

Fair Observer

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Fair Observer Monthly



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

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

Anna Pivovarchuk (Co-Founder & Deputy Managing Editor)

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

www.fairobservers.com | info@fairobservers.com

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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a US-based nonprofit media organization that aims to inform and educate global citizens of today and tomorrow. We publish a crowdsourced multimedia journal that provides a 360° view to help you make sense of the world. We also conduct educational and training programs for students, young professionals and business executives on subjects like journalism, geopolitics, the global economy, diversity and more.

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Mark Zuckerberg Is More Dangerous than Donald Trump

Atul Singh

October 2, 2018

By controlling the attention of over 2 billion people, Mark Zuckerberg is tearing up the fabric of society and destroying democracy.

US President Donald Trump sits in the Oval Office as the big boss of the world's largest military. He has his finger on the nuclear trigger and can kill anyone with a drone strike. Conventional wisdom dictates that the famously thin-skinned former reality TV star who tweets "crazy stuff" at 3 am is the most dangerous man on the planet.

It turns out that might not entirely be true. Today, nearly half of American adults get their news on Facebook. They see what their friends share and the ads that the social media network sends their way. During the 2016 US presidential election, Cambridge Analytica used personal data of 87 million Facebook members to send them fake news. Initially, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, rejected the evidence that fake news had influenced the election as a "pretty crazy idea."

It transpires that we do live in a crazy world, and the 34-year-old Zuckerberg is the father of 72-year-old Trump. As Niall Ferguson, a Scottish historian at Harvard and Stanford who champions

the British Empire, rightly remarked, "no Facebook, no Trump."

Zuckerberg has not only enabled Trump to ride to power, but he has also helped demagogues around the world. Those inciting riots in India or genocide in Myanmar have used WhatsApp and Facebook to deadly effect. Numerous newspapers from The Daily Telegraph to The Washington Post have described how dictators use and love Facebook.

Yet nowhere has the company been more toxic than in the Philippines. By offering free, basic internet services, Facebook has become the window to the world for 69 million Filipinos.

The company has created a society where "the truth no longer matters, propaganda is ubiquitous, and lives are wrecked and people die as a result," says journalist Davey Alba. She adds, "Facebook treats the Philippines as an absentee landlord might, occasionally dropping by to address minor issues but often shrugging off responsibility for the larger, more problematic stuff."

It is an uncomfortable fact that no dictator wields the amount of power that Zuckerberg does. No leader rules over a realm as vast as him or knows as much about so many people as he does. Facebook's company page tells us that it had 1.47 billion daily active users on average for June 2018 and 2.23 billion monthly active users for the same month. This beats the number of Christians, Muslims or Hindus who show

up at churches, mosques or temples to pray.

Facebook may have lost \$120 billion in market capitalization on July 26, roughly 20% of its value, but billions of people still use Facebook and Facebook-owned platforms, such as WhatsApp and Instagram, on a daily basis. In the past, emperors and priests in positions of power became a law unto themselves. This probably led to the hoary adage that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Emperor Zuckerberg is no exception.

BIG BOSS OF THE NEW BRITISH EAST INDIA COMPANY

On September 17, The New Yorker published a wordy piece by Evan Osnos titled, “Can Mark Zuckerberg Fix Facebook Before it Breaks Democracy?” Osnos has done a fair bit of research on Zuckerberg but, like many American journalists, cravenly genuflects before the rich and powerful. Explicit in the headline is the assumption that Facebook is about to break democracy and that only Zuckerberg can save it by “fixing” his Frankenstein. Trump, Congress and over 235 million voters in the US or the many billions and their leaders elsewhere are obviously incapable of doing so.

Osnos shares this belief in the benevolence of Zuckerberg with hundreds of millions, if not billions. Sadly, this popular belief lacks a solid foundation. At the end of the day,

Facebook is a for-profit company. Zuckerberg has majority voting rights thanks to a dual-class share structure that leaves him in complete control. He may spout homilies to human rights, community and connecting people, but his fiduciary duty is to maximize returns to shareholders. Like the British East India Company before him, he may care for people in his empire because of altruism or enlightened interest, but he is responsible only to his shareholders and accountable only to himself.

Just as the British East India Company did some good things, so does Facebook. Yet Zuckerberg is akin to the robber barons of yore who made fortunes from people’s addictive behavior. Opium was the drug of choice for the British East India Company. Social attention is what billions crave today. And, like opium, it turns out that this addiction is “negatively associated with well-being.” These are not observations of aging grandparents, but of an extensive study published in the American Journal of Epidemiology.

As in earlier generations, teenagers are most at risk. Professor Jean M. Twenge of San Diego State University has found that teens tend to report symptoms of depression when they spend more time on smartphones. They also feel more unhappy the more they use Facebook. Teens are sleeping less, reading fewer books and news articles, and reducing their engagement with the real world. The spiking rates of depression and suicide among teens are proof of an acute mental health crisis that

Zuckerberg insists on turning a Nelson's eye to.

Facebook is like the British East India Company in another important way. It has colonized a country as populous as India, a continent as vast as Africa and even a democracy as robust as the United Kingdom. A member of the Competition Commission of India confessed to this author that he felt impotent and depressed because Facebook would not even bother to answer his letters. Giving him information to investigate collusion or other anti-competitive practices was out the question. It is indubitably and incontrovertibly true that Facebook pays scant regard to concerns, challenges and problems of the billions of darker skinned natives who inhabit its global realm.

This is not unsurprising. Osnos records that Zuckerberg is fascinated, if not fixated by Emperor Augustus. He quotes Zuckerberg as crediting the "really harsh approach" of Augustus for "two hundred years of world peace." Zuckerberg may have married a lady of Chinese origin, but he is a classic privileged white man who conflates the Roman Empire with the entire world. He also finds the violence of Augustus and his successors worthwhile because it supposedly brought peace to the world. Perhaps the Gauls, the Goths and even Jesus might disagree.

Like Augustus, Zuckerberg's "desire to win" is legendary. In the early days of Facebook when its motto was "Move

fast and break things," Zuckerberg ended meetings with a war cry, "Domination!" He has commented on the zero-sumness of network effects, which translates simply as winner takes all. Facebook's high value depends on everyone in your circle being on it. Then you can post photos for all your friends to see, you can invite them to parties you host, and you can target ads to the exact audience you target.

It is important to note that sub-Saharan Africa, India, China and Southeast Asia do not register in Zuckerberg's view of the past. In Adam Fisher's Valley of Genius, Ezra Callahan muses how the direction of the internet was influenced by "well-off white boys." Today, with Sheryl Sandberg leaning in, Facebook and the direction of the internet is determined by powerful white men and a few white women who pay scant regard to blackie natives, brownie fuzzie wuzzies and yellow chinkies, in the same vein as the big bosses of the British East India Company.

LYING, LOBBYING AND LARGESSE WEAKEN DEMOCRACY

If Emperor Zuckerberg was only causing damage to the likes of India, Myanmar and Philippines, those in the developed world could ignore the perils of Facebook.

Sadly, the company and other social media giants threaten American democracy itself. None other than Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay and one of the pioneers of the internet, has made

this argument because Facebook more than others has facilitated the rise of echo chambers, fake news, hate and more.

Not only Omidyar but also former confidantes of Zuckerberg are worried about Facebook. Chamath Palihapitiya, the former vice-president of user growth, has observed, “The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works—no civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth.” He candidly admitted, “I feel tremendous guilt. I think we all knew in the back of our minds... that something bad could happen.”

Sean Parker, the glamorous first president of Facebook immortalized in the movie *The Social Network*, has described the company’s expertise as “exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.” In his words, its goal: “How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?” More time and attention translate into more advertisements, leaving the likes of Zuckerberg, Sandberg and Facebook shareholders laughing all the way to the bank.

In its pursuit of growth, time, attention and money, Zuckerberg, Sandberg and Co have been less than economical with the truth. In an article for *Slate*, Will Oremus examined Zuckerberg’s recent testimony to Congress and parsed out five of the emperor’s most dishonest answers. To be fair to Zuckerberg, he finally admitted not taking a “broad

enough view of our responsibility” and not dealing with fake news, foreign interference in elections, hate speech and data privacy adequately.

Furthermore, Zuckerberg apologized, a pattern he has followed since 2003. In a tour de force in *Wired* earlier this year, Zeynep Tufekci examined Zuckerberg’s apologies over 14 years. During this period, Facebook used 700,000 people as guinea pigs to do mood manipulation experiments, finding that emotions on social media are contagious. It launched the news feed without any notice to anyone. It violated people’s privacy repeatedly with wanton abandon. In case Facebook’s actions caused too much outrage, Zuckerberg offered “a tepid apology” but stayed calm and carried on.

By 2008, Tufekci points out that all of Zuckerberg’s four posts on Facebook’s blog were apologies. By 2010, Zuckerberg, who is elusive to everyone except close friends and family, had declared privacy to be no longer a “social norm.” His subjects, addicted to dopamine hits of incessant attention, voted by continuing to use his medium and post ever-increasing amounts of personal information.

Only with President Trump’s victory and reports of Russian interference in the US elections did Zuckerberg feel some real heat for the very first time. Yet this heat did not prove to be too high because it turns out that Congress is still in awe of this young billionaire.

Sadly, the Senate kowtowed before Emperor Zuckerberg instead of holding his feet to the fire. One senator kicked off the hearing by calling Facebook “pretty extraordinary,” another did not know that the company sells advertisements, and one asked Zuckerberg what regulations should Congress draft for his company. The hearing was absolutely risible and demonstrated that Congress did not understand Facebook, making any regulation improbable if not impossible.

MONEY TALKS

There is another little matter that makes Congress impotent in the face of Zuckerberg. Money plays a big role in American politics and Zuckerberg has a few billion US dollars in his pocket. His friends are also not poor. Besides, the US believes in the cult of success. Any entrepreneur who has made many billions commands reverence.

Therefore, in the heart of the world’s most powerful democracy, Zuckerberg can afford to be cursory in his apology and crow that Facebook is “an idealistic and optimistic company” despite his much checkered past. And the emperor knows that people will believe him.

Such is the power of Facebook that popular leaders like Barack Obama and Narendra Modi have made their way to Facebook to pay obeisance to Emperor Zuckerberg. Obama and Modi are pin-up idols of the left and the right in the world’s two biggest democracies.

Yet both of them found Zuckerberg’s stardust useful for their electoral prospects. With so many people addicted to Facebook, most politicians are mortally afraid of upsetting Facebook. After all, they use Facebook to reach their voters, canvass donors and organize their campaigns.

Facebook is also playing the traditional lobbying game not only in Washington, but also in other capitals. The company spent \$3.67 million on lobbying in the second quarter of 2018.

In addition, unlike other tech giants, Facebook has an ace up its sleeve. Sandberg, its frighteningly savvy No. 2, went to Harvard for both her undergraduate and business degrees. She worked for Larry Summers, a key aide of Bill Clinton, infamous for his arrogance, cozy ties with Wall Street and aggressive financial deregulation.

Sandberg is smooth as silk and is rumored to have political ambitions. Unsurprisingly, she packs an iron fist under a velvet glove. She reportedly told James P. Steyer, when he expressed concerns about children using social media, that “the best thing for young kids was to spend more time on Messenger Kids.”

In a virtuoso performance before the Senate Intelligence Committee, Sandberg cloaked herself in patriotism and spoke of an “arms race” against opponents to protect democracy. Senators purred demurely in approval.

Facebook is also adopting the revolving door employment policy that once made Goldman Sachs and McKinsey infamous. For instance, Robert Rubin, Hank Paulson and many others moved from Goldman Sachs to the US Treasury and returned to cushy jobs on Wall Street when they retired. The Obama White House was full of bright young things from McKinsey with no dirt under their fingernails. Now, Zuckerberg pays the salaries of the likes of David Plouffe, Obama's former campaign chief, and Aneesh Raman, one of Obama's speechwriters.

Even as Facebook becomes more powerful, there are fewer and fewer journalists there to hold its feet to the fire. Few people read these days and even fewer pay to read. Content is free and news media is in mortal danger. There is little money left for investigative or independent journalism.

Even when hard-hitting articles are published, they rarely get much attention because people are almost incessantly distracted on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Tinder. In 2014, the Pew Research Center found that there were five jobs in public relations for every job in journalism. In 2018, that ratio is definitely worse and some estimate it to be 8:1, if not higher.

Tellingly, Zuckerberg told Osnos that he mostly reads news aggregators. The emperor neither browses many news websites, nor does he pick up any newspaper and read it "front to back."

He does not need to. Zuckerberg can hire all the public relations professionals to spin the news, making him look brilliant, brave and benevolent.

Before too long, President Trump will be out of office. He is too old, too erratic and too unpopular. Even if he wins a second term, there is an expiry date to his reign. Meanwhile, Emperor Zuckerberg can rule his realm till his dying day, hiring smooth operators, buying elected representatives, avoiding scrutiny and influencing the people themselves.

In our brave new world, the cool and calculating Zuckerberg is far more sinister than the blustering and blundering Trump.

Atul Singh is the Founder, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of Fair Observer. He has taught political economy at the University of California, Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. He studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton School. Singh worked as a corporate lawyer in London and led special operations as an elite officer in India's volatile border areas where he had many near-death experiences. He has also been a poet, playwright, sportsman, mountaineer and a founder of many organizations.

Maduro's Regime Is in Denial Over the Scale of Venezuela's Migrant Crisis

German Peinado Delgado & Glenn Ojeda Vega
October 8, 2018

If the exodus continues, the staggering amount of Venezuelan refugees spread throughout the Western Hemisphere could eclipse the total of 6 million that have fled from war in Syria.

Numerous countries and regions across the globe are experiencing the consequences of mass migration waves due to violent conflicts, food insecurity, climate change and economic crisis. More specifically, countries like Syria and Venezuela are remarkable examples of migratory crises currently unfolding on both sides of the Atlantic. Just as remarkable, however, has been the struggle faced by neighboring governments in dealing with the effects that the refugee influx has had on the domestic political landscape of the destination countries.

Over the last five years, an estimated 2.3 million Venezuelans have fled their country in what has now become South America's largest migratory crisis in the modern era. Domestically, Venezuela is suffering from a historic inflation that reached 200,000% between August 2017 and August 2018, rendering the local currency, the bolivar, effectively worthless. Additionally, massive food shortages due to issues with the commercial supply chain and foreign

exchange have led to what is referred to as the "Maduro diet," by which the average person living in Venezuela has lost approximately 20 pounds in weight over the last few years. Therefore, scores of desperate Venezuelans decide to undertake a days-long journey, in many cases by foot, leaving behind their country in search of the most basic necessities like food and medicine.

Venezuelans have been departing their country for almost two decades now. The first wave of emigration consisted of the country's elite, who started leaving Venezuela when the leftist President Hugo Chavez came to power in 1999 and changed the constitution. The second wave, which expanded to include larger sectors of the country's middle class and cultural sector, came in 2006, when Chavez was re-elected for a third term. Then, the migratory wave of recent years was set off after the passing of Chavez in 2013, the following ascension of Nicolás Maduro to the country's presidency and the dramatic decrease in international oil prices — oil being the backbone of Venezuela's economy.

While those who left because of Chavez were mostly members of the country's aristocracy and business elite, the resounding failure of the so-called Bolivarian project under the leadership of President Maduro has forced working-class Venezuelans to flee in the most dramatic of circumstances. The fact that working and middle-class families are walking from all corners of

Venezuela toward the Colombian and Brazilian borders, mainly to the international bridges that connect with the city of Cúcuta, is particularly important because these social groups previously formed the bedrock of the Chavista movement.

Tragically, the government that they once supported turns its back on them today, and it is up to international institutions — such as the International Organization for Migration, the Organization of American States, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UN Refugee Agency — to record their stories and provide them with assistance. No official aid or information has been given by the Venezuelan government despite thousands of frontier crossings being reported every day.

GOOD NEIGHBORS

Over the last several years, the brunt of the Venezuelan crisis has fallen on the shoulders of neighboring Colombia. Nevertheless, this issue affects most countries throughout the Western Hemisphere, including Brazil, Ecuador, Chile and Peru.

Colombia — the frontline of the Venezuelan migrant crisis given the 2,341 kilometers of shared border between the two countries — has welcomed approximately 1 million migrants from its struggling neighbor in recent years. However, Colombia's open arms policy, which has included the issuing of special humanitarian visas

and work permits, has substantially transformed the social landscape of major cities such as Cúcuta, Bucaramanga, Cali, Medellín and the capital Bogotá. The sudden introduction of a million economic migrants into Colombia has led to a spike in informal work, has depressed wages in major cities, stressed the country's health-care system and has unfortunately led to an increase in criminal activities such as petty theft, human trafficking, smuggling and underage prostitution.

Certainly, many Venezuelan migrants choose to stay in Colombia, Peru and Ecuador because they have family in these countries. They expect that they will be able to return home soon and often don't have the resources to go any further, finding comfort in the cultural similarities shared by all four countries. For instance, Peru is currently estimated to be hosting 400,000 Venezuelans, while Ecuador has taken in a further 200,000 amongst its population of just 15 million.

Nevertheless, many refugees seek to continue on to other destinations, such as Chile, Mexico, Brazil, Panama, the United States or even Europe. Responding to this reality, many of the affected countries have restricted the entry of Venezuelans into their territory. Brazil's government, for instance, has reinforced its border controls and frontier security. Panama, Peru and Ecuador have also tightened their border security and have deported Venezuelan migrants that enter the country illegally. Meanwhile, important

public figures in the region and the world, such as Pope Francis, have exhorted churches, civil society and charitable organizations to aid migrants and refugees, particularly those suffering from severe malnutrition and chronic illnesses.

In recent weeks, with the accession of Ivan Duque to Colombia's presidency, the rhetoric against Caracas has become increasingly assertive. Political leaders throughout the region, from Argentina's President Macri to Ecuador's President Moreno, have intensified the international campaign to relocate the region's refugees according to the capacities of each country and condemn the systematic violation of human rights in Venezuela. Simultaneously, in a burden-sharing effort, most of the countries have agreed to grant special visas and work permits to those Venezuelans who have legally settled within their territory.

SHARING THE BURDEN

The economic and social stress that has been set off by the amount of Venezuelan migrants currently working below the minimum wage throughout Colombia's and Peru's labor market is unsustainable. Therefore, working groups have been organized through multilateral institutions, such as the Andean Community and the OAS, specifically to discuss burden sharing when it comes to aiding Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Thus far, the Lima Group has made some progress on this issue as countries negotiate

quotas of how many of the millions Venezuelan migrants they are willing to welcome into their country. If the exodus continues, the staggering amount of Venezuelan refugees spread throughout the Western Hemisphere could eclipse the total of 6 million that have fled from war in Syria.

Unfortunately, the magnitude of the Venezuelan migrant wave has even led to small outbreaks of xenophobia in some parts of Colombia, Peru and Ecuador. However, leading figures in the region do not hesitate to remind Colombians, Peruvians and Ecuadorians that not too long ago, it was them who fled to oil-rich Venezuela in search of better opportunities. At this moment, the future of Venezuela remains uncertain and, at least for now, countries throughout the region have maintained an open doors policy toward migrants. Nevertheless, at the current pace of migration, the impatience of politicians in the region might lead some of them to close borders.

Meanwhile, in Venezuela, the Maduro regime is in denial and looks the other way as the amount of abandoned houses and apartments throughout major cities has skyrocketed due to migration and hyperinflation. The administration has also denied the veracity of the dramatic footage recorded by journalists of thousands of migrants crossing the frontier. President Maduro is so tone-deaf to this reality and defiant of international pressure that he was recently shown enjoying a sumptuous steak cooked by a celebrity

chef during a stop-over in Turkey, the video unleashing immediate condemnation across the world.

Yet in spite of his incompetent and authoritative leadership, Maduro has proven to be extremely resilient. He has managed to co-opt the national military through a web of corruption and drug trafficking, has played on the weaknesses of a divided political opposition, and has maintained political ties with countries like China, Russia and Turkey. Outside of Venezuela, the exiled opposition struggles to present a unified front, with negotiations breaking down on several occasions. And no one seems to truly want a foreign military intervention — at least for the time being.

German Peinado Delgado is a business project manager and international relations professional based in Bogota, Colombia. A graduate of the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana and the Universidad Javeriana, Peinado Delgado has worked throughout both Colombia and Ecuador.

Glenn Ojeda Vega was a 2017 Latin America Fellow at Young Professionals in Foreign Policy. He is also an emerging markets consultant and financial analyst in Washington, DC. Ojeda Vega earned his BS in Foreign Service from Georgetown University and his Master's in International Relations from the Universidad Javeriana in Colombia.

Iran's Defiant Message on Syria

Giorgio Cafiero

October 15, 2018

By firing missiles over Iraq into Syria, the Iranians delivered a powerful message to Washington at a time when the Trump administration ratchets up its aggression against the Islamic Republic.

On October 1, Iran carried out six missile strikes against Islamic State (IS) targets in Abu Kamal, situated in eastern Syria near the Iraqi border. Iran's state-owned television showed one missile carrying slogans "Death to America," "Death to Israel" and "Death to al Saud." The bold move was officially a retaliation for the deadly attack in Ahvaz, in the Iranian Province of Khuzestan, nine days earlier, which the Iranian leadership blames on IS. In addition to killing "many terrorists" in Abu Kamal, as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) claimed, the missiles also eviscerated stockpiles of the Islamic State's ammunition and infrastructure. By firing missiles over Iraq into Syria, the Iranians delivered a powerful message to Washington at a time when the Trump administration ratchets up its aggression against the Islamic Republic.

Put simply, the message is that five months after the US withdrew from the Joint Plan of Comprehensive Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal, Tehran will not change its regional conduct or cave in to pressure from the United States, Israel and

certain Arab Gulf states. When it comes to Syria, Iran is set to remain in the country despite the White House's stated goal to cause a retreat of Iranian forces and proxies. As Tehran begins conducting a more muscular and "offensive" approach in the region following America's JCPOA decision, hardline elements within the Iranian regime — chiefly within the IRGC, which carried out the October 1 missile strikes — are being empowered.

Also, the International Court of Justice's (ICJ) October 3 ruling ordered Washington to ensure that its anti-Iran sanctions do not harm humanitarian assistance or civil aviation security. This left officials in Tehran more determined to stay their rigid course even if the ICJ lacks the teeth to enforce the ruling against the United States, which was rejected by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Other recent instances of Tehran acting confidently against perceived security menaces and asserting a stronger regional clout came on September 8 when Iran killed at least 11 people in long-range missile attacks on the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan's headquarters in Koya, Iraq, which belongs to the Kurdistan Regional Government. During the previous month, Iranian officials stated that over the previous several months, Iran's military had transferred several dozen short-range ballistic missiles to Tehran-sponsored Shia militias in Iraq to deter attacks against Iran's homeland. Depending on from where in Iraq they

are placed, these missiles (Zelzal, Fateh-110 and Zolfagar) can reach both the Saudi and Israeli capitals.

PRESSURES WITHIN IRAN

Such acts, along with the Iranian intelligence ministry's alleged role in the foiled plot to attack a gathering by the militant Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen-e Khalq in France in June, illustrate how hardliners within the Islamic Republic are demonstrating more will to operate with greater autonomy from the central government, without obtaining permission before acting in the region. As the Iranian economy continues to suffer many ills, from rising unemployment and inflation to excess liquidity, as Washington's sanctions continue to hurt the country, President Hassan Rouhani appears to find himself in a difficult political situation. That the parliament has summoned Rouhani to provide answers to questions about the country's economic crises, and with a number of voices calling for his impeachment, the extent to which his centrist government has failed to meet the average Iranian citizen's expectations about the economic rewards that JCPOA was to bring is clearly highlighted.

As such pressures within Iran intensify, moderate elements within the government struggle to maintain relevance in the country's political arena. With nationalist sentiments on the rise, moderates have been prompted to align, at least to some degree, with hardliners in support of

Tehran's assertive conduct across the region. For the Iranian leadership, given the Trump administration's rhetoric and conduct that leave many Iranians fearing a US-orchestrated regime change plot, engaging the White House at this point would be humiliating, particularly given how anti-Iranian Trump's foreign policy has been since he entered the Oval Office.

Now with the Trump administration calling on Iran to leave Syria, and with a number of Sunni Arab states appearing set on welcoming the regime of Bashar al-Assad back from the cold, the White House, along with its Arab Gulf allies, seems optimistic about plans to accept Assad staying in power for the long term, but only with his regime putting space between itself and Iran. IRGC leaders, however, have declared that Iranian forces will remain in Syria as long as the Damascus regime demands their presence. Given how much Assad owes Iran for his survival, it is difficult to imagine the Syrian regime being in any position to push out the Iranians, who currently wield unprecedented influence over the Baathist order in Damascus.

FURTHER AWAY FROM DIPLOMACY

That Iran's missiles landed within three miles of US troops in Syria on October 1 shows how grave the risks are of intense friction originating in Washington and Tehran spiraling out of control in the Middle East. With US National Security Adviser John Bolton declaring on September 24 that the US military would remain in Syria "as long as Iranian

troops are outside Iranian borders and that includes Iranian proxies and militias," the 2,000 US troops currently in the country face a likelier possibility of a direct confrontation with Iran's roughly 10,000 IRGC forces in Syria.

Doubtless, Syria will remain a major point of contention between the US and Iran. Even when bilateral relations were at their warmest after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 while Barack Obama was in the White House, Washington and Tehran had serious conflicts of interest in Syria notwithstanding their mutual interest in defeating IS. The JCPOA resolved neither both sides' opposing stakes in the Syrian crisis, nor any other non-nuclear issue. Yet the nuclear deal afforded both the US and Iran the means to build on some degree of trust to work toward finding common ground on such regional issues such as Syria, along with Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan.

Without the JCPOA as a foundation, Washington and Tehran are set to address their conflicting interests in Syria on terms that move farther away from diplomatic strategies, raising serious risks of an American-Iranian war that could bring far more devastation and instability to the Middle East than the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Giorgio Cafiero is the founder and CEO of Gulf State Analytics, a geopolitical risk consultancy based in Washington, DC. His research interests

include geopolitical and security trends in the Arabian Peninsula and the broader Middle East. Cafiero is a regular contributor to several think tanks and publications, including the Middle East Institute, Atlantic Council, The National Interest, Al Monitor, and LobeLog. From 2014-15, he was an analyst at Kroll, an investigative due diligence consultancy.

The US Is in Uncharted Territory with Saudi Arabia

Gary Grappo

October 18, 2018

The US must lead with a principled position following Jamal Khashoggi's assassination, but this will require a type of diplomacy not yet seen in this administration.

Information about the shocking and brazen torture and execution of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi spills out now with stomach-churning regularity. All indications point to Saudi Arabia's top leadership's culpability. Unable to justify or explain the inconceivably barbaric and contemptible act, the Riyadh regime responded first with denial and then shifted to a new storyline to dodge what increasingly appears to be direct responsibility for this heinous criminality.

There are several aspects of the grisly crime that bear significantly on the character of the current Saudi regime, its future and the US-Saudi relationship. The first is that for Saudi Arabia, its relationship with the US is its oldest and

most important. There is no overstating its prominence in Saudi foreign, economic and security affairs. Since the founder of the modern Saudi state, King Abdul Aziz al-Saud, or Ibn Saud, first met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt aboard the USS Quincy on the Great Bitter Lake outside the Suez Canal in the waning days of World War II, the US has been the one and only nation to which Saudi kings have turned for security, counsel and support. While also of vital strategic importance to the US, for the kingdom it is its foreign policy touchstone and security blanket.

A SERIES OF IRRATIONAL ACTS

Second, this incident must be viewed in light of other actions and behavior of the Saudi leadership since King Salman ascended to the throne in January 2015, and especially since his son, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), was promoted to crown prince in June 2017. There is the bloody civil war in Yemen, which, after more than three years, shows little prospect of ending despite billions expended by the Saudi government. The Saudi armed forces have been accused of repeated human rights violations in the war. There is also the inexplicable blockade of Qatar and consequential weakening of what had been the Middle East's most effective regional alliance, the Gulf Cooperation Council.

In November 2017, the Saudis forcibly detained the prime minister of Lebanon, Saad Harari, and forced him to issue a public resignation from Riyadh while on

an official visit. In the same month, Saudi security authorities, acting on orders from MBS, detained nearly 200 Saudi business executives, including royal family members and senior officials, on charges of corruption. Many observers believe that the charges were trumped up to justify a purge of those suspected of harboring opposing views. There have been multiple arrests of dissidents and critical bloggers inside the kingdom, too.

Then, last June, the Saudi leadership clashed with the government of Canada over its remarks critical of the kingdom's human rights record, including arrests of human rights advocates. Riyadh expelled the Canadian ambassador, withdrew Saudi students studying in Canada and severely curtailed its economic relations with Ottawa.

And while Saudi Arabia's angst over bordering Iran is understandable, the Saudi leadership has remained adamantly opposed to any dialog with the Islamic Republic, ratcheting up regional tensions to a feverish pitch.

All of these seemed questionable and suspect at the time. But today they are clear indicators of a leadership with questionable judgement. It appears to be thrashing to protect itself from enemies — real and imagined — and to sanitize the public space of all criticism. Given such an approach, the only thing shocking about the murder of Jamal Khashoggi is its brazen, careless manner and calculated brutality.

Many questions surface in considering such an act. Has too much power been concentrated in the hands of one man? Has it led to effective disinhibition, in which the normal constraints of human beings — as well as leaders — are repressed, and all actions become justified just because the one in power can do them?

QUESTIONABLE JUDGMENT

Third, having by all accounts indeed committed this crime and now faced with calls from around the world for accountability and full transparency, the Saudi leadership faces one of its most existential crises in recent history. How does it respond in order to satisfy these demands, mollify critics and yet preserve the status quo in Saudi Arabia?

The Saudi leadership has always been purposely opaque — not unusual for a family that runs a country of the size, wealth and influence of the kingdom. It has generally done a creditable job of avoiding crises, often relying on American advice and support. Moreover, Saudi kings have relied on the counsel of the family's top princes, both those in government as well as out, in order to keep its foreign and domestic policies on a largely steady course.

But with MBS being catapulted over family members to the kingdom's number two position and de facto decision maker, it isn't clear whether family members are even consulted today, and whether the crown prince

enjoys their support the way his predecessors have.

Last year's round up, detention and purge of perceived MBS opponents no doubt did little to endear him. So, it may be fair to surmise that even if they are proffering advice, unless it accords with the crown prince's own instincts, it's likely disregarded.

Meanwhile, the US has stepped down from its historic role as counselor. Today, the Trump administration, represented before the Saudis by the president's son-in-law Jared Kushner, may be enabling Mohammed bin Salman. That would appear to be the case in Yemen, the blockade of Qatar and other matters. Reasons for that are myriad. However, the administration wants to maintain Saudi support for its Iran policy — not a heavy lift for the Iran-phobic Saudi leadership — and is probably looking for ways to distinguish its overall Middle East policies from those of Donald Trump's predecessors. That suggests disengagement and turning the keys over to, in this case, the Saudis. It may be, therefore, that MBS felt he had a green light to continue his approach of eliminating opponents, like the influential and eloquent Jamal Khashoggi.

So, the leadership — the king and the crown prince — themselves at the center of attention now, must grapple with the decision of what to do to silence worldwide condemnation. How can this leadership genuinely hold accountable those responsible for Khashoggi's assassination but still maintain credibility

and confidence outside and inside the kingdom?

US Senator Lindsey Graham described the crown prince as “unhinged” and a “rogue killer” and said he “must go.” The senator may be right in his view of meting out a suitable sentence for the unspeakable crime. But no sitting king — or crown prince acting in his stead — has been forced to abdicate since King Saud bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud in 1964.

THE UPPER HAND

Last and perhaps most important in this affair is what the US will do. The president has been loath to condemn or even criticize the Saudis, despite the mounting evidence. He prudently dispatched Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Riyadh, who elicited a commitment of transparency and accountability from the king and the crown prince. But this has never been a regime known for its transparency. Moreover, given that at least one of them has been implicated, how transparent can we expect the Saudi investigation to be?

For an administration that has gone out of its way to de-emphasize human rights in its foreign policy, this is an especially difficult issue. On the one hand, the Saudi-ordered, mafia-style “hit” on Khashoggi contravenes the very core of America's values and crosses every line of acceptable human behavior. It demands a strong response. On the other, though, the Saudi relationship is a critical one for the US, and a diminished Saudi leadership or weaker government

isn't good for either country. It's the textbook interests-versus-values tug of war in American foreign policy, only accentuated now because this administration pays little attention to American values.

One fact is clear: The US cannot be seen as complicit in or collaborating with a whitewash. Meeting with the Saudis as Pompeo did earlier this week was a sensible first step. Difficult issues are best addressed with Saudi Arabia in the privacy of a high-level diplomatic exchange. Addressing too much in the public eye will force the Saudis to withdraw, further depriving themselves of desperately needed perspective and balance in this crisis. That is patently not in anyone's interest.

If the US accepts anything less than full Saudi cooperation and accountability, it truly will be seen as abandoning the field to autocrats like Russia's Vladimir Putin, North Korea's Kim Jong-un, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte, Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and the rest of the world's thugs-in-waiting.

For all these reasons then, the Khashoggi affair may be as great a challenge for the US as it is for Saudi Arabia. However, America, as the indispensable ally of the kingdom, holds the upper hand. It can get what it wants. It must lead with a principled position reflecting American core values and then follow with actions necessary to ensure maintenance of the vital partnership. It is possible. But it will

require a type of diplomacy not yet seen in this administration.

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

Jamal Khashoggi: The Martyr Who Made Backlash Possible

Peter Isackson

October 19, 2018

In his last ever article, Jamal Khashoggi lamented the lack of an "independent international forum" and "transnational media" in the Arab world.

In his final, posthumous column published by The Washington Post, Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi complained about the public's general acceptance of attacks by governments in the Arab world on freedom of the press. They are so frequent and widespread that the public has become

inured and indifferent. “These actions no longer carry the consequence of a backlash from the international community,” he wrote. “Instead, these actions may trigger condemnation quickly followed by silence.”

When the press first began to speak of Khashoggi’s failure to appear after a visit to the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul, many in the media expressed their alarm and ran stories about it for two or three days and then began to go quiet when, following Saudi denials of any knowledge of Khashoggi’s fate, no further news was forthcoming. The pattern seemed confirmed. The world would move on to other dramas.

But the mystery deepened with the continued insistence of the Saudis that they knew nothing and had nothing to report, including the basic facts about how and when he left the consulate, as they claimed. Then, probably to the Saudis’ own surprise, the Turkish authorities revealed that they had evidence not only that the journalist had never left the consulate, but that he was most likely murdered inside the consulate.

Now the media had something to work with. Embarrassed by the revelation, the Saudis had a brief opportunity for damage control by admitting partial responsibility (i.e., the “botched interrogation” suggested some days later). All they needed to do would be to place the blame on a designated subordinate — the standard procedure of “plausible deniability. But by then they

may have realized that the degree of toxicity of the event was such that the only viable strategy would be to continue stonewalling, hoping that Khashoggi’s own insight was correct, that his murder would simply “trigger condemnation quickly followed by silence.”

THE UNRAVELING OF DONALD TRUMP’S MIDDLE EAST GAMBIT?

This is where US President Donald Trump may have been unwittingly responsible for the definitive undermining of the reputation of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), on whom Trump, or rather Jared Kushner, has based his grand vision of a new Middle East led by Israel and Saudi Arabia, with Iran neutralized after regime change or simply reduced to rubble.

By failing to join one of his most vocal supporters, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, in expressing his moral indignation and forcing the Saudis to admit some level of accountability — if only to stabilize the increasingly embarrassing situation caused by their blanket denial — Trump has revealed to the world how focused his own values are on money and power to the exclusion of justice and human rights. He has run the risk of potentially splitting the fragile unity he had created in the Republican Party around his bombastic personal power.

As we wait to see the chain reaction of future events once the already evident

facts are brought out into the open, observers will focus on how three threads of the story will play out: the damage inside Saudi Arabia to Mohammed bin Salman's hold on power (after all he is "only" the crown prince); the damage done to Trump within in his party and to his party during the midterm elections in November; and the fate of the notorious peace plan for Palestine and Israel, engineered by Kushner which, according to reports, included a major role for Saudi Arabia.

After first speculating that there may have been "rogue killers," which most observers believed was an allusion to the "botched interrogation" thesis, Trump has finally admitted that he "believes Jamal Khashoggi is dead." He also tellingly revealed his disappointment that the story has remained in the public spotlight longer than he and MBS hoped or expected: "This one has caught the imagination of the world, unfortunately." In an act of uncharacteristic patience, Trump now insists on waiting for the outcome of three investigations before making a "strong statement," possibly in the hope that in the meantime Kanye West and Kim Kardashian will have drawn "the imagination of the world" to a more exciting subject.

Trump's willingness to passively support as long as possible the Saudis' stonewalling illustrates Khashoggi's concern that the international community was no longer capable of providing the "backlash" he felt was necessary to drive a wedge in Saudi

Arabia's despotic control of the press. As more and more economic partners, international firms and European ministers turn away from their commitment to the glitzy Future Investment Initiative in Saudi Arabia, something resembling a backlash finally seems to be taking place.

If the backlash continues to capture not just the imagination but also the moral indignation of the world, Khashoggi's martyrdom may turn out to be a blow for freedom, opening a slight but possibly growing breach in the authoritarian control of the media that MBS has exercised. Could the journalist's murder be for Saudi Arabia what the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi was for Tunisia's Arab Spring in 2010? That seems unlikely, given the nature and the sheer wealth of the interests in place, but symbols and acts of martyrdom have been known to change the course of history, particularly in the Middle East.

HOW FREE IS ANY PRESS?

Describing how the media is manipulated in the Arab world, Jamal Khashoggi tells us: "[T]hese governments, whose very existence relies on the control of information, have aggressively blocked the Internet. They have also arrested local reporters and pressured advertisers to harm the revenue of specific publications."

Free media, Jamal Khashoggi murder, murder of Jamal Khashoggi, Jamal Khashoggi Washington Post, Jamal Khashoggi article, freedom of the press,

Saudi Arabia, independent media, Arab world news, press freedom

In the West it's different, but only by a degree. As this author recently pointed out, quoting Jacob Rees-Mogg, a member of the British Conservative Party: "Governments want to control information. To do this they have elaborate systems for promoting themselves." These include putting the media in a dependent and eventually compliant position.

The Washington Post is a prime example of this. The newspaper is known both for its heroic challenges to government (Watergate) and its compliant bending to the wishes of partisan insiders and even to Saudi Arabian interests. This soft or indirect control of information takes different forms, one of which Khashoggi mentions in his posthumous article: through the pressure of advertisers, who combine with governments to present and enforce an official account of certain events and, more commonly, a normalized version of social values.

As the wealthiest man on earth, Amazon's Jeff Bezos could pay to have Khashoggi write for The Washington Post, just as he pays for a number of establishment writers who promote establishment values, while excluding a wide range of celebrated thinkers and writers known for critiquing those values. US commercial news media is locked into a binary logic that pits Democrats against Republicans, liberals against conservatives and occasionally

subdivides the drama into opposing clans within each of the parties.

Consequently, they confine all discussion of politics, society and economics within the purview of two traditional partisan establishment points of view, creating and often fomenting false drama that excludes any point of view, however seriously reasoned, that fails to fall within the categories of debate defined by the bi-partisan establishment. The news as a source of public debate is organized in the manner of a sporting event, designed to foment fandom for one team or the other, confining the public's attention to recognized, official positions on the issues that those two teams consider important and focusing the public's interest on the question of who will win and who will lose.

The website Media Bias/Fact Check offers this description of The Washington Post: "They often publish factual information that utilizes loaded words (wording that attempts to influence an audience by using appeal to emotion or stereotypes) to favor liberal causes." Of Fox News, it reports: "They may utilize strong loaded words (wording that attempts to influence an audience by using appeal to emotion or stereotypes), publish misleading reports and omit reporting of information that may damage conservative causes. Some sources in this category may be untrustworthy."

No writing is entirely trustworthy. All writing reflects someone's point of view

and loaded words can be found in every discourse. But the damage of media bias comes more from the deliberate narrowing of perspective. It achieves a deeper effect through the consistent framing of issues in a way that invites the “loaded words” its public expects to hear, which provokes an emotional response.

PROPAGANDA TO RESPECTABLE FAKE NEWS

Jamal Khashoggi left this world dreaming of “an independent international forum, isolated from the influence of nationalist governments spreading hate through propaganda.” It is a dream that people in the West should share and extend. Alas, it remains a dream because reality has not been kind to the idea of independence. Recent history makes it clear that despite the variety of platforms in the so-called “free world” (free of what?), true independence is rare. When it does exist, it tends to be aggressively marginalized by its more successful opposite — commercial journalism — which we would be wise to get in the habit of calling our “dependent media.”

A single sentence in a recent article by Rick Newman of Yahoo Finance concerning the Khashoggi affair helps to clarify what we mean by Western media’s dependence on established interests, both government and private. Attempting to explain “why Trump is going soft on Saudi Arabia” (the title of the article), Newman writes: “The

Khashoggi mess, however, could disrupt Trump’s Iran strategy just as he’s about to tighten the screws on the hard-line Islamic nation.”

In a context where the subject is both Saudi and Iran, an objective observer might legitimately pause and wonder which “hard-line Islamic nation” he is referring to: Iran or Saudi Arabia? Obviously it’s Iran. Why should that be? Because everyone knows and accepts that Iran is the enemy of the US and Saudi Arabia is its ally. The public is taught to think in binary categories, where only opposites exist (as in a sporting contest).

But if you ask any thinking person which of the two nations cited they would describe as the most hardline or the most “Islamic,” after a bit of thought and research, the more obvious answer would be that it’s Saudi Arabia. Not only do women have fewer rights than in Shia Iran, but Wahhabi Saudi Arabia has for decades exported violent Islamic extremism and terrorism on an unparalleled scale, spawning both al-Qaeda and, to a degree, the Islamic State. As military historian Major Danny Sjursen complains, the extremists who killed soldiers under his command in Afghanistan were “too often armed and funded by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” Is that how we choose our allies?

SEPARATING ALLIES AND ENEMIES

Westerners have been conditioned to think within the constraints of a culture and political ideology created and

promoted by governments working — closely, intimately and, more often than not, outside of public view — with financial and industrial interests. As a group, they are more concerned about opportunities for business and power relationships than human rights or even the lives of their own soldiers. The technique for conditioning the public is, as mentioned above, fairly simple. Binary reasoning permits the presentation of any problem as a choice either between good and evil (by excluding all nuance) or between the lesser of two evils. This helps us divide the world into two camps: allies and enemies.

How do the public and the nation as a whole make that choice? That's easy: "it's the economy, stupid." Do we really prefer Sunni Islam to Shia Islam? Few in the West have even a vague idea of the difference between those two versions of Islam and even fewer care. Do we compare their records on human rights or despotic rule?

No, all we need to know is that the nation we end up calling the enemy can truthfully be accused of practices that can be labeled despotic. The fact that the ally may be equally as despotic, or even more so, has no importance because we presume that their leaders trust and honor us, meaning that they will not direct their despotic tendencies to curtail our own sacred freedom. After all, anyone who does business with us must trust and honor us. What more do we need to know?

From the very time of its creation in 1932, Saudi Arabia accepted its role as a cog in the wheel of the complex arrangements established between powerful financial, political and industrial interests defined in the West. Iran, on the other hand, dared to revolt twice against the Western system. First when Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh attempted to nationalize Iran's oil industry.

The democratically elected leader was quickly overthrown in 1953 through the collaborative work of American and British intelligence agencies. What was Mosaddegh's real crime? A wish for economic independence, which he felt Iran could achieve by nationalizing the oil industry. The US and Britain made what they called the "progressive" move of replacing a democratically elected leader by a monarch, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a former playboy who easily slipped into the role of Western puppet and local tyrant.

THE MAKING OF AN ENEMY

When Imam Ruhollah Khomeini led the revolt that forced the shah into exile in 1979, the new Islamic regime had finally found a way to gain the independence that had been denied by the West in 1953, but this time with a vengeance and a deep resentment that required the combined force of religious conviction with the political sense of national identity to achieve its goal. This constituted a perfect recipe for a rigid, inflexible, theocratic, culturally authoritarian form of government, in

contrast to the secularism of Mosaddegh. In some sense, Khomeini's Iran duplicated the template of Saudi Arabia, with similarly massive oil reserves but without a royal family.

The democratic West reacted with its usual shock and incomprehension at seeing another group of people refuse the benefits of economic cooperation with the powers that, in the name of democracy and free markets, rule the world and control its resources.

This confirmed in many people's minds the perverse but facile Islamophobic belief that Muslim populations prefer theocracy to democracy, even though it was the US and the UK who had put a halt to the growth of secular democracy in Iran — the same two nations that since the creation of the Saudi nation never ceased to endorse, or at least benignly tolerate, its despotic theocracy.

We must therefore ask ourselves: How does the establishment, including the media, maintain the public's perception of Saudi Arabia as a trusted ally and Iran as an existentially defined enemy?

As everyone knows, Iran was designated as a core member of George W. Bush's "axis of evil." It was also the country John McCain wanted to bomb without asking questions and the nation John Bolton is now promising to give "hell to pay." Donald Trump had no trouble canceling Barack Obama's Iran deal, not because there was an objective reason to do so, but because he knew that the majority of Americans

believed Iran is, by definition, "the enemy."

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are theocracies, but Iran has a democratically elected government, whereas Saudi is the world's last significant absolute monarchy. It doesn't matter how hardline, how Islamic (or Islamist), how brutal, cruel, unjust and committed to violence one or the other may be. Saudi Arabia wears our uniform. It's on our team. Iran isn't. In the words of English poet John Keats, "that is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know." And for decades the public has asked no questions, not even after 9/11 when it became clear that both Osama bin Laden and 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens.

REALIZING JAMAL KHASHOGGI'S DREAM

In his final article, Jamal Khashoggi lamented the lack of an "independent international forum" and "transnational media" in the Arab world. There is a great diversity of media platforms in the West, but most of them — and those that are the most watched and read — are neither independent nor truly international. Publishing and broadcasting the news that aligns with corporate interests and is careful not to disturb the ideological taste of its public is only a tiny step closer to independence than many government-funded and run media outlets.

That explains why celebrity news, entertainment and sports play such a prominent role in such media. They fill

the time that might be more responsibly dedicated to raising issues of serious concern, issues that would invite people to think and eventually act democratically, but which might also risk disturbing the population's comfort level with an economy and political system managed, unbeknownst to them, by the corporate interests that program the news.

There are some exceptions. The BBC and Al Jazeera have established reputations for a high but far from perfect level of independence. Al Jazeera projects a more international vision of the world than BBC, which is still encumbered culturally by Britain's colonial heritage and its fundamentally English-speaking view of the world. Khashoggi mentions with approval the fact that "Qatar's government continues to support international news coverage." Had the article been published before his death, it would have been a sufficient pretext for the Saudis to assassinate him, since MBS made the decision in 2017 to brand Qatar — Riyadh's traditional Gulf partner and ally — a dangerous enemy, which he threatened to destroy and annex.

There are a number of online channels that have achieved independence but rarely correspond to Khashoggi's wish for "an independent international forum." This media organization, Fair Observer, actually does fall into that category. By refusing institutional sponsorship and advertising, and steering clear of any ideological orientation, Fair Observer deserves to be cited as an example of

true independence. It gives voice to the widest variety of serious and frequently conflicting points of view, always in the interest of creating perspective, the very thing most commercial media outlets endeavor to suppress.

As an independent publication, Fair Observer refuses to put itself in a position in which it would be beholden either to governments or private corporate interests. Alas, those two bastions of power remain the primary sources of the news people consume. As we have seen, governments and corporate interests understand that they wield the power not just to present the news stories that comfort the status quo but, more importantly, the power to shape public discourse and guide people's "thinking," even on questions as basic as: who is our ally and who is our enemy?

Would Jamal Khashoggi have submitted articles to Fair Observer? Nothing would have stopped him, although without Jeff Bezos' cash to keep the pot boiling, in contrast to The Washington Post, he couldn't have made a living doing so. Are there other voices inside or outside Saudi Arabia that can deliver the kind of independent and knowledgeable insight Khashoggi offered us?

Perhaps few with the deep insider knowledge that Khashoggi had, but there are many valid perspectives that we need, more than ever, to learn about. Fair Observer welcomes them. And because it is a truly "international

forum,” it welcomes them from everywhere in the world.

Peter Isackson is an author, media producer and chief visionary officer of Fair Observer Training Academy. Educated at UCLA and Oxford University, he settled in France and has worked in electronic publishing — pioneering new methods, tools and content for learning in a connected world. For more than 30 years, he has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, training of trainers and developing collaborative methods in the field of learning. He is the chief strategy officer at Fair Observer and the creator of the regular feature, The Daily Devil’s Dictionary.

Why Erdogan Had to Act on Khashoggi Killing

Nathaniel Handy
October 24, 2018

The Khashoggi affair played right into Turkey’s hands in the wider struggle for control of the Middle East.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey is once again back, center stage. The question this time is what he is doing there. The murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi has all the hallmarks of the dark side of the modern security state. But the affair was largely a story about Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, its eternal ally and superpower benefactor, the United States.

The mix was that the whole affair played out on Turkish soil (if we exclude the soil beneath the Saudi Consulate). Until October 23, Erdogan remained tight-lipped. This is not surprising. Political elites are usually cautious when such intelligence and security activities spill into the public domain.

But this was an earthquake everyone knew was coming. You could hear the clock ticking. Why? Because — drip, drip, drip — the leaks kept coming. Daily, the pro-government Turkish press was teasing out a story that the Saudis were clearly desperate to brush under the carpet. It was plain that more was going on here than met the eye.

There was speculation that such leaks were a warning from President Erdogan to the Saudi regime that Turkey could blow the story, but could also refrain with the right incentives. If so, were the incentives not forthcoming? Or was the plan all along to bleed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s regime dry?

DO NOTHING AND BE DAMNED

Let’s look at this from the Turkish government’s perspective. It mostly likely bugged the Saudi consulate. It had ample CCTV footage. It knew what had occurred, who had been involved and how. It could have said nothing, just like the Saudis. Just like what usually happens in such cases — especially in the open-ended case of a journalist who went missing.

But then, how likely was this story to stay hidden? Khashoggi didn't go missing in Saudi Arabia or even in some non-descript hotel or apartment. He went missing — as his Turkish fiancée made clear — inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. Given such circumstances, Ankara may well have calculated two things: Either the story would surface, or even if it didn't, it would look so dirty as to leave a bad stain on anyone vaguely connected with it — including the Turkish authorities.

It's reasonable to question at this point why the Saudis even executed such a brazen and thinly disguised plot. Fifteen intelligence and security men flown in overnight — several with close ties to the crown prince — and whisked away again just after Khashoggi's disappearance. It's like they were asking to be held to ransom by Turkey. Was this an inept operation or simply the action of a regime that didn't expect to be closely scrutinized?

Whatever it was, for the Turkish government, the calculation seems to have been clear. This was an opportunity to be on the right side of the story. Not even President Erdogan's enemies could outmaneuver him here. To the charge of playing politics with a journalist's murder, the answer is simple: What would you have me do — conceal a crime when we have the evidence? To do so would simply put the Turkish president on par with the despots of the Middle East, and he knows it.

This was — at last — an opportunity not to be missed. Events have not been kind to Erdogan of late, but here was a gift. This is a situation in which the Turkish president perhaps feels vindicated after all the moral outrage that has been thrown at him from outside powers. It is a situation that plays out in two spheres: the Middle Eastern and Muslim world on one side, and the Western world on the other. In both, it plays well for Turkey.

Since the days of Turkey's soft power outreach in the Middle East, prior to the Arab uprisings of 2010-11, the Turkish government has vied with Saudi Arabia for the mantle of leader of the Sunni world, if not the wider Muslim world. Such rivalry appeared to have been somewhat eclipsed by the Syrian Civil War, which turned Saudi Arabia and Turkey into potential allies against the Iranian backing of Shia regimes in Syria and Iraq.

But look more closely and this was never the case. Erdogan, with his close affinity to the Muslim Brotherhood, was never in the Saudi camp. The apparent triumph of political Islam during the early days of the Arab uprisings was a triumph for Turkey and Iran, not for Saudi Arabia. It was the Saudis who gave the nod to the 2013 coup d'état in Egypt, removing the Muslim Brotherhood from power after then-Prime Minister Erdogan's high-profile visit and endorsement of the Brotherhood.

For all the ambiguities of the Turkish-Iranian relationship, the Saudi-led assault on Iranian interests, the blockade of Qatar in 2017, and the drive toward an American-Israeli-Saudi understanding over Palestine and the future Middle East order is an attack on political Islam and a threat to Turkey. In all these Saudi actions, Ankara has been a robust critic and supporter of the opposing side. President Erdogan has also been a steadfast champion of the Palestinian cause, in particular that of the beleaguered Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

A BOOST TO TURKEY'S MORAL STANDING

Given the erratic nature of the Saudi regime under Mohammed bin Salman's guidance and its apparent willingness to raise stakes and tensions across the region, it seems somewhat surprising that they were not expecting some mudslinging. Yet in the grand scheme of things, that may not have seemed so bad. After all, the Khashoggi affair appears to have had negligible impact of the popularity of the crown prince at home. In fact, his agenda of social liberties for the middle classes is having the converse effect. It is dampening dissent.

What's more, in the regional power struggle that has been laid bare by the Arab uprisings, power matters more than popularity to the Saudi regime. Saudi Arabia is an autocratic monarchy. The Saudis are also the key US ally, and that is their ace. Erdogan is a

political figure of a very different type. He is a populist, elected to his office. He is instinctively against the US system of autocratic alliances in the Middle East, and he knows he has popular support in that.

The Khashoggi affair will not bring the Saudis to heel. That's because, as Ankara well knows, its Western backers and arms suppliers will very soon find ways to circumnavigate the awkward moral questions surrounding the murder, as they have so many other moral questions in relation to Saudi Arabia. That is not what motivates President Erdogan. What motivates him is the opportunity to lead in the region, to take the moral high ground that lies so vacant, and in doing so to expose the Saudis and their Western backers to the popular verdict.

Nathaniel Handy is a writer and academic with over ten years of experience in international print and broadcast media. He is the author of the chapter "Turkey's Evolving Relations with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq since the Arab Spring" in *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring* (Isiksal & Goksel, Springer, 2018); the article "Turkey's Shifting Relations with its Middle East Neighbors During the Davutoglu Era: History, Power and Policy" (*Bilgi Dergisi Journal*, 2011); and he presented a paper at the British Society of Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES) annual conference

in 2014 on Turkish relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.

Is Jair Bolsonaro the Man for Brazil?

Kinga Brudzinska
October 26, 2018

Brazil heads to the polls on October 28, with Jair Bolsonaro widely tipped to become the country's next president.

There can be no doubt that Jair Bolsonaro entered Brazil's presidential campaign as a rank outsider. When it comes to populist anti-establishment politicians making their mark across Latin America, the far-right congressman and former army captain is certainly in good company. Take, for example, the rise of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Mexico's president-elect. Like Bolsonaro threatens to do in Brazil, López Obrador has broken the center-right's traditional dominance of Mexican politics.

But there the similarities end. In stark contrast to López Obrador's leftist message, Bolsonaro has consistently highlighted his authoritarian sympathies and illiberal social views over the course of the election campaign. Brazil's likely next president is a long-time defender of the country's former military dictatorship and a supporter of the armed forces, a point underlined by the selection of retired general Hamilton Mourão as his running mate. Some of Bolsonaro's more controversial statements include his preference for a dead rather than a

gay son, and his declaration that it would not be worth raping Congresswoman Maria do Rosario because she was "very ugly."

Not that such choice words have affected his popularity among ordinary Brazilians. Indeed, support for Bolsonaro increased after he was stabbed at a political rally in September. During the first round of presidential elections on October 7, Bolsonaro won a spectacular 46% of the vote, with his closest rival, Workers' Party (PT) candidate Fernando Haddad, polling at 29%. Datafolha predicts that Bolsonaro will receive 52% on October 28 against his challenger's 41%.

TAPPING INTO POPULAR ANGER

So what explains the meteoric rise of someone like Bolsonaro in a country where memories of the last military dictatorship remain relatively fresh? Many Brazilians are weary of the interchange between PT and Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) governments. Despite the remarkable achievements of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's PT — rapid economic growth and an expanding middle class — things were far from plain sailing for his predecessor Dilma Rousseff. Under her leadership, Brazil fell into a deep recession in 2014 due to economic mismanagement and a decline in global commodity prices. And while economic growth has since returned, conditions remain grim, with more than 12% of the population unemployed, and millions living back below the poverty line. Put

simply, trust in the PT is at an all-time low, with many Brazilians holding the party responsible for economic hardship and much more.

Jair Bolsonaro has effectively tapped into this anger and desire to disrupt the status quo, particularly when it comes to corruption and high levels of street violence. Brazil continues to struggle with the repercussions of 2014's "Lava Jato" — "Car Wash" — the country's biggest ever corruption scandal. The revelations contributed to the impeachment and eventual removal of Rousseff from office in August 2016, as well as the Lula's imprisonment earlier this year.

As things stand, Brazil remains the home to 17 of the world's most violent cities, with an annual homicide rate of 30 per 100,000 people. According to Latinobarometro, support for the police has declined by almost 20% over the past few years, from 53% in 2010 to 34% in 2017. Neither do Brazilians have much faith in their democratic institutions. A 2017 poll suggests that only 13% of the population were satisfied with the state of democracy, way below the Latin American average of 30%. Further polling suggests that 97% of Brazilians think that the country is governed by an elite that only has its interests at heart. The polls also make for grim reading for Brazil's incumbent president Michel Temer and his Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), with an approval rating of just 5%. His cause has hardly been helped by his arrest and charging with obstruction of

justice (a charge which he categorically denies) and a narrow brush with impeachment.

THE MAN

Finally, there is Jair Bolsonaro the man, a passionate and charismatic individual who stands apart from the relatively dour Haddad and Temer. Many Brazilians have also warmed to his backstory — a devout Catholic from a small town and working-class background. Bolsonaro has proved particularly adept at using social media on the campaign trail, a significant development given his small budget and the absence of major party backers. His Facebook page currently has 7.8 million followers, five times as many as Fernando Haddad (1.5 million), and knocking President Temer's paltry 628,000 into the long grass.

Bolsonaro's popularity has also been boosted by his decision to choose the free-market economist Paulo Guedes as his potential finance minister. This is a remarkable development, given that he has advocated economic nationalism throughout his political career. Thanks to this change of heart, Bolsonaro received more votes from investors and wealthy Brazilians than he perhaps expected in the first round of the presidential election. Many believe that he will curtail social spending and implement much needed market-friendly reforms.

Jair Bolsonaro is adamant that he is the man to make Brazil great again. The

task at hand should not be underestimated. Far-reaching reforms are required to boost the country's weak economic growth, including the consolidation of public finances and reform of the pension system. Brazil's next president also needs to restructure a business environment that hampers foreign investment. Without such measures the country will continue to teeter on the brink of one fiscal crisis after another. Fighting corruption and improving public security will also be at the top of the to-do list.

In the absence of party support, Bolsonaro will have to quickly learn the art of coalition building and managing the different factions that make up Latin America's most fragmented congress. This will be no mean feat, with the next parliament consisting of 30 parties in the lower house and 21 in the senate. Regardless of each candidate's ambitions, plans and expectations it will undoubtedly be difficult for the incoming president to make Brazil great again.

While it's true that Bolsonaro's right-wing politics could pose a danger to Brazilian democracy, it does not necessarily mean a collapse or a slide into tyranny. First, it may be simply that Brazilians are hungry for a strong and charismatic leader — one that would resemble Lula. Second, Brazilian politics are about coalition building, so Bolsonaro won't find it so easy to push his ideas through congress. Finally, Brazilians are known for impeaching their presidents when they cross a red

line, so Bolsonaro will have to watch out as he navigates his political path.

Kinga Brudzińska is a senior research fellow for the Future of Europe Programme at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute in Bratislava, Slovakia. She received a PhD in Political Science from the University of Warsaw and an MA in Economics from the University of Economics in Krakow. She also holds a Diploma in Latin American Studies from TEC Monterrey in Mexico. She is an expert on the Spanish-speaking world, EU foreign policy and on issues of international democracy. Prior to joining GLOBSEC, she worked at the Polish Institute of International Affairs.

Is Brazil Headed for a Dictatorship?

Karin Schmalz

October 27, 2018

Far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro could become the next Brazilian president.

The eyes of the world are on Brazil. For a long list of reasons, an autocratic candidate is the frontrunner in the presidential election on October 28. Considered the “most misogynistic, hateful” politician in the democratic world, Jair Bolsonaro is at the top of all election polls, aided by WhatsApp chains, fake news and defamation.

On October 18, an investigative piece by the renowned newspaper Folha de

São Paulo exposed a scheme involving illegal funding for a virtual smear campaign against Bolsonaro's election rival, Fernando Haddad of the Workers' Party's (PT). The scheme is based on techniques spearheaded by the infamous Cambridge Analytica and was inspired by Donald Trump's former chief strategist, Steve Bannon, who met Bolsonaro's son in August.

Bolsonaro's shameful performance as a congressman over the past 27 years does not affect the dedication of his supporters. Condemned for racism, homophobia and misogyny, his followers seem to dismiss his serious crimes as easily as they ignore his life-long fight against democracy. For decades, Bolsonaro has been vocal in his admiration for the last Brazilian military dictatorship and support for torture. For him, the solution to poverty and crime is to get rid of favelas (shanty towns) using automatic weapons, make women earn less because they "get pregnant" and fill up prisons to the brim.

BRAZIL: A LONG ROMANCE WITH DICTATORSHIPS

Democracy in Brazil is young and frail. The country became independent of Portugal in 1822, but was ruled by Peter I, the son of the king of Portugal, John VI. Brazil was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to outlaw slavery, and one of the few that did not implement reparative measures afterwards. Freed slaves had no other option than to continue their unpaid

work as land reform was never on the cards.

Peter II, emperor of Brazil, was removed by a military coup orchestrated by Marshall Deodoro da Fonseca in 1889. The movement incited troops against the aristocratic enemy and was inflamed by an economic crisis after the promulgation of the "golden law" in 1888, which ended all forms of slavery in Brazil. The five-year military dictatorship was so bloody that it is known today as "republic of the sword."

This was followed by military legislative rule for another four years. Both periods ended in economic and social bankruptcy, leading to revolts all over the country. This continued for two decades under right-wing governments that were not concerned with growing poverty in the countryside. Rural areas still lived as they lived in imperial times, with most poor people working in conditions analogous to slavery.

President Washington Luís, a civilian, was removed by a military coup known as the 1930 Brazilian Revolution. The stock market crash in 1929 escalated the internal economic crisis, and generals from three corners of the country took power in a coordinated move. The military junta elected Getúlio Vargas, a civilian co-conspirator. Vargas was more progressive than his military counterparts, and he implemented workers' policies and benefits that did not exist in Brazil until then. His constitution of 1937 was authoritarian and industrialist, and it mainly benefited

large coastal urban centers rather than inland areas.

Inequality grew exponentially, and the impoverished flooded the cities. Favelas established during the old republic multiplied throughout Brazil, especially in Rio de Janeiro, the country's capital at the time. Vargas was in charge for 15 years and ended his period with such approval that he was re-elected as president in 1951, this time by popular vote. He is still regarded as a hero in Brazil, despite the autocratic measures he took in his first term.

Brazil's most recent dictatorship (1964-1985) was not the result of an economic crisis, although the economy was not doing well. Instead, it was concocted against a fabricated enemy: communists who wanted to transform Brazil into a new Cuba.

This fear of communists was imported by American diplomatic personnel, fomented by Irish priests and the media, and funded by the US government through the Central Intelligence Agency as a means of blocking the nationalization of oil, which was announced by the 1961 presidential election winner, the left-wing João Goulart.

The 1964 coup d'état was a bloody one: censorship of communication channels, arbitrary arrests, over 500 deaths in military custody, 1,100 native Brazilians of several ethnicities killed, and countless other deaths among guerrillas, criminals and poorer people.

It is claimed that mayors used military helicopters to dump "undesirables" in high seas to "clean the city," as was happening in Chile under Augusto Pinochet.

In Brazil, there was arson in favelas, police massacres and political repression. Most of the country's intelligentsia went into exile, and artists were arrested, tortured or deported. Media organizations were severely controlled. One of the most powerful Brazilian networks, Rede Globo, only recently apologized for collaborating with and promoting the regime.

OPPRESSION BY DECREE

The tools that the last dictatorship used were called "institutional acts" or AIs. These were constitutional amendments that could go over the rather progressive 1946 constitution without approval by congress or the senate. Some of the most decisive decisions to remove civil rights came from these acts, including the formalization of political repression, published in AI-5 of 1968. The military dictatorship enforced 17 AIs between 1964 and 1969, which gave total powers to the state over the people's public, political, religious and individual rights. In June 1964, the National Information Service (SNI) was created, unifying investigative and repression forces all over the country and abroad. Although instituted as a crime repression organization, its tools were used mainly to persecute and kill dissidents and political adversaries.

After becoming a democracy once again in 1985, a new, more democratic constitution was promulgated in 1988, but all legal instruments that gave ultimate power to the president of were preserved. In fact, there are some ways to change the constitution, with or without the input of the legislative or the people. These loopholes were very seldom exploited and, when they were, the aim was to improve democratic decisions.

Amidst the political turmoil that Brazil has faced since 2013 — when a students' movement against bus fares saw hundreds of thousands protesting — extreme right-wing movements called out the communist threat of the Workers' Party and hijacked the popular movement to suit their agenda. Ultraconservative writers and journalists joined the call, and liberal bloggers multiplied on social media.

In congress, a law typifying criminal organizations was sanctioned, with the presidential veto on a dubious article that could interpret international charities as terrorist organizations. The Workers' Party had given full investigative powers to the federal and civil police forces against corruption, and scandals started to emerge. Mainstream media, mostly conservative, suppressed scandals involving all other parties except PT. President Dilma Rousseff was re-elected in 2014 by a tight margin, but Brazilians also elected what was described as "the most conservative legislative since 1964." In 2016, rich entrepreneurs of São Paulo

organized enormous protests for the impeachment of Rousseff, which were widely supported by white upper classes who were concerned about wealth distribution and labor rights pushed forward by PT's agenda.

In March 2016, the president signed an anti-terrorism law as part of an international agreement to host the Rio Olympics. Rousseff vetoed two articles that could compromise the activities of civil society movements, such as human rights groups and grassroots organizations. To ensure the law was not used to curtail political rights, the second article clearly typifies terrorism as acts perpetrated by "reasons of xenophobia, discrimination or prejudice of race, color, ethnicity and religion."

In August that year, Rousseff was impeached on flimsy charges, and negotiations for her unfair dismissal were recorded and shown openly in the media. All members of the Workers' Party were removed from higher levels of government. Michel Temer, the vice-president who took the position because of PT's alliance with his party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement, immediately implemented a new economic plan called "A Bridge for the Future," which was a compilation of ultra-liberal austerity measures. Unemployment rates went from 4.8% in January 2015 to 12.1% in September 2018. The Brazilian public, bombarded daily by scandals involving PT, still blames the crisis on the party's policies, more than two years after its officials were removed from power.

On October 15, 2018, incumbent President Michel Temer signed decree 9,527, creating the Intelligence Taskforce (FTI) “to confront organized crime in Brazil, with the competences of investigating and sharing data, and producing intelligence reports, aiming at subsidizing the creation of public policies and governmental action to fight against criminal organizations affronting the Brazilian state and its institutions.”

The taskforce, directly controlled by presidential orders, counts on the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN), the democratized remnants of the SNI and other intelligence offices, the militarized remnants of the SNI and financial investigation offices from the civil government. The FTI will act according to an action plan yet to be defined, created without legislative input but needing its approval. It could criminalize a political party, for example, that has been accused of being a criminal organization. This term has been applied by conservative media to most left-leaning parties in Brazil, especially the Workers’ Party.

If this was not enough to make democrats uncomfortable, two bills were given urgency for voting at the legislative houses — both suggested by ultraconservative politicians. Law 5,065 removes the second article of the anti-terrorism law and typifies terrorism as acts motivated by “ideological, political, social and criminal” reasons, which effectively gives decree 9,527 the same powers of AI-5. Law 212/2016, proposed by a senator, considers all

acts of political protest and active dissidence to be terrorism, and it prescribes long reclusion sentences. The law defines sheltering, helping, talking and giving money to a terrorist as crimes that are as serious as terrorism itself.

Taken together, the decree and these two laws could end all forms of activism, public manifestations, social organizations and opposing political parties in Brazil.

One week before the most crucial election in Brazil’s modern history, Jair Bolsonaro appeared in a video address to his supporters to affirm that he will purge members of the Workers’ Party and imprison whoever stays in the country. His supporters used the slogan of the 1964 dictatorship: “Brazil: love it or leave it.”

Facebook and WhatsApp have removed thousands of accounts that pushed fake news for Bolsonaro. His controversial speech alerted international experts and may have irked many of his moderate voters. Recent polls show a strong swing toward Fernando Haddad, with the progressive candidate winning in the northeast and north regions. Southern Brazil, however, still shows an advantage for Bolsonaro.

With a conservative legislative and more members of the Bancada BBB (Bullets, Beef and Bible) group in congress and the senate, an eventual Bolsonaro victory will give him autocratic powers. By now, Brazilians can only hope for people to have some sense on October

28 as they head to the polls. Voters hold all the power to avoid a worst-case scenario for Brazil.

Karin Schmalz is a Brazilian scientist who has worked with human rights and environmental organizations since 2002. She has held positions as an environmental scientist, university lecturer, and science, culture and politics writer for over 25 years. After graduating at federal universities in Brazil, she received her DPhil in Zoology from the University of Oxford in 2005.

Pro-European Conservatives Will Soon Call Time on Brexit

Richard Coward

October 29, 2018

The relentless political logic of Brexit will soon lead a determined group of Conservative MPs to stop Brexit in its tracks.

There is a relentless logic about the whole Brexit saga. Like a series of deductions in a mathematical proof, one step leads to another until a firm conclusion is reached. The reasoning process can be lengthy and complicated, and sometimes the outcome can be surprising. So it will be with Brexit.

To the immense frustration of Brexiteer politicians who believed they could break apart the four fundamental

freedoms of the European Union in goods, services, capital and labor in order to secure a bespoke “deep and special partnership” based on extensive cherry-picking, the EU is holding firm. It just won’t play ball. Instead, it continues very politely to force Britain to choose between a Brexit in which we stay locked into the whole European economic system of the customs union and the single market and jumping off an economic cliff.

It’s a miserable choice for Britain. Either we have a Brexit in which the only thing we’ve achieved in the name of “Take Back Control” is to give up our seats on the European Council and in the European Parliament, thereby becoming a vassal state of the EU, or we leave the EU in March 2019 without a deal, wreck our economy and inflict grievous harm in every corner of the realm.

The bipolar choice we face should be becoming brutally clear to all but the most ostrich-like of MPs in Parliament. Even the slow learners amongst them will have worked it out in the next few months. The interesting question is how they will react when this choice can no longer be evaded.

Some will undoubtedly want to head for the cliff and take the plunge, dreaming of liberation and freedom after the fall. We know who they are. Some are ideologically-driven right-wingers dreaming of a brave new world free of annoying EU rules and regulations. Some are traditional far-left socialists wishing to ensure that they can take

control of the means of production, distribution and exchange unhindered by the tedious single market enforcement mechanisms of the EU. Others simply don't like living with a Polish family next door, or at least worry that many of their constituents don't. These odd bedfellows have been dominating the political agenda in the last few years, but this might soon change.

KICKING THE CAN

If you were to ask the vast majority of MPs which choice they would take — the cliff edge or the full European package with which we have lived for nearly half a century — many would initially wriggle and squirm. They would still try rather pathetically to grab a piece of European cake that they could greedily devour. But if you were to force them to choose between the two options, they would choose the European package. Some would do so happily, most rather grumpily, but that is what they would choose.

So how does the majority of MPs rejecting the cliff and therefore by default supporting the European package impose its will on the others? The cliff-jumpers are a powerful faction within the Conservative Party, but even there they are probably not the majority. The current pro-Brexit Labour leadership is already in a weak political position given the overwhelming pro-remain sentiment in both the party and its electoral base, but jumping might still be seen as the more appealing option

by a small number of Labour MPs. We can therefore be pretty certain that both major parties will stay deeply divided.

And so the metaphorical can continues to be kicked down the road while the literal clock continues relentlessly to tick. A delay here, a fudge there. It's becoming quite an art form in the last few years in Brexit Britain. The most talented practitioner is the prime minister, but Theresa May is certainly not alone in developing this particular skill set. The so-called Chequers deal was really just another example of can-kicking, because even its authors knew that the EU would never accept it. Another recent manifestation is a "blind Brexit", whereby the UK enters a surreal "transition period" for nearly two years or perhaps longer as a powerless vassal state of the EU, still safely embedded inside the single market and the customs union. During this time we would not have even the foggiest notion of what might come next.

Political logic dictates it will be the pro-European Conservatives who will finally bring things to a head. When the choice can no longer be evaded, they will urge the prime minister to finally turn her back on the hard-line Brexiteers and accept the European package on offer by the EU in order to avoid the cliff. If she needs more time to negotiate the details, they will urge her to seek a lengthy extension to the Article 50 deadline in order to do so. If she agrees, she will inevitably have to see off a challenge from the committed cliff-jumpers in her party. She might or might

not win the resulting vote of no confidence, but either way the Conservative Party will effectively split.

With or without the current prime minister, the pro-European faction within the Conservative Party will then be forced to rely on the support of Labour MPs to win key votes in the House of Commons. These MPs will extract a high price for their support, but they will not refuse. By the time this happens, the stakes will be too high and the time still available to stop the clock too short.

There will no doubt be vocal calls for yet another general election, especially from the Labour leadership, but the last thing the Conservative pro-Europeans will do is support a simple vote of no confidence in Parliament, which might result in Jeremy Corbyn entering Downing Street as prime minister. As a group, they are far too clever for that. The next general election isn't scheduled until 2022, long after the key Brexit decisions will have been made. Pro-European Conservative MPs will therefore insist that it is the responsibility of those elected in the recent 2017 general election to sort out the enormous mess in which the country finds itself.

So, Labour MPs will face a brutal choice between accepting an offer of cooperation with an organized Conservative faction in Parliament on an agreed and negotiated program, or nothing at all.

STOPPING THE CLOCK

Having possibly tried and failed to persuade Labour MPs to support the program of a minority government led by a Conservative politician, the pro-European Conservative faction will finally be forced to offer Labour and perhaps other parties in Parliament a full coalition government in order to prevent Britain from falling off the cliff. They will present this as a proposal for a "government of national unity" although of course it will be no such thing. It will instead be a government with one central purpose and that is to stop the Brexit clock ticking down to zero at 11pm on March 29, 2019.

Faced with the formal and very public offer of a coalition by the pro-European Conservative faction, Labour MPs will then find themselves faced with a terrible dilemma. If they refuse to support the formation of a new cross-party government of national unity in which they would be the biggest force and, as a direct consequence, Article 50 is neither suspended nor revoked, the Labour Party collectively and each Labour MP individually will be co-responsible for the all the economic consequences of the cliff fall alongside the hard-line Conservative Brexiteers. The vast majority of their voters would never forgive them for this.

So, however reluctantly, they will eventually be forced to accept the offer and enter into formal negotiations leading to the formation of a new government. Even if the Eurosceptic Labour leadership were to decline the offer, there will be a sufficient number of

Labour, Liberal Democrat and nationalist MPs absolutely determined to protect their constituents and stop the Brexit clock to make up for the inevitable loss of the hard-line Conservative Brexiteer MPs in crucial Parliamentary votes.

A formal coalition agreement will have to be negotiated, just as was the case before the coalition government was formed between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives in 2010. It will include large parts of Labour's anti-austerity program, watered down by the other elements in the coalition. The negotiations will not be easy, but given the urgency a way will be found. Nobody will get everything they want, but everybody will get something.

Since someone has to do the job, a future prime minister will have to be identified. Even assuming they wanted to participate, the two obvious contenders for the job — Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May — will both no doubt be ruled out because they would be unable to command sufficiently broad support across the coalition. So a compromise figure will have to be found. Fortunately for Britain, there are a good number of widely-respected and well-known pro-European politicians who could comfortably fulfil this role, certainly on a temporary basis.

Having formed a new government, the coalition prime minister's first task will be to write to the president of the European Council formally requesting a lengthy extension in the Article 50

deadline in order to allow for further discussions to take place without duress. Following a change of government in Britain, this will be swiftly agreed by the other 27 member states and there will therefore be no need for Britain to attempt to formally revoke Article 50 unilaterally.

The new government will then negotiate a withdrawal agreement, providing for continuing frictionless trade with Europe. This will necessarily incorporate the EU's minimum demands of continuing full UK membership of the customs union and single market outside the EU. This will satisfy those in the coalition who feel it is important that the British electorate, who voted narrowly in June 2016 to leave the political machinery of the European Union, should have a negotiated option to do so. This withdrawal agreement will then be put to a ratification referendum in which the alternative would be to revoke Article 50 and remain as full voting members.

The funny thing about political logic is that it never stops. As so often with mathematical proofs, it just gets a little harder sometimes to see the deductive steps that lie ahead. So it is here. The national coalition that will be formed to take control of the executive and stop us leaving the European economic system will create its own dynamic. It will face enormous political opposition, certainly from the furious forces of the populist right, but also from the far left. The British first-past-the-post system of elections will therefore coerce the major players in the coalition to stand together

when a general election finally arrives, finding a way to field a single national government candidate in every constituency on a common program.

In the electoral meltdown that will then occur, it might look as if anything can happen. But once again, it is political logic that will actually dictate the outcome. But that, as they say, is another story.

Richard Coward is an independent commentator on British political affairs. He studied politics, philosophy and economics at Wadham College, Oxford before taking a further degree in economics at the London School of Economics and then briefly worked for the British Foreign Office. Later he taught economics and has written four mystery thrillers. He is a director of studies at EDDeU Education.

What's at Stake in the US Midterm Elections?

S. Suresh

October 30, 2018

Decency and decorum in American politics will still be a distant dream, even if Democrats win the midterm elections on November 6.

The US midterm elections are just a week away as a deeply divided nation anxiously watches whether the Republicans will maintain their majority in Congress, or if the Democrats will pull

off a surprise retake of the House or the Senate. Any pretense of bipartisanship and decency in politics today has completely evaporated, as evidenced in the recently concluded hearings on the allegations of sexual misconduct against Judge Brett Kavanaugh at the Senate Judiciary Committee. Just last week, Americans have resorted to expressing differences of opinions not with words but with bombs.

The person singularly responsible for the demise of decency in American politics, President Donald Trump, paid lip service to condemn the attempted attacks against his critics like Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and George Soros, among others, stating that “acts or threats of political violence of any kind have no place in the United States of America.” He quickly resorted to blaming the media and everyone who is critical of him, continuing to spew the divisive rhetoric that would define his presidency.

On October 25, Trump tweeted: “A very big part of the Anger we see today in our society is caused by the purposely false and inaccurate reporting of the Mainstream Media that I refer to as Fake News. It has gotten so bad and hateful that it is beyond description. Mainstream Media must clean up its act, FAST!” The president’s hate-filled words have only deepened the partisan divide in a nation that is already split asunder by ideology-based politics rather than issue-driven discourse. Republican Senators and House Representatives have dispensed with any sense of self-

respect and propriety to line up meekly behind Trump just to advance their party agenda.

UNDERDOG URGENCY

Over the last century, Republicans have been the underdogs of American politics. Democrats have had control of the Senate for 66 of the last 100 years. They have also enjoyed a majority in the House for 65 years, including 40 straight from 1954 until 1994. With control of both arms of Congress and the presidency, it is no surprise that underdogs are behaving with a great deal of urgency, rushing through their agenda.

Now, a GOP-controlled Congress successfully passed a tax bill that is projected to increase the national debt by \$1.9 trillion between 2018 and 2028. The tax breaks will primarily benefit corporations and America's superrich, while the fast-dwindling middle class and the poor end up getting crumbs.

In complete defiance of science, the Trump administration has precipitated the problem of climate change by rolling back environmental regulations. The world has just 12 years to apply the brakes on greenhouse gas emissions and limit the rise in Earth's temperature before humanity faces the irreversible effects of global warming in the form of droughts, flooding, extreme heat and poverty.

In his eight years as president, Barack Obama appointed 329 Article III federal

judges, two to US Supreme Court, 55 to the US Court of Appeals, 268 to the US District Courts and four to US Court of International Trade. Thanks to the Republican-controlled Senate that had stalled several Obama nominations since 2015, Trump inherited several vacancies, including the one that allowed him to appoint Judge Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court. As of this writing, Trump has appointed 84 Article III judges, including two to the Supreme Court, 29 to the Court of Appeals and 53 to the District Courts, reshaping the complexion of the most important courts in the country.

WHAT ARE THE ODDS?

The battle to retake the Senate may prove near impossible for the Democrats, with more of them contesting for re-election than their Republican counterparts. To regain the majority, vulnerable Democratic candidates Heidi Heitkamp, Joe Donnelly, Jon Tester and Joe Manchin have to hold on to their seats in the battleground states of North Dakota, Indiana, Montana and West Virginia respectively. In addition, they have to flip two of the three possible seats in Nevada, Arizona and Texas.

While the Democratic incumbents in Indiana, West Virginia and Montana are likely to hold their ground, Heidi Heitkamp is trailing in North Dakota by three points, a deficit that may prove very difficult to overcome following her vote against Kavanaugh's confirmation. Incumbent Republican Ted Cruz holds a

comfortable five-point edge over his Democratic rival, Beto O'Rourke, in Texas, but the contest is surprisingly close for a Senate race in the Lone Star State. The Senate race is a toss-up in Nevada. Democrats stand the best chance of an upset in Arizona, where Democrat Kristen Sinema holds a thin lead over Republican Martha McSally. When the dust settles, the final tally may remain exactly what it is today, 51-49 in favor of Republicans, giving them two more years to comfortably fill court vacancies at various levels in the country with conservative judges and altering the complexion of the judiciary for decades to come.

The prospect for Democrats to retake the House majority looks more promising. In order to change the current 194-241 breakdown to a majority, Democrats have to flip at least 24 Republican seats in addition to holding on to their current constituencies. While the number 24 may seem daunting, the House has flipped a majority in the recent past with much larger margins. In 1994 and 2010, Republicans gained a House majority with a swing of 54 and 62 seats respectively. Democrats did that in 2006 with a swing of 32 seats. Regaining the majority in this election season is achievable if the anti-Trump sentiment, especially in key blue states, translates into more voters at the polls.

DECENCY AND DECORUM

Despite having the highest number of electoral votes, California typically plays

an insignificant role in presidential elections. That is likely to change in these midterm elections as California can singlehandedly give more than a third of the seats needed for the Democrats to retake the House majority. Political pundits and polls show that California does have the ability to transfer as many as eight Republican-held seats to Democrats in their quest for 24. They are also aided by the millions that former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg is pumping into California to help the cause of winning the House back.

The Garden State, New Jersey, has five Republican incumbents who are vulnerable and is very likely to unseat four of them in preference to their Democratic challengers. New York, Illinois, Virginia Iowa and Pennsylvania are all states with competitive elections that can provide the remaining seats needed by the Democrats. A statistical analysis website [FiveThirtyEight](#) projects that the Democrats will retake the House with a 6-in-7 chance.

If the Democrats do gain House majority, Trump, one of America's most scandal-prone presidents, will come under closer scrutiny and may even face impeachment. He and his administration will likely face a slew of investigations that will apply brakes on the Republican legislative agenda for rest of his term, slowing down Trump's destructive policies in the areas of immigration, environment and the rights of marginalized minorities. His threat to end birthright citizenship with an

executive order, potentially defying the 14th Amendment of the Constitution will undoubtedly face stiff legal battle, driving another wedge in a nation already struggling with many unresolved immigration issues.

Decency and decorum in American politics will still be a distant dream even if Democrats flip the House next week. America's vindictive and hate-mongering president will only redouble his efforts maligning every effort that exposes the vacuous and corrupt person that he is. That would still be a small price to pay for providing the much-needed checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches of the US government that has been completely absent the past two years.

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