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Language Wars: The Francophone-Anglophone Conflict in Cameroon

Imogen Alessio
May 27, 2025

Cameroon was established as a “bilingual” federation, but soon evolved into a centralized state. French was imposed on the Anglophone population leading to dissent. Attempts of cultural assimilation of the former British Southern Cameroon and systematic marginalization by the Francophone elites has resulted in protests and violent suppression.

In his resignation letter, the former Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon and one of the key architects of the 1961 federal union, John Ngu Foncha, exclaimed: “The Anglophone Cameroonians whom I brought into union have been ridiculed and referred to as ‘les Biafrais’, ‘les ennemies dans la maison’, ‘les traîtres’ etc., and the constitutional provisions which protected this Anglophone minority have been suppressed, their voice drowned while the rule of the gun replaced the dialogue which the Anglophones cherish very much.”

However, the current President, Paul Biya, have long maintained that the Anglophone “problem” Foncha discusses does not exist and that the government rather “has often tried to minimize the Anglophone-Francophone divide by highlighting the existence of a common identity under German colonial rule and the official recognition in all the post-colonial constitutions of the bilingual and multicultural nature of the

Cameroonian nation.” Nevertheless, despite the denial, the Cameroon government has resorted to “intimidation, corruption and repression” to dispel the Anglophone population’s demand for independence or autonomy, suggesting that a problem does in fact exist. This suppression has led to a bloody language war.

Historical Background

Until the end of the First World War, Cameroon (formerly Kamerun) was a German protectorate. However, following Germany’s defeat, it was divided by the League of Nations between Great Britain and France. The territory under the British was further divided into two administrative regions: Northern Cameroon and Southern Cameroon. While the British pursued a policy of indirect rule that conferred a large degree of autonomy to their part of the territory, France constructed a highly centralized colonial territory.

Following the Second World War, Great Britain and France began to relinquish their colonial territories. In the referendum that took place on February 11, 1961, British Southern Cameroon was confronted with the decision to either join Nigeria (which was joined by British Northern Cameroons) or the newly emerging Francophone La République du Cameroun (the Republic of Cameroon). South Cameroon chose the latter, but their hope “to preserve their cultural specificity” as part of French Cameroun was short-lived.

The origin of the Anglophone problem

The Anglophone problem has its origins in the Founban Constitutional Conference of 1961. The Conference, held in July 1961, created a constitution for the new Federal state consisting of the British Southern Cameroon and La République du Cameroun. It also set the stage “for the birth of

the Federal Republic of Cameroon on October 1, 1961, which reunited two pieces of the former German Kamerun, both with very distinct political cultures.”

The conference is, however, remembered as a turning point where the promise of a truly bilingual and bicultural federation began to fall apart. Anglophones, representing 9% of the total population, were forced to accept a highly centralized system of government and administration. This laid the groundwork for many of the ongoing tensions between the Anglophone and Francophone communities.

An amendment was made to the Constitution in 1984, which has only served to exacerbate the Anglophone problem further. The 1984 amendment changed the country’s official name from the United Republic of Cameroon to the Republic of Cameroon. This alteration was not merely symbolic. It marked a shift from the federal structure enshrined in the 1961 Constitution, which had recognized and protected the unique identity of British Southern Cameroons (later known as West Cameroon). By adopting the new name, the amendment effectively erased the legal and cultural distinctions of the Anglophone regions.

Today, the Anglophone community demands the restoration of West Cameroon’s cultural identity and the implementation of the articles of the Constitution that had once pledged to safeguard the values and institutions that British Southern Cameroons had brought into the Union in 1961.

Linguistic and economic hegemony

As Mufor Atanga declares, “the Federal Republic of Cameroon came into being in 1961 as the first ‘bilingual’ federation in Africa.” However, Atanga notably put the bilingual descriptor in quotation marks. Although the Fomuban Conference

declared that both French and English were Cameroon’s two official languages, the latter has been significantly marginalized since. From the inception of the unified state, French has been established as the language of administration and official communication. Government institutions, legal proceedings and public services are primarily conducted in French, which not only centralizes administrative power but also creates barriers for those who are more comfortable in English or local languages. As a result, the Francophone elite today holds disproportionate power. This linguistic preference of the French is not by any means accidental; it is a deliberate policy designed to solidify a single national identity, one that aligns with the cultural legacy of French colonial rule.

The educational system further illustrates how the French language functions as a tool of domination. In many schools across Cameroon, the curriculum is predominantly taught in French. Textbooks, teaching methods and examinations reflect this orientation. In 2016, teachers in the English-speaking regions of North West and South West Cameroon went on strike, along with lawyers, protesting against the “francophonization” of the English educational system. The teachers saw these measures as part of a broader pattern of state centralization and cultural assimilation. By mandating French as the language of administration and public discourse, the state has thus created a barrier that has effectively excluded Anglophone Cameroonians from full participation in public life and represents a clear instrument of control.

Economic exploitation has further kindled discontent. Francophone-dominated Cameroon has systematically exploited the economic resources of the Anglophone regions whilst providing little infrastructural development in return. The Southwest and Northwest regions are rich in oil, timber and agricultural resources. Yet, it is these same areas that remain underdeveloped, with poor

roads, failing schools and inadequate healthcare services. The Biya government has kept economic and social activities in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon at bay, with serious socioeconomic implications on the local communities and the economic tissue of the regions.

Most of Cameroon's crude oil, which accounts for approximately 12% of the country's GDP, is located in West Cameroon, off the coast of the South West Region. The state-controlled oil sector, SONARA (Société Nationale de Raffinage), is also ironically located in Limbe in the Anglophone region of Cameroon. The revenues from the oil industry, however, overwhelmingly benefit the Francophone elites, leaving local communities to bear the brunt of environmental degradation and economic neglect. Similar dynamics exist in the timber industry, where foreign corporations (often backed by the Francophone elite) extract high-profit resources with little reinvestment in local communities. This exploitation not only perpetuates regional economic disparities but also deepens the political and cultural alienation felt by the Anglophone community.

Systematic repression

Amnesty International's report in 2023 has exposed some of these human rights abuses in Cameroon's Anglophone regions, where state security forces have been accused of arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, torture and rape. The report documents how these brutal tactics have been deployed against activists, journalists and civilians who advocate for greater autonomy and a federal system. As pointed out in the report, "Cameroonian authorities must act to end the violence against the population and conduct thorough investigations into the killings, acts of torture, rapes, burning of houses and other atrocities committed in the Anglophone region."

Anglophone movements that aspire to federalism or secession have been the main targets of such repression. The introduction of multi-party politics in the early 1990s and the easing of restrictions on freedom of association led to the formation of various opposition parties and pressure groups. Among these, the Social Democratic Front (SDF) emerged as a significant voice for the Anglophone community and has articulated the frustrations of those who have felt sidelined by the centralized Francophone-dominated state. Members of these Anglophone movements, however, have been harassed by the security forces, threatened with arrest, and subjected to travel restrictions, forcing some to go into exile. The state has also repressed public demonstrations and protests organized by the SDF. This includes violent crackdowns during rallies, which are often characterized by the use of excessive force. For instance, in the protests that took place in 2016, security forces deployed tear gas, batons and live ammunition, killing four people. In addition to this, police crackdowns on gatherings and ghost town actions (shutting down a town as a form of protest) have been met with violent dispersals.

The way forward

The Anglophone problem is not simply a vestige of a troubled past; it is a living crisis that continues to shape the nation's destiny. In Cameroon's case, the cultural wars have turned into a civil war. By favoring a Francophone elite, the state has not only undermined the cultural identity and rights of the Anglophone minority, but it has also fueled cycles of repression and conflict. Only by acknowledging and rectifying these systemic disparities can Cameroon hope to fulfill the promise of a truly bilingual and bicultural nation that was originally agreed on in 1961.

[Asmita Adhikari edited this piece.]

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ASIA PACIFIC

China May Now Dare to Challenge the US Dollar

Jiahao Yuan
January 26, 2025

With US debt at an all-time high, the Federal Reserve cut interest rates drastically to reduce debt pressure. However, if the Fed continues to cut rates, the dollar's power in global trade will take a massive hit, potentially leading to a loss for the US in the US-China trade war. China is poised to reap the benefits of the dollar's depreciation and may do so soon.

Since the last fiscal quarter, the United States has officially started to cut interest rates. This is not surprising, but the extent of the rate cut exceeded many expectations. Even so, the Federal Reserve, the central banking system of the

US — colloquially referred to as “the Fed” — envisions four more rate cuts in 2025 and 2026. If this continues, it will likely negatively impact the US financial market and cause China's currency, called the renminbi (renminbi), to strengthen in the long run. It is even possible that the US will be “harvested” by China in reverse.

US may lose the dominant position in the US-China “competition”

Over the past half-century, due to its so-called advantages such as autocratic politics, the whole-nation system and unfair competition, China has developed rapidly in the fields of economy, science and technology. However, China's bandit development logic over the years has also caused extreme dissatisfaction among most democratic countries in the world. This includes, most importantly, the US.

In 2018, under the impetus of President Donald Trump's administration, Western countries led by the United States launched a “trade war” against China. Since the US holds the most powerful weapon in global trade — the dollar — China has been forced into a very passive position regarding global trade. However, it is unrealistic for the US to defeat communist China with a few trade barriers. The competition between major powers is often a long-standing game that depends not only on who has the bigger fist but also on who has a stronger determination.

However, no one expected that in a few years, the US macro-economy would be in trouble. Since 2020, the US has experienced severe inflation. Usually, this requires the Fed to raise interest rates, but this is not the case. With the US debt hitting new highs, breaking through the \$35.5 trillion mark at the end of 2024, the Fed is forced to lower interest rates in order to halt the debt pressure.

If the Fed continues to cut interest rates, the advantage the US dollar has accumulated over the years will disintegrate more quickly. Many countries are now promoting a “multi-currency” settlement system under the active advocacy of China. China is also eroding the original advantages of the dollar bit by bit. Last August, as soon as the news of the Fed's upcoming interest rate cut was released, the renminbi rose by more than 1,000 basis points within just one week. It can be said that the losses the renminbi suffered due to past US interest rate hikes were all compensated at once.

China is about to reap the US in reverse

The US is currently at a crossroads: raising interest rates is not feasible with the current debt situation, but lowering interest rates further will cause extreme consequences. First, when the dollar depreciates, or loses value, capital suddenly becomes the most mischievous troublemaker. Investors are likely to go to other places such as China to find better investment returns. Capital is profit-seeking, and investors will go wherever the profit is higher. This means that more dollar funds would flow into China.

Second, if the renminbi appreciates, or increases in value, it will boost the real purchasing power of Chinese consumers. This will substantially minimize the Chinese people's dissatisfaction with the government.

Third, there is a deeper "currency war" brewing behind the scenes. The dollar's global dominance has caused other countries to offload dissatisfaction onto the dollar. In other words, dissatisfaction with US monetary policy has reinforced China's ability to challenge the United States to a certain extent.

Fourth, although the depreciation of the dollar might result in sluggish exports for China, the

appreciation of the renminbi may buy China more bargaining chips in the global game.

The macroeconomic situation of the US is not very optimistic. Under such circumstances, the turmoil brought about by this wave of interest rate cuts in the US may open up more strategic opportunities for China. Therefore, in the coming year, any minor strategic mistake in US monetary policy is likely to lead to a fierce and fatal counterattack from China, which has been eyeing the US for a long time.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]

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China Turns Tariff War Into Strategic Opportunity Against United States

Jiahao Yuan
June 05, 2025

US President Donald Trump raised tariffs on Chinese goods to cut the US trade deficit and push firms to leave China. In response, China has shifted its imports, tightened control of key resources and deepened ties with other

countries. Beijing now holds stronger cards in a world that is moving away from US-led supply chains.

As a Chinese economist, I generally do not comment on other countries' internal affairs, especially political ones. However, from an economic perspective, the tariff war initiated by US President Donald Trump is truly unbelievable. Although China and the US reached a preliminary agreement and reduced tariffs during negotiations in Switzerland in May, it is unrealistic to think that the tariff war will cease. The two sides have reduced tariffs on the surface, but the strategic goals of both remain unmet, especially for the US. In the medium to long term, disputes and conflicts in trade are likely to continue until the US midterm elections next year. Therefore, we must examine the logic of the tariff war and its impact on both countries.

One of the most ridiculous measures came from White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, who proposed taking the US trade deficit as the numerator, dividing it by the total bilateral trade volume, and using the result as the tariff rate. This calculation ignores basic economic principles and appears in no reputable economics textbook.

China holds the bargaining chips

Objectively, Trump's shocking tariff rates made it rational and correct for Chinese President Xi Jinping not to call him. Xi knew exactly what such a call would produce.

First, China currently holds a little less than \$800 billion in US Treasury bonds. Trump could demand that China convert these into 100-year, interest-free bonds. He might also demand a sharp devaluation of the renminbi and ask China to adopt policies supporting the dollar's global dominance.

Both of these demands are unacceptable. In response, China began strategic preparations to counter the US tariff policy. For example, China cut oil imports from the US and turned to Canada. It began importing beef from Brazil, soybeans from Argentina and pork from Spain. In other words, it replaced US goods with those from other countries.

China's most powerful strategic tool may be its rare earth export controls. The global supply tension in rare earths arises not from scarcity but from refining technology. China possesses the most advanced rare earth refining technology and holds at least 90% of global patents. Other countries cannot build a complete rare earth supply chain quickly. It would take at least ten years and hundreds of billions of dollars to develop. Therefore, China's restrictions could inflict severe losses on major American industries. For example, each F-35 fighter jet requires at least 920 pounds of rare earths.

Columbia University economics professor Jeffrey Sachs argues that, as a real estate developer, Trump lacks an understanding of trade. After he announced the tariff war, global stock markets lost \$10 trillion in value in just two days. If tariffs really benefited the US as Trump claimed, the stock market should have surged. Instead, in April, following the announcement, stock markets around the world fell sharply.

Trump fails to understand that trade must benefit both sides. His policy splits the world into two camps: the US and everyone else. His tariff policy puts the US at odds with the global economy.

Another negative result appeared in late April. Investors sold approximately \$200 billion in US Treasury bonds globally. Japan led with \$30 billion, followed by the UK with \$18 billion. Other countries accounted for the remainder. China

likely sold bonds too, although it did not release data. If this trend continues, US asset prices will fall, and the US economy may slow significantly.

The largest holders of US Treasury bonds are not foreign governments but US financial institutions like securities firms, mutual funds and commercial banks. If their asset values collapse, US stock markets will fall further. This pressure led Trump to suspend new reciprocal tariffs for 90 days in late April. On May 25, he extended tariff negotiations with the EU until July 9, signaling a more passive stance.

Totalitarian systems respond differently to crises

Trump's tariff policy sparked protests across the US. Dozens of leading economists, including Nobel laureates, wrote to the government demanding an end to the policy. Some state governments, including California, sued the Trump administration. US Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin, adviser Elon Musk and many members of Congress criticized the tariffs. Trump faced growing internal and external pressure. If this continues, Republican losses in the midterm elections could be significant. Many party members hope the Supreme Court will declare the policy illegal.

Unlike the US, China is not bound by democratic constraints. Xi does not face elections. China can afford to wait, but Trump cannot.

Trump also made undiplomatic remarks, saying, "I am telling you, these countries are calling us up, kissing my ass." This damaged the US's global reputation and pushed other countries closer to China, which now appears as the defender of global trade norms.

A Chinese proverb says, "It is easy to go from frugality to luxury, but hard to go from luxury to

frugality." If bottled water rises from \$1 to \$2, Americans may protest. But if a Chinese worker's income drops from \$800 to \$400 per month, they are more likely to support the government. Chinese people have endured hardship for 70 years and are used to it. Americans, by contrast, depend on cheap Chinese goods. Sudden price hikes from switching to European products may prove unacceptable. China's political system can absorb more domestic hardship.

The tariff war benefits China in key ways

The US wants to decouple from China by rebuilding a global industrial system without it. China, which once occupied the low end of the global value chain, has moved up and challenged US dominance. Trump wants developing countries like Vietnam or India to replace China. Foreign companies such as Apple have begun moving production. But this process takes time.

Trump's sweeping tariffs triggered rapid decoupling. Other countries still depend on China's supply chain, so China gained leverage in negotiations. Meanwhile, the US risks hyperinflation as its supply chain suffers. Political pressure on the Trump administration rises as a result.

For years, China exported goods to the US in exchange for dollars. But it could not use those dollars to buy what it needed, such as high-tech products. Now, China pays for oil in renminbi and settles trade with Russia in local currency. Holding large amounts of dollars no longer benefits China. The US external debt has reached \$36 trillion. Trump even proposed 100-year interest-free bonds. China no longer wants to buy US Treasury bonds.

Some argue that holding dollars allows China to trade globally. But China is internationalizing the renminbi through bilateral swap agreements. These often include fixed-value anchors like the price of

oil. If a foreign currency depreciates, the agreement adjusts automatically to preserve purchasing power.

China also lends renminbi to other countries, especially in Africa, often in exchange for natural resource collateral. Those countries then use the renminbi to buy Chinese goods. For this system to work, the renminbi must remain stable. But China must not overexploit trading partners or provoke tariffs in return.

In this context, Trump's tariffs have promoted Chinese trade with other countries. Anti-American sentiment around the world helps China attract foreign investment. China also lowers its own market access barriers. For example, the Spanish prime minister recently visited China and signed a large pork export deal. At the same time, Chinese battery giant Contemporary Amperex Technology Co. Limited (CATL) announced a major investment in a factory in Spain.

The tariff war also reduces China's fear of US sanctions if it takes military action against Taiwan. If China chooses to decouple fully, it has less to lose from tariff penalties. From a geopolitical perspective, this gives Beijing more room to act.

The US has historically helped China's ruling Communist Party during times of crisis. President Harry Truman sanctioned the Kuomintang and indirectly aided Mao Zedong. President Jimmy Carter broke relations with Taiwan and welcomed Deng Xiaoping. President Barack Obama sent Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to China in 2012, facilitating Xi's rise.

Whether Trump, as a Republican, will once again help the Communist Party survive is worth watching.

***Jiahao Yuan** is a Chinese economist who has been engaged in China's foreign economic cooperation, the "Belt and Road" strategy and international affairs for 20 years. His research interests are mainly focused on macroeconomics and development economics. Jiahao has rich experience in international affairs, especially in China's foreign economic cooperation and development strategy. He has elected to write under a pseudonym.

Blood on the Streets: Indonesia Silences Its People's Pleas

Yeta Purnama, Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat
September 04, 2025

Indonesian protesters took to the streets last week to demand government accountability, fair wages and an end to corruption. During the protest on August 28, police violence in Jakarta resulted in the death of Gojek driver Affan Kurniawan and many others. Their deaths mark a turning point that forces Indonesia to choose between impunity and real reform of its democracy.

Indonesia is in shock. Our hearts burn with anger, grief and unrelenting outrage over a profound injustice. On August 28, 2025, Affan Kurniawan, a young Gojek driver, was brutally killed in Jakarta while delivering a food order, in the midst of a protest that embodied the essence of democracy. Let there be no mistake: this was not simply an accident. This was the result of state-sanctioned violence — raw, deliberate and utterly

unthinkable in a democratic society — inflicted on peaceful protesters demonstrating against soaring unemployment and rising prices.

Affan was no criminal, no threat to anyone. He was simply exercising his constitutional right to protest while trying to earn a living. Yet he lost his life to tactical police vehicles deployed by the Mobile Brigade Corps of the Indonesian National Police, turning an institution meant to protect citizens into a machine of terror. His death was just the first of many to take place.

Protests and violence

Public outrage over government abuse and elite greed fueled the protests that led to Affan's death. On August 25, demonstrators demanded the resignation of President Prabowo Subianto and Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka, called for the dissolution of the Merah-Putih Cabinet and the House of Representatives (DPR), and condemned the ongoing rewriting of Indonesia's history.

They demanded justice for Minister of Culture Fadli Zon's denial of the 1998 mass rape tragedy, transparency in parliamentary salaries, the cancellation of members' housing allowances and the halting of proposed DPR pay increases. The protesters' grievances were clear: they were fighting unchecked corruption, state arrogance and policies that deepen inequality.

By August 28, the focus had broadened to include workers' rights and economic justice. Protesters demanded an end to low wages, outsourcing and layoffs, an increase in the minimum wage and tax-free income threshold (PTPK), elimination of taxes on bonuses and severance pay, limits on contract work, restrictions on foreign labor and the repeal of the Omnibus Law (job creation law) in favor of a labor law that truly protects workers. These were urgent,

reasonable and non-negotiable demands from citizens suffocating under economic strain.

Instead of listening, the state responded with violence. Police vehicles plowed through crowds. Over 600 demonstrators were detained and held in confinement at Polda Metro Jaya. And in the midst of this, Affan Kurniawan was killed. His death is not an isolated tragedy — it is the inevitable product of a system that values elite comfort over human life, tolerates impunity, and enforces submission through fear. Indonesia might have evolved into a democracy in form but the Indonesian state remains authoritarian in spirit.

Affan is not the only one. As the protests spread across the country, state brutality followed. In Makassar, four people perished when the Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) building in Ujung Pandang was set ablaze: Syaiful Akbar, Head of Social Affairs in Ujung Tanah Subdistrict; Muhammad Akbar Basri (Abay), a public relations staff member of the council; Sarinawati, another DPRD employee; and Budi Haryadi, an officer of the Makassar Civil Service Police Unit (Satpol PP).

The violence did not end there. Rusmadiansyah, an online motorcycle taxi driver, was beaten to death by a mob under the baseless accusation of being an intelligence agent as he passed in front of the Indonesian Muslim University (UMI) campus in Makassar.

In Solo, Sumari, a becak (pedicab) driver, suffocated after being engulfed by tear gas during clashes. In Yogyakarta, Rheza Sendy P., a young student at Amikom University, lost his life in the chaos. And in Jakarta, Andika Lutfi Falah became a victim of the police during the demonstrations near the national parliament complex.

The violations are blatant and unforgivable. Their right to life, enshrined in Article 28I of the 1945

Constitution and reinforced by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, was obliterated.

This is a culture of impunity. Field officers, commanders and political overseers shield one another while citizens suffer. Every detention, every act of violence against peaceful demonstrators, sends a chilling message: dissent is dangerous, and human life is cheap.

Confronting government greed

Meanwhile, the DPR continues its grotesque display of greed. While Indonesians fight for fair wages, workers' rights and justice, lawmakers voted to increase their own salaries and allowances. Luxury for the elite, suffering for the people. How can anyone respect a parliament that enriches itself while young workers die for demanding transparency? Immediate cancellation of these increases is not negotiable — it is a moral imperative.

We believe the government must confront reality. Words of condolence are meaningless. Apologies cannot restore life. The victims' deaths demand decisive, transparent and unflinching justice. The National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) must launch an independent investigation, free from political interference. The National Police Commission (Korpomnas) must exercise genuine oversight, holding both individual officers and commanders accountable for their actions.

The police must remember their oath: they exist to protect, not terrorize. Every detained citizen must be released. Every act of brutality against civilians must be punished. Officers who abuse power must face prosecution and imprisonment. Anything less is a betrayal of the social contract and a declaration that Indonesian lives are expendable.

These common people's death is a mirror reflecting systemic corruption, moral decay and a government addicted to self-enrichment at the expense of the people. It is a warning: unchecked power, impunity and elite greed can — and will — kill.

A call to action

We cannot allow their life to fade into oblivion. This situation is a defining moment for Indonesia. Authorities must act decisively. Parliament must abandon its greed. Police must prove they exist to protect, not to terrorize.

The expanding number of victims across the country is a stark reminder that Indonesia cannot afford complacency. A movement for accountability, for transparency, for real reform must rise. We must honor them not with silence, but with action: decisive, fearless, unyielding action.

Indonesia now stands at a crossroads. One path leads deeper into impunity, inequality and state violence. The other demands a government that protects its people instead of preying upon them. The choice is ours. The time is now. The deaths of these people were preventable. The injustice was preventable. The collapse of our democracy is preventable — if we have the courage to confront it.

No more excuses. No more delays. No more blood on our streets. Justice must be immediate. Justice must be absolute. True justice requires not just promises, but deep structural change. Across Indonesia, the people's demands are clear, urgent and undeniable.

First, accountability at the top: we believe that the Finance Minister needs to step down. Parliament's recent decision to raise its own allowances is unacceptable; lawmakers' salaries

should be capped at no more than three times Jakarta's minimum wage, with all government pay and benefits made transparent under the oversight of an independent remuneration committee.

Second, fairness in wealth and taxation. A Wealth Tax must be enacted so that the richest contribute their fair share. The long-delayed Asset Confiscation Bill must be passed to allow the state to recover assets from corruption and crime. The broader tax system must be reformed to ease the burden on ordinary citizens, starting with lowering the value-added tax (VAT) from 12% to 8%.

Third, a reorientation of public spending. Indonesia's budgets for police and security forces — including Brimob (the paramilitary police), Koperasi Desa Merah Putih (a village-based cooperative promoting local welfare and economic self-reliance) and Danantara (a government investment management agency established by President Prabowo to consolidate and optimize state assets and investments) — are excessive and should be reduced. These funds should instead be redirected into cash assistance and social support for ordinary Indonesians, who are struggling with rising costs of living.

Fourth, financial responsibility. Government debt needs to be restructured, and reckless borrowing must end. Every rupiah spent should serve the public good, not fuel waste or corruption.

Fifth, enforcement of the law. The Constitutional Court has ruled that ministers cannot hold multiple positions, particularly when they are tied to corporate interests such as Danantara. This ruling must be implemented immediately to prevent conflicts of interest at the highest levels of power.

Finally, an end to wasteful mega-projects. National strategic projects like the construction of the new capital city and the development of nickel

industrial zones are draining the country's wealth while benefiting only a small elite. These resources should instead be invested in programs that directly improve the lives of millions of Indonesians.

In short: Indonesia's future depends on redirecting wealth and power away from the few and toward the many.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Anatomy of the Mushroom Murders

Ellis Cashmore
September 16, 2025

Australia's "mushroom murders" have gripped the world. Erin Patterson is found guilty of poisoning her in-laws and a relative of her husband, and is imprisoned for life. This extraordinary case confounds criminologists and leaves psychologists speechless. Fair Observer attempts to make this grotesque crime understandable — and our own fascination comprehensible.

It is a horror story without monsters or demons, though evil is certainly present. In the absence of an intelligible motive, Erin Patterson's alleged triple-murder of her in-laws has elicited incredulity and the familiar fallback of "evil." This old bromide stands in for a cogent explanation, but psychologists have remained silent, journalists are waiting for inspiration and even the lawyers prosecuting Patterson failed to explain her motives. I'll try. But first, let me describe what is, after all, an extraordinary sequence of events.

Erin Scutter worked for RSPCA Australia (an animal welfare organization) in Melbourne, Australia, when, in the early 2000s, she met Simon Patterson. They married and moved to Perth, a city on the west coast. Scutter had earlier inherited \$2 million Australian (\$1.32 million). She had a son by Patterson and enjoyed cordial relations with her in-laws, Gail and Don Patterson. She changed her surname after marrying. Later, the couple moved to the state of Victoria, ostensibly to be nearer his family. Erin gave birth to a second child but soon lost both her parents to cancer.

Around 2015, Erin and Simon separated amicably, sharing custody of their children. They remained on friendly terms, even vacationing together. But in 2022, Simon filed tax returns listing himself as single, which reduced Erin's government child support payments. He claimed it was an accounting error, but it is at least possible that Erin blamed him and bore a grudge.

Between November 2021 and September 2022, Simon was hospitalized three times with severe gastrointestinal issues. Physicians never identified the cause, though the symptoms appeared consistent with ingestion of rat poison. Erin maintained friendly relations with both Simon and his family.

In July 2023, Erin invited Simon's parents, Gail and Don and his aunt and uncle, Heather and Ian Wilkinson, to lunch at her home in Leongatha. Simon declined. Patterson, who reportedly told her guests she had ovarian cancer, served beef Wellington. Later, all four guests ended up being admitted to the hospital with gastro-like symptoms. Gail and Heather later died, followed by Don. Only Ian survived.

Police searched Erin's home and questioned her. In November 2023, she was arrested and charged with three counts of murder and one of attempted murder. She pleaded not guilty, claiming the deaths were a tragic accident. But the jury found she had laced the food she served with *Amanita phalloides*, better known as death cap mushrooms, and found her guilty. The judge sentenced her to life imprisonment (though one imagines she won't be trusted with kitchen duty).

So far, no one has satisfactorily answered the question: Why would an apparently ordinary woman commit such an extraordinary act of familial homicide?

Why? Why not?

Let me start by turning the question inside out: Why wouldn't Patterson, a supposedly ordinary woman, kill her relatives? She may have harbored resentment toward her estranged husband after what he called an accounting error reduced her income. Perhaps she didn't rage at him or his family openly, but silently held a simmering grievance. Rage can be expressed in different ways.

Criminologist Travis Hirschi's Social Control Theory begins from an unusual premise: People commit crimes not because of irresistible urges, but because the restraints that usually check behavior have weakened. Bonds of attachment, commitment, involvement and belief ordinarily fasten us to society and restrain our behavior.

In Patterson's case, many of those bonds appear weakened. Her marriage had collapsed. Trust in the extended family was frayed. She'd allegedly engaged in deception, by which I mean fabricating a cancer diagnosis. These are signs of someone unmoored from the attachments and commitments that inhibit transgression. Social Control Theory doesn't reduce her actions to pathology: It suggests how crime becomes possible when the ordinary prohibitions of social life lose their hold.

It's conceivable Patterson may have suspected that Simon, though estranged and living independently, had met another woman. There is no evidence of this, but even the belief could have shaped her sense of entrapment — hemmed in by disappointment, estrangement or disrespect. The fantasy of removing obstructive relatives may have seemed like a reasonable solution to otherwise insoluble pressures. The lack of control can't explain the actual transgression, but it frames it as a distorted response to unbearable experiences.

Unnatural born killers

Killers are not born with murderous intent. They acquire techniques, rationalizations and cues that normalize deviance. Crime is learned behavior. People adopt definitions favorable to lawbreaking through their interactions with others. For Patterson, these lessons may not have come from a criminal underworld, but from subtler sources, like television, books, even casual conversations. Poisoning with mushrooms requires familiarity: lethality, preparation, dosage. Anyone versed in Agatha Christie's novels knows how cues abound in popular literature. Knowledge, once acquired, makes the step into action conceivable.

Sociologist David Matza's theory of "drift" adds another layer. Matza argued that people don't set out to become criminals. (There are exceptions, as anyone familiar with the first line from filmmaker Martin Scorsese's *GoodFellas* knows: "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.") They drift into deviance, oscillating between conformity and transgression. At times of loosened social bonds or weakened supervision, opportunities for deviance open up and individuals rationalize their acts as temporary departures from the norm.

The Patterson case fits this unsettling model. She may not have begun with a firm resolve to kill, but with smaller transgressions — deceptions, manipulations, fantasies. Over time, these slid toward a point where serving poisoned food no longer felt unthinkable but almost natural, even normal. Drift explains the gradual erosion of moral boundaries that can culminate in extraordinary violence.

None of these accounts alone captures Patterson's motivation. But together they suggest a convergence: weakened social bonds, perceived strains, learned definitions of deviance and a slow slide into moral suspension. This does not yield a neat motive — revenge, resentment or liberation may all have played roles — but it situates the

crime in broader social dynamics. What looks incomprehensible becomes, from a sociological perspective, an intelligible sequence of disintegrating bonds, blocked goals, deviant learning and drift toward transgression.

Enduring fascination

If the causes of the crime lie in subterranean processes, the spectacle it created belongs to a different realm. The “mushroom murders,” as they’re colloquially called, were not just a local tragedy. They became global news, followed in real-time by podcasts, documentaries and soon a drama series. Why has this case captivated the world?

Since the 19th century, crime has been a staple of mass journalism. The Jack the Ripper murders of 1888 made East London the focus of global headlines and established a template: Lurid crimes, mysterious motives and a public insatiable appetite for detail. The mushroom murders fit into that lineage.

They contained all the elements of narrative drama: family betrayal, exotic poison, survival and death, deception and courtroom revelation. A Sunday lunch, usually a picture of domestic normality, became the setting for spectacular horror. Journalists know instinctively that such juxtapositions of the banal and the grotesque guarantee readership. So do scriptwriters for the British drama *Midsomer Murders*, in which charming villages in rural Oxfordshire, England, become the scenes of macabre killings.

The 21st century has seen an explosion of true-crime culture. Streaming platforms, podcasts and documentaries have turned real cases into serialized entertainment. The mushroom murders, with their unusual method and compelling characters, were perfect raw material for this ecosystem. Millions followed the daily updates,

not only in Australia, but worldwide, as though consuming a live drama. ABC’s decision to dramatize the case in a television series, *Toxic*, is less an aberration than the logical next step in a global appetite for crime stories.

Why does crime, especially gruesome crime, hold such enduring fascination? Partly it reassures: By observing the extraordinary, we confirm our own normality. Partly it excites: Transgression, especially in the domestic sphere, exposes the fragility of everyday order. A family lunch is supposed to embody familiarity, friendship and safety. Turning it into an occasion of mass poisoning shatters those assumptions and forces us to ponder what we ordinarily suppress.

We are also drawn to questions of motive. When killers act from greed or desperation, their behavior is explicable, even if repellent. But when motives remain opaque, as in Patterson’s case, curiosity intensifies. The absence of explanation makes the story more haunting. Media interest feeds on that vacuum, replaying details in the hope that a rationale might surface.

Finally, the globalization of media ensures crimes no longer stay local. Satellite news, digital platforms and social media amplify cases that once would have occupied only regional headlines. The mushroom murders became a global spectacle not only because they were sensational, but because the global infrastructure now exists to circulate them instantly. In that sense, the case reveals as much about us and our contemporary media ecology as it does about Patterson.

[Ellis Cashmore’s “The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson” is published by Bloomsbury.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

Bangladesh Now Aligns With China, India Worries

Shokin Chauhan, Atul Singh
October 26, 2025

China seeks to counter India's rise by deepening its influence in South Asia and binding Bangladesh through trade, infrastructure and military ties. Interim leader Muhammad Yunus has pivoted Dhaka toward Beijing with major investments, including control of Mongla Port. This shift threatens Indian security and demands urgent diplomatic recalibration.

China has long aimed to be the top dog in Asia. Historically, the Chinese have called their state Zhōngguó, which literally means the Middle Kingdom. For centuries, China

was the dominant global economy and the most powerful empire in the world. Beijing sees itself as reclaiming its rightful position in the world after the century of humiliation that began with the First Opium War (1839–1842) and ended with the defeat of Japan in World War II (1945).

The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission tells us that China's strategy in South Asia is to check the rise of India. To do so, Beijing is exploiting the India-Pakistan rivalry. It is also cultivating influence among other South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The China-Pakistan relationship is well known. Not so well-known is the fact that China has deepened its relationship with Bangladesh. Beijing has entwined itself deeply into Bangladesh's economy, infrastructure, digital systems and security matrix.

The courting of Dhaka: How the Dragon slipped in

Bangladesh was born in 1971 thanks to India's going to war against Pakistan. Thanks to its role in liberating Bangladesh, India earned much goodwill in the young nation on the Bay of Bengal. Relations between the two countries remained close for decades.

Warning signs for the India-Bangladesh relationship appeared as early as 2004. That year, China replaced India as Bangladesh's "top source of imports." One of these was cotton, a key ingredient for Bangladesh's booming textile industry that churns out jeans, t-shirts, shirts, etc, for Western retailers like Costco, Walmart and Amazon.

Bangladesh has given China special economic zones, such as one in the strategic port city of Chittagong and the other in the national capital of

Dhaka. China has also invested and continues to invest in roads, bridges, power plants and ports. Bangladesh became the first country in South Asia to join China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Dhaka and the two countries, upgrading the China-Bangladesh relationship to "a strategic cooperative partnership." Since 2016, Chinese investment has flowed into Bangladesh. As in many other parts of the world, China is involved in huge infrastructure projects. Importantly, China has a near-monopoly in high-tech construction and a key presence in key transportation corridors.

Early this year, Bangladesh made a major foreign policy shift. Under Sheikh Hasina, the previous leader who was ousted by street protests in July-August 2024, Bangladesh walked the diplomatic tightrope, balancing India and China. Wahiduzzaman Noor and Samantha Wong of the Atlantic Council point out that China became Bangladesh's top trading partner during the last ten years of Hasina's rule. Worryingly for India, China also became Bangladesh's top supplier of military hardware. Yet Hasina was able to keep India onside. It helped that her party had historic links with India. Her father was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of Bangladesh, who began the Awami League, and Hasina inherited his legacy.

Since Hasina was ousted, relations between Bangladesh and India have steadily and dramatically deteriorated. Historically, every new Bangladeshi leader has made India the first foreign destination after taking power. Muhammad Yunus, chief adviser of the Bangladeshi interim government, broke with tradition and made his first state visit to Beijing, not Delhi. Bangladesh has now very publicly made a "pivot toward China."

Closer Bangladesh-China relations threaten India

The March 2025 Yunus Beijing visit has led to increased Chinese investments in Bangladesh. Yunus secured \$2.1 billion in investments, loans and grants. Notably, the Chinese will invest \$400 million to modernize Mongla Port. This is Bangladesh's second-largest seaport, and just before Hasina was defenestrated, India had secured operating rights to a terminal at Mongla. Last year, India scored "a strategic win" in the port wars of the two Asian giants. In March, China came out tops.

Chinese investment in Mongla raises Indian concerns because it is part of Beijing's "String of Pearls" strategy. China is building the ports of Chittagong in Bangladesh, Gwadar in Pakistan, Colombo and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Marao in the Maldives, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Lamu in Kenya and Bagamoyo in Tanzania. Beijing claims that these facilities are for commercial use, but in the future, the Chinese navy could use these ports as naval bases or logistical hubs. This geopolitical string of pearls contains India and ties up China's populous southern neighbor in its own backyard.

China will also help Bangladesh in the Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project. This alarms India. Originating in the Indian state of Sikkim, the Teesta flows into Bangladesh, and its water secures the lives and livelihoods of millions of Bangladeshis. India has built the Teesta Barrage to generate electricity and supply water to farmers in the state of West Bengal (note that West Bengal and Bangladesh were both part of the state of Bengal in British India till independence in 1947). Both India and Bangladesh want more of Teesta's water. A population explosion since independence means that northern West Bengal and northern Bangladesh have a greater demand for water. The Teesta Water

Dispute is one of the rising number of geopolitical tensions over water.

There is another matter of critical geopolitical importance of which coon of the authors has considerable personal experience. The first author served extensively in India's northeast and commanded Assam Rifles, a body of troops engaged in the region. India's northeast is connected to the rest of India through what has come to be known as the "Chicken's Neck." This 20–22 kilometer stretch of land surrounded by Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh is a key choke point for India, akin to the Strait of Malacca for China. Exacerbating Indian concerns about the Chicken's Neck is the fact that the seven states in India's northeast have been turbulent and China disputes Indian control of much territory of the northernmost state of Arunachal Pradesh.

The northeast's "Seven Sisters" (a term for the seven states) have been home to fierce secessionist insurgencies that have cost India much blood and treasure. Reports that China plans to construct an airfield in Bangladesh's Lalmonirhat district close to the Indian border naturally set alarm bells ringing in India. During his visit to Beijing, Yunus mused that Bangladesh could serve as "an extension of the Chinese economy." He spoke of Bangladesh becoming the sole oceanic gateway for India's landlocked Seven Sisters. Tellingly, supposedly democratic Bangladesh now explicitly opposes Taiwan's independence. A Yunus-led Bangladeshi government has now clearly thrown in its lot with China, which is terrible news for India.

China's growing digital footprint and rising PLA presence

In the new world of digital connectivity, China dominates Bangladesh's 4G infrastructure and is now building 5G. Huawei rolled out the country's first 5G network in Dhaka in December 2021.

Surveillance systems, smart city components, data storage centers and facial recognition systems, all powered by Chinese technology, are becoming embedded in Bangladesh's civic and policing infrastructure.

China's digital penetration of Bangladesh has sparked concern among Indian cyber experts and policymakers. Data collected via Chinese-controlled systems, even if operated under Bangladeshi supervision, is potentially vulnerable to siphoning by the Chinese state. In an era where information is power, Bangladesh's growing digital dependency on China is a great strategic worry for India.

A more obvious worry is Bangladesh's extreme dependence on China for military equipment. After Pakistan, Bangladesh is the second-largest importer of Chinese kits. Since 2002, China has been Bangladesh's largest supplier of military hardware, providing tanks, artillery, naval vessels, radar systems, fighter aircraft and training aircraft. China provided 73.6% of Bangladesh's arms acquisitions between 2010 and 2020.

Bangladesh Navy acquired two Type 035G Ming-class submarines in 2016, marking a major shift in the maritime equation of the Bay of Bengal. In 2023, Dhaka inducted Chinese-origin VT-5 light tanks, and the Chinese are upgrading Bangladesh's missile systems as well as air defense platforms.

Increasingly, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) trains Bangladeshi military officers. Till not too long ago, the Indian and Bangladeshi militaries had close links. Both were descended from the British Indian Army. Now, China has replaced India and Bangladesh's National Defense College has a number of instructors from the PLA.

Rising India-Bangladesh trust deficit and why Delhi needs to act now

Over the years, a trust deficit has developed between Delhi and Dhaka. Even under Hasina, Bangladesh was deepening relations with China. It is an open secret that Hasina returned to power in 2008 with India's support. Therefore, Delhi was able to convince Dhaka in 2016 "to abandon the Sonadia deep water port project China intended to build." Yet by the end of 2003, 700 Chinese companies operated in Bangladesh. After the bloody 2020 India-China border clash, rising Chinese presence in Bangladesh fuelled disquiet in Indian national security circles.

Another issue muddying India-Bangladesh waters is immigration. Just as many Americans are concerned about migrants flooding in from across the Mexican border, some Indians worry about Bangladeshi immigrants flocking to their country. The Indian government's attempts to institute a National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the introduction of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in 2019 led to nationwide protests and misgivings in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi scholar Sadia Korobi makes the point that complex demographics make the NRC and CAA emotive issues. Bangladeshis have settled in India in large numbers. They "frequently travel across to exchange commodities, work informal jobs, and visit family members." In 2023, India-Bangladesh trade reached \$15.9 billion. Bangladeshis worry that both the NRC and the CAA could cause an influx of Muslim immigrants to Bangladesh and damage trade.

Historians point out that the Muslim League began in 1906 in Dhaka. The religion that caused the partition of the states of Punjab in the west and Bengal to the east is still a fault line. Bangladesh won its independence from Pakistan in 1971 through Indian support. The Awami League championed the Bangla language and Bangladeshi nationalism. Yet there were Bangladeshi Islamists who distrusted India even in 1971.

Hasina severely repressed Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist party in Bangladesh. It is an offshoot of an Islamist movement founded by Syed Abul A'la al-Maududi in 1941. This so-called direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad wanted to institute sharia (Islamic law), oppose Western imperialism, and oppose the three evils of secularism, nationalism and socialism. Jamaat-e-Islami opposed the independence of Bangladesh and the dismemberment of Pakistan. With Hasina's fall, Jamaat-e-Islami's influence has risen. The caretaker Yunus government regularly confers with Jamaat leaders who want closer ties with Pakistan and Turkey. Bangladesh's political center of gravity has shifted away from India.

The fact that India has given refuge to Hasina sits poorly with Bangladesh's new regime. As mentioned above, Nobel laureate Yunus has thrown in this country's lot with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Ironically, democratic Bangladesh now supports authoritarian CCP claims over Taiwan. Though India-Bangladesh trade ties are still strong, Delhi and Dhaka no longer trust each other.

The authors believe that all is not lost yet. Many Bangladeshis still value a close relationship with India. They treasure trade ties and shared history. They have not forgotten that India backed Bangladeshi independence at a time when Pakistani troops were engaged in violent repression, genocide and mass rape. Delhi must engage with Bangladeshi civil society as well as the youth. Note that over 40% of the Bangladeshi population is under 25. A renewed emphasis on connectivity, cultural ties, educational exchanges and digital collaboration could potentially offset Beijing's checkbook diplomacy.

As of now though, the Indian government has to recognize the urgency of countering China's moves. Delhi fears antagonizing Dhaka. Indian diplomats speak of strategic patience. In reality,

muddled thinking, lack of focus and inaction imperil long-term Indian interests. Indian policymakers need to engage the new Bangladeshi regime with a judicious mix of accommodation and assertion. If Delhi does not act now, it may lose its leverage in Dhaka permanently.

[Shokin Chauhan first published a version of this piece on Substack.]

[Members of Fair Observer's Young Editors Program collectively edited this piece.]

Lieutenant General Shokin Chauhan — PVSM, AVSM, YSM, SM, VSM — is a decorated former director-general of Assam Rifles and chairman of the Ceasefire Monitoring Group in Nagaland, India's turbulent northeastern state bordering Myanmar. Commissioned into the 11 Gorkha Rifles in 1979, he commanded key formations including 1 Corps, 8 Mountain Division and 70 Mountain Brigade, with extensive experience in counter-insurgency in Kashmir and Northeast India. He was also a founding member of the Indian Army's public outreach and was a key leader of the Additional Directorate General of Public Information (ADPI). Chauhan was defense attaché to Nepal where he strengthened Indo-Nepal military ties. A noted scholar with a PhD on Indo-Nepal relations, he authored *Bridging Borders* and is a sought-after speaker. He has received five presidential awards and is affiliated with leading Indian think tanks and universities.

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. Atul 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 of the University of Pennsylvania. He worked as a corporate lawyer in London and served as an officer in India's volatile border areas where he had a few near-death experiences. Atul has also been a poet, playwright, sportsman, mountaineer and a founder of many organizations. His knowledge is eclectic, and his friends often joke that it comes in handy when access to Google is limited.

Australia's Idiotic Social Media Ban

Ellis Cashmore
November 22, 2025

Australia's social media ban for children under 16 is set to take effect on December 10 — becoming the world's first prohibition on youth accounts across major platforms. According to lawmakers, the ban is rooted in concerns over online harms and promises relief for parents. The ban fuels moral panic, sparks teenage resistance and calls for targeted policy.

“**M**ore moral panics will be generated ... our society as presently structured will continue to generate problems for some of its members ... and then condemn whatever solution these groups find”

— Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972)

Cohen might have been writing about Australia in 2025. By banning every child under 16 from social media — the world’s first, due to take effect on December 10 — the Australian government is not protecting youth. It is spooking its own population, provoking widespread anxiety and amplifying scrutiny over teenage behavior.

In attempting to regulate digital life, policymakers have sparked the very fears they claim to contain. This is textbook moral panic, in which misconceived legislative overreaction has generated attention, consternation and, of course, resistance. There are bound to be unintended consequences.

Rationale

Australia’s legislation is the culmination of a year-long political build-up of concern over online harms, including cyberbullying, sexual predation, self-harm content, algorithmic manipulation and addictive scrolling. Ministers sold the new legislation as a lifeline for parents. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese puzzlingly suggested the law is about “letting kids be kids.” Communications Minister Anika Wells added that parents deserve “peace of mind.”

Publicized cases of teenage suicide linked to online abuse, combined with national apprehension about the wider digital world’s opacity, created an open goal for decisive intervention. But the intervention was as crude as it will be ineffective.

Nine platforms are affected: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, Threads, X, YouTube, Reddit and Kick. They must block new accounts for under-16s and deactivate existing ones. Noncompliance carries fines of up to 49.5 million Australian dollars (\$32 million).

Platforms had initially protested, warning that mandatory age verification would be intrusive, inaccurate and pretty easy for a teenager to circumvent. The compromise relies on behavioral age-estimation tools, using engagement metrics such as “likes,” with third-party age-assurance apps invoked only for disputes. Teens will receive notices inviting them to download their data, freeze accounts or lose them entirely. The government reckons the measure is fail-safe.

Interestingly, public opinion largely agrees: a poll last November found that 77% of Australians over 18 support the ban. Internationally, the legislation is being watched closely: New Zealand is considering similar restrictions, Florida attempted a comparable law and European countries are experimenting with age checks on social media.

Australia has become a global crucible, potentially setting a precedent for future restrictions elsewhere, though it is unlikely that such a contentious measure would receive comparably emphatic support elsewhere: analogous research from the USA and Europe reinforces the sense that Australia is out of step with global opinion (55% of Americans favor banning children under 16 from using social media platforms, while 42% of Brits aged 18-27 would support, relative to 50% who would oppose such a ban).

Forbidden fruit

The ban rests on a naïve assumption: that teenagers will quietly accept exclusion. History suggests otherwise. Adolescents grow up in a culture in which a ban is not so much a prohibition as a challenge. You don’t have to be familiar with Genesis 2:17 to know that anything becomes more desirable once it’s not allowed. It’s called forbidden fruit.

Young people are wired for risk-taking and boundary-pushing, culturally inclined to resist adult overreach and technologically literate enough to bypass nearly any restriction. Cohen's spiral is already becoming evident: officialdom suppresses, youth respond by circumventing and media attention magnifies both behavior and, by implication, anxiety.

Every generation of adults seems either to forget or ignore what youth entails. This is a developmentally crucial period: experimentation, novelty-seeking and testing limits are essential to forming adult judgement (or at least they were mine). Social media is not simply the communication toy adults assume it to be: It is an organic space, a venue for the formation of identities, connecting with peers and performativity — by which I mean presenting to audiences. Policymakers' assumption of adolescent passivity, that young people are childlike innocents who need to be insulated from "danger," is patronizing and just plain wrong.

Savvy teenagers are inevitably going to find ways around blocks using virtual private networks (VPNs), multiple accounts, peer sharing or app workarounds. Attempts at enforcement will generate not compliance, nor even frustration, but clandestine use, probably promoting the very thing the Australian government is trying to curb. The ban, while intended as a protective measure, will inadvertently amplify attention, defiance and risk.

Australia's discourse around the online dangers of youth often exaggerates risk while underestimating teens' capacity for ingenuity and critical engagement. Social media is an uneven terrain: simultaneously treacherous and empowering, unintelligent and educational. By understanding it only as a hazard in the hands of the young, policymakers manufacture fear and fuel anxiety, rather than addressing specific harms in a targeted manner.

Wonderworld

Let me declare an interest: as I see it, the internet has introduced us — and I mean everyone with access to a functioning keyboard — to a wonderworld. It might at times appear dystopian, but it is a beguiling, exploratory, shapeshifting encyclopedia-cum-almanac that fascinates us and will continue to fascinate, no matter how hard misguided politicians try to put young people off.

What Australian legislators have ignored is the immense educational and cultural value of social media and the broader internet. For many adolescents, these platforms are not booby-traps but jetpacks to the stars, taking them to places where they can explore identity, pursue interests and access knowledge unavailable in school.

YouTube hosts Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) lectures on physics, creators offer language lessons from Seoul to São Paulo and online communities nurture everything from coding to calligraphy. Teenagers today learn, connect and experiment in ways literally unimaginable to previous generations.

For all the scares surrounding it, social media is not merely a funfair of distraction; it is a gargantuan archive of human knowledge, a site of peer support, creative collaboration and social cohesion. Adolescents do not merely consume content; they negotiate, reinterpret and contribute. The internet has become a vast, decentralized educational system that surrounds and inhabits us. To cordon off adolescents from this is not protection; it is denial, cutting them off from resources essential to their development.

We humans have historically reacted to new technologies with suspicion: the telephone was once accused of distracting women from productive endeavors (like housework); radio of corrupting the young; television of shortening

attention spans; film of unleashing delinquency. Every trepidation now seems ludicrous. The hostility to social media follows the same script: a mix of fear of novelty, fondness for stability and conviction that younger generations must be defended from innovation.

Australia's ban will do little to stop young people from navigating the wonderworld. It will only make that navigation more secretive, more fragmented and potentially more hazardous. In attempting to "let kids be kids," lawmakers risk stunting the curiosity so integral to growing up. As Stanley Cohen warned in 1972, "Moral panics, once launched, develop a life of their own, becoming more about the panic than the actual event that started it." Australia is about to learn this.

[Ellis Cashmore is co-author of *Screen Society* (Macmillan).]

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Ellis Cashmore is the author of *The Destruction and Creation of Michael Jackson*, *Elizabeth Taylor*, *Celebrity Culture* and other books. He is a professor of sociology who has held academic positions at the University of Hong Kong, the University of Tampa and Aston University. His first article for *Fair Observer* was an obituary for Muhammad Ali in 2016. Since then, Ellis has been a regular contributor on sports, entertainment, celebrity culture and cultural diversity. Most recently, timelines have caught his fancy and he has created many for *Fair Observer*. What do you think?

Warnings are Escalating: Sino-Japanese Relations are Deteriorating Rapidly

Jiahao Yuan
December 10, 2025

China and Japan are experiencing increasing tensions as Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi issues strong warnings in response to Tokyo's indications of military interest in Taiwan. Wang Yi cites Japan's wartime legacy and Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's remarks to justify new retaliatory measures targeting travel and trade. This dispute is prompting both governments to consider more severe actions that could destabilize East Asia.

On November 23, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi gave an interview to Chinese media after a strategic dialogue with the foreign ministers of three Central Asian countries, during which he spoke extensively about the current Sino-Japanese friction. Major media outlets widely reported some of his warnings because they considered these warnings quite unusual, given Wang Yi's roles: former Chinese ambassador to Japan, a well-known "Japan expert" among the top Chinese government officials and currently China's highest-ranking diplomat.

Wang Yi's views were frank and also quite stern; his core intention was to explain to the international community why China had to retaliate against Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's erroneous remarks.

China's government has taken a hard line

There are at least three points in Wang Yi's speech that deserve special attention:

First, 2025 is a very special year, marking the 80th anniversary of China's victory in the War of Resistance Against Japan. Besides, Japan bears a historical "original sin" regarding the Taiwan issue. In Wang Yi's words, returning Taiwan, which Japan "stole" from China, is an international obligation that Japan, as a defeated nation, "must continue to abide by." Therefore, especially this year, Japan should deeply reflect on its actions and adhere to the rules and commitments on the Taiwan and historical issues, acting with caution and restraint, rather than provoking trouble, he says.

Second, Wang Yi pointed out, "But what is shocking is that the current Japanese leader has publicly sent the wrong signal of attempting to intervene militarily in the Taiwan issue, said things he shouldn't have said, and crossed a red line that shouldn't have been touched."

Why is this considered a wrong signal? Because Sanae Takaichi broke with the practices of almost all previous prime ministers of Japan, explicitly stating her intention to intervene militarily in the Taiwan Strait dispute. This clearly constitutes "saying things she shouldn't have said and crossing a red line she shouldn't have touched."

Third, faced with Japan's blatant infringement upon China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and its violation of international justice and human conscience, China seems to have no choice but to retaliate. Therefore, Wang Yi also stated, "The Chinese people love peace and are friendly to their neighbors, but on major issues concerning national sovereignty and territorial integrity, there will be no compromise or retreat."

This indicates that China is unlikely to have any room for compromise on this issue. If the Chinese

government chooses to compromise, the surging nationalistic sentiment among 1.4 billion Chinese people could very well shake the foundations of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule.

Japan has "no bargaining chips" over China on the legal basis

If China were to attack Japan in a future conflict across the Taiwan Strait, it would have a legal basis, namely the Articles 53 and 107 of the UN Charter which stipulate that if a former enemy state launches another invasion, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — China, France, the Soviet Union (now Russia), the United Kingdom and the United States — have the right to directly conduct military action without authorization from the Security Council. Although the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by emphasizing that these clauses are outdated because UN General Assembly Resolution 50/52 of 1995 declared them obsolete, they remain valid.

This is because the UN Charter has a higher legal standing than any UN General Assembly resolution. In other words, a General Assembly resolution cannot overturn the UN Charter. Even if a country votes in favor of a General Assembly resolution, it can still invoke the UN Charter because it has the highest legal standing. It's like, if a bill passes a referendum in the United States but violates the Constitution, actions can still be taken according to the Constitution, not the bill itself, unless the Constitution is amended.

The UN Charter, the core of the "enemy state clause," states that when the UN Security Council considers a situation threatening international peace, it may authorize regional organizations or states to take action. However, actions against "enemy states" (such as the Axis powers in World War II, such as Germany and Japan) are not subject to this restriction and do not require

Security Council authorization. Legally, this clause allowed the Allied powers to take direct military action against aggression by “enemy states”, thereby serving as a deterrent to the post-World War II international order.

Article 107 of the UN Charter is also one of the core contents of the “enemy state clause”, stipulating that: “This Charter does not abolish or prohibit any action taken or authorized by a responsible government against an enemy state of any signatory State of this Charter in connection with the Second World War.” Its core meaning can be understood as: this clause explicitly preserves the right of victorious powers in World War II (such as China and the United States) to conduct military action against the Axis powers (Japan, Germany, etc.), and even after the UN Charter came into effect, these actions remain unrestricted by Security Council authorization. Essentially, this is an “exceptional authorization” under international law for the military expansion of defeated powers, aimed at preventing a repeat of the history of aggression.

During World War II, Japan and China were enemies, and Taiwan was also affected during the war (occupied by Japan). Therefore, if Japan were to intervene in Taiwan affairs militarily, it would perfectly comply with the provisions of the clause as mentioned above, allowing China to launch an attack on Japan directly without authorization from the UN Security Council.

Would China dare to declare war on Japan?

However, the key question is, even with these legal guarantees from the UN, would China really dare to declare war on Japan?

Economically, signs of Japan’s downturn have indeed been emerging for some time. In the third quarter of this year, Japan’s GDP contracted for the first time in nearly two years; inflation has

continued to rise for 43 consecutive months, already exceeding the Bank of Japan’s warning line; consumer goods prices are soaring while wages are still stagnant; the yen’s exchange rate has been depressed for a long time; plus, the most troublesome problem — extremely high debt-to-GDP ratio. With all these internal problems unresolved, a diplomatic conflict with China is particularly detrimental at the moment, as China has already begun imposing a slew of economic measures that appear aimed at Japan.

First, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs immediately warned Chinese citizens to avoid traveling to Japan. Subsequently, major Chinese airlines announced that tickets for flights to Japan could be refunded free of charge, while several other airlines directly announced the cancellation or reductions of flights to Japan. Meanwhile, the Hong Kong and Macau Tourism Bureaus also updated their travel safety advisories, reminding those planning to travel to Japan to be vigilant. According to media reports, tens of thousands of tickets from China to Japan were cancelled in just two days after November 15.

Suddenly, Japan’s tourism industry lost its largest source of customers and its most stable overseas consumer group — Chinese tourists. As a result, the Nikkei index on the Tokyo Stock Exchange began to fall on the morning of November 17, with significant declines seen in sectors related to the Chinese market, particularly those pertaining to Chinese tourist spending, such as Mitsukoshi Isetan (a wholly-owned subsidiary of Mitsukoshi Isetan Holdings, a Japanese department store holding company that primarily operates the Mitsukoshi and Isetan brands in the Kanto region). If the number of Chinese tourists visiting Japan were to decrease by 25%, as in 2012, it would roughly lead to a reduction in spending of trillions of yen, equivalent to nearly 0.5% of Japan’s real GDP. Simultaneously, China

also reimposed bans on imports of Japanese seafood and beef.

Still, China has more cards to play, such as launching trade remedy investigations, restricting investments and taking antidumping measures. However, all these moves seem like “sharp pinpricks” rather than “a knockout blow”. This is to say, in the long run, these economic measures from China’s side are unlikely to shake the foundations of Japan’s macroeconomy. This is because, fundamentally, Japan is a high-end manufacturing powerhouse, not a country primarily reliant on agriculture or services. What will remain most critical to Japan’s economy will still be its ability to sell cars to the United States, not the ability to sell seafood to China.

Politically, on November 24, the leaders of China and the United States also spoke by phone again. Unlike their previous meeting in South Korea, this time the two sides explicitly discussed the Taiwan issue (according to China’s side). Immediately afterwards, US President Donald Trump spoke with Takaichi. Although Takaichi did not mention whether the Taiwan issue was discussed in the press conference, she did not deny it either. Media outlets widely speculated that Trump exerted pressure on Japan at China’s request.

This shows that regardless of how the outside world evaluates some of Trump’s policies, he remains clear-headed, at least on historical and Taiwan issues. However, this has once again negatively impacted China’s diplomatic strategy and international image. As the world’s second-largest economy, which frequently clashes with the United States on various international stages, China still needs the US to mediate its conflicts with other countries at crucial moments, even if it’s for China’s own domestic problems. Rationally, this makes us wonder how China’s “brotherly” countries, like North Korea, Iran and

even Russia, will view China after this recent Sino-Japanese conflict.

From a military perspective, Japan and Taiwan have completely different international statuses. Taiwan is a disputed territory, and if China were to launch a military attack on Taiwan, the United States would lack the legal basis to assist it, as the UN General Assembly resolution formally recognizes the “One China” principle. Therefore, any conflict between mainland China and Taiwan would be considered as China’s internal affair. Japan, on the other hand, is entirely different. Japan is a fully sovereign state and has signed a formal military alliance treaty with the United States.

If China and Japan were to go to war, the US military could fully intervene in it without any legal or realistic restrictions. As for Russia, the Russia-Ukraine crisis has already overwhelmed the “polar bear” significantly; lots of experts doubt that Russia will truly have the capability and willingness to fully assist China when the war comes. As for China’s other “friendly” countries, such as North Korea, Iran and Myanmar, as well as others, they will likely only issue some diplomatic statements at most.

Ultimately, China still needs to face two military superpowers simultaneously — Japan and the United States — in which case, China would have virtually no chance of victory. Note that on Thursday, November 20, US State Department spokesman Tommy Pigott reaffirmed the US’s commitment to Japan’s national security on X, without mentioning the “One China” policy.

The situation may continue to deteriorate

It is foreseeable that the situation will continue to deteriorate in the short term, and it will be hard to get back to the status quo ante. This is because the Chinese government has no way out of the issue of

Sino-Japanese relations. The Taiwan issue not only concerns China's core interests — a red line within a red line — but also represents the most important foundation of public opinion for the CCP's rule in China.

However, this right-wing wave in Japan did not actually begin with Sanae Takaichi. Instead, it has already been sweeping across Japan for quite a long time. For instance, in 2021, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces had already formulated plans to operate around the Taiwan Strait. In recent years, the Taiwanese, US and Japanese militaries have conducted numerous joint war exercises. What does this mean? It means that the US, Japan and Taiwan have already essentially begun preparing for military intervention in a potential Taiwan Strait crisis.

Does China know about these facts? Of course, it does. But for many years, the Chinese government has remained silent. Furthermore, Japanese warships transited the Taiwan Strait three times — in September 2024, February 2025 and June 2025 — neither the Chinese government nor the military has responded appropriately to such incidents, nor has it taken Japan's military actions seriously or analyzed them from a strategic perspective.

Therefore, the rapid rise of right-wing forces in Japan in recent years has resulted from the goodwill shown to them by the former victorious powers in the surrounding region (China, South Korea, North Korea and Russia). Japan's passage through the Taiwan Strait under the guise of freedom of navigation is, in reality, an act of militarism that will inevitably be exposed.

Sanae Takaichi's firm decision to lift the lid on this matter may have been deliberate, intended to put a "pressure test" on China. China's retaliation, to some extent, is also a "pressure test" for Japan. China wants to test the economic reaction to

decoupling from Japan. Of course, political factors are also at play. China has taken a series of actions, including conducting military exercises and so-called "comprehensive military preparations," all aimed at putting pressure on Japan.

Over the past decade, Sino-Japanese relations have experienced ups and downs, but have generally improved in the same direction towards a warming relationship. However, Takaichi's actions have completely undermined this long-held momentum and further fueled new animosity between the two countries. In other words, the achievements accumulated over many years in Sino-Japanese relations have been almost entirely destroyed this time.

For the moment, tensions thus far show no sign of abating. In the near future, we should not be surprised if small-scale conflicts even occur between China and Japan.

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said, "When you gaze into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." And those words still resonate powerfully today. They serve as a constant reminder to every nation in the world, including China and Japan: most cycles of history begin with the forgetting of history!

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Jiahao Yuan is a Chinese economist who has been engaged in China's foreign economic cooperation, the "Belt and Road" strategy and international affairs for 20 years. His research interests are mainly focused on macroeconomics and development economics. Jiahao has rich experience in international affairs, especially in China's foreign economic cooperation and

development strategy. He has elected to write under a pseudonym.

Chile's Indigenous Rapa Nui Wants Its Stolen Moai Back

Priya Acharya
October 12, 2025

Rapa Nui natives are demanding the return of Hoa Hakananai'a, a venerated statue taken by the British from their island in 1868. The British Museum argues that housing Hoa Hakananai'a is not a symbol of theft of other people's cultural heritage, but a way of preserving and sharing different cultures with a global audience.

About 3,700 kilometers off the Chilean coast, on one of the most remote inhabited islands in the world, stand the moai of Rapa Nui. Moai refers to the large, monolithic stone statues of deified ancestors on Easter Island in Eastern Polynesia. European explorers first visited this island in 1722, and it now belongs to the South American country of Chile, just as Hawaii belongs to the US and French Polynesia belongs to France.

Carved between the 11th and 16th centuries AD, these towering stone figures act as guardians of the island and enduring symbols of Rapa Nui culture. Yet one of the most important moai, Hoa Hakananai'a, is missing. Like the Elgin and the Amravati marbles, this moai rests in London's British Museum. Understandably, the moai is the subject of a heated debate that calls into question far more than the fate of a single statue.

For the people of Rapa Nui, the moai in the British Museum is not just art — it is ancestry, spirituality and history carved into stone. Hoa Hakananai'a, the name for this moai, once stood at Orongo, the island's ceremonial village, where it became associated with the tangata manu ritual that was an annual competition to secure leadership without war.

To the indigenous people of Rapa Nui, the moai in general and Hoa Hakanaia'a in particular embody peace. For many, the removal of Hoa Hakanaia'a in 1868 by a British expedition feels like the theft of a relative. "Allowing the British to hold onto this piece of our history," says Rapa Nui's mayor Pedro Edmunds Paoa, "is like keeping our family away from us."

The British case for retaining foreign cultural treasures

By law, the British Museum cannot return objects in its collection to their original sites. The return of Hoa Hakananai'a, aside from being unlawful, could set off a wave of global repatriation claims. Laws aside, such a case would run the British Museum dry. As any visitor to the museum knows, this venerable British institution is "home" to thousands of artifacts gained through colonial efforts or expeditions that mimicked the manner of the expedition that resulted in Hoa Hakananai'a standing in the British Museum.

Many cultures around the world see the possession of their cultural treasures in the British Museum as "theft," and the Greeks have been demanding a return of the Elgin Marbles for decades. On December 4, 2024, a former advisor to the Greek government told the BBC that a deal to return the Parthenon Sculptures — what the Greeks call the Elgin Marbles — was "close" but, as of today, they still remain in the British Museum.

The British Museum not only makes a legal case for retaining foreign treasures but also a public interest argument. It argues that keeping the statues is in the world's best interest. The British argue that their prized museum is a global public good where world heritage is preserved and shared. Anyone from around the world can visit the British Museum for free or see the museum's treasures online. The Hoa Hakananai'a moai would not be accessible to the world were it to return to remote Rapa Nui.

Museums in richer countries, often former imperial powers, make this argument that foreign cultural treasures are better off with them. Were the treasures to return to their native lands, they might be damaged or destroyed. Humanity would lose them forever. These treasures might also be stolen and sold on the black market, ending up in private hands. Public access to these treasures would then be lost. Ironically, world heritage is best preserved in the British Museum or the Louvre, which have decades of expertise in preserving and displaying cultural treasures of the past.

If every great work of art remained in its cultural home, how could it be shared with so much of the world? How would people around the world have the chance to learn about a culture that they were unlikely to come in contact with?

The case for returning cultural treasures

The British argument for retaining Hoa Hakananai'a, the Parthenon Sculptures and the Amravati Marbles for global public benefit over time calls into question the very meaning of "cultural preservation." Is a culture preserved if one of its symbols is looked after very well in a wonderful museum and kept in good condition? Or is a culture preserved when the symbol is part of a living tradition in the society where it is the warp and woof of the culture?

If Hoa Hakananai'a is just a historic stone statue, then the British Museum is perhaps the best place to preserve this wonderful art. If Hoa Hakananai'a is still a part of the culture of the indigenous people of Rapa Nui, then perhaps the arguments of rightful ownership, collective dignity and cultural perpetuation trump the legal and public benefit arguments of the British Museum. Hoa Hakananai'a is a moai venerated by the people of Rapa Nui in a way it is not by the most interested, invested and culturally sensitive visitors to the British Museum.

When colonization, slavery and disease nearly destroyed the Rapa Nui population in the 19th century, the moai remained steadfast symbols of identity. Losing Hoa Hakananai'a meant more than losing a statue — it meant losing a part of the island's indigenous population's survival story. There is an argument to be made that Hoa Hakananai'a is integral to the identity of the people of Rapa Nui.

A tricky and complicated issue

As you can see above, there are good arguments for both retaining and returning the Hoa Hakananai'a moai. That is why the remote islanders and the British have been disputing ownership for decades. Delegations have traveled back and forth from Rapa Nui to London, but the issue is unresolved. The British have made promises of collaboration, but Hoa Hakananai'a still remains in London.

Perhaps the answer is not as simple as "returning" or "retaining" Hoa Hakananai'a. Some Rapa Nui leaders have even floated the idea of keeping Hoa Hakananai'a in London as an ambassador, as long as the British acknowledge that it belongs to Rapa Nui.

The Rapa Nui community itself is divided over the moai's fate. While many argue passionately for

its return, others recognize that the British Museum may offer the best conditions for its preservation. On Rapa Nui, hundreds of moai remain exposed to wind, saltwater and rain. In the past, many fell and all have already suffered damage.

By contrast, Hoa Hakananai'a is protected, conserved and well-positioned in the British Museum to share Rapa Nui culture with a global audience. Some form of the status quo is perhaps the most sensible path forward. Cultural preservation takes multiple forms: The moai on Rapa Nui island embody ancestral presence, while Hoa Hakananai'a in the British Museum serves as the island's cultural ambassador to the world.

The Hoa Hakananai'a debate points to a broader tension concerning the repatriation of cultural treasures. Colonial theft is an undeniable truth. Naturally, many people want to right that wrong and return these treasures to their native lands. Some play the morality card and try to guilt descendants of their former colonial masters or imperial adventurers into returning these treasures.

Yet the practical question of returning these cultural treasures is more complex. If every piece of art, sculpture or cultural artefact taken during the height of the European empires were repatriated, global museums would be stripped of their collections. More importantly, millions of people would lose access to cultural traditions that differ from their own. As pointed out above, these artifacts may be destroyed or end up in private collections, with the public losing access to them forever.

In the case of Rapa Nui, the return of Hoa Hakananai'a would not significantly affect the island's tourism economy. Tourists can and do visit the hundreds of moai still guarding Rapa Nui's shores. The return would certainly deprive millions of British Museum visitors from around

the world to learn about a culture that they might never have heard of or ever explored.

The operative question is not simply whether Hoa Hakananai'a should stay or go, but what does cultural preservation truly mean today? Is heritage best preserved when artifacts remain in their place of origin, fulfilling their intended spiritual role, or when they are safeguarded and shared with the world? In practice, both approaches matter — Rapa Nui can retain its sacred moai and spiritual traditions, while Hoa Hakananai'a extends the island's cultural reach far beyond its shores.

In the case of Hoa Hakananai'a, the best solution is what some islanders themselves suggest. The British Museum should continue housing the moai in its fantastic building in London, but the British government should acknowledge the indigenous islanders' ownership of the statue. Until the British Isles and Rapa Nui island can come to an agreement, Hoa Hakananai'a remains a symbol of a larger, unresolved question: Who has the right to control cultural treasures — global museums that house them, or the communities that created them?

Priya Acharya is a high school student at the Brearley School in New York City. She has an ever-so-slightly unorthodox background, and her interests range from history to fashion. Priya has a deep interest in understanding how things really work and appreciates diverse viewpoints that make her think. She has been an intern with *Fair Observer* since July 2022, where, among other tasks, she has moderated a talk on Buddhism by Professor Srinivas Reddy in April 2023. Priya dabbles in martial arts, arts and playing with her new dog, Teddy.

“The Scars Are on My Body and Mind, Forever”: Survivors Onboard Ocean Viking Share Their Stories

Fellipe Lopes
June 19, 2025

The rescue ship Ocean Viking picked up 234 migrants in the Central Mediterranean and heard their stories. These survivors described torture, slavery and extortion in Libyan detention centers. The abuse will continue as long as Europe backs the Libyan Coast Guard and blocks safe ways out.

While onboard the humanitarian rescue ship Ocean Viking, Fellipe Lopes, Communications Coordinator for SOS Méditerranée, documented testimonies from migrants who suffered brutal abuse in Libya.

I joined Ocean Viking in mid-April. In the following weeks, we conducted four rescue operations, saving a total of 234 people. Survivors shared harrowing accounts of torture, forced labor, and sexual abuse in Libya.

Talking to survivors onboard, it became clear that an inhumane and profitable system operates with protection in many parts of Libya. Extortion and torture are common elements in the process of obtaining freedom. Many survivors reported being forced to work long hours without pay. A masked man entered their rooms daily and forced them to call their families to demand money. The message was simple: no money, no freedom.

For years, Libya has served as a key transit point for people seeking safety in Europe. Many begin their journey in other countries, misled by the promise that a boat from Libya will take them directly to Italy. That promise is false.

Once in Libya, migrants are frequently captured by militias or organized groups. These groups extort, torture, and enslave them. Survivors described widespread rape, arbitrary detention, sexual slavery, and murder. Both militias and state-affiliated groups participate in these abuses.

Since 2014, more than 31,000 migrants have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea. It remains the deadliest migration route in the world. In the Central Mediterranean, where state-led rescue operations are largely absent, civilian ships conduct most rescues. Instead of support, many face criminal charges for their efforts.

A man who asked to be called “Lamunn” said he had applied for visas in Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy several times, but never received a response. Armed men in Libya forced him to witness sexual assaults and subjected him to repeated rape. After going three days without water, he asked for some — but because he didn’t speak the local language, the guards beat him. “Trauma is the only word,” he said. “I would rather die at sea than spend another day in Libya.”

Rebecca, Medical Team Leader for SOS Méditerranée, said, “Part of my role onboard is not only to provide medical care but to support people psychologically. Sometimes it’s through basic psychological first aid. Sometimes we connect them to organizations on land that can give them the long-term support they need. To see people withdraw into themselves and disassociate from the world — because that is their only refuge — is devastating. We do what we can while they are with us, if only to show that there is still kindness and a gentle touch.”

Rebecca added, “In four years of work onboard, I have seen many survivors of the brutal conditions in Libya. The scars are not only on the body — unhealed wounds, burns, broken bones — but also in the mind.”

The United Nations report *Abuse Behind Bars: Arbitrary and unlawful detention in Libya*, published in April 2018, concluded that thousands of people are held in unlawful detention by armed groups, including state-affiliated groups. These people are routinely tortured, raped, and enslaved.

Libya’s detention system is designed to profit from human suffering. Its network reaches across borders. In Libya, authorities allow this system to persist. The EU funds and supports the Libyan government’s efforts to curb migration. At sea, the EU provides funding and training for the Libyan Coast Guard. This group has been accused of violently intercepting rescue operations and forcing migrants back to Libya, where they reenter the cycle of abuse.

[SOS Méditerranée is a humanitarian maritime organization founded in May 2015 in response to the rising death toll in the Central Mediterranean and the failure of the EU to act. It operates through a European network based in Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland. From February 2016 to October 2018, SOS Méditerranée operated the rescue ship *Aquarius*. Today, it continues its mission with the ship *Ocean Viking*. Since 2016, SOS Méditerranée has rescued 42,052 people at sea.]

Fellipe Lopes, 37 years old, is a migrant from Brazil based in Ireland for over 11 years. He is a photojournalist and a human rights activist. His work focuses on human rights, environmental issues and migration. Fellipe has produced video documentaries and photo essays for the

international media and international organizations in several locations, including Brazil, Ireland, Greece, Bosnia, Kenya and the central Mediterranean off Italy.

Germans in Romania: A Story of Survival and Remigration

Andrea Geistanger
June 22, 2025

German minority groups such as the Transylvanian Saxons and the Banat Swabians have a long, rich history in Romania. However, political strife as well as benefits elsewhere drove German cultural groups out of the country. While Germany benefited from this remigration, Romania’s diverse culture suffered. Europe must encourage the protection of minority groups if it wishes to enrich communities.

“**F**or a kingdom with only one language and one custom is weak and fragile.” This sentence, written around 1030 by King Stephen I of Hungary, can be regarded as a cornerstone in the argument for preserving the diverse population in Southeastern Europe and Romania. It is not widely known that German settlement groups were also part of this population diversity for many centuries. Around 1930, approximately 700,000 Germans lived in the area of present-day Romania in various groups that were historically, culturally and regionally distinct from one another. The two largest groups were the Transylvanian Saxons in central Romania, and the Banat Swabians who settled in western Romania.

Starting in the 1970s, a remigration movement of Germans led to an almost complete eradication of their culture, history and specific dialects. Romania suffered the most from this exodus, but generally speaking, all of Europe is now poorer in cultural diversity, mutual understanding among peoples, and openness. Cultural diversity must be encouraged and protected, as it benefits Europe at large.

German ethnicities in Romania

In the 1200s, a large group of German settlers migrated under King Géza of Hungary into the “land beyond the forests” (terra ultrasilvana), likely to protect the southern border of the Hungarian kingdom. These “Saxones” were first mentioned in 1224 in a charter by Hungarian King Andrew II, granting them extensive autonomy in legal, economic, political and ecclesiastical matters. Over the following centuries, this group became known as the “Transylvanian Saxons” and represented one of three estates in the Hungarian Diet, the country’s national assembly. They were granted extensive rights in electing kings and enjoyed significant autonomy within the Principality of Transylvania under Ottoman rule. In the 16th century, they were even able to convert to Protestantism — a key factor shaping their identity. Their extensive autonomy was lost only in the 19th century due to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, which created the dual monarchy between Austria and Hungary.

Alongside the Transylvanian Saxons, the Banat Swabians have played a key role in shaping Romania’s history. The origins of this group are well-documented due to the Austrian-Habsburg administration. German migrants first arrived in the Banat around 1725 as part of an organized settlement by the Habsburg monarchy, and increasingly flocked to the area under Hungarian queen Maria Theresa in the 1760s. The recruited settlers came from various areas in southern and

central Germany. This Habsburg settlement policy was not a new idea. To consolidate their newly acquired kingdom, Hungarian kings would recruit settlers from German principalities in order to give strength to the territory.

Although considered “state-supporting” minorities within the Kingdom of Hungary, German minorities suffered from assimilation pressures imposed by Budapest’s government. In 1876, their self-governance was dissolved, and school laws sought to erode their culture. This is known as Magyarization, or the assimilation into Hungarian culture and language. Habsburg’s tolerance of this Magyarization policy was perceived by these minorities as betrayal of their loyalty to the ruling house. This led to a reorientation toward Germany after its formation in 1871, thus making German-nationalist sentiments increasingly prominent.

Romania’s foundation sowed discontent among German minority groups

Despite the alienation that Magyarization brought, men from German minorities still fought for Austria-Hungary during World War I. However, the end of World War I and Austria-Hungary’s collapse into multiple nation-states left German minorities in Banat and Transylvania caught between competing interests. Romania acted swiftly: on December 1, 1918, the Romanian National Assembly in Alba Iulia resolved to unite Transylvania, Banat, and other parts of Hungary with Romania. The 1920 Treaty of Trianon – the treaty that concluded World War I – confirmed these territorial changes.

The Alba Iulia resolution envisioned a democratic Romanian state with extensive minority rights. In return, these groups were expected to support Romania’s accession declaration, endorse international recognition efforts and prove themselves loyal citizens of the

new state. Initially optimistic due to Alba Iulia's resolutions and Romania's minority protection treaty with Allied powers, Germany saw favorable conditions for trade and industry emerge. However, these hopes soon faded: politically agreed minority rights were barely implemented as Bucharest's government transformed Romania into a centralized state modeled after France — contrary to the federalist preferences among minorities' representatives.

Several laws from Romania's new centralized state had severe consequences for German minorities. For example, a 1921 land reform law led to expropriation of communal lands and over half of church-owned property. Since Lutheran-Protestant churches in Transylvania as well as Catholic churches in Banat played key roles in education systems and cultural institutions, the German minorities were disproportionately affected. Romania's government gradually lost support among German communities. Due to this growing disenchantment, German minorities soon became susceptible to manipulation by Nazi Germany during World War II. Younger politicians increasingly adopted Nazi rhetoric, aligning themselves directly with Hitler's Germany.

Minority groups align with Germany during World War II

By late 1930s tensions increased between Romanian authorities and nationalist factions within German minorities. However, both Romania and Hungary became pawns of the Axis powers. In 1940, Romania was forced to cede parts of Transylvania under the Second Vienna Award orchestrated by Nazi Germany and Italy. This decision satisfied neither Hungary nor Romania and resulted in Transylvania being divided for the first time in its history. The Transylvanian Saxons found themselves as minorities in two states, as opposed to just one.

The status of German minorities in Romania became further complicated following authoritarian Marshal Ion Antonescu's rise to power with his "Iron Guard." Both Hungary and Romania had to comply with the German Nazi government's directives regarding their German minorities. In November 1940, Antonescu enacted a law declaring the German ethnic group a Nazi organization within the Romanian state, effectively creating a "state within a state." Berlin appointed a leader for the ethnic group who acted solely in the interests of Nazi Germany, aligning the minority populations with German and Saxon institutions and organizations. This policy did not serve the German minority but instead tied their fate inextricably to Nazi Germany's expansionist ambitions, which ultimately ended in disaster.

A tragic peak was reached with another German-Romanian agreement in 1943, requiring future generations to serve in the Waffen-SS — the military branch of the Nazi party — instead of the Romanian army. Many German youths from Romania were deployed in the Waffen-SS, exacerbating post-war accusations against Germans in Romania as Nazis.

When Romania declared war on the German Reich, the leadership of the ethnic groups fled. The German minorities in Romania were held collectively responsible and punished for Nazi crimes. In January 1945, nearly 70,000 able-bodied men and women were deported to work in rebuilding efforts in the coal mines of Donetsk, Ukraine. Almost 15% perished during this labor, and many were not released back to their hometowns. Instead, many ended up in areas of East Germany, where some managed to make their way to West Germany or Austria. This marked the beginning of family separations, with vastly different opportunities for development in West Germany compared to the East.

German Romanians emigrate to escape discrimination and political turmoil

In Romania itself, a gradual takeover by Moscow-controlled communists began in 1945, culminating in the proclamation of the “Romanian People’s Republic” in 1947. Since all members of the German minorities were considered former members of a Nazi organization due to the ethnic group decree of 1940, they were completely excluded from any political participation. In spring 1945, all land was expropriated without compensation, and by 1949 all farms were converted into collective economies.

Although discriminatory measures against German ethnic groups began to ease after 1950 and cultural life gradually started to flourish again, all residents of Romania were now subjected to terror and arbitrariness under the communist regime. In the 1950s, around 40,000 Banat Swabians were deported to the Bărăgan Steppe under the pretext of “cleansing” border areas. By the 1970s, push factors such as deteriorating economic living conditions combined with pull factors from family members already living in West Germany became so strong that more and more Germans decided to emigrate to West Germany (FRG). In addition, emigration was supported by FRG politicians through financial payments for each emigrant.

In 1991, after the fall of the communist dictatorship and border openings, emigration reached its peak. That year alone, 110,000 Germans left Romania. Distrust toward the Romanian state was too great, the future too uncertain and promises in West Germany too enticing. With their strong work ethic, those who emigrated quickly integrated into Germany. Since they were well-educated and spoke German fluently, there were few barriers to starting anew. Germany has benefited immensely from the influx of Germans from Romania in terms of economic performance, tax revenues and loyal voters. Even a

Nobel Prize for Literature can now be attributed to Germany: In 2009, Herta Müller — a Banat Swabian — received the award for her book *The Hunger Angel*, which describes the deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union.

However, emotionally settling into Germany has proven harder for many. Many emigrants had a strong agricultural background, so relying solely on supermarkets in Germany remains difficult for some. Additionally, many Germans from Romania felt disappointed by the complete lack of knowledge among native Germans about their history. The realization that Germany might be a different country than they had imagined proved intensely jarring.

Today, German diversity in Romania is nearly nonexistent

Today, approximately 20,000 people in Romania still identify as Germans. This group strives to preserve and advance their diverse culture in Romania through close exchanges with relatives, friends and the Associations of the Banat Swabians and Transylvanian Saxons in Germany. Cities like Sibiu (Hermannstadt) and Timișoara (Temeswar) have been revitalized, and they attract many tourists as European Capitals of Culture (2007 and 2023, respectively). Klaus Werner Johannis, a Transylvanian Saxon from Hermannstadt, served as Romanian president since 2014.

However, many of these places within Transylvania are not places that continue to grow and change through German culture. A visit to these fortified churches is comparable to a trip to the Roman Forum in Rome – a place of history, not of future change. Dialects such as Transylvanian Saxon — which preserved archaic forms of medieval speech due to long isolation — are rarely spoken today and are no longer living languages. Their old, handmade traditional

costumes, which used to be part of village life on festive days, are hardly worn anymore.

History cannot be reversed; the era of large German populations in Eastern Europe is over. Romania has certainly not benefited from the remigration of Germans to West Germany. The history of the various German ethnic groups in Romania clearly demonstrates that as long as a government and country care about their minorities, these minorities will remain loyal and supportive citizens. However, if another country presents enticing promises from outside, push-and-pull factors can trigger emigration movements until diverse populations are almost completely dissolved. Countries must encourage the existence of cultural, economic and political diversity first and foremost.

[Cheyenne Torres edited this piece.]

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Born in Romania as part of the German minority, Andrea emigrated to Germany as a child, an experience that shaped her enduring interest in migration. She explores questions about what drives individuals, families and communities to leave their homeland and what makes them feel settled again. Despite living in Munich for over 23 years, she occasionally feels like an outsider, though her children, born there, are true “Münchner Kindl.”

NATO and European Defense in the Face of Russian Resurgence and America First

Peter Hoskins
September 24, 2025

The Russo-Ukrainian War and the trend for US disengagement from Europe, particularly under the Trump administration, have brought the inadequacy of European defense to the forefront of political debate. Europe must reduce its dependence on the US and improve its capacity for defense. The critical question is, how will this be achieved?

Lord Hastings Ismay, before he took up office as NATO’s first Secretary General, said that the purpose of the alliance was, “to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.” These words, spoken in the immediate aftermath of World War II, reflected the distrust of Germany after two terribly destructive wars within 30 years, the belief that the Soviet Union posed a threat to post-war Europe and the appreciation that Europe was in no position to defend itself without US support.

The fear of a resurgent Germany has long since fallen away, but the war in Ukraine has brought into stark relief the perception of a renewed threat to Europe from Russia. This, coupled with the US strategic focus turning towards China and the Indo-Pacific region, accentuated by the America First policy of the Trump administration, raises three interlinked questions for Europe. How do the Europeans ensure that they can keep Russia out? How do they keep the US engaged, at least in the

mid-term? What architecture best suits European defense in the future, with or without the US?

Keeping the Russians out — political will

Keeping the Russians out requires credible European defense, which relies on both political will and military capability. If we take it as given that the principal aim of defense policy for Europe is to deter aggression, then the Russian perception of the strength of political will on the part of NATO and the EU is critical. At the institutional level, the political support of the EU and NATO for Ukraine has been unwavering, but this papers over very divergent positions taken by member states.

The various contributions in military aid are revealing. As of June 30, 2025, the US was the most important contributor of military aid at €64.62 billion (\$75.60 billion). However, aid from NATO members and other European states has exceeded that of the US, contrary to what one may believe from statements by US President Donald Trump, totaling €79.14 billion (\$92.58 billion). Germany (€16.51 billion [\$19.31 billion]), the UK (€13.77 billion [\$16.11 billion]) and, perhaps surprisingly, Denmark (€9.16 billion [\$10.72 billion]) were the three most important suppliers after the US, with France (€5.96 billion [\$6.97 billion]) sixth of European contributors.

Indicative of the different perspectives within the European allies, Hungary has not contributed any military aid. If we look at financial, humanitarian and military aid in total, the principal contributors remain the same in a similar ranking, with the exception that the EU institutions come into the picture with €63.2 billion (\$73.93 billion) of financial and humanitarian aid. Hungary has contributed only a very modest €0.05 billion (\$0.06 billion) of humanitarian aid.

Another political aspect has been the unexpected adherence of both Sweden and Finland to NATO — unthinkable before the Russian invasion in 2022. A complex and contradictory picture confronts the Russians: some strong signals but some weaknesses to exploit. Whether these weaknesses would be there if there were a direct threat to a NATO member is, of course, an imponderable.

Equally, despite the ambiguities surrounding the Trump administration's support for Ukraine and its desire to avoid foreign entanglements, it would be dangerous for the Russians to assume that the US would not come to the aid of a NATO ally in the event of direct aggression.

Keeping the Russians out — military capabilities

Assuming that there is the political will to keep the Russians at bay, how does military capability within Europe shape up? The picture is mixed. The two most capable armed forces, in terms of quality and breadth of capabilities, are those of the UK and France.

However, over recent years, both nations have focused much of their effort on low-intensity counter terrorist operations and global reach at the expense of preparing for a major European conflict. It seems that the lesson of Ukraine has been learnt, but it will take time to switch emphasis.

On the positive side, there is an independent nuclear capacity held by France and the UK. On the conventional, non-nuclear level, there is a patchwork of capabilities, readiness and combat experience within European armed forces. In this context, after many years of neglect, the recent renewed commitment by Germany to defense is very important.

Perhaps the most significant problem for the non-US NATO members is that they rely heavily on the US for target acquisition and reconnaissance, suppression and destruction of enemy air defenses, command and control functions, electronic warfare and resupply of munitions and other consumables in any major conflict.

In this context, a major European war cannot be viewed in isolation. If the US were to be involved in a major operation elsewhere, such as a Chinese blockade or invasion of Taiwan, these capabilities for use in Europe and resupply of munitions would likely be compromised. Non-US NATO nations must prioritize acquiring these capabilities where they are lacking and enhancing them where they are present but at insufficient levels.

They must also improve the capacity of the European armaments industries for the manufacture of equipment and replenishment of consumables. However, there are supply chain issues outside of Europe that also need to be addressed. As an example, Europe relies on China for more than 70% of its requirements for cotton linters, used to manufacture nitrocellulose for artillery shells and other explosives.

Another dimension to keeping the Russians out is “where would the blow fall?” The least likely scenario is a direct thrust through Poland, but it is probably the threat for which NATO is best prepared. Perhaps the most likely threat is against the Baltic states, all of which have a common land border with either Belarus or Russia.

The challenge for NATO is that the only route for overland access to the Baltic states is the short, roughly 50-mile-long border between Poland and Lithuania, sandwiched between the Russian Kaliningrad enclave and Belarus. All other deployment or resupply would need to come by sea or air, requiring control of both over and in the

Baltic Sea. Fortunately, air and maritime power are strong European capabilities.

Keeping the Americans in

President Trump has long been critical of NATO, particularly his perception that the US bears a disproportionate burden for European defense, and he has threatened to withhold support if nations do not pull their weight. On June 24, 2025, en route to the NATO summit in the Netherlands, he commented on Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty to journalists, “Depends on your definition. There are numerous definitions of Article 5. You know that, right? But I’m committed to being their friends.”

It is worth a look at the wording of Article 5: “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them ... will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith ... such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force ...” The military commitment of the US has long been taken for granted, and the widely held view has been that Article 5 implies the commitment of military force.

In essence, President Trump is correct, but his statement raises the specter of US support short of military engagement, perhaps limited to diplomatic or logistic support. Currently, the greatest guarantee of US military engagement is the deployment of 84,000 US armed forces personnel in Europe, spread widely but with the greatest deployments in the UK, Germany, Italy and Poland. This is a significant contribution, but well below the troop ceiling of 326,414 set by Congress in 1985 during the Cold War.

Non-US NATO forces have more than 3,000,000 active personnel, but the importance of

the US contribution is not simply the numbers stationed in Europe but also the quality of the capabilities deployed and the overall strength of US forces worldwide. There is speculation that the US is reviewing its force levels in Europe with an announcement due in the fall of 2025. If this were to result in a drawdown, then the concern for Europe must be at what number do US force levels in Europe fall below a critical mass, which may lead Russia to conclude that US engagement has been fatally weakened.

The best means for the NATO European nations to convince the US that it is serious about its own defense, and hence keep the US engaged, is by increasing their defense spending. On June 25, 2025, a NATO summit agreed that members “would commit to investing 5% of GDP in defense – including 3.5% of GDP on core defense requirements and 1.5% on defense and security-related investments like infrastructure and industry. This marks a major uplift from the previous benchmark of 2% of GDP.”

It remains to be seen how this translates into defense budgets. In February 2025, the UK announced an increase in UK defense spending from 2.3% GDP to 2.5% by April 2027, with an “ambition” of reaching 3% within the next parliament (in effect by 2034), short of the 3.5% target. France’s President Macron has pledged to increase the country’s defense budget from a little over 2.0% in 2024 to 3.5% by 2030.

However, both the UK and France face serious overall budget challenges, with the added dimension of an unstable political situation in France and a presidential election due in 2027. Germany has increased its defense budget for 2025 to 2.4% and plans to reach the 3.5% NATO target by 2029.

The other nations’ budgets for 2024 ranged from around 1.5% for Spain to more than 4% for

Poland. How all this will pan out, particularly with the scope for creative accounting with the formula for 1.5% for “defense and security-related” expenditure, is anybody’s guess. An unanswerable question is, will the foot come off the accelerator if a peace accord is found in Ukraine?

In the short term, the NATO agreement on defense budgets seems to have satisfied President Trump, but it would be unwise to assume that the US will remain engaged in the long term. What future defense architecture best suits Europe in the future, with or without the US? First of all, how did we get where we are now?

The evolution of post-war defense in Europe

How Europe should best defend itself has been on the political agenda since shortly after the end of World War II, periodically coming to the fore and then slipping into the background as the perception of the threat has varied.

In 1947, France and the UK signed the Dunkirk mutual assistance pact — not to counter any perceived Soviet threat but to forestall, however unlikely that may seem now, any resurgent threat from Germany. Within a year, the growing threat from the Soviet Union resulted in the expansion of the Dunkirk pact into the Western Union (WU), incorporating Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg.

The WU, established by the Brussels Treaty in March 1948, provided for military, economic, social and cultural cooperation. However, a succession of other institutions (the Organization for European Economic Cooperation [April 1948], NATO [April 1949], the Council of Europe [May 1949] and the European Coal and Steel Community [April 1951]) effectively stripped the WU of many of its functions.

The creation of NATO, which brought together nine European nations, Iceland, Canada and the US in a treaty for collective defense, was the most significant post-war development. Faced with the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the maintenance of large Soviet forces in Eastern Europe, and with the French and the British heavily committed in Indochina and Malaya respectively, NATO members recognized that the forces available in Europe were inadequate to counter Soviet forces.

There was growing pressure, particularly from the US, to allow Western Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany, [FRG]) to rearm and contribute to European defense, but there was opposition from France and Belgium to the reestablishment of independent German armed forces.

The French formulated a counterproposal in 1950 for the creation of a European Defense Community (EDC) and a European army, which would include German forces integrated in a supranational structure, sidestepping the issue of independent German forces. This culminated in the Treaty of Paris signed by France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy and the FRG at the end of May 1952.

This ambitious project envisaged an integrated army of 40 divisions assigned to NATO supreme command with a common budget, common arms and centralized procurement. The project eventually floundered when France got cold feet over the loss of sovereignty and suspended treaty ratification in August 1954. Italy had been waiting to see which way France would jump, and it also suspended ratification. As an aside, in April 2025, an Italian member of parliament introduced a bill to reconsider ratification. However, it is most unlikely that a resurrected EDC will be the instrument for enhancing European defense in the future.

In the wake of the collapse of the EDC, events moved quickly. In October 1954, the WU transitioned into the Western European Union (WEU). Italy and the FRG joined the five members of the WU, the allied occupation of the FRG was ended and the FRG was authorized to rearm.

In May 1955, the FRG joined NATO. In response, the Soviet Union created the Warsaw Pact (WP) for the Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe. Greece and Turkey had also joined NATO in 1952, and Spain joined in 1982, ending the Cold War expansion of NATO. A further development in European defense integration during this period was the creation of a joint Franco-German Brigade, around 6,000 strong, in 1989.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the WP in 1991, there was an expansion of both the EU and NATO, and in 1992, France and the newly reunified Germany founded the Eurocorps. The Eurocorps has steadily expanded with the addition of Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg and Poland as framework nations with Austria, Greece, Italy, Romania and Turkey as associate nations.

However, Eurocorps has no standing forces; it is a corps headquarters that can take under command European Battle Groups. The corps is assigned to both NATO and the EU. The WEU had been largely dormant during the Cold War; there were periodic attempts to revive it until it was finally dissolved in 2011, with its functions absorbed into the EU under the auspices of the European Security and Defense Identity.

The future of European defense

There has been much talk over the years, often driven by the French, of the need for enhanced European defense and indeed a European army. A major stumbling block has been the opposition, by

the US and the UK in particular, to the creation of parallel structures to those of NATO, seen as wasteful and divisive, and also a potential risk to continuing US commitment to the defense of the European continent.

A recent paper published by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies raises the issue again of a European army, proposing a supranational common EU force, an EU unified command headquarters integrated into the NATO command structure, development of integrated forces for such tasks as air-to-air refueling, air transport, intelligence and targeting, command and control, and an EU defense intelligence service. Overall control would be vested in the EU Council of Ministers.

The long-standing concerns over duplication of effort remain, and there are practical issues with many of the proposals. More importantly, there is a fundamental problem with all proposals for supranational armed forces — the elephant in the room, which effectively left the EDC still borne, the issue of national sovereignty. Within NATO, all nations delegate operational command but retain full command of their armed forces.

In other words, they keep the ultimate power concerning their commitment or not. No NATO or other multinational force commander will have full command over other national forces. This simply reflects the reality that nations will not cede sovereignty of their armed forces. This, in turn, is because armed forces are an instrument of foreign policy; foreign policy leads defense policy, and not the inverse. To paraphrase Karl von Clausewitz in *On War*, “War is the continuation of politics by other means.”

Although the EU has a foreign minister, or more correctly a High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, foreign policy is not supranational and is subject to

decisions of the Council of Ministers. A general, all-embracing supranational foreign policy is difficult to envisage short of the creation of a federal European state — for example, France has worldwide interests with its overseas territories and legacy involvement in Africa, while its EU partners have diverse and narrower foreign policy interests.

Nevertheless, interest in a European army has ebbed and flowed with the perceived threat. When the Soviet threat disappeared and Russia seemed a potential partner, then one could abstractly talk of a European army.

France has been, and remains, a strong proponent of enhanced European defense, but it is not always clear what this means. Does this mean it should be centered on the EU or a broader view of Europe? EU-based defense has attractions for those committed to the evolution of the European project, but it has inherent problems — setting aside the US, it excludes three European NATO members, Norway, the UK and Turkey, and two peripheral members, Canada and Iceland. Excluding the UK would be foolhardy, and its integration in an EU structure impracticable post-Brexit.

Iceland, although it does not have armed forces, would be strategically important in the event of a major European war with its air base at Keflavik, vital for maritime air anti-submarine operations to counter Russian submarines penetrating the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap to threaten trans-Atlantic maritime lines of communication.

Similarly, Norway and Turkey are in critical strategic positions on the European flanks — the latter controlling the Bosphorus and access to the Black Sea. Also, the presence of Austria, Malta and Ireland as neutral states within the EU does not sit easily with the development of an EU-wide military alliance.

With the appreciation that a resurgent Russia poses a threat to Europe, reality has returned and NATO is once again, at least implicitly, seen as the vehicle for enhancing European defense. Nevertheless, the French position remains ambivalent. President Macron, in an interview with *The Economist* in 2019, said that “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO,” with it having “lost its strategic focus.”

In March 2022 he said that “The war launched by President Putin brings a clarification, and creates at our borders and on our European soil an unusual threat which gives a strategic clarification to NATO ... Yet, I continue to think that we need to rebuild a new European order of security, that the war today in Ukraine makes it even more indispensable.” By March 2025 this had evolved to a statement that France was a “loyal and faithful” NATO ally.

It is possible that Macron would still prefer an alliance based on the EU, but to move in this direction would not only create expensive and unnecessary duplication but also fail to make use of many years of experience with NATO: command structures, joint operating procedures, standardisation, co-ordinated long-term defense planning, interoperability and command and control.

US predominance in command positions need not stand in the way of a greater European role in NATO, or indeed a NATO minus the US. If the US were to withdraw from NATO or not participate in a given operation in response to a crisis, the NATO command structure is sufficiently flexible to operate without US commanders — those commanders who are American all have non-US deputies and/or chiefs of staff.

Providing credible European defense with reduced reliance on the US requires commitment of adequate resources by European nations, and

their development and enhancement of those capabilities which are currently exclusively or predominantly provided by the US. European defense, in the broad sense, can best be served by the existing NATO framework.

[Casey Herrmann edited this piece]

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The Battle Over Euroclear and Russia’s Frozen Billions

Alex Gloy
December 17, 2025

The EU has begun to use frozen Russian assets in Brussels to fund Ukraine’s war effort, and has triggered Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union. Belgium resists full confiscation, fearing damage to its

financial sector and the euro's credibility. The US pushes Europe to seize more funds, intensifying pressure on Brussels amid growing geopolitical tensions with BRICS nations.

As the war in Ukraine grinds toward its fourth winter, a parallel conflict is being fought not in the trenches of the Donbas, but in Brussels. The weapon of choice is neither artillery nor drones, but sovereign debt and international banking law. At the center of this financial storm lies a cache of wealth: nearly €200 billion in Russian Central Bank assets, immobilized since the onset of the full-scale invasion in 2022.

The European Union has moved beyond merely freezing these funds. In a landmark and legally perilous shift, the bloc has begun to actively utilize the profits generated by this capital to fund Ukraine's defense and reconstruction. This strategy, however, has exposed deep fissures within the EU and placed a singular, private Belgian company, Euroclear, in the geopolitical crosshairs.

The vault: Euroclear and the mechanics of immobilization

To understand the scale of the situation, one must understand the custodian holding the keys. Euroclear is not a bank in the traditional consumer sense; it is a Central Securities Depository (CSD), a critical piece of the “plumbing” that underpins the global financial system. Headquartered in Brussels, Belgium, and employing approximately 6,000 people, Euroclear settles securities transactions for stock exchanges and major financial institutions, ensuring that when a bond or share is traded, the ownership transfers and the cash is delivered.

A consortium of major international financial players owns Euroclear. Its shareholder registry includes Caisse de Dépôts (a French public-sector financial institution), GIC (the sovereign-wealth fund of Singapore), Euronext (the pan-European stock exchange) and Sicovam, the French central securities custodian (now integrated into the group structure but historically a key stakeholder).

The sheer volume of assets flowing through Euroclear is difficult to visualize. At the end of the third quarter (Q3) of 2025, Euroclear held a staggering €42.5 trillion in custodial assets. Much of this sum is held on behalf of clients — pension funds, central banks and commercial banks — and does not sit on Euroclear's own balance sheet.

However, income generated by Russian-owned securities does end up on Euroclear's books. As of the latest financial disclosures, Euroclear Bank's own balance sheet stood at €229 billion. Of this amount, a massive €194 billion — nearly 85% — is classified as “related to sanctioned Russian assets.” These are primarily maturing bonds and coupon payments belonging to the Central Bank of Russia that sanctions have blocked. Unable to be transferred back to Moscow, this cash piles up in Belgium, requiring reinvestment.

The “windfall”: turning cash into weapons

In the first half (H1) of 2025 alone, these immobilized Russian assets generated €2.7 billion in interest income. Under normal circumstances, this profit would belong to the client (Russia). However, the EU argues that these “windfall profits” are not sovereign assets but rather a byproduct of the sanctions regime itself.

Following legislation passed in May 2024, the EU formalized a mechanism to seize these profits. Of the €2.7 billion earned in H1 2025, €1.8 billion was declared a “windfall contribution.” After Belgian corporate taxes and management fees were

deducted, a net total of €1.6 billion was paid out to the EU Commission.

The money is transferred to the Ukraine Facility and the European Peace Facility (EPF), where it is used to directly reimburse EU member states for weapons shipments to Kyiv and to fund the purchase of new ammunition and air defense systems. In effect, the EU has successfully engineered a system where Russia's own sovereign wealth is partially financing the war effort against it.

The Belgian resistance: fear of the “Euroclear run”

While the EU Commission in Brussels pushes for aggressive use of these funds, the Belgian government, located just a few miles away, has urged extreme caution. Belgium finds itself in the uncomfortable position of being the sole guardian of the vast majority of Russia's frozen wealth.

Belgium's resistance is not rooted in sympathy for Moscow, but in fear for the stability of its financial sector and the Euro itself. The Belgian government, along with Euroclear's management, strongly opposes the full confiscation of the principal assets (the €194 billion itself), as opposed to just the interest profits.

The primary concern is legal precedent and “capital flight.” If the EU were to seize the principal assets, it would cross a Rubicon in international law, effectively declaring that sovereign property is no longer immune. Belgium fears this would send a shockwave through the Global South. Large international asset owners — such as Saudi Arabia, China, Brazil or Indonesia — might look at the precedent and decide that the Eurozone is no longer a safe haven for their reserves.

If these nations were to move their securities custody from Euroclear (EU) to competitors in Dubai, Hong Kong or a potential future BRICS-created depository, it could trigger a “run” on Euroclear. Given that Euroclear holds €42.5 trillion in assets, even a partial exodus would be catastrophic for European capital markets.

Furthermore, Belgium fears it would be left holding the bag for the inevitable legal retaliation. Russia has already filed dozens of lawsuits in Russian courts against Euroclear, seizing the entity's meager assets within Russia. Belgium worries that if the principal is confiscated, it will face decades of litigation and potential liability for billions of euros, potentially bankrupting the custodian without an explicit backstop from the rest of the EU.

The legal hammer: triggering Article 122

Recognizing that unanimity on Russia policy is becoming impossible due to resistance from member states like Hungary and Slovakia, the EU Commission has resorted to a powerful and controversial legal tool: Article 122 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

Traditionally designed for economic emergencies (such as the energy crisis or natural disasters), Article 122 allows the Council to adopt measures by a qualified majority, bypassing the need for unanimous consent.

This month, the EU triggered Article 122 to fundamentally alter the sanctions regime. Previously, sanctions on Russian assets had to be renewed every six months by a unanimous vote. This gave leaders like Viktor Orbán of Hungary a biannual opportunity to hold the bloc hostage, threatening to veto the renewal unless concessions were made elsewhere.

By invoking Article 122, the EU has moved to freeze the assets indefinitely until Russia ends the war and compensates Ukraine. This move serves two purposes:

Political Insulation: It removes the assets from the six-month veto cycle, locking them down regardless of shifting political winds in Budapest or Bratislava. **Collateralization:** It provides the legal certainty needed to use the assets as collateral for larger loans. If the assets are guaranteed to remain frozen for years, G7 nations can issue “Reparations Loans” to Ukraine, to be repaid by the future income streams (or the eventual confiscation) of the Russian funds.

The implication of using Article 122 is profound. It signals a shift in the EU toward a more federalized, majority-rule foreign policy, much to the chagrin of smaller, neutrality-inclined states.

The geopolitical fallout: BRICS+ and the Euro

The aggressive utilization of these assets has not gone unnoticed in Beijing, Riyadh or Brasília. For the BRICS+ nations, the “weaponization of finance” confirms their long-held suspicions about the Western-led order.

The immediate impact has been a “quiet diversification.” While a wholesale dumping of the Euro has not occurred — simply because there are few liquid alternatives to the Dollar and Euro — trust in the EU as a neutral arbiter of capital has eroded. Central banks in the Global South are increasingly repatriating gold reserves and exploring non-Euro settlement mechanisms for trade.

The danger for the Euro is slow but existential. If the perception solidifies that Euro-denominated assets are subject to political seizure, the Euro’s status as an alternative reserve currency could

diminish over the next decade. This would raise borrowing costs for all European governments, as demand for European debt softens. Belgium’s resistance is essentially a warning: Do not sacrifice our long-term financial credibility for a short-term cash injection for Ukraine.

Alternative legal avenues

Critics of the EU’s approach argue that there were other, perhaps more legitimate, paths to making Russia pay.

International Reparations Mechanism: The standard path would be a ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) mandating reparations. However, Russia does not recognize the court’s jurisdiction in this matter, and enforcement would still require the seizure of assets, bringing the EU back to the same legal hurdle. **The Countermeasures Doctrine:** Legal scholars have argued that under international law, states can take “countermeasures” against an aggressor to induce compliance. This theory posits that seizing assets is a lawful countermeasure to Russia’s illegal invasion. The US has largely backed this interpretation, but European legal scholars (and the Belgian government) remain skeptical, viewing it as a slippery slope that blurs the line between executive action and judicial process. **The Trump factor:** pressure from across the Atlantic

Hovering over this entire debate is the shadow of the White House. With Donald Trump in office in late 2025, the dynamic has shifted dramatically. The Trump administration has made it clear that American taxpayers should no longer foot the primary bill for a war in Europe’s backyard.

Pressure from Washington has been intense. The US has pushed the EU to stop “dithering” with interest payments and seize the full €194 billion principal to fund the war effort, thereby allowing the US to reduce its own financial aid. Trump’s “Peace through Strength” rhetoric implies that if Europe wants Ukraine to survive, Europe must pay for it, using Russian President Vladimir Putin’s money.

This pressure partially explains the EU’s rush to trigger Article 122 and lock in the loan mechanisms this month. European leaders fear that if they do not present a self-sustaining funding model for Ukraine soon, the Trump administration might cut aid entirely or force a peace deal on terms unfavorable to Kyiv. The mobilization of Euroclear’s assets is, in many ways, Europe’s attempt to “Trump-proof” the defense of Ukraine.

The €194 billion question

The situation at Euroclear represents a defining moment for the intersection of law, finance and war. The EU has managed to uncork a stream of billions to aid Ukraine, paying for weapons with the aggressor’s own accrued interest. Yet, in doing so, it has ventured into uncharted legal territory, risking the reputation of its financial system and bypassing its own democratic unanimity rules.

For now, the €1.6 billion transferred to Ukraine is a lifeline. But as the war drags on and reconstruction costs mount into the hundreds of billions, the temptation to seize the full €194 billion sitting in Brussels will only grow. Belgium stands as the final gatekeeper, holding the line against a move that could redefine the concept of sovereign property forever. Whether that line holds against the combined pressure of a desperate Kyiv, a federalizing Brussels and an isolationist Washington remains the €194 billion question.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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In France, Politics is an Extreme Sport

Peter Isackson
January 22, 2025

“Extremism in defense of liberty is no vice. Moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue,” are the words American politician Barry Goldwater famously intoned at the 1964 Republican convention before being crushed in the November election by Lyndon Johnson. Confusion about whether extremism is good or bad is not a new phenomenon. President Emmanuel Macron has been outed as France’s latest and most dangerous extremist.

Few would deny that we are living through a period of political and geopolitical transition. Transitions always bring with them an element of turmoil. Today, power relationships across the globe are shifting, often in surprising ways. We sometimes fail to realize that

even the descriptive vocabulary we use to define politics has shifted, adding to the confusion.

When we refer to a party, politician or political thinker as being on the “left” or “right,” what does it mean? Americans are no longer even sure what political, economic or moral principles the label Democrat or Republican stands for.

Most people agree that President Donald Trump belongs to the right wing of US politics, and even the extreme right. But pundits and demographers alike have noticed that his electoral victory in 2024 was due in part to the fact that many on the left of the Democratic party supported his candidacy. The fact that Robert Kennedy Jr., who initially sought to challenge Joe Biden within the Democratic primaries, joined forces with Trump and helped him to victory reveals the degree of blurring of the traditional distinction between left and right.

More telling are the attempts the media have recently made to describe personalities consistently identified with an uncompromising left — Glenn Greenwald, Matt Taibbi or Russell Brand, for example — as right-wing. This is mainly the work of Democrats who prefer to hold a monopoly over the terms “left” and “progressive,” even when they embrace policies most Europeans would describe as center-right.

Trump himself was no stranger to this confused system of labeling when he qualified Biden Democrats as “radical left” and even “communist.” A buzzword in the form of an insult will always produce a stronger, more immediate effect than a nuanced discussion of principles, policies, facts or reasoned conclusions.

In France, equivocation about left and right may be less pronounced, but it exists as well. Because it is a multi-party system in contrast with the binary logic of US politics, there is more room for nuance. But when you consider that the

majority of voters who four or five decades ago voted for the Communist Party, deemed far-left, now vote for the extreme-right, the confusion is as real in France as in the US.

If left and right now lead to such confusion in nations as culturally contrasted as the US and France, surely we expect one thing to remain reasonably stable: the center. But even that notion has become ambiguous.

Attempting to assess the political standing of Emmanuel Macron, the publication *Le Monde* last week featured an article whose title translates: “The ‘extreme center’, an extremism that can lead to authoritarianism.”

Today’s **Weekly Devil’s Dictionary** definition:

Extreme center:

A supposed safe place in the middle of the political spectrum that rather than attenuating the risks associated with extremes concentrates with the gravitational force and capacity for annihilation of a black hole in the cosmos.

Contextual note

Although mention of the idea of “extreme center” in contrast with a moderate center dates back to 1980, *Le Monde* cites the work of historian Pierre Serna who, in 2005, examined the concept in some depth. According to *Le Monde*, “this concept designates individuals, groups or parties claiming to be in the center of the political spectrum, with a fluctuating ideology and whose extreme character refers to the intolerance they show towards their opponents and their use of strong executive power.”

The comforting notion of reasonable people seeking a position at the center and avoiding the extremes should, at least theoretically, correlate

with a focus on the interests of “average people,” “the middle class” and the “silent majority.” But Serna demonstrates that the extreme center consciously cultivates intolerance of anything that deviates from the status quo. This becomes doubly dangerous for democracy when trends towards increasing inequality of wealth spawned by the normal practice of financialized capitalism combine to define the status quo as an oligarchic system run by the moneyed elite.

The extreme center will seek first to dismiss and then to vilify as extreme any position or even idea that calls into question the status quo. The concern with security quickly becomes the obsession with protecting any and all of the institutions representing the status quo. Any critique of the established order can be branded extremist.

Interestingly, *Le Monde* quotes Emmanuel Macron’s own use of the term, following the first round of the 2022 presidential election. “Three-quarters of voters,” according to Macron, “voted for three projects. An extreme right-wing project... an extreme left-wing project... and an extreme-center project, if you want to qualify mine as such.”

One of the characteristics of an extreme center, according to Serna, is the aptitude to change one’s vest whenever convenient and to speak out of both sides of one’s mouth. “Once in power, they tend to rule the country with an iron fist, repressing their opponents to stay in power.” When Macron applied the term to his own movement, he was certainly ignorant of the historian’s description.

Historical note

The political activist and writer Tariq Ali exploited the idea of extreme center, a concept he analyzed in detail, when he published his 2015 book, “The Extreme Centre, A Warning,” followed in 2018 by

a second edition: “The Extreme Centre, A Second Warning.” He develops his analysis in the context of United Kingdom politics, in the period just before and shortly after Brexit. He also looks closely at the European Union and NATO.

He notes in particular that in Western democracies, mainstream parties, regardless of their traditional left or right affiliations, converge to serve the interests of the market and uphold shared neoliberal policies. This means that the notion at the core of democratic ideology, that people can choose and manage their system of governance, has been mechanically replaced by a trust in market forces. Markets decide; markets legislate, even if they need human robots (legislators) to carry out the formal task.

Extreme centrists will always consider the marketplace as the true geographical “center” of politics, though they generally refuse to acknowledge the logical corollary, that this can only happen to the detriment of the demos in democracies and even the human princes, governors, benevolent dictators or philosopher-kings that dominated traditional, pre-democratic political thinking.

Macron famously aspires to be a “Jupiterian” autocrat and, as a super-technocrat who understands marketplaces but famously fails in his rapport with actual people, the former Rothschild banker is well placed to play king of the gods in a super-centrist world. The gods over which he reigns are the forces of the marketplace.

In 2021, *The Jacobin* interviewed French MP Danièle Obono, who explained her vision of Macron’s hold on power. “The last four years have seen a form of radicalization. But from two different points: from both the far right and the extreme center, which has grown into an annex of the far right. We see this when we consider Macronism as a political force, as a form of power,

both in its antisocial dimension and in its anti-ecological dimension.”

Macron’s extreme centrist mandate may end soon, possibly even sooner than the official deadline for a new election in 2027. Most commentators believe that the confusion within his now twice rejected centrist coalition leaves the door open to the person who has become his now traditional rival on the extreme-right: Marine Le Pen. But, of course, Le Pen earned her apparent legitimacy by distancing herself from her extremist father, the late Jean-Marie, and innovating with a new hybrid ideology: that of an extreme-right party that embraces an extreme centrist culture.

Apart from the blow to Macron’s narcissism, the current president may well feel more comfortable with Le Pen at the Elysée Palace than any of the other possible successors on the left, right or even no man’s land. For the latter, I’m thinking of Dominique de Villepin, who could rise above the establishment crowd as the providential choice of the electorate. A more likely scenario, if Villepin does emerge, is that he will be blocked, if not emasculated by the Israeli lobby, more discreet, but possibly just as influential in France as in the US.

*[In the age of Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, another American wit, the journalist Ambrose Bierce produced a series of satirical definitions of commonly used terms, throwing light on their hidden meanings in real discourse. Bierce eventually collected and published them as a book, *The Devil’s Dictionary*, in 1911. We have shamelessly appropriated his title in the interest of continuing his wholesome pedagogical effort to enlighten generations of readers of the news. Read more of Fair Observer Devil’s Dictionary.]

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

Peter is Fair Observer’s chief strategy officer . He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management. As a publisher, he has developed collaborative methods and revolutionary software tools based on non-linear logic for soft skills training. He has authored, produced and published numerous multimedia and e-learning products and partnered with major organizations such as the BBC, Heinemann and Macmillan. Peter has published books and articles in English and on intercultural management, language learning, technology and politics. Educated at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Oxford, Peter resides in France and shares US and French nationality. His Fair Observer column, *The Daily Devil's Dictionary* created in 2017, which now appears in a weekly format, provides ironic perspectives on the news, and has attracted fans across the world.

LATIN AMERICA

The Trial of Jair Bolsonaro: The Future of Brazilian Democracy

Luiz Cesar Pimentel
September 13, 2025

The Supreme Federal Court in Brazil judges former President Jair Bolsonaro and other officials accused of planning a coup and undermining democracy. Investigations

describe a plot beginning in 2021 that culminated in the January 2023 attack on Brasília. The trial defines Brazil's institutional strength while US pressure under Donald Trump heightens tensions.

In a historic milestone for Brazilian democracy, the Supreme Federal Court (STF) convicted former President Jair Bolsonaro and seven other defendants for participating in a coup plot that sought to subvert the results of the 2022 elections — when Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva defeated him — and remain in power. The trial, concluded on September 11, by the First Panel of the Court, established prison sentences and ineligibility for the eight individuals involved.

Brazil witnessed for the first time the trial of the architects of a plan to destabilize institutions and the democratic rule of law. The seriousness of the charges and the importance of the verdict for the country's future reflect the unprecedented nature of the case.

Bolsonaro is the tenth head of state to be punished for this crime in the world, and the first in Brazil's history. The newspaper *O Globo* conducted a survey of leaders convicted since 1946 and identified a total of 186 convictions of 128 heads of government in 69 countries. Most of these convictions, however, were for corruption crimes, not attempted coups.

Brazil has experienced at least 15 coups or coup attempts since the end of the monarchy in 1889. The most infamous and damaging was the seizure of power by force in 1964, when a military uprising overthrew President João Goulart, ushering in a 21-year dictatorship.

Jair Bolsonaro defended this stance throughout his political career, since the 1980s, and refused to

call the regime that was imposed a dictatorship, classifying it as a period of “order and progress” (which is the motto written on the Brazilian national flag).

When he voted in favor of the impeachment of then-President Dilma Rousseff in 2016, he dedicated his vote to Colonel Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra, “the terror of Dilma Rousseff,” in his words — Ustra had tortured the president during the dictatorial regime.

The decision and the sentences

The final decision was four votes to one. Justices Alexandre de Moraes (rapporteur), Flávio Dino, Cármen Lúcia and Cristiano Zanin voted for conviction, while Luiz Fux voted for acquittal. The sentences, based on evidence such as notes, live videos, use of the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) for espionage and draft coup documents, were established as follows:

Jair Bolsonaro: Sentenced to 27 years and three months in prison, to be served in a closed regime, in addition to a fine of more than 447,000 Brazilian Real (about \$80,000). The former president and the other defendants were sentenced to ineligibility for eight years, added to the eight years already determined by the Superior Electoral Court (TSE) in 2023. The reporting minister, de Moraes, pointed to Bolsonaro as the leader of an armed criminal organization that sought the violent abolition of the democratic rule of law.

Other defendants: Walter Braga Netto (general and former minister), Almir Garnier (admiral and former Navy commander), Anderson Torres (former Minister of Justice), Augusto Heleno (general and former Minister of Institutional Security), Paulo Sérgio Nogueira (general and former Minister of Defense) and Alexandre Ramagem (federal deputy and former director of Abin) were also convicted, with prison sentences

ranging from 16 to 26 years. Mauro Cid, Bolsonaro's former aide-de-camp, received a two-year open prison sentence, benefiting from a plea bargain.

The defendants were convicted of various crimes related to the attempted coup, including armed criminal organization, violent abolition of the democratic rule of law, aggravated damage to federal property and deterioration of listed heritage sites.

Context: The chronology of the alleged coup

What led Brazil to this decisive point was a series of events that, according to investigations by the Federal Police (PF) and allegations by the Attorney General's Office (PGR), form the basis of the indictment.

According to the complaint, the plot began in March 2021, when the STF annulled former President Lula's convictions, and his release from prison made him eligible to run for office. From then on, Jair Bolsonaro's support group allegedly began a campaign to question the electoral system and delegitimize the possible victory of an opponent. In July 2022, the PGR and the PF indicated that a criminal organization had been structured with plans to interfere in the elections.

After Bolsonaro's defeat by Lula in the presidential election in October 2022, the movement allegedly became more radical, with supporters camping in front of Army barracks calling for military intervention. Investigations revealed the existence of a coup plan, the "Green and Yellow Dagger," which was reportedly presented to military commanders in December 2022 but was rejected by the Army and Air Force leadership. The complaint points to the existence of a "coup decree," which provided for the annulment of the elections and the arrest of Supreme Court ministers.

The crisis reached its peak on January 8, 2023, with the invasion and destruction of the headquarters of the Three Powers in Brasília, in acts that investigations by the PF and the Joint Congressional Investigating Committee (CPMI) concluded were part of a planned and financed mobilization. In July 2023, the investigation also found a draft decree on Law and Order at the home of former Justice Minister Anderson Torres, which would confirm plans to arrest Minister Alexandre de Moraes and annul the election.

The culmination of this investigation occurred in November 2024, when the PF indicted Bolsonaro and 36 other individuals. The PGR formalized the complaint to the STF in February 2025, and the court accepted the request in March 2025, turning the accused into defendants.

Trump on the scene: the international dimension

The trial took on a complex international dimension. The lawsuit is a domestic matter, but the shadow of US President Donald Trump looms over the case with profound political and diplomatic consequences.

According to analysts, the relationship between Brazil and the US is experiencing a deepening crisis, with Washington imposing tariffs on Brazilian products and sanctions against members of the Supreme Court. These measures are seen as a direct reaction by the Trump administration in support of Bolsonaro.

The strategy of rapprochement with the US was articulated by federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, son of the former president, who traveled to the country to ask for international support and seek "fair punishment" for de Moraes and the Federal Police.

Trump's support for Bolsonaro was not limited to statements. The American president spoke out against the legal proceedings, calling them a "witch hunt," and imposed 50% tariffs on Brazilian products. The US government then announced sanctions against de Moraes, revoking his visa and those of his family members, and opened a trade investigation against Brazil, accusing the judiciary of "censoring" American technology companies. Experts believe that these acts of intimidation and bullying reflect Trump's personal affinity with Bolsonaro, as both have been accused of attempting to overturn election results and incite their supporters.

The political and diplomatic consequences of this interference are notable. US pressure has worn down Brazilian public opinion and, according to polls, has reinforced the perception that Bolsonaro participated in the coup plot. However, this interference does not seem to have changed the opinion of his most loyal supporters. In the political arena, the growth of negative views about Bolsonaro had led parties to rethink the costs of a strong defense of the former president.

The protagonists and the next steps

The progress of the process reflects the actions of two key figures: Alexandre de Moraes and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

As rapporteur for the investigations, de Moraes has become the main face of the judicial response. His actions have been marked by conducting investigations, authorizing searches and seizures, and now, by reporting on the trial, with a vote that points out that the defendants not only planned but also initiated concrete actions to discredit democracy.

For his part, Lula has taken on the role of defender of the rule of law, vehemently condemning the acts of January 8 and defending

the work of the PF and the judiciary. His stance has reinforced the autonomy of institutions and the country's democratic legitimacy in the eyes of the international community.

The defendants' defense can still appeal the decision, which prevents immediate imprisonment. Bolsonaro is currently under provisional house arrest, and the final decision on where he will serve his sentence will be made after all appeals have been exhausted. The loss of the convicted men's military rank will be reviewed by the Superior Military Court (STM) after the final judgment.

This trial was not just an isolated case. It served as a global reminder that democracy, even in consolidated nations, is not immune to internal (and external) threats. The way Brazil dealt with this plot determined the strength of its institutions and its reputation as a nation that, above all, submits to the law and the Constitution.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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US Revokes Colombian President's Visa: The Volatile Relationship Between North and South America

Laura Pavon

October 22, 2025

Colombian President Gustavo Petro confronted US President Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly over foreign intervention and climate policy. Washington revoked Petro's visa after he urged US soldiers to disobey Trump's orders. This clash may redefine Colombia's ties with Washington and shape Latin America's stance toward US influence in 2026.

In September, Colombian President Gustavo Petro delivered two controversial speeches at the 2025 United Nations General Assembly in New York. The first was his speech at the podium to a crowd of international leaders, where he called for the creation of a UN army to liberate Palestine and denounced US attempts to intervene in Venezuela and Colombia.

Following his speech, he addressed a gathering of pro-Palestinian protesters and journalists outside the UN building using a megaphone, where he urged US soldiers to disobey President Donald Trump's orders. His exact words were:

The people united will never be defeated. We are going to present a resolution ordering the United Nations to form an army to save the world, whose first task will be to liberate Palestine. From

here, from New York, I ask all soldiers in the US Army not to point their guns at humanity. Disobey Trump's orders, obey the orders of humanity.

Washington responds: visa revocation and diplomatic fallout

In response, the US State Department announced on X that it was revoking Petro's visa due to his "reckless and incendiary actions." This is the second time a Colombian president has had his visa revoked by the US. The first was Ernesto Samper during former US President Bill Clinton's first term in 1996, due to his alleged connection to the Cali drug cartel and Colombia's refusal to extradite drug traffickers. In August 2025, Arturo Arias, the ex-president of Costa Rica and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, stated that the US had canceled his visa after he voiced his criticism of Trump on the internet.

Petro's visa cancellation appears to have added him to the list of current or former presidents banned from entering the US. This list also includes Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, who was unable to attend the UN assembly for this same reason.

A fractured relationship: Colombia and the United States through history

The revocation of Petro's visa is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the United States' decades-long challenging relationship with Colombia, a pivotal nation in the South American political landscape. This relationship is typically portrayed by endeavors to combat drug trafficking, the contradictory romanticization of figures like Pablo Escobar by popular culture — as depicted in the Netflix series *Narcos* — and the cloaking of the shared history of North and South American decolonial struggles for independence and the contributions of figures like Gabriel García Márquez (the Colombian Nobel Prize winner in

literature in 1982 and author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* [1967]).

More specifically, setting aside magical realism, the relationship between Petro and Trump has been brief yet intense, and it has been defined by a series of mutual accusations that began in January of this year.

Petro initially rejected two planes carrying Colombian deportees, arguing that they were not receiving dignified treatment. However, the two countries later reached an agreement amid threats of tariffs.

Petro's rhetoric of resistance and the echo of Bolívar

Petro chose X to address the US president directly. In this missive, which begins with a confessional tone, he writes:

Trump, I don't really like traveling to the US. It's boring, but I must admit that there are some good things about it ... I don't like your oil, Trump. You're going to destroy the human race because of your greed. Maybe someday, over a glass of whiskey, which I accept despite my gastritis, we can talk frankly about this. But it's difficult because you consider me inferior, and I'm not, nor is any Colombian.

In his lengthy letter, Petro suggests taking a historical journey and recalls the US intervention against Chilean President Salvador Allende, which elevated Augusto Pinochet to power. He appears to be defending Colombia's global standing, highlighting aspects such as "Colombia is the heart of the world, and you misunderstood that. This is the land of yellow butterflies, the land of Remedios' beauty," drawing a literary parallel to one of the most stunning scenes in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

Among other references to the past struggles of the US civil rights movement, Petro contradicts his willingness to share a whiskey with Trump when he adds, "I do not shake hands with white slave owners. I shake hands with white libertarians, the heirs of Lincoln, and black and white peasant boys of the United States."

In this X message, Petro uses the plural form of "Americas," making it clear that Colombia will no longer look northward. He also mentions Venezuelan statesman and military officer Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), the hero of South American independence — also known as *El Libertador*, "the liberator" — highlighting the shared, collective and plurinational history of the Americas, which he believes Trump does not represent.

He draws attention to Trump's immigrant past and lack of Native American ancestry, referring to him as an "immigrant" as well: "I raise a flag and, as Gaitán said, even if I am alone, it will continue to fly with Latin American dignity, which is the dignity of America, which your great-grandfather did not know, but mine did, Mr. President, immigrant in the United States."

Although several months had passed and the scenario was different, Petro maintained the core sentiment of his aforementioned X epistle when he addressed the UN General Assembly. His speech was equally assertive and combative.

Climate, conflict and calls for a new world order

He addressed statements made by the US government one week prior to the assembly, in which they claimed that neither Venezuela nor Colombia was cooperating in the fight against drug trafficking.

These statements were made amid the sensitive situation involving the US troops' launch of a

missile at a small boat in Caribbean waters in early September. The US alleged that the ship was trafficking drugs. Standing before the UN, Petro shared that an investigation was underway to determine if Colombian civilians were aboard the boat. He stressed the importance of initiating due process against the US officials who ordered the missile strike.

From the podium, Petro provocatively proposed that “Drug traffickers live elsewhere. They live in New York, a few blocks away, and in Miami. They make deals with the DEA. They live in luxury, not poverty. Not in the Caribbean or Gaza.”

The Colombian President also devoted much of his speech to discussing the climate crisis and clean energies, such as green hydrogen and decarbonization. He praised the “enormous absorbent sponge of the Amazon rainforest”. He also accused the “most powerful government in the world” of not believing in science: “That is called irrationalism, and it was that same irrationalism that filled Hitler’s Germany.”

When it was his turn, Trump devoted a significant portion of his address to the UNGA to criticizing renewable energy and rejecting the scientific consensus on climate change. He claimed that clean energy sources, such as solar and wind power, are less effective and more expensive than fossil fuel alternatives.

Speaking from the UN podium, Petro adopted the tone of the Latin American independence heroes he mentioned in his January letter when he proposed the creation of a UN armed force. He made statements such as, “There is no superior race, gentlemen. There are no chosen people of God. Neither the United States nor Israel are chosen by God. Ignorant fundamentalists of the extreme right think that way. The chosen people of God are all of humanity.”

After this, he added that diplomacy had run its course and urged the UN to establish an armed force to protect the lives of Palestinians: “Words are no longer enough. It is time for Bolívar’s sword of liberty or death because they are not only going to bomb Gaza and the Caribbean, they already are, they are attacking humanity, which cries out for freedom.”

From Bolívar’s dream to a divided continent

In addition to his defiant tone toward Trump and his call for the US military to rebel against him, Petro’s recent public statements are notable for their repeated mention of Bolívar. During his visit to New York, he granted an interview to the BBC News World based in Manhattan. The words chosen for the headline of the interview’s video were “Trump has failed to understand that Bolívar’s children are not subordinates.” Bolívar, the “Liberator of America,” fought against the Spanish crown for 20 years to achieve independence for Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela. Born in Caracas to a family of Creole nobility, Bolívar received a European education. He then brought what he had learned about liberation in France to the other side of the ocean.

In August 1819, Bolívar crossed the Andes mountain range and defeated Spanish troops in the Battle of Boyacá, achieving independence for the region of New Granada, now Colombia. Interestingly, in 1691, Palenque, located in present-day Colombia, was the first colonial settlement to free African slaves, who became the first officially freed black slaves anywhere in the Americas.

One of Bolívar’s greatest hopes was a grand confederation of all the former Spanish colonies in America, inspired by the United States’ model. To this end, in 1826, he convened the Congress of Panama to organize a confederation of American

nations that would support and cooperate with each other for the common good. However, as we know, he did not achieve his goal.

Nowadays, the differences among countries in the region continue. In the current state of affairs, Trump is favored by Ecuadorian President Daniel Noboa and Argentine President Javier Milei, who distance themselves from other regional leaders, such as Chilean President Gabriel Boric and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, who oppose US interventionism.

Domestic backlash and regional uncertainty

2026 will be a pivotal year for South American politics, with upcoming presidential elections in countries such as Peru, Brazil and Colombia. A map that has always been of strategic imperial interest to the United States, as evidenced by its long history of interventions in regime changes. According to the Harvard Review of Latin America, “In the slightly less than a hundred years from 1898 to 1994, the US government has intervened successfully to change governments in Latin America a total of at least 41 times.”

Since the late 20th century, the international relations between Colombia and the United States have been marked by bilateral efforts against drug trafficking, such as the Plan Colombia, signed in 1999 between the administrations of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana Arango and Clinton, who signed it into US law as an approval of an aid package to both keep drugs outside the US shores and “help Colombia promote peace and prosperity and deepen its democracy.”

A fundamental aspect of the Plan Colombia was indeed supporting the disarmament of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the country’s largest insurgent group, founded in the 1960s, and the National Liberation

Army (ELN), both designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the US State Department.

Álvaro Uribe, elected Colombian president in 2010, began formal peace talks with the FARC in 2012. It wasn’t until US President Barack Obama’s and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos’s terms that the peace process actually reached its culmination in Colombia, after only four rounds of negotiations, and with the governments of Chile, Cuba, Norway and Venezuela as hosts, mediators and observers.

The peace agreement called for the guerrillas to hand over their weapons to a UN commission. It also contemplated that international aid, especially from the United States, would be needed to invest in neglected rural areas and create economic alternatives to drug trafficking.

Unlike the FARC, the ELN remains active, particularly along the Colombia-Venezuela border. During his presidency, Petro has pursued the idea of achieving “total peace” by disarming the ELN. However, negotiations broke down in July after the ELN attacked civilians in the Catatumbo border region.

Due to its involvement in illegal economies, peasant agriculture and the centuries-long indigenous struggle for land sovereignty, it seems that the ELN continues to hold significant social power.

Returning to Petro’s controversial visit to New York, during the BBC News World interview, journalist Tom Bateman asked Petro, “Are you concerned that taking this approach of resisting the US administration risks further isolating your country?” Petro responded that he believes it is President Trump who is isolating himself from the world regarding his position on the Palestinian genocide.

However, a quick review of mainstream Colombian media shows the opposite: the president is facing fierce opposition in his own country. Journalist Daniel Coronell claims that Petro is “building his pedestal as a martyr” and “dragging Colombia down with him.”

Former Foreign Minister Juan Carlos Pinzón told the Colombian media outlet *Semana*, “This country does not need clowns.” Pinzón, who is presenting himself as a potential presidential candidate and former ambassador to the United States, also said, “We will resolve the issue with Israel immediately.” The newspaper *El Colombiano* ran the headline, “Petro without a visa but with a megaphone.”

Francia Márquez, the current Vice President and representative of the Afro-Colombian community, is a prominent figure on the left in Colombia. However, in recent months, her relationship with Petro has been filled with disagreements, despite their cordial appearance together at the UN. Adding to the political tension, Manuel Uribe, a future Colombian presidential candidate, was shot and killed earlier this year. US Secretary Marco Rubio blamed Petro’s inflammatory rhetoric for the assassination.

Colombia clearly has its own internal and historical struggles to tackle. Only time will tell how Petro’s continued antagonism toward the United States will affect the Colombian general elections next year and how the region’s new leaders in 2026 will align with or oppose the United States’ imperialistic endeavors.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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To Live Without Fear: Brazilian Protests Denounce Rise in Gender-Based Violence

Karin Schmalz
December 29, 2025

On December 7, thousands of Brazilians marched to protest femicide and violence against women. Brazil has a deep-rooted history of misogyny, racism and inequality, and though the country has improved since 1988, cultural norms continue the violence. Far-right populism, Bolsonarism, neo-Pentecostal movements and online hate speech, which can receive explicit political support, perpetuate the struggles women and minorities face.

On December 7, the eve of the Feast of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, the Catholic representation of the sinless Virgin Mary, thousands of protesters gathered in over 20 Brazilian cities to petition a wave of unbridled violence against women. In Sao Paulo, the country’s largest city and the epicenter of gruesome events, almost 10,000 people carried signs demanding change. They carried makeshift placards declaring, “Silence kills - stop femicide!,” “Neither monsters nor psychopaths: MEN are

killing us!” and “A Brazilian woman is killed every two minutes,” and called for legal abortion and harsher penalties for sex offenders. The crowd was awash in photographs to honor hundreds of femicide victims.

Artists and intellectuals, social movement leaders, representatives of the Black Movement and politicians from left-leaning parties joined together in many cities to support women’s rights. Protestors carried placards saying, “Marielle lives.” This message references Rio de Janeiro’s former councilwoman, Marielle Franco, a women’s rights activist who was assassinated in 2018. The statement reminded everyone that violence against women is not constrained to domestic relations, as remarked by Marielle’s sister, Minister for Racial Equality Anielle Franco, in the event in the capital of Brasília.

Not even five blocks ahead of the Sao Paulo demonstration, however, 1,200 people had gathered for a different cause: hardline supporters of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, organized by Sao Paulo’s vice-mayor, Colonel Mello Araújo, demanded amnesty for him. Bolsonaro is a notorious misogynist who recently lost his house arrest privileges after using a soldering iron to tamper with his ankle monitor. As his ally, Sao Paulo State Governor Tarcísio de Freitas has cut 96% of the budget to fight violence against women since 2024; this move mirrors Bolsonaro, who cut 90% of the funding to fight gender-based violence between 2020 and 2022.

With support of the police, neo-Pentecostal pastors and controversial characters of Brazilian politics, Araújo told the media there was only one agenda for protests that Sunday: amnesty for Bolsonaro. It was not a lack of judgment or a faux pas by the city’s second-in-command, but a clear message from the right-wing state and municipal governments that the safety of 54% of Brazilians does not matter.

Misogyny in Brazil

Brazil is no stranger to femicide and all forms of violence against women. Since colonial times, sexism and racism have been intertwined, with a patriarchal Christian elite imposing gender roles and behavioral standards on a largely multicultural population. From the struggle of women to get basic voting and labor rights to the ongoing fight to achieve full body autonomy, Brazil has mistreated its female population for centuries.

Misogyny is still a socially acceptable political weapon, as former Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff — the only woman to ever hold that position — experienced during her term and impeachment. Brazilian women earn less than men despite being better educated, and experience worse life conditions. Certain professions, such as those in the law field, underrepresent women despite them graduating in higher numbers than men. Sexism runs rampant in Brazilian science and higher education. Women in Brazil suffer discrimination at work for getting pregnant despite law protections, are subject to sexual harassment and have poorer medical care, as doctors ignore their complaints more often.

Racial and income inequality aggravate these issues. Domestic violence occurs in all female demographics but is higher for young, black and lower-income women. Poor black women in Brazil are targets of triple discrimination, despite this demographic being the largest in public universities thanks to affirmative action. The insidious combination of racism and misogyny, however, has yet to be extirpated from Brazilian society if the vulnerability of this population, who represents 28% of Brazilians, is to be reduced.

Progress in femicide law and behavioral change

The country has seen strides to reduce gender inequality since the 1988 promulgation of the most

recent Brazilian Constitution, which institutes gender equality in its 5th Article. Previous civil law changes improved the agency for women to remove themselves from dangerous relationships. For example, the nation prohibited divorce until 1977, when it became a legal process, but still required a cause and a mandatory minimum 12-month period of legal separation. The whole process could be contested, generally by the man, at any moment. The law was generally applied unfavorably to women, especially if they were accused of adultery. Courts could only implement the current “no-fault” process after a constitutional amendment in 2010 dispensed with the need for judicial agreement. This led couples to divorce in record numbers for several years.

“Crimes of honor,” which practically allowed men to kill their wives, were only outlawed in 1991. Adultery, often used as a defense in domestic violence cases against women, was decriminalized in 2005. One of the most infamous cases in Brazil, in which both the moral slander of a woman’s behavior and the “defense of honor” were used to acquit a murderer, was recently adapted to film: the 1974 femicide of socialite Ângela Diniz by entrepreneur Doca Street, her then-boyfriend, with four close-range gunshots to her face. In his 1976 trial, he pleaded guilty of “killing for love,” initially received a two-year prison sentence and immediately saw release.

The trial focused on Diniz’s “immoral lifestyle;” she was separated but not divorced from her husband, and therefore was an adulterer and sinner. The opposite of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception, the media described Diniz as a woman who was “begging to be killed.” Public prosecutors appealed, and Street was re-sentenced in 1981, this time to 15 years in prison. The media circus led to one of the first campaigns against domestic violence in Brazil: “Quem ama não mata” (“Those who love do not kill”).

The most important legal turning point came with the creation of the landmark Maria da Penha Law in 2006, based on the infamous 1983 femicide attempt against Maria da Penha Maia Fernandes by her husband, after the authorities ignored her pleas for help. The case ended up in the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States in 1998 — it found Brazil negligent in her case.

The new law defined domestic violence more broadly, including, in addition to physical violence, psychological, sexual, moral and patrimonial violence by partners regardless of gender or cohabitation, understanding these as a breach of human rights. It also created specialized courts and support mechanisms for victims, including shelters and protection measures for women threatened by their partners, and increased sentences for offenders. Its efficiency, however, is highly dependent on sociocultural factors and regional implementation. Some indicators suggest the law has decreased hospitalizations and deaths caused by domestic violence, and increased case notifications.

In 2015, Brazil enacted the Femicide Law, adding femicide to the Penal Code as an aggravated form of homicide and a hate crime, with much higher sentences. Its implementation still encounters sociocultural and regional obstacles. Then in 2023, after two years of deliberation in the Brazilian Supreme Court, the “legitimate defense of honor” argument, used by Street in his first trial, was definitively declared unconstitutional. It cannot be called on any phase of a femicide case, from the investigation to the trial by jury.

Beyond legal instruments to protect women, federal, state and municipal governments, social movements and even companies created strong campaigns that reviewed traditional Brazilian attitudes that fostered domestic violence. In 2018,

Magazine Luiza, one of Brazil's largest retail stores — famously founded and headed by women — picked on the old saying, “Em briga de marido e mulher, ninguém mete a colher” (“No one should poke their nose into a husband-and-wife fight”). The campaign urged the population to “yes, poke [their] noses” and intervene, call the police or anonymously denounce cases. The slogan later found adoption by the National Campaign to Fight Violence Against Women, or “Lilac August,” which defines a yearly month-long awareness campaign about the Maria da Penha Law.

The effectiveness of campaigns appears to depend on adopting the behaviors recommended by them and the multiplication of behavior-changing ideas through social contact, or “word-of-mouth” actions.

Misogyny, Bolsonarism and Brazil's digital sphere

Violence data is tracked by the Institute for Applied Economic Research, a public institution linked to the Brazilian Ministry of Planning and Budget. Its interactive publication *Atlas da Violência* (“Atlas of Violence”) pools homicide rates from 1980 up to 2022, allowing users to select particular years and states, gender, race and age. However, it does not discriminate between femicide, manslaughter or felony murder. Overall murder rates fluctuate in the country, but have been declining since 2017.

The murder rate of women, however, declined from 5/100,000 in 1997 to 3.8/100,000 in 2022, including manslaughter and robbery-homicides. A more detailed view comes from the Observatory on Violence Against Women, a committee from the Brazilian Federal Senate designated to study femicide rates and accompany legal cases. It identifies an unsettling increase in this type of crime since 2022, with the state of Sao Paulo having the highest numbers in 2025. Renata

Furbino, a professor of criminal law from the Federal University of Minas Gerais, affirms that, despite the laws already in place to protect women, it is necessary to understand the present context of society to interpret and combat these trends.

Digital campaigners from #ShePersisted, a non-profit organization fighting misogyny in global politics, published a study about Brazil that highlighted the weaponization of misogyny against Brazilian women in public life. They identified organized actors who coordinated social media attacks towards women in leadership roles, most connected to politicians such as Bolsonaro and his allies, and pseudo-intellectuals such as the deceased self-proclaimed philosopher and far-right guru Olavo de Carvalho.

Men have so frequently targeted women in the Brazilian digital sphere that entire books are published on the phenomenon, alleging that Big Tech companies organize and foster the attacks. A study from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro shows that digital misogyny is a business model from social media platforms, with algorithms pushing disinformation and fraudulent ads that demean women in all digital channels. Misogyny is profitable, and tech companies found a gold cauldron in Brazil, as the nation's digital presence is one of the largest worldwide. Dubbed the “Social Media Capital of the Universe,” Brazil is the second largest market on Facebook, with over 65 million users. Its netizens spend more than nine hours a day interacting with others online.

This is such a hotbed for social media misuse that Supreme Court Minister Alexandre de Moraes fined X owner Elon Musk for circumventing Brazilian laws against hate speech and spreading disinformation. Moraes even temporarily blocked X in the whole country until Musk paid the fine.

Misogynistic efforts from Big Tech platforms are growing more hostile. Recently, Meta blocked

content from organizations advising on reproductive rights across the world, regardless of whether abortion, queer rights and transgender support are legal in a country. These accounts enable cisgender and transgender women to deal with body autonomy and domestic and social violence, providing an anonymous, discrete way to access information and guidance while they seemingly browse their social media.

Progressive lawmakers are still fighting for pieces of legislation that may ameliorate this shameful scenario in Brazil. In 2024, after intense lobbying by Big Tech companies with far-right congressmen, then-President of the Chamber of Deputies Arthur Lira discarded a vital bill meant to regulate the spread of fake news through social media. The caucus all but stopped any bills trying to halt hate speech in social media, forcing the Supreme Court to expand the responsibility of digital platforms with the content they host. Another bill, which legally equates misogyny to racism, would make social media bullying against women a non-bailable offense and carry higher sentences. The ongoing public consultation of the Senate about this bill has not yet reached the greater public, but already has over 70% support for its approval.

The digital sphere also fostered and spread throughout Brazil imported movements such as “incel culture,” “red pilling” and the “manosphere,” bringing in concepts such as masculine supremacy, extreme misogyny and justification for gender-based violence. Together with far-right ideology, which is intrinsically linked to gender-based violence, neo-Pentecostal churches have pushed to end gender equality for at least a decade. They have found social media perfect for convincing battered, socially-isolated and hopeless young men that they are divinely entitled to rule over, and even kill, the women who reject them.

Far-right populism, such as that personified by Bolsonarism, attracts low-income men during economic crises, while women tend to be attracted to progressive movements under the same circumstances. Misogyny may be the differential, also fueled by racism and cruelty, to the point that Brazil now has a saying when gender- and race-based violence happens: “Nem todo Bolsonarista, mas sempre um Bolsonarista” (“Not all Bolsonarists, but always a Bolsonarist”). Femicide skyrocketed during Bolsonaro’s term, and researchers understood this hike in numbers to be connected to a virtual “licence to kill” granted by the presidency.

A perfect example of the explosive mix of misinterpreted mythical Christian biblical masculinity, militarism, the money-oriented Prosperity Gospel and far-right conservatism is the Legendários movement, created by an evangelical pastor in Guatemala and imported to Brazil in 2017. Claiming to transform “woke” and “weak” men into “heroes,” the movement charges high fees to take men on hikes in nature, teaching them to bottle up their feelings and “soldier up” when in distress. This strategy led to two deaths in 2025.

Despite claiming to teach Christian love, on March 8 — International Women’s Day — two Legendários members violently attacked a woman in the city of Cuiabá, state of Mato Grosso, beating her in front of security cameras after an argument at a restaurant’s playground. The group later expelled the two wealthy entrepreneurs after social backlash. Progressive religious leaders continue to criticize the movement and point out the link between this Christian interpretation and increasing femicide numbers.

Digital media platforms became fertile ground for Bolsonarism and the growth of misogynistic hate speech in Brazil, a phenomenon that is involved with the attempted coup on January 8, 2023, and receives strong support from Big Tech

companies. When the Bolsonarist caucus in Brazilian legislative houses became a majority during Bolsonaro's 2019–2023 presidential term, it employed disruptive strategies to create mayhem during votes on human rights, gender equality and race equality topics, using inflammatory moments as snippets for social media. For the 2023 election, they used Telegram to question the validity of Brazil's electoral system and, as the main group inside "deep web" environments and the "influence-sphere," managed to gain an even larger majority for the current legislative term.

Using social media techniques such as polarization, false identity, emotion, defamation (often targeting women, ethnic minorities and LGBTQIA+ politicians) and conspiracy theories, far-right politicians and influencers abuse digital platforms to destabilize social discourse and feed into Brazil's ingrained prejudices. They produce virtue signaling short videos inside Congress and post them on TikTok, Instagram and X, showing far-right politicians preaching against "woke" congressmen, in particular female, transgender and black left-wing representatives. In January 2025, Chief of Staff Rui Costa warned that the opposition in the legislature behaves like "spoiled brats" and one cannot build hospitals with "preachy videos."

The most recent push to achieve amnesty for the perpetrators of the coup attempt brought utter chaos and authoritarian moves by conservative President of the Chamber of Deputies Hugo Motta, of the Republicanos party. On December 9, Motta ordered Legislative Police to forcefully remove a progressive lawmaker, cut the live feed of the TV Câmara public television network — an unprecedented move after re-democratization — and expel the press from the building, physically harming journalists like Universo Online reporter Carolina Nogueira. Bolsonarist lawmakers took the opportunity to pronounce their prejudices and hate

speech for their audience, and instances of violence against women repeated on the tribune.

The next night, on December 10, Congress held a vote to impeach left-wing Congressman Glauber Braga for kicking a far-right activist from the Movimento Brasil Livre (Free Brazil Movement). The debate inflamed Bolsonarist congressman Paulo Bilynskyy, the proud grandson of a Nazi soldier who is infamous for his involvement in his girlfriend's controversial death. At the session, Bilynskyy threatened Congresswoman Duda Salabert, a transwoman, saying he would "break her face" if he could. Motta then called Congresswoman Benedita da Silva, a black 83-year-old veteran of the center-left Workers' Party, a liar, told her that her party was against the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution and cut her microphone mid-speech. Da Silva managed to return to the microphone and read him the signatures on her copy of the Constitution: She was actually the Third Secretary of the Constitutional Commission.

A bizarre tale can serve as a summary of Brazil's situation of mixing neo-Pentecostal religions, Bolsonarism and femicide. A film about Bolsonaro's life, *Dark Horse*, is in production in Brazil, directed by American filmmaker Cyrus Nowrasteh, written by Bolsonarist congressman and actor Mário Frias and starring actor Jim Caviezel as Bolsonaro. The production company, headed by executive producer Karina Ferreira da Gama, has no experience in cinema. Yet it received 108 million reais (over \$19.5 million) to install overpriced Wi-Fi systems in Sao Paulo's low-income communities — which it never properly delivered — and raised funds for neo-Pentecostal festivals.

The whole convoluted deal, as described by news agency Intercept Brasil, involves large amounts of public funds being transferred to the production company and its subcontractors. One of

these subcontractors, Alex Leandro Bispo dos Santos, received over 12 million reais (over \$2.1 million) from Dark Horse's production company and inadvertently helped trigger the massive protests against femicide around the country. On November 29, following a violent domestic altercation, Santos's severely beaten 25-year-old wife Maria Katiane Gomes da Silva died after falling from the tenth floor of their apartment building. Police arrested him a few days later, when investigators doubted his account of her suicide, and abundant evidence of his violence came to light.

Brazil's femicide struggle persists

The actions taken by Motta and the Bolsonaroist caucus in Congress to pass a disguised amnesty to Bolsonaro and the military involved in the coup attempt triggered yet another country-wide mobilization. Called by popular progressive organizations in just three days, supporters held massive gatherings in all Brazilian capitals, with calls to remove Motta from the presidency of the Congress, and continued calls for indigenous rights and against femicide. In the city of Recife, feminist groups and female politicians made their presence known. The northeastern Brazilian capital has a strong feminist tradition and has acted as a haven to guarantee legal abortion rights that other Brazilian states denied.

When asked their views on the anti-femicide protests, the women who attended illustrated how important these mobilizations were. Artist Lia Letícia, who works with the relations of patriarchy, race and gender, expressed that femicide has always happened in Brazil. Since the European invasion in the 16th century, indigenous women, and later trafficked African women, were raped, traded and killed with impunity. Violence against women is a tragic part of Brazilian past and present. "Now, we are coming together and talking

about it, so this is a step forward," Lia Letícia affirms.

Cultural producer and actress Irma Brown agrees that femicide has always been present. "Brazil was born from oppression, so all gender-based, racial and class violence end up falling on women, especially women of color," she says. The current situation allows for free discussion, but violence against women is still naturalized across Brazil and bringing the topic to the streets can illuminate this issue. Lia Letícia and Brown believe that instead of an actual growth in femicide in the last months, we are seeing high profile cases and open dialogue on the topic, rather than an actual increase of numbers. In fact, recent governmental statistics show an overall decline in cases of lethal violence against women between 2023 and 2024.

Photographer Camila Silva agrees that these cases were highly publicized, and the media pushed the discussion forward, but women faced gender-based violence all their lives in Brazil. "We all know friends and relatives in some sort of domestic violence situation, and hear about femicide cases all the time," she says. She believes there was a turning point for women's rights born from collective action which allowed for women to get positions of power, but masculine fragility could be the reason for many of these instances of violence. Illustrating this is the case in which a public servant killed his two female superiors at a public technical school in São Paulo, as he could not accept being "ordered around" by women. Silva feels men should be part of the conversation and take action: "A man can say 'well, I do not do that,' but he needs to act more strongly, as he is actually part of this constant struggle."

Artist Juliana Notari points out that the recent cases were not only in São Paulo: Highly-publicized cases came from several Brazilian states, and she agrees that Brazil has always been a

violent place to women, with statistics being aggravated by race and class. A shocking case happened in Recife, where a man provoked a fire and killed his wife and four children. “We had an extremely misogynous far-right president, and the far-right is notorious for its violence, racism and machismo. He validated this type of violence.” Far-right politicians still act in the Congress and Senate, and social media pushed the global swing to the extreme right, but “the same digital platforms that feed red-pilling are also used to push forward fourth-wave feminism.” She urges people to focus on black women, the most common victims, and to push left-wing leaders to better understand the demands of women, as they are still ignoring crucial issues like the right to abortion.

Notari’s 2020 artistic intervention, titled “Diva,” which was exhibited during Bolsonaro’s term and represented historical violences against women and nature, went viral around the world and incurred the wrath of far-right politicians and bloggers. Olavo de Carvalho used his platform to offend the artist and make her a target for disinformation and harassment. The installation earned praise and raised important discussions of patriarchalism, gender violence and body autonomy, and how society is still uncomfortable with female issues.

Dr. Ana Paula Portella, a sociologist and author of the book, *Como Morre uma Mulher?* (“How Does a Woman Die?”), has been researching violence against women since the 1970s. She sees this new wave of protests to combat violence against women as a very positive step, reminding that this movement has been organized for more than 40 years.

“We have a very solid, very strong social feminist movement, and since before Ângela Diniz’s murder we were organizing in this direction, to denounce patriarchal violence,”

Portella says. She explains that despite the last 20 years of governmental support through policies to fight gender-based violence, and an excellent structure to remove women from dangerous situations, society itself offered very little support. “We have seen efficient policies and services at municipal, state and federal levels, but we haven’t seen such massive social support. [The recent cases] were a shock, and I am seeing this popular manifestation for the first time. We had the #MeToo movement in 2015, but it was almost restricted to social media. This time, it spilled over to the streets.”

Portella says that Brazil has been a part of the White Ribbon Campaign, a global action movement of men and boys to end male violence against women, for almost 30 years. But only now are men, including the Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, speaking publicly that “this struggle is also mine.” It is crucial we make it clear that violence against women is a men’s, not a women’s, problem: “Women are victims of a man’s motion, and to end violence it is necessary to interrupt this motion.” She affirms that men become violent by repeating a set of attitudes, words, thoughts and concepts, which unfortunately are also introjected by some women. Men must take responsibility to stop the violence.

“I see these movements of the last two weeks in a very positive way, if this trend is maintained,” she adds. We need to wait and see if this was a fatuous initiative to gain popularity on social media or a genuine effort. “Men need to stop beating up women, and they won’t stop just because of the threat of 40 years in jail.” This comments refers to the changes in law that increased the sentences for rape, domestic violence and femicide, including the creation of a new criminal classification for such cases. “It is not the punishment that solves the problem: the problem will be solved when men say, ‘I will stop.’”

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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.

MIDDLE EAST

International Community Bears Responsibility for Red Sea Crisis and Houthi Crimes

Fernando Carvajal
March 12, 2025

The UN's 2018 Stockholm Agreement exacerbated the current crisis on the Red Sea. This failed diplomatic solution empowered Houthi rebels, allowing them strategic control of critical ports around Yemen. Merchant vessel strikes in the Bab al-Mandab strait threaten global commerce as Yemeni civilians suffer for the Iran-supported militia's crimes.

At the core of the Red Sea crisis lies a failure to address the catastrophe in Gaza. But the outright failure of the United Nations's 2018 Stockholm Agreement in Sweden exacerbated the situation. The Houthis, an Iranian-

sponsored terrorist group based in Sanaa, Yemen, were not empowered by the war in Gaza, but by the opportunities granted them by a deal brokered by then-UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths. Houthis spent nearly a decade building an Iranian-supplied arsenal, which permanently threatens global commerce and regional stability.

The failed diplomatic approach in 2018 produced two major consequences: Houthi aggression along the Red Sea and Arabian Sea and the crimes against Yemenis working for humanitarian organizations. Accounts of the battles for Hodeidah city from June to December 2018 depict how anti-Houthi forces were pressured to halt their advance. Humanitarian organizations and analysts warned against "destructive" military operations against Houthis and advocated for a diplomatic approach to prevent dire consequences for the civilian population. By the time Griffiths called for a summit in Stockholm, southern forces and units under Commander Tareq Saleh had reached the airport and advanced to a position within 16 km east of the city.

The summit concluded with a photo-op and handshake between the Legitimate Government's Foreign Minister, Khaled al-Yamani, and Houthi chief negotiator Muhammad Abd al-Salam. What followed weeks and months later was a classic Houthi manipulation of the Stockholm Agreement — they retained full control over the city, port facilities in Hodeidah and Salif and the oil terminal at Ras Isa. Houthis also neutralized the mechanisms created by the UN Security Council to oversee implementation of the agreement.

Victory postponed

Criticism of the UN approach to conflict in Yemen is not new. Yemenis have attacked every UN Special Envoy since Jamal Benomar (who served from 2011 to 2015), each blamed for further empowering Houthis since they joined the popular

uprising against politician and military officer Ali Abdullah Saleh. Benomar was replaced soon after Houthis launched their invasion of the city of Aden in March 2015. Houthis went on to control 25% more territory than they did when Griffiths was appointed as the third UN Envoy to Yemen in 2018. This prompted Griffiths's replacement.

Reality is far more complicated than a collection of events to justify criticism. However, one can't ignore failure sustained by insisting on the same approach for a decade expecting different results. Millions of Yemenis have suffered the consequences of war since 2011, and there is still no end in sight for this crisis. Yemenis critical of UN officials are aware Houthi rivals also bear responsibility for a decade of armed conflict, but it is abundantly clear that actions by the UN and others directly empowered Houthis and postponed victories to dislodge the rebels from the cities of Hodeidah, Sanaa and Taiz.

While Saleh's stepping down in November 2011 was hailed as a major diplomatic achievement, Yemenis highlight the failure of the National Dialogue Conference and the Peace and Partnership Agreement of 2014 as preludes to the catastrophe in December 2018. Houthis learned that the UN, regional powers and the West were unable to counter their manipulation of agreements that merely granted the rebels time to regroup and rearm. The handshake at Stockholm once again served Houthi interests, as it increased operations at Hodeidah's Red Sea port, allowed troop mobilization east of Saada city and the western al-Jawf province and enabled a strangle-hold over Taiz.

Crimes as consequences

Houthis and their progressive allies in the West present aggression against civilian commercial vessels as operations supporting Palestinians in Gaza. In reality, these attacks have been an

extension of Iran's strategy and Houthi tactics to gain leverage in Yemen.

As members of Iran's Axis of Resistance, Houthis continue to represent a vital instrument for Iran in the southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. While they have independent goals in their fight against Yemeni rivals, they are vital to Iran's encirclement of Saudi Arabia. Iraqi militias from the north, Houthis from the south and new alliances in East Africa grant Iran indispensable advantages over Gulf monarchies, not just Saudi Arabia.

The attacks along across the Bab al-Mandab strait managed to disrupt the global economy, short of expected damage, but failed to accomplish anything in support of Gaza. The attacks on ships, including the hijacking of the *Galaxy Leader* and sinking of the *Rubymar* and *M/V Tutor*, were not new tactics. Houthis have attacked vessels nearly since the start of the war. Training and weapons facilitated their new capabilities and efficiency employed from October 2023. This shows the international community that as long as they are in power and present along the Red Sea coast, they represent an enduring threat to maritime commerce.

Their strategy, as that of Iran, failed to produce expected results vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the UN. Houthis expected the Coalition to acquiesce on demands for a formal security agreement, and the UN to submit under pressure and increase the flow of aid to northern Yemen. Saudi Arabia remains hesitant to finalize the agreement with Houthis beyond the détente of April 2022, and lack of funds from donors decreased the flow of aid to Houthi controlled territory. In response, Houthis raised the stakes and engaged in so-called "hostage diplomacy;" they launched a criminal campaign last summer that detained dozens of Yemenis who worked for UN agencies and non-governmental organizations.

There is no clear path to a return to peace talks between Houthis and the Legitimate Government. The UN lacks any leverage over Houthis and has simply abandoned Yemeni nationals, which leaves their fate up to willing mediators who in turn have their own demands from the international community. Saudi Arabia faces increasing unpredictability from the US administration, risking further derailment of its 2030 Vision. A major challenge for Houthis this time around is that the structure of the PLC serves to prevent the next Stockholm fiasco. Southern factions within the Legitimate Government will not submit to pressure for a deal that further empowers Houthis once again.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

Fernando Carvajal served on the UN Security Council Panel of Experts on Yemen from April 2017 to March 2019 as a regions and armed groups expert. He has nearly 20 years of experience conducting fieldwork in Yemen and is a specialist in Yemeni politics and tribal relations.

Kurdish Newroz Celebrations Expose Iranian Chauvinists' Fear of Ethnic Identity

Halmat Palani
April 29, 2025

On March 21, Kurds across Iran and the diaspora celebrated Newroz with massive, symbolic displays of defiance. Kurdish participation triggered an intense backlash from Iranian and Turkish nationalist forces

seeking to suppress ethnic identity. Iran's refusal to recognize its multi-ethnic reality may ultimately drive further internal conflict.

March 21 marks Newroz, the Kurdish New Year, a joyous celebration of renewal. But for Kurds, it is far more than the arrival of spring. It symbolizes resistance, a declaration of existence in the face of relentless oppression, and a reaffirmation of a centuries-old struggle for freedom.

Across Greater Kurdistan and the diaspora, millions of Kurds gather every year to light torches, dance in traditional dress, and celebrate Newroz. These fires are not merely symbolic of seasonal change but of defiance against the forces that seek to extinguish Kurdish identity. This year, however, Newroz carries even greater significance given the fall of the Assad regime and the unfolding changes in the region.

In Syria, Kurds stand at a pivotal moment. With the fall of the Assad regime and the emergence of a new Syrian authority, Kurdish forces under the SDF have emerged as a decisive power in shaping a future Syria. Despite ongoing challenges, their political and military resilience has transformed them into a formidable force that cannot be ignored by the new administration or regional and Western powers.

In Turkish-occupied Kurdistan or Northern Kurdistan, Newroz arrived amid mass protests against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule and renewed hints at a potential peace process with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party (DEM).

Rojhelat rises: Kurdish defiance and the regime's fear

But perhaps nowhere was Newroz more politically significant this year than in Iran's Kurdish region known as Rojhelat. Kurds in Rojhelat began their Newroz celebrations earlier than the spring equinox on March 21 and continued for a few weeks. What was most striking was the choice by many to wear the Jamanah head wrap and khaki colors as a symbolic gesture of defiance, given that these colors are commonly worn by Kurdish peshmerga who oppose the Shia theocracy that has ruled Iran since 1979. This year's Newroz celebrations are referred to by Kurds as Newrozi Khaposhi, meaning khaki-wearing Newroz.

The large turnout for the celebrations across major cities was unprecedented and took social media by storm. In Mahabad, thousands of Kurds gathered in traditional attire, reaffirming Newroz as a cultural and political act of defiance. Mahabad, the birthplace of the short-lived Kurdish Republic in 1946, symbolizes the Kurdish struggle for self-determination. However, these celebrations were met with severe repression. According to the Hengaw Human Rights Organization, Iranian security forces summoned thousands of people and arrested at least 41 individuals, including six children, across multiple Kurdish cities, including Urmia, Oshnavieh, Sardasht, Saqqez, Marivan, Sanandaj, Piranshahr, Illam and Kermanshah.

In Marivan, the regime even recruited religious clerics loyal to it to decree fatwas that incited violence against Kurds celebrating Newroz. A report by Hengaw cites that a religious figure of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Marivan, Mustafa Sherzadi, warned young people against holding Newroz celebrations and incited groups called the "Religious Honor Forces" to attack and suppress Kurds participating in the celebrations. This crackdown highlights the Iranian regime's systematic efforts to suppress Kurdish cultural expression and political activism through any means necessary.

Another factor that made this year's Newroz celebrations significant among Kurds in Iran was the presence of women dressed in traditional Kurdish clothes and without the required hijab that led to Zhina Amini's death and sparked a revolution for Women, Life and Freedom. Despite threats and the summoning of participants at the Newroz events, women danced freely in defiance of unjust morality laws and demonstrated their desire to celebrate life as a free people.

A further factor that made this year's Newroz significant was the mobilization of Kurds across all Kurdish regions. Thousands came out to celebrate despite the repressive environment in Kurdish areas. Kurds in provinces like Kermashan and Illam also turned up in the thousands, which was unprecedented considering that historically Kurds have been most active politically and culturally in the Mukriyan region and Kurdistan Province. This mass mobilization across all areas inhabited by Kurds put on display the unity of the Kurdish people in Iran, the organization of Kurdish civil society and a new sense of hope in the air as regional events unfold in ways that could present opportunities for Kurds to secure their rights as a people.

From Newroz to nationalist backlash

The unprecedentedly large and passionate Kurdish turnout across all Kurdish-inhabited areas for peaceful Newroz celebrations sent shockwaves through nationalist and state-backed circles. The size and visibility of the Kurdish celebrations, coupled with the growing strength of Kurdish identity in Rojhelat, triggered an immediate backlash from Turkish nationalist groups in the city of Urmia, where over 150,000 Kurds gathered to celebrate Newroz.

According to Rudaw and other reputable news outlets, at an Alawite religious gathering in Urmia shortly after Newroz, a crowd chanted openly anti-

Kurdish slogans like “Urmia belongs to the Turkics and will remain Turkic” and “No Kurd can pass here if a Turkic doesn’t allow it.” “Azerbaijan will never part from Khamenei.” These chants were not random — they were an intentional escalation, aiming to reassert Turkish nationalist dominance over a city that has historically been home to Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians and other ethnic groups alongside its Turkish-speaking population.

The rallying cry of “Hassani, where are you to back and support the Turkics?” invoked the name of Gholamreza Hassani, a cleric infamous for his role in the 1979 Qarna massacre, when Kurdish villagers were slaughtered by state-backed militias.

The backlash reveals how the Islamic regime uses anti-Kurdish sentiment and the ethnic and religious divide among Kurds and Azeris to further threats and animosity toward Kurds under its rule. This anti-Kurdish demonstration was followed a week later by the circulation of a petition by Persian nationalist elites published on Iran’s Khabar Online news agency. The petition, signed by over 800 Iranian academics, musicians, artists and performers, reacts to the celebrations in Kurdish areas and events corresponding to it as a threat to national cohesion, aiming to justify and further institutionalize the marginalization of Kurds and other ethnic nations under Iranian rule.

Iranian nationalist rage and the petition to erase Kurdish identity

While the petition does not explicitly cite the Kurds, the reaction to the Kurdish Newroz celebration makes it clear that references to ethnicity are deliberately indirect references to the Kurds. The points raised by the drafters of the petition reinforce the marginalization of Kurds and other ethnicities under the guise of defending “national unity.” This is evident in the main arguments made in the petition and illustrates how

Persian supremacist narratives work to erase and suppress non-Persian ethnic groups like the Kurds in Iran.

Firstly, the petition insists that Newroz is exclusively “Iranian” and dismisses Kurdish celebrations as “small ethnic, tribal, and local ceremonies.” It even calls Kurdish festivities “imitative and fabricated.” This revisionist history denies the deep Kurdish and non-Persian roots of Newroz, portraying Persian traditions as the only legitimate expression of the holiday. Furthermore, the labeling of Kurds and other ethnicities as “tribal” is equivalent to the European colonizers’ racist labeling of indigenous populations as savage with no culture or civilization. This labeling plays a role in the erasure of Kurds and other non-Persian ethnicities in Iran to delegitimize any counter-narrative to the Persian-centric narrative that Iranian elites hold so dear.

Secondly, the petition labels Kurdish celebrations as “dangerous,” “provocative” and “worthy of condemnation.” The gathering of 150,000 Kurds in Urmia and other Kurdish-inhabited cities was framed as an extremist political event rather than a cultural celebration. This supremacist logic seeks to portray any assertion of non-Persian identity as a security threat.

Thirdly, the document attacks efforts to teach Kurdish, Azeri and Arabic mother tongue languages by portraying them as a “misuse” of Article 15 of Iran’s constitution, which in theory allows for regional languages to be taught and used in local media and schools. The drafters of the petition claim that linguistic rights will “fragment” the country, reinforcing the forced assimilation of non-Persian communities.

Fourthly, the petition accuses Kurds and other ethnic groups of being manipulated by foreign powers, implying that their desire for political and

cultural rights is not genuine but an “imported” agenda. This rhetoric suggests that non-Persian peoples are inherently disloyal. These same accusations are levied against anyone who criticizes regime policy and often lead to capital punishment for Kurds and other non-Persian activists unjustly imprisoned under bogus charges.

Additionally, the petition is riddled with fear-mongering about ethnicity while promoting Persian nationalism as the only legitimate source of identity in Iran. It implies that Persian culture must remain dominant and that others should assimilate rather than embrace their ancient heritage.

Lastly, the petition calls for the suppression of non-Persian cultural and political expression in Iran. The authors urge Iranian authorities to silence Kurdish activism and expression of cultural identity by censoring and controlling Newroz and other cultural celebrations by Kurds and other non-Persian ethnicities. They advocate for the dismissal of officials who support federalism, linguistic rights or non-Persian cultural expressions and direct the government to crack down and increase repression to maintain security and national cohesion.

What the petition reveals about Iranian elites

The signatories of this petition claim to be concerned about national unity and seem alarmed about Kurds expressing their cultural identity. They fear-monger about the very idea of ethnic identity and frame it through a security lens that furthers the oppression of Kurds and other ethnic groups in Iran. This mindset reveals that the chauvinistic and racist mindset often attributed to the ruling Shia theocracy is not exclusive to the governing apparatus but is very much a part of the educated elite of Iranian society inside and outside the country. It further highlights that the occupiers of the Kurds fear any form of gathering and

expression of identity by Kurds, whether it be in Iran, Turkey, Syria or Iraq.

Although a lot has changed in the last two countries mentioned, the anti-Kurdish mindset and policies of forced assimilation against Kurds and other ethnic nationalities are still active and being furthered not just by the government in Iran but also by a chauvinistic and racist class of educated Iranian elites that seek to further criminalize ethnic identity by calling for restrictions on freedom of expression, gathering and political activism among non-Persian groups. This outlook is unjust and extremely dangerous because it portrays Kurdish identity as a national security threat, which legitimizes the abhorrent levels of executions, imprisonment and oppression against Kurds and other ethnic minorities like the Baloch and Ahwaz.

This securitization of ethnicity and culture is not new. It is meant to suppress and discourage efforts to democratize and devolve power from Persian-centric policies to a more multi-ethnic framework of power and citizenship, revealing that Iranian society and government are unlikely to embrace any form of a multicultural political entity or decentralization championed by the Kurds as the way forward for Iran. This refusal to accept the reality on the ground — that Iran is a multi-ethnic state with varying identities — will be what leads to Iran's partition, not the Kurdish expression of identity and culture. Until Iranian elites come to terms with this reality, the prospects of internal conflict in Iran remain high.

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The Middle East 2025: The Good, the Bad and the Tragically Ugly

Gary Grappo
May 03, 2025

In the last hundred years, the Middle East has been persistently unstable, shaped by shifting power dynamics and external interference. Though the Gulf States have seen positive economic development, other countries and regions, especially Gaza and Sudan, face vicious conflicts. The rare opportunities for peace have been squandered, leading to further instability.

Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the 20th century, the Middle East has been marked by conflict, violence, political instability, foreign interference, the rise and consequent decline of regional powers and economic hardship. Much of that remains today, but much has also changed. Some for the better, some not. What has not is that the region remains as full of opportunity as it is fraught with external and internal political tension and conflict. Some of the region's struggles are as far from resolution as they've ever been.

Economies are in flux. The oil-rich Gulf States have joined the ranks of some of the most developed nations in the world, leveraging their oil wealth to move into areas like artificial intelligence, hydrogen fuel, widespread solar energy and mega sporting events. Outside the Gulf, however, the economic picture is less rosy as nations and their societies wrestle with high unemployment (especially among youth) and underemployment (especially among women), low

growth, corruption and low domestic and foreign direct investment.

The most significant change has been the region's overall balance of power. It has clearly shifted over the last 18 months. The United States is still the Middle East's preeminent outside power, though not without competitors near and far. Without question, Israel is the most powerful regional state though very much dependent on the continuing support of the US. Regional powers — Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — play a much more active role than in the past, for better and for worse. Looking ahead at the opportunities and threats the region faces, these factors lead to much uncertainty.

The good

The conflict provoked by the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel triggered several strategic changes in the region. It bears out the adage known to generals and diplomats that war is inherently unpredictable for both aggressors and victims. In this case, Israel's superior military prowess, technology, intelligence and firepower paired with indispensable support from America produced positive results across the region: the destruction of Hamas as a governing organization in Gaza and a greatly weakened military organization (accompanied by incalculable devastation in Gaza), the effective neutralization of Hezbollah, the first full-fledged government in Lebanon in more than two years, the devastation of Iran's air defenses and ballistic missile factories and fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria.

All of this meant that the strength of one of the region's major powers, Iran, has been significantly diminished while that of another, Israel, has been elevated. Beyond the deterioration of its internal defenses, Iran has lost a number of its external proxies, e.g., Hezbollah and Hamas, and a vital ally in the region, Syria. Moreover, Russian

influence in the Middle East has declined immensely as a result of its war of aggression in Ukraine.

From the perspective of the West and its moderate Arab allies, all of this is good news. With a reduced threat from Iran, countries might be able to redirect more of their resources to the economic and social challenges they face. But this is the Middle East — changes in the strategic balance don't always provide anticipated benefits.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the weakening of Iran has presented Israel and the US with a strategic opening. Israel reportedly had proposed attacking Iran's nuclear infrastructure. US President Donald Trump apparently nixed the plan for now, preferring the diplomatic option. The US and Iran have conducted at least three negotiating sessions with more promised, including those at the all-important technical level.

Had the two sides not opted for diplomacy and resorted to war, the outcome might have been prolonged, greater violence in the region, even if Iran's nuclear capabilities were neutralized. Yet the possibility of war against Iran remains real. Should negotiations fail or one side withdraw, it is almost inevitable that Israel, with the likely assistance of the US, will attack the Islamic Republic.

For now, however, the ongoing negotiations between Tehran and Washington are an unambiguous good, which all nations can and should applaud.

The bad

Despite this good news, at least from the perspective of some quarters, the region remains unstable. Publics remain dissatisfied with their governments, almost none of which are accountable to their people. Governments, having

witnessed the instability of the Arab Spring in 2011–2012, look suspiciously on their people, accounting for their stepped-up repression, including through greater use of electronic surveillance and artificial intelligence. Respect for human rights in the region remains distressingly low.

Continuing concerns about the future of Iran, the Gaza War, Syria's future direction, Turkey's increasing regional interests and the actions of the great powers gazing on the region's resource wealth have meant that Arab governments must still devote considerable budget resources to military forces and their hardware, and less to the economic and social demands of their people. We should not expect this picture to change a great deal in the near- to medium-term future. Change comes slowly in the Middle East.

Internal political forces pose their own set of challenges. That is no more evident than in the Middle East's lone democracy, Israel, which has seen right-wing factions rise to unprecedented influence in the Knesset. Despite being a distinct minority, these parties have managed a hammerlock on the government. The government too often ignores settler violence in the West Bank and, in some cases, has supported it. And it still seeks to diminish the power of Israel's otherwise steadfastly democratic judiciary. Much of this is due to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is unwilling to concede power and must, therefore, make repeated concessions to his ever more ambitious right wing.

Regime change in Syria handed the region an unexpected opportunity for change. While the results of newly installed interim president Ahmed al-Sharaa's plans are far from realization, it would be naïve to think that the nation will become a stable democracy. Its history clearly suggests otherwise. Nevertheless, moderate Arab states, the US, Europe and even Israel should not miss the

opportunity to move Syria in the direction of a nation at peace with itself and its neighbors with a stable economy. In addition, they could ensure with appropriate and much-needed aid and investment that the region's troublemakers, e.g., Iran, Russia and the Islamic State, do not return. That should mean concerted action now.

Similarly, in Lebanon, an extraordinary opportunity has been handed to Israel, the Middle East, the US and the West. If that nation is to ensure that the elements of the Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire are fully met and Hezbollah is disarmed, the Lebanese Armed Forces will need help, and lots of it. Additionally, years of economic decline and political disarray have led to a near-catastrophic economic state. Aid and investment are immediately needed to set that country on the road to stability, prosperity and success.

To date, nations that would stand to benefit from stability and peace in Syria and Lebanon haven't reacted sufficiently quickly. This is more than unfortunate. Restoring stability in these nations would mean an unquestionable change in the region's political fortunes and reduce chances of greater conflict. Action is needed now to prevent autocratic backsliding in Syria — historically the nation's default position — and fitful, lackluster progress in Lebanon.

Then there is Yemen and the Houthi question. The country has been mired in ten years of civil war, political instability and unrest since the early days of the Arab Spring. The Houthis, an extremist Shia Islamist organization with its own version of regional and global jihad, seized power in a 2014–2015 coup and now control about a third of the country, some two-thirds of the population, the capital of Sana'a and the country's major port of Hudaydah. The Houthis declared a state of war on Israel — and effectively the US — following the October 7 attacks. Under former US President Joe Biden, the US and a handful of its allies launched

sporadic attacks against the Houthis who had begun attacking tankers and other commercial shipping traffic transiting the Red Sea. Under current President Trump, those attacks have escalated but the Houthis continue to threaten shipping through one of the world's major maritime choke points.

While internal opponents to the Houthis exist in southern and eastern Yemen, they lack the unity and firepower to seriously threaten the Houthis at this time. Moreover, no external power is contemplating dispatching ground forces to challenge the Houthis. The Egyptian experience in the 1960s and the Saudi experience first in the 1930s and again in 2015 serve as abject lessons of ground wars against indigenous rebels in this highly tribal country.

Any hope of persuading the Houthis to back off from their campaign against global shipping traffic in the Red Sea may lie in the ongoing US-Iran negotiations. Tehran wields considerable, though hardly commanding, influence over the Houthis and could be persuaded to exercise that influence in the event Washington and Tehran can come to some understanding. That would not necessarily preclude Russia, which shares intelligence, weapons technology and other support with the Houthis, from finding ways to incentivize the Houthis to continue their war against the West. For now, the mini-war at the southern end of the Red Sea shows little prospect of ending soon.

The tragically ugly

Turning to the most depressing issues of the Middle East, there are two conflicts that cry out: Gaza and Sudan. Sadly, neither shows much prospect for resolution soon.

At the start of the year, a ceasefire in Gaza held slight hope for an ultimate end. But barely eight weeks later, the fighting resumed. Though lacking

the ferocity and intensity of 2024, the toll on the Gazan civilian population is horrific. The death toll is now estimated at north of 50,000, though that figure is unconfirmed by any impartial entity, has been subject to change and likely includes an estimated 20,000 Hamas combatants. But the devastation on the territory itself — the near total destruction of schools, hospitals, mosques, businesses, residences and infrastructure — is readily apparent from numerous publicly available satellite imagery.

It will take decades to rebuild the ravaged territory, and that assumes there is an end to the conflict, and humanitarian aid and investment are able to flow into the strip. An Arab plan advanced in March 2025 estimated the cost of reconstruction at \$53 billion, but that will likely rise once the conflict ends and a true, on-the-ground evaluation can be done.

But ending the war is the challenge now. Neither side is willing to bend. Israel insists on the release of all remaining hostages, estimated at 59 with 35 likely already dead, and the complete disarmament of Hamas. Hamas, while willing to release remaining hostages, is unwilling to surrender its arms. It has also agreed to turn governing authority to an independent Arab/Palestinian entity.

Hamas's arms are the apparent obstacle to the end of this war. In fact, Hamas's unwillingness to recognize that it has suffered an overwhelming defeat and has no chance of ever realizing its far-fetched goal of eliminating the State of Israel, if it ever did. This is a fact accepted by the rest of the Arab world beginning with Egypt in the 1979 peace accord with Israel. Its stubborn and hopeless resistance has meant inestimable suffering for the people of Gaza and Palestinians at large. For now, however, there seems little chance of the two sides reconciling the Hamas arms question, absent unanticipated external pressure on Hamas. The

aforementioned Arab Plan, while calling for a government in Gaza that excludes Hamas, makes no mention of disarming Hamas, effectively rendering it an empty plan.

Israel and Netanyahu bear their own share of the responsibility. Their stubborn opposition to even acknowledging the possibility of an independent state is unsupportable. Accepting the inevitability of a Palestinian state, as more than 100 foreign governments already have, would dramatically alter the political landscape, positioning Hamas and its extremist supporters as the enemies of peace.

The corollary to all this is the woeful state of the Palestinian Authority (PA). It is unfit to govern, and polls of Palestinians bear this out. This disenchantment, especially toward PA President Mahmoud Abbas, may have led to the latter's recent decision to anoint a successor, Hussein al-Sheikh, the current secretary-general of the PLO Executive Committee. Barring genuinely free and fair elections in the Palestinian Territories (to include Gaza), however, no PA institution is likely to win much favor or trust among the Palestinian people.

Lost amidst the war in Gaza, Russia's continuing war of aggression in Ukraine and the global financial crisis provoked by the Trump administration's trade tariff scheme, is the ongoing civil war in Sudan. Now moving into its third year, it has produced an estimated 150,000 deaths, 14 million displaced Sudanese (including over three million refugees in neighboring countries) and 30 million in need of humanitarian assistance. The United Nations has called it "the world's largest hunger crisis."

The two opposing sides — the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) — are nowhere near resolving their issues, which boil down to who will govern Sudan. The leaders

of the two warring factions, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the SAF and Mohamed Hamdan “Hemedti” Dagalo of the RSF, were briefly allies but could not agree on who would rule Sudan or how their respective forces would be integrated. The RSF is a reconstituted force from the Janjaweed, the barbarous militia responsible for the genocide of African Sudanese in Darfur in the early two thousands. The SAF has recently retaken territory, including the devastated capital, Khartoum, but the RSF maintain firm control in the western part of the country: the large, resource-rich Darfur region.

The military standoff is further complicated by the external powers supporting one or the other side. Those include the UAE, Ethiopia and Eritrea on the side of the RSF, and Ukraine, Turkey, Egypt and Iran with the SAF. Russia has backed both sides at various times. The support of these nations has prolonged the war and contributed to the rising death toll and growing humanitarian crisis. Mediation efforts variously carried out by the African Union, the United Nations, the US, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Turkey and Libya have so far failed.

At present, a military solution hardly seems possible, as with the continuing external support, the two sides appear fully committed to pursuing war. Diplomacy has not reached its time yet and shows no sign of doing so soon.

The future

True to its modern history, the Middle East presents a conflicting portrait of hope and despair, opportunity and desperation.

This July will mark the 25th anniversary of another moment of hope and optimism in the Middle East, the Camp David II summit between Israel and the PA and hosted by then-US President Bill Clinton. Israel offered what was its most

ambitious proposal (then and since) to the Palestinians, who, under the leadership of then-PA President Yasser Arafat, rejected it. Arafat rejected a subsequent and even more attractive plan advanced by Clinton, though the Israelis had accepted it.

The Second Intifada, which followed Camp David II, destroyed what hope there might have been for a peace between Israelis and Palestinians, a tragedy that only grows with time. The author’s own experiences in dealing with the Israelis and Palestinians from Israel, Jerusalem and the West bank lent justification to claims that many Palestinians regret having walked away from Camp David without even attempting to continue negotiations.

Today, the region’s conflicts are indeed manifold. Clear opportunities for peace, or least the absence of war, are apparent in some cases and much less so in others. But as the experience of Camp David in 2000 showed, the dangers of walking away from diplomacy and compromise when they are available only condemns the region to greater instability, violence and tragedy.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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The World’s Silent Complicity in Israel’s War on Gaza

Alan Waring
July 19, 2025

Israel has carried out a relentless and zealous military onslaught in Gaza that shows orchestrated mass inhumanity on a gargantuan scale. This campaign has killed tens of thousands of civilians, razed Gaza’s infrastructure and blocked humanitarian aid, while most political leaders remain reluctant to condemn the conduct or take meaningful action. Their silence, shaped by self-interest, historical guilt and fear of backlash, raises urgent questions about moral responsibility and global accountability.

For a long time, many people have argued that silence about perceived evil or outrages against human rights and humanity itself amounts to complicity in such evil. These include some of the greatest scientists, moral philosophers and human rights campaigners, such as Albert

Einstein, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King Jr, who reportedly said, “The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people”.

There is now wide recognition of the idea that silence, especially when exhibited by those in a position of formal authority and with the capacity and power to act, implies tacit agreement with, if not approval of, evil acts. Yet, the contemporary abject refusal by vast swathes of supposedly “good” people in positions of responsibility to publicly condemn manifestly egregious conduct, much less take action to stop it, suggests that powerful counter-motivators are at work.

Does anyone care about mass civilian carnage in Gaza?

Few people could remain unaware of the terror attack by Hamas militants on October 7, 2023, on Israel close to the border with the Palestinian territory of Gaza. This killed around 1,139 people in Israel, wounded 3,400 others and resulted in Hamas taking 251 hostages into Gaza. Equally, few could be unaware of Israel’s apocalyptic military response in Gaza, which has gone on relentlessly for over 20 months.

By July 9, 2025, according to the UN, out of Gaza’s 2.2 million people, at least 57,680 (around 70% of which were women and children) had been killed by Israeli Defense Force (IDF) action as recorded from birth and death certificates, plus an estimated 12,000 others unaccounted for and presumed buried under rubble. At least another 125,000 have been wounded.

According to the UN, IDF aerial or ground bombardment has destroyed most of the residential, business, government, education, medical and food supply buildings and facilities across Gaza. The IDF has forcibly displaced 90%

of the Gazan population, typically three, four or more times, either because their homes have suffered destruction or because IDF short-notice evacuation diktats directed them to so-called “safe zones” away from an impending IDF attack.

Often, the IDF attacks these “safe zones” — empty schools doubling as displacement shelters and makeshift tented shelter areas — causing more civilian casualties. Nearly all Gaza’s hospitals and clinics have been subject to IDF bombardment, gunfire and/or IDF incursions, sometimes several times, and more than half are closed or only partly functioning.

In addition, the IDF blocked all shipments of essential food, medicines, fuel and water into Gaza from March 2 to May 19, 2025, thereby creating a potential humanitarian disaster. Even after partly lifting the blockade, fewer than 20% of the daily 600 trucks required were allowed in, and once inside, further IDF restrictions and warehouse insecurity hindered aid distribution. By the end of May, with imminent mass starvation and rising deaths, Israel — backed by the US — ignored the existing UN aid network in Gaza and imposed a new aid organization called the Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF). However, its local inexperience initially resulted in chaos with the shooting of dozens of aid seekers and only minimal aid being distributed.

International aid organisations with many years’ experience in Gaza universally rejected the new scheme as naïve and unworkable. Controversy surrounds the entire project, especially since it was widely publicized that not only does the foundation willingly let the Israeli government direct and vet its activities, but also that its new owner reportedly holds a former senior CIA officer position and owns a private security company, Safe Reach Solutions, that will work with the foundation.

Israel also stands accused of arming criminal Palestinian gangs — some of which are linked to ISIS terrorists — to protect GHF operations in Gaza. However, these gangs reportedly also run protection rackets against other aid organizations.

The official Israeli position

The Israeli government and IDF steadfastly assert that all their military activities in Gaza are essential to root out, defeat and ultimately eliminate Hamas as a terrorist organization. At face value, this may not seem an unreasonable position to take. After all, Hamas militants (and other groups such as Hezbollah) have inflicted many terrorist attacks on Israel over the years, and perhaps the October 7th atrocity constituted such a significant escalation that the incumbent government of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu decided it now required a final crushing showdown with Hamas.

However, the IDF’s “devastated terrain warfare” strategy has, unsurprisingly, had apocalyptic consequences for civilians. The relentless mass civilian carnage inflicted by Israel in Gaza — with 50 times more people killed and 37 times more wounded relative to the Israeli casualties on October 7, 2023 — plus an almost complete destruction of all buildings, facilities, essential supplies and means for sustaining life, coupled with a complete blockade of food and humanitarian aid for two-and-a-half months, suggest an Israeli motivation other than military necessity.

Nevertheless, the Israeli government remains adamant that only a total annihilation of Hamas will suffice, regardless of “collateral” death and destruction. Finally, in May 2025, many governments that are traditionally pro-Israel (with the notable exception of the US) openly rejected Israel’s justification. While the majority of Gaza’s 2.2 million population have not been killed,

nevertheless, the numbers continue to rise, and the specific intent of the Israeli government and its IDF more than meets the 1948 Genocide Convention criteria. The trajectory appears genocidal, more accurately a proto-genocide rather than one yet achieved. However, Professor Avi Shlaim, an Israeli–British historian, argues that it is already a de facto genocide. Regardless of how it is classified, it is undoubtedly an atrocity on a mammoth, slow-motion scale.

A more plausible narrative

So, what plausible narrative could explain this orchestrated mass inhumanity? Here, we encounter a peculiar, contradictory espousal from Netanyahu, other Israeli leaders, spokespersons, politicians and the IDF. On the one hand, they constantly assert that Israel remains in clear and present danger of being destroyed by Hamas to such an extent that the Gaza War must be prosecuted relentlessly and ruthlessly. This assertion persists despite the IDF commanding 169,000 armed ground forces plus 465,000 reservists compared to Hamas, which had an estimated 30,000 fighters (now reduced to about 12,000).

The IDF also possesses greater weaponry, including 40,000 armoured vehicles, 350 self-propelled artillery pieces, 171 towed artillery systems, 50 helicopter gunships, 600 aircraft — including 272 combat craft — and numerous drones. Hamas has no such weaponry other than drones, miniature rockets and firearms, RPGs and barely 7% of the number of Israel's armed ground forces, or 1.9% if reservists are included.

As their October 7 attack and other attacks have shown, Hamas clearly does present a formidable long-term terrorism threat to Israel's population and peace. However, set against Israel's overwhelming military strength, firepower, advanced technology and intelligence systems, it

will never likely pose an existential threat to the State of Israel.

On the other hand, Netanyahu, along with IDF chiefs and government spokespersons, maintains that in its conduct of the Gaza War, Israel is a paragon of morality. They claim that the country makes significant efforts to adhere to the language and intent of the Laws of War, particularly in protecting civilians. They deny all the mounting allegations, despite the tally of civilian casualties, video evidence, eyewitness accounts, forensic evidence and medical reports.

International courts have accused Israel of various war crimes, including genocide. Neither Israel nor the US accepts these charges or recognizes these courts. However, as highly respected independent observers have noted, the way foreign governments respond to Israel's unbridled savagery may haunt them for years to come.

With the military necessity justification universally discredited, why else would Israel want to perpetrate such wanton mass carnage and destruction on Gaza? A compelling answer to the question can be found in a complex and often toxic interplay of factors. This includes the vengeful collective punishment and suffering inflicted on the civilian population in response to the Hamas atrocities committed on October 7, 2023. Deep-rooted religious beliefs and the concept of Eretz Yisrael, along with ultra-Zionist interpretations of Jewish superiority and rights, contribute to this dynamic. Additionally, there are elements of opportunistic ethnic cleansing and land grabbing, as well as the desperate measures taken by right-wing Prime Minister Netanyahu since 2004 to maintain his grip on power.

His megalomania has allowed fanatical ultra-nationalist Zionist groups to gain influence by giving them positions in his Cabinet in exchange

for their loyalty. They now control him and dictate government policy. This influence has shaped a master plan regarding Gaza and the Palestinians, including those in the Occupied West Bank. This plan aims to fully implement the 2018 Israeli Nation State Law, particularly Article 7. This article explicitly encourages the expropriation of Palestinian land by Israeli settlers and the expulsion of its owners.

The ultimate goal appears to be the complete removal, intimidation, or forced exit through violence of all Palestinians from Israel, Gaza and the West Bank. Where the total of some 5.5 million expelled Palestinians would go is not in this extremist plan, and Israeli ministers have made it clear that it is not their problem and they don't care as long as they are gone!

The Eretz Yisrael ideology and the Greater Israel territorial expansion mission of ultra-nationalist and ultra-Zionist supremacists, who hold sway over Netanyahu and IDF strategy, has a colossal reach. It encompasses not only Gaza and the West Bank but also Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, large areas of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and even as far away as Kuwait. Absorption of Gaza and the West Bank and expulsion of all Palestinians is their first step.

The justification for these bold territorial claims is repeatedly emphasized, with a focus on the belief that God informed Abraham nearly 4,000 years ago that he and all his descendants would inherit "the whole land" of Israel. However, a small number of Jewish supremacists derived the political ideology of Eretz Yisrael only in the late 19th century, as part of the creation of the Zionism movement. Maps appeared that showed Eretz Yisrael stretching from Egypt in the west to Kuwait in the east and as far north as Anatolia in modern-day Turkey.

Of course, being convinced of divinely granted superiority and exclusive entitlement to other people's land is not supported by any objective evidence. Furthermore, *jus divinum* (God's law) cannot be used to sanctify land grabs or the repression, if not violent expulsion or homicide, of the incumbents. Beyond the universal rights of existence and self-defense, the justifications of God's law and a claimed exclusive right to all the land of Eretz Yisrael appear more like naked, neo-imperialist sophistry rather than self-determination, rightful sovereignty or anything remotely godly.

If this potential explanation seems far-fetched, consider the numerous statements by Israel's leaders and ethno-religious nationalist activists.

Israeli leaders in their own words

Today, Israeli authoritarians dogmatically advance a revisionist history of Palestinian and Jewish presence that insists that Palestinians are only recent squatters who never had any land rights and have no right to be in Eretz Yisrael.

In reality, both Jews and Palestinian Arabs have cohabited in the same land for roughly the same length of time — several thousand years. What's more, according to the 1922 British census, Jews represented only 11% of the population, with Palestinian Muslims at 78%. By 1948, via natural birth rate and immigration, it still only stood at 32% against Palestinian Muslims at 60%. As former Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meir, stated unequivocally in 1970, "I am a Palestinian. From 1921 to 1948, I carried a Palestinian passport."

Bezalel Smotrich, Israeli Finance Minister: "There is no such thing as a Palestinian people. There is no Palestinian history." March 19, 2023.

Gaza's 2.2 million population will be confined to a narrow "humanitarian zone", with the rest of

Gaza “totally destroyed” ... “They will be totally despairing, understanding that there is no hope and nothing to look for in Gaza, and will be looking for relocation to begin a new life in other places.” May 6, 2025.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, Israeli National Security Minister: The Gaza War presents “an opportunity to concentrate on encouraging the migration of the residents of Gaza ... I do not rule out Jewish settlement there ... it is an important thing.” January 1, 2024.

“There is no need to bring in aid. They have enough. Hamas food stores should be bombed.” May 6, 2025.

Amihai Eliyahu, Israeli Heritage Minister: The Palestinian population “can go to Ireland or deserts ... the monsters in Gaza should find a solution themselves.” When asked if Israel should drop a nuclear bomb on Gaza and kill all the inhabitants, he replied, “That is an option.” November 5, 2023.

Israel “must find ways for Gazans that are more painful than death” to defeat them and break their morale. January 6, 2024.

“We must stop humanitarian aid. There is no problem in bombing their food and fuel reserves. They should starve.” May 6, 2025.

Israel Katz, Israeli Defence Minister: “Israel’s policy is clear. No humanitarian aid will enter Gaza, and blocking this aid is one of the main pressure levers ... No one is currently planning to allow any humanitarian aid into Gaza, and there are no preparations to enable such aid.” April 17, 2025.

May Golan, Israeli Social Equality Minister: “I am personally proud of the ruins of Gaza.” February 21, 2024.

“Taking territory is what hurts them most”. Re-establishing Jewish settlements in Gaza would be “a lesson that the Arabs would never forget.” October 21, 2024.

Nissim Vaturi, Israeli Knesset Member: “Gaza and its people must be burned.” January 10, 2024.

“Who is innocent in Gaza? Civilians went out and slaughtered people in cold blood.” Israel needs to “separate the children and women and kill the adults in Gaza, we are being too considerate.” February 24, 2025.

Anti-extreme Zionism is not anti-Semitism

Anyone criticising contemporary Israeli actions against Palestinians is likely to be slurred as anti-Semitic by fanatical Zionists trying to deflect attention away from their Gaza inhumanity. Peter Isackson highlights the absurdity of such defensive “gaslighting”, and various courts (e.g., Denmark, Australia) have supported the distinction.

While some critics of Israeli actions may well be anti-Semitic, the vast majority are not. They are simply calling out relentless violations of civilized standards that have persisted for at least 20 months. Such condemnation is not against all Israelis, all Jews or even against all Zionists among them. Rather, it is against the fanatical ultra-Zionist minority and their political enablers who are currently orchestrating the slaughter and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in Gaza (and the Occupied West Bank). All while they rejoice in the terror and torment inflicted.

It is a criticism against the wholesale sadopsychopathy that will forever rank Israel and Israelis, unfortunately, and most unfairly, the innocent along with the guilty, as perpetrators in the list of other genocidal catastrophes, such as those faced by the Armenians under the Ottomans (1915-1923), Tutsis and moderate Hutus in

Rwanda (1994), Cambodians by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar (2016-2022), and yes, ironically, Jews and other minorities across Europe in the Nazi Holocaust (1933-1945).

The original benign Zionist model, founded by Theodor Herzl and Chaim Weizmann, was all about establishing a permanent, safe and secure home for the Jewish diaspora alongside Palestinian Arabs. The model, as summarized in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, stated that the Palestinians' pre-existing rights would be fully protected. In particular, "nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

Since 1948, however, successive Israeli governments have relegated the Palestinians to a barely tolerated second-class status with diminished rights. In the 21st century, the Netanyahu regime has totally reneged on affording them any rights. By May 2025, his Gaza War and West Bank repression had degenerated into wholesale ethnic cleansing and land grabbing.

Why such a complicit silence? And is it total?

With such an appalling Gaza tableau, it is unsurprising that United Nations reports began condemning manifest Israeli rampages sparked by the Oct 7, 2023, Hamas attack. Further, the UN General Assembly resolved in September 2024 that Israel had to dismantle its occupation of all Palestinian territory, including Gaza and the West Bank, by September 15, 2025. Various submissions of other related resolutions against Israel at the UN Security Council have failed, largely owing to vetoes by the US.

From early 2024, one might also have expected a rapid and widespread condemnation of Israel, if not action, from many foreign governments and leaders who claim to defend universal human

rights and oppose hegemonic tyranny. However, aside from occasional complaints, it took more than a year before individual leaders, often slowly, grudgingly and almost apologetically, started to criticize Israel. Significant calls for sanctions and measures by foreign governments, usually friendly towards Israel, only truly began in Spring 2025.

For example, Spain cancelled contracts in May 2025 worth over €290 million (\$330 million) to supply defense products to Israel and proposed wider sanctions to its European allies. In 2024, Spain began blocking access to its ports for any vessel carrying arms to Israel, as seen in May and November of that year.

UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Norway sanctioned Israeli Cabinet Ministers Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir on June 10, 2025, for inciting "extremist violence and serious abuses of Palestinians' human rights." The sanctions include travel bans and asset freezes. Spain and France are likely to impose similar sanctions.

In February 2024, Ireland sanctioned the passage through Ireland of any weaponry for Israel. In May 2025, Ireland banned the importation of any goods emanating from Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories.

Before June 2025, only a handful of foreign political leaders had publicly taken a stand against the Israeli excesses. For example, former Australian Foreign Minister, Bob Carr, commented on May 26, 2025, on the Israeli Gaza War, stating, "Yes, it is genocide, Yes, they are starving civilians. Yes, these settler fanatic politicians are baby-killers. None of this can any longer be denied."

On May 26, 2025, Anthony Albanese, Australian Prime Minister, condemned the Israeli food and aid blockade of Gaza, saying that it was

“completely untenable” for the Netanyahu government to starve Gazans.

In May 2025, British Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) Mark Pritchard delivered to the UK Parliament an impassioned plea to protect Gaza civilians from Israel’s food and aid blockade.

Former British Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Shadow Home Secretary Diane Abbott were also prominent in their steadfast commentaries on Israel’s conduct in Gaza following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack.

What about the Fourth Estate?

Again, lazy and/or gullible journalists have been only too happy to regurgitate propaganda from the Israeli or US government or play safe by waiting for minimal and uncritical commentary from their own country’s politicians. Fortunately, there are some outstanding exceptions.

On May 12, 2025, Times columnist and former Conservative MP Matthew Parris published one of the most unflinching critiques of Britain’s policy toward Israel. “We have reached the point at which Israel’s western allies must say ‘enough is enough’ — and actually mean it,” he wrote.

Parris accused Britain of hiding behind American power while reciting empty phrases about “restraint” and “international law,” all the while supplying Israel with its most powerful weapon — silence. He challenged both the British left and the Conservative opposition for abandoning their moral commitments. “Why did we, through silence and quiet support, give cover to this atrocity?” he asked.

He then offered a blunt answer. Guilt has shaped Western sympathy for Israel’s fight for survival. The shame of Europe’s past and the West’s lingering remorse have formed a deep well

of political credit for a small, embattled nation to draw from. Israel, he argued, has turned victimhood into a strategic asset.

But that well is drying up. Nothing seems likely to stop Israel’s push for annexation — first Gaza, next the West Bank — where settlers continue to seize land with the government’s quiet approval. A slow, corrosive moral decay now spreads through both civil and military policy. One day, Parris warned, Israelis may wake to find that the world sees them not as a beacon of democracy but as just another repressive regime in the region.

Parris’s stark assessment echoed the moral tension voiced by another British Conservative, Times columnist Lord Daniel Finkelstein OBE. In his article, “What Do I Feel About Gaza?”, Finkelstein grappled with the anguish of watching the war unfold as both a committed Jew — whose family suffered under the Nazi Holocaust — and as a humanitarian appalled by the suffering in Gaza. “I feel distress, dismay, despondency. I feel depression, despair, disgust, defiance. Above all, I feel defeated,” he wrote.

Finkelstein condemned the idea of permanently displacing Palestinians or settling the West Bank, warning that if Israel’s war of defense transforms into a campaign of expulsion, it will cross a moral line. “All the language about genocide and war crimes that has been used as taunts by Israel’s opponents will be applicable,” he wrote. He rejected the tactic of collective punishment, stating that if Israel aims to destroy Gaza instead of Hamas, the line between civilian casualties and deliberate harm vanishes. Starving civilians, he argued, is not a strategy — it is simply unacceptable.

He adds that creating a Greater Israel by force is something that he had “always seen as morally wrong and a strategic error” and that plenty of Jews agree with him.

Righteous voices in Israel

Despite the overwhelming cacophony of Israeli government propaganda, its media supporters, large sectors of its population and a campaign to intimidate and silence dissent against Netanyahu's Gaza War, there are still clear voices within Israeli society that will not be silenced or made to comply.

For example, Oded Na'aman's article "Menacing Silence" eloquently decries the ongoing denial, concealment and self-censorship of Israeli media about the Gaza reality. He notes that the Israeli public are so disorientated and riddled with self-doubt that they are easy targets for zealots and manipulative politicians offering a fantasy future. At the same time, "there is simply no available vision of a tolerable future." They "refuse to look directly at the calamity of Gaza ... because knowing the devastation of Gaza is knowing the true devastation of Israel ... their declarations of righteousness are as fierce as the fear of their depravity."

As Israeli Professor Chaim Gans notes, the self-defining and self-serving nature of ultra-Zionists' arguments is "valid only for those who believe them" and that "they do not make the slightest attempt to provide moral or universally valid arguments, only reinforcing the prejudices of the already persuaded." He observes that one nation's extreme quest for self-determination may expunge another's legitimate quest and may involve a criminal land grab.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has consistently opposed Netanyahu's strategy and conduct of the Gaza War, and by Spring 2025 he was becoming increasingly disillusioned and alarmed. As the civilian Palestinian carnage grew and IDF bombardment, shootings and mass displacements intensified, an exasperated Olmert finally exploded in interviews with Haaretz, CNN

and other media: "What is it if not a war crime?", accusing Netanyahu and far-right cabinet members of "committing actions which cannot be interpreted in any other way ... What we are doing in Gaza now is a war of devastation: indiscriminate, limitless, cruel and criminal killing of civilians." He stated that "terrible damage" had been caused "to the moral integrity of the state of Israel and the people of Israel."

In early July 2025, Olmert accused the Israeli government's plan to force the surviving Palestinians in Gaza into a narrow so-called "humanitarian zone" as creating a massive "concentration camp" as part of an ethnic cleansing mission.

Yet, as early as July 2024, reports were appearing in Israel that IDF soldiers were videoed confessing to shooting Palestinian civilians for sport or out of boredom. More recently, Haaretz has published damning admissions by IDF soldiers that their commander ordered them to shoot unarmed Palestinians desperately trying to join the massive queues for food at the sparse number of GHF food aid locations, adding that these were undeniably genocidal acts.

Why have so many leaders stayed silent for so long?

Foreign governments and politicians have remained complicitly silent about Israel's actions in Gaza for several intertwined reasons. Some act out of self-interest, shallow integrity and political hypocrisy. Others remain burdened by historical guilt, shame and remorse — aware that their predecessors during the 1930s and 1940s looked the other way as Hitler's Final Solution unfolded, and only acknowledged its full horror once the evidence became undeniable in 1945. Many fear appearing bold or controversial, unwilling to risk being labeled anti-Semitic for criticizing ultra-Zionist abuses. And for some, their silence stems

from a deeper, prejudiced view that sees Palestinians as an inherent ethno-religious threat to Western values and interests.

Only after the Nazis were defeated and WWII had ended did foreign governments and politicians suddenly all claim to be philo-Semites and champions of a new Jewish State. When Palestine and Palestinians finally gain release from Israeli hegemony, will that same class of Western leaders and politicians be true to form and suddenly proclaim they had been pro-Palestinian all along?

Some countries have already severed or downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel. Many more (147 out of 193 countries in the UN) now formally recognize Palestine as a state. Israel has isolated itself and created its own pariah status. Now more than ever the situation demands sustained diplomatic, economic, financial, trade, weaponry, travel and cultural sanctioning pressure, especially after Israel's pre-emptive military attacks on Iran beginning on June 13, 2025, cast attention away from its Gaza crimes.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece]

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Washington's Gamble on Ahmed al-Sharaa Could Push Syria Toward a New Authoritarian Era

Halmat Palani
December 03, 2025

Washington faces a volatile shift as Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa moves from hunted jihadist to accepted partner amid regional pressure. US President Donald Trump's suspension of Syria sanctions and public embrace of al-Sharaa mark a sharp turn in US policy. Syria's future demands decentralization to prevent renewed authoritarian rule and communal and local revolt.

On September 22, 2025, Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa, a man once hunted by the United States and its allies, walked onto the stage of the Concordia Annual Summit in New York City. Waiting to interview him was retired US General David Petraeus, the same commander once tasked with pursuing him as the head of the Al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front during the height of the Iraq and Syria Jihadi insurgency. Petraeus, once CIA director, praised al-Sharaa's vision and barely concealed the surreal nature of the moment.

Only weeks later, al-Sharaa sat in the White House with President Donald Trump, who suspended sanctions on Syria for 180 days and hailed him as a major advocate for peace. What was unimaginable a few years ago is now official US policy.

This rebranding of al-Sharaa is a dangerous gamble. He didn't stumble into power through democratic reform or national consensus. He built

his position through the Nusra Front, which later became the Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). According to the United Nations and Human Rights Watch, this group engaged in suicide bombing, massacres, torture, unlawful killings, war crimes and coercive rule during the Syrian Civil War. West Point's Combating Terrorism Center has shown that HTS's rebranding didn't change either its core jihadist ideology or methods.

Washington once placed a \$10 million bounty on al-Sharaa and put him on the terrorist list. Today, these designations have been removed and replaced by handshakes and photo ops with jihadists in suits.

Al-Sharaa's impact on Syria's diverse communities

Trump's description of al-Sharaa as a stabilizing partner sends a troubling message to the communities that suffered most under jihadist and authoritarian violence. Syria's Kurds, Druze and Alawites see an unelected leader with a hardline past consolidating power in Damascus with Western blessing as a dangerous threat to building a decentralized and democratic Syria that enshrines in its constitution and institutions guaranteed rights and freedoms for all.

They understand the danger a man like al-Sharaa poses because they have not only lived through the reign of leaders with similar ideological and authoritarian tendencies but have also paid many lives responding to such forces of intolerance and repression, as in the case of the Al-Assad Dynasty and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The signals of alarm sent by the Kurds and Druze about al-Sharaa and the HTS should be heeded because nothing in this man's record suggests he has abandoned his desire for centralized rule and homogenization politics cloaked in Jihadism.

His government has already made it clear that, in its desire for national unity, it will stand against demands for power-sharing or decentralized structures of governance. The interim constitution rejects federalism and strips Kurdish cultural and linguistic recognition in line with Ba'athist homogenization of the Assad era, rather than a break from it.

According to the London School of Economics, Al Monitor and North Press, there has been an active rollback of Kurdish language curricula, cultural programs and even public holidays such as Newroz since al-Sharaa took the helm in Damascus. These are not symbolic moves but evidence of the governing philosophy for Syria's future under al-Sharaa.

The ethnic and religious groups in Syria will not accept marginalization reminiscent of the Ba'athist era. They will reject and revolt against any authority that seeks to strip them of the freedoms and autonomy they have paid for with blood.

Rising tensions and marginalization of the Druze

Similar to the Kurds, the Druze in Sweida suffer from marginalization and threats to their security as a people. Reporting by the Middle East Institute and Syria Direct suggests that the central government has supported Sunni Bedouin tribes in recent clashes, exacerbating sectarian insecurity and eroding local defence structures.

This forms part of a concerning pattern that emboldens groups loyal to the HTS-run government and furthers ethnic and religious fault lines rather than calming them. This leads to a security and political climate where groups like the Druze and Kurds, who demand autonomy or self-defense, are treated as threats to national

sovereignty rather than forces crucial to the security of their regions and the broader country.

Al-Sharaa presents this tightening grip on power as necessary for defending national unity and Syria's sovereignty. In reality, it is the same centralization that led Syria to civil war and eventual collapse under Bashar al-Assad. Concentrating authority in Damascus without meaningful inclusion of the periphery does not create stability. Instead, it alienates communities like the Kurds and Druze that proved to be the most resilient against ISIS and the most willing to build pluralistic governance, while the central state resorted to massacres, detention and torture of the populace seeking their democratic rights and freedoms.

Why decentralization is essential for Syria's future

The strategic flaw in Washington's embrace of al-Sharaa is deeply concerning and should be viewed with great caution. True stability in deeply divided states comes from balancing power between the center and the periphery, not from labeling the periphery as a national security threat and the central power as justified in whatever it does. This is clear both from international relations theory and the lived experience of pluralistic and multicultural societies.

When the center knows the periphery can check its excesses, incentives shift from the use of force towards negotiation. When the periphery knows it cannot be dominated, incentives shift toward cooperation rather than revolt. Thus, decentralization is the ideal model of governance for Syria since it creates a balance of power, whereas centralization seeks to destroy it through the domination and supremacy of the central power.

In Syria, the communities most committed to shared governance are the same ones being sidelined today. Kurdish forces protected Arabs, Yazidis, Assyrians and Christians during the fight against ISIS and were decisive in the destruction of the ISIS caliphate. While they held the line, al-Sharaa was pledging allegiance to Al Qaeda, expanding HTS control and jihadist governance. It is hard to justify rewarding al-Sharaa's HTS while undercutting the Kurds and others.

Turkey's role and the regional push for centralization

It is also important to highlight the influence of regional powers like Turkey in this push for centralization. According to the Atlantic Council and the Washington Institute, Ankara sees al-Sharaa as someone who could help neutralize Kurdish autonomy and reshape northern Syria in line with Turkish interests.

A US policy that strengthens the central government under al-Sharaa effectively aligns with Turkish objectives at the expense of the Kurds, who fought ISIS and pushed back against both jihadist and regime authoritarianism in Syria. Such a policy does not bode well for US allies or the objectives of stability and democracy in the region.

Given Syria's demographic diversity, a federal or pluralistic system that provides real cultural, linguistic and administrative autonomy for Kurds, Druze and others is the only structure that can create stability and prosperity. Security arrangements might include local forces like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and community units made up of Druze, alongside, but not subordinate to, the Syrian army.

The details would have to be worked out, but the principle is paramount to the stability and harmony of all groups in a future Syria. Stability

cannot be built on the pretense that Syria is a homogeneous Arab nation with one identity, one center, and one narrative.

Lastly, Al Shara is unelected. His authority rests on military power and foreign endorsement. No leader with that profile should be allowed to reshape Syria's political future without major constitutional guarantees, independent elections and the full participation of the country's diverse communities to check any moves towards authoritarian and discriminatory policies.

By backing al-Sharaa without strong conditions and checks on power, Washington and its allies risk empowering a force that could create a new authoritarian and Islamist system akin to the Islamic Republic built by former Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini and his successors in Iran. Syria's stability and prosperity begin with a stronger periphery, not a reinforced central authority led by a man whose record and ideology have yet to indicate any meaningful change.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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SOUTH ASIA

The Long-Term Dangers of China's Expanding Swap Line Strategy: Financial Dependence and Geopolitical Influence

Masaaki Yoshimori
February 25, 2025

China's currency swap strategy expands its financial influence by creating economic dependencies. While these agreements provide liquidity to struggling economies, their opaque terms grant Beijing leverage over recipients. The renminbi's limited convertibility, political conditions attached to swaps and growing concerns over debt entrapment cast doubt on the credibility of this strategy as a dollar alternative.

China has significantly expanded its currency swap agreements in recent years, using them as a strategic instrument of financial diplomacy to enhance the global standing of the renminbi (RMB). While these agreements offer short-term liquidity to partner nations, they also serve broader geopolitical objectives, particularly by challenging the US dollar's dominance in international finance. However, this strategy raises concerns, including the risks of economic dependency, the potential for political leverage and broader implications for global financial stability.

China's swap lines: structure and expansion

The People's Bank of China (PBOC) has established bilateral currency swap agreements with over 40 countries, which amount to an

estimated \$500 billion in total commitments. These agreements provide foreign central banks with access to RMB liquidity in exchange for their local currency, ostensibly to facilitate trade and enhance financial stability. Unlike the US Federal Reserve's (or the Fed's) swap lines, which primarily support allied economies and major financial centers, China's swaps are frequently extended to emerging markets facing liquidity crises, such as Argentina, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

A key distinction between China's swap agreements and Western financial mechanisms lies in their structure and conditions. China strategically deploys these arrangements to countries with strong economic ties or significant reliance on Chinese investments, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative. However, due to the RMB's limited convertibility, recipient nations often find that the funds must primarily be used for trade with China rather than broader financial needs. Additionally, there is growing evidence that these agreements serve as instruments of geopolitical influence, with financial support often conditioned on diplomatic alignment with Beijing's interests.

Geopolitical implications: challenging the dollar-dominated system

For decades, the US dollar has been the world's primary reserve currency, with the Fed's swap lines acting as a financial lifeline for major economies. China's expansion of RMB swap agreements presents an alternative liquidity source, particularly for nations facing restricted access to dollar-based financial systems due to sanctions or economic instability. Argentina's use of a \$1.7 billion RMB swap in 2023 to meet its IMF debt obligations marked a significant precedent, as it demonstrated how an emerging economy could bypass dollar reserves in favor of RMB transactions. Similarly, Russia's increasing reliance on RMB for trade settlements following

Western sanctions in response to the war in Ukraine illustrates how China's financial instruments can provide an alternative to US-led economic pressures.

China's financial leverage and Pakistan's sovereign risks

China's currency swap agreements provide emergency liquidity for struggling economies but often create financial dependencies that heighten economic vulnerabilities. Pakistan has repeatedly relied on Chinese swap lines to manage its balance-of-payments crisis, which has effectively tied its financial stability to Beijing. Similarly, Sri Lanka, after depleting its swap reserves, became increasingly dependent on Chinese financial goodwill. This has complicated its debt restructuring efforts with Western creditors.

Unlike the IMF, which mandates structural reforms for financial aid, China's swap agreements lack transparency, raising concerns about opaque debt arrangements and potential political leverage. This opacity increases the risk of long-term financial instability for recipient nations, allowing China to exert greater influence over their economic and political decisions.

Pakistan's growing economic reliance on China is most evident in the \$65 billion China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has significantly eroded Pakistan's strategic autonomy. With \$26.6 billion in outstanding debt to China, Pakistan remains trapped in a cycle of borrowing, even as it struggles with IMF bailouts. Despite concerns over unsustainable debt, Islamabad continues to pursue new CPEC projects, deepening its financial entanglement.

Security threats to CPEC projects have further complicated this relationship. The Balochistan Liberation Army, a militant group operating in Pakistan, has targeted CPEC-related infrastructure

— its attacks have killed over 60 Chinese workers since 2016. In response, Beijing has expanded its security role in Pakistan. China has pressured Islamabad to enforce its Global Security Initiative, which includes counterterrorism efforts, enhanced border security and joint security exercises in Gilgit-Baltistan and Xinjiang. These developments underscore the shifting nature of China–Pakistan relations, where economic cooperation increasingly overlaps with security and strategic interests.

China's leverage in Argentina and the future of the swap line

China's financial relationship with Argentina has been largely asymmetrical, with Beijing holding substantial control over when and how the swap line is utilized. While China has historically used this mechanism to strengthen its influence in Argentina, Argentinian President Javier Milei's strong anti-China rhetoric complicates future cooperation. If Milei aligns more closely with Washington, China may reconsider its financial support and potentially cut off access to the swap line. Some Chinese analysts suggest that Beijing should take a firmer stance, demanding a shift in Argentina's political rhetoric before continuing financial support. Although an immediate termination of the swap agreement is unlikely, China could leverage its financial influence to pressure Argentina into maintaining pragmatic ties.

Since 2008, the PBOC has signed many currency swap agreements with foreign central banks, making China a key global lender. These agreements serve both economic and political purposes, increasing China's influence worldwide. This study looks at how these swaps affect public opinion in Argentina, which has used the swaps to manage economic crises. During the 2023 election period, a survey was conducted to see if informing people about China's financial aid would change their views. The results show that while some

voters became more supportive of China, others, particularly opposition supporters, became more critical. They suggested that China's financial diplomacy has a mixed and polarized effect on public opinion.

A double-edged sword?

China's currency swap strategy represents a bold attempt to reshape global financial dynamics, offering an alternative to the US dollar while extending Beijing's geopolitical reach. However, structural limitations — such as the RMB's lack of full convertibility, concerns over transparency and fears of economic dependency — present significant challenges to its broader adoption. While China's swap lines provide immediate relief to financially distressed economies, they may also introduce long-term vulnerabilities, which would reinforce reliance on Beijing rather than foster sustainable economic independence.

If China seeks to establish the RMB as a true global alternative to the dollar, it must address these critical deficiencies. Greater transparency in swap agreements, increased RMB liquidity in global markets and improved trust in Chinese financial institutions will be essential in achieving this goal. Otherwise, China's currency swap strategy may be viewed less as a stabilizing force and more as a mechanism for exerting financial dominance with political strings attached.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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Indian History Students Must Learn to Analyze, Not Memorize

Aaditya Sengupta Dhar
April 08, 2025

Indian history students rely on rote memorization and do not engage actively with their material. Instructors must take an active learning-driven approach so that students can learn transferable skills such as critical thinking, which is vital both for a vibrant economy and a healthy democracy.

There is something gravely wrong with the way India's schools teach history. Rote, passive learning and politicized curricula asphyxiate interest and critical thinking.

Indian history students memorize events and dates without discussing or analyzing them. This habit goes back to the days of British rule (late 18th century–1947). After independence, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru failed to reform this system. He pushed a curriculum that centered liberal values and Hindu–Muslim unity. This suited the political needs of a nation recently traumatized by the Partition between India and Pakistan, but it did not encourage students to think

critically. Instead, their instructors expected them to accept the official narrative as gospel. More recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has shifted the narrative to emphasize the glory of ancient Indian and Hindu civilization. This a change in tone, but not a change in teaching style.

Kanchan Thakur, a history teacher with 32 years of experience, told me how “for years and years, the syllabus doesn't change. Students are subjected to the same rut, [and] the pressure to finish the syllabus is huge.” As a result, 62% of students at government schools say they find history boring, while 57% struggle to understand lessons.

Obviously, unengaged students, and especially bored students, learn little. In a 2019 study, 40% of students interviewed remembered nothing about Partition, and most said they did not feel concerned about the event. This is alarming because the religious riots that Partition caused consumed 2–3 million lives, leaving a legacy of strained Hindu–Muslim relations and communal violence.

As troubling as these facts are, the failure to teach history well is not merely a failure to make students remember events. More fundamentally, it is a failure to build skills like communication and critical thinking. Today, Indian companies see around 54% of youth as unemployable due to their lack of these soft skills.

Students who lack communication and critical thinking skills make poor workers; they also make poor citizens. A rational, democratic society requires citizens who are aware of contemporary issues, are capable of reflecting on them and care enough about them to do so. Meanwhile, 46% of Indians born between 1981 and 1996 say that they lack interest in politics. This kind of apathy encourages voters to thoughtlessly support candidates based on distorted, partial

understanding or caste and confessional loyalty. The result? 46% of newly elected members of parliament in 2024 had criminal charges against them.

A good history education, on the other hand, would these vital skills through practice.

How can India teach history differently?

History teaches young people to think about the present by training them to think about the past. Case studies in Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have shown that teaching students about history increases their engagement with present-day issues.

So, how can Indian instructors get their students in touch with history? The answer is active learning. Active learning is about asking questions, discussing and analyzing. It hinges on the application of analytical and communication skills — the very soft skills that Indian students need to develop.

Instructors can bring active learning into the classroom by replacing monologue with dialogue. Facilitating active discussions makes it easier for students to understand the causal connections that make history make sense, turning it into a flowing narrative rather than a staccato rhythm of dates and facts. As British author Rudyard Kipling once said, “If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.”

Instructors must also emphasize historiography — not just telling students one narrative, but explaining how different historians interpret sources and debate. This teaches students to think like historians, not just to accept their conclusions. This fosters a more critical attitude and reduces students’ vulnerability to distorted narratives. By doing so, as Cornell University writing professor Kelly King O’Brien and her coauthors have found,

students gain the ability “not just [to] invoke generalizations about history (such as “history repeats itself”) but actually interrogate that history through a synthesis of sources.”

Schools also need to assign writing and research projects outside the classroom. Such projects give students the immersive experience of poring over multiple sources and constructing their own informed opinions. It also teaches them how to communicate their opinions clearly through writing, another vitally important soft skill.

However, changing teaching style alone would be futile without changing another aspect of the broader system — testing. Instructors’ internal assessments only make up 20% of a student’s final grade; the other 80% is a memorization-oriented board exam. So, students have little choice but to subject themselves to the drab, monotonous regimen of rote learning.

If testing does not reward active engagement, then students will make the rational choice not to put effort into it. Schools must recalibrate the incentive structure, both by giving more weight to internal assessments and by redesigning all exams to test meaningful skills. As historian James W. Loewen wrote in his book *Teaching What Really Happened*, “Doing history is a verb.” To equip its youth with new skills that will power their development and the nation’s future, India must recognize this truth.

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Vedanomics column on BW Businessworld and Spotify podcast connect ancient Indian philosophy to modern economics. His interest in the Partition comes not just from academic interest, but from a deep personal connection of coming from a family of Partition refugees. Aaditya is Commissioning Editor (intern) at Fair Observer.

India Must Threaten Escalation to Force Pakistan to Stop Terrorism

Cherish Mathson
May 16, 2025

To stop Pakistan-backed terrorism, India must shift from deterrence — threatening a future response — to compellence — applying present pressure. Because the Pakistani military, not just terrorist groups, is the main center of decision-making in the state, India must impose direct and painful costs on the armed forces themselves.

The concept of red lines shot into prominence in the Indian subcontinent in 2002, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001. In a conversation with two Italian physicists that year, General Khalid Kidwai, the head of Pakistan's Strategic Forces Division, identified four red lines that could trigger Pakistan to use nuclear weapons:

India captures a large part of Pakistan's territory (spatial threshold). India destroys a large part of Pakistan's armed forces (military threshold). India strangles Pakistan economically

(economic threshold). India destabilizes Pakistan internally (political threshold).

In other words, for every possible Indian action against Pakistan, Islamabad has declared a red line, and it places no restriction on initiating a nuclear strike. Though these thresholds remain vague and rest entirely on Pakistan's perception, cultivated air of irrationality and nuclear saber-rattling keeps the deterrent threat alive.

Pakistani aggression operates behind a nuclear shield

India has no ambitions to expand its territory. It has always been a status quo power that only seeks to regain territory it legally inherited from the British colonial government at independence. Pakistan, by contrast, used intrigue and deception, in collaboration with the British, to seize Gilgit-Baltistan. On November 2, 1947, Major William Brown, the British commander of the Gilgit Scouts, raised the Pakistani flag in Gilgit and declared its accession to Pakistan. The British government did not intervene and instead awarded Brown the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1948. Pakistan posthumously awarded him the Sitara-e-Imtiaz, its third-highest civilian honor, in 1993.

Pakistan confirmed its revisionist posture by launching the invasion of Kashmir in October 1947, leading to the first India–Pakistan War. The ceasefire line from that war became the mutually agreed Line of Control (LoC), across which Pakistan has shelled civilian areas since India conducted airstrikes on nine terrorist camps on 7 May in retaliation for the Pahalgam terror attack.

After Kidwai declared Pakistan's red lines in 2002, then-Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf repeated them later that year. India, for its part, has adhered to its "No First Use" nuclear doctrine and has not crossed any of Pakistan's stated red lines.

This may have lulled Pakistan into believing that it had neutralized its conventional military inferiority. Pakistan relied instead on its low-cost strategy of cross-border terrorism to bleed India. It first developed this approach by training and deploying mujahideen in Afghanistan at the request of the US to push out the Soviet Union. After the Soviet withdrawal, Pakistan redirected these fighters to Kashmir. It assumed that terrorism gave it an inexpensive means to inflict pain on a stronger India.

Pakistan carried out the 26/11 Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008. India responded through diplomatic and legal channels, but Pakistan remained emboldened. It then launched the Uri attack in September 2016. India responded with a cross-LoC surgical strike that destroyed launch sites used for infiltration. This was Pakistan's first major shock.

Less than three years later, Pakistan executed the Pulwama terror attack in February 2019. India responded with an airstrike on a terrorist camp in Balakot, located inside Pakistan.

Six years after Pulwama, and despite its own economic crisis and internal security threats from Afghanistan and Balochistan, Pakistan has now perpetrated the Pahalgam massacre, selecting victims by religion.

To the present day, Pakistan has used terrorism as a substitute for conventional warfare. What it failed to achieve in war, it seeks to gain by destabilizing Kashmir through terrorism. Its ambitions there are the same as its seizure of Gilgit-Baltistan: to acquire territory by means other than open war.

India must become ready to use its own firepower

After Pahalgam, India had no choice but to launch Operation Sindoor, carrying out limited strikes within Pakistani territory to avenge the victims and reassure an outraged public. General Ved Prakash Malik, former Chief of the Indian Army during the 1999 Kargil War, questioned the strategic effect of the operation, however. On his X account, he wrote:

Ceasefire 10 May 2025: We have left it to India's future history to ask what politico-strategic advantages, if any, were gained after its kinetic and non-kinetic actions post Pakistani horrific terror strike in Pahalgam on 22 April.

Even a layperson would reasonably ask: If India has conducted military operations in response to terrorism since 2016, why does Pakistan continue to cross this line?

The answer lies in strategy. But India has never formally stated its red line against cross-border terrorism or the consequences for violating it. By contrast, Pakistan's nuclear doctrine permits first use if it perceives that India has crossed one of its thresholds. Pakistan's readiness to use nuclear weapons first enhances the credibility of its deterrence. That places the burden of escalation on India.

India rules out first use, putting itself at a disadvantage. Pakistan continues to export terrorism despite evidence, UN designations of terrorist groups, diplomatic efforts, and Indian military responses. Terrorism has already claimed too much Indian and foreign blood. If Pakistan can back four red lines with the threat of nuclear first use, why can't India back its one red line with the same?

India must declare that terrorism is its red line and that crossing it could trigger a nuclear strike of a size and timing of its choosing. Simply removing

the No First Use clause from India's doctrine would change the nuclear equation.

Inflict pain now, then more later

India suffers from confusing deterrence with compellence. Deterrence means stating a red line and threatening to respond if the adversary crosses it. It aims to preserve the status quo. Deterrence alone does not change behavior.

Compellence, by contrast, means causing pain now and demanding a change in behavior lest more pain follow. Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling explains this in his book *Arms and Influence*.

Pakistan continues to utilize terrorism because India has not made it dread what might come next. The pain must fall primarily on the Pakistani Army, which uses the conflict to justify its power and privileges, even if doing so crosses Pakistan's military threshold. India calls this strategy option "punitive deterrence," but what it really means is compellence.

What that intolerable pain should be is a decision for India's political and military leadership. But until India compels Pakistan to change, terrorism will persist. The next attack is only a matter of time.

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My Memories of the Emergency: The Darkest Period in Independent India's History

Vikram K. Malkani
June 25, 2025

India's 1975–1977 Emergency saw Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's government suppressing free speech and arresting dissenters. My father was one victim, taken from my family for writing against the regime. This is the story of my childhood experience living through that authoritarian period, finding small joys and suffering painful hardships.

As years tick on in our lives, some memories, good or otherwise, stay on top of all others. Being the son of a journalist who was also closely associated with Indian politics for over 50 years, my most vivid memories are of developments in India's political landscape over the decades. I remember the outcome of each Lok Sabha — the lower house of Indian Parliament — election, starting from 1977. And then there are memories of the 1990s being overcrowded with Lok Sabha elections, of coalition governments that did and didn't last, of nuclear tests conducted in 1998 and many others. But my oldest and most unforgettable memories are of the Emergency declared in India from June 25, 1975, to March 21, 1977.

Although there was growing resentment towards the Indira Gandhi-led Congress government in the mid-1970s, this infamous event's immediate trigger was the Allahabad High Court verdict. It declared her election to the Lok

Sabha invalid. The court also disqualified her from holding public office for six years.

Instead of resigning as prime minister, she chose to declare a state of emergency and establish her absolute authority over the country. Citizens' fundamental rights, which included freedom of speech, stood suspended. Newspapers and magazines could only publish what the government approved. The public broadcasting organization Doordarshan and radio station All India Radio, both already run by the government, became propaganda instruments of Indira's regime. Over 100,000 people, including my father, K.R. Malkani, were arrested under the draconian Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA). Under this act, anyone who even spoke out against the government could be arrested and held indefinitely without trial, on the pretext of maintaining national security.

Indira declared the Emergency during our school summer holidays. I was eight years old then. As young children, my ten-year-old sister and I knew that my father would fearlessly write against Indira. The following are all the stories I have recollected and documented from that period.

The night of June 25, 1975

On the night of June 25, our family was sleeping in the courtyard at the front of our house, as we often did during Delhi's scorching summer. My sister and I slept through the night, unaware that we had had visitors at an unearthly hour.

The next morning, my mother, Sundari Malkani, told us that the police had visited us soon after midnight. They did not enter the courtyard but called out my father's name from the gate. My parents woke up and learned that the police wanted my father to accompany them to the nearby station. When my mother asked them why, their response was that my father knew the reason. For

some support, my mother woke up my older brother, who was 17 then. She wanted to request a neighbor to accompany my father to the station. As she opened the back door to walk to his house, she realized that the police had our home surrounded.

I also learned from my father's book, *The Midnight Knock*, that before leaving home, he turned and looked at us children, thinking that perhaps this might be the last time he would see us.

I don't recall my sister or myself crying upon hearing the news. We probably didn't understand what it meant for our family. I didn't know the meaning of the word arrest until my mother explained it to me.

My mother's incredible bravery

I learned, also from *The Midnight Knock*, that my father had left a modest balance in his bank account. Meanwhile, on that dark night, my mother was left with two frightening worries. The first was my father's safety; under MISA, officers would not convey why a person was being arrested, where they were being taken and for how long. The second was our family's financial uncertainty. Our sole breadwinner was now gone, but we still had to be fed and educated. Throughout that dark period, she was very brave. Despite our family having almost no money at hand, the swim classes my sister and I started that summer continued unabated.

All three of us studied in Modern School, New Delhi's then-most expensive school, which was also considered one of the best in the country. It wasn't easy for my parents to afford the fees but they cut other household and personal expenses to give us a good education. Thankfully, my brother had finished his schooling by 1975. Moving my sister and me to a government-run school would have reduced monthly expenses but it would have

also compromised the quality of our education and exposure. For our futures' sake, we stayed at our school. I learned several years later that my mother's Delhi-based brother was financially supporting her, as were at least two family friends, one in Mumbai and another outside India.

The family car was provided by my father's office. It could not be sold off to get money to run the house, nor could it be left unused month after month. During this time of uncertainty, my strong mother learned how to drive and took up the additional responsibility of driving the family around. Unlike the summer of 1975, when we used to take a bus to National Stadium for swim classes, the following summer she would drive us and a few other kids from the neighborhood to swim lessons.

Despite the financial hardship, my mother managed to give us little pleasures of childhood as best she could. One of those was when right after swimming, she would occasionally take us for a movie instead of immediately heading home. I recall after one swim practice, we headed to the modest Stadium Cinema nearby, which was playing the Hindi movie, *Kalicharan*. None of us fancied watching it! *Sholay* was the most famous Hindi movie running during that period. Although we had much time on our hands during the summer holidays, not to mention the luxury of a car to drive us places, she didn't take us to watch it — possibly because of its violence and abusive dialogue.

Another time, when I asked for a bicycle, my mother tried to get me a second-hand one. When I saw the poor state it was in, I became very sad. So she bought me a new one, although a cheaper brand than the standard Atlas or Hero bike. I can't imagine what other expenses she would have compromised on to buy me a new, high-end one.

Visiting various jails

But going swimming and watching the occasional movie were among the sweeter memories from those 21 months. We also visited the jail regularly to spend time with my father. I don't know how and when my mother learned his whereabouts. He was first sent to a jail in Rohtak, Haryana, about 40 miles from Delhi. My uncle had two cars. Each time we went to visit my father, my uncle would lend us his personal driver and one of his cars, while he would drive himself to his office in his other car.

In the Rohtak jail, all the MISA detainees and their visitors met in a large hall. I did not know anyone else there. In the same crowded venue, my father had pointed out architect and politician Pilo Mody once, whose wife would visit him.

The next "home" for my father was the jail in Hissar, also in Haryana. It was about 100 miles from Delhi. Our first trip there took us a long time. We returned home at about 10 PM.

In Hissar, the rules were more stringent for visitors. We met my father in a small room in the presence of a few jail officers (or perhaps officers sent by the government) whose job was seemingly to listen to everything we said to each other. The seating was limited; during one visit, we were short one chair. Being the youngest visitor there, I sat on my father's lap. I was quiet and shy by nature, so when I wanted to say something to him, I started talking softly to him. One of the officers objected to this. My mother responded to him saying that "children are innocent" ("bachchay to masoom hotay hain"). But he still wasn't okay with me saying something he couldn't hear. I don't think I completed my sentence at all after that.

The third jail my father occupied was Delhi's Tihar Jail. I don't remember much of it at all. On either side of the huge door of the jail were the words, "Hate the sin, not the sinner." I think it was here that as we waited to enter the jail one day, a

large group of prisoners were being taken away in a bus. They were chanting in unison in Urdu, “Shanti Van say aayee aavaz, aaja beti mere paas” (“A voice is calling from Shanti Van — former Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s cremation ground — come to me, my daughter”). My mother found it amusing.

For the jail visits, my mother would prepare a meal that all of us would eat together. This gave my father a break from jail food.

The jails allowed only two adult visitors at a time. My brother was 17, but the authorities still counted him as an adult. So, when any other adult relative wanted to visit my father along with us, my brother would have to stay home.

Balancing school and jail visits

Jail meetings were held late in the afternoon. To arrive on time, my sister and I had to leave during school hours. Initially, we both were in junior school — which encompasses elementary/primary and middle school — at Humayun Road. But after fifth standard (or fifth grade), she moved to senior school at Barakhambha Road. My uncle’s driver would first come to my school to fetch me, then to my sister’s school and then to our place for my mother and any other family member.

Up until fifth standard, we were not allowed to wear watches in school. So I had no idea what time it was or when I was supposed to wait outside school for my ride. The driver would reach my school and go hunting for me on campus. He would find me only by luck, because I was never looking for him! My sister, by contrast, was responsible and would be waiting outside the school when the driver and I arrived.

Once during a parent-teacher meeting, my sister’s teacher said she was taken aback when my sister sought permission to visit our jailed father.

She said she had initially wondered what crime he had committed! But upon hearing the situation, the staff began showing thoughtfulness toward us and respect for my father.

Only one experience during this period was different. My Hindi teacher, Mrs. Sahai, a well-known terror, once asked the class to write an essay on Indira as our homework. When my mother saw the assignment, she was furious and asked me not to write it. The next day, I received a white card from the teacher — a severe punishment in my school, and the only time I ever received one. I started crying in class but she still wanted me to write the essay. Pressured, I managed to write a page, which is far shorter than a conventional essay.

I narrated the happenings to my mother. As I left the room, her neighborhood friend dropped in to meet her. My mother explained what happened, crying. It was also the only time I saw her cry during those 21 months.

We will never know if the topic of the essay was the teacher’s choice or mandated by the government. It may not have been the latter, given that my sister did not get the same assignment. If this was the teacher’s own choice, I can’t imagine what purpose it served for anyone, including her.

Given how my family was impacted by Indira’s Emergency, it was ridiculous of Sahai to punish me for not completing that assignment. A few days later, she tried to do damage control by telling me that a teacher is the children’s mother in school. That made me think: Should the “mother in school” do something that makes the real mother cry? Of course, I didn’t dare ask her that.

My father, a well-read prisoner

My father was an avid reader and used to spend most of his waking hours at home, reading. His

favorite book was Choose Life: A Dialogue (Echoes and Reflections), a dialogue between scholars Arnold Toynbee and Daisaku Ikeda. A few times during my childhood, he had cited the saying, “A fool lends a book, and a bigger fool returns it!”

Being locked in jail had a silver lining: It enabled him to spend his time as he pleased. I imagine he spent a lot of the time in open discussions about the government, something Indira could do nothing to stop, given that the “offenders” were already in jail. He would also play badminton — we had given him one of the racquets from home — and read a lot.

One of my Pune-based cousins owned a bookshop called Modern Book Stall. My father used to give my mother names of books he wanted to read, which she would send to my cousin. Whenever he sent us the books, we would take them to my father.

During one of our visits, he had finished reading all the books he had in jail, and we had no new one to give him. I generously offered him my The Adventures of Tintin comic book, which I’d brought to read in the car. He accepted the offer. He had the habit of marking interesting sections in the margins of books he read. I don’t remember if he found anything in Prisoners of the Sun worth marking, but he wrote down a few words on the last page, which he wanted to explain to me the meanings of. The first among those was “Inca.”

I don’t know how much of the story he understood, given that he hadn’t read the preceding comic, The Seven Crystal Balls. But then again, neither had I.

The bored spy in our neighborhood

My mother was sure our phone was being tapped. She also spotted someone standing some distance from our house and watching our place all day.

Presumably, the government hired this person to keep surveillance on our visitors. Every journalist with a spine was already in jail, as were Opposition — political parties not supporting the ruling cabinet — leaders and tens of thousands of Opposition workers. So, this person clearly wouldn’t have anything interesting to report.

Possibly bored with the lack of action, he once asked a neighbor’s domestic worker — informal workers in India who perform household tasks for clients — to keep an eye on our place while he took a break. The domestic worker then informed the lady of the house of this conversation. The good neighbor promptly came and told my mother about it, confirming her suspicion.

A meeting with Indira that didn’t happen

One person who used to visit our house during the Emergency was a man named Bhikshu (ordained Buddhist monk) Chaman Lal. I have no recollection of who he was or what he looked like. Some years after the Emergency, my father narrated one incident related to him.

On one of his visits to our home, he told my mother that he was going to meet Indira and tried to convince her to accompany him, saying that she did not need to say anything during the meeting. My mother wasn’t sure if this was right. At that same time, her brother happened to drop in at our place. He heard this suspicious-sounding invitation and advised my mother to decline it.

While narrating this story, my father said it was a very wise move. The visit could have been projected by the media as a meeting in which my mother apologized for my father’s stand against Indira — something he would never have done.

My mother, an active rally-goer

One Sunday evening, a large rally was organized, possibly by some Opposition leaders who were released from jail early. My mother drove to the rally and took a few interested people with her. She said it was a very well-attended one. While the rally was on, a helicopter hovered over the venue, possibly to assess how big the anti-government/Emergency movement was. They organized a second rally for the following Sunday.

Through the '70s, Doordarshan was a drab affair — we'd rarely switch the TV on. But every TV-owning household would watch the movie that aired on Sunday evenings, however boring it may have been that week. But the station announced unexpectedly that it would broadcast the relatively new movie, Bobby, on the evening of the second rally, instead of a much older movie, which I remember being Waqt. It seemed a desperate attempt by the government to prevent people from attending the rally. But it worked! My mother mentioned at home that the crowd this time was much smaller than in the first.

India's growing resentment

As the oppression continued, the populace's resentment of Indira grew. While people did not dare speak against her outside of private conversations with trusted people, I remember an incident that demonstrated the popular acrimony. Along the road leading to Minto Bridge in Delhi, a very long billboard had been put up. It had Indira painted in the center, with a vast number of small, faceless figures behind her, implying she was leading the country's masses. I used to see it every day as my school bus passed from the nearby outer circle of Connaught Place, New Delhi's business hub.

One day, my mother learned that someone had smeared tar on Indira's face on that billboard. I saw the spectacle on my busride the next day. Before long, the tar was scraped off and her face

painted back on the billboard. Whoever the "tartist" was, it was incredibly brave of them to do so, knowing any person could well have spotted them and got them arrested.

And then there was this joke I heard in school. I shared it with my mother, who had a good laugh over it. It went like this: Rajiv Gandhi (Indira's older son, who was a pilot then) is flying Indira and Sanjay Gandhi (Indira's younger son) in a plane. As they fly over a village, they look down at it. Indira says, "If I throw ten rupees down from here, that will make the villagers very happy!" Sanjay betters her proposal and says, "If I throw 100 rupees down from here, that will make the villagers happier!" Rajiv betters both their proposals and says, "If I throw both of you down from here, that will make the villagers the happiest!"

As time passed, some prominent Opposition members were released. Shri L.K. Advani and Shri A.B. Vajpayee were among them. After his release, one Opposition leader went to meet Indira. He asked her about Nana Deshmukh's and my father's release. She said my father would be released soon, but did not commit to Deshmukh's release. However, from what I recall, he was released soon after, while my father continued to wait in jail. We will never know for sure why my father was among the last to see release, given the hardship we — his family — were enduring. One can only assume it was driven by personal hatred.

Election day: March 16–17, 1977

Ultimately, elections were announced. My mother was very active on election day. She drove several elderly people in the neighborhood to the polling booth and back. As the day progressed, she also went to some neighbors' homes reminding them to go and vote. She had a very close friend two houses away from ours whose husband was an unwavering Congress voter. As my mother was

visiting other houses in the neighborhood, she asked my sister and me to go and remind her friend to vote. Innocent of the reason for her not going there herself (I suppose she was hurt at them not committing to vote for the Janata Party), we both went to their place. The friend's husband looked slightly surprised on hearing our message, possibly thinking it was nice of my mother to remind them despite his political preference.

My father's release

The election results were announced over a few days. For us kids, it was a novel and delightful experience that Hindi movies were being broadcast for a few days in a row. The unfolding election results — what little we understood of them — would have added to the delight.

From what I recall, my father was released only after the government's defeat was announced. My mother and a few neighbors went to Rohtak to bring him home. I think my uncle's car and driver were unavailable that evening, and one neighbor had volunteered to drive our car. A huge number of people visited us that night to meet him.

The next morning, I told the other kids at my school bus stop that my father had been released. At last, it had happened!

A quarter-century after the Emergency was lifted, when my father lived in the city of Pondicherry, a close friend of the Nehru-Gandhi family visited him. During their chat, my father asked him what had made Indira finally lift the Emergency. His insight was that major democracies in the world had strongly objected to the imposition of the Emergency in India. He also mentioned that the jailing of Gayatri Devi, the Rajmata ("Queen Mother") of the royal family of Jaipur had particularly offended the British royal family. Indira eventually succumbed to international pressure.

The Emergency can't be forgotten

The majority of India's population today was born after the Emergency. They know little, if anything, about that period. However, as the famous saying goes, those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

While one can safely assume that no political party today will impose the kind and extent of oppression the Emergency did. But since the Emergency, and indeed, even in the decades preceding it, the Indian government has imposed or attempted to impose curbs on its people's freedoms. A particularly perverse attempt was the Defamation Bill of 1988, introduced by the same party that imposed the Emergency. The decade of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance wasn't particularly supportive of free speech. On the other hand, similar accusations have been hurled by the Congress against the Union Government led by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Fortunately, the present government has ensured greater visibility of this period by declaring today, June 25, as Samvidhan Hatya Divas ("Day of murder of the constitution," or Constitution Murder Day). Additionally, over the decades, several books — from the late '70s to a few years ago — have been written on the Emergency. Notable among these are B.N. Tandon's PMO-1 Prelude to the Emergency, Coomi Kapoor's The Emergency: A Personal History, A. Surya Prakash's The Emergency: Indian Democracy's Darkest Hour, my father's The Midnight Knock, Janardan Thakur's All the Prime Minister's Men and Advani's My Country, My Life. Interestingly, aside from the last (which has a chapter on the Emergency), each of these was published when Congress was not in power in New Delhi.

A deeper understanding of the Emergency will give us context to understand the present better. That dark chapter of history must be discussed and documented extensively for the benefit of future generations.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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Afghanistan Under the Taliban Four Years Later: No School, No Future, No Problem

Saboor Sakhizada
August 15, 2025

Every August, Afghanistan makes headlines as experts try to decipher “what went wrong” since the Taliban took control. They imposed strict rules, turning schools into indoctrination camps for boys and banning girls from

education. A former student suggests channeling boys' potential into manual labor instead of continued indoctrination.

Every August, the headlines return like a seasonal affliction. Editorials lament, and policy experts reappear on panels to explain, yet again, “what went wrong” in Afghanistan. Think tanks repackage their failures in fresh fonts before the spotlight shifts elsewhere: Yemen, Ukraine, Gaza. For one fleeting moment, the world pretends to remember a country it helped dismantle and then promptly forgot. Afghanistan is now an export sold as a think tank insight, recycled as a policy failure and shelved until next year's anniversary coverage.

But for those of us who lived through the collapse, August isn't just a month. It's a rerun of disaster — a parade of absences. Grief in the postcolonial world rarely announces itself in headlines. It festers in what's no longer there: the shuttered schools, the sold daughters and the stolen breath of possibility.

And from that vacuum emerged the victors: long-haired, dark-robed and triumphantly illiterate. These self-anointed “Chosen Warriors of Allah” couldn't read, write or explain the religion they claimed to defend. But they could enforce it, with bullets, with beards and with absolute certainty. Armed with machine guns and divine delusions, they marched toward Kabul beneath a white flag. Why bother with colors when you're already blessed?

They swept into the capital like a holy blackout, purging it of the corrupting influences of science, technology and joy. The Taliban returned education to its sacred essence: rote memorization of medieval texts, supervised under the watchful

eye of a solemn Doctor of Religion unburdened by curiosity. Divine decree canceled the future.

Gender apartheid as state policy

Naturally, this sacred learning was reserved for men. Women, in contrast, were “protected”, a word that, in the Taliban lexicon, translates to imprisonment, starvation or erasure. UN Women has named this for what it is: gender apartheid.

The Taliban barred girls from secondary school, banned them from universities and expelled them from public life. Some families dress daughters as sons to smuggle them into markets; locals call it Bacha Posh (“girl dressed like a boy”). Others sell children to keep the rest alive. Marriage has become a market innovation, where poor girls are exchanged in halal contracts, a sacred fusion of piety and predation.

For boys, on the other hand, schools remain open, but the patriarchy, obsessed with lineage, control and theological purity, converted boys’ schools into indoctrination camps. These are not classrooms but assembly lines for future Taliban fighters, martyrs, traffickers and tyrants.

As Radio Free Europe documented, the Taliban have systematically transformed secular schools and teacher training centers into madrasas, prioritizing rote memorization and antimodern ideology over any form of critical or scientific learning. These young boys are taught not to think, but to obey. Not to question, but to lead others into submission.

Having been one of those “students” myself during the Taliban’s first regime, I’ve spent years pondering how to reform this model. Finally, I have found a reasonable solution: ban boys’ education entirely.

Think about it. Instead of training tomorrow’s warlords, why not redirect their potential? Send them to the fields. Let them plant literal crops instead of ideological ones. Merchants assure us that, while today’s boys may be physically soft and mentally stagnant from years of sedentary indoctrination, they can be reconditioned. With sturdy boots and early intervention, they might become useful agricultural laborers. It’s a better outcome than becoming the next wave of “trusted leaders” trained to export holy war.

Families, too, will benefit. Boys will finally contribute to the household in ways that don’t involve bullets or beards. It’s a win, win, win; the merchants get workers, families get breadwinners and society sheds the burden of toxic masculine leadership. Afghanistan moves forward, free from the weight of ideas.

A new export economy

Naturally, the regional traffickers will rejoice. They’ve always seen Afghanistan’s children as commodities. A generation of obedient, uneducated boys is a gift to the global market, pliable enough to carry cement bags or Kalashnikovs (AK-47s), depending on demand. And they’re already being shipped out.

As ABC News reports, the Taliban has begun exporting Afghan workers, particularly young men, to Qatar as a way to “ease unemployment” at home and possibly secure financial returns abroad. It’s a brilliant economic strategy: deny them education, then rent out their labor to foreign governments. The boys may not know algebra, chemistry or philosophy, but they understand orders — development through displacement, with divine approval.

Domestically, the benefits multiply. With no need for boys’s schools or universities, we can repurpose those buildings into poultry farms,

opium labs or camel stables. Why waste infrastructure on abstract concepts like math or ethics — and individuals like 13th-century poet Jalaluddin Mohammad Balkhi (Rumi) and Persian polymath, physician and philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna) — when chickens and heroin offer real, measurable returns?

Let's not pretend this is unjust. After all, when the Taliban excluded girls from education, the world called it "cultural differences." Doing the same to boys is merely a balance. Justice, Taliban-style.

In closing, this modest reversal offers a pragmatic, low-cost solution. It demands nothing from the international community and offends no one who matters. It's ideologically consistent with the current regime and disturbingly aligned with global indifference.

Surely, this is the future the world had in mind when it left Afghans behind?

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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shaped by war, displacement and resilience. He resides in Syracuse, New York.

Forty Years After the Oregon Cult Commune: The Girl from the Osho Ranch

Anke Richter
September 11, 2025

Indian spiritual leader Osho's communes drew thousands of seekers to India and the US, where children like Sarito Carroll endured neglect and sexual abuse under the guise of spiritual freedom. Carroll now recounts her childhood in a memoir and documentary that expose the crimes long hidden from public view. Her testimony signals renewed calls for accountability and justice for survivors of cult abuse.

Sarito Carroll lived in Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's commune in Oregon, which collapsed under criminal charges 40 years ago. Like most teenagers in Rajneeshpuram, she was sexually abused there. Now she is holding the cult of "Wild Wild Country" accountable.

Sarito Carroll holds two pairs of shoes in her hand and looks undecided. For the stroll through town, she opts for the more stylish ones: "I definitely don't want to look like a hippie!" The author and acupuncturist from Boulder has flown to California for a discussion on stage the next day. The recorded live event will be about Osho. The name stands for an ideology that has liberated

many people and destroyed others — especially former children of the new-age movement, who still have a stronghold in the Rainbow Region.

Carroll's father was a junkie from New York; her single mother was a hippie. In 1978, the restless seeker and her young daughter ended up in the Indian commune of Osho, who was known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh back then. Thousands of followers from all over the world flocked to his ashram in Pune, India, dressed in orange and later red. Most were middle-class and educated, and more than half were female.

The sannyasins danced, meditated, played music and toiled in a state of perpetual euphoria for their guru. The mystic and philosopher loved to provoke as a capitalist rebel with diamond watches and a fleet of Rolls-Royces. His promise was divine ecstasy through sexual freedom.

In encounter workshops, his followers howled, screamed and lashed out. There were mental breakdowns, broken bones and even rape. The goal was to overcome parental conditioning and old moral values. To surrender, let go. Transforming into a new person without shame, fear, attachments or jealousy. Open relationships were the norm. Young women got sterilized because the master didn't want children, claiming they would hinder spiritual development.

"Bhagwan always said that we don't belong to our parents, but to the community," Carroll recounts on her way to the café. Her copper-colored curls bounce. She speaks fast and precisely, and appears composed. Thanks to decades of therapy, any bitterness or anger is barely noticeable. She even sounds dry when she says, "They were meant to give us up to be happier."

The girl hardly saw her mother in the ashram anymore. They lived separately, and their

relationship was permanently shattered at that time. In the sea of new people, the nine-year-old felt lonely and lost.

French kissing and touching

Soon after arriving in Pune, everyone received new Indian names. American Jennifer became Ma Prem Sarito, meaning "River of Love." For her, it meant that she finally belonged. The photo of the sannyas initiation, where the bearded guru laid his hand on her, is the cover of her memoir *In the Shadow of Enlightenment*. This shadow is disturbing when you read the book. It describes the dark side of a parallel world where "love and light" were preached. Always be radiantly positive. Above all, don't be a victim.

Bhagwan also said that one should follow one's "energy". Give in to your sexual urges and also act them out in front of children so they wouldn't become uptight. "Our cultural norm shifted," says Carroll. "We were desensitized. There were no boundaries, no one was looking out for us." The ashram children mocked the uninhibited adults or imitated them. Nothing could shock them. "I saw many erections," Carroll writes in her book.

She was only ten when a security guard pulled her onto his lap in front of others and practiced French kissing with her. Another man urged her and her friend to give him a hand job. When he ejaculated, the shy girl tried to suppress her nausea: "I didn't want anyone to see that I wasn't carefree like we were expected to be."

Departure to Oregon

In 1981, the enterprising sex cult expanded to the US. In the Oregon hinterland, the Rajneeshees bought the deserted Big Muddy Ranch from which they planned to take over world domination. The utopian dream required volunteers to transform 260 square kilometers of desert that was covered in

snow in winter and in mud in spring into a thriving oasis with its own city. A new wave of maroon-clad pilgrims started: free labor as “worship”.

Sarito was one of the first to arrive, without parents or guardians. Her move across the world for what she now considers child labor had been decided from above. Once again, the 12-year-old was a stranger and lonely. The cold dormitory, where she was housed alone with 14 men, had mattresses instead of beds and only one bathroom. No one locked the door. The shower and toilet were used in front of everyone, naked.

Sarito tried to shower secretly at night, ashamed of being so prudish and hiding her body. It wasn’t “juicy” like all the sensual women of the commune. Before falling asleep, the pubescent girl heard people compare their conquests of the day and comment on her own sprouting breasts and pubic hair. “All of this was normal to me,” Carroll says, looking back. “Only I didn’t feel normal because I had this old-fashioned idea of pure, romantic love.”

Youngest with a boyfriend

In her first month, she met Milarepa (Augustus Pembroke Thomas III), the star of the Rajneesh Country Band. Most nights, the American left the communal dining room with his arm around a different “Ma”. After playing Eagles songs on his guitar, he invited Sarito to a poker game.

When Milarepa held the cards in one hand, he casually slid the other under her t-shirt and played with her breast. She froze and tried not to react, because no one else seemed bothered. Since the scenario soon repeated itself, Sarito believed, “I’m special to him”. That was what she longed for. Not the fondling.

Milarepa was 29 and part of a gang that prided itself on taking someone’s virginity. The first time

with him, in his trailer, was painful. There was none of the ecstasy everyone raved about. He didn’t use a condom and curtly excused himself the next morning for his 12-hour shift. Sarito was upset and disappointed. But she told herself that she should actually be proud: “I was the youngest girl on the ranch with a boyfriend. It was an honor.”

The week after her deflowering, she was summoned to the commune’s clinic with three other minors to have diaphragms fitted. To this day, Carroll doesn’t know who arranged this. None of the “moms,” as the motherly women in charge were called, had mentioned Milarepa to her. Let alone ever offering proper sex education. “But someone in a high position knew.”

The nights with Milarepa continued. Sarito believed it to be a relationship, a secret love story. All her thoughts revolved around her first lover. Even though she was the youngest, she wasn’t the only one: Carroll estimates that 80% of the approximately 40 teenagers on the ranch were sleeping with adults. She knows of one girl who was with 70 men before the age of 16. Another with 150. “It was statutory rape,” the 56-year-old clarifies. “Child sexual abuse.” Sanctioned, covered up and ignored.

Flying for the master

Sarito hardly attended school anymore. At first, she worked in the commercial kitchen and then in the office, in the inner circle under Bhagwan’s infamous secretary Ma Anand Sheela. The “Goebbels to the guru” was tasked with transforming the makeshift enclave into the model city of Rajneeshpuram with a hotel, its own airline and a paramilitary unit. 2,500 “orange people” lived there on average. For the annual World Festival, the number rose to 15,000.

Publicity mattered for this megalomaniac mission. A model in Bhagwan's wake suggested Sarito have her photo taken. This landed the poster child on the cover of *The Rajneesh Times*. At 14 years old, she became an air hostess and flew in a maroon uniform for Air Rajneesh.

Even though she didn't feel like a woman, she was regarded as one. More men approached her. The girls who gave in gained respect: "The more 'liberated' you were, the better." But she was still hopelessly in love with Milarepa, who also slept with others. "For over three years, with several hundred," Carroll says over lunch. His friends jokingly nicknamed him "rapist". Some of the boys, therefore, called the musician "Milaraper".

A teen disco was held every week at Rajneeshpuram's ice cream parlor. Always present were the men and women who were sexually interested in teenagers. A 16th birthday party ended in an orgy with blindfolds. A dressing-down from Sheela followed this. The drill sergeant was angry about the noise and alcohol, not the men's assaults.

To get over her heartbreak, Sarito also became promiscuous. She had lost all self-respect. Someone seduced her by insisting that it would cure his back pain. Then she thought she was in love with a British guy in his thirties, an Eton graduate — the same old story. Each time, she felt used when the erotic interest in her was only fleeting, because everyone lived "in the moment". Her underlying anger grew, and with it her cognitive dissonance. Because what she always heard was that she was lucky not to live in the outside world among the unenlightened, but in Bhagwan's presence.

German disco tour

The Rajneesh movement spread to more than 30 countries in the early 1980s. In Germany, the cult's

main European base, 43 centers were established, with 13 discotheques that welcomed half a million visitors in their first year. Sarito was suddenly asked to leave the country again. For five months, she was shuttled through communes from Munich to Zurich, where she worked behind the bar. In Amsterdam, she injured her back on a construction site.

Today, she suspects that one reason for the "foreign exchange" was to cover up the abuse. During her absence, the top Moms compiled a secret list of those who had sexual relations with minors. There were more than 100 names. Those were simply advised to behave more discreetly in the future so that nothing would leak to the press. "When journalists showed up," Carroll recalls, "we always pretended that we were totally happy, and everyone was going to school."

External and internal tension in Rajneeshpuram rose to a maximum. The animosity between the tiny neighboring town of Antelope and the paranoid ranch dwellers escalated to criminal activities: mass-scale immigration fraud, drugging homeless people to get their votes and even attempted murder. 700 people in Dallas were poisoned with salmonella in the largest bioterror attack in the US — plotted by Bhagwan's right-hand woman.

The empire in red collapsed when the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrived. On September 14, 1985, Sheela fled to Germany, where she was later arrested and extradited. By the end of October, her master was arrested too, and the commune came to a standstill. The outside world was horrified by the crimes committed under the guise of a new religion. But no one cared about the youngest victims.

When the crime saga was retold in the 2018 Netflix documentary *Wild Wild Country*, the filmmakers omitted the fate of the Osho kids,

although the facts were known by then. A 121-page survey from 1983 by the US Ministry of Justice had explicitly stated that sex between adults and children was the norm in the community. “That was a turning point,” says Carroll, who binged the six-part series in two days. “We didn’t want to stay invisible any longer.”

Escape into Society

The Oregon commune dispersed in panic in the fall of 1985. The Byron Bay area became an international catch basin for many displaced devotees from the US. Sarito didn’t know where to go. She had had little contact with her mother for four years. Without money or family, a new odyssey began — with a brutal awakening about her ex-lovers: “I finally realized the truth about them.”

The truth about Osho and his accomplices only dawned on her much later. After a short stint in a US jail, the cult founder returned to India, where he died in 1999 at 58 years old under mysterious circumstances. He only rebranded himself as Osho shortly before his death.

Adjusting to the cultural norms of the outside world was tough. “I felt like an alien reintroduced to society as part of a social experiment,” Carroll describes this time in her book. She hid her body under oversized sweaters. Friends from the ranch supported themselves through sex work — “some still do.”

The biggest hurdle was her lack of education. Sarito got her school-leaving certificate to study literature. When she read Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* in her freshman year, the plight of the sexually exploited handmaid felt disturbingly familiar. From then on, the student knew she had to tell her story. But it took more than 30 years before she fully ventured out of the shadows of the past.

During this period, she lost close friends from the Ranch who had experienced similar abuse. One ended up in a psychiatric ward and attempted suicide. Another died of an ectopic pregnancy after reversing the sterilization she had undergone at a young age in India. In the so-called “second generation”, as from other cults around the world that are now under scrutiny, there are disproportionately high rates of suicide, depression, illness, drug addiction, prostitution and poverty. Carroll describes this legacy of the utopian dream as a “path of devastation”. She calls herself lucky to have survived it.

Reconciliation and repression

Neither her mother nor Milarepa wanted to talk about the past. In 2018, Carroll sent a letter with registered mail to him, demanding accountability. There was no response. He continued to tour the world as “Osho’s musician”, still a star of the scene.

Finally, in 2021, Carroll and another woman appealed to the entire remaining community, estimated at over 100,000 members worldwide. They named names, demanded clarification and reparation. Suddenly, Milarepa spoke out via video and posted an “Apology to Sarito and the Osho-Sangha.” For his victim, his words rang hollow and came too late. “It was a PR stunt to save his reputation.”

Some members of the first generation reacted with compassion. But very few saw any complicity in their own actions and silence, let alone that of their long-dead guru. They were stuck in the old ideology: If you have a problem, then you alone are responsible for that and need to work harder on yourself.

“This gaslighting is crazy making,” says Carroll. “We were marginalized as children, and now again.” The last time she ran into local Osho

devotees, they shunned her. Nevertheless, she considers most of them to be “warm-hearted, kind and idealistic.” That’s why it hurts so much.

Despite the internal denial, the flood of exposure could no longer be stopped. Media reports with paedophilia allegations from the Rajneesh schools in England followed. And then the answer to Wild Wild Country arrived in 2024 with the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA) nominated documentary *Children of the Cult*, in which Sarito participated along with European women. It will screen at the Dutch Film Festival in the Netherlands at the end of September.

Director Maroesja Perizonius, a commune kid herself, interviews the 76-year-old Sheela, who still claims her ignorance. Perpetrators are confronted on camera too, including Milarepa — again without further consequences. The statute of limitations for his crimes has long passed. Earlier, he claimed that “there was no grooming or molestation”.

The estimated number of children abused in the communes runs over a hundred, but not a single perpetrator has ever been in court. A British law firm gave up on a class action lawsuit after six months, says Sarito. The OIF (Osho International Foundation), which manages the cult founder’s intellectual property and books that have sold millions of copies, denies any responsibility. “There is no one in Osho International who had any organizational function in any of the entities mentioned, and so they know nothing of these accounts,” an OIF spokesperson told the *Sunday Times* in 2022. The former ashram in Pune, where Sarito’s story began, is now an expensive meditation resort run by the old believers.

“Each of us should receive decent compensation for all our years of therapy,” says Carroll, pushing her half-eaten salad aside. “I could have bought a house with my therapy fees

alone.” Now she’s agitated. Her voice is coarse when she mentions her broken relationships and why she never had children. “I was just too afraid of becoming a single parent myself. Because I experienced it as so horrible.”

Return to the ranch

Why did she keep her Sannyas name then, once she was fully aware of the negative association? “When I wrote my book, it was a protection mechanism,” she explains. “Those who want to threaten me will only come after Sarito.” Jennifer is still her legal name. She can hide behind it and not be found. And she’s also not shying away from wearing red again. “I’m taking the color back. It doesn’t belong to Osho. And it suits me.” She almost packed a scarlet top in her suitcase for the upcoming event.

Carroll’s cell phone buzzes while she finishes her iced tea: a message from a friend from back then, who will be coming to San Francisco tomorrow and will sit in the audience. One of the few who didn’t duck away after the tell-all book. They haven’t seen each other since escaping the Ranch together 40 years ago, but the memory is still fresh: “I sat in the back of the car with my few belongings and was in shock.”

This spring, the author returned to the fateful place for the first time for a television interview. It is now a Christian summer camp. Again, she was overwhelmed, but this time by the beauty of the landscape, the vastness and the tranquillity, “without the thousands of people back then.” The tour around the old buildings was healing. Nothing triggered her anymore, she says. “It felt like closure.” At Krishnamurti Lake, which the freedom seekers had once built as a huge water reservoir, she performed a spontaneous ritual and threw stones into the water. Then the tears came.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Anke Richter is a New Zealand correspondent in the Weltreporter network and an international observer of cults. She is the author of four non-fiction books. Her last one, *CULT TRIP: Inside the world of coercion & control* (HarperCollins, 2023), is an investigative and personal exploration of former and current sex cults.

Richter's reporting has been published in *Die Zeit*, *Spiegel*, *FAZ*, *taz*, *New Zealand Geographic*, *North & South*, *The Spinoff*, *Stuff*, *RNZ*, *TVNZ* and many more. She is now the founder and pro bono director of DECULT, a grassroots charity that organized the first cult awareness conference in New Zealand.

US

De Bello Trumpico: Will the US Really Take Greenland and the Panama Canal?

Andrew Morrow
January 19, 2025

With his proposal to annex Greenland, Donald Trump is probably using hardball negotiation tactics with Denmark, not seriously attempting to acquire the territory. His proposal to acquire the Panama Canal Zone — a former US territory — however, may be more earnest.

I am increasingly sure that no one (very few people) has ever really paid attention to US President-Elect Donald Trump in a way that matters. This is nowhere more apparent to me than in the current discourse regarding Trump's interest

in acquiring the territory of Greenland and re-acquiring the previously ceded territory around the Panama Canal. Why? Because if people had bothered to read *The Art of the Deal*, or even even talk to a businessman, they'd know that businessmen negotiate while politicians (for the last three generations of them so its entrenched now) dictate.

Am I saying that politicians never compromise? No of course not, and I am of course speaking in generalities, but when politicians compromise on some bill it never results in mutual advantage, just which party's constituents are having their pockets turned out more than the other side. A businessman, on the other hand, wants advantage, sure, but will obtain a win-win when able.

The Big Ask

Reading *The Art of the Deal* reveals the term "the Big Ask." If you're a businessman and negotiate a lot, or a lawyer like me, you're already familiar with this idea. You anchor negotiations at some high point that you know the other side would never rationally agree to (but one that, if your negotiation partner were foolish and just accepted it, you'd be quite happy with anyway) with the knowing expectation that you'll settle the issue for far south of where you opened negotiations. I send out demand letters all the time with demands far above where my client and I know we'll eventually settle. That's how demand letters work.

Politicians seem unfamiliar with this idea, however. They see "Trump wants Greenland" and feverishly imagine legions of goosestepping polar bears painted orange taking over Nuuk to build a new Trump Tower there, shiny and gold.

Of course, if the Danes and the Greenlanders agree to a change in sovereignty, Trump would be happy with that. So would I. Territorial expansion is one of the few objective measurements that

show a state is dynamic and growing rather than stagnating and dying. Green lines on the economic charts don't hold a candle to the colors of the map changing, and anyone (young Barron Trump included) who has played a wargame can tell you that. Of course, the taboo against territorial expansion is one of the pillars of the post-World War II international order, but as Senator Marco Rubio noted recently, that order is dying. It's in its death spasms and not quite gone, but it's not coming back.

Hard to imagine the Kingdom of Denmark would hand over one of its biggest territories. Far more likely, Copenhagen and Washington would come to some kind of settlement. Trump has hinted at many ideas that are not quite as flashy and dramatic — although they would be just as revolutionary to world politics. Things like putting pressure on the EU to fund a European army and take care of itself instead of grifting off of the US defense budget. Things like long leases on more bases than just Thule Air Base to cover changing sea lanes and the growing space industry. Things like a common economic zone with the people of Greenland — a people who share with Americans both Native American and European heritage — to bridge a gap between the old world and the new. You know, stuff that grows American power, which Trump really does care about.

I don't think Trump genuinely expects Greenland to happen. He expects negotiation, not capitulation. Those who are in hysterics thinking that Trump does expect capitulation are not engaging honestly with Trump but projecting their fears onto a man who has been in politics, open about his tactics and strategies and aims, since he came down that escalator a decade ago.

So what about the canal?

Let's turn our eyes from the great white north to the most valuable 51 miles of waterway in the

western hemisphere, the Panama Canal. While it is not quite as valuable as the Suez Canal, it's also right there. What's more, America owned it within your lifetime, or at least within the lifetimes of your parents — and certainly within the lifetime of Trump.

Critics such as Senator Strom Thurmond lambasted the decision of President Jimmy Carter to give the canal zone away as shortsighted, stupid and driven by decolonial fervor. This has only been borne out since and Trump has lambasted Carter's decisions for a long time. Trump seems genuinely upset that the canal was given away, given its over \$3 billion annual value, and I take his stated goal of reacquiring it physically much more seriously than I do Greenland.

The US does not need sovereignty to achieve its goals in Greenland, but there's little other way to be sure of a secure waterway through the Isthmus of Panama. A person on standing on the bank of the canal could wreck super-freighters with small explosive arms. This goes especially after the last few years have shown what small arms and drones can do to obstruct trade through the Red Sea. No, Panama must be controlled physically to have any chance of secure trade across the Isthmus.

Territorial acquisition is back on the table, globally speaking. Russia is currently winning a territorial war in eastern Europe. We know that Trump doesn't find the idea of territorial acquisitions as gut-wrenchingly, reflexively intolerable as the bureaucrats and the Washington establishment do. Devotees of managed democracy enjoyers have been hand-holding the world through the last century saying, "We just don't do that anymore!" to the idea of acquiring sovereignty over land. But we know that there are genuine strategic interests in acquiring both territories, Greenland and the canal zone. There is really no good reason why it is not on the table to acquire either territory, by any means. The only reason not

to would be a deal that is better. I don't know what will happen; I'm not on the negotiation teams. But I do know that Trump's negotiators twisted Israeli President Benjamin Netanyahu's arm into negotiating over Gaza on the Sabbath.

Trump 2 is a different ball game from Trump 1. Perhaps it's time to invest in Greenland and Panama futures.

Andrew Morrow is a partner at Counxel Law Firm and a former administrative law judge. Born in Indiana, he later moved to Arizona. Andrew earned his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Arizona State University. He earned his law degree from Arizona Summit Law School, a school that no longer exists, which is fine by him. Andrew currently practices civil, civil rights and employment litigation in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. He likes to read, play video games that are really spreadsheets with graphics attached and chase his two-year-old son around.

Donald Trump's Two-Pronged Strategy To Gut the "Deep State"

Alfredo Toro Hardy
February 18, 2025

Donald Trump believes the "deep state" within the US government robbed him of reelection in 2020. He now aims to destabilize the federal bureaucracy with a pincer strategy: appoint his loyalists to control departments from the inside and threaten bureaucrats from the outside. How will this affect the country?

US President Donald Trump is convinced that the "deep state" thwarted his first term, robbing him of the 2020 election. Expunging it seems to have become his main priority of this second term. But, is there such a thing as a deep state? There certainly is. It would be enough to read the memoirs of former US presidents or secretaries to discover their frustration in face of the bureaucratic resistance confronted while in office. In this regard, those of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, written a few decades ago, were particularly enlightening.

The following excerpts from his Memoirs speak volumes. They referred to the interaction between the White House and the Pentagon: "Orders were given in that respect, but our military bureaucracy resists intrusions in strategic doctrine even if they come from the White House (...) When I assumed my functions, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara told me that he too had tried to give more options to the President in strategic matters, but he finally desisted given the bureaucratic resistance (...) A 1969 presidential request demanding a reasoned explanation on the naval programs was never satisfactorily answered during the eight years that I served in Washington. The responses given were always close to insubordination and far from being useful."

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis had also much to tell in this regard. One of the main reasons that led Nikita Khrushchev, the Secretary General of the Soviet Union's Communist Party, to install missiles in Cuba was the presence of American missiles in Turkey, bordering the Soviet Union. US President John F. Kennedy understood the risks involved therein. Several months before the crisis, he had ordered that the US's missiles be removed, as they represented an unnecessary provocation. However, bureaucratic resistance both within the State Department and the Department of Defense thwarted the

implementation of such orders, which were never carried out.

Moreover, during the infamous 13 days of the crisis, the US Navy was reluctant to obey the president's orders with regard to the Cuban naval blockade. While Kennedy wanted to give Khrushchev time to see, think and blink, bureaucracy within the Navy did all it could to circumvent those orders and put in place its own book of procedures. Additionally, when tensions between both countries peaked, and war could have ensued at any moment, an American spy plane crashed in Siberia. The Air Force bureaucracy had kept its regular procedures in place, notwithstanding Kennedy's insistence on acting with the utmost prudence.

The deep state, indeed, exists. It represents the natural impulse of the federal bureaucracy to act in accordance with its own institutional aims, set of rules and particular subculture. Seeing presidents and secretaries as simple snowbirds, bureaucratic loyalties are entrenched within their own institutions. For someone like Trump who, more than requiring loyalty for his agenda demands fealty to his person, this represents the worst of sins. Indeed, "he demands personal loyalty—or what John Bolton, Trump's longest-serving national security adviser in his first term, has called 'fealty, a medieval concept implying not mere loyalty but submission.'" The interaction of complete opposites such as these can only lead to a trainwreck.

Trump's pincers: destabilizing federal departments from both sides

In his second term, Trump aims to bend the federal bureaucracy into submission through a pincer strategy. One jaw pursues its destabilization from the inside by putting federal departments and offices under the control of well-known disrupters.

The other jaw harasses and destabilizes these organizations from the outside.

The avowed intention of this dual process is taming bureaucrats by making them feel vulnerable and insecure, by demolishing their sense of entitlement and career safety. In the words of Russell Vought, the new Director of the Office of Management and Budget: "We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains."

The first jaw, thus, is entrusted to people that have "sworn" personal allegiance to Trump. Experience or knowledge regarding their assigned area is not an employment requisite, though. An important historical precedent in this regard dates back to 12th-century England. Faced with the Church's resistance to his rule, Henry II of Plantagenet decided to appoint his closest friend, the conspicuous dissolute Thomas Becket, as Archbishop of Canterbury.

The problem ended up being that Becket realized that his true base of power resided in the Church that he was supposed to "rule," and not in the king that had put him in charge. As the king's man, he was fated to be institutionally resisted, thus becoming feeble and ineffectual. Contrariwise, by submitting to the Church's interests and organizational subculture, he could personify the political might of that institution. Hence, he sided with the Church.

This phenomenon is well known in contemporary US politics. For a political appointee, siding with the bureaucratic organization is known as "going native." When a secretary becomes a "native" of the Department that they were chosen to lead, they acquire real power. Otherwise, the risk of remaining as an ineffectual figurehead is always present.

Conscious of that reality, US presidents tend to choose figures with knowledge of the subjects involved, but at the same time with sufficient personal standing and integrity. The former is to avoid manipulation from the inside of the organization. The latter is for them to promote workable compromises between bureaucratic and political objectives. Although an imperfect solution, it is a pragmatic one.

Trump, however, searches for absolutes. He not only wants personal allegiance from his barons but for them to forcefully control their fiefs. This is why he places so much importance in choosing disruptive figures, people susceptible of exacting obedience under the continuous threat of chaos. This translates into management by fear.

However, installing fear from the inside may not be enough. That is why the second jaw of the pincer searches to project it from the outside as well. It does so through a blistering shake-up of federal bureaucracy: shutting down or dismantling agencies, ousting federal appointees before their term has ended, planning large-scale layoffs, reviewing the elimination or combination of bureaucratic divisions or entire agencies, transforming civil servants' failure to implement the president's will into cause for disciplining and separation. All this and more.

Much of the above is being done in overt violation of the US Constitution's separation of power. Since the inception of the Republic, indeed, it has always been the legislative branch that decides how to structure the executive branch, creating departments, giving them functions and providing their funds. Not anymore. So far, though, judicial authority in this field has been respected. However, a furious rhetoric on challenging the judiciary builds up in the president's camp. All of this, of course, must be sending shock waves of fright upon federal

bureaucrats, who feel that they may no longer be protected by the rule of law.

Trump's strategy may damage the US

No doubt about it, this pincer strategy could be utterly effective in domesticating the deep state, rendering it docile. The problem is that it can disassemble the State itself in the process. It can, indeed, make a big mess of federal institutions, procedures and civil service, degrading the capacity for policy implementation and distorting institutional memory and governance know-how. Additionally, it can dangerously meddle with the Constitutional separation of power. Hammering the foundations upon which the federal government and the branches of government depend for their functioning, is indeed a risky business — one that could turn a global superpower upside down and set in motion a spiral of decline.

Frankly speaking, though, a good dose of pure deep state doesn't seem like such a bad thing, when faced with proposals such as turning Gaza into an American Riviera while permanently expelling the Palestinian population, retaking the Panama Canal or absorbing Greenland. And what about Trump's repeated questioning of Canada's viability as a nation and his threats to annex it through economic force? Indeed, the US might need its deep state.

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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Zohran Mamdani: Hypocrisy, Socialism and the Danger of Elitist Politics

Christopher Roper Schell
July 06, 2025

Zohran Mamdani, son of elite parents and raised in privilege, champions socialist policies while enjoying capitalist comforts. Critics argue he exploits identity politics and white guilt, pushing third-world socialism doomed to fail in America. Despite slick messaging, his economic ideas are incoherent, hypocritical, and risk harming the working class he claims to help.

Zohran Mamdani, the Democrat mayoral candidate for New York, has caught the fancy of many around the world. Yet when we take a closer look at him, the 33-year-old does not appear so wonderful. If Mamdani isn't a fraud, he's certainly one of the most dangerous and disingenuous politicians in America.

US President Donald Trump called him "a 100% communist lunatic," even as Mamdani suggests otherwise. Note that Mamdani is on the record for saying that "the end goal" is "seizing the means of production."

Will the real Mamdani please stand up?

Before we carry on, let me explain why Mamdani is interested in controlling the means of

production. He comes from de facto South Asian royalty. In India, the land of his forefathers, the currency of social status is not wealth but power. Children of top bureaucrats get to swim in Olympic pools while the hoi polloi struggle to get drinking water. Billionaires doff their cap to petty bureaucrats because that is the cost of doing business.

If a bureaucrat is late for a flight or a train or a movie, everyone has to wait until the "sahib bahadur" (brave lord) arrives. No billionaire can claim such privilege. A posh Englishman who went to Harvard wrote a fashionable though superficial book about the billionaire raj in India. As a casual visitor to India, I can say he was wrong. India has a bureaucrat raj, not a billionaire raj. Think of a pantomime cartoon villain who is the master of the universe. That is exactly the privilege Mamdani comes from. If you read on, I will explain further.

For now, let us give Mamdani the benefit of doubt. Assume he said what he did about seizing the means of production to play to the gallery. Assume further that he ain't no real communist, he's just a washed out hip-hop counselor and rapper with a penchant for paying homage to the Holy Land Five whom Mamdani kindly called "my guys" and who were convicted on all counts for giving \$12 million to Hamas.

Perhaps the "my guys" comment might just have been virtue signalling. On the left, it is fashionable to call Israel an apartheid regime and ignore the crazy jihadist Islamic ideology of Hamas as well the organization's murderous ways. So, our man was just following fashion. Perhaps he is just a child of elite parents who fled a failed system from which their forebears profited.

Unfortunately for Americans, Mamdani now wishes to impose those same failed principles and frameworks of his forebears on the US. Therefore,

it is important to examine his background. Mamdani went to Bank Street, a private school, where preschool tuition currently starts at \$37,554, and middle school will cost you \$68,793 a year. From there Mamdani went to the Bronx High School of Science, which boasts the most Nobel Prizes of any high school. Clearly he was no science star and, if he is a product of this joint, I doubt the school's alumni have won any Nobel prizes in economics. Finally, Mamdani attended the tony Bowdoin College, an exorbitantly expensive private liberal arts school in Maine. Leveraging his high school science know-how to the hilt, he studied Africana Studies and co-founded Students for Justice in Palestine. Wherever Mamdani came from, he was no slumming Salaam Bombay kid.

Elite kid with crazy ideas

It is incongruous to find Mamdani as the poster child for the poor and the disadvantaged New Yorkers and even Americans today. In fact, his background makes it difficult to see how the son of an Oscar-nominated mother and firebrand Columbia University professor would understand the average Joe, despite the slick marketing of his campaign. Note that Mamdani makes \$142,000 a year plus a per diem as an Assemblyman and owns property in his country of birth that is valued between \$150,000 and \$200,000.

This not-so-poor mayoral candidate is advocating rent control. I'm sure he's just the kind of guy he has in mind for rent stabilized apartments. Come to think of it, Mamdani lives in one in Astoria. His current location may be modest, but he likes posher digs, telling the New York Editorial Board in an interview, "If I was able to put in a rent freeze, I wouldn't be in a rent-stabilized apartment. I would actually be on the Upper East Side, in a new apartment."

At least Mamdani is consistent, as he goes on to say, "I am someone who is deeply skeptical of means testing." A chicken in every pot and an Upper East Side apartment for everyone, especially himself, is Mamdani's political creed. If he wins the mayoral election, no doubt prosperity and Ferraris will rain down on the young man himself. Mamdani doesn't seem to realize that, if he implements rent control, the Upper East Side will be a tenement, and Gracie Mansion, the home of the New York mayor, will be subdivided into squalor in no time.

Then again, Mamdani's grasp of economics is not his strong point. In an interview with Erin Burnett, Mamdani was asked, "Do you like capitalism?" Mamdani responded, "No, I, I, I have many critiques of capitalism." (8:00 minute mark here) His answer was amazing for a guy who wants to run a city that is the embodiment of capitalism.

Mamdani says of the city with the most billionaires in the world that those with such wealth shouldn't exist. To adapt a famous headline, "Mamdani to billionaires: drop dead." Of the people who pay the most in taxes to keep the city afloat, he says in another interview, "I don't think we should have billionaires." These comments are important because they provide a window into Mamdani's thinking. He genuinely believes that billionaires do not have a right to their wealth and their assets are unseemly. If billionaires should not exist, what about millionaires? Is a net worth of \$999 million alright or is it too much as well?

New York has turned against billionaires before. Andrew Cuomo, the 67-year old former governor of New York state whom Mamdani has just beaten in the Democratic primary, targeted the wealthy earlier. However, during the Covid pandemic, Cuomo realized that was the wrong approach for a city and state that leans heavily on the most affluent. The 0.7% who make \$1 million

or more a year pay 35.6% of the Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) tax, and 42.4% of New York City's Personal Income Tax (PIT). That is highly progressive as is and has been pushing many of the wealthiest to the sunnier shores of Florida. While New York City recovered many of its most affluent post-pandemic, Mamdani's primary victory is once again accelerating this trend.

The 33-year-old star of the Democratic Party is promising freebies at a time the US debt is at a record high, and his city of choice is not exactly flush with cash. In more ways than one, he is bringing third world populism to America. How is this elite kid with crazy ideas convinced that Peronist populism will work in this country? Perhaps the answer lies in his Bowdoin education as The Spectator surmises. I take the view that we will get a better answer if we study Mamdani's family background instead.

The story of Mamdani's elite Hindu grandfather

Many see Mamdani as an underdog who upset Cuomo. That is indubitably true. However, as I point out earlier, he ain't no Oliver Twist. His mother's family occupied the commanding heights of privilege in newly independent India.

A little bit of a history lesson is important here. Prior to India's independence in 1947, the British ruled India through the Indian Civil Service (ICS). The ICS was known as the "steel frame" of the British Raj. At the district level, the ICS officers were and, still are, referred to as collectors. It was their job to collect extortionate taxes rapaciously and ruthlessly, often causing famines in the process.

After independence, India did not disband the ICS and delegate power to elected mayors. Instead it renamed the ICS as Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and increased its powers. Under

Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, New Delhi embraced socialism. An already-powerful colonial bureaucracy now acquired draconian powers. The IAS occupied the commanding heights of the economy and the state. To put this matter in context, the head of the Archeological Survey of India, the Reserve Bank of India, and the Competition Commission are all headed by IAS officers. They head all departments in the government and are the most powerful superelite in the world.

My Indian friends point out repeatedly that IAS officers are brown sahibs who replaced white sahibs in their colonial bungalows with their 20 servants. Many also point out that they are the top dogs of postcolonial corruption. To be fair, back in Mamdani's grandfather's days, IAS officers were not so corrupt. They were still notoriously incompetent though.

Almost invariably the IAS officers of the Nehru era studied some humanities a la Africana Studies but they were in charge of science education, engineering projects, and state-owned enterprises. It is to these innumerate IAS officers — colonial bureaucrats turbocharged by socialism — that India owed its pathetic "Hindu rate of growth." Some of my Indian friends indignantly argue that this Hindu rate had nothing to do with Hinduism and everything to do with the command and control license-permit-quota socialistic IAS raj that lasted until 1991, the year known in history for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Mamdani's maternal grandfather, Amrit Lal Nair, was an IAS officer. Nair's father had changed his last name from Nayyar to Nair, presumably to win brownie points with the British. As an IAS officer, Nair helped set up the first government-owned integrated steel plant in India under the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL). Note that Nair had no expertise in the steel industry and had never run a factory before, but

IAS officers are like gods in India and are deemed to be able to do everything. Perhaps this family heritage convinces Mamdani that he can run grocery stores in New York but more on that later. Anyway, note that it was the Germans, not Nair, who really built the SAIL steel factory that began production in 1959.

After embracing socialism, the government got into the business of business. Not only did it run steel factories, but it also ran hotels, airlines and almost everything else. In 1953, the Indian government nationalized Air India. Under Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, India embraced the Soviet Union more closely. In 1969, Indira — no relation to Mahatma Gandhi — nationalized all 14 of the major banks and squeezed out private industry.

Father and daughter created a leviathan state with the IAS as their praetorian guard. Needless to say the inevitable occurred: corruption and cronyism flourished. Taxpayer subsidies went to bloated state-owned enterprises, not to schools and hospitals. The economy collapsed and hundreds of millions remained trapped in poverty.

More tragedy followed. In 1975, Indira declared the "Emergency," which allowed her to rule by fiat. This leftist authoritarianism was very similar to the Soviet regime. Indira suspended civil liberties, locked up opponents, and even gave her son, Sanjay Gandhi, "extra constitutional authority" to, among other things, create a police state. Indira and Sanjay used IAS officers to rule the country just as their British predecessors had used the ICS. Mamdani's maternal grandfather did fine under Indira and Sanjay as did Congressman Ro Khanna's grandpa.

The story of Mamdani's celebrity mother and professor father

Grandpa Nair was at the top of the Indian social tree and made sure that his daughter went to the

poshest of posh boarding schools. She went to Loreto Convent, Tara Hall in a city that was the de facto capital of British India. For at least six months, senior British officials retired to Shimla to escape the enervating heat of the Indian plains.

It was in this summer capital in the Himalayas that Christian missionaries set up boarding schools to train the high-born children of the British Empire. In 1892, the Loreto Sisters came to set up a Catholic boarding school. Mira Nair, Mamdani's mother, studied in this exalted colonial institution. She started college at Miranda House, founded by Sir Maurice Gwyer, and transferred to Harvard after her first year in 1976. Remember, Indira was ruling India as a dictator in this year and Mira's father was dutifully serving in the IAS. In those days, only the superelite in India could even think of an overseas education, and Mira was one of the chosen ones.

Today, Mira is known as the celebrity director of films like *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala*, and *Monsoon Wedding*. They are anglicized Bollywood-esque movies, which have earned Mira plaudits among critics and even some monetary success. She owns three homes in New York City, Kampala, and New Delhi. The Big Apple is her home base though, and she and her husband hustled to get back as fast as possible during the Covid pandemic lockdowns. Note that she did not choose to live in Kampala or New Delhi during this period.

Mira is a Punjabi Hindu who married a Gujarati Muslim. Her husband is the Herbert Lehman Professor of Government and a professor of anthropology, political science, and African studies at Columbia University, and he also serves as the chancellor of Kampala International University in Uganda. Like Mira, Mahmood Mamdani also went to Harvard and he "specializes in the study of colonialism, anti-colonialism and decolonisation." A prolific author, Mamdani

Senior grew up in Kampala and is a Gujarati Shia Muslim of the Twelver branch, just like Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

My Indian friends point out that Zohran Kwame Mamdani was raised in his father's faith. His father chose Kwame as the middle name after Francis Kwame Nkrumah, a Ghanaian pan-Africanist leader. Neither in name nor in faith does Mamdani demonstrate any connection to the Hindu tradition of his mother Mira's family. My Indian friends further point out that this is in keeping with a centuries-old tradition of Muslim men marrying Hindu women and bringing them into the Islamic fold. The children of such mixed marriages almost invariably identify with Islam. Love live paternalism and patriarchy — multiculturalism and multi-religiosity be damned.

To go back to Mamdani Senior and Mira hunkering down in their New York digs, it is important to note that they aren't half shabby. Theirs are hardly the homes of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" Marxists. Instead, they look more like the homes of people who espouse egalitarian, socialist, anti-colonial nonsense so long as they're at the top. Hell, I might espouse socialism too if I had a \$2 million Chelsea loft.

A savvy, slick campaign

Mamdani's parents give us clues about his terrific political campaign. He has access to both Harvard and Hollywood. He is the darling of the left-leaning South Asian elite, many of whom are children of IAS officers. Naturally, his social media prowess is extraordinary and his videos are rather good.

I will just examine one of Mamdani's videos. In a fantastic campaign ad shot in Hindi, he explains New York's rank voting as well as his agenda. Mamdani splices Bollywood movies into his

message as he speaks in Hindi. *Deewaar*, a cult 1975 movie, is thrown into the message. In that bit, Vijay, the all-action man who takes the path of crime, is saying to his straight-arrowed cop brother, Ravi, "I have buildings, property, bank balance, bungalow, car. What do you have?" In the movie, the brother responds, "mother." Breaking from the clip, a smiling Mamdani responds, "you." This video is meant to pit the people against the billionaires, implying they are all crooks like Vijay.

Let me explain the subtext further. In 1975, Indira was ruling India through the likes of Mamdani's IAS grandfather. She had criminalized most private economic activity through the license-permit-quota raj that I have already mentioned above. Smuggling cheaper goods of higher quality and bribing officials was often the only way to get ahead. In his video, Mamdani is blaming Vijay for being a crook. What he is getting wrong is that the system created the crime, not the other way. At the end of *Deewaar*, Vijay is killed by his brother. Indeed, he is the tragic hero of the movie. Taking the analogy from his own campaign ad, I have a question: will Mamdani metaphorically shoot billionaires on the streets of NYC and turn them into tragic heroes?

In the 1970s, superstar Amitabh Bachchan played the angry young man fighting an unjust system. In *Deewaar* he takes to a life of crime. In 2025, is Mamdani playing the cheery young man taking on another unjust system?

Hypocrisy of brown privilege

A friend in Indian Punjab quipped, "Mamdani was not only born with a silver spoon in his mouth but also a pearl necklace, diamond crown, and jeweled bracelets in a gold thali." A thali is a round Indian plate with a rim that typically has many dishes.

My Punjabi friend's point is that we are dealing with a scion of a South Asian leftist elite that blames colonial oppressors to deflect responsibility from the fact that they failed their fellow citizens. After the British left, Mamdani's IAS grandfather lived in those very bungalows the British built and imposed socialism on the country. At the same time, he educated his daughter in elite Western institutions, and she pulled stakes for the US.

As many of my middle class Indian friends point out, this sanctimonious South Asian elite has preyed on white guilt for decades. They made hay while the sun was still shinin'. In his college application to Columbia University, Mamdani identified his racial background as "Asian" and "Black or African American." He claims he ticked two boxes to represent his Ugandan-born South Asian background, but it's clear Mamdani manipulated a nuance to rig the system to gain an advantage.

We can view Mamdani as yet another charismatic young politician doing whatever he can to get ahead. However, just as people talk about white privilege, Mamdani represents brown privilege. Many of the South Asian elites send their children to the US. Typically, these elites have enjoyed all the fruits of empire but profit from railing against it. Their children and grandchildren who become Americans are dyed in the wool socialists because their families gained from this system. They also have the sense of entitlement that they, not markets, should control the commanding heights of the economy.

Along with entitlement, these inheritors of brown privilege have a sense of victimhood. They argue incessantly that they suffered against white oppressors who frequently robbed them of their language, religion, and culture. Naturally, identity politics follow. Mamdani is appealing to the poor by blaming billionaires. He is attracting LGBTQIA+ voters by supporting "gender-

affirming treatments to trans youth." Mamdani is seducing South Asian voters through slick Bollywood-inspired ads. He is drawing in Muslim votes by laying claim to his Islamic heritage.

Just to be clear, Mamdani's family enjoyed all the fruits of the British Empire. So their railing against the empire is a little rich. Now Mamdani seeks to bring in the old spoils system that his Hindu IAS grandfather administered in India. He seeks to bring socialism to the land of capitalism, failing to answer a critical question: Why did socialism that India chose through its free will fail so spectacularly?

Third World paternalism comes to America

Recently, I came across a fascinating scholar on Fair Observer named Harshan Kumarasingham who explained how brown and indeed black sahibs took charge when the colonial masters left. This Eastminster model is very different from the Westminster democracy of the UK. In a nutshell, postcolonial elites composed of the likes of Mamdani's grandfather imposed paternalism, elitism, and neocolonial socialism.

Nehru is a poster child of this class brimming with brown privilege. The man who set India off on the socialist path went to Harrow, the same hallowed British school as Winston Churchill, and then to Cambridge. Dr. I.P. Singh, who is now in his 80s, tells me that Nehru was only comfortable in English and spoke poor Hindi. He also called himself "Pandit Nehru," a Brahminical title that was hardly egalitarian or modern. Yet India's anglicized first prime minister had the arrogance to speak for the great unwashed not only in his own country but also in the entire Third World. Like Nehru, Mamdani went to posh schools and is now promising a new form of paternalistic socialism. It did not work in India, and it will certainly not work here in the US.

It is certainly true that Mamdani is raising the right questions. There is undeniably a cost of living crisis, and most New Yorkers are struggling to make ends meet. In addressing this issue, Mamdani is indisputably resonating with a number of New Yorkers, especially the younger generation. He smiles a lot, has clear talking points, and stays on message. Yet Mamdani is the classic example of style over substance, and almost all of his answers to the questions facing New York are plain wrong.

Let us take the simple example of government-run grocery stores. Many have already pointed out that grocery stores have among the lowest margins in America. They generally make a mere 1-2% in profits after tax. Running these stores is not easy and requires expertise. Mamdani wants the city government to run these stores in much the same way IAS officers like his grandfather ran steel mills and airlines. Remember that the IAS ran state-owned enterprises into the ground, and they were only kept aloft thanks to ever-ballooning taxpayer subsidies in the halcyon days of socialism. Governments running businesses has always been and continues to be a damnably stupid idea.

To make matters worse, Mamdani plans to use union labor at his proposed grocery stores. I studied literature, not finance, and even I fail to see how this would make groceries cheaper. Mamdani also misunderstood the NYC FRESH budget item he plans to use to pay for his pet grocery stores, which is not an encouraging sign for a potential mayor of one of the most complicated cities on the planet.

Some people worry that Mamdani's grocery store plan will result in a government takeover of the local industry and is a "blueprint for collapse" — I don't. There's no way a government entity will be able to compete in a market that has tiny margins using union employees in the total

vacuum of a market incentive. It would be like fearing the Department of Motor Vehicles opening a bodega down the street.

More importantly, the waste will be enormous, the employees utterly indifferent, the savings to both taxpayer and patron illusory, and the cost ridiculous, which is why I'm all for trying this idea and laying bare (again) these ridiculous claims backed by socialist lunacy. I'm still trying to figure out how New York City's government shells out \$1 million for toilets. Not only that, how do five, count 'em, five grocery stores cost 60 million taxpayer dollars? If you build enough low-price, nonprofit grocery stores, you'll bankrupt the city.

Yet another Pied Piper

Mamdani sells his immigrant story with great gusto. His anticolonial comments win him much acclaim from the left. Even the likes of Rory Stewart and Alistair Campbell, two famous British politicians turned podcasters, have fallen prey to Mamdani's charms. On close scrutiny, Mamdani's anti-colonial drivel is vacuous. He is what the French would call a member of *la gauche caviar*. You could use the terms "limousine liberal" or "champagne socialist" to describe Mamdani as well.

In brief, Mamdani comes from a long line of people who bought into the idea of socialism for their own personal benefit, while never experiencing the worst of it themselves. They profited from the system even as it increasingly teetered on the verge of collapse. These brown sahibs then sent their kids to America, where expensive schools, fancy houses, and success were to be had in a way that was impossible in India or Uganda.

Ironically, the privileged brown kids who fled a dysfunctional system created by their fathers are now seeking to bring that misery to their adopted

lands. As a Texan I can't wait to watch this latest "experiment" in socialism implode.

The internal contradictions of Mamdani's political platform boggle the mind. He told Jacobin, "I began my political organizing life around Palestinian solidarity." Yet Mamdani should know fully well that neither Hamas nor Hezbollah would leave LGBTQIA+ people alive for more than two minutes after meeting them. Mamdani is a sanctimonious scoundrel, a hypocrite of the highest order, or, at best, a man possessed of no coherent worldview.

There is another tiny little matter that Indian historians point to me. The South Asian Muslim elite has imperial memory. From 1192 to 1858, the official language from Pakistan to Bangladesh was Persian. This Muslim elite now controls two states and remains wealthy as well as powerful in secular India. Yet it sings the song of victimhood and self-pity. Note that the man who wants to "globalize the intifada" might well be a closet Islamist. Even though he has a Hindu mother, he has scrubbed out his idol-worshipping relatives just as the Soviets airbrushed inconvenient leaders out of history.

The Democratic Party purports to represent and support the poor, the disenfranchised, and the working class. Yet in Mamdani they have found a leader from postcolonial elites reeking of privilege, and known for avariciousness, dishonesty, and hypocrisy. Beware New Yorkers!

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Make America Scary Again: The Challenging Path to Reviving US Deterrence

Emma Isabella Sage
August 07, 2025

America's strike on Iran's nuclear facilities marked a rare reinforcement of deterrence after years of erosion due to the "preparedness paradox." Yet the polarizing nature of the leaders behind the strike has saturated the public discourse, obscuring the strategic gains and increasing the risk that many democracies will worsen their strategic position in the aftermath.

What America wouldn't give to turn back the clock to February 23, 2022, and make a bold, controversial and possibly unpopular military decision that could have stopped the Russian invasion of Ukraine before it began. To act pre-emptively, decisively, even provocatively; to risk being accused of escalation,

warmongering and sticking its cowboy boots where they don't belong.

At that moment, equipped with credible intelligence assessments predicting the invasion, the world's policeman froze up. The West now lives in the consequences of its appeasement and excessive caution: a grinding, gruesome war, millions displaced, a fortune spent in blood and treasure.

No one is yet in a position to conclusively determine how much the recent American strike regressed Iran's nuclear program, but that might not be the final and best determinant of its effectiveness. The better question is, did it scare the right people?

The preparedness paradox

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Western democracies suffered from the preparedness paradox. This paradox occurs when preventative measures, preparations and mitigation efforts are so effective at preventing catastrophe that observers mistakenly conclude the preparations were unnecessary or wasteful.

Because nothing bad happened, people start to assume nothing would have happened even without the preparations — giving in to what I term a “causal oversight fallacy.” Ironically, as a result of this false sense of security, decision-makers often reduce preparedness, which can invite the very crises that the initial measures had successfully deterred.

The erosion of deterrence is far from the only example of the preparedness paradox that afflicts us. It can also be seen when, after decades of rigorous fire safety codes and few fatal fires, a city decides to reduce the stringency and enforcement of fire safety regulations, which was a causative

factor in London's Grenfell Tower fire, with its death toll of 72 people.

Since the West had not faced a total war for nearly a century, it increasingly viewed its armies as a vestigial appendage, allowing for attrition in pursuit of other goals. This perception diminished Western psychosocial readiness for war and led Western leaders to shun hard power, even in cases where all the alternatives proved ineffectual.

This is part of a broader failure on the part of democracies to adapt to modern warfare. Modern wars are (with few exceptions) not total in nature — the full force of either side is usually left to the imagination. For many decades, democratic states have rarely fought other states, and increasingly confront nonstate actors (the primary agitants in conflict for well over a decade). Counterinsurgency campaigns go against American warfighting psychology and that of democracies more broadly, which nonstate actors exploit to gain the psychological and political upper hand. As a result, Western forces often stumble into pitched battles — and leave without clear victories.

American deterrence has been further attenuated by its fleeting or fumbling shows of strength and humbled by its own extravagant signalling. The country suffers from a version of the preparedness paradox compounded by unusual political and cultural challenges around future threats. Recent events, such as the Texas floods, demonstrate that even awareness of a threat doesn't guarantee it will be prioritized. This is why, although Russia's invasion of Ukraine logically should have startled the West into a full awareness of the need to prevent wars by preparing for them, deterrence still floundered right up until the strike on Iran.

Executive power and politics

Two of the most controversial leaders in the democratic world — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump — orchestrated this strike, heightening the public perception of caprice or executive overreach. Both leaders have destabilized democratic norms in different ways and to varying degrees, leaving a track record of democratic backsliding, broken promises and legal transgressions. Both are so hated by some constituencies that any major action they take will elicit criticism.

For Netanyahu, Iran has always been the career-defining threat — a rallying cry across his decades in politics. From 1996 to the Israeli airstrikes, which “softened the target” at Natanz, his escalation against Iran was, if not entirely predictable, unsurprising. While over half disapprove of Netanyahu himself, Israelis overwhelmingly support the recent military actions against Iran.

Trump is a different case entirely. His past actions — such as withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 without a better plan, repeatedly undermining NATO and oscillating on US troop commitments — have measurably harmed US credibility abroad. He aligned with a heady anti-interventionist base during his campaign, promoting an “America First” agenda that seemed to abdicate America’s role in anything foreign (unless there was a dollar to be made). Yet in this case, he chose bold action over bluster, domestic fallout be damned.

Given the noxious nature of the politicians involved, would I and others in my field have dared to offer such a full-throated defense of the decision to strike Iran if the results had been less agreeable? In a perfect world, yes; in reality, probably not.

To the torment of statisticians the world over, humans tend to misinterpret the outcome of events to form unfounded beliefs about the underlying probabilities at play (a phenomenon known as outcome bias). Success doesn’t negate the risks involved — and failure wouldn’t have automatically discredited the decision. In this case, the people who took the action, and the action’s perceived success, seem to be having an outsized impact on public perception (see fig. I), while the underlying strategic calculus falls by the wayside.

These fluctuations in public opinion may hamper efforts by America and other democracies to reestablish deterrence, rein in rogue states and chart a coherent strategic course. Recognizing that kinetic operations may not always go smoothly — and that even successful ones can provoke fierce criticism — creates a strong internal deterrent for risk-averse politicians within any democratic nation (worsening the underlying status quo bias). The lack of political will among traditional politicians to address the gradual disintegration of a credible deterrence posture, demonstrated by the fact that only an extremely unorthodox US leader acted against a significant and long-standing threat to national security, stands as a warning to the democratic establishment: democracies have ignored deterrence at their peril.

Rather than taking this as a moment for recalibration and self-reflection, the democratic orthodoxy has lashed out with a willful strategic blindness. Opposing politicians acted cynically, even hypocritically partisan, and while the War Powers Vote had an understandable motive (reining in a painfully unpredictable and power-hungry executive), it demonstrated an outrageous lack of consideration for the safekeeping of broader American strategic objectives. From a deterrence perspective, the worst possible move after a provocative action is to reduce the perceived risk of retaliation in the mind of the target.

Troublingly, 63% of Americans polled afterwards said that Trump needed congressional approval for the strikes. Still, at the same time, 56% said that Iran having a nuclear weapon would be a threat to the security of the United States. The problem: there is no mechanism for Congress to debate and approve strikes when the success or failure of those strikes depends entirely on maintaining secrecy and catching the target off guard.

Debating and publicly approving a strike would render it moot because Iran would immediately relocate its most essential stocks and components away from the targeted locations. This action would also significantly increase the likelihood of casualties on both sides, and create the perception that Iran and America were going to war, which would, ironically, set both on course for an actual war. Congress is many things, but an effective architect of deterrence posture is not one of them, and assigning it that responsibility would be disastrous.

The broken link

There is another problem hiding in plain sight: something is very wrong inside the body of the United States security apparatus. Watching America decide to strike was like watching an animal walk with a dislocation — the US intelligence community being the dislocated appendage.

In the weeks leading up to this strike, Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard testified before Congress that Iran was not actively on the path to a nuclear weapon. Gabbard, the lead anti-interventionist in this Trump cabinet, has used her brief and controversial tenure to undermine the independence of the analytic process and shape intelligence products to political ends.

Chosen by a president with a profound distrust of the intelligence community, Gabbard was unleashed on the world's most vaunted spy agencies with a mandate that would slowly destroy their credibility. But then, in a strange case of a flawed process yielding a correct outcome, Trump ignored that assessment altogether (and Gabbard later publicly reversed her position).

Even if the recent assessments were not irreparably contaminated by the environment in which they were produced, American intelligence has a checkered history with Iran. The 1979 Islamic revolution blindsided the US so badly that it left its embassy staff directly in the morass, resulting in a humiliating 444-day hostage crisis.

There is an uncomfortable possibility that looms that, in the shadow of the Iraq weapons of mass destruction (WMD) intelligence failure — which erred in the opposite direction — the intelligence community once again overcorrected, exercising excessive conservatism in its assessments of Iran. It would have been reckless to do nothing on the hope that the American analysts got it right this time, especially since, if that had been the case, the rest of the world would have been horribly wrong.

Prior to the strike, the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had issued a series of increasingly urgent assessments, warning about rising uranium enrichment levels, restricted inspector access and suspicious activities at undeclared facilities. They ultimately declared Iran noncompliant in June 2025. Key allies such as France had also issued warnings, along with multiple security-focused think tanks. In private intelligence briefings, assessments were reportedly sharper than what was being publicly released, particularly after Iran stonewalled the IAEA and missile test activity intensified.

Even in a typically fractured information environment, American intelligence assessments leading up to the strike seemed oddly out of sync. They relied more on assertions of Iran's benign intentions than sober assessments of its rapidly advancing capabilities, despite a clear trend in the Iranian nuclear program's troubling history and the fact that there are no civilian uses for uranium enriched to these levels.

The strategic case for a strike

Since Iran has never been a nuclear power, it is impossible to know how it would behave with such dangerous weaponry, but its past behavior offers cause for concern. It is very likely that in considering the scenario of a nuclear Iran, many beyond the Middle East fall prey to normalcy bias, assuming that things will continue as they always have, with Iran as a state sponsor of proxy militias, terrorism and cybercrime around the globe, but not an existential threat to anyone but its neighbors.

According to the preponderance of analyses (and of course, the revised American assessments), this strike occurred during the last narrow window before the strategic calculus would have shifted irreversibly. In this case, the radiation was contained; not so if Iran had crossed the nuclear threshold. Delaying a strike until that point would have magnified the risks exponentially, forcing a choice between effectively setting off nukes in Iran or risking them detonating in Israel.

The alternative to military action against Iran — diplomacy — had long since become a euphemism for a meaningless political circus. For over two decades, the world has debated whether to tolerate, delay or dismantle the regime's forays into nuclear science, while Iran made a mockery of negotiations. By 2023, Iran was already producing an approximation of weapons-grade uranium. There was no question that Iran had amassed

enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) to build multiple bombs in a matter of weeks.

The repercussions of America's strike in the late hours of June 21st extend far beyond the Middle East. America's willingness to return after two decades of draining conflict in the region must have surprised many adversaries. For Russia, still entrenched in its costly and grinding invasion of Ukraine, the strike flies in the face of its narratives about the West's frailty and impotence. It might afford a second chance for Trump to make good on his seemingly abandoned campaign promise of ending that war.

It will be extremely difficult to reverse Putin's entrenched position, but in Beijing, which has not yet committed itself to a specific timeline for its long-anticipated land grab, this unpredictable American hard-power projection may delay a possible invasion of Taiwan. In one of the many ironies of the moment, this bombing recalls, however imperfectly, the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki — not in scale or devastation, but in effect.

In August 1945, the willingness to use overwhelming, paradigm-altering military force recalibrated the global balance and ushered in the Pax Americana (the period of relative peace, from circa 1945, in areas where the United States has exerted significant influence). Imagine if even a fraction of that effect could have been achieved not by using nuclear weapons, but by preventing their creation. While this dark comparison may be loathsome, it is also instructive: overwhelming force remains the only mechanism to deter a truly committed adversary.

If America's strike on Iran's nuclear facilities achieves a long-term strategic goal, it will probably derive from the reintroduction of an almost anachronistic element into the global security equation: the looming threat of American

power projection against state actors. Deterrence only works when it is credible, and true unpredictability (as opposed to Vladimir Putin's theatrical nuclear brinkmanship, which Trump is now mimicking) can be a powerful tool for creating uncertainty in the minds of adversaries, confusing or frightening them into restraint.

There is much to be gained by reigniting the fear that America might actually use its tremendous military might, not in flailing off-brand counterinsurgency campaigns, but in the kinds of theaters it was built to dominate.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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The Epstein Files: A Political Ticking Time Bomb

Liam Roman
October 07, 2025

The Department of Justice (DOJ) confirmed that US President Donald Trump's name was in the Epstein files, fueling bipartisan calls for transparency. Despite Trump's deflection, Congress and the public demand accountability, with divisions even within his MAGA base. The files remain volatile, blending unanswered questions, elite ties and victim protection, reflecting a trust crisis in US institutions.

The summer of 2025 was a very eventful season for the US as the Department of Justice (DOJ) notified US President Donald Trump that he appeared multiple times in the Epstein files. Congress is involved and has formed committees.

There has been backlash from Trump's own Make America Great Again (MAGA) supporters as he has resorted to his usual tactics of deflection. Despite this, Trump has not been able to avoid the whirlwind of events. The outcry for transparency is why the Epstein files remain a ticking public and political time bomb with escalating pressures from all sides.

Who was Jeffrey Epstein?

Jeffrey Epstein was a financier who was a convicted sex offender and an alleged sex trafficker accused of abusing dozens of teenage girls at some of his multi-million dollar estates around the US and private Caribbean islands.

Epstein was born and raised in New York City. Although he did not graduate from college, the prestigious Dalton School in New York offered him a position to teach math and physics. The father of one of his students had introduced Epstein to a senior partner at Bear Stearns, a

respected Wall Street investment firm. Epstein quickly advanced through the ranks and earned a promotion to partner in under five years.

In the early 1980s, Jeffrey Epstein created his own firm, J Epstein and Company. His firm managed assets for uber-wealthy clients with assets reaching into the billions. Mr. Epstein quickly used his fortune to purchase mansions in New York and Florida, a ranch in New Mexico and two islands — Little St. James and Great St. James — in the US Virgin Islands. As his wealth grew, he began increasingly mingling with celebrities, artists and politicians.

In 2005, parents informed authorities in Florida that Epstein had molested their 14-year-old daughter at his Florida mansion. When the police searched the property, they discovered pictures of young girls throughout the house. Investigators later determined that Epstein had developed a scheme to exploit several vulnerable girls and women, some of whom were underage.

This scheme started in 1994 and lasted until at least 2004. Mr. Epstein made a deal with Federal prosecutors in 2008 that avoided federal charges and could have led to a life sentence. Instead, he was sentenced to 18 months and was released early on probation after only 13 months.

Fast-forwarding to 2019, federal agents again arrested Jeffrey Epstein on August 6 for running a large network of underage girls for sex that took place between 2002 and 2005. Mr. Epstein, if found guilty, would face up to a 45-year prison sentence. Guards placed Mr. Epstein on suicide watch and recorded his behavior and activity every 15 minutes. However, on August 10, 2019, Jeffrey Epstein was found dead by suicide while awaiting trial.

Maxwell's trial and conviction

In July 2020, following Epstein's death, his former girlfriend, Ghislaine Maxwell, became a person of interest in Epstein's sex schemes. She was arrested for her role in Epstein's crimes. Prosecutors alleged that Maxwell had helped recruit minors whom Epstein later abused.

Maxwell, an Oxford-educated scholar, introduced Epstein to her wealthy and influential acquaintances, including former US President Bill Clinton and the Duke of York. In June 2022, after a one-month jury trial, Ghislaine Maxwell was sentenced to 20 years for her role in helping Jeffrey Epstein abuse minors.

What the Epstein files contain

The Epstein files comprise documents from two criminal investigations, including interview transcripts with victims and witnesses, as well as items seized during raids on his properties. To date, the House Oversight Committee has released 33,000 pages, though a large portion of them have already been available to the public. Nonetheless, consolidating these documents into one official release has increased their impact, renewed public scrutiny and fueled speculation about what remains sealed.

The files reference numerous celebrities and politicians. Among those mentioned so far are Clinton and Trump, the late New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, actor Kevin Spacey, Prince Andrew, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, renowned attorney Alan Dershowitz and former US Vice President Al Gore. Along with the numerous names listed, the 900 pages of unsealed documents also named friends, associates and alleged victims.

Investigators and legal experts continue to emphasize that a mention in these records does not imply guilt or direct involvement in Epstein's crimes. Nevertheless, the association alone has

proven damaging for many, as the shadow of Epstein's crimes has cast doubt on anyone connected to him.

Unanswered questions

Several questions remain unanswered, notably how Jeffrey Epstein accumulated his wealth. From 1998 to 2013, American multinational financial services firm JPMorgan Chase often allowed Epstein to withdraw large sums of money. His account frequently held hundreds of millions of dollars. Epstein also inexplicably received significant sums from some of America's wealthiest individuals, typically in installments of tens of millions of dollars.

Additionally, Epstein was a client of Deutsche Bank from 2013 to 2018. Both JPMorgan and Deutsche Bank settled lawsuits with their victims, who alleged that both banks knew about the underage sex trafficking network.

In a letter from Senator Ron Wyden, the ranking member on the Senate Finance Committee, to the DOJ, Wyden criticized the Trump administration for not conducting a thorough investigation into the funding of Epstein's network. Wyden urged the committee to investigate the role of sanctioned Russian banks involved in financing Epstein's sex trafficking network.

The Treasury Department's Epstein file shows that he used multiple sanctioned Russian banks to wire hundreds of millions of dollars to his operations. This has raised urgent questions about how such transactions went undetected for so long.

Wyden also requested that the committee conduct depositions with the bankers responsible for overseeing Mr. Epstein's large transactions, especially when these bankers perform "know your

customer" checks as part of their due diligence on large wire transfers — safeguards designed to flag suspicious activity and prevent this kind of abuse.

Mr. Epstein's flight logs and black books have attracted significant public attention. In February, Attorney General Pam Bondi released the initial redacted documents. The flight logs show how often Mr. Epstein traveled, along with his routes, destinations and individuals who traveled with him. The black book was Mr. Epstein's contact list, part of the first documents to be released, which included names and phone numbers of individuals he knew, redacted.

There have been several recent disclosures involving Donald Trump in the Epstein files. Among them is a "birthday book" entry that included a drawing of a woman's body outline with a sexually suggestive note allegedly signed by Trump, which was unsealed this summer and has sparked renewed scrutiny. Trump has denied writing it and has filed a lawsuit over its release.

Still, the controversy underscores Senator Wyden's broader point: without full transparency, the public cannot fully understand the extent of Epstein's financial or political connections. Alongside these revelations are photos documenting Trump and Epstein's decade-long friendship before their falling out in 2007, emphasizing how the circle of high-profile figures connected to Epstein continues to attract public and political scrutiny.

Legal and political fallout

Files related to Mr. Epstein have sparked investigations by congressional committees. These probes have led to legal and political repercussions, fueling debates over public transparency versus elite protection. A complex web of promises of transparency, partial disclosures and denials now surrounds the Epstein

story — with President Trump firmly at the center of the controversy.

Politico published a timeline that raises questions for President Trump. Specifically, Kash Patel, during his confirmation hearing for Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director, promised to reveal connections to Epstein if confirmed. On February 21, Attorney General Pam Bondi stated that the Jeffrey Epstein “client list” was on her desk. Subsequently, on February 27, Bondi released the initial set of Epstein files. In May, Bondi informed Trump that the Epstein files named him several times. But on July 7, in a DOJ memo, Attorney General Bondi said there is no “client list” and that Mr. Epstein’s death was a suicide.

The situation has raised questions about the “client list” and whether authorities are ensuring the protection of elite names on that list. The inconsistent statements and shifting timeline have intensified scrutiny over whether a definitive list exists, who appears on it and whether prosecutorial decisions and transparency have inadvertently protected — or intentionally shielded — influential figures implicated in the case.

The political fallout is where the files are most dangerous. In this rare situation, Trump could lose political support regardless of whether the Epstein files are ultimately released. On one hand, his base — normally steadfast and forgiving — has shown visible frustration with the way he has handled the controversy.

Many of his supporters rallied behind his 2024 campaign promise of “full transparency,” and now view his refusal to deliver as a betrayal of that pledge. If the files are fully released and he is mentioned in them, as Pam Bondi told him he was back in May, then he is likely to lose more of his support for his alleged involvement in the sexual abuse of numerous women.

However, keeping the files sealed presents serious risks. Since Congress reconvened after its summer recess, calls for transparency have grown and the perception of a cover-up has only intensified the explosive nature of the issue. For Trump, the risk is that secrecy encourages speculation and fuels conspiracy theories, keeping the story alive in the news cycle.

The Epstein files have become a political ticking time bomb for both the administration and those lawmakers who appear unwilling to confront the scandal. Members of Congress who fail to demand the release may find themselves ousted in favor of challengers who promise openness and accountability.

While the House Republican leadership recently blocked an amendment that would have required the full release of the files, several rank-and-file Republicans broke ranks to support it, signaling cracks within the party. The longer the White House delays disclosure, the greater the risk to both Trump’s support among voters and the unity of his congressional coalition.

In addition to these investigations, President Trump has encountered pressure and disagreements with his supporters over his failure to release the files. This was a promise he made during his 2024 campaign. The lack of transparency has fueled numerous conspiracy theories regarding Jeffrey Epstein’s true fate.

Due to the lack of transparency, there is also an erosion of trust in institutions such as the Justice Department and the media. For many, this has been a call to arms; there has been a bipartisan push to unseal the documents.

While some are pushing to unseal the files, there is also resistance to keep the documents sealed for the protection of the victims, given that Epstein

harmed more than 1,000 women, each of which have suffered unique trauma.

A memo from the Justice Department said, “[s]ensitive information relating to these victims is intertwined throughout the materials. This includes specific details such as victim names and likenesses, physical descriptions, places of birth, associates, and employment history.” While victim protection is a legitimate concern, a large number of victims have advocated for the release of files, further fueling the crisis.

The case for transparency is straightforward. There has been bipartisan support to hold those involved in Mr. Epstein’s sex trafficking network accountable for their crimes. Senator Ron Wyden wrote a letter to Attorney General Bondi, Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent and FBI Director Kash Patel, blasting the Trump administration for withholding documents that would limit the exposure to Donald Trump’s ties with Jeffrey Epstein. Senator Wyden also noted that, following his investigation, there appeared to be additional individuals who need to be held accountable for the crimes they helped facilitate.

Growing pressures on Trump

This summer was a very eventful season with the Trump administration being under increased pressure to disclose the information from the Epstein files. Trump has resorted to his usual tactics of deflecting and has even gone so far as to accuse former President Barack Obama of treason.

While Trump has begged his supporters to “not waste Time and Energy on Jeffrey Epstein, somebody that nobody cares about,” he has faced backlash from his MAGA base for the lack of transparency over a two-page memo from the DOJ. The memo claimed that after an extensive review, there was no evidence of a “client list.”

The additional deflection has led to increased scrutiny from both the public and the legal system. Democrats, too, are taking this opportunity to attack Trump. Senator Jon Ossoff kicked off his campaign asking, “Did anyone really think the sexual predator president who used to party with Jeffrey Epstein was going to release the Epstein files?” House Democrats sought to introduce a long-shot resolution demanding the release of all files related to the Epstein case.

However, before the scheduled vote, House Speaker Mike Johnson concluded business early and gavelled Congress into its month-long summer recess to avoid holding the vote. Some Republicans, such as Trump’s former Vice President Mike Pence and MAGA-supporting Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, have broken ranks.

Greene has said, “[c]rimes have been committed,” and “[i]f there’s no justice and no accountability, people are going to get sick of it. That’s where people largely are.” They are also diverging from Trump and pushing for the files to be released.

The DOJ, in its memo denying a client list exists, has cited victim protection precedents and stated that “much of the material is subject to court-ordered sealing.” While the administration continues to cite victim protection precedents, many critics of the administration label the moves as politically motivated.

Jeffrey Epstein’s files have shifted from a distant scandal to a highly charged controversy over accountability — or the lack thereof — in modern American politics. House Democrats have released hundreds of pages of documents. The birthday card that included a note for Epstein’s 50th birthday, featuring an outline of a woman’s body and a sexually suggestive tone, is reportedly signed by Trump, who strongly denies it and has

even sued over it, bringing transparency into public debate.

Meanwhile, the Senate narrowly blocked a Democratic effort to require the full release of all related files. The DOJ has begun releasing redacted grand jury testimony, but with some reservations, citing ongoing victim protections.

Amidst this political maneuvering, legal battles and institutional hurdles, one fact remains undeniable: the Epstein files are still a ticking time bomb — one that could reveal truths, test and potentially destroy loyalties. Consequences, including denials, diversions and refusals, are just beginning.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Liam Roman is an editorial intern with Fair Observer. From Williamsport, Pennsylvania, Liam graduated from Lycoming College in 2020 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. In May 2023, Liam volunteered with a group of Lycoming students to research and improve police-community relationships. Their research is to be published by the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Liam enjoys golfing and traveling, and he has been to several countries in Europe.

Republicans Test the Limits of Gerrymandering and Voter Suppression

Pooka MacPhellimey
November 14, 2025

Republican lawmakers seek to retain power through aggressive gerrymandering and voter suppression in the US Congress. Their strategy risks backfiring as shifting voter behavior and wave elections could undermine their assumptions as to how safe reshaped districts may be. This approach may weaken Republican control and create electoral losses that reshape American politics in the next national election cycle.

The math is tricky, but Republican gerrymandering (the political manipulation of electoral district boundaries to benefit a party, group or socioeconomic class within the constituency) in the US Congress could be setting Republicans up for an electoral catastrophe.

Assuming they cannot perform sufficient, effective and non-counterproductive vote suppression, there is a risk with extreme gerrymandering (apart from the ethical issues) that you might end up creating more seats vulnerable in a wave election against you than any that you might gain.

How gerrymandering works

Although there isn't active gerrymandering in the UK, as in the United States, the UK uses first-past-the-post electoral districts, and the last elections there are illustrative of what might happen in the US. In the UK in 2019 and 2024, relatively small swings in the popular vote led to a remarkable number of "safe seats" changing hands, first Labour, then Conservative.

To break it down, the Conservatives in 2019 surged to 365 seats (of 650), a majority of 35 based on 43.6% of the popular vote, which imploded to 121 with 23.7% losing two-thirds of their seats for a less than half collapse in their vote.

Meanwhile, Labour fell to 202 in 2019 with 32.1%, then more than recovered to 411 in 2024 with just 33.7%, more than doubling their seat haul for a mere 1.6% increase in their vote, i.e., a 5% increase in their total. Thus, a small increase in Labour's vote share propelled Labour to a substantial majority, surpassing what the Tories secured in 2019 — indeed, 46 more seats with 10% fewer votes. The central factor, of course, was the collapse of the Tories' vote, magnified by first-past-the-post; Labour didn't have to be popular, just not as unpopular as the Tories. It's not who voters love, it's who the voters are angriest with.

Back in the US, the danger in the Republicans' mathematics is part of how gerrymandering works — it tries to create districts with enough reliable voters for one party, say reliable Republican voters, to ensure that the seat is noncompetitive, that it will only ever return a Republican.

Gerrymandering works by “packing and cracking” — pushing many of the (presumed) consistently Democratic voting demographics into just one potential House-seat of several, and spreading (presumed) reliable Republicans out to create majorities in as many of the remaining districts as possible — the latter also with supposed to be low-propensity Democratic voting groups. The data that gerrymandering depends on is the decennial census combined with voter behavior in the most recent elections.

Dependence on voter behavior — what if the Republicans are very unpopular?

The problem is that the more extreme the gerrymandering, the thinner you have to spread the presumed-to-be-reliable Republican voters, and the more you depend on Democratic voters not turning out. This inevitably reduces many of their “safe majorities.” But it also depends on how consistently voters will repeat their previous

behavior in the next election — it assumes stability from one election to the next.

In a wave election, those assumptions can break down — gerrymandering might have turned what were believed to be safe Republican seats into marginal ones during a big wave; the “sea-wall/levee is overtopped,” leading to electoral collapse.

Moreover, assumptions predicated on voter behavior in previous elections are “carrying a lot of freight,” but if something happens to change that behavior — boom! It also raises the question of whether voter behavior in past elections was atypical or a durable trend — say Hispanics in 2024...

In Texas, a lot seems to be riding on Republican assumptions about how the Hispanic population will vote; in the this month's general and special elections, the gains in Hispanic votes that US President Donald Trump and Republicans secured in 2024 appears to have collapsed (this too may be a long-term problem — running against the Catholicism of former Presidential Candidate Al Smith in 1928 cost Republicans Catholic voters all the way into the 1950s and 60s. How badly and permanently have Hispanics been alienated by the Make America Great Again [MAGA] Republicans' actions and rhetoric?)

In addition to 2024 voting patterns, the gerrymander is also based heavily on data from the 2010 census, which will be six years old by November 2026, in a state with large and rapid population and demographic shifts. Moreover, Texas has historically had unusually low turnout, 56.6% in 2024 versus 63.9% in the US as a whole — were something to “goose” that turnout, such as voter anger at Trump and the Republicans...

Republican strategy and Trump's influence

Although it appears extreme, Republican gerrymandering has, until now, been cautious and carefully calculated to limit the impact of a wave election, but, spurred by Trump's demands, they may be going too far and have massively exposed themselves. That may leave few options except for blatant voter suppression — but this too brings its own risk of backlash, of spiking angry turnout amongst the groups targeted for suppression.

Historically, incumbents — especially those in safe seats — have had a lot of influence over districting and gerrymandering (state parties, too, are happy to keep their safely gerrymandered majorities). They are, in fact, a key effective, if not very visible, opponent of overly increased gerrymandering because it necessarily reduces their safe majority, makes them work harder in elections and puts their seat at greater risk. But Republican incumbents are more terrified of Trump and his backing a primary candidate in their district than they are of their natural antipathy and caution about excessive gerrymandering.

Anyone remotely familiar with, say, Texas politics, or North Carolina (to cite two heavily gerrymandered states) would say that in 2001, the Republicans there already seemed to have pushed the gerrymandering math as far as they safely could get away with.

Trump, in his demand for increased gerrymandering, has nullified and silenced incumbent objections while paying little attention to the mathematics — but those Republicans are obviously more scared of a Trump-backed primary opponent than the general election. That may cost them.

Voter suppression's limits

Notably, a lot of voter suppression relies on making voting more logistically and bureaucratically difficult — through obstacles such

as voter identification requirements, registration hurdles, voter record purges and logistical challenges like limiting or banning mail-in ballots or having polling stations that are poorly located with limited hours (which can be hard for hourly workers to find time to vote).

The problem with these voter suppression efforts is that they could disproportionately affect MAGA constituencies, making it harder for Republican voters to cast their ballots. This is especially true because the Republican base within that group tends to include older voters, hourly workers, workers without a college education and people who will find voter suppression obstacles harder to navigate than younger, increasingly more educated voters who are breaking heavily Democrat.

Moreover, despite Trump's preening, voter suppression has mostly to be instituted at the state level — and, if there is a wave election in 2026, Republican losses in statehouses might preclude effective voter suppression measures by 2028 — even more so if Republicans lose the national House and Senate. Under current law and voting arrangements, states organize and administer elections, even Federal elections, and within those states, municipalities (cities) and counties play a significant role. Even with the current Republican control of Congress and, despite the Supreme Court disgracing itself with obvious political partisanship, voter suppression would be very hard to do at the national level.

A national infrastructure usable for voter suppression simply does not exist and would take time to create (Trump has largely gutted the Federal Election Commission, by firing the Democratic Commissioner and driving two relatively moderate Republicans to resign, it no longer has a quorum, it can't do anything). Ideas Trump is militantly pressing for, like say banning postal voting at the federal level would:

— Likely have to be executed at the state level and predominantly in Republican states;

— Fall heavily on elderly, infirm and rural voters, constituencies Republicans rely on.

— Risk a backlash amongst regular postal voters, like say the US military.

Efforts to intimidate by, say, deploying Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) to polling stations would be predicated on the myth of noncitizens voting; they'd be ineffectual at suppressing these nonexistent votes, but very effective at enraging Latino, Black and other voters. The Army, the National Guard and even the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) are not likely to be sufficiently partisan to be effective or willing to engage in intimidation.

Indeed, the central risk of obvious, clumsy efforts at voter suppression is that it'd turn voting Democratic into an act of defiance, a middle finger extended to the Grand Old Party (GOP). Meanwhile, crude voter suppression and gross gerrymandering may antagonize independent voters — witness the huge majority the “Proposition 50” retaliatory redrawing of California's districts in response to Texas unexpectedly secured — in August 2025, almost two-thirds of those asked in opinion polls opposed it, but it secured a vote of almost two-thirds by November. Voters are angry, but are they particularly angry at Republicans more than Democrats?

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Pooka MacPhellimey (pseudonym) is a member of the devil class. He sits in a hut in the middle of a firwood, meditating on the nature of numerals. He reflects: “Answers do not matter so much as

questions... A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question.”

Nobody's Girl: Virginia Giuffre's Memoir Reached Libraries Six Months After Her Suicide

Laura Pavon
November 23, 2025

Virginia Giuffre's memoir, *Nobody's Girl*, and life story reveal a network of powerful figures who abused her or were active contributors to her abuse and her long fight for justice. Her suicide and the release of new Epstein-related records reignite public scrutiny of those ties. Her case advocates for institutions to defend truth with greater transparency and accountability.

Virginia Roberts Giuffre — one of convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein's most vocal and prominent victims — was born in Sacramento, California, in 1983, but soon moved with her family to Palm Beach County. When she was 16, her father found her a side job as a towel girl in the spa at the Mar-a-Lago Club, where he worked as a gardener.

In her newly published memoir, *Nobody's Girl*, edited by Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Penguin Random House, she recounts that when she started working at Mar-a-Lago, she was determined to leave her previous years as a runaway teenager behind her and give herself another chance. However, just as she was starting to envision a brighter future, the British socialite Ghislaine

Maxwell, a regular client of the Mar-a-Lago spa, approached her for the first time.

The Louvre and the hero's journey

Although the book follows a clear chronology, there are numerous flashforwards, as seen in the opening chapter. In this initial passage, 16- or 17-year-old Virginia, who had never traveled outside the US until accompanying Ghislaine and Jeffrey, finds herself at the Louvre. Here, Epstein explains to her what she describes as a magnificent tapestry. She is probably referring to the Richelieu Wing of the Louvre, which has several rooms devoted to 16th-century Renaissance tapestries, many of which once adorned royal palaces.

Several pages later, we see her return to the museum. Over a decade has passed, and she is back in Paris, ready to testify against Jean-Luc Brunel, one of Epstein's closest associates and a French modelling agent.

I think the parallel with the Louvre in these two very different moments in her life marks the hero's journey narrative and the overcoming story she is striving to communicate. In the same hope-filled spirit of triumphing over evil, she dedicated her book to anyone who has suffered sexual abuse.

Megalomania and the shield of self-proclaimed genius

I find it fascinating how megalomaniacs and con artists like Epstein often draw on self-proclaimed genius and academic status to build their social power. Virginia's memoir mentions that she was trafficked to a number of "academics from prestigious universities", and recounts how Ghislaine first introduced Epstein to her as a "genius".

After all, according to the person who hired him for his first teaching job, Epstein, a college

dropout, lied about having degrees in mathematics and physics in order to secure a position at the prestigious Dalton School in New York. It was there that he took the big leap. The father of one of his students was a millionaire who was impressed by him and secured him a job at an investment bank.

The weight of trauma and the limits of public belief

When discussing Virginia Giuffre's posthumous memoir, *Nobody's Girl*, it's important to acknowledge her death by suicide in April 2025, when she was only 41 years old. Symbolically, at the very least, her death highlights the toll that trauma and continued victimization can take on a person.

In the public narrative, her death is inextricably linked to the lasting effects endured by victims of sexual abuse, especially when they are not believed. While no one can claim to fully understand the complex emotional, medical or social reasons that led Giuffre to take her own life, it's clear that confronting some of the most powerful elite groups by pursuing legal cases against deceased pedophile Jeffrey Epstein; Ghislaine Maxwell, who is now incarcerated; and the recently destitute former Prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor — to name a few — was extremely difficult.

Disclosing sexual abuse is heroic in any situation, regardless of socioeconomic status. Patterns of victim-blaming tend to prevail whether one is wealthy or poor, as there's typically an added burden of having to prove one's credibility. However, most of Epstein's victims did come from economically challenging and precarious situations, which always adds a layer of vulnerability.

#MeToo and the power of public scrutiny

Giuffre's life story, as told in *Nobody's Girl*, is both sadly universal and historically unique. In her memoir, she suggests that the 2017 #MeToo movement probably helped raise awareness about Epstein, who was finally imprisoned in early July 2019 and subsequently committed suicide.

It is true that the flood of testimonies led by actresses such as Alyssa Milano brought new light to how sexual violence is institutionalized, how it is part of the economy and how it is a defining characteristic of many powerful businessmen. Specifically in Virginia's case, the added sensation that royalty brings to the media may have increased her exposure.

To the public, Andrew's involvement may have seemed more scandalous and unusual than that of a Hollywood celebrity. British monarchs are still the titular heads of the Church of England since its foundation by King Henry VIII. Like Andrew, born second to the heir, Henry was also the Duke of York. However, after his brother Arthur died, Henry became king, a fate that Andrew has never come close to experiencing. This is far-fetched, but I'm still unsure whether Henry VIII's womanizing and violent tendencies would have been enough to remove him from the throne in the #MeToo era.

Settlements, credibility and the pursuit of justice

Despite having her credibility questioned at every turn, I would argue that Virginia accomplished more than she would have if she had been born ten years earlier. One notable takeaway from the reading is her point that it's unfair to doubt victims who reach economic settlements. She presents several arguments, such as the fact that trauma incurs material costs in the form of therapy or lost work income.

When Giuffre reached a settlement with the then-Duke of York, her team couldn't get a direct

admission of guilt from him. However, they did obtain a statement in which he acknowledged Virginia as a victim. For him, this was a concession; for her, it was a means to compensate her for repeatedly dismissing her status as such. He also paid her an undisclosed sum of money. The sense of not being believed or of being unworthy of belief is a central, recurring theme in *Nobody's Girl*, encompassing the emotional arc of her life.

Cartoonist Ella Baron published a drawing in *The Guardian* depicting Virginia standing triumphantly on a podium while a caricature of Queen Elizabeth II's son lies on the floor far below her. When disclosing her encounters with the prince, Virginia provided a photograph of the royal holding her waist. This piece of evidence made it nearly impossible for him to deny meeting her when she was 17.

Just a the memoir's few days before publication, King Charles III began the process of removing his brother's titles and honors. Though probably insufficient, this serves as poetic justice. As the cartoon suggests, she emerged victorious while he was expelled from "paradise" — and recently from the palace where he lived.

The tragic connection between Virginia's and Jeffrey's suicides at the end of their lives speaks to an absence of justice from different standpoints. Nevertheless, Ghislaine Maxwell did receive a jail sentence. Giuffre recalls how, at her trial, Maxwell's defense team asked: "Why would an Oxford-educated woman do this?" Although intended as a rhetorical question, it alludes to the elitist delusion that sexual abuse is beyond the reach of intellectual and class prestige.

Along these lines, we could discuss the public corruption of the monarchy as a symptom of the decay of outdated systems based on privilege and kinship. According to a few former employees, Andrew has very specific instructions about the

placement of his teddy bears and tends to humiliate and insult his employees for minor infractions regarding this and other matters. As Carol Hanisch once said, “The personal is political.”

The mechanics of complicity

In her memoir and in various interviews, Virginia emphasizes that this case is not about two psychopathic monsters. A level of abuse like this can only occur with the participation, silence or complicit approval of countless people, ranging from bystanders to co-perpetrators. This is true for nearly every case of sexual abuse. Perpetrators rely on religious cultures that silence all things sexual and on the complicity of those who look the other way for various reasons, sometimes for their own profit.

Though scarce and delayed, collaborating with Epstein’s associates was crucial to the investigation. For instance, one of the pilots provided his flight logs, and the Palm Beach driver confirmed that Maxwell ordered him to stop the car as soon as she saw Virginia enter the Mar-a-Lago spa to start her shift as a towel girl. The driver also mentioned seeing many young female visitors.

In her memoir, Virginia recounts meeting Maxwell. She stresses that no one would suspect the beautiful, posh woman who approached her and spoke with a British accent. It seemed like a stroke of good luck when, out of the blue, she asked if Virginia was interested in interviewing for a job as a travel masseuse for her millionaire friend.

The flight logs, in particular, provided proof that Virginia and other victims had traveled with Epstein and Maxwell. Conversely, the testimonies of victims and bystanders wouldn’t be as compelling if not for their abundance. Together, they are very powerful, as are the striking

similarities in the descriptive details, such as the constant presence of underage females entering and leaving the house as described by employees, or the almost identical pattern of grooming retold by all the victims.

Power, denial and the unraveling of truth

The banality of evil — the apparatus and collective organization behind the sexual exploitation of minors — is also evident in British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) journalist Emily Maitlis’s account of her visit to Buckingham Palace, during which Andrew granted her his infamous first interview. In it, he denied Virginia’s allegations and failed to properly apologize or explain his association with Epstein. When Maitlis retells her first time visiting the palace, she mentions the abundance of cooks, butlers, assistants, guards and cleaners who keep the machinery running, comparing them to a society and a macro corporation.

In the aforementioned BBC interview, Maitlis questioned Andrew about his continued relationship with Epstein after the millionaire was imprisoned in 2006. This information went public because a photo of the two of them walking in Central Park was taken. Andrew did not provide a satisfactory explanation. He conceded he had made the mistake of being too honorable and thinking that he had to end the friendship in person. When asked why, after ending the relationship, he stayed several days as a guest in Epstein’s house, Andrew simply said it was a convenient place to stay.

Due to recent revelations from police files, we now know that Andrew continued to email Epstein and express his support until just a few days before that same interview, writing, “keep in close touch and we’ll play some more soon!!!!”

When asked by Maitlis about the photo with 17-year-old Virginia, Andrew deflected, saying he

didn't remember and that the photo might be altered. He focused on a part of her testimony that referred to the first night they met, when she said they were dancing and he was sweating. Out of the blue, he offered the unsolicited explanation that, after serving in the Falklands War, he had temporarily lost the ability to sweat.

In his book *The Kingdom*, French writer and Goncourt Prize winner Emmanuel Carrère reflects on the metafictional question of truth in stories, such as biblical ones, where distinguishing historical data from fiction becomes difficult. He mentions a detail from the story of Jesus of Nazareth's arrest by Roman soldiers who take him on the Via Crucis. During the arrest, chaos reigns, and the narrator recounts that one of the disciples drops a handkerchief he is wearing. Carrère calls this type of detail a "detail of truth": something so insignificant that it could have been omitted yet recounted because of the impression it made.

I mention this because, as with the accounts of many other Epstein and Maxwell victims or associates, Virginia's life story contains such details of truth. For example, she specifically remembers Andrew's sweat.

Nonetheless, the arrest and global condemnation of these perpetrators did not result from these narratological characteristics; rather, it resulted from the existence of multiple pieces of evidence, including flight logs that recorded the minors' air travel alongside the millionaires.

After hearing one of the former Buckingham Palace security guards speak on 60 Minutes Australia, I feel compelled to mention Andrew's sweat again. The former guard said he decided to speak out because of the mistreatment he witnessed the royal inflict over the years. He emphasized one scene in which Andrew came in from playing golf, threw his bag on the ground, and watched as police officers retrieved his balls

while a butler handed him a towel to wipe off his sweat.

Justice and the defense of the truth

Given the ongoing debate and controversy surrounding the release of Epstein's files, Virginia's memoir is very timely. New emails were released this week suggesting that US President Donald Trump spent hours at Epstein's house with a victim. However, this information appears to contradict her account of the president in *Nobody's Girl*; she claims that she did not see him do anything inappropriate. Ultimately, the emails alone will not mean much unless the totality of the files is released and there is an in-depth investigation.

In her memoir, Virginia describes how achieving justice requires a collective effort from lawyers, experts, prosecutors and — in this case — other victims. Most of the time, simply speaking the truth is not enough. For a truth to be considered legitimate, it must be defended.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Why Talking About Israel and Gaza Feels so Taboo in the Best US International Affairs School

Liv McAuslan
November 01, 2025

The most pressing foreign policy issue goes largely undiscussed by students at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. If students at the best international affairs school fail to confront the taboo behind the Israel-Hamas war, the United States will lose inquisitive, thoughtful and discerning future leaders who speak with the courage of their convictions.

The last four years at Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, my peers and I coexisted within an elite sphere of the most influential foreign policy minds, US diplomats and international correspondents. We aspired to join these ranks, contributing to a better and safer world guided by American leadership.

From the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I witnessed international affairs unfold in real-time that challenged my ideas about the US-backed global order and tested the very theories taught in my International Relations courses. Our Georgetown community reeled together through current events. With discussion and transparency, we always found a way through with open conversation, even if the lack of precise explanations of global calamities by trusted adults unsettled me.

The war between Israel and Hamas undoubtedly marks the biggest foreign policy

conundrum of my time at Georgetown. Georgetown's School of Foreign Service is widely regarded as the best undergraduate international affairs school in the country, with a mission that values free speech, critical thinking and mutual respect. Why then did it feel so taboo to talk about Gaza?

The taboo about Gaza

The general consensus on campus agreed with US support and defense of Israel following October 7, but with new daily headlines of mounting civilian casualties, the restriction of humanitarian and food assistance and the possibility of starvation in Gaza, there seemed to be a reluctance to openly discuss US policy.

The Biden administration matched Israel's escalated offensive with increased arms sales and military assistance to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and I entered my junior year at Georgetown. My peers and I witnessed this foreign policy play out in real time. US strategy mirrored what we largely believed: Israel is our strongest and most vital Middle Eastern ally, whom we must support to ensure democracy, security and stability across the region.

However, as the civilian death toll increased and multiple violations of international humanitarian law came to light in Gaza, many people began to wonder if there was a red line in US support for Israel.

Many students at Georgetown grasped the complexities behind the Israel-Hamas war. Hamas is a terrorist organization that has weaponized civilian infrastructure, yet Israel has bombed hospitals and schools. Israel has blocked humanitarian aid and food into Gaza, engineering a man-made famine that Hamas has exacerbated by not releasing the hostages.

The United States, under both former President Joe Biden and current President Donald Trump, has supplied billions of dollars in military assistance and arms sales to Israel. This assistance has contributed to nearly 70,000 deaths, especially women and children, in Gaza as of October 2025, yet skepticism persists over the reported casualties by the Hamas-run Health Ministry.

Instead of talking, a taboo emerged when it came to the ongoing conflict. Why did it feel bold to question the actions of the Israeli government, while also condemning October 7th and the terrorist attack by Hamas? Why was it so uncomfortable to contemplate unrestricted US military assistance to the IDF, while also supporting Israel's right to defend itself and affirming the US responsibility to stand by its strongest Middle East ally?

The foreign policy hot potato

The irony of the taboo at Georgetown to talk about Israel and Gaza is that Georgetown intends to create future policymakers, strategists and diplomats, yet discussing the conflict felt like a foreign policy hot potato. Students avoided the topic as if it were an active land mine or a political trip wire. Rather than fostering discussion, the complexity behind the war seemed only to foster a culture of silence.

During the spring of 2024, Georgetown's campus remained eerily silent while widespread protests took over numerous elite universities around the US. Georgetown students held some small protests, but they paled in comparison to the widespread encampments and sit-ins seen at Columbia University, University of California, Los Angeles and more.

This omerta was self-inflicted. In reality, Georgetown's faculty provided ample educational opportunities through the Center for Jewish

Civilization and the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, including the Gaza Lecture Series, a Conversation with Families of Hostages in Gaza, guest speaker events and related classes to learn about the ongoing conflict. Still, a lack of free, open discussion among the student body persisted. Unlike other foreign policy issues my peers and I confronted during our time at Georgetown, Israel's war in Gaza seemed to blur lines of good and evil, right and wrong.

Understanding the taboo

Fear of saying the wrong thing inhibited students from saying anything at all. The anticipated lack of empathy and understanding behind discussing the conflict, as well as the potential career repercussions of public opinion, drove the silence at Georgetown.

On campus, the pervasive fear of being called anti-Semitic prevented much of the criticism of the actions of Israel's government. In the hyperpolarized and tense atmosphere relating to the ongoing conflict, any criticism against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was feared to be taken out of context as criticism against the Jewish people themselves. Speaking out against Israel's offensive, the civilian death toll and the starvation in Gaza could result in being labeled a sympathizer of Hamas.

At the same time, the rise of anti-Semitism across the US posed a real threat to many students' identities and comfort level to speak their minds. Many students were afraid to express their support for Israel, for fear of being met with anti-Semitism or being labeled as heartless and immoral because of the crisis in Gaza.

There appeared to be no middle ground or safe space to reach a common understanding. Social media and mainstream news had whittled the image of student protestors for Palestine into

American-flag-burning, angry anarchists unable to have a conversation but more than willing to pitch a tent and protest. Criticism against the incursion in Gaza and ongoing international law violations seemingly grouped one in with the latter.

I remember one professor recommending that my class not join any protests. The long-standing, revered instructor of both introductory and seminar classes respected students' rights to assemble and speak freely, but warned against the repercussions of doing so and being part of an unpredictable crowd. To him, we all had bright futures in policy and government, and one photograph at a protest gone wrong was not worth the risk.

The recent politicization of the federal government under the Trump administration further raised the risk of speaking up and out. For the many students at the School of Foreign Service who aspire to work in government, taking a public opinion that differs from the current administration's could jeopardize future professional opportunities due to new hiring loyalty tests and heightened examination of social media activity.

The cost of silence

The sad truth is that this taboo isn't unique to Georgetown. When I shared my idea to write an article about the taboo of talking about Gaza, many of my friends from Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and George Washington University immediately resonated with my thinking. I heard about a student from Columbia University who thought of writing a similar article, but ultimately feared having their name attached to any opinion piece traceable to the ongoing conflict.

If students at the highest-ranked international affairs schools in the US shy away from discussing Israel and Gaza, we will lose many thoughtful leaders who speak with the courage of their

convictions. The mission statement at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service includes "educating future leaders who will make the world safer and more equitable, prosperous and peaceful," but if we are too afraid to speak up and have real, genuine and difficult conversations, we are doing ourselves and our country a disservice.

The United States needs bold, thoughtful and courageous leaders now more than ever. The failure to speak truth to power comes from the failure to speak openly, honestly and respectfully within our communities. At Georgetown, this starts by confronting the taboo behind talking about Israel and Gaza. We cannot be so afraid to speak that we say nothing at all.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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WORLD

Balkan Tinderbox: How Russia's Moves Could Reignite Bosnia

Harun Karčić
February 07, 2025

Russia is trying to stop the Balkan nations from joining the Euro-Atlantic community. This is causing instability in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in the Republika Srpska region. The push for independence in Republika Srpska threatens the country's stability. The international community must stay alert and act to prevent more unrest.

Russia illegally and deliberately interfered in the recent Moldovan presidential elections. It may even be laying the groundwork for a false flag operation in Moldova's Transnistria region, providing a pretext for invading the nation. Russia is evidently willing to destabilize its neighbors in order to expand its sphere of influence.

Moscow could easily adapt this broader strategy to the Western Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bosnia and Herzegovina remains one of the most politically volatile states in the region. It has a legacy of ethno-political divisions. The Dayton Peace Agreement that ended the Bosnian War in 1995 is fragile.

A potential flashpoint lies in Republika Srpska, the Serb-majority entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, where secessionist ambitions are a persistent undercurrent in political discourse. A well-executed false flag operation by Russia could serve as a pretext to destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina and pave the way for Republika Srpska to declare independence, transforming it

into a satellite akin to Abkhazia or South Ossetia in Georgia.

Russia's strategic interests in the Balkans revolve around undermining Euro-Atlantic integration, in addition to maintaining influence in a region historically linked to Slavic and Orthodox cultures. Bosnia and Herzegovina's aspirations for NATO and EU membership are particularly problematic for Moscow, which views such moves as an encroachment on its sphere of influence — it is already furious at the extent of NATO expansion in the Balkans today, which has left only Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo outside the alliance.

Republika Srpska is a highly autonomous political entity comprising 49% of the country and covering its eastern and northern borders. Under the de facto 16-year leadership of Milorad Dodik, it has frequently flirted with the idea of secession, capitalizing on the entity's significant autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina to resist centralization efforts and align closely with Belgrade's and Moscow's interests.

Furthermore, Dodik's criminal links and business ties with Serbia's strongman Aleksandar Vučić and fellow pro-Russian aligned Serb politicians and underground networks in Montenegro and Kosovo are well known and well documented. Dodik himself takes pride in having met Russian President Vladimir Putin more than a dozen times and has continuously defied the authority of Christian Schmidt, the appointed High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, who is tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Dayton Agreement.

Deception in the Balkans

A highly concerning potential scenario is emerging. Russia could carry out a false flag operation, creating the illusion of a crisis that

necessitates Republika Srpska's unilateral declaration of independence, all while providing Russia with plausible deniability.

The target for such a false flag operation could be a symbolically significant site or community within Republika Srpska. This could include ethnically mixed areas and towns like Brčko, where ethnic Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks coexist, or it could take the form of an attack (framed as terrorism) on critical infrastructure sites such as bridges, transportation hubs or government. Moreover, targeting critical economic infrastructure, such as energy pipelines or trade routes and blaming Bosniak Muslim or Croat elements could portray the Republika Srpska as an economically besieged entity. Russia could then step in with economic aid and recognition, mirroring its actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Radical nationalist groups or extremist organizations with ties to Belgrade or other external forces could target emotionally sensitive locations such as Srebrenica, site of the 1995 genocide perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs against Bosniak Muslims, with a false-flag operation.

These groups could carry out an attack on Muslim returnees in that town or launch an arsonist attack against a local mosque, which would be enough to provoke Bosniak Muslims to launch reciprocal attacks against Serbs in Muslim-majority areas. That would spark tit-for-tat violence which would quickly spiral out of control in a country where almost every household has an assault rifle buried in its backyard.

Another possible false flag operation would involve covert Russian operatives or local proxies staging an attack and attributing it to Bosniak Muslim extremists. This narrative could exploit existing Islamophobic hatred among Bosnian Serbs towards Bosniak Muslims, portraying the

Serb entity as under siege and its independence as a necessary step to protect its people.

Russia's extensive disinformation apparatus would likely amplify this false narrative. Pro-Russian media outlets active in the Balkans — such as RT and Sputnik — as well as social media bots and influencers would disseminate fabricated evidence of Bosniak aggression or Western complicity. Concurrently, Russian officials could use diplomatic channels to cast doubt on the credibility of Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutions and NATO's intentions.

A perfect storm of manipulation

In the aftermath of a staged attack, Republika Srpska authorities would declare a state of emergency, mobilize its security forces, set up hard borders along the existing invisible entity-division line and declare independence. Russia, leveraging its position in the UN Security Council, could block any resolutions condemning the Republika Srpska while extending “humanitarian” support to the entity. Given Russia's heavy presence in neighboring Serbia — especially its so-called humanitarian center in Niš (seen by the US as a spy center) this would be relatively easy to carry out bearing in mind that Republika Srpska effectively shares a 302-kilometer-long border with Serbia.

For such a plan to succeed, several preconditions must align. First and foremost, weak state institutions and Bosnia and Herzegovina's fragmented governance structure, characterized by competing ethnic agendas and an under-resourced central government, provide fertile ground for manipulation.

Secondly, there is plenty of distrust among Bosnian Serbs towards the international community, particularly towards NATO, foreign embassies in Sarajevo and the Office of the High

Representative. Russia could exploit this distrust to fuel grievances among Republika Srpska leaders, potentially destabilizing the region.

Thirdly, there must be local proxies — “little green men” like we saw in Crimea — and there are plenty. In the Republika Srpska there are already well-connected pro-Russian biker gangs, local chapters of the Night Wolves, criminal networks and paramilitary units often tied to veterans’ associations. These could serve as enforcers in the wake of a false flag operation.

Finally, there must be global distractions: a concurrent global crisis, such as heightened tensions in Ukraine or the Middle East, could divert Western attention and resources away from the Balkans.

All this is in place at the moment.

Who would respond?

The international response to a false flag operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina would be crucial in determining its success. However, the West faces several challenges.

At the very outset, the international community’s focus is divided. With NATO and the EU preoccupied with Ukraine, anxiety over US President Donald Trump’s new administration and Europe’s own defense shortcomings, their ability to respond decisively to Balkan instability may be limited. For example, the international community failed to react and refuses to openly hold Belgrade accountable for the Banjska Monastery incident, a thwarted but very serious attempt by criminals affiliated with Belgrade to destabilize Kosovo, despite overwhelming evidence.

Furthermore, the international community promotes inconsistent policies. Western powers have often struggled to present a unified stance on

Bosnia and Herzegovina, with some EU nations such as France and Germany prioritizing stability over justice and reform. Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden’s policy of “decoupling” Serbia from Russia, and thereby the Republika Srpska too, was a failure of epic proportions.

Serbia has not only played these actors but used the legitimacy it gained from the US and EU to tighten its repression against any forms of opposition to the Vučić regime. All the while, it continues to receive EU investment and to maintain cordial relations with Moscow and Beijing.

Should the Republika Srpska declare independence, who would react? Bosnia and Herzegovina’s armed forces cannot react without a unified decision of all three members of the tripartite presidency, and the Serb member of the presidency will never vote to send the country’s forces against his or her own statelet. Given that Darko Ćulum, former interior Minister of the Republika Srpska, runs the State Security Agency (SIPA), it is unlikely that he will send special forces to prevent the entity from declaring independence either.

From my observations as a journalist working in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past twenty years, all Republika Srpska politicians, regardless of their political party affiliations, pledge their allegiance first and foremost to the Republika Srpska and not to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many of them have even made public statements expressing their disrespect and even outright hatred for the country.

Defusing a Balkan powder keg

EUFOR, the European Union’s peacekeeping mission, is unlikely to react effectively to a crisis. It has only around 600 soldiers, mostly reservists without heavy weaponry or military experience.

Similarly, NATO's headquarters in Sarajevo has a limited mandate, focusing on providing assistance and advice to the country's military reform process rather than taking direct action. In other words, NATO would have to deploy a rapid reaction force if it decided to act. A number of high-ranking NATO generals are certainly following events in Bosnia and Herzegovina closely. They would push for a quick response. But would all 32 NATO members vote to send forces to keep the peace in a small slice of non-NATO territory?

For me, the answer is in the affirmative. This isn't because there is any love between NATO and non-member Bosnia and Herzegovina, but because the last thing NATO needs is another Abkhazia, this time nested between two NATO member states (Croatia and Montenegro).

Before things get out of control, it is imperative to prioritize certain measures. First and foremost, EUFOR's presence must be beefed up to a brigade level. A more visible EUFOR presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including joint military exercises, public military presence and counter-disinformation campaigns, could deter Russian adventurism.

Another avenue is bilateral military cooperation. For one thing, Bosnia and Herzegovina's armed forces have had decades-long military cooperation with the Maryland National Guard. The US can intensify this existing cooperation, which would send a very strong message to Moscow.

Moreover, the NATO headquarters in Sarajevo must increase its public visibility and take concrete steps to promote the political, economic and social merits of joining the alliance. Merely organizing closed-door roundtable discussions and meetings about the need to reform Bosnia and Herzegovina's military has proven futile. It needs

to embed cyber security and disinformation advisors to work in key ministries and agencies and provide support.

Enhanced support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's central government, judiciary and security apparatus could mitigate vulnerabilities. These institutions must be reformed in order to prevent them from being hijacked or blocked by Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat nationalists. Bosnia and Herzegovina risks a Lebanon-like scenario if left to the mercy of vetoes by ethnically driven agendas. A Russian-backed false flag operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is a plausible scenario, and Republika Srpska's secession would not only destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina but also set a dangerous precedent for other frozen conflicts in Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina neighbors two NATO member states — Croatia and Montenegro — and any conflict in the country would have a spill-over effect that would drag the transatlantic alliance in. Ultimately, to prevent this outcome, the international community must remain vigilant, proactive and united in supporting Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Dr. Harun Karčić is a journalist and political analyst covering the Balkans. Over the past decade, he has authored numerous articles on geopolitics and religion, particularly Islam, in the post-communist Balkans. He also writes about the role played by foreign powers including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. His scope has more recently expanded to include China and Russia as well. He also regularly reports on Muslim minorities in Europe and rising right-wing nationalism.

Authorial Intent and Psychosis: How Authors Make Meaning From Chaos

Dustin Pickering
March 09, 2025

Writers struggle with reality because recognizing the world's disorder is a necessary element in creating art. Their work transforms personal and social turmoil into meaning that others can grasp. By confronting and making sense of chaos, they reveal deeper truths that shape human understanding and history.

A psychotic is one who loses control of their functions because they cede control of reality to fantasy. As an example, schizophrenia disorients the patient into fantasy worlds that they do not recognize as delusion. As Sigmund Freud, the father of scientific psychology, wrote in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, “Neurosis is the result of a conflict between the ego and its id, whereas psychosis is the analogous outcome of a similar disturbance in the relation between the ego and its environment (outer world).”

The inability to adapt to reality is a psychological ailment we all face to some degree. One cannot tolerate too much reality and constructs beliefs and creations to escape chaos. It is a primary mental resource for mapping meaning in order to live fully.

Writers and the struggle with reality

It is sometimes said that writers secure their sanity through their art. Otherwise, they would become

unstable. Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, once said that groundbreaking Irish author James Joyce and his daughter, the dancer Lucia, were “two people going to the bottom of a river, one falling and the other diving.” He described Joyce’s writing as bordering on schizophrenia, a disorder of fragmented self and thought.

However, it must be noted that authorship is not a symptom of a merely diagnosable ailment. Rather, it is the diagnosis of ailment itself. Authors tend to struggle more with reality as sensitive beings facing it directly.

German author Thomas Mann in *Magic Mountain* used this heuristic to describe the ultranationalistic fervor of prewar Europe. In his essay “Thoughts in Wartime,” Mann wrote, “Deep in our hearts we felt that the world, our world, could no longer go on as it had. We were familiar with this world of peace and frivolous manners ... A ghastly world that will no longer exist — or will not exist once the storm has passed! Wasn’t it swarming with vermin of the spirit like maggots? Didn’t it seethe and stink of civilization’s decay?”

This suggests a pensive mind reflecting on social ills more than a sick person who requires medication. Social dilemmas are the author’s premier fascination. Such a person is like a seismograph measuring the ground’s motion before an earthquake to determine its impact.

The search for meaning

German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche offered such a diagnosis in *The Antichrist*. In “Diagnosing the Human Condition,” School of the Art Institute of Chicago undergraduate student Sean Leftwich wrote, “There is a certain concealment of the true meaning of the traditionally positive Christian terms that Nietzsche attacks here, promising life where there may be emptiness, and therefore

promoting a hostility towards life, perhaps even a rejection of it.” Does this offer the redemptive value it purports? In a broad discussion of Christianity’s nihilism, Nietzsche constructed a vision of the human condition that finds meaning in its bare existence.

Jung is quoted as stating, “The psychological rule says that when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside, as fate.” The dialectic between the conscious and the unconscious illumines the principle of individuation. In Jung’s dynamic psychology, the unconscious holds archetypes that resonate with ancient meaning which become conscious through dreams and during psychotic states.

Jung also noted that mythical revelations are part of the psychological process of collective humanity. Can we take the author’s works as part of the mythical process of creating universal meaning within this context? Jung himself wrote, “The poet’s conviction that he is creating in absolute freedom would then be an illusion: he fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along.” So yes, we can. Such revelations from the author unite humankind and unveil the seriousness of the world stage.

The author as the seeker of truth

By unveiling the unconscious psychology that causes suffering, the author delineates collective healing. Analogous to yin and yang, the dialectical process of the quest for freedom is one of synthesis in which dark contains light and light, dark. Akin to German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’s view that self-consciousness requires others to realize itself, the binary of dark/light is universal self-recognition. This distillation of truth requires rejuvenation. Like the scapegoat of Christianity, the author bleeds to unveil the inner recesses of suffering within the human soul. This act of

healing within the author is the secret of universal expression.

The tensions between opposites create rivalries and binaries that seem irreconcilable. Such are right and left on the political spectrum or good and evil in theological terms. The interconnected nature of these oppositions suggests the need for synthesis. Great leaders and thinkers reconcile the tensions of their era creatively and proactively.

The psychotic sensibility is fragmented and lost within fantasy. The author may recognize their delusions and moral shortcomings, but their voice is essential to the development of humankind. Struggle is universal and demanding. The author offers divine wisdom for the collective illumination of humanity. By radicalizing the tensions or getting at their root, the author searches deeply and often fumbles around in the dark until something is uncovered.

[Avery Ewing edited this piece.]

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Can Aging Better Prepare Us For Death?

Gabriel Andrade
March 23, 2025

Optimistic beliefs surrounding immortality have increased despite bioethicists' arguments against radical life extension. The most bizarre argument is that the gradual decline and suffering of the aging process better prepares us for death. This line of thinking is ultimately flawed and misguided, as it harms our understanding of aging and death.

In *The Price of Immortality*, journalist Peter Ward recounts that Neal Van De Ree, the officiator of the Church of Perpetual Life, told him that he is “going to live for five hundred, one thousand, ten thousand years.” Ward then goes on to ridicule Van De Ree and many other immortalists for their hopes of radical life extension. Bioethicists have long made arguments against these prospects, but perhaps the most bizarre of them is the one that claims that a miserable aging process is a necessary psychological preparation for death.

Aging is a little taste of death

Van De Ree's optimism surrounding immortality is open to criticism. Industrial society has allowed for a sudden increase of life expectancy over the past two centuries, which can influence such optimism. However, this is mostly due to reduction in infant mortality. Skeptics of immortality technologies point out that 125 is the likely ceiling for any extension of age.

Compression of morbidity is on much firmer ground than the vague hope of immortality. Even if the ceiling for dying age may be firmly set, there is still the possibility of reducing the length of time people remain ill or disabled, so as to maximize the healthy lifespan. As James Fries explains, “the compression of morbidity occurs if the age at first appearance of aging manifestations and chronic disease symptoms can increase more rapidly than life expectancy.”

The argument can be traced back to sixteenth century philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who wrote the essay, “That to Philosophize Is to Learn to Die.” Montaigne expressed these thoughts: “I notice that in proportion as I sink into sickness, I naturally enter into a certain disdain for life... Inasmuch as I no longer cling so hard to the good things of life when I begin to lose the use and pleasure of them, I come to view death with much less frightened eyes... When we are led by Nature's hand down a gentle and virtually imperceptible slope, bit by bit, one step at a time, she rolls us in to this wretched state and makes us familiar with it... the leap is not so cruel from a painful life as from a sweet and flourishing life to a grievous and painful one.”

These philosophical musings have been picked up by contemporary bioethicists who have formulated a similar argument. In his influential *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity*, Leon Kass sensibly asks, “who would not want to avoid senility, crippling arthritis, the need for hearing aids and dentures, and the degrading dependencies of old age?” But then, he goes on to complicate his argument by saying that such degenerations make us more inclined to view death as a much better alternative. Theologian Gilbert Meilaender makes a similar case in his book, *Should We Live Forever?*: “the decline that aging involves is, in a way, a gradual and (at the least sometimes) gentle preparation for the cliff toward which we move.

To Kass and Meilaender, the lack of suffering in old age increases the fear and loathing of death.”

Such an argument is paradoxical and damaging

Is this a good argument? I posit that it is not. This line of thinking appeals to the sorites concept in philosophy, in which it is hard to establish with any precision when a particular reality begins. Sorites appeals to “little-by-little” arguments built around vague terms. In the case of age and dying, bioethicists presume that somehow death is more bearable if “little by little” decay is introduced in the form of aging. But a closer inspection reveals that this “little-by-little” sorites approach can be absurd in many situations. As with the sorites paradox, it is impossible to confirm where the “little-by-little” approach begins or ends in the case of aging.

Death is sometimes jokingly compared to taxes; the “little-by-little” tax approach can demonstrate just how difficult such an approach to death can be. Julian Baggini considers the case of a politician who wants to impose a 3% increase in taxation. The politician proposes to do so by a 0.01% increase each day, so that after 300 days, the tax is fully collected. Baggini correctly points out that “no one would be fooled that 300 tiny tax rises don’t add up to a major hike.” Psychologically, “little-by-little” procedures do not always work. As per Baggini’s passage quoted above, that comparison is fitting to death. In both cases, the “little by little” approach is not likely to convince a person the outcome will be beneficial or painless.

Consider a patient who is about to undergo surgery. Obviously, the recovery phase will bring some pain. As per Montaigne’s logic, in the month prior to the surgery, the patient should be exposed to increasing sensations of pain, so that when the post-surgery kicks in, the patient will be used to it. Therefore, in addition to suffering in the post-surgical period, the patient should also suffer in the

pre-surgical period. Presumably, the intensity of pain would increase as the date of the surgery approaches.

This proposal is outrageous. It is eerily masochist and even anti-humanist. Ingemar Patrick Linden reasonably asks, “is this not akin to arguing that one of the good things about getting diabetes and necrotic limbs is that it makes it easier to accept having one’s limbs amputated?” Indeed, Montaigne’s argument is akin to the naïve Panglossian approach that sees purpose in everything (including obviously bad things).

Suffering should not be the goal

Aging and death are bad things. Aging implies suffering, to the extent that it decreases many mental and bodily capabilities and makes life less enjoyable. Death is also bad, because as philosopher Thomas Nagel famously argued, it deprives us of many things. By any meaningful ethical standard, we ought to reduce bad things. Yet, bioethicists such as Kass bizarrely urge us not to reduce bad things, under the dubious psychological excuse that allowing the badness of aging will somehow make the prospect of death more tolerable.

Kass believes that somehow the death of a 90-year-old person is less sad if she is decrepit rather than in a vigorous state. I counter that the death of the vigorous 90-year-old person is less sad, because although her life came to an end, at least she was able to enjoy life fully.

When Montaigne wrote his famous essay, there was very little medicine could do about aging. Perhaps he simply engaged in cognitive dissonance, as in Aesop’s tale of the fox and the grapes, and argued that since nobody could reverse aging we might as well be happy with it. That was in the sixteenth century, and it was understandable. But in the twenty-first century, we do have the (at

least theoretical) possibility of reversing aging, and we do not need to reason along the lines of Montaigne's cognitive dissonance. Opposing anti-aging efforts on the basis of dubious ethical reasons is immoral by and of itself.

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The Problem with the Dollar: When One Nation's Currency Becomes the World's

Alex Gloy
July 15, 2025

The US dollar serves as both the world's reserve currency and America's national currency, forcing other countries to accumulate dollars while the US runs persistent trade deficits. The global monetary order is facing new strains as the US deepens its dependence on foreign capital and confronts a rising backlash to dollar dominance. The dollar system risks fracture as confidence erodes and no neutral alternative stands ready to replace it.

There's a paradox at the heart of the global economy. Having one global means of exchange isn't a bad thing. It reduces friction. Fewer currencies mean fewer price lists, fewer arbitrage opportunities (profiting from price differences across markets) and less need for multinational corporations to hedge foreign exchange (FX) risk — that is, the potential losses from changes in currency values when doing business across borders. A single dominant medium of exchange smooths the gears of commerce.

But the problem isn't that the US dollar plays this role. The problem is that it is both the global reserve currency — the currency most widely used in global trade and held by foreign central banks — and the national currency of the United States. That creates dangerous repercussions for both the US and foreign nations' accumulation of US dollars.

The dollar trap

US President Donald Trump and his followers aren't wrong in saying the US pays a price for issuing the global reserve currency. For foreign countries to obtain US dollars, which they need for international trade and to repay dollar-denominated debts, they must run current account surpluses (exporting more than they import). That requires the United States to run perpetual current account deficits (importing more than it exports).

Of course, being the issuers of the world's reserve currency allows the US to import anything it desires and simply pay with financial claims (US dollars), without the fear of devaluing the dollar, at least in the short term.

This benefits US consumers, who enjoy cheaper imported goods. But it comes at a cost to exporting countries, where workers produce authentic goods in exchange for financial claims that may never be

redeemed for US goods. The result is a global wealth transfer from foreign laborers to American consumers. Meanwhile, foreign countries accumulate dollars and acquire US assets — including bonds, stocks, companies and land.

A key measure of this trend is the Net International Investment Position (NIIP), which tracks the difference between a country's external financial assets (what Americans own abroad) and its external financial liabilities (what foreigners own in the US). The US's NIIP has deteriorated significantly from less than negative \$1.7 trillion in 2008 to more than negative \$24 trillion at the end of March 2025. In the fourth quarter of 2024, NIIP declined by more than \$2 trillion, partly due to the strong dollar that increased the value of US assets held by foreigners. Annualized, the figure would be equal to more than a quarter of GDP, a staggering amount.

As foreign holdings of US debt grow, so do interest and dividend payments flowing out of the US economy — a steady drain of income to overseas investors.

Sectoral view of economics

One way to understand global economics is through the sectoral balance view, a way of understanding financial flows using accounting identities. It breaks the world down into three sectors: private (households and businesses), government (taxation and public spending) and foreign (trade balance with foreign countries).

Every dollar spent or saved by one sector must be matched by an opposite balance in one or both of the others: (Private Sector Balance) + (Government Sector Balance) + (Foreign Sector Balance) = 0

For example, when Americans import a car, dollars leave the country and show up as a surplus

in the foreign sector and a deficit in the private sector. When someone pays taxes, their savings decrease, while the government's revenues increase.

In recent years, the US government's deficit (shown in purple in this chart) mirrors the private sector's surplus (orange). Meanwhile, the foreign sector's surplus (green) comes at the expense of US households and firms. Even though corporate profits are at record levels — around 12% of GDP — many households are struggling to save. Publicly traded corporations pay about \$2 trillion annually in dividends to shareholders, but that money is concentrated among the wealthiest Americans — and increasingly, foreign investors.

A brief history of US external balances

The US began running persistent current account deficits in the early 1980s, during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. The deficits widened significantly in the late 1990s and early 2000s, reaching over 5% of GDP during the mid-2000s. Although the 2008 financial crisis temporarily reduced the deficit, it did not disappear.

As of 2024, the deficit remains large, driven by a chronic imbalance in goods trade (heavy imports of consumer products and industrial inputs). The shortfall is partially offset by a surplus in services trade, exports like software from Apple, licensing of American movie rights and global usage of US-based financial services.

These imbalances are not merely economic accidents; they are structural features of a global financial system built around the dollar.

The limits of dollar demand

Foreigners are accumulating US assets — not out of charity, but necessity. They need dollars to

settle international trade, service dollar-denominated debts and build FX reserves. But this accumulation has limits.

First, foreigners cannot redeem their dollar claims for US goods and services, in total, unless the US runs a trade surplus, which it doesn't. Second, it means non-US labor is producing real goods in exchange for paper claims that they may never redeem in kind.

While the US can theoretically print as many dollars as needed, this doesn't mean the rest of the world will always want to hold them. You can force-feed financial claims to producers or authentic goods only for so long. The dollar system rests on confidence. At some point, this confidence could break.

The dollar's status as the world's reserve currency also depends on its stability. So far, no central banker has been fired for holding too many dollars. However, nobody wants to hold a wasting asset.

The hoarding of US dollars by foreign central banks prevents the exchange rate from adjusting to a price where trade imbalances would decline. Insofar as the dollar is a victim of its own success, to be a reserve asset, it cannot be weak. Its continued strength, at least until the beginning of 2025, hollowed out the US industrial base, exporting jobs and inflation to other nations.

The Eurodollar mirage

An alternative access route to US dollars — and it's an imperfect one — is the Eurodollar Market. This is a global financial system of offshore US dollars created by non-US banks. Despite the name, Eurodollars are not related to the euro. They are dollar deposits held in foreign banks, often in London or the Caribbean.

You can think of the Eurodollar market as a casino. Players use chips as currency. They settle bets with chips that represent and may look like dollars, but aren't backed by the Federal Reserve Bank. The monetary system within the casino works fine until either someone with large winnings wants to cash out or a player is unable to repay their debt.

Offshore dollar markets function until they don't. Eurodollars are not automatically convertible into onshore dollars without a corresponding credit line from a US institution. When liquidity dries up, those credit lines become hard or impossible to obtain. The Federal Reserve may step in — as it did with swap lines in 2008 and 2020 — but it is under no obligation to save the system. Swap lines are dollar loans to foreign central banks, which, in turn, lend these dollars to borrowers in distress (at their own risk).

The current administration will likely make a point of excluding “non-friendly” countries from access to those swap lines.

Ecuador, which abandoned its own currency and dollarized in the year 2000, found out the hard way. The government defaulted on dollar-denominated debt twice (in 2008 and 2020) because it lacked the ability to issue its own currency during a crisis.

The case for a neutral reserve currency

The obvious solution is a supra-national reserve asset. Ironically, such a thing has already existed for decades: the Special Drawing Right (SDR), created by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1969. It is not a currency used by consumers but rather an accounting unit used between governments. It only exists in digital form, based on a basket of currencies (dominated by the US dollar and the Euro).

Initially, the SDR was linked to gold, as one unit was set to represent slightly less than one gram (0.888671) of gold. After Former US President Richard Nixon “temporarily” suspended the dollar’s convertibility into gold in 1971, the gold link was removed in 1973.

An SDR-based monetary system would still face challenges. In our fiat monetary system (where trust rather than commodities backs currency), money can only be created by issuing an equal amount of debt. This would require a global lender of last resort to intervene in case national central banks ran out of debt-bearing capacity to create additional SDR liabilities. It would be a highly centralized system with few potentially unelected officials deciding over the allocation of credit.

The world would know only one interest rate. There would be no national sovereignty over monetary policy.

Commodity currencies? Be careful what you wish for

What about backing a global reserve currency with commodities? Gold? Oil? Bitcoin?

A commodity-backed system brings discipline — but also rigidity. They restrict how much money governments can create, since the supply is tied to commodity prices. When prices fall, the money supply shrinks. The money supply becomes pro-cyclical, causing deflation and recessions. And it favors commodity-rich nations like Russia and Saudi Arabia, while hurting import-dependent economies like Japan.

Bitcoin appears to be unsuitable as a medium of exchange, as its limited issuance may lead to hoarding. Expected price appreciation would mean that other goods expressed in Bitcoin would fall in value; they would deflate. Prolonged periods of

deflation can harm the banking system, leading to depression and widespread unemployment.

The dangers of small currency fragility

What if there won’t be a new global reserve currency? What if the international monetary system disintegrates into countries trying to use their domestic currencies to settle international trade? Imagine the friction of having to price your product in 20+ different currencies and adjusting prices almost daily. Hedging costs would explode, and inefficiencies soar.

Furthermore, the currencies of smaller nations often serve as playthings for speculators. Their currencies are vulnerable to speculative attacks (when investors suddenly pull out money). Hot money inflows — short-term capital chasing high interest rates — can vanish in a crisis. Exchange rates collapse. Imported inflation spikes. Living standards fall.

Take Turkey — not exactly a minion of a nation (16th largest by GDP). In 2016, the Turkish lira traded at 2.5 per dollar. Today: over 40. Nominal wages soared from 2,210 lira (~\$1,000) in 2014 to 26,600 (~\$665) in 2024. The average Turk is poorer in US dollar terms.

A collapsing currency can make energy imports unaffordable. Resulting power cuts may lead to social unrest.

America’s missed opportunity

The US never seriously pursued transitioning to a neutral reserve system, a massive policy failure. The ability to run deficits without immediate punishment (i.e., currency depreciation) proved too tempting.

The endgame is in sight. The US is now addicted to deficits, with neither party being able

to rein in spending. Rather than engineering a soft landing, the current administration seems eager to speed toward the cliff by alienating international creditors. No one sinks a leaking ship faster by grabbing an axe. But here we are.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece]

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Democracy is in Decline. The Mechanics of Changing the World Offers a Way Out

Cheyenne Torres
August 10, 2025

The Mechanics of Changing the World by John Macgregor is an engaging analysis of what went wrong with democracy. The book, divided into ten parts, provides the context behind current democratic deficits as well as the means to implement reforms. In this age of political polarization, Macgregor explores what it means to be a citizen capable of changing the system.

John Macgregor's *The Mechanics of Changing the World* is a ten-part, comprehensive analysis of the shortcomings of current democratic structures. As the global public grows increasingly disillusioned with current forms of democracy, books such as this one are necessary for understanding how the public might enact radical change. This is what makes *The Mechanics of Changing the World* convincing and compelling: it bridges the gap between problem and solution. It offers insight into both our disillusionment and what we can do about it.

Balancing insight and engagement in complex analysis

The book's strength lies in its balance between a clear, empirical tone and sympathetic humor. Macgregor's analysis is complex, yet well-managed; the argument effortlessly flows from one point to another without losing the reader's attention. Macgregor presents a difficult subject in a way that is both entertaining and comprehensive. His prose has a way of captivating — even during data-heavy sections.

Despite the book's obvious length, I caution readers not to take Macgregor's suggestion ("When the mood strikes, skim!"). "Attacking [challenges] singly," Macgregor writes, "has not gone well." I took this to heart as a reader. Each of the ten parts contributes a wide, unique array of insightful topics to the three goals (and thus the overall purpose) of the book.

How democracy declined, how to fix it and how to make it happen

The first goal, to explore the reason for democratic decline, is incredibly detailed. Macgregor takes us through the history of democracy from early humans to the Greek demos. This is a clue into the structure of the rest of the book: Macgregor is determined to make sure the audience understands

the context behind an event before offering analysis. It's effective – readers won't be missing context regarding certain events, policies or laws.

The second goal is to present solutions for the current democratic deficit. Parts three and nine are the most solution-driven sections, but I found that most parts offer well-detailed and empirically supported suggestions for fixing the current democracy. Never once does Macgregor fail to support the “dynamic constitutional experiments” he explores. His ideas are logical — and achievable. This, in my opinion, is the most important aspect of the solutions this book offers. *The Mechanics of Changing the World* urges us to realize that change is not unattainable.

That brings us to the third goal: to describe how to implement these solutions effectively, both in terms of cost and collaboration. The book doesn't shy away from the hard question of implementation, a factor many analyses often refuse to touch upon. To quote Macgregor: “Without the means to implement, the best paper reforms would come to nothing.” *The Mechanics of Changing the World* is not a laundry list of solutions. Not only that, but the forms of implementation are largely grassroots movements, harkening back to the second goal of presenting feasible solutions.

Empowering citizens to ignite democratic change

The argument and case for implementation could be strengthened even further, perhaps, with suggestions for what to do right now. This is not to say that the book doesn't explore how citizens can participate in building up democracy — it does, and quite effectively. What I mean to say is, what actions can citizens take to spark a widespread desire for democratic change?

That being said, this book will undoubtedly rouse the desire for action in its readers. I found my own feelings of disillusionment reflected back at me, only this time in a way I could understand. Even if readers take Macgregor's advice to skim, they would undoubtedly gain an increased interest in the failings of our current democratic structures. This is the broad purpose of *The Mechanics of Changing the World* — this book is an open invitation to peel back the layers of democracy and question what makes it tick.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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The Dollar at a Crossroads: Trade Wars, Tariffs and Stress on the World's Safe-Haven Currency

Masaaki Yoshimori
December 21, 2025

The US dollar's dominance has rested on America's economy, strong institutions and deep financial markets, which made dollar assets the world's preferred safe haven. Rising tariffs, a retreat from globalization and political pressure on institutions weaken the trade networks that support the dollar's safe-haven role. Continued protectionism and institutional erosion could push the international monetary system toward a multipolar structure.

For nearly eight decades, the US dollar has served as the backbone of the international economic system. It is the dominant currency for trade invoicing, the principal reserve asset for central banks and the anchor for many economies' exchange-rate regimes. Its unique "safe-haven" status — its tendency to appreciate when the world is under stress — has allowed the United States to borrow inexpensively, sustain persistent external deficits and exercise disproportionate influence over global finance. For years, the world has treated this dominance as structural, almost natural, as if dollar primacy were a permanent feature of the global landscape rather than the outcome of deliberate policy choices and institutional credibility.

A new body of research, together with the policy turn toward tariffs, supply-chain reshoring and political pressure on US institutions, challenges that assumption. A recent paper by economists and professors Tarek Hassan, Thomas Mertens, Jingye Wang and Tony Zhang, presented at Brookings Papers, demonstrates that the dollar's safe-haven premium is not only a product of financial depth and institutional strength but also fundamentally linked to US trade openness. When the US raises trade barriers or injects uncertainty into its economic governance, it quietly weakens the foundations that support the dollar's global

role. The emerging picture is one of slow-motion stress — a gradual erosion of the trade and institutional underpinnings that have long sustained America's monetary privilege.

Rethinking why the dollar is dominant

Traditional explanations of dollar dominance, from American economist Barry Eichengreen's work on reserve currencies to Indian-American economist Gita Gopinath's research on dominant-currency pricing, emphasize three pillars: the size of the US economy, institutional credibility (rule of law, contract enforcement, central-bank independence) and the depth and liquidity of US financial markets. These factors make dollar assets convenient, safe and easy to trade.

Recent research does not dispute these explanations but highlights an additional and often overlooked mechanism: the structure of global trade itself. When a large share of international transactions is invoiced, financed and settled in dollars, the currency becomes deeply embedded in the operational infrastructure of world commerce. Empirical work by the American Economic Association and the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) shows that most world trade is priced in a few dominant currencies — above all the US dollar — which gives dollar movements outsized effects on global trade prices and quantities.

Firms borrow in dollars to hedge dollar-denominated revenues, banks manage dollar liquidity to support their trade clients and central banks hold dollar reserves to buffer their economies against trade-related shocks. This network of real-economy linkages helps explain why, during periods of global financial stress, investors take refuge in dollar assets rather than fleeing from them.

In this framework, the dollar's safe-haven premium — the extra value, reflected in investors' willingness to accept lower yields on US Treasuries and other dollar assets, that the dollar enjoys because of its safe-haven status — arises endogenously from the global trade and financial linkages that anchor demand for dollar liquidity. The more the world trades with and through the US, and the more balance sheets are structured in dollars, the more valuable dollar "insurance" becomes. The National Bureau of Economic Research shows that the convenience yield on US Treasuries — the willingness of global investors to accept low interest rates in exchange for safety and liquidity — is tightly linked to the valuation of the dollar in foreign exchange markets. This yield reflects global demand for dollar safety.

A related model of the collateral advantage of US government debt — the premium investors will pay for US government debt because Treasuries serve as superior collateral in global financial markets — explains why, in global downturns, dollar assets become especially attractive. Conversely, as global trade and supply chains diversify away from the US, and as alternative safe assets or invoicing currencies expand, the demand for dollar insurance — and thus the dollar's safe-haven premium — is likely to erode over time.

What is "safe-haven stress?"

Safe-haven stress refers to periods when global investors urgently seek security during a crisis, but the usual safe-haven assets, especially the US dollar, come under unusual pressure. In most episodes of turmoil, the dollar strengthens because investors rush into dollar-denominated assets such as US Treasury bonds, which are considered exceptionally liquid and reliable. Safe-haven stress arises when this mechanism is strained: Demand for safety rises sharply, but the asset's ability to absorb that demand or function as a dependable refuge is compromised.

One way safe-haven stress manifests is through disruptions in dollar-funding markets. During major geopolitical or financial shocks, global institutions scramble to secure dollar liquidity, causing spikes in the cost of borrowing dollars offshore and widening deviations from covered interest parity. The Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas shows that these distortions highlight an environment where the dollar is simultaneously in high demand yet increasingly difficult to obtain. This classic form of stress exposes deeper fragilities in the global financial system.

Safe-haven stress can also appear when the dollar's traditional behavior weakens. If the global economy suffers a shock and the dollar does not appreciate, or even depreciates, it signals reduced confidence in its role as a universal refuge. Foreign Affairs argues that rising trade fragmentation and protectionism may erode the structural foundations of dollar dominance, reducing the automatic "flight to the dollar" during crises.

As more countries expand trade in alternative currencies or build regional financial systems, the dollar may command less automatic trust during global stress events. Research from the Brookings Institution suggests that prolonged trade conflicts and protectionist policies can weaken the global anchoring role of the dollar, further amplifying safe-haven stress.

The broader concern is that if the US dollar experiences sustained stress, the global financial system becomes more volatile. Investors lose a reliable anchor, crisis hedging becomes more difficult and US borrowing costs may rise as the safe-asset premium on Treasuries diminishes. The dollar remains the world's primary safe haven, but safe-haven stress underscores a growing vulnerability: Its dominance now depends more on economic and geopolitical conditions that are shifting in ways unfavorable to the US.

Tariffs, tipping points and a multipolar future

To quantify these effects, Hassan and the other researchers built a calibrated general-equilibrium model connecting three elements: trade costs (tariffs), portfolio choices and the choice of anchor currency for smaller economies. Their key findings are sobering:

Higher tariffs erode the safe-haven premium.

As trade with the US becomes costlier, global investors demand higher yields on US assets to compensate, raising interest rates and weakening the dollar's crisis appeal.

Capital outflows and lower real wages follow.

With higher funding costs, US firms invest less. Over time, this translates into lower productivity and real wages — an ironic outcome for a policy supposedly designed to protect workers.

Beyond a tariff threshold (around 26%), the global anchor can flip.

In their simulations, once average effective tariffs reach about 26%, it becomes welfare-optimal for many smaller economies to stabilize their currencies against the euro rather than the dollar. The world shifts from a dollar-centric to a more multipolar monetary system.

This “26% threshold” is not a prophecy, but it is a powerful thought experiment. It tells policymakers that the dollar's role as the global anchor is conditional. If the US government pursues protectionism for long enough, the rest of the world has both the motive and the means to adjust.

Markets are starting to notice

On April 2, 2025 — US President Donald Trump's declared “Liberation Day” — the administration's sweeping new tariffs provided a real-world demonstration of how trade policy shocks can move markets, echoing the dynamics documented in the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco (FRBSF)'s Economic Letter. Instead of behaving like a traditional safe-haven asset, the US dollar fell on the announcement, long-term Treasury yields rose and US equities underperformed their foreign counterparts after adjusting for the currency move.

According to the FRBSF analysis, markets interpreted the tariffs as raising economic risk and lowering future profit expectations: the S&P 500 dropped about 11% within days, dividend futures fell 6–8% over the next three years and the dollar depreciated notably against safe-haven currencies. Together, these reactions show that large, unexpected trade actions can tighten financial conditions and weaken risk sentiment rather than support the dollar or US assets.

Reuters, summarizing the Hassan research, put it bluntly: Higher tariffs at current levels “could weaken, but not yet reverse, the dollar's reserve status.” The model's tipping point sits at roughly 26%, which is above today's effective rates, but not dramatically so. Safe-haven stress is already visible in price data, even if the system has not yet flipped.

Institutions still matter — but they are under pressure

Trade integration is only half the story. American economist Lael Brainard, in her review essay in *Foreign Affairs*, reminds us that the dollar's dominance also rests on a dense web of institutions: an independent Federal Reserve (or Fed), credible statistical agencies, the rule of law and a track record of honoring international commitments.

Those institutions underpin the convenience yield on Treasuries. Brainard notes that this yield saves the US government on the order of hundreds of billions of dollars per year in interest costs, depending on how broadly it is measured. If investors begin to doubt the Fed's independence, the integrity of US data or the reliability of US treaty commitments, that convenience yield shrinks.

Recent developments point in that direction. The administration has:

Pushed tariffs to levels not seen in nearly a century. Signaled a willingness to disregard existing trade agreements. Publicly pressured the Federal Reserve to deliver lower interest rates and even attempted to remove Fed officials.

These actions have prompted warnings from other central bankers. The governor of the Bank of Canada, for example, has stated that political interference with the Fed is “raising questions” about the independence of US monetary policy and has “dented the safe-haven appeal of the US dollar.”

In combination with trade fragmentation, this institutional erosion amplifies safe-haven stress. Tariffs attack the trade channel, while political interference attacks the credibility channel.

Policy lessons: How not to squander exorbitant privilege

American economist Ben Bernanke argues that the international spillovers of US monetary policy reveal a larger truth: The dollar's global role is neither immutable nor costless to maintain. The Fed draws disproportionate global scrutiny precisely because dollar funding markets remain deep, liquid and central to international finance, especially for emerging-market borrowers who

rely heavily on dollar-denominated credit. Yet many of the traditional advantages associated with this dominance have weakened over time. Competition from other major currencies has intensified, the US share of global output has declined and the interest-rate advantage on US government debt has largely eroded.

At the same time, Bernanke highlights how safe-haven flows, a uniquely deep Treasury market and the global scale of dollarized credit also magnify risks when US policy becomes unpredictable. Sudden tightening cycles, sharp dollar appreciations or disruptive trade actions can raise the real burden of dollar-denominated debt abroad, strain emerging-market balance sheets and undermine confidence in the dollar's stability. The lesson is straightforward: Preserving the benefits of the dollar's central role requires disciplined monetary policy and consistent institutional reliability across the broader policy landscape.

Trade and finance cannot be separated.

As French economists Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas and H  l  ne Rey have argued, the US enjoys its “exorbitant privilege” because it supplies the world with insurance in the form of safe assets. But that insurance value depends on credible, stable economic institutions. When trade policy becomes a source of uncertainty — as seen on Liberation Day, when sweeping tariffs triggered a fall in the dollar, a rise in long-term Treasury yields and underperformance of US equities — markets interpret the US as a source of risk. Trade shocks can therefore erode financial strength directly.

The dollar's privilege is conditional, not guaranteed.

The US earns cheap external financing only as long as global investors consider Treasuries the most reliable store of value. Policy choices that

undermine institutional credibility — protectionist surges, fiscal brinksmanship or political interference with independent agencies — chip away at the safety premium embedded in US assets. Markets can reassess that premium quickly. Exorbitant privilege is not a birthright; it is an asset that must be actively maintained. **A more multipolar system is plausible.** IP Morgan's analysis indicates that the future is unlikely to be defined by sudden de-dollarization, but rather by a gradual drift toward a more multipolar monetary order. Should US policies weaken the appeal of the dollar, other anchors, including the euro and eventually a liberalized renminbi, could gain ground. For emerging markets, such a shift would bring both opportunities and risks: greater diversification of reserve and invoicing currencies, but also more complex exchange-rate management and capital-flow dynamics. A slow-motion stress test

Hassan and his co-authors emphasize that the global system is not yet on the brink of rupture. Effective tariffs, though rising sharply, remain below the 26% threshold at which their model predicts a shift away from the dollar as the world's anchor. Yet the direction of travel is unmistakable. Higher protectionism, open political pressure on the Federal Reserve and the increasingly aggressive use of sanctions are reshaping global perceptions of US reliability. None of these developments produces an immediate crisis, but together they erode the trust that underpins the dollar's safe-haven premium.

This erosion is likely to proceed quietly and cumulatively. The early signals will not resemble dramatic headlines but subtle shifts in the architecture of global finance. They will be a slow rebalancing of central-bank reserves away from the dollar, thinner foreign participation in long-dated

Treasury auctions and a growing inclination to use alternative safe assets such as the euro or Swiss franc during periods of turmoil. No single development constitutes a turning point. But taken collectively, they illustrate that dollar dominance is not a law of nature. It is a confidence-based equilibrium — and confidence can weaken.

For generations, the US enjoyed a reinforcing loop in which openness, institutional credibility and financial depth generated global demand for dollar assets, lowering US borrowing costs and cementing American leadership. Today, rising tariffs, institutional slippage and policy unpredictability threaten to unwind that virtuous cycle. The dollar remains the world's leading currency, however.

What the Brookings analysis ultimately demonstrates is not that collapse is near, but that reserve-currency status carries obligations. If Washington allows short-term political imperatives to dictate trade policy, interfere with the Fed or undermine the stability of the broader policy framework, it will pay a price in the realm it can least afford to compromise: the credibility of the dollar itself.

In an increasingly fragmented global economy, the central question is no longer whether the dollar can remain dominant by default. Rather, is the US still prepared to maintain the economic openness, institutional integrity and policy predictability required to sustain the trust on which that dominance depends?

[Lee Thompson-Kolar edited this piece.]

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The Unseriousness of Young Revolutionaries

Tara Yarwais
November 08, 2025

Young protesters across the world use humor, memes and pop culture to confront failing governments and rigid institutions. Their decentralized movements turn digital platforms into tools for organizing and resistance. This approach signals a lasting shift as Generation Z transforms protest into a global, creative challenge to authority.

Forget everything you think you know about revolution. The old model with stern-faced guards, manifestos and uniforms is obsolete. The new generation is taking action, and they're not waiting for a leader to tell them what to do. They're creating their own approach, using humor and cultural references like anime that catch the old guard off guard.

This isn't a lack of seriousness. It's a new kind of seriousness, an "unseriousness". Generation Z isn't just protesting power; they are trolling it into irrelevance.

Look at the imagery. In the 2025 Nepalese protests, one piece imagery is the closest you'll get to a uniform. In Morocco, as Gen Z demonstrators demand education reform and accountability, their social media is a blend of protest footage and pop culture. This isn't a coincidence. It's a deliberate signal.

Using anime and meme culture creates an immediate visual language that sets them apart from the political establishments they reject. They're fighting for a future they feel has been stolen.

Radicalization through shared language

The methods used to radicalize this generation are the same methods they use to organize. The pipeline isn't through dusty political pamphlets; it's through TikTok think pieces, virality and coded discussions in Discord servers and Telegram channels.

This generation is digitally native and globally connected (RIP Vine). They see Nepal's fight against a TikTok ban not as isolated but as part of the same struggle they're waging in Morocco for education or in dozens of other countries for climate justice. Algorithms don't respect borders, and neither does their solidarity, so even someone like me, who's never seen One Piece, knows what that hat means or what the flag looks like.

They're not radicalized by one ideology but by a shared experience of broken systems. The methods are the same because the medium is the message. A viral meme explaining complex policy is both education and a call to action. A shared anime screenshot signals alliance faster than any

slogan. This decentralized, culturally fluid approach makes them incredibly resilient. You can't erase an idea if it's dressed as a cartoon.

Tactical frivolity as shield and weapon

This unseriousness is their smartest tactic. When Moroccan youth stage a sit-in, they frame it with the same humor they use online. Nepalese protesters recreated couples' trends in the midst of smoke.

This does two things. First, it shields them psychologically. Facing police batons and a bleak future is crushing. Memes, music, shared aesthetics — they're connections. They build community and keep morale alive under overwhelming pressure. "This is why we're risking our lives to protest," shows that the stakes are real, but they're just being handled with jokes.

Second, it's a weapon that confuses those in power. State security knows how to handle angry mobs but has no playbook for naked protests or dance challenges, so when violence starts, it looks absurd and unnecessary.

The protesters aren't just winning the streets; they're winning the narrative by refusing to protest the way the state expects. Keep in mind, these are the same kids that dealt with recessions, school shootings and a whole pandemic. They're told they are lazy and have it easy, and are often looked at as a joke, so they became the comedians, staging a global roast of the powerful. Madagascar succeeded in forcing its now former President Andry Rajoelina to run away after facing crippling water and electricity shortages. Peru has been in unrest since September, and Nepal built a revolution on Discord.

At the same time, Morocco's Gen Z protesters, organized by an anonymous group called GenZ 212, used TikTok, Instagram and Discord to

coordinate demands for education and healthcare reform. Their tactics spread to Kenya, Indonesia and the Philippines, decentralized, digitally coordinated, culturally rich and connected across borders. Why create a new game plan when those already worked?

The psychology of the frivolous fight

This shift runs deep. For a generation facing overlapping crises, old-school solemnity leads straight to burnout. Humor becomes a weaponized coping mechanism, a way to deal with the unbearable without being consumed.

It's also a hard truth. In an attention economy, you must capture the algorithm to capture the moment. A grim speech might get a 15-second news clip. A brilliantly absurd street act or viral dance for a cause can garner a million views on TikTok. It's a decentralized, self-spreading media strategy that old power structures can't control.

The world is on fire. The old guard waits for a revolution that looks like those in history books, preparing for a fight of fists. But the new resistance wins with a dance. They're proving the strongest way to challenge a broken system is to build a more compelling, more joyful world in its shadow.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

Tara Yarwais is a Kurdish American. Born in Baghdad, she immigrated to the US in 2007. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Belmont University, Nashville, Tennessee, and a master's in terrorism, security, and far-right extremism at Richmond University, London, England. It was during her graduate studies that Tara discovered her love of writing. Tara is

passionate about understanding radicalization. Studies reveal that radicalization is a process and can turn people to terrorism or manifest in other, less visible forms of radical sentiment. Tara believes that understanding radicalization is the most effective way to counter terrorism.

Corporate Power: From Armies and Cannons to AI

Alfredo Toro Hardy
November 25, 2025

Corporations have evolved from heavily armed colonial enterprises to lean global firms that dispers production across borders. Recent geopolitical tensions, supply chain disruptions and industrial policies are now pushing companies back toward material assets and domestic reinvestment. AI firms signal a different future, where small teams wield outsized power through highly scalable technologies.

In his 1946 groundbreaking book *The Concept of the Corporation*, Peter Drucker argued that corporations had replaced the Church as the most representative institution of modern society. In 2004, in turn, *The Economist* made the famous statement: “The company is the most important institution of our day”. Following the historical evolution of this institution, thus becomes necessary to understand its meaning and significance.

Materiality

The earliest manifestation of this institution, in its modern sense, dates back to 17th-century Holland. Its main characteristics were a permanent share capital, publicly tradable shares, separation of ownership and management, limited liability for shareholders and a State charter granting it monopoly rights. It wouldn’t take long, though, before England emerged as a rival. The Glorious Revolution, which put the Dutch Stadtholder on the throne of England under the name of William III, was responsible for bringing these new notions to London.

France, however, remained reluctant to the concept of publicly tradable shares. There, the company’s capital tended to be state-owned. This resulted from the resounding failure of its first major private company, which John Law founded at the beginning of the 18th century.

However, notwithstanding their publicly tradable shares, Dutch and English companies placed their aims at the service of the grand purposes of the State or the Crown. In this regard, they were not all that different from the French ones. They all became, indeed, implementing tools of the State’s mercantilist and imperialist policies.

In the case of Dutch and English companies, the conquest and colonization of overseas territories was entrusted to them through State charters that granted them commercial monopolies. To this end, these companies had their own armies and fleets, administered territories autonomously and waged war against rival countries and companies. All of this, while the State not only retained a significant share of the profits but also had its flag flying over the conquered territories.

The Dutch East India Company (VOC), responsible for the spice trade with the Far East, was the first major global corporation. It boasted 150 ships, 40 large warships, 50,000 employees and a highly equipped private army of 10,000

soldiers. The English and the French East India companies would equal the VOC's size some years later, and the three would vie for control over countries, raw materials and trade routes.

England would eventually reach the top of this competition, bringing this corporate vision of trade and international relations to its highest expression. By 1757, Robert Clive, at the head of the army of the British East India Company (EIC), had conquered a large share of India.

Contrary to the Virginia Company and the Plymouth Company, dating back a century earlier — both English joint-stock companies chartered by the Crown to establish permanent English colonies in North America — the function of government in India remained in the hands of the EIC. Indeed, whereas in the former two cases the Crown retained government, it would take until 1856 for it to assume direct governmental responsibilities over India.

In the final years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the British South Africa Company, a public joint-stock company headed by Cecil Rhodes, also had its own private army. With it, it conquered the territory of what was to be called Rhodesia (present-day Zambia and Zimbabwe). By Royal Charter, this company was entitled to raise its own police, exert control over taxation, make administrative regulations, grant land rights and establish courts. For all practical purposes, it behaved like a private government very much in the same manner in which the East India Company had done before.

If something characterized institutions such as the VOC, the EIC or the British South Africa Company, it was their sheer materiality. This means: armies, war fleets, territories and their capacity to wage wars. To an important extent, they represented the most visible manifestation of the power of their states.

Immateriality

Fast forward to the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st (100 years after Rhodes's exertions in Southern Africa), the nature of the company as an institution changed completely. From its raw materiality, it had evolved into an increasing immateriality. Indeed, globalization led big corporations to divest from everything that wasn't core to their business, making them more and more bodyless.

The assembly line, which since the time of Henry Ford had become the essence of the manufacturing process, reached such a point of specialization during the height of globalization that it got fragmented. The different components of a single final product came to be manufactured in numerous factories scattered across multiple countries.

Within this model, the large corporation focused on finding the lowest-cost worker for each constituent part of the manufacturing process. Wherever he could be found. But, at the same time, it went on the hunt for the most economical engineer, designer, accountant, financial analyst or customer service representative, also, anywhere in the world. This, of course, required targeting those countries where a higher level of qualifications and lower costs converged for each specific function.

As Thomas L. Friedman argued, with the global economy transformed into a level playing field of sorts, there was little impediment to having not only production, but also design, research or services, broken up and scattered around the world. All of the above, needless to say, implied a massive outsourcing of blue-collar and white-collar jobs.

This process not only involved outsourcing manufacturing and service operations to other countries but, even more significantly, outsourcing

them to other companies. Increasingly, manufacturing and services were not performed directly by the multinational corporations themselves, but were outsourced to local companies in the countries involved. That is, smaller companies were scattered across the most diverse latitudes. As a result, big corporations were able to rid themselves of labor obligations that had traditionally burdened their finances.

Following this trend, the large corporation of the early 21st century tended to strip itself of everything that was not core to its business. Ultimately, the corporation jealously guarded brands and patents, its two fundamental assets, while outsourcing as many functions as possible. Hence, corporation's notorious contrast with the Dutch or the British East Indian companies, whose materiality runs counter to the disembodiment hereby pursued.

Materiality or immateriality?

Recent but fundamental changes, though, have brought back materiality into the life of big corporations. The resurgence of geopolitics, the disruption of global supply chains brought about by COVID, the reduction of production costs in developed countries driven by technology, and, most recently, US industrial policies and increasing tariffs, have profoundly undermined globalization.

Under these circumstances, divesting itself from noncore functions lost its meaning. Nowadays, companies are integrating vertically once again, strengthening themselves by adding functions and, above all, returning home.

Is this newfound materiality, thus, the prevailing trend within the corporate world of our day? Not necessarily. Jointly with it, immateriality is the main characteristic of the most consequential technology shaping the future: Artificial

Intelligence. A technology based on data, algorithms and computing. Meaning, soft assets that can be shared or duplicated without depletion. AI companies, indeed, do not depend on the accumulation of people or of huge assets, beyond those necessary to make their ethereal nature functional: energy, computer hardware, and networking and data storage infrastructures.

Let's just consider the event that took place on November 23, 2023, inside OpenAI, the pioneer of ChatGPT. Reacting against the dismissal of its President and founder, Sam Altman, by the board of directors, 70% of the company's staff rebelled, threatening to resign. Indeed, 738 of the company's 770 employees forcefully demanded the reinstatement of Altman and the departure of the board members. In other words, a company that was revolutionizing the modern economy had a workforce of fewer than 800 employees.

Since then, OpenAI has somewhat grown. As of 2025, it has 3,000 employees. Meanwhile, Anthropic, one of its main competitors, valued at \$61.5 billion, has just 1,097 employees. Mistral AI, with a reported value of \$12 billion, has 150 employees, while Thinking Machines Lab, also with a valuation of \$12 billion, has even fewer personnel: just 50 employees.

The main characteristic of companies like these is that they have very leveraged teams. Meaning, a small group of people that produces an unusually large amount of output, economic impact or value. Within them, each employee can generate high amounts in revenue, as, by its own nature, AI is scalable. That is, able to grow significantly without needing a proportional increase in costs or efforts.

However, the scalability of Artificial Intelligence is not limited to the companies that produce it. As countless corporations in other fields are in the process of engaging with AI for their own business purposes, jobs will undoubtedly

be lost to it. The implications of this are clear: Increasing immateriality could be the sign of the corporate world of the future — a very costly immateriality, indeed, when measured in human terms.

The gigantic level of power that can be attained through immaterial algorithms (including machine learning or pattern-recognition ones) is something that Robert Clive, despite his soldiers, war fleets, weaponry and huge territories under his control, could never have imagined possible.

[Kaitlyn Diana edited this piece.]

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Pope Francis Was a Misunderstood Visionary

Anton Schauble
April 22, 2025

Early on in his papacy, both supporters and detractors called Pope Francis a liberal or even a socialist. Later, commentators called him everything from an “obstinate heretic” to

“Putin’s Pope.” In truth, this simple priest from Buenos Aires lived a life in service to the Gospel, fighting for peace, fraternity and social justice at the expense of his own image.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio — Pope Francis — went home to face his Lord on the morning of Easter Monday, after 12 years on St. Peter’s throne, at the age of 88.

From the start of his pontificate, Francis changed the tone of the papacy. He chose the name Francis — the first new papal name since Pope Lando (913–914). Many noticed that, by invoking St. Francis of Assisi, he was emphasizing mercy and compassion. They may also have noted the saint’s peculiar attachment to the virtues of poverty. What often gets missed, though, in glib discussions of St. Francis is that this emphasis on poverty wasn’t proto-socialism, but a fundamentally evangelical outlook: “Blessed are the poor” — and not just metaphorically poor, but the actually poor — because they don’t have riches to distract them from God.

Ultimately, Francis’s whole papacy aimed to lead the church and the world closer to the love of God, not to turn the church into a political influence organization — although, of course, loving God and one’s neighbor, if one really means it, will always have political implications.

Political commentators love to reduce everything to interests and parties. “Pope Francis is a leftist, so he’s doing this to support...” “He’s doing that because he opposes...” But the church doesn’t work that way. It’s not an adversarial Westminster system, designed to generate passionate, sometimes productive, opposition between factions. Where there is love, there are no factions, though there may still be struggles. And

Francis had his share of struggles. But through everything, one principle animated all that he did:

"Let us ask the Lord to help us understand the law of love. How good it is to have this law! How much good it does us to love one another, in spite of everything. Yes, in spite of everything!"

A “left-wing” pope

In the United States, both conservative firebrands like radio host Rush Limbaugh and supportive commentators like Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders called Pope Francis a “socialist” for preaching a gospel of justice for the poor. The world loves easy titles for what it cannot understand — and, it seems, it understands few things more poorly than the Christian church.

Francis came from the continent that spawned liberation theology — an attempt to harness the revolutionary impulse of Marxism while avoiding its atheistic materialism, but retaining its concern for justice for the poor. At this, the movement was only partially successful. Too often, it drifted into something more like a reskinned Marxism than a vision truly transformed by the Gospel. In practice, liberation theology was frequently little more than Marxist-Leninism with Bibles, openly praising the Soviet Union and Cuba and possibly even receiving direct support from them.

The church’s concern for spiritual things forms her concern for material things. When Christians invert that order, they descend into worldly political struggles. Any political victory, however fruitful, remains ultimately temporary. To tie the church’s fortunes to those of a political party is as practically foolish as it is spiritually misguided.

As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis pushed back against this tendency. He steered the church between the Scylla of collaboration with the right and the Charybdis of identification with the left.

This led a good portion of the Argentinean left to brand him as the enemy, while at the other end of the spectrum, Argentinean President Javier Milei would call Francis “a filthy leftist.”

To be hated by both left and right, so much the better. Still, plenty of rank-and-file Catholics who had grown up with Bibles depicting Cuba as the promised land were relieved to hear the archbishop strike a different tone. So were a large number of cardinals in the 2013 conclave that elected Francis.

How quick we all are to brand someone as being on the opposite side the moment they disagree with us. If Francis doesn’t want my socialist party to win the next election, he must be a capitalist pig. And if he doesn’t want to bless a system that gives tax breaks to billionaires while working the poor to the bone, why, he must be a commie.

Let’s listen to the man’s own words instead:

"The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies. At times, however, they seem to be a mere addendum imported from without in order to fill out a political discourse lacking in perspectives or plans for true and integral development. How many words prove irksome to this system! It is irksome when the question of ethics is raised, when global solidarity is invoked, when the distribution of goods is mentioned, when reference is made to protecting labour and defending the dignity of the powerless, when allusion is made to a God who demands a commitment to justice. At other times these issues are exploited by a rhetoric which cheapens them. Casual indifference in the face of such questions empties our lives and our words of all meaning. Business is a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of

this world and to make them more accessible to all."

"We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in justice requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programmes, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. I am far from proposing an irresponsible populism, but the economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded."

Francis the antipope

Of course, the church is not free of parties either. Like any human society, it suffers from selfishness and dissension, and so it has factions. In heaven, there is no partisanship — save for one incident.

Non-Catholic readers may not be aware that there is a growing community of people who are attached to an older form of the Roman Rite. The Roman Rite is the liturgy used by the majority of Catholics worldwide, excluding communities that follow other ancient liturgies, such as the Greek Catholics — including the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church — and others, like the Copts. Until Pope St. Paul VI published the current revision in 1970, the Roman Rite was celebrated almost exclusively in Latin.

Many harbor a mostly aesthetic and cultural attachment to the older form: the language, the bells and smells to which they or their ancestors were accustomed before the Second Vatican Council. For others, however, the Latin liturgy represents a bulwark against everything wrong with the world and the modern church — an

antidote to the priestly worldliness and quiet atheism which they detect at the heart of today's Catholicism.

This latter, dissident faction divides into two further groups. For some, loyalty to the Latin mass and to Catholic tradition requires disobedience to the pope. This is the position of the Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), the largest dissident group. Others go further still, rejecting Pope Francis's legitimacy altogether. They regard him not only as a false pope but as a false Catholic. This position, known as sedevacantism, has been growing especially in online communities.

Pope Benedict XVI tried to reach out to these groups of Christians by allowing the older Latin liturgy to be used as an "extraordinary form" of the Roman Rite, while the 1970 Missal — still officially in Latin, though almost always celebrated in the vernacular — remained the ordinary form. This move helped ease tensions and enabled individual priests and laypeople to break away from groups like the SSPX and return to full communion with the Roman church.

After his election, however, Francis saw the Latin mass community morph into a full-scale internal opposition party to his papacy. This was especially true in the US, which has long taken an independent tack in its relationship with Rome — a tendency once condemned as the heresy of Americanism. Prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the US was a center of theological liberalism, often resisting the perceived dogmatic rigidity of the Vatican. Now that the Vatican has become more open to modern currents of thought and has expanded the liturgy into the vernacular, the roles have, in some respects, reversed. In 2018, Francis remarked that some of the most virulent attacks against him were coming from America.

Francis provokes these "traditionalist" Catholics because of his attempts to soften certain

practices — something they regard as unsound or even heretical. Note that in principle, the doctrines of the church cannot change, because they come from Jesus — not from the authority of the popes, who could later revise what they had previously decided. Yet the application of doctrine to pastoral practice leaves many secondary decisions open to the pope.

One example case to illustrate this principle is the male-only priesthood. Jesus ordained only men as apostles. Ancient tradition maintains that the church has no more power to confer the sacrament of holy orders on women than it does to celebrate the Eucharist with rice cakes instead of wheat, or to baptize with beer instead of water. (Both of these have, in fact, been attempted at different times in church history.) This is a matter of divine law — which sometimes does deal in details this fine, because it is positive law.

But there is no divine law against allowing women to hold positions of authority in the Roman Curia. These roles, while traditionally filled by priests, do not inherently require priestly ordination. In 2022, Francis enabled laypeople (and thus, women) to head offices within the Vatican bureaucracy. In this way, he sought to open up the church in the ways it could be fruitfully opened — and made more equal — without compromising a jot or tittle of divine law.

Does that sound like a difficult task? Of course. But so is every task that requires balancing two things that are both real values — rather than caring only about one and giving lip service to the other.

Francis earned a lot of suspicion from the Latin mass crowd for putting women in positions of power. Likewise, he earned their ire for a range of other decisions, including:

Allowing, under certain circumstances, divorced and remarried Catholics to receive Communion. Calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality. Permitting priests to say a prayer of blessing over gay couples. Calling for the abolition of the death penalty. Suggesting that the existence of non-Christian religions may be positively willed by God.

At its most extreme, traditionalist rhetoric branded the pope as approving adultery and sodomy, rejecting the moral teaching of the church and even denying the truth of Christianity itself.

I think my fellow Catholics who are rightly concerned with doctrinal orthodoxy need to take a deep breath, perhaps log off of social media for a while and ask themselves: Is the Pope Catholic?

And yes, bears do still poop in the woods.

In reality — and much to the dismay of liberals who would have liked to see the church's stance on these things changed — Francis consistently taught:

That the church does not have the power to redefine marriage. That the church does not have the power to redefine human sexuality. That both individuals and states may, in some cases, use lethal force when the protection of human life demands it. That Christians have a duty to share the Gospel with the whole world.

As Francis told a somewhat disappointed gathering of representatives of nuns who had hoped he would open the door to ordaining women deacons: “We cannot go beyond revelation and dogmatic expressions ... We are Catholics.”

Francis's thirst for justice for the poor and forgotten defined his papacy. So too did mercy

toward those who — like all of us — fall short of the Gospel's demands. The principle that "truth is an inseparable companion of justice and mercy" grounded his ministry. Francis never compromised on the truth, even as he sought every possible way to meet people where they were and "become all things to all people." In doing so, he embodied the principle so beloved by Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, Pope John Paul II's doctoral supervisor:

"The church is intolerant in principle because she believes, and tolerant in practice because she loves; the enemies of the church are tolerant in principle because they do not believe, and intolerant in practice because they do not love."

For the first seven years of his pontificate, Francis continued Benedict's policy of forbearance toward these traditionalist groups, even as they attacked him for extending mercy to others. In 2020, he consulted bishops around the world by letter, and from their responses, he concluded that the policy had failed. Given an inch, activists within the traditionalist movement had taken a mile, and the older form of the mass had become, in many places, a hotbed of agitation against not only Francis's leadership but the Second Vatican Council itself.

Francis was forced to take repressive measures to forestall this growing schism. He prohibited diocesan priests from celebrating the older form of the mass without explicit permission from their bishop and from the Vatican, and he directed bishops not to authorize new groups devoted exclusively to the form. In addition, he required existing groups to use designated chapels rather than parish churches. These measures, while necessary, unfortunately caused a great deal of pain to a number of faithful Catholics.

Francis did not live to see the end of this new brand of Catholicism — a movement that, in truth, functions as a form of Protestantism. It has

adopted a kind of sola scriptura hermeneutic that locates tradition in the texts and decrees of dead popes (to be interpreted, in the end, by the private reader) rather than in the living magisterium of the Apostolic See.

To the world, Latin-mass Catholics — both dissident and obedient — may seem like an extreme minority to be dismissed rather than encountered. Yet I recall how Francis, during the Jubilee Year of Mercy in 2016, reached out even to the SSPX. He allowed their priests to validly hear confessions and, later, to witness marriages — a conferral of sacramental jurisdiction that Rome had long withheld.

That gesture did not immediately produce reconciliation. But it has not been forgotten. Perhaps some future pope will preside over the full reconciliation of the SSPX and other dissident traditionalist groups with the Roman church — hopefully soon.

Putin's Pope

The principled mildness of Pope Francis ruffled far more feathers than just those of traditionalist Catholics. Never was this more obvious than when, in 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Francis refused to take sides in the way many expected. He condemned the invasion — even breaking protocol to express his displeasure to the Russian ambassador directly — but he also declined to reduce the conflict to a morality play or to cheerlead the Ukrainian war effort, even as nearly every other voice in the West seemed eager to do.

They called him "Putin's Pope" for not calling for more killing.

According to Catholic just war doctrine, a defensive war can be waged — but only under

very strict conditions. The infinite value of human life necessitates that fighting be permitted only in the most extreme circumstances. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church outlines:

The damage inflicted by the aggressor on the nation or community of nations must be lasting, grave, and certain. All other means of putting an end to it must have been shown to be impractical or ineffective. There must be serious prospects of success. The use of arms must not produce evils and disorders graver than the evil to be eliminated.

Ukraine may well have had reasonable prospects for a partial success in the spring of 2022, when the nation was riding high after repelling the twin Russian assaults on Kyiv and Kharkiv. But once the hopelessness of driving the invaders out of Kherson Oblast became apparent that autumn — and especially after it became clear that the promised 2023 summer offensives would yield only blood and mud — the moral calculus changed.

In a February 2024 interview, Francis committed political heresy by calling on Ukraine to display the “courage of the white flag:”

"The word “negotiate” is a courageous word. When you see that you have been defeated, that things are not going well — having the courage to negotiate. And you are ashamed, but if you continue like this, how many dead will there be then? And it will end up even worse ... Negotiation is never a surrender. It is the courage not to bring the country to suicide."

It took courage just to say it. Francis knew full well what the reaction would be. Ukrainian and European leaders accused him of betrayal, of cowardice, of moral blindness. Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, insisted: “Our flag is a yellow and blue one. This is the flag by which we

live, die, and prevail.” Poland's foreign minister scoffed: “How about, for balance, encouraging Putin to have the courage to withdraw his army?”

Events came to prove Francis right. Russia proved far more economically resistant than Western sanction hawks had hoped. Its autarkic economy might not be booming, but it is now certain that Russia is capable of maintaining its war effort far longer than Ukraine or NATO can stand. As Fair Observer's Atul Singh and Glenn Carle noted at the time, the scales were already tipping quite heavily by the end of 2023. Yet most Western leaders and pundits kept their heads in the sand well after that point.

It was Francis's moral clarity that allowed him to see the truth early, and his Christian fortitude that enabled him not to join his voice with the greatest and loudest number.

In 2024, US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was still saying that it was in Washington's “cold, hard, American interests” to “degrade the military of a major adversary without committing American lives to the effort.” That's a lovely euphemism for “the more Russians die, the better for us.” A good proportion of the educated public believed that.

Of course, that means a similar number of Ukrainians dying — or far more, if you count civilians. Russian and Ukrainian lives are both cheap to McConnell. They're both cheap to Putin. But they weren't cheap to Francis, who begged, bled and wept for every single one of them. That's the kind of man he was.

Just as he refused to sanctify political violence abroad, Francis refused to let the church become a proxy battlefield in the culture wars at home. Whether speaking to nations at war, to the disillusioned poor or to the self-styled defenders of orthodoxy, he told the same truth. The world is

now so much the poorer for want of his apostolic guidance and steadfast witness.

I pray that the widowhood of the church will be short and that Francis will enjoy a worthy successor sooner rather than later. I have very little to say in speculation about who that might be or what name he might take. But I do know that then, as even now, Jesus will watch over His church and inspire the whole world with His example of love — a love that “does not insist on its own way” but “bears all things,” that finds its victory in patient suffering, and yet conquers all.

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