

Fair Observer

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Our education arm runs training programs on subjects such as digital media, writing and more. In particular, we inspire young people around the world to be more engaged citizens and to participate in a global discourse.

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Where India Went Wrong

Heya Shah
May 5, 2021

How did India's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic spiral out of control?

In just over a month, India has gone from boasting about its vaccine distribution to becoming the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. As this author explained in a previous article, many have questioned whether India's vaccine diplomacy was a bold masterstroke or an unwise distraction.

Before the start of the second wave of COVID-19 infections in March, the pandemic seemed to be under control in India. In September 2020, the country recorded an average of 95,000 daily cases of COVID-19 during the peak of the first wave. By January 2021, that figure had dropped to under 20,000.

At the same time, the United States went from around 35,000 confirmed cases per day in September to a peak of over 300,000 in January. At the start of the year, the United Kingdom was in the midst of a deadly second wave of infections, which reached over 60,000 cases a day. At that time, Britain was battling a more contagious strain of COVID-19 known as the "Kent variant," which is named after the region where it was first discovered in England. Countries in Europe and around the world raced to halt flights to and from the UK in a bid to control the spread of the new strain, which they feared would soon go beyond the British isles.

To put these figures in perspective, the UK population is 66.6 million, the US is 328 million and India is around 1.36 billion. That means at the start of 2021, the infection ratio per 100,000 people in India was far lower than in the UK and the US.

Lax Safety Measures

As a result, Indians thought the country was beyond the worst of the pandemic. In March, Harsh Vardhan, the Indian health minister, said the country had entered the "endgame" of the health crisis. This led to a false sense of hope, which made the public and the central and state governments complacent. Restrictions that were brought in to curb the spread of the coronavirus were quickly eased. Life had almost returned to normal in January with the opening up of nightclubs, restaurants, hotels, tourist locations and public transport.

At the same time, elections were announced in five states, including West Bengal, which the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had set its sights on winning. All political parties and their supporters held rallies with tens of thousands of people in attendance. The Hindu festival of Kumbh Mela attracted millions of people who took a dip in the Ganges, a river considered sacred in Hinduism. Nearly 60,000 spectators were also allowed to enter stadiums to watch cricket matches. All of these events took place with lax safety measures in place, with no social distancing or wearing of masks.

In hindsight, India did not anticipate a second wave of COVID-19. It lifted the lid on public restrictions at a time when countries such as the UK were battling a winter wave of infections. As mainland Europe realized, it was inevitable that the more contagious strain of COVID-19 discovered in the UK would spread. India failed to understand this despite repeated warnings.

Now, India is battling its own second wave. The country has repeatedly broken the record for the daily number of confirmed cases of COVID-19. On May 2, India recorded more than 400,000 new daily infections. The actual number of cases is believed to be far higher due to a shortage of testing kits and people getting tested. Many Indians are not getting checked because they have no symptoms but are contagious or they are worried about testing positive for the virus. States like Bihar, West Bengal and Maharashtra have been accused of manipulating and underreporting the number of positive cases and deaths from

COVID-19 to avoid criticism over inefficient governance. Worryingly, epidemiologists believe that India has not yet hit the peak of the second wave and that the worst is yet to come.

No Improvement to Health Care

It has been argued by many that the pandemic will not come to an end until it is under control everywhere. This is because “viruses naturally mutate over time.” There are currently thousands of mutations of the coronavirus around the world, but only a few of them are variants of concern for scientists. As more people contract the virus and spread it to others, it is inevitable that different strains will emerge. This is why despite the successful vaccination rollout in countries like Israel, the UK and the US, authorities have been cautious as they reopen economies and reduce restrictions for the public. The fear is that some variants, such as the one discovered in South Africa, will evade the existing vaccines and render them less effective.

India has discovered a worrying COVID-19 variant of its own that is officially called B.1.617. This new strain — which is also known as the “double mutant” due to two mutations coming together in the same variant — accounts for 61% of infections in Maharashtra, a major epicenter in India. It is unclear whether the Indian variant is driving the second wave, but it is believed to be more transmissible than previous strains of the virus. This is in addition to fear over the UK strain, which has spread to more than 50 countries.

Complacency by the central and state governments has made the health care system crumble as Indians desperately seek medical assistance. When the pandemic first hit India in March 2020, authorities failed to strengthen the infrastructure at hospitals. As of 2018, the Indian government spent only 3.54% of GDP on health care. Other emerging economies such as Brazil and South Africa spent 9.51% and 8.25%, respectively. In India, there is only one doctor per 1,445 people, which is far lower than the figure the World Health Organization recommends. At

public hospitals, there were only 0.7 beds available per 1,000 people.

In July 2020, state governments opted to build temporary centers for COVID-19 patients instead of buying additional beds for existing hospitals and allocating more resources. These centers were barely used. Due to their high maintenance costs, they were dismantled a couple of months before the second wave hit. Now, as hospitals face a short supply of beds and a high demand for them, some state governments are considering whether to rebuild the makeshift centers.

In March 2020, Modi allocated 150 billion rupees (\$2.03 billion) to strengthen the infrastructure of health care in India. The government purchased personal protective equipment (PPE) and an additional 60,000 ventilators. Yet as of last fall, just under 24,000 of the ventilators had been installed in hospitals across the country. Both public and private hospitals are currently short of beds, ventilators and oxygen in many major cities.

As COVID-19 infections sweep the country, social media networks have been flooded with posts calling for help. Friends and families of those suffering from the virus have desperately sought to find available beds in hospitals, oxygen supplies or medication to combat COVID-19. Disturbing reports of people dying after being unable to access treatment have been heard all over the country. Ambulances and other vehicles with COVID-19 victims inside them have lined up outside hospitals that no longer have space available. Many hospitals have reported that patients they were treating died as the oxygen supply ran out. Outside crematoriums, the number of dead bodies is mounting.

The Government’s “Vaccine Diplomacy”

With the situation worsening, the BJP-led government has been criticized by Indian courts for focusing on state election campaigns instead of taking preemptive action to combat the second wave. Aside from easing restrictions too quickly and not reinforcing the health care system in time, many states face shortages of COVID-19

vaccines. In January, Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed to have rolled out the “world’s largest vaccination drive,” aiming to get jabs in the arms of 300 million people by July. At the time of writing, only 2% of the Indian population — 29 million — has been fully vaccinated with two doses. This is compared to 23% in the UK and 30% in the US, both of which focused on vaccinating their most vulnerable citizens first to drive down new infections and deaths.

India had other things in mind. It sought to distribute doses worldwide as part of its vaccine diplomacy. With the world’s largest manufacturer of vaccines, India has so far exported 66 million doses to 95 countries. Yet, earlier this year, the Modi government implemented an initiative to donate free batches in an attempt to boost the country’s soft power when the pandemic was seemingly under control. Many observers questioned whether the move was necessary instead of focusing on vaccinating Indians themselves. Toward the end of March, as infections increased and vaccines decreased, the Modi government realized that its decision to export millions of doses was premature. It decided to halt the export of doses and instead vaccinate Indians over the age of 45. Yet the damage had already been done due to poor planning by the BJP-led government.

Meanwhile, state administrations in Maharashtra, Delhi and Andhra Pradesh that are not ruled by the BJP have claimed they are running short of vaccines. Critics have accused Modi of playing politics with vaccine distribution as states with BJP governments, such as Gujarat, were given almost the same number of vaccine doses as Maharashtra, which has a population double that of Gujarat. Vardhan denied that regions were short of supplies and instead blamed state governments for the poor rollout of vaccines.

In order to counter criticism over its inefficient planning, the central government announced on April 19 that all citizens above 18 would be able to get vaccinated from May 1; it had previously focused on health and frontline

workers and those over 45. By opening the door for all adults, an additional 600 million citizens are now eligible. Yet with vaccines in short supply, some states have postponed the rollout. The website through which citizens can book a jab crashed minutes after it went live for the new age group.

The government has approved additional funds for vaccine manufacturers to ramp up production. However, the increased production is unlikely to be available for a few months as vaccines go through a lengthy process of packaging and safety checks. To make up for this shortage, the government has fast-tracked the approval process for foreign-produced vaccines. These include Johnson and Johnson from Belgium and Sputnik V from Russia, which cost more than domestically-produced ones.

Public Image

In an attempt to maintain his public image, Modi addressed the nation on April 20. Indians needed assurances and demanded answers, but the prime minister offered none. He neither informed the public about plans to tackle the crisis, nor did he give any reasons about why the country is facing a horrific second wave. This is despite him previously boasting that India’s handling of the pandemic had been exemplary and should a model for the world. It seems the central government is content with placing the blame on state administrations and the public instead of admitting that it made mistakes.

Earlier this week, the BJP failed to win in the state of West Bengal despite heavy election campaigning. It seems that Indians are beginning to realize that Modi’s preoccupation with his public image, and his need to win votes, is costing the country dearly. In fact, the obsession with elections on the part of Indian politicians has contributed to the second wave of COVID-19 infections. India can only hope that Modi and other politicians shift their focus from politics to health care before it is too late.

***Heya Shah** is an editorial and video intern at Fair Observer.

Fintech's Problem With Race

Kiara Taylor
May 11, 2021

How can we undo the inequality challenges African American students face in the fintech industry?

It's been a turbulent year for the fintech industry. The pandemic had its effect on the sector, just as it did on many others, in strange and contradictory ways. Experts are predicting that COVID-19 will drive more people into the fintech market while simultaneously slowing down the globalization process that the tech industry has relied on.

Some things never change, however, or at least never seem to. One of them is the fintech industry's problem with race. Following the Black Lives Matter protests over the past year, some commentators once again turned their attention to this perennial problem, pointing out that despite years of awareness of the issue, fintech companies are still not hiring enough black people. Often, fintech companies put their relative lack of progress in this area down to a so-called pipeline problem. There are simply not enough gifted, well-qualified black students, they say. Spoiler alert: This is not true.

The Scale of the Problem

First up, let's establish just how big the problem is. Up until 2014, although circumstantial evidence showed that very few black people worked in tech, there were no hard numbers to prove this. That changed, gradually, following Google's decision to publish figures on the diversity of its workforce. The numbers were damning: Last year, just 3.7% of Google's

employees and contractors were black, up from 2.4% in 2014.

Research has also shown that fintech's problem with discrimination goes far beyond race. We've known for a long time, for instance, that women are also under-represented, as are Latinx people. Although we don't have data on fintech firms specifically, it's a fair bet that their diversity is similar to that of other tech firms, namely very low. This means that, according to Georgetown Professor Chris Brummer who cites data from Harvard Business Review, with fintech accounting for between 10% and 15% of overall tech employment, the total number of African American executives and professionals in the fintech industry is lower than 2% and 5.3% respectively, and could be just hundreds.

This is a problem, and not just for young people who want to get into the fintech sector. Research also suggests that it might be costing the economy of California — at over \$3 trillion, the largest in the United States — hundreds of millions of dollars a year in lost revenue and opportunities. So where does this problem come from, and what can we do about it?

A Pipeline Problem?

Tech firms like to explain their relative lack of diversity by arguing that there are fewer well-qualified black candidates for the positions they are offering. This, however, is not entirely true. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, five years ago, almost 9% of graduates with a bachelor's degree in computer and information science were black. That may be a small figure, but it's hardly insignificant.

Instead, in order to understand the lack of diversity in the tech and fintech sectors, one has to look at the way they operate. Many people outside the industry presume that it is fairly meritocratic or that the hiring practices in Silicon Valley are as logical as the computers designed there. But this is not true. Often, in order to get a job, students have to do a number of unpaid internships, go to the right restaurants and know the right people. For black students coming from

underprivileged backgrounds, this makes it very hard to break into the sector.

Another complicating factor is the fact that fintech companies have done a poor job in terms of their overall outreach to minorities. Diversity is simply not a priority for many fintech companies. Financial inclusion does not just refer to the individuals who are launching their own fintech businesses. Rather, it means that everyone needs to have the same level of access to those fintech companies.

One of the biggest problems is the reduced access to traditional banking and financial services that African American families have to live with. The average African American family, for instance, has earning power equal to only one-tenth of white families. This naturally means reduced access to savings and investment accounts. Fintech has proved it has the proper tools to help provide access to bank accounts for underprivileged groups. An example is the development of neobanks that operate entirely online without a physical location and that offer lower fees and lower entry barriers than traditional banks. But it's not enough to simply develop a product and hope that enough people have access to it.

Instead, fintech companies need to do more to actually reach out to the communities themselves in order to help build trust in these services. As a result of this lack of outreach, many minority students do not even view the fintech industry as being particularly favorable to people of color. Minorities possess precious few leadership positions in the fintech and banking industries as a whole. Millennials and Generation Zers are likewise wary of traditional banks, for example, partially due to this reason.

Seen this way, in fact, the discriminatory hiring practices of fintech firms reflect a much broader problem: that black people, and especially students, have been barred from access to financial systems and tools. Even though many trading platforms now pride themselves on encouraging inclusion, there is still a massive gap

when it comes to access to finance between black students and their white counterparts.

Look a little deeper, and you'll also see that this is a problem compounded by the way that the tech sector is funded. The ecosystem that has been built up to support tech firms relies heavily on venture capital funding, and these firms are even worse at hiring black people than tech companies. Black entrepreneurs currently see less than 1% of venture capital funding in the United States, and some premier firms do not have any black partners at all. This system, with largely white tech firms making deals with largely white investment funds, is similar to the kind of systemic discrimination we have grown used to in many other sectors of our economy. As we have seen elsewhere, it doesn't have to be that way.

Vectors of Change

When it comes to charting a course out of this problematic situation, we can look to a number of different groups. For their part, tech firms will likely continue to insist that educators are simply not training enough black graduates who aspire to work in fintech. But given the systemic discrimination inherent in the system, tech will never be a representative space until we change the way it is financed and regulated. We should look to the people with the most power in the fintech sector and pressure them to do more for black students. This means, first and foremost, investment fund managers and tech CEOs. These groups can immediately do three things that will help students break into the industry.

First and foremost, black students need money behind them. Thankfully, this is slowly happening already. For example, a leading venture fund in Silicon Valley called Andreessen Horowitz announced a fund to invest in entrepreneurs of color, beginning with \$2.2 million in funding from the firm partners. Meanwhile, Apple has announced a commitment of more than \$100 million to hiring and retaining black employees.

Second, firms need to do more to establish trust among the black community. This year has been a terrible one for the image of fintech firms and investment platforms in America, with significant concerns about incidents of identity theft and data breaches that have damaged trust in many of these organizations. If companies can show they have strong security measures in place and a strong moral conscience, they are more likely to be viewed as trustworthy by students.

Third and finally, firms need to simply change the way that they look for candidates. Many tech firms rely heavily on current employee referrals. This is fine if you are running a startup from a garage and need to find trusted employees quickly, but, when applied in large multinationals, this can quickly exacerbate systemic discrimination. On average, you are only likely to see 5%-7% annual growth from traditional investments with a diversified portfolio.

Ultimately, the challenges that black students face can be best met by those with the resources available to make genuine change — multibillion-dollar tech companies and investment firms. Educators and students, in other words, are already doing their part to overcome this discrimination, and it's time that the industry stepped up. If it fails to do so, it might finally be time to look into regulating the fintech landscape or even encouraging students to look outside Silicon Valley for firms that truly value them. India is embracing fintech, for instance, and if Silicon Valley is not careful, my black students might take their talent abroad.

***Kiara Taylor** is a financial analyst. Her career has involved a number of financial firms, including Fifth Third Bank, JPMorgan and Citibank.

The Hazara Minority's Precarious Existence in Afghanistan

Sakhi Khalid
May 13, 2021

The Afghan government has a responsibility to protect the Hazara community from continued attacks.

On the evening of May 8, a car bomb exploded in front of a high school in a majority Hazara neighborhood of west Kabul, Afghanistan. The blast killed more than 85 civilians and injured at least 150 others, almost all of them schoolgirls aged between 13 and 18. Images shared on social media showed bloodied backpacks, crushed shoes and torn notebooks strewn beside the burning carcass of the vehicle used in the attack.

As the United States has started to formally withdraw its troops from Afghanistan, life keeps getting harder for the vulnerable ethnic minorities in Afghanistan such as the Hazaras, who have suffered long-term persecution. Distrustful of the government forces, the Hazaras considered US presence as a protective shield against attacks. According to a report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, there have been more than 25 acts of terrorism against the Hazara community between 2014 and 2018, including bombings of maternity hospitals, wrestling clubs, mosques and schools. Last time, in October 2020, the Kawsar-e-Danish education center in Kabul was targeted by Islamic State Khorasan Province (IS-KP) militants, killing at least 30 students.

While the IS-KP and the Taliban have claimed responsibility for almost all of the acts of violence against the Hazaras in the past, so far, the May 8 attack remains unspoken for. The motivation behind this latest atrocity remains murky, especially since IS-KP does not officially exist anymore, having failed to establish a base in

the country. A Taliban spokesman recently told TOLO news that the attack has been carried out by the Islamic State with the help of the Afghan government's National Directorate of Security to damage the reputation of the Taliban.

As some lay the blame on the authorities, officials believe the attack has been carried out by the Taliban. Amid the confusion, the Afghan government and various political parties are calling on the UN to investigate the bombing. According to Adam Nossiter of The New York Times, "Whoever was responsible, they appear to have taken pains to kill as many of the girls as possible."

Active Target

Since 2014, a year that marked the height of insecurity and saw IS-KP emerge in Afghanistan, the Hazara community has become an active military target for various armed groups and has accused government forces of standing by as massacres continue unimpeded. In the words of Sarwar Danish, Afghanistan's second vice president and himself an ethnic Hazara, in some cases, the community holds the government responsible for the attacks against it.

At the end of 2020, for instance, government forces attacked Habibullah Ghoriani, a tycoon known for arming local Hazaras in Herat province. According to locals and eyewitnesses, the army opened fire on Hazara civilians, including women and children.

In late January, government forces killed 11 Hazaras in the highlands of Behsud district of Maidan Wardak province, claiming that they were affiliates of a local commander who fought against the Taliban and formed the Resistance Movement for Justice, a Hazara militia. The Afghan National Security Council and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission later sent two separate delegations to the scene. The results of both investigations showed that Allah Dad Fadaei, the police chief of Maidan Wardak, committed war crimes and shot at peaceful demonstrators. Although the Interior Ministry announced that Fadaei had been

suspended from his duties and the case referred to the attorney general, a few days after the incident, he was appointed police chief of Laghman province without ever standing trial.

Such atrocities have a long history and are deeply rooted in Afghanistan's culture, society and politics. The Hazaras have faced long-term persecution and discrimination from the majority Sunni Muslim population for being the adherents of the Twelvers branch of Shia Islam. Above all, the Hazaras are viewed as the descendants of Genghis Khan, whose armies ransacked the Islamic world, putting an end to the Islamic Golden Age in the 13th century.

In the late 19th century, Abdur Rahman Khan, the emir of Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901, declared jihad against the Hazaras, annihilating more than 62% of their population. Widespread antagonism toward the Hazara community means that the ethnic group is subject to systematic physical elimination, violence and discrimination for religious and racial reasons. On the day of the school attack, for instance, an Austro-Afghan journalist and author, Emran Feroz, tweeted "When I was in Dashte Barchi in March, I made a horrible experience that shocked me. I was making photos of a sports event mainly visited by Hazara. Security was bad. So, I asked a soldier about it. His answer: 'Let them kill the Hazara.' He continued racist slurs. I freaked out."

The Responsibility to Protect

The important question now is what should be done to protect this community? The day after the attack, the families of the victims called on the International Court of Justice to impartially assess the bombing. Furthermore, the Hazara diaspora is working to have the 19th-century Hazara genocide recognized. There is also the move to petition the International Criminal Court to start an investigation into crimes against Hazara civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the community is disappointed with the government's lack of action. Sarwar Danish called the May 8 bombing an act of genocide, mentioning that the terrorists targeted a particular

ethnic group with distinct beliefs. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in a statement also called on a team of UN experts to investigate these killings and other violence in Afghanistan.

The Afghan government and the international community must recognize the Hazara ethnicity as a group subject to systematic discrimination and violence. The Afghan government and the United Nations have a legal, moral and political obligation to protect such a community. This should be clearly reflected in international declarations as has been proposed by the Hazara diaspora.

There is a number of measures that can be implemented to protect the Hazara community in Afghanistan. First, the presence of the Hazaras at the strategic, staffing and operational levels of the country's security sector must be increased and ensured. At the present moment, the number of Hazaras in senior and middle ranks of the security organs is in the single digits.

This has intensified targeted attacks against the ethnic group because officials do not feel responsible for securing the Hazaras and are unfamiliar with the socio-cultural and environmental conditions in which the community lives. The first vice president of Afghanistan, Amrullah Saleh, before assuming office, had suggested that he would provide a way of self-protection for the community via intelligence-sharing. Now in office, fulfilling that promise would go a long way.

Second, the international community should use any possible cultural, political and military tools commonly deployed to protect vulnerable groups from extremists. It is key that the Hazara genocide is acknowledged by both the Afghan government and the UN. The attacks on the Hazaras in the last six years go beyond war crimes and crimes against humanity and carry the hallmarks of modern-day genocide. The government of Afghanistan and international organizations should pay attention to the evidence presented to international legal

authorities and consider the demands of the Hazara diaspora.

Last but not least, the government of Afghanistan has to strengthen and support the Hazara community so that it can protect itself within the framework of national security and international values as it has successfully done in the past. In 2017, following the escalation of targeted terrorist attacks on the Hazaras in Afghanistan, the government decided to arm civilians to protect Hazara mosques and religious ceremonies. The government's plan was to arm at least 20,000 people under the aegis of the Interior Ministry.

The plan was so successful that, according to Mohammad Mohaqiq, a Hazara leader and President Ashraf Ghani's senior adviser on security affairs, it prevented terrorist groups from attacking Hazara religious ceremonies and mosques during some important ceremonies, such as the Muharram. By implementing such a program, the Afghan government will take a big step toward securing the Hazara areas in the country. Until this is achieved, the Hazara community will continue to face threats to its already precarious existence in Afghanistan.

***Sakhi Khalid** is an Afghan freelance journalist.

Pandemic Family Life: The Struggles Behind Closed Doors

Anis Ben Brik
May 14, 2021

The world's most vulnerable families do not have the personal resources to manage the multi-layered pandemic crisis.

With an estimated 255 million full-time jobs lost in 2020, the global economy shrank by 4.4%, pushing ever more

people into poverty. Right now, 34 million are on the brink of starvation, and 235 million will require humanitarian assistance and protection in 2021 — an increase of 40% from last year. Limited social and economic mobility has deeply altered family life with alarming speed and magnitude. For families, the fundamental building blocks of our society, the pandemic is a public and yet a very personal crisis. As the raging socioeconomic inequalities we have allowed to multiply are exposed, their severe strain continues to be experienced differently among families.

COVID-19 has exacerbated many of the injustices that face vulnerable families, women and children in every country, but especially in those nations undergoing political and economic turmoil, from inadequate internet access to housing instability, tacit unschooling and food insecurity. Dr. Hans Henri P. Kluge, the World Health Organization's regional director for Europe, recently noted that "the cards have been stacked against them in terms of jobs, housing, community, social support and health care." In turn, new and different types of inequality, such as the mental health and wellbeing gap or digital and gender inequalities, are exacerbated. Each is a threat to the human dimension of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Facing the Crisis

There is empirical evidence that families, women and children are experiencing mental health stress in the face of the unfolding crisis. The cross-sectional COVID-19 Family Life Study initiated at the College of Public Policy, Hamad Bin Khalifa University, carried out online surveys among 123,845 parents of children under 18 spanning every continent between March and October 2020. The results show the worrying incidence of parents' and children's mental health, wellbeing, behavioral and emotional difficulties.

During the pandemic, anxiety was the most pervasive symptom among parents, followed by depression, then stress. The prevalence differed

significantly according to gender, education and employment status. Symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress were found in mothers, parents with primary and intermediate educational levels, as well as retired and unemployed parents.

Parents reported elevated levels of anxiety in their children across high-income, upper-middle-income and lower-middle-income countries, as defined by the World Bank. In countries facing political instability or conflict, such as Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Venezuela, Iraq and Syria, however, the pandemic has had a severe impact on children's levels of anxiety. Palestine had the highest percentage of children experiencing elevated and severe levels of anxiety compared to countries with high incomes such as Greece, Norway, Poland, Italy and Australia, which had the lowest.

In Asia, children in early adolescence living in single-parent households experienced higher levels of anxiety. In the Gulf region, over 30% of parents reported their children experiencing an elevated level of anxiety and over 20% reported severe difficulties in their child's emotional, behavioral and attentional abilities. The study also shows that teens are struggling under the oppressive weight of anxiety and depression, many of whom live in low and middle-income countries.

Children's activity, eating and sleep routines have been disrupted globally, which may have detrimental effects on their health and overall development. More than half of parents surveyed in the UAE, Lebanon, Indonesia, the United States, the Netherlands, China, Pakistan, Singapore, the Philippines, South Africa, Sudan and Peru reported an increase in their children's sleep problems. Over 50% of parents in Qatar, Bahrain, Italy, the US, Oman, Kuwait, Germany, China, Chile, Venezuela, Malaysia, Nigeria, India and Iraq reported an increase in their children's reading difficulties. In Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Sweden, Oman, the UAE, Singapore, France, the US, Norway, Brazil, Jordan, Nigeria, Tunisia, Kenya, Algeria, Angola, Ecuador and Chile,

more than half reported an increase in their screen time.

The results reflect humanitarian crises that predate the pandemic. Many already vulnerable refugees have been plunged into even greater precariousness, for example. The data shows an increasing inequality between countries, with children in high-income countries experiencing fewer mental health problems than those in the global south. While the challenges of the pandemic are overwhelming for all of us, the more pronounced psychological symptoms among children and teenagers may also be a reflection of the inequities inside their homes and in some cases the utter lack of protection offered by national systems. It is also in these countries where mental health counseling is too often unavailable for those who need it most.

The disruptions to children's physical activities, sleeping and eating routines, reading and screen time will have a long-lasting effect on their physical and mental health. These must be addressed if we are to guard children's wellbeing and prevent the onset of more severe behavioral and emotional problems.

Facing the Future

Parents are facing serious challenges and need support if they are to continue fulfilling their foundational role in providing secure, stable and healthy home environments for their children. The most vulnerable families, those who are plagued by poverty, those mired down by gender inequality, and those living in conflict zones, must receive the support they need and deserve.

These more vulnerable families do not have the personal resources to manage the multi-layered pandemic crisis. Their vulnerabilities are too easily exploited, whether within the labor or the housing market, with the most vulnerable often willing to accept abusive conditions to stave off complete destitution. Negative coping strategies may include behavioral disengagement, self-blame, denial and substance abuse, leading to further social exclusion.

On the International Day of Families, we must be mindful that the global SDGs will be difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill unless strategies to achieve them focus on the family. Our policy choices today will determine how quickly countries can overcome the pandemic's impact. Otherwise, we risk aggravating the already deep inequalities both within and between countries.

Technology and digital tools can help in many respects, offering mental health support or giving parents access to essential public health information and tips on how to recognize and cope with the symptoms of anxiety in their children and teens. But for that to work, the widening digital gap must be addressed. The challenges ahead include the need to develop global, regional and national intervention programs to offset the effects of the pandemic. Evidence-based policy interventions can do much to ensure a fair global order that recognizes the inherent dignity of all persons and all families.

Far beyond the span of current COVID-19 stimulus packages, there is an urgent need for investment and support by governments to protect families, as evidenced by the study. Over 90% of parents surveyed reported an urgent need for financial support for families and the elderly, work-family balance arrangements, mental health programs for parents, children and adolescents, and parenting and relationship education programs. The pandemic has illuminated positive opportunities for shaping family and childcare policies, and family policies must be the foundation of post-pandemic recovery.

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Netanyahu and Hamas Are Playing a Deadly Game

Hillel Schenker
May 18, 2021

Benjamin Netanyahu and Hamas hope to benefit from the latest round of violence between the Israelis and Palestinians while civilians on both sides suffer.

In March, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu was unable to achieve a parliamentary majority in the Knesset after a fourth Israeli election in two years. As a result, he needed a national crisis to prevent the establishment of an alternative government by the opposition. Such a coalition would include right, centrist and left-wing parties, presenting a threat to Netanyahu's premiership.

The last crisis in 2020 was the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused opposition leader Benny Gantz to cave in and agree to form a national unity government with Netanyahu. Now, Netanyahu has a new national emergency with the conflict in Gaza. This has led Naftali Bennet, leader of the right-wing Yamina party, to abandon efforts to form an alternative government with Yair Lapid, head of the centrist Yesh Atid, the largest opposition in Israel. Yamina and Yesh Atid have attempted to combine with Gantz's Blue and White, the left-wing Labor and Meretz parties, and the United Arab List to reach a 61-seat majority in the Knesset.

Netanyahu may not have planned the exact scenario of the current conflict with Hamas militants in Gaza, but his policies laid the foundation for it. First, he has refused to negotiate with the Palestinian Authority and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, Netanyahu has preferred to bolster divisions

between the Palestinian factions of Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank.

There is no chance that Netanyahu would order the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to overthrow the Hamas government in Gaza. The prime minister wants the division amongst the Palestinians to continue. Netanyahu is content with having Qatar — which did not join the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in recognizing Israel in 2020 — prop up Hamas' rule in Gaza.

Evictions in Sheikh Jarrah

Other Israeli decisions connected to East Jerusalem and its Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood have led to the multiple crises now taking place.

The first spark that lit the flame was the decision by Israeli police to set up barricades toward the end of Ramadan, the Islamic holy month, at the Damascus Gate entrance to the Old City. Since that is a place where many young Palestinians gather in the evening after breaking their fasts, it led to anger and protest — some violent. Kobi Shabtai, the novice police commissioner, falsely claimed this was a longstanding policy to prevent crowding. He later lifted the ban.

This was followed by clashes in East Jerusalem inside a compound known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Haram al-Sharif. Israeli police made another major mistake of firing stun grenades into Al-Aqsa Mosque, which is inside the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. This led to outrage amongst Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and Israeli-Arab citizens in Israel.

The second spark was due to right-wing Israeli extremists attempting to evict Palestinians from their homes in Sheikh Jarrah to make way for Jewish settlers. These Palestinian families became refugees in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and were relocated to Sheikh Jarrah in 1956 after the Jordanian government, which controlled East Jerusalem at the time, built homes for them.

An extremely unfair law permits Israelis to try to reclaim property in East Jerusalem that was held by Jews before 1948. Yet Palestinians are

not allowed to do the same with property they once owned in West Jerusalem. A hearing over the legality of the eviction attempts was due to be heard by the Israeli Supreme Court on May 10. The case has since been postponed for a month at the request of Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit.

With the events on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif and the evictions in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, the focus is on Netanyahu. To reach a majority in the Knesset, the prime minister encouraged the newly-elected Itamar Ben-Gvir — a follower of the extreme right-wing Rabbi Meir Kahane — and his Jewish Power Party to join forces with Bezalel Smotrich and his Religious Zionism, a nationalist, far-right party.

Ben-Gvir has been accused by the Israeli police chief of supporting young, right-wing extremists who attacked Palestinians in the Old City and in Sheikh Jarrah last week. “The person who is responsible for this intifada [uprising] is Itamar Ben Gvir. It started with the Lehava protest at Damascus Gate,” Shabtai said. “It continued with provocations in Sheikh Jarrah, and now he is moving around with Lehava activists.”

To his credit, even Netanyahu realized that the situation in Jerusalem was at risk of turning ugly. This year, just before what Israelis call the “Jerusalem Day Flag March,” marking the capture of the Old City and East Jerusalem in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Palestinians marked Laylat al-Qadr (night of decree), one of the holiest nights in Ramadan and the Islamic calendar. On May 10, thousands of young, right-wing Israelis were scheduled to march through Damascus Gate while taunting Palestinians in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. Instead, it was rerouted via the Jaffa Gate adjacent to West Jerusalem.

Uncertainty for Hamas

This is where Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip, comes into the picture. Hamas has been losing popularity in Gaza because of the dire conditions that Palestinian face there. In May and

July, Palestinians were due to vote in legislative and presidential elections, respectively. While the elections have been postponed by President Abbas, who blamed Israel for uncertainty about whether Palestinian elections could take place in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, the Hamas leadership was concerned.

On the one hand, it was predicted that Hamas might benefit from the weakness of the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority. Fatah has split into three groups for the elections, with Abbas part of the main one. On the other hand, Nasser al-Qudwa’s decision to run a separate list from Fatah poses a risk to Hamas. Qudwa, a senior diplomat who was sacked by Fatah in March, is the nephew of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Qudwa represents a group led by Marwan Barghouti, a popular Fatah leader who is currently in an Israeli prison and is dubbed “Palestine’s Nelson Mandela,” while a third Fatah list is led by Mohammed Dahlan, an exiled rival of Abbas who is originally from Gaza.

An election for the Palestinians presents uncertainty for both Fatah and Hamas. Therefore, Hamas decided to present itself as the guardian of Jerusalem and of Al-Aqsa Mosque, hoping to take advantage of Palestinian disappointment at the postponement of elections by Abbas. Hamas leaders threatened Israel by saying unless its police forces withdrew from the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound and from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, they would fire rockets on Jerusalem. Most observers thought this was a bluff, since it was assumed that Hamas wouldn’t shoot missiles at Jerusalem out of fear they might hit Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam.

It turns out that they weren’t bluffing. Ever since this round of deadly clashes began on May 10, Hamas militants have kept their word. A few nights ago, Hamas said it would fire rockets toward Tel Aviv in retaliation for IDF actions during the day. Minutes after midnight, the anti-missile alert sirens sounded and 2 million people in the greater Tel Aviv area headed into bomb shelters, including my family and neighbors.

By firing indiscriminately at a civilian population, Hamas is committing war crimes. Any government facing such a situation would feel compelled to respond. Of course, since the Israeli army is far more powerful than Hamas forces — and because Gaza is densely populated — there are many more Palestinian casualties than Israeli. At the weekend, Haaretz, an Israeli daily, published an article with the headline: “Israeli killed by rocket; IDF destroys media offices, kills families in Gaza.” The Israeli died on May 15 after a “barrage of rocket fire targeted Tel Aviv.” On the same day, Hamas said “it had fired dozens of rockets at central Israel in response to the killing of eight children and two women, all members of the same family, in a [strike] on the Al-Shate refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip.” As the exchange of fire enters its second week, the death toll at the time of publishing stands at 212 in Gaza, including 61 children. In Israel, 10 people have died, including a 10-year-old Israeli-Arab girl.

By evicting families and building settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, Israel is also committing war crimes. This includes Israeli attempts to displace Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah. Israel’s disproportionate use of military force to defend itself — though justifiably — against repeated rocket fire is also problematic.

Violence on the Street

The worst byproduct of the current situation is perhaps the inter-communal conflict in Israel that has evolved as a result of the broader crisis. This is particularly in the mixed Jewish and Arab cities of Acre, Lod, Ramla, Jaffa and other locations such as Jerusalem.

This is tragic given the progress that has been made in recent years with Jewish-Arab cooperation and partnership inside Israel. To tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, Israeli-Arab medical personnel have taken on a central role. In football, Israeli-Arabs have played a prominent part. In politics, the Joint List, an alliance of Arab-majority parties, recommended Gantz for

the role of prime minister in 2020. Now, the United Arab List led by Mansour Abbas could play a decisive role in the possible formation of an alternative Israeli government.

All of this has been undermined in a few violent weeks. It was as if we suddenly had a throwback to the murderous intercommunal strife that occurred in 1921, 1929 and 1936 in the British Mandate of Palestine before the state of Israel was created. Fortunately, there is a strong foundation for the revival and continuation of Jewish-Arab cooperation within Israel. Young people in Standing Together, a Jewish-Arab grassroots movement, have taken to the streets in protest. Mayors of joint and neighboring municipalities have also been active in trying to heal the social wounds.

Time for a Plan

Israelis and Palestinians will need to find the strength as societies to deal with the current crisis and to develop paths toward internal solidarity and a cross-border resolution of the conflict. It is equally important that the international community takes an active role. World powers have played a major role in the region in modern times — from the Ottoman Empire, the British Mandate of Palestine and the 1917 Balfour Declaration to the 1947 UN General Assembly resolution to create two states, Arab and Jewish. Now, they cannot stand aside and watch. They must play a part in defusing the current violence and creating the foundations for a more fundamental resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In Washington, the Biden administration, which has a lot on its plate domestically, had hoped it could ignore the Middle East conflict. That is clearly not working. US President Joe Biden has even delayed designating a new American ambassador to Israel. He has also not yet reopened a US consulate in Jerusalem to serve as an address for American communication with the Palestinians. These are two simple steps that should urgently be taken.

In addition, the Americans can revive the role of the Middle East Quartet — which is made up of the US, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations — in seeking to advance a resolution of the conflict. The Arab world can bring back and activate the Arab Peace Initiative. Proposed by Saudi Arabia and confirmed at the Arab League's 2002 summit in Beirut, the plan offers Israel recognition, peace and normalized relations with the Arab world, backed by all Muslim-majority countries. In exchange, a Palestinian state would be established in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital, alongside the state of Israel, with small, mutually agreed-upon land swaps.

When it comes to Jerusalem, it would perhaps be best to return to the original partition plan of 1947. According to the UN General Assembly's decision, a Jewish state and an Arab state were to be established, while Jerusalem was to be an international city. While the situation today is completely different from that plan 74 years ago, the conflict around the Old City and the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif — which contains the sites considered holy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam — could be neutralized by making it an area shared by all peoples. Jerusalem would be what Jordan's late King Hussein called "God's city."

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Biden Changes the Russia Equation

Thomas Kent
May 18, 2021

President Joe Biden's tough position on Russia risks exacerbating further the split within NATO countries over how tough to be on the Kremlin.

The Biden administration is posing some stark choices for its European allies. It is not only challenging them to stand more firmly against the Kremlin, but is expanding America's expectations of what democracy should be inside their own countries. President Joe Biden's tough position on Russia, especially the sanctions announced on April 15, risks further exacerbating the split within NATO countries over how tough to be on the Kremlin. The administration also risks blowback from Central and East European (CEE) states over its strong support for liberal democratic standards that not all of them endorse.

For all the contempt that many Europeans held for Donald Trump, his policies toward Russia were easier for some of them to live with. Hard-line NATO nations drew comfort from his continuation of sanctions against Moscow, sale of lethal arms to Ukraine and fierce opposition to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Trump questioned Article 5 of the NATO charter, but Russian President Vladimir Putin never had the stomach to put Trump's jumbled position on the issue to the test. Meanwhile, Europeans eager to accommodate Russia were encouraged by Trump's attempts to forge a personal relationship with Putin and his enduring belief that the Kremlin could somehow become an ally.

Trump was also a convenient president for those in CEE nations with conservative social values and an unsteady commitment to the rule of law. Trump's attitude toward their countries was simply transactional; his interest was in what

America could gain from their relationship. How they were governed held little interest for him.

Bows and Wrist-Slaps

Biden has changed the equation dramatically. Some might have expected him to set aside everything that Moscow did during the Trump presidency and focus on the future. Instead, Biden did the opposite. On April 15, he expelled Russian diplomats and imposed significant new sanctions for Russia's actions during Trump's time in office, leaving space for a whole new set of possible actions in case of further provocations from Moscow. Some observers found the measures Biden announced to be wrist-slaps.

But in many respects, the measures were significant and pointed clearly to future possibilities, ranging from new financial actions to the criminal prosecution of senior Russian regime figures. Officials also intimated that the US might already be retaliating on the cyber front.

Biden has made the appropriate bows to potential cooperation with Moscow and offered Putin a summit in the coming months in a third country. But overall, the tone of his message to Russia has been hostile, including calling Putin a "killer." Putin's claim to legitimacy, at home and abroad, is built on the idea that he is a respected statesman and even something of an intellectual rather than the boss of a dictatorship backed by organized crime. (While most Russian reports on Biden's comments translated "killer" as "ubiytsa," the usual word for "murderer," some media chose the imported word "killer," which in Russian means a mob hitman.)

With Biden taking a more uncompromising attitude to the Kremlin, the question now is whether Western responses to Russian provocations will become much more unified and move well beyond diplomatic statements and scattered financial sanctions. Is a point approaching where US pressure — plus Russia's threats to Ukraine, its torture of Alexei Navalny, its cyberattacks against the West and its murder of opponents abroad — might finally lead the

allies to slash the scale of business deals with Moscow, choke off the flow of illicit Russian money and impose tighter restrictions on visas to the EU? Even if sanctions don't work, they say something about the values that the country imposing them stands for.

In CEE countries, substantial numbers of citizens still believe Russia poses little threat to their nations. But the drumbeat of provocations from Moscow, including espionage and even sabotage inside CEE countries, will have its effect. Even though Visegrad nations lack a united policy on Ukraine — mainly because of Hungary — they all backed Czechia's expulsion of Russian diplomatic staff over the explosion of an arms depot in 2014. Will allied nations now respond to Czechia's call for them to expel Russian diplomats from their countries, too, to show solidarity?

Human Rights Challenge

Meanwhile, the new US administration has thrown down a human rights challenge not only to authoritarian regimes, but to some of its CEE allies. Biden's team has made clear that America once again cares very much about democratic rights in other countries. When directed at Russia, this message has the dual advantage of reflecting American values while also pressuring Putin, who, judging by his repression of even tiny protests, seems to genuinely believe a "color revolution" is around the corner.

Yet the policy may well make some allies uncomfortable. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a speech on March 30, declared that in America's view, there is no "hierarchy of rights" in a democracy. He not only vigorously and specifically defended abortion and LGBTQ+ rights, but essentially put them on the same level as freedom of speech and religion. In so doing, he lined up with forces in the EU that are pressing some CEE countries not only to strengthen basic democratic institutions, but to also adopt liberal social values. The US position creates a new opening for pro-Russian and populist politicians who have been claiming for years that the West is

intent on undermining the “morals” of former members of the Soviet bloc.

Virtuous as the US position may be, it is unclear how far the administration will go with it. Blinken, an experienced diplomat, knows that idealism often must bow to political realities. As his predecessor Mike Pompeo put it, “Our commitment to inalienable rights doesn’t mean we have the capacity to tackle all human rights violations everywhere and at all times.” Even if the administration recognizes no hierarchy of rights, it certainly has a hierarchy of interests. At the top of that hierarchy may well be the geopolitical imperative of keeping CEE nations out of Russia’s orbit.

If the US runs into too-strong opposition over its human rights agenda, it could focus more on campaigning against corruption. That cause has wide public support. It is also effective against many anti-democratic forces, including pro-Russian actors who thrive on murky financial deals. This could de-escalate conflict over liberal social values while still encouraging activities that undermine Kremlin influence in the CEE region.

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Expect an Uneven Rebound in MENA and Central Asia

Jean AbiNader
May 20, 2021

Although recovery from COVID-19 and the economic downturn is still in play, the IMF projects a turnaround for some countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia.

Projections, no matter how well-grounded in analytics, are a messy business. Three years ago, COVID-19 was unheard of and then-US President Donald Trump’s politics caused uncertainty in international relations, with democracy in retreat across the world. Despite the best-informed prognostications, predictions failed to capture cross-border variables such as immigration and civil conflict that have yet to play out in rearranging local and regional economic prospects.

No region is more complex in terms of confusing signals than the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Central Asia. This is the subject of the latest report by the International Monetary Fund titled, “Regional Economic Outlook: Arising from the Pandemic: Building Forward Better.”

What is clear from a review of the data is that 2020 was an outlier in terms of trend lines earlier in the decade, skewed by the COVID-19 pandemic, erosion of oil prices, diminished domestic economic activity, reduced remittances and other factors that have yet to be brought into an orderly predictive model. Even the IMF had to recalibrate its 2020 report upward for several countries based on rising oil exports, while decreasing marks were given countries slow to vaccinate against COVID-19 and that rely on service-oriented sectors.

Mixed Outlook

The numbers indicate a mixed picture, ranging from Oman growing at 7.2% and the West Bank at 6.9%, to Lebanon receiving no projection and Sudan at the bottom of the range with a 1.13% real GDP growth rate. Yet, so much can impact those numbers, from Oman's heavy debt burden to continuing turmoil in intra-Palestinian and Palestinian-Israeli affairs.

The good news is that real GDP is expected to grow by 4% in 2021, up from the projection last October of 3.2%. Much of the lift has come from two factors: a more optimistic trend line for the oil producers and the rate of vaccinations in countries that will promote business recovery.

As CNBC pointed out, Jihad Azour, director of the IMF's Middle East and Central Asia department, noted that recovery will be "divergent between countries and uneven between different parts of the population." Key variables include the extent of vaccine rollout, recovery of tourism and government policies to promote recovery and growth.

In oil-producing countries, real GDP is projected to increase from 2.7% in 2021 to 3.8% in 2022, with a 5.8% rise in the region's sector driven by Libya's return to global markets. Conversely, non-oil producers saw their growth rate estimates reduced from 2.7% to 2.3%. In fact, Georgia, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, which are highly dependent on tourism, have been downgraded in light of continuing COVID-19 issues such as vaccination rollout and coverage.

As the IMF report summary notes, "The outlook will vary significantly across countries, depending on the pandemic's path, vaccine rollouts, underlying fragilities, exposure to tourism and contact-intensive sectors, and policy space and actions." From Mauritania to Afghanistan, one can select data that supports or undercuts the projected growth rates. For example, in general, Central Asia countries as a group seem to be poised for stronger results than others. Meanwhile, Arab countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council face greater uncertainty,

from resolving debt issues to unforeseen consequences of negotiations with Iran.

So, how will these projects fare given a pending civil war in Afghanistan and the possible deterioration of oil prices and debt financing by countries such as Bahrain and Oman? Highlighting this latter concern, the report goes on to say that public "gross financing needs in most emerging markets in the region are expected to remain elevated in 2021-22, with downside risks in the event of tighter global financial conditions and/or if fiscal consolidation is delayed due to weaker-than-expected recovery."

An Opportunity

Calling for greater regional and international cooperation to complement "strong domestic policies" focused on the need "to build forward better and accelerate the creation of more inclusive, resilient, sustainable, and green economies," the IMF is calling on the countries to see a post-pandemic phase as an opportunity. This would involve implementing policies that promote recovery, sustain public health practices that focus on sustainable solutions, and balance "the need for debt sustainability and financial resilience."

There is great uncertainty assigning these projections without more conclusive data on the impact of the pandemic, the stress on public finance and credit available to the private sector, and overall economic recovery across borders that relies on factors such as the weather, oil demand, external political shocks and international monetary flows. The IMF report is a very helpful bellwether for setting parameters for ongoing analyses and discussions.

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Marvin Gaye's What's Going On, 50 Years On

Ellis Cashmore
May 20, 2021

We often talk about entertainers' legacies, as if they all leave one. Marvin Gaye did.

What is it about some great artists that makes them want to be someone else? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the father of Sherlock Holmes, aspired to be a historical novelist like Leo Tolstoy or Fyodor Dostoyevsky, neglecting that he created some of the finest detective fiction of all time. François Truffaut was in awe of Alfred Hitchcock, even though many thought his own films as complex, mysterious and beguiling as Hitchcock's. Marvin Gaye had his sights set on becoming another Frank Sinatra. At least that's the inference we take from his biographer, David Ritz. In his book "Divided Soul," Ritz quotes Gaye: "Everyone wanted to sell to whites 'cause whites got the most money," adding that, at Motown, his record label, "Our attitude was — give us some."

Gaye recorded 25 studio albums plus four live and 24 compilations, mostly for Motown, but his magnum opus was "What's Going On," an album that unfurls the narrative, and perhaps the meaning, not only of Gaye's understanding of life, but of the times in which he lived. First released on May 21, 1971, Gaye's supreme achievement approaches its 50th anniversary. The occasion offers a chance to assess Gaye's and his creation's relevance.

Perfect Material

As a teenager, Gaye (or Gay, as he was; he added the "e" for effect later) was in one of the doo-wop groups popular in the 1950s that specialized in close harmony vocals and meaningless phrases — hence the name. On the advice of a friend, he moved to Detroit, the base of Motown Records,

the now-iconic label started by Berry Gordy in 1959. While his contemporaries at the Atlantic and Chess record companies annulled some of their black artists' attempts to mimic white performers, Gordy, in many cases, reversed the process. In Gaye, he found perfect raw material.

Passionate about success in the mainstream and, by implication, white-dominated markets, Gordy initially marketed Gaye as a wholesome crooner, appearing with big bands on national television when possible. His early releases were typically covers of standards, such as Vaughn Monroe's "Sandman" or nondescript Motown originals, like Gordy's own composition "Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide." Gaye's first album, released in 1961, was most likely an indication of his desired musical direction and comprised standards such as Cole Porter's "Love for Sale" and Rodgers and Hart's "How Deep Is the Ocean (How High Is the Sky)." His versions of Sinatra's "Witchcraft" and "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face," from the musical "My Fair Lady" suggest his ambitions.

Gaye was a multi-instrumentalist and would often play on other artists' material. He also wrote. One of his songs (co-written) was "Stubborn Kind of Fella," which, while no harbinger of what lay ahead, gained Gaye recognition when it was released as a single in 1962. It also set his career off on a different trajectory. Over the next several years, he continued to write and collaborate with other Motown personnel, until, in 1965, he gained international attention with his "Ain't That Peculiar." Gaye also duetted, most notably with Tammi Terrell ("Ain't Nothing Like the Real Thing" became a big success in 1968). Terrell died tragically young, at 24, in 1970.

The whole time, Gaye still had his sights set on the mainstream. Gaye, as Ritz writes, "did everything he could to win a mainstream middle-class audience, crooning the ballads he thought white music lovers wanted to hear." He may not have felt comfortable doing it, but he went along with most of Gordy's ideas, like performing at

whites' dinner clubs, dressed in a tuxedo and a bowtie.

Remember: Gaye would have been accustomed to appearing in front of whites-only and sometimes physically segregated audiences. Some African American artists specialized in what was disparagingly called the chitlin circuit — a network of clubs, theaters and other venues with black clientele. Up until 1964, segregation was a constitutional part of America's social structure. The landmark civil rights legislation outlawed segregation in public places and made discrimination in employment illegal. Of course, society didn't change nearly as quickly as many wanted. Frustration at the lack of meaningful progress expressed itself in the rise of militant groups like the Black Panthers and the more pervasive ethos of black power that became prominent in the late 1960s.

Gaye's early attempts to maneuver himself into a mainstream market were often at odds with the ambitions of contemporaries like James Brown, Otis Redding and Gaye's colleague at Motown, Stevie Wonder, all of whom pursued a rather different course, maintaining a black sensibility without compromising their independence. This rankled with Gaye and, even while his records sold and he became acknowledged as a global artist, he confessed to feeling like "Berry's puppet." This didn't mean he felt exploited. If anything, Gaye was complicit, at one stage agreeing to sing an advertising jingle on a Detroit radio station.

Even after his internationally acclaimed "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" in 1968, Gaye felt he was quiescent to the demands of the white market he was trying to break into: "Sometimes I felt like the shuffle-and-jive niggers of old, steppin' and fechin' for the white folk." It was a remarkable and seemingly guilt-stricken admission for a singer who, at the time, was drawing comparisons with Ray Charles and Sam Cooke. (Incidentally, this tune was used under the famous 1985 ad for Levi's, which featured the recently deceased Nick Kamen.)

Heart and Soul

Then, in an unexpectedly magnanimous deal, Gordy offered Wonder a contract that effectively freed him from the usual constraints of Motown and allowed him creative control over his own music. Gordy was rewarded with four virtuoso albums from Wonder. Presumably emboldened by Gordy's newfound amenability, Gaye sought and got a similar contract, one with greater artistic license. He took immediate advantage of it. At first, Gaye released a single: "What's Going On" was not one of his own songs but delivered a message he endorsed.

The message itself was generic: "There's far too many of you dying / You know we've got to find a way to bring some loving here today." Resistance to US involvement in the Vietnam War, which had started in 1964 and ended with the withdrawal of American forces in 1973, was at its height and, while the lyric was presumably about this conflict, it had — and still has — wider resonance.

The single was successful and Gordy encouraged Gaye to make an entire album in a similar style. He did so, the story being that he completed the whole project in a month. Early reviews were exciting. "Gaye has designed his album as one many-faceted statement on conditions in the world today, made nearly seamless by careful transitions between the cuts. A simple, subdued tone is held throughout, pillowed by a densely-textured instrumental and vocal backing," wrote Vince Aletti in his review for Rolling Stone. "Part mystic, part pentecostal fundamentalist, part socially aware ghetto graduate, this particular Motown superstar simply happens to believe that he speaks to God and vice versa," Time magazine rhapsodized.

The album had a molten quality, each track bleeding into the next, with themes of spirituality, violence, poverty, unemployment, policing, drug dependence, the inner cities, the environment and the care of children flowing through. It was a glistening, rippling, soul-stirring triumph, fundamental and organic. And it wasn't just the audial beauty that caught the attention but the

almost primal force with which it was delivered. Gaye sang as if he were baring his heart and soul.

Gaye never surpassed his masterwork and went into a gradual descent, parting with Motown, falling behind on alimony payments and sliding into a debt reported to be \$7 million by 1978. Gaye spent time alone in Hawaii, the UK and Belgium, still writing and sporadically recording. It was a period of unhappy isolation. He was given a lifeline by Larkin Arnold of CBS and repaid him with an album and the 1982 single "Sexual Healing," which is, as readers will know, as sensuous a piece of pop music as there has ever been.

Gaye might have slid a little, but he was still a solid entertainer in his forties. The following year, he went on a concert tour that was, by all accounts, disorderly and marred by confusion. Gaye had also acquired a taste for cocaine. During the tour, he became involved in a violent conflict with his own father, who drew a gun, killing his son. It was the day before Gaye's 45th birthday.

We often talk about entertainers' legacies as if they all leave one. Of course, very few actually do. Marvin Gaye did. His tour de force remains an intricately immersive piece of art, of its time and also of any time. It has the social realism of a Basquiat canvas and the sly subversiveness Spike Lee brings to his films. It is an exercise in the possibilities of popular music, persuading listeners to engage with issues and events, but in elliptical ways that make thinking and taking pleasure one and the same thing.

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India Is Slowly Evolving Into a Market Economy

Sunil Asnani and Kshitij Bhatia
May 26, 2021

After years of piecemeal reforms, India is introducing bold changes and opening up state-controlled sectors to market competition, promising higher growth prospects in the future.

India has come a long way since its independence from colonial rule in 1947. It started as a mixed economy where elements of both capitalism and socialism coexisted uneasily. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was a self-declared Fabian socialist who admired the Soviet Union. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, amended the constitution in 1976 and declared India to be a socialist country. She nationalized banks, insurance companies, mines and more.

Gandhi tied Indian industry in chains. She imposed capacity constraints, price controls, foreign exchange control and red tape. India's colonial-era bureaucracy now ran the commanding heights of the economy. Such measures stifled the Indian economy, created a black market and increased bureaucratic corruption. The Soviet-inspired Bureau of Industrial Costs and Prices remains infamous to this day.

India also adopted the Soviet five-year plans. A centralized economy emerged with the state controlling the media and telecom, financial, infrastructure and energy sectors. Even in seemingly private sectors such as consumer and industrial, the state handled too many aspects of investment, production and resource allocation.

Opening Up the Economy

In the 1980s, India took gentle strides toward a market economy and opened many sectors to

private competition. In 1991, the Gulf War led to a spike in oil prices, causing a balance-of-payments crisis. In response, India rolled back the state and liberalized its economy. The collapse of the Soviet Union that year pushed India toward a more market-oriented economy.

Over the years, state-run monopolies have been decimated by private companies in industries such as aviation and telecoms. However, India still retains a strong legacy of socialism. The government remains a major participant in sectors such as energy and financial services.

After years of piecemeal reforms, the Indian government is again unleashing bolder measures. These involve the opening up of several state monopolies to private competition. They are diluting state ownership of public sector units. In some cases, they are selling these units to domestic or foreign buyers. In due course, professionals, not bureaucrats, will be running this sector.

The government's bold move to privatization is because of two reasons. First, India's public sector has proved notoriously inefficient and been a burden on the taxpayer. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has made the economy shrink and caused a shortfall in tax revenue. Privatization is a way for the government to balance its books.

As Shweta Punj, Anilesh S. Mahajan and M.G. Arun rightly point out in *India Today*, the country "will have to rethink how it sells" its public sector units for privatization to be a success. India's track record is poor. The banana peels of political opposition, bureaucratic incompetence and judicial proceedings lie in waiting.

Potential Benefits of Privatization

Yet privatization, if managed well, could lead to several benefits. It will lead to more efficiently managed businesses and a more vibrant economy. Once a state-controlled firm is privatized, it could either be turned around by its new owner or perish. In case the company fails, it would create space for better players.

Importantly, privatization could strengthen the government's fiscal position, giving it greater freedom to invest in sectors like health care and education where the Indian government has historically underinvested. Furthermore, privatization could increase investable opportunities in both public and private markets.

Given India's fractious nature and labyrinthine institutions, privatization is likely to lead to mixed results and uneven progress. One thing is certain, though. Privatization is inevitable and cannot be rolled back. Sectors in which market forces reign supreme and shareholder interests are aligned are likely to do well. State-controlled companies that prioritize policy goals over shareholder value are unlikely to do so. Similarly, sectors that have experienced frequent policy changes are unlikely to thrive.

There is a reason why savvy investors are constructing portfolios weighted toward consumer and technology sectors. So far, companies in these sectors have operated largely free of state intervention. They have had the liberty to grow and function autonomously. Unsurprisingly, they have delivered good returns.

The state-dominated financial services sector also offers promise. Well-managed private companies have a long runway to speed up on. Among large economies, India's financial services sector offers unique promise. In the capitalist US, the state has limited presence and private players dominate. This mature market offers few prospects of high growth. In communist China, state-controlled firms dominate financial services, leaving little space for the private sector. With the Indian government planning to reduce its stake in a state-controlled life insurance company, as well as sell two state-owned banks and one general insurance company, the financial services sector arguably offers a uniquely important opportunity for investors.

Just as India did well after its 1991 balance-of-payments crisis, the country may bounce back after the COVID-19 pandemic. The taxpayer may no longer need to subsidize underperforming

state-owned companies holding the country back. Instead, market competition may attract investment, create jobs and increase growth.

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Rebalancing the Power Asymmetry Between Israel and Palestine

Zeinab Fayad
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There is an urgent need to rebalance the equation to protect Palestinian rights and lives.

Shortly after the International Criminal Court announced its decision to investigate Israel for war crimes committed in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Tel Aviv continued its annexation of East Jerusalem through forced expulsions in the neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. The residents protesting their eviction were met with excessive force from the Israeli military, including the storming of Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam, in the midst of the holy month of Ramadan, and attacking peaceful worshippers. Hamas, a Palestinian faction that controls Gaza, reacted by launching thousands of rockets into Israel, approximately 90% of which were intercepted by the Israeli Iron Dome defense system.

In retaliation, Israel launched hundreds of airstrikes on Gaza, killing over 200 Palestinians, including 65 children. On May 14, an airstrike leveled a Gaza tower block housing media organizations, among them Al-Jazeera and Associated Press. This attack on press freedom caused an uproar around the world, including in

the United States. A week later, Israel and Hamas agreed to a ceasefire brokered by Egypt. Meanwhile, the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories continues.

The Power Imbalance

This series of events demonstrates the power imbalance between Israel and Palestine. This asymmetry is a result of decades of British and US support — political, economic and military — for the Zionist settler-colonial project. Over the decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has, in essence, consisted of Israel carrying out ethnic cleansing against Palestinians and being met with resistance. The latest bout of fighting emphasizes Washington's tendency to justify Israel's behavior while perpetuating the false narrative that Palestinian violence is terrorism. As such, there is an urgent need to rebalance the equation to protect Palestinian rights and lives through changing the narrative, supporting Israeli civil society and ending US weapons sales to Israel.

US leaders typically bring up the legitimacy of armed violence only when violence is being perpetrated by Palestinians. For instance, instead of condemning Israel's bombing of civilian areas, President Joe Biden, like all of his predecessors, claimed that Israel has a right to self-defense. Although he did call for a ceasefire, Biden's words fall flat. First, the US has repeatedly blocked UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire. Second, on May 5, Biden went on to approve a whopping \$735-million sale of precision-guided weapons to Israel. Third, the ceasefire brokered by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Egypt does not address the core issues of Palestinian statehood and Israeli occupation. Rather, it manages armed violence in the short term, promising to rebuild the same Gaza that was destroyed by US weapons.

Emboldened by Israel's actions and the context of impunity, some Israeli settlers in the occupied territories have formed mobs to sporadically attack Palestinians in the streets. With ethnic clashes engulfing the country, the Israeli settlers will get to have their day in a civil

court while Palestinians are subject to Israeli military courts. In fact, Israel has arrested over 1,550 demonstrators since May 9, many of whom are children. Among those detained, over 70% are Arab citizens of Israel. This disproportionality exemplifies the impunity of Jewish Israeli citizens vis-à-vis Palestinians and highlights the power imbalance inherent in Israel's judicial system.

Palestinians, often armed only with rocks, are commonly condemned as terrorists by Israel. Yet a nuclear Israel, backed by the most powerful country in the world, is always justified in its self-defense. Hamas is a security threat to Israel, but the damage it inflicts is usually contained to the few rockets that manage to get through the Iron Dome. Furthermore, conflating Palestinians, especially Gazans, with Hamas is a dangerous assumption that has a direct cost for Palestinian lives.

As part of this power asymmetry between Israel and Palestine, Tel Aviv has long controlled the narrative around the conflict, resulting in a paradigm in which any criticism of Israel is perceived as anti-Semitism. This makes legitimate dialogue and policy reevaluation challenging. However, the narrative is slowly changing thanks to long-standing Palestinian activism.

Peace Beyond Borders

How can the power imbalance be offset and peace achieved? A simple answer would be ending the illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories, restoring the 1967 borders and respecting the rights of Palestinians. Short of this, there are three additional steps that can go a long way in improving the facts on the ground for Palestinians.

First, human rights activists, and especially journalists, have a moral responsibility to counter the narrative that opposing Israeli apartheid is anti-Semitic, that Tel Aviv's actions are justified in the name of self-defense, and that Palestinian resistance is terrorism. Thanks to social media, Palestinian activists have slowly shifted this

narrative, with many leaders and protesters around the world denouncing Israel's actions and advocating for Palestinian rights.

Second, Israeli citizens themselves must recognize the atrocities upon which their state was built. Human rights groups within Israel, such as B'Tselem, voice concern and attempt to raise awareness, but it is up to ordinary citizens to decide if ethnically cleansing Palestinians is the right way to build a nation. Israelis committed to a democracy built around values of liberty, equality and reciprocity have a responsibility to oppose their government's policy, including the targeting of NGOs that promote Palestinian rights.

Third, the US must halt weapons sales to Israel and push for the protection of Palestinian rights. Currently, Israel receives \$3.8 billion in military aid from the US annually and is equipped with high-technology defense systems such as the Iron Dome.

In a marked shift of mood, US congress members are standing up for Palestinian rights. For instance, Rashida Tlaib (herself a Palestinian-American), Ilhan Omar, Cori Bush and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez have condemned Israel's use of armed force against civilians, as well as its annexation policy. On April 15, these representatives co-sponsored Betty McCollum's bill defending the human rights of Palestinian children and families living under occupation. Senator Bernie Sanders also introduced a bill to block a weapons sale recently approved by President Biden.

These are positive steps toward rebalancing the power dynamic between Israel and Palestine, but without a comprehensive shift of the narrative to more accurately reflect the complex reality on the ground, correcting decades of asymmetry will be hard to achieve.

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