Sudan's membership, but condemnations of violence by the United Nations, Britain, Norway and the US seem to have fallen on deaf ears in Khartoum. While the ruling military council and the opposition did sign a deal on July 17 agreeing on a transitional period to full civilian rule, whether the army will relinquish its three-decade hold on power is still under question.

This all makes for a grim picture of human rights and African democracy. But people are becoming more empowered and positively aggressive, getting their voices back and ready to risk it all to keep the leaders in check. Across the continent, Africans — especially the younger generation — have united thanks to the use of internet and cross-border university enrollment, finding that they may be fighting the same cause.

With a youth population of 226 million, Africa seems to be headed in the right direction when it comes to political reform. The long wait for democracy could be nearing its goal in the next decades after almost a century of dangerous, hard work and resistance by previous generations.

Africa's young people can see that the old guard failed to make any meaningful changes to benefit the continent. Recently, youths in Algeria and France played a major role in ousting President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had ruled for two decades and was planning to run for the presidency in the April elections before giving in to protests. It is now only a matter of time. In the next two decades, most of the long-serving "African presidents for life" will not be in power, driven out not by age but by demands for change and a brighter future by the youth. As witnessed in Uganda, Algeria and Sudan, among others, the continent is suddenly very alert.

For the first time in history, an African president, South Africa's Jacob Zuma, was forced to resign and is currently under official inquiry for corruption. Although there is still work to be done for democracy across the continent, Africa is on its way.

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Google and Our Collective AI Future

Daniel Wagner

July 19, 2019

Artificial intelligence is already a fact of life and its potential will grow exponentially, along with its applicability and impact.

The pace of change in the artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning arena is already breathtaking, and it promises to continue to upend conventional wisdom and surpass some of our wildest expectations as it proceeds on what appears at times to be an unalterable and pre-ordained course. Along the way, much of what we now consider to be “normal” or “acceptable” will change. Some technology companies are already envisioning what our collective AI future will look like and just how far the boundaries of normality and acceptability can be stretched.

In 2016, for example, Google produced a video that provided a stunningly ambitious and unsettling look at how some people within the company envision using the information it collects in the future. Shared internally at the time within Google, the video imagines a future of total data collection, where Google subtly nudge users into alignment with the company’s own objectives, custom-prints personalized devices to collect more data, and even guides the behavior of entire populations to help solve global challenges such as poverty and disease.

Entitled “The Selfish Ledger,” the nine-minute film maintained that the way we use our smartphones creates a constantly evolving representation of who we are, which it terms a “ledger,” positing that these data profiles can be built up, used to modify behaviors and transferred from one user to another. This ledger of our device use — the data on our actions, decisions, preferences, movements and relationships — is something that can be passed on to other users, much as genetic information is passed on through the generations.

Building on the ledger notion, the video presents a conceptual Resolutions by Google system in which Google prompts users to select a life goal and then guides them toward it in every interaction they have with their phone. The ledger’s requirement for ever more data and the presumption that billions of individuals would be just fine with a Google-governed world are unnerving. The video envisions a future in which goal-driven automated ledgers become widely accepted. It is the ledger, rather than an end user, that makes decisions about what might be good for the user, seeking to fill gaps in its knowledge in a “Black Mirror”-type utopian reality.

Like other firms who are leading the pack in AI, Google is increasingly inquisitive about its users, assertive in how it wishes to interact them, and pressing existing limits about what is considered an acceptable level of intrusion into their lives. Much of this may be welcomed, based on how we have already been “programmed” to accept the company’s unsolicited overtures and

now consider them to be perfectly normal and acceptable.

As the ethical deployment of emerging technologies — and AI specifically — continue to be subjects of public discourse, Google appears to be unfazed by the potential ethical implications of its current products, practices and vision of the future, or whether it is overstepping its bounds by proceeding apace to implement its vision. Google wants to understand and control the future before it occurs by, in essence, creating it and using AI and machine learning to help interpret and manage it. That is both an welcome and chilling proposition, but the truth is that our collective technological future is unfolding at lightning speed, and no single government or company can control it.

So, is Google to be commended for attempting to contain and craft the future, or should it be feared and resisted at every turn? Is there a middle ground? Will the fact that most consumers do not know the difference, or necessarily care, enable organizations like Google to basically do whatever they want? Is our great leap into the AI unknown meant to be purely exhilarating, or should we be intuitively cautious and approach it with care? The truth is that there is no single answer to these questions, nor is there one that is necessarily a right or wrong answer.

Artificial Intelligence Is Here

Artificial intelligence is already a fact of life and its potential will grow exponentially,

along with its applicability and impact. Just as manned flight could only have occurred once combustion engines technically enabled it, the use of graphics cards, creation of custom hardware, the rise of cloud computing and the growth in computing capabilities — all occurring at the same time — have made AI a force to be reckoned with. Being able to rent cloud space or outsource computational resources means relative costs have come down to earth and will continue to do so. The widespread use of open-source, internet-based tools and the explosive growth in data generation have also made a big difference.

So much data is now generated on a daily basis globally that only gigantic infusions of data are likely to make a difference in the growth of artificial intelligence going forward. That implies that only the largest, most technically sophisticated firms with the capability to consumer and process such volumes of data will benefit from it in a meaningful way in the future.

Attempting to govern AI will not be an easy or pretty process, for there are overlapping frames of reference and many of the sectors in which AI will have the most impact are already heavily regulated. It will take a long time to work through the various questions that are being raised. Many are straightforward questions about technology, but many others are about what kind of societies we want to live in and what type of values we wish to adopt in the future.

If AI forces us to look ourselves in the mirror and tackle such questions with vigor, transparency and honesty, then its rise will be doing us a great favor. History would suggest, however, that the things that should really matter will either get lost in translation or be left by the side of the road in the process.

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Donald Trump: The Biggest Coward of Them All

S. Suresh

July 22, 2019

The president's bullying of the four first-term Democratic congresswomen in the name of patriotism is nothing but cowardice.

On July 14, in a series of tweets, US President Donald Trump told four "Progressive Democrat Congresswomen" — Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar,

Ayanna Presley and Rashida Tlaib — "to go back and fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came." Trump's tweets not only blatantly showcase his xenophobic and misogynistic outlook on life, but have successfully deepened the rift in the already polarized nation that America is today. In just a matter of days, "Send Her Back!" became a thunderous chant during a Trump campaign rally in North Carolina, in reference to Omar.

Trump lamely tried to distance himself from the racist chant, stating: "I felt a little badly about it. But I will say this, I did — and I started speaking very quickly." In fact, the president waited a full 13 seconds before he started speaking, visibly basking in the power of his words as the crowd chanted.

Ilhan Omar, a junior representative for Minnesota's 5th congressional district, epitomizes everything Trump hates: a Muslim immigrant woman who is also a person of color. Attacking Omar and the three other American-born congresswomen — nicknamed "The Squad" — and gloating at the rallying cry of "Send Her Back!" may stoke the ego of America's narcissistic president. But what it really shows is his deep-rooted fear of losing the 2020 election. In 2016, Trump successfully ran an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, anti-Obama campaign against Hillary Clinton with the rally chant "Lock Her Up!" to win the presidency.

Presiding over a corrupt and tumultuous first term in office, now into its third year, Trump knows that it will not be his policies

that ensure his reelection. He knows that he has to rely on a recipe that mixes fearmongering, bullying and nationalism to reenergize his voter base for a successful second bid. Even with an approval rating consistently below 50% in Gallup polls, Trump's confidence in his ability to pander to his voter base comes through loud and clear in a June interview with Time magazine, during which the president quipped when asked about reaching out to swing voters: "I think my base is so strong, I'm not sure I have to do that."

A Deal With the Devil

Not surprisingly, Democrats have been up in arms against Trump and his provocative tweets against the four newly elected congresswomen. The House moved quickly to condemn Trump's attack against them. House Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi called his tweets "racist" and, in an unprecedented scenario, this characterization remained in the formal rebuke of the president. Yet only four Republicans joined the Democrats in chastising Trump.

The Republican leadership still stands staunchly by Trump. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell believes "the president is onto something" and wants everyone to "tone the rhetoric down across the country," while accusing the Democrats of wanting "to take America into a socialist country." Senator Lindsay Graham, of South Carolina, one of Trump's strongest allies, refused to condemn his tweets as racist; instead, he went one step further and

described the four congresswomen as "a bunch of communists."

A marginally stronger condemnation by a Republican amounting to nothing more than a gentle slap on the wrist came from Utah Senator Mitt Romney when he said the president's behavior was "destructive, was demeaning, was dis-unifying and frankly was very wrong." In a similar vein, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, himself a son of a Cuban immigrant, said that "The president shouldn't have written that. I think it damages him but it damages the country and none of us should be participating in identity politics."

However, there is not a single elected Republican leader who had the courage to acknowledge the xenophobic, racist and misogynistic nature of Trump's behavior, let alone confront him, either today or in the past. While the Democrats continue to be outraged every time Trump goes on the offensive, they can do little to rein him in. Afraid of facing the president's wrath and fearing their own political survival by alienating his voter base, Republican leaders have chosen to stay silent and shift the blame onto progressive Democrats. While career politicians in both parties play into the hands of the political reality show orchestrated by Trump, America slowly but surely sinks deeper into an ethical and moral vacuum.

Daring Trump

Trump lost the popular vote in 2016 by a margin of 2.9 million ballots. But the fact

remains that there were 62 million American voters who wanted him in the White House. That Trump's crass language laced with racism, xenophobia and misogyny was acceptable to more than 46% of the voting population ought to make everyone wonder about the country's true moral fiber. Emboldened by an impotent GOP and an ineffective opposition from the Democrats, it has been left to a handful of people in Congress to challenge Trump's autocratic ways.

The four congresswomen has been unafraid to dare Trump and stand up for what they believe in. Omar, a Somali refugee who came into the United States in 1995, has battled the odds to win her seat in the House Representatives last year. She confronted Trump in a recent social media battle, tweeting that "It is time for us to stop allowing this president to make a mockery out of our constitution, it is time for us to impeach this president."

Omar did made the mistake by using anti-Semitic tropes earlier this year when she tweeted that "It's all about Benjamins baby," alluding to the reason behind the pro-Israeli stance among US politicians. The whole political establishment, comprising of both Democrats and Republicans, came down heavily against her critical view on Israel. Apparently, expressing an anti-Israeli opinion amounts to hating United States of America, as Senator Graham summed it up succinctly when he suggested that apart from being "communists," the four congresswomen "hate Israel, they hate our own country."

Anyone who has had a chance to see the junior representative from New York, Ocasio-Cortez, questioning the acting chief of Department of Homeland Security would understand why she makes the Republican establishment squirm in discomfort. The first black woman elected to Congress from Massachusetts, Pressley is unafraid to call Trump "an occupant" of the White House for the way he dishonors the country's highest office every day. "We are allowing a crooked CEO to run this country," says Tlaib, the representative from Michigan who is a daughter of Palestinian immigrants.

The double standard prevailing in American politics is appalling. The Republican establishment is willing and ready to give Trump a pass every time he makes a racist statement, be it against The Squad or standing up for white supremacists following the far-right Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in 2017 in which a peaceful protester, Heather Heyer, was killed. Trump has denigrated Hispanics, calling them criminals and rapists early on in his presidential campaign, and stoked Islamophobia time and time again over the last few years without facing any repercussions.

Yet when Rashida Tlaib stands up for the rights of Palestinians, or Ilhan Omar challenges the influence of Israeli money in American politics, they are quickly branded anti-Semitic and haters of America. Just because they are critical of its policies and are open about their criticism of it, it doesn't mean Omar, Tlaib, Pressley and

Ocasio-Cortez hate America. Far from being haters, they are the true patriots for trying to make the nation better. Bullying them for it in the name of patriotism is sheer cowardice — and Trump is the biggest coward of all.

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The World After Climate Change

Arek Sinanian

July 22, 2019

Arek Sinanian brings you the 2051 World Climate Order Committee Report on the state the planet and its recent achievements.

This is the first yearly report on the status of the World Climate Order as required by the Global Agreement on Climate Change (GACC), which was ratified by all nations in 2025.

The baseline report prepared by the Climate Order Committee was submitted to

the Global Chapter at The Hague-based International Court of Justice (ICJ), also known as the World Court, on December 1, 2050.

The international group of 50 experts (and their supporting teams of researchers), agreed upon by all nations, have carried out monitoring of every country's performance to date and rated their achievements against agreed and stipulated targets for greenhouse gas emission reductions. The targets were determined on the basis of each country's emissions since the Kyoto Protocol's monitoring program began in 1997.

In summary, the baseline report concluded:

1) Following the mixed success of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), measures to effectively reduce greenhouse gas emission in the years following the 1997 Kyoto Protocol and subsequent agreements, including the 2015 Paris Agreement, the UNFCCC was disbanded and a new system of greenhouse gas management was established — the World Climate Order — under which all nations agreed to comply with targets set by the Climate Order Committee and the Global Agreement on Climate Change (GACC).

This radical action followed revolt from citizens all around the world and which necessitated leaders of all nations to agree to act decisively.

2) The set greenhouse gas abatement targets are binding.

3) Under the GACC, countries that do not comply with their set targets can be prosecuted by the Climate Order Committee through the ICJ and fined harsh penalties. These penalties are deliberately set at levels that are higher than it would cost for the country to comply.

4) Collected funds from these penalties are then used to bring the particular country into compliance through the most cost-effective measures.

5) An additional tax is imposed by the World Climate Order on all fossil fuels manufactured and distributed. Taxes collected are added to the penalties collected to assist developing countries to meet their set targets. These taxes have effectively made fossil fuels a luxury item. As a result, the use of fossil fuels is now at a historic low, such that their exploration, manufacture and use are expected to continue to diminish at an increasing rate. Until an alternative fuel such as hydrogen is found, air travel is currently a highly-taxed and expensive option for most people.

6) These punitive measures have resulted in unprecedented global action to significantly reduce carbon emissions. Since 2025, reductions in global carbon emissions have averaged 10% per year and have overtaken the effect of population increases. Carbon reductions at these levels are expected to bring global levels to the desired ones

within the next decade. The achievements just in the last two decades have included:

Health Outcomes

There has been a shift in the assessment of climate change impacts more toward the social and health impact to communities of more frequent and severe occurrences of extreme weather conditions, but also in the impacts of air pollution resulting from the combustion of fossil fuels.

Transport

More than 60% of all road vehicles (private and commercial) sold were plug-in electric and, with all the solar power being generated in so many households and factories, can recharge their fifth-generation batteries in just 20 minutes using renewable energy. All countries have now implemented plans for public transport to be a priority over the construction of highways, which previously encouraged more cars on the road. In addition, 80% of all public transit buses are now either hydrogen or electric (battery) powered.

Renewable Energy Sources

All new centralized power generation is now sourced from renewable energy, including large and small hydro-electricity, pumped hydro-electricity, PV solar power, concentrated solar power, wind, geothermal — all supported by the latest technology battery and molten salt storage, tidal energy and nuclear power. No new

coal-fired generation plants have been constructed since 2030.

Buildings, Urban Design and Active Transport

Cities are now designed to minimize car transport requirements and to encourage cycling and walking. Many cities now provide free public transport.

All new commercial buildings since 2030 are constructed using recycled materials, and all glass windows are solar power collectors. All roofs in most countries have mandatory solar power PV and hot water systems

All new private dwellings constructed in the past two decades have been required to have a combination of high-rating insulation, double or triple glazing, solar power with fifth-generation battery storage, solar roof tiles, solar windows, efficient lighting and reverse-cycle air conditioning.

Passive building design measures, intelligent houses and commercial properties have reduced consumption of energy by 25%, compared with early this century.

Work and Lifestyle Changes

A huge impact on decoupling consumption and economic prosperity has been the implementation of a number of changes in work and lifestyle balance. The general concept that has been adopted in various different forms around the world relies on

people working fewer hours — therefore, earning but also spending less. This has resulted in significant reductions in the consumption of goods and services. Other benefits of this have been improved health outcomes and better life balance.

The tax base for most countries remained the same to provide the required high levels of public services and infrastructure. But while tax rates rose for all salary earners, the expenditure decreases meant that disposable income requirements of citizens were also less. As a result, the quality of life in most countries either remained the same or improved.

Agriculture

There have been dramatic changes to farming practices and the consumption of food around the world. The consumption of meat and other high-protein and high-carbon foods, including imported goods, is in decline due to the strict targets put on carbon emissions. Generally, meat prices have increased in all countries, with the consequent reduction of meat consumption and improvement in health, in addition to the benefits of active transport.

Industrial Activity

Manufacturing, utilities and commercial operations have dramatically reduced their carbon emissions due to energy efficiency, renewable energy usage and material recycling. Since 2030, all major appliance, vehicle and electronic gadget manufacturers have been required to take

back their used goods for reuse and recycling. This has encouraged the rethinking and redesigning all such items.

The past few decades have been challenging and there have been encouraging achievements in decarbonizing the world through the initiatives of the World Climate Order. But according to the chair of the World Climate Order Committee, there is much more to be done. The next committee report will be issued in 2052.

Arek Sinanian is the author of “A Climate for Denial” and an international expert on climate change, greenhouse gas abatement and carbon accounting, and he has extensive experience in resource efficiency, waste minimization and sustainable development. He is a member of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) expert panels of the clean development mechanism (CDM) Methodology Panel and the Accreditation Panel, providing advice on new methodologies and projects for CDMs submitted for registration under the Kyoto Protocol. He was also voted onto the prestigious six-member Joint Implementation Accreditation Panel of the UNFCCC. As a qualified engineer and consultant with over 30 years of experience, Sinanian has conducted numerous national and international projects involving responses to climate change, sustainability and resource efficiency.

Uncertainty Looms Over Taliban Talks

Muska Dastageer

July 22, 2019

The Qatar peace talks done wrong could risk nullifying progress made in Afghanistan over the past 18 years and set a dangerous international precedent, challenging the norm of state sovereignty’s inviolability.

The intra-Afghan conference held in Qatar on July 7-8 is the latest development in the ongoing peace talks convened since January, which have been led by the US special envoy for reconciliation, Zalmay Khalilzad. Yet it remains unclear what the Taliban’s post-peace settlement vision, policies, programs and priorities for Afghanistan would be. Added to this is the extent to which Pakistan would be able to influence domestic Afghan matters through the Taliban.

Although the intra-Afghan meeting represents a welcome step in the talks, there is still reason for deep concern. Not only because the democratically elected Afghan government has been sidelined in the talks and the Taliban’s continued refusal to engage directly with Kabul as a key stakeholder in the Afghan conflict. But because the peace talks appear to rest on a long-disproven assumption that has historically thrown lethal wrenches into the US and NATO engagement in Afghanistan, which is that the Taliban should be dealt

with through an in-country counterinsurgency campaign.

Pakistan's Proxy

In the early 2000s, when Pakistan's support was more concealed, the Taliban were incorrectly characterized as independent insurgents. If this was true, then what segment of the population do the Taliban represent, and whose grievances have been fueling their decades-long campaign of terror? The Taliban's own demands are clear: the withdrawal of US troops and other foreign forces and the release of members of the movement who remain imprisoned. But this goes nowhere toward addressing the issue of their own post-peace settlement political change agenda for Afghanistan.

With the Taliban, we are not dealing with a movement supported by marginalized, if any, groups of the population, which would confer some measure of legitimacy. On the contrary, as they did in the 1990s, the Taliban rule through intimidation and fear in the districts under their control.

This is key to reminding ourselves that the Taliban continue to be a proxy for Pakistan, not an insurgency unless we accept a definitional expansion of the term to accommodate an externally-enabled one. Yet the role of Pakistan in the Taliban's post-peace deal policies is unclear. Has Pakistan's strategic sponsorship of the Taliban featured at all in the peace talks? More importantly, have the implications of the Taliban's lifeline to the Pakistani army

been considered for the change agenda that the movement would pursue in Afghanistan after a peace deal is in place?

From repeated statements by US President Donald Trump to this effect, including well-evidenced investigative publications in recent years, there is near-unquestioned consensus now that the Taliban are a proxy for Pakistan and that the latter has been supporting the group since the beginning of the Afghan War in 2001.

Following the corollary of this fact, a peace settlement's conferral of political legitimacy to the Taliban would effectively translate into an indirect admission of a demonstratively aggressive foreign state, Pakistan, into the domestic affairs of Afghanistan.

What lends credence to this concern is the Taliban's radio silence on their political agenda following a peace deal. Though educated guesswork in a recent article speculated what the Taliban might want, the fact of the matter is that their representatives in Qatar have been remarkably taciturn regarding not just the specificities of their political vision for Afghanistan, but the vision itself.

One would think that a movement that has fought as ruthlessly as the Taliban have, repeatedly violating the laws of war and rejecting several calls for a ceasefire, would have a communicable political vision for a post-war Afghanistan. If the Taliban's demands were grounded in the real grievances of well-defined, if not ostracized

segments of the Afghan population, it would be in their interest to put these forth with as much force as possible. What is the benefit of secrecy if the Taliban's demands are grounded in the legitimate concerns of local people?

Posing the question of what the Taliban want beyond troop withdrawal is absolutely fair and timely. If the movement is a proxy for Pakistan's army — as an accumulating body of evidence confirms it to be — the Taliban would be wise to keep tight-lipped in negotiations.

Their change agenda following a peace settlement would be nothing less than a thorough reorientation of state capability and resources to the benefit, leverage and enrichment of Islamabad. The political infrastructure of Afghanistan would be remodeled in every perceivable way to become a strategic asset to Pakistan. President Trump's fear that Afghanistan could devolve into a lab for terrorists would only hold true.

Broader Consequences

Besides broadening the sphere of influence for an increasingly praetorian Pakistani army and its draconian martial law, the case of Afghanistan's surrender of sovereignty through the internationally condoned mechanism of peace talks would set a dangerous precedent for global security. This would be keenly noted by states with expansionist ambitions — a phenomenon no longer relegated to the distant past. Terrorize, maim and murder through a

proxy for long enough, and incursions into the sovereignty of other states can still come within view 70 years after the UN Charter enshrined the inviolability of sovereignty.

It follows then that the answer to the question of the Taliban's post-peace settlement change agenda carries ramifications not just for Afghans, but also for the security of all states. How the US handles the Taliban is being studied closely by countries and non-state actors alike, all of which would be drawing their own inferences for what is henceforth possible between nations.

For the United States, it would be a victory exacting heavy costs in Afghanistan and beyond. Other US adversaries would see an American-condoned peace deal appeasing Pakistan as the herald of an international order more permissive of aggression. Afghans would pay the highest price: loss of independence, resources and decades more of insecurity.

To prevent both, Special Envoy Khalilzad should carefully ascertain what the Taliban's policies, programs and priorities for the Afghan state and society would be after a peace settlement. Equally important is to pursue a principled approach in the face of further secrecy and half-answers. A failure to do so could see the Qatar talks cast as an internationally supported mechanism that cleared the way for one state to splinter the sovereignty of another by way of a proxy. For non-state actors and

expansionist states, this would be emboldening.

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We May Be Better Off Without a Clear Definition of Terrorism

Cole A. Baker
July 23, 2019

Ambiguity is currently the world's best option for preventing the misuse of the term "terrorism."

In all likelihood, you have an ambiguous understanding of "terrorism." The average individual can recognize an event as terrorism but, when asked to define the term, is able to offer only the most general of definitions. The reason for this is that terrorism is undefined or, more accurately, over-defined, with even the US government having multiple definitions of the term.

Moreover, there is no commonly accepted international definition of terrorism. For example, in the United States an act is

deemed terrorism if its intent is to influence policy, citizens or the US government through coercion, whereas in France the intent must simply be to disrupt law and order deliberately and to a great degree. Due to this ambiguity, many people do not understand the multifaceted and sometimes mercurial definition of the term "terrorism."

Yet, while living with a vague definition of terrorism seems irrational and certainly has practical downsides, this ambiguity is currently the world's best option for preventing the misuse of the term.

Societal Conceptions

The lack of an authoritative definition has led to a societal characterization of terrorism — even if only on a subconscious or emotional level — as being explicitly tied to Islam. For instance, when the prime minister of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe, denounced attacks on churches by radical Islamists in April 2019 as terrorism, the rest of the world did not bat an eye. However, New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, made headlines for making the exact same announcement about a white nationalist's live-streamed attack on two Christchurch mosques one month earlier.

A major problem with conceptualizing terrorism as being inherently linked to radical Islam is that it widens an ever-present — and ever-growing — societal division. When an Islamist and a white nationalist commit similar attacks against the public with only the Islamist labeled a

terrorist, a societal conception begins to form: If only Islamists can be terrorists, then Islam, and by extension all Muslims, should be feared.

This alienation of Muslims encourages discrimination and attacks against their community, which then becomes another contributing factor in radicalization. Moreover, by not characterizing the white nationalist attacks as terrorism, our society focuses on condemning the individual rather than the driving ideology. This allows white nationalist ideas to become increasingly mainstream.

Additionally, the ambiguous definition of terrorism, and the lack of an international definition, allows for government overreach. In 2018 alone, the Turkish government arrested 68 journalists, accusing many of them of supporting or being affiliated with terrorist groups. However, an examination of many of these cases has led to the conclusion that the only crime committed by these journalists was criticizing the government or simply reporting on the enemies of the state, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party and the Gulen movement. Led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish government has interpreted its definition of terrorism, which includes any acts done by members of an organization with the intent of “changing the characteristics of the Republic,” to suit its own means.

However, this interpretation has been heavily criticized by the international community, with Turkey being increasingly

viewed as an authoritarian state by both foreign governments and civil society. Moreover, multiple countries, including Spain and the United States, have refused to extradite individuals charged with terrorism offenses by Ankara. These examples prove that sometimes the ambiguous definition can be beneficial.

Potential Abuse

The complexity of terrorism necessitates a broad definition, as an incredibly specific interpretation would inevitably be too narrow to address the entire spectrum of the phenomena. However, a broad definition would allow for the potential over-designation of groups or individuals as terrorist. The difference between the potential abuse of power and what Turkey is already doing is that such a characterization, regardless of how prejudiced, would be justifiable. Governments could silence, or at the very least mitigate, criticism by pointing to the justification of the definition, thereby allowing governments more control in shaping public perception.

Additionally, an international definition of terrorism would have legal implications, making it potentially more difficult for countries to refuse extradition requests that fall under the purview of the definition.

The potential misuse of an international definition to justify government actions, harness public opinion and obligate the international community is particularly problematic because citizens around the

world have ceded immense powers to their governments for the purpose of dealing with terrorist threats. The United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France all possess expansive counterterrorism legislation. These laws allow, among other things, closed material proceedings, travel controls and even for the executive branch to use all “necessary and appropriate force” against terrorist groups that meet a certain criteria.

This is an immense level of power with few constraints, one of which is the international community and civil society’s ability to offer government oversight through criticism and opposition to unfounded terrorism designations. Rather than enabling this oversight, however, an international definition of terrorism would encourage government overreach and facilitate possible abuse of power. A broad definition creates the potential for mischaracterization and manipulation while simultaneously allowing governments the privilege of justification. By any measurement, this is an ominous pairing.

While leaving terrorism undefined contributes to misunderstanding and hate, it also allows for dialogue and dissent. A more concrete understanding of terrorism is undoubtedly desirable. Yet when the letter of the law will inevitably be manipulated, it is safer to trust in ambiguity.

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Boris Johnson: Bumbling Buffoon, Pied Piper or Churchillian Statesman?

Atul Singh

July 24, 2019

Boris Johnson, the most charismatic politician of his generation, takes over the United Kingdom despite his dodgy past and questionable character.

The history of England and indeed the United Kingdom can be summed up as a ding-dong battle between cavaliers and roundheads. Like Gordon Brown, Theresa May is a roundhead. Both are children of men of the church. They work hard, find it hard to delegate and are not exactly the life of the party. Like Tony Blair, Boris Johnson is a cavalier. Both went to public schools, are preternaturally confident and like the fine things in life. Yet again, a dashing

cavalier is replacing a dour roundhead as prime minister.

The Favorable View

To those who support him, Johnson is witty, funny, charming, clever, insouciant, energetic and eloquent. At worst, they find this Old Etonian is a lovable Falstaffian rogue. Like Lord Flashheart, Johnson takes risks, flies high and admirably secures a decent number of “notches on [his] phallocratic phallus.” Some love-crazed supporters even find him reminiscent of Henry VIII. Like the portly 16th-century king, he will lead the blessed green isle of England to freedom from Brussels, the Rome of our times.

It is indubitably true that Johnson is one of the most charismatic politicians worldwide. He brings extraordinary energy to the table, connects exquisitely with people and carries himself with the confidence of the “world king” that he once wanted to be. Many Tories tell this author that Johnson could be a better bet than micromanager May because he can delegate. The say nimble-footed Johnson was a terrific mayor of London, ran the 2012 Olympics splendidly well and will do a smashing job as prime minister.

Johnson thinks so too. He compares himself to Winston Churchill. In fact, he has written a biography of the great man — another journalist-turned-politician who came to power during dark times. John Kampfner called Johnson’s biography of Churchill “self-serving but spirited.” Even though

Kampfner opposes Brexit and writes for The Guardian, he could not help but be seduced by Johnson’s writing. This raises the question: Why?

Perhaps Johnson appeals to something subliminal in the British psyche. The new Tory leader’s braggadocio is redolent of an era when Britannia did rule the waves, when a mere 6,000 British colonizers lorded it over 200 million Indians and when the pound was the undisputed currency of the world. If only the British could recover some of their mojo à la Johnson, then they would yet again saunter to the broad, sunlit uplands of their past.

The Not-So-Favorable View

To those who are appalled by him, Johnson has never had a fling, leave aside a relationship with the truth. He has repeatedly lied to his bosses, colleagues and the public. His housemaster concluded that Johnson “honestly believes it is churlish of us not to regard him as an exception — one who should be free of the network of obligations which binds everyone else. Boris is pretty impressive when success can be achieved by pure intelligence, unaccompanied by hard work.” It is therefore no surprise that many regard Johnson as an insufferable toff with a sense of entitlement that he was born to rule.

Tory grandees such as John Major, Michael Heseltine and Kenneth Clarke find Johnson a touch ridiculous. Former colleagues such as Sir Alan Duncan, Philip Hammond, Anne Milton, David Gauke and Rory Stewart have

refused to serve under the new Conservative Party leader. They will be hitting the backbenches in Parliament. Historian Lord Hennessy is anxious about Johnson because he seems to be a politician “who’s inhaled his own legend before he’s created it.” The noted historian worries about Johnson’s “personal and political narcissism.” Sir Nicholas Soames, another Old Etonian, a friend of Johnson’s and Churchill’s grandson, fears the new prime minister “could bugger it up.”

Soames is right to fear Johnson’s premiership. This scholar boy from Eton and Balliol first made a name for himself as a prurient purveyor of salacious headlines from Brussels. Apparently, the bloody Europeans had nothing to do but interfere with British sausages, manure and even condoms. Needless to say, some of Johnson’s fellow journalists found him to be “fundamentally intellectually dishonest.”

Furthermore, Johnson’s affairs, offensive remarks and erratic behavior have earned him a reputation of a bumbling buffoon who skates through life by only doing the bare minimum. It is for this reason that Michael Howard packed him off to Liverpool to offer a groveling apology and sacked him for lying about an affair.

Not Really a Brexiteer

The biggest cloud that hangs over Boris Johnson is the fact that he is not really a Brexiteer. Before the 2016 referendum on the UK’s membership to the European Union, Johnson told Soames that he was

not an outer. Therefore, people rightly suspect him of leading the “leave” campaign out of shameless opportunism. Johnson calculated that he would lead a robust campaign, lose gallantly, win the support of Tory euroskeptics and emerge as Prime Minister David Cameron’s successor. When the British unexpectedly voted for Brexit, Johnson’s plan backfired. He suffered a meltdown and failed to seize the reins of power.

Now, three years later, a reenergized Johnson promises to deliver Brexit, unite the country and defeat the Labour Party’s Jeremy Corbyn. This Pied Piper of London has thundered, “Dude, we are going to get Brexit done on October 31.” No one yet quite knows how.

Like his hero, Winston Churchill, Johnson is taking charge at a perilous time. Yet there is one striking difference. A former military man, Churchill was a conviction politician who had railed against appeasement during his long, dark years in the wilderness. So far, Johnson has been a politician with no convictions except the unshakable belief that he was born for Number 10. With the Pied Piper of Brexit in charge, Great Britain may not be as great as before.

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Iran's Spy Scandal Exposes the Regime's Insecurity

Irina Tsukerman

July 25, 2019

A witch-hunt against real or imaginary spies is a sign of desperation in Iran's ruling circles.

On July 22, Iranian media reported the arrest of 17 alleged CIA assets, captured around facilities associated with the country's nuclear program. Some of these individuals, although unnamed, have already been sentenced to death. It is not clear whether this group is connected to an alleged CIA spy ring broken up in June. The announcement comes in the midst of rising tensions between Iran and the United States, exacerbated by a series of steps by the Islamic Republic seen as aggressive and provocative by both Western and Gulf states.

After the US designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a

terrorist organization in April, Iran threatened to block the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow strategic international waterway essential for the passage of oil tankers from a number of Gulf countries that would have few and, in some cases, no other options for trade. In May, waivers on oil trade that the US had issued to eight countries, including Japan, South Korea, India and China, which had all been dependent on Iran for their supply, expired.

With Iran remaining China's primary oil supplier, after the expiration of waivers, Beijing defiantly refused to comply with the ban and engaged in smuggling activities. On July 23, the US sanctioned a Chinese company, Zhuhai Zhenrong Co., and its chief executive, Youmin Li, over the violations, but some officials have debated not enforcing the ban on China or issuing a new waiver.

In May, Norwegian, Emirati and Saudi oil tankers were attacked off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. While no one claimed responsibility, the United States and the UAE alleged that a "state actor" was behind those attacks. The incident was followed by a series of attacks by the Yemeni Iran-backed Houthi separatists and Iran-backed Iraqi militias against Saudi oil rigs, as well as civilian and military sites. While the war of words between Iran and the US escalated, more ships were attacked in June, including a Japanese tanker that was damaged by two "flying objects" as Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was visiting Iran to mediate between Washington and Tehran.

This time, the United States, Saudi Arabia and others directly blamed Iran for the attacks, and the US produced evidence allegedly pointing to Iran's participation in the operation that damaged the ships. The war of words between Tehran and Washington escalated, as did cyberattacks. By July, Iran claimed credit for a downed US drone, struck down in international airspace, as footage of its flight path released by the Pentagon shows.

The US responded with a cyberstrike on the IRGC unit responsible for the operation, disabling its rockets. It also sanctioned Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's personal assets, and the Basij militia and other government-affiliated groups. The US also reported that it downed not one, but possibly two "provocative" Iranian drones involved in aggressive maneuvers, which Iran denied.

Undeterred

Undeterred by escalating sanctions, or even the increasing difficulties in exporting its oil, Iran resumed bellicose activity in the Gulf of Oman, diverting a number of tankers into its own waters, and encouraged Chinese boats to disable surveillance to facilitate smuggling. These and other episodes caused the US to up security in the region, bringing two destroyers, the Patriot system and B-52 bombers to the nearby Al Udeid base in Qatar, as well as pledging 1,000 troops to keep peace in the vicinity — 500 of which have been approved for relocation to Saudi Arabia.

The US has also attempted to expedite emergency arms deliveries to its Gulf allies, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but for now this measure has been blocked by US Congress. Those in foreign policy circles who support the Iran nuclear deal interpreted this chain of events as a push toward war either by Iran or by the White House, which would engulf the region and mean high costs in terms of both military equipment and personnel for the US side. This self-serving narrative was crafted by the unregistered pro-regime Iranian lobby in Washington, the National Iranian American Council (NIAC), since the signing of the nuclear deal, presenting a false dichotomy between actions by the US that would serve in Iran's interest — or war.

The United States, for its part, has conducted itself with unusual restraint. US President Donald Trump has allegedly called off a military strike against IRGC targets because of the concern for human casualties. So far, the United States has failed to retaliate in any way for the repeated attacks against US targets in Iraq, constraining itself to combatting the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in Yemen, providing the Saudi-led coalition with logistical and intelligence assistance against the Houthis.

Likewise, despite tightening sanctions against Hezbollah, the United States has not pursued the armed group's targets in Yemen, Africa or Latin America. It has also provided the Lebanese government with a supply of weapons despite the fact that Hezbollah, which is designated as a terrorist organization by the US government, holds a

majority of seats in Lebanon's parliament. The group is a major beneficiary of free advanced American weapons that in some case may have filtered to them via the Lebanese air force, and boasted of a number of Abrams tanks it captured from the Iraqi army.

In this context, Iran operates with knowledge that the United States is limited in its response by several factors. The central issue at the moment is that the United States is in the midst of a hotly contested election year, in which getting involved in either a major protracted conflagration or anything that could be perceived as a step in that direction will harm the administration's chances. According to a Reuters/Ipsos poll, half of Americans expect a war with Iran "in the next few years." Yet only a third of those polled want to see military action against Iran.

Other factors affecting the decision-making process include the political divide between the White House and Congress, particularly the Democrat-led House of Representatives. Furthermore, under the limelight are President Trump's campaign promises to keep the US out of foreign conflicts and the general public distaste for US military interventionism. The sensationalist nature of the 24-hour media cycle adds to an impression of impending doom, even if in reality the tensions are fairly limited in scale and duration. The drama of the US being on the brink of war has been largely created to keep the US out

of the Gulf, through a mass-scale psy-op of fearmongering.

How Iran Benefits

Given this context, the announcement of the capture of US spies likewise benefits Tehran in several ways. First, as such rumors go, it speaks to some extent to the internal weakness within the country and a paranoid atmosphere fueled by frequent mass protests across Iran, and not just by opposition activists. The level of dissatisfaction with the economic situation among the wider population, the regime's recalcitrance in addressing grievances and the expenditures of any public funding toward foreign wars, terrorism and internal corruption are destabilizing and unnerving.

Nevertheless, the situation is largely under control thanks to the lack of leadership among the main opposition, and the various fissions among different segments of the population, including non-Persian minorities — Azeri Turkis, Ahwazi Arabs, Kurds, Balochis and other ethnicities marginalized by the government — that don't work closely with the mainstream Persian opposition.

The announcement of breaking up a foreign spy ring feeds into the regime narrative and serves to demoralize the opposition. If anyone truly believes that Americans have succeeded in recruiting agents who have penetrated the clandestine nuclear research and development program, their roundup can be perceived as a painful blow. And to everyone who has grown skeptical

of such claims, it will be a reminder that the regime can arrest anyone for any reason and get away with extracting false confessions, without having to fear major consequences. Human rights sanctions against perpetrators of Iran's domestic reign of terror have mostly eluded the regime apparatus, nor has it prevented any torture or executions.

Second, if Americans indeed had assets in Iran that were now exposed, this public announcement sends a signal to US intelligence that there was a security breach, which means that the entire CIA program in the country is possibly in danger. Also, it gives leverage to the regime to negotiate for minor concessions, depending on the value of any such assets. President Trump denied that this announcement was anything more than a propaganda move by Tehran. Secretary Pompeo, too, pointed out that Iran has a long history of fabricating such matters for its own benefit.

Of course, even if the CIA lost 17 assets, that will not ultimately stop future efforts at gathering intelligence, nor will it prevent the administration from pursuing tough policies against Iran if it so chooses. However, if the administration, as many believe, is on course to court a new and "better" nuclear deal with Tehran, these announcements are a different sort of signal. They may signify that the regime is looking to exchange these assets for Iranian spies imprisoned in the United States, or that it is now in possession of sensitive

information about US operations against it or its own plans.

Detecting a Pattern

Even if this move is nothing more than bluster by the regime, it will contribute to the general perception that the tensions are rising, and that the United States may soon find itself on the brink of a perilous situation similar to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The regime has a long history of arresting ordinary protesters and activists and — after torture and humiliating Soviet-style show trials — parading them as CIA, Mossad or British intelligence spies.

In theory, this should discredit the alleged spies in the public eye. In reality, the regime is fully aware that at this point few Iranians — those who aren't directly benefiting from close contact with the government — believe such rumors. If these people are indeed ordinary protesters, such periodic episodes signal a crackdown on dissident activity and serve to show that if people take to the streets, they will be treated as traitors and foreign spies. It also supports Tehran's narrative that any dissent or a show of public dissatisfaction, even if not sponsored by Western powers, benefits the regime's adversaries and, therefore, for all intents and purposes, they might as well be agents of US influence — or whoever else.

In light of the current developments, the regime has good reason to be concerned that Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran may inspire a new wave of protests over the summer, further

destabilization and perhaps even defection of key members of the regime. Most recently, a number of senior IRGC officials have known to have disappeared, some only temporarily. If there is a rise in general chaos among Iranian intelligence, and if there is a fear of defection, this move may be signaling an internal shakedown as much as a crackdown against any mass public mobilization, like the Green Movement in 2009.

Unlike his predecessor, President Trump is highly likely to express open support for such events, which will demoralize Iran's intelligence services and give support to the opposition. In order to prevent this from happening, the regime is likely to take measures to secure both its own people and take further measures to intimidate the opposition.

In other words, the announced arrests and executions may also be a preemptive strike against any attempts to create an "Iranian Spring" by the Western powers. The regime should indeed be concerned. The entire country is roiling from the economic and environmental devastation precipitated by misgovernment. Foreign involvement, such as China's unceremonious meddling, is decidedly unwelcome. An internet crackdown and anti-Western rhetoric are seen as a hostile act by the very young Iranian population, which is increasingly secular and open to the West. Iran faces a plethora of internal problems, and going on a witch-hunt against real or imaginary spies at a time when it has limited resources to

stand up to a much stronger West is a sign of desperation.

However, there is an exception to this otherwise predictable and unimpressive pattern. During the nuclear negotiations with Iran, one of the conditions presented to former President Barack Obama was the termination of intelligence activities in Iran. During the period of negotiations between 2011 and 2012 that resulted in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which were still secret at the time, a mysterious communication breach that apparently was not fixed for years led to the exposure of a number of CIA assets in Iran and other countries.

But was it mere incompetence coupled with arrogance, or was the breach at least partly connected to a tacit political agreement? President Obama's willingness to allow Bashar al-Assad's massacre of civilians in Syria to continue despite his pronounced "red line," as well as his supportive attitude to Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi's tenure despite his rapprochement with Iran at around the same time would lead one to believe that even if such an agreement was never formalized, Iran would have demanded, as a sign of good faith, that the US abandon its intelligence gathering operations in Iran and that the US intelligence agencies should quietly cease protecting their assets in the event of exposure. Exploiting a known vulnerability without taking steps to protect these assets may have been a nod as a show of good faith during the negotiations.

As a result, the CIA allegedly lost 30 agents. Many assets were arrested, imprisoned or executed. If the Trump administration is indeed pursuing a renegotiation of the nuclear deal, the regime may very likely make the same demands of it and announce the capture of these assets shortly before making an offer to the Trump administration that the White House cannot refuse.

Finally, it is worth noting that Iran has taken hostage a number of Americans and dual nationals, accusing them of espionage, likely in an effort to broker advantageous deals during any potential negotiations. It would be a repeat of similar efforts under Obama when the regime exchanged several Americans, including The Washington Post journalist Jason Rezaian, for a substantial sum of money and several Iranian prisoners.

However, all of these individuals have been publicly named and have been arrested on individual basis while doing research or visiting family members, like Iranian-British dual national Nasreen Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has been imprisoned in Iran since 2016. Iran has not claimed that they are part of a “network” taken as a group.

Paper Tiger

This pattern leads one to believe that those taken by the regime are regular Iranians who are less likely to attract international attention and campaign to secure their release than prisoners with Western

connections. What does this ultimately mean for the United States?

First, Iran is largely a paper tiger: There is no need to fear a confrontation. Its military capabilities are vastly inferior to the US. Its economy, devastated by corruption has little to offer to the United States. Furthermore, the regime has a history of being manipulative and deceptive. So far, all of the efforts to make a deal with it resulted in breaches and abuses. Therefore, a pursuit of a new nuclear agreement will likely yield more of the same and is not worth the potential devastation of the region and loss of trust by regional allies.

Second, Iran has used intelligence as a weapon of pressure against the opposition, as well as countries abroad. It has accused dissidents of working for the West while inserting fifth columnists in Western institutions and weaponizing the diplomatic service around the world to cover for terrorist activities and assassination attempts against dissidents.

US officials dealing with Iran should openly confront Foreign Minister Javad Zarif or other visiting officials instead of letting them speak freely to US media, largely unchallenged. Iran presents plenty of opportunities to expose its record of deception, manipulation and false and hypocritical accusations.

Finally, no negotiations with Iran are possible until every American and other Western national is released. That should be a starting point, not a sideshow that Iran

could use to exercise further leverage. Likewise, if the alleged captives are indeed spies, Iran should act as any civilized country in such a situation and at the very least publicize their names. In the past, it has arrested activists and scientists, accusing of them espionage in an attempt to recruit them to carry out the regime's agenda, but the information eventually became known to their governments and to the public at large.

This cynical ploy that is meant to keep everyone wondering what Iran will do next is unacceptable and should be forcefully rejected. Here is an opportunity for the international community to call out Iran for its horrendous abuse of the legal system to come up with baseless accusations against both its own citizens and foreigners, making a mockery of the courts.

Regardless of the identity of these people and the cause for their arrest, the fact that they are being tried on such serious charges and have been sentenced to death, likely after torture and false confessions, should not go unchallenged.

It is time to show that Iran is playing games with the West largely through bluff and exploitation of greed, false expectations and cowardice rather than because it has anything advantageous to bring to the table. Its corrupt system would not enrich investors. Its oil is of poor quality and needs to be refined externally. Members of the business community connected to the regime are implicated in all sorts of illegal

activities that may violate international law and so cannot be trusted.

It is time to realize that Iran has nothing to offer except chaos and threats, and be put it in its place.

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