

Fair Observer

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Fair Observer Monthly



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ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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Should Rohingya Be Repatriated?

Swathi Gokulan

February 1, 2018

Citing concerns of safety and the possible risk of forced returns, Bangladesh says it needs more time to prepare for the monumental logistics of repatriation of the Rohingya refugees.

The number of Rohingya refugees pouring into Bangladesh from Myanmar has soared to over 800,000 as the two neighboring countries try to smooth a repatriation agreement that was set to take effect on January 23. The Bangladeshi government's decision to delay the plan to return many of the Rohingya to Myanmar comes as an interim sigh of relief amid heightened apprehension for the UN Refugee Agency, human rights groups, aid agencies and the Rohingya themselves.

Citing concerns of safety and the possible risk of forced returns, Bangladesh says it needs more time to prepare for the monumental logistics of repatriation. While the two nations bicker over when to start implementing the deal, there is no talk about revising its terms, which in itself would facilitate the premature repatriation of the Rohingya refugees. Based on a design that seemed guaranteed to fail, the agreement as it stands only serves to ease Bangladesh's burden and enable Myanmar to save face as international actors cry foul over its practice of ethnic cleansing. Meanwhile, the Rohingya remain stateless and persecuted, while

the international community has done little other than calling attention to their plight.

According to the bilateral agreement, Myanmar has agreed to accept up to 1,500 Rohingya each week in an attempt to bring back more than 650,000 people who fled to Bangladesh following a wave of violence in August 2016. The agreement does not include refugees who left Myanmar prior to 2016, thus turning away several previous waves of refugees. Despite Myanmar's stated willingness to start resettling the returning the Rohingya, the situation on the ground paints a different picture. The repatriation talks between the two countries came even as the Rohingya continued to stream into Bangladesh on a daily basis, although in fewer numbers than in the final months of 2016.

The recent resignation of a veteran US diplomat from the advisory panel on the Rohingya crisis following the arrests of two Reuters journalists covering the issue are among many events that point toward Myanmar's lack of cooperation in addressing the crisis. Further, the repatriation deal specifies that it would take two years to complete the "safe and voluntary" return of the Rohingya refugees to their homes and property, much of which have been destroyed in the ongoing violence. It remains unclear how the Myanmar government plans to provide the returnees with shelter, which is likely to be in "temporary" camps that run the risk of becoming long-term, open-air detention camps.

The agreement requires the refugees to present some form of proof of identity and residence to return to Myanmar. But the questions of identity and citizenship are at the heart of the crisis. Rendered stateless by consecutive governments, the Rohingya have been denied basic rights for generations, and some of them have had their identity cards seized by Myanmar authorities. Many fled their homes without carrying any documents at all. The identity-verification process provided in the repatriation agreement reveals the skewed commitment of the government in Naypyidaw to take back refugees from Bangladesh. Having no guarantee of recognition of their rights upon return to Myanmar, the refugees will be subject to further discrimination.

This brings us to the concerned voices of the Rohingya themselves, who were not consulted at any point during the negotiations over the deal. One group of Rohingya leaders protested the repatriation plan and put forth several demands on the Myanmar government before any returns are made. These include granting of citizenship, recognition of the Rohingya ethnicity and the return of their land and property. Rohingya leaders have also demanded that the military be held accountable for the atrocities that led to the mass exodus. These demands have gone unaddressed by the Myanmar authorities as they try to push for the repatriation deal.

Faced with squalor in the gigantic camps in Bangladesh and probable persecution if they return to Myanmar,

the future looks bleak. Given the overall reluctance of the Rohingya to return to Myanmar, any pressure from Bangladeshi authorities could make them complicit in the forced return of the refugees — a clear violation of the principle of non-refoulement under international law.

The UN Refugee Agency has not been part of the bilateral agreements either and has, along with other aid agencies, been denied full humanitarian access in Myanmar. The agency said in late January that “conditions in Rakhine state [where nearly all the Rohingya had lived] are not yet conducive to the safe and sustainable return of refugees.” Any mandate to facilitate the safe return of refugees from Bangladesh should be overseen by UNHCR and other international monitors.

Myanmar’s neighbors should assume responsibility for sharing in the protection of the Rohingya. Bangladesh is the only country in the region that has stepped up to the crisis. Of course it had no choice, once the refugees began arriving by the thousands. Now, finding itself stretched thin, it’s understandable that Bangladesh would see returning the refugees to Myanmar as an attractive option. However, you can’t share a refugee crisis with a country that persecutes the very population you are trying to repatriate. While the real solution to the crisis has to be a political one within Myanmar itself, nearby countries like India, Malaysia and Thailand should work with Bangladesh to ease its burden and exert pressure on

the Myanmar government. Until there's a joint concerted effort to do so, any effort to return refugees is far from being voluntary, safe and dignified.



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India Enters the Era of Sanatan Socialism

Atul Singh and Manu Sharma
February 9, 2018

The Indian government's latest budget courts the poor with an indigenous brand of socialism that relies on financial transfers and private provision of services in an election year.

In an article for the BBC, Vivek Kaul has damned the most recent Indian budget as “full of vague promises” that “sells dreams for votes.” In contrast, Shyamal Mukherjee, the chairman of

PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) India, has hailed the government for approaching “development holistically.”

The budget deserves neither Kaul's condemnation nor Mukherjee's genuflection. Instead, a cold look at the budget's proclamations and numbers reveal that this is a budget of both promise and peril. If the government can follow through on its proposals, it will improve the lives of hundreds of millions.

If it fails or falters in its implementation, a surge in inflation, unemployment and debt is inevitable.

STATE OF THE ECONOMY

To analyze the budget, we have to examine the state of the economy, and the government of India's Economic Survey 2017-18 is the best place to start. The Indian economy decelerated in the first half of the year before rebounding sharply in the second half.

Apparently, the slowdown in the first six months was because of demonetization, teething difficulties in the new goods and services tax, rising real interest rates, companies struggling to meet interest payments, bad debts on the books of banks, and sharp falls in certain food prices that impacted agricultural incomes. From July 2017 onward, the global economic recovery boosted exports. Because of government reforms, India jumped 30 spots on the World Bank's Ease of

Doing Business rankings from 130 to 100.

Yet, as Economic Survey 2017-18 acknowledged, anxieties remain. In its words, “fiscal deficits, the current account, and inflation were all higher than expected, albeit not threateningly so, reflecting in part higher international oil prices—India’s historic macroeconomic vulnerability.”

While pointing out that India had risen 30 spots in one of the World Bank’s rankings, the survey failed to note that, out of 190 countries, India still ranks 156 when it comes to starting a business, 164 in enforcing contracts and 181 when dealing with construction permits. The rankings reveal that India’s infamous red tape, notorious corruption and dysfunctional judiciary continue to hinder its economic potential.

Newspaper headlines tend to focus on growth alone. However, Indians must pay attention to three pertinent facts.

First, private investment in India has collapsed from a high of 27.2% of GDP in 2011 to about 21.9% of GDP in 2015. The Economic Survey 2017-18 observes that Indian corporates have modest investment plans despite the low levels of the cost of equity, thanks to booming stock markets.

Second, exports of goods and services fell from 25.4% of GDP in 2013 to 19.2% in 2016. Alarming, “the only two truly sustainable engines” of rapid

economic growth are not quite firing on full throttle.

Third, unemployment and underemployment in India continues to remain a huge challenge. Year after year, even doctors of philosophy continue to apply for positions of peons. The lack of “good, high productivity jobs” threatens to make India’s much-heralded demographic dividend a demographic disaster.

GROWING TAX BASE

Tellingly, the Economic Survey 2017-18 reveals an important fact. The number of unique indirect taxpayers in India has gone up by 50% since the government implemented the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Act in July 2017. The income tax net has widened too. Now, an additional 1.8 million are paying income tax, taking the figure of those who file returns to around 59 million payees. Income tax collections have risen from 2% of GDP to a historic high of 2.3%. This number is still miniscule in a country of over 1.3 billion people, but the government has made significant progress in its goal to formalize the Indian economy.

Even as the central government in New Delhi is casting a wider net, the 29 state governments do a terrible job in collecting taxes. The Economic Survey 2017-18 reveals that Indian states get less than 10% of their total revenue from direct taxes. The corresponding figures for their counterparts in Brazil and

Germany are nearly 20% and over 40% respectively.

India's tax figures reveal an important fact. The informal or "black" economy in India has been humongous for decades. Neither Jawaharlal Nehru's socialism nor Narasimha Rao's liberalization were able to shine the light on this black economy. Indians found innumerable ways to work around their government's interminable red tape, and avoiding tax was a national sport in a manner uncannily similar to Italy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government has made progress on its long-term goal of the formalization of the Indian economy.

TACKLING TWIN BALANCE SHEET PROBLEM

In March 2017, The Economist analyzed India's Twin Balance Sheet (TBS) problem. During former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's second term when Raghuram Rajan was the governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), companies invested on over optimistic assumptions and banks lent without due diligence.

As a result, many companies are near-bankrupt and are struggling to repay their debt. This puts the balance sheets of both companies and banks in "parlous states" because non-performing assets throttle investment. Since most banks are owned by the government, the risk of an acute crisis is low. Having said that, bad debts are causing a "chronic malaise" in the economy.

Rajan is the man responsible for this malaise. Interestingly, Business Insider prides itself on calling Rajan the "James Bond of Dalal Street." This New York-based publication was not alone in letting Rajan off the hook for India's TBS problem. Like Alan Greenspan, Rajan and his predecessors presided over an "irrational exuberance" that led to banks lending merrily to the likes of Vijay Mallya, who alone racked up over \$1 billion. Mallya, the "King of Good Times," has since fled to the United Kingdom and been charged with money-laundering. Rajan might have been Bond for the stock market, but this US-based son of an intelligence official left a trail of carcasses in India's banking sector.

Such is the scale of the TBS problem that India's non-performing assets ratio is among the highest in the world. Only Greece, Italy, Portugal and Ireland have worse ratios. In December 2017, RBI published the Financial Stability Report (FSR), a biannual publication. As per the FSR, non-performing assets in the banking sector may rise from 10.2% of the total loans in September 2017 to 10.8% in March 2018 and further to 11.1% by September 2018.

To be fair to the Modi government, it is finally addressing TBS through, what the Economic Survey 2017-18 called, the four Rs strategy involving "recognition, resolution, recapitalization and reforms." It has also brought in a new Indian Bankruptcy Code (IBC) to provide a resolution framework for companies to

clean up their balance sheets and reduce their debts. Furthermore, the government has announced a large recapitalization package of about 1.2% of India's GDP to strengthen the balance sheets of public sector banks.

BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

Finance Minister Arun Jaitley trumpeted Modi's vision of "minimum government and maximum governance" in paragraph seven of his budget speech. In the next paragraph, he talked about improving "ease of living" not just "ease of doing business," especially for the poor and middle classes. He declared that good governance involves minimum interference by the government in the life of common people of the country. If we are to derive the philosophical underpinnings of the budget, they lie in paragraph eight of the finance minister's speech. The government aims to ameliorate the lives of the people but intervene minimally in the process.

To improve this ease of living, the budget raised the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for a large number of crops by one and a half times. The government's goal is to raise incomes for farmers. However, the budget does not contain an analysis of how the rise in MSP might impact inflation, cropping patterns or the budget deficit. It does focus on strengthening rural markets, though, and sets an ambitious target of upgrading 22,000 of them. The budget also announced 500,000 Wi-Fi hotspots that hold the promise of connecting millions of villagers to high-speed

internet. It focuses on rural infrastructure, announcing 1.7 million kilometers of new roads, 5.1 million new homes, 19 million new toilets and 17.5 million new household electricity connections for India's villages.

More importantly, the budget announced two major initiatives as part of the Ayushman Bharat program that, in the words of Jaitley, aims to make "path breaking interventions to address health holistically, in primary, secondary and tertiary care system covering both prevention and health promotion."

First, 150,000 health and wellness centers are to "provide comprehensive health care, including for non-communicable diseases and maternal and child health services." They are also supposed to dispense "free essential drugs and diagnostic services." Second, "a flagship National Health Protection Scheme" is to cover over 100 million poor and vulnerable families, providing coverage of up to \$7,800 per family per year for secondary and tertiary care hospitalization. This is four times the country's real per capita income. With an estimated 500 million beneficiaries, this scheme "will be the world's largest government funded health care program."

The budget recognized that "Medium, Small and Micro Enterprises (MSMEs) are a major engine of growth and employment in the country." Jaitley observed that demonetization and GST were causing the formalization of MSMEs. He announced more than \$590

million for MSMEs as “credit support, capital and interest subsidy and innovations.” The slashing of corporate income tax is more significant measure for MSMEs. Companies with a turnover of up to approximately \$39 million will pay tax at 25%. This will benefit 667,000 companies that employ 110 million Indians and comprise 37% of India’s GDP. Thus, 96% of the total number of companies filing tax returns will benefit from this measure. The assumption behind this move is that it will strengthen the MSMEs sector and boost employment.

On the taxation front, the budget introduced the long-term capital gains tax on return on investment from equity. As per the finance minister, buoyant stock markets have largely benefited corporates and limited liability partnerships. Besides, as the Economic Survey 2017-18 observed, this stock market surge has coincided with deceleration in economic growth. India’s corporate earnings to GDP ratio has fallen to just 3.5%, while the corresponding figure in the United States has remained a healthy 9%. As per Jaitley, this has created “a bias against manufacturing” and some say even capital investment. This measure is intended to even the playing field apart from getting some coins for India’s coffers.

Finally, the budget increases the existing health and education cess by 1%. This will net the government a little over \$1.7 billion and go to the

Consolidated Fund of India but, unlike the GST, not be shared with the states.

READING THE CHARTS: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Prima facie, the health insurance scheme is a bold move that could ameliorate the lives of hundreds of millions. Recently, the World Health Organization and the World Bank published Tracking Universal Health Coverage: 2017 Global Monitoring Report, as per which India did not fare too well. About 16% of Indian households spend over 10% of their income on health care in case of crises. Nearly 4% spend as high as 25% when emergency strikes, in contrast to South Africa and Russia where merely 0.1% and 0.6% households spend a similar amount. As per two different poverty lines, 4.2% or 4.6% of households end up impoverished because of excessive spending on health care.

The above percentages imply that of the 240 million households in India, 50 million are ruined by costs of health care. In theory, insurance could save these borderline cases — people who are often pushed over the edge by simple diseases such as malaria and diarrhea.

Health insurance could also create a parallel health care system that provides for the poor. India’s public health delivery system is on the verge of collapse. Government hospitals lack doctors, nurses, equipment and medicines. Employees fail to show up,

wards are dirty and patients die waiting. Furthermore, of a total of 628,708 government beds, only 196,182 are in rural areas. India does not have enough doctors and most do not go to rural areas. This leaves villagers highly vulnerable because simple conditions can deteriorate rapidly into life threatening ones.

The budget's health insurance scheme could bring about dramatic change if executed well. However, after the shambolic implementation of demonetization and the multiple gaffes over GST, the government's ability to execute is in question. Health care and public health professionals point out that the budget has given up on the provision of health care by the government. Since this model has failed for decades, it is opting for the insurance-based solution. However, this runs risks of inflation as the American experience demonstrates. In the US, an insurance-driven system now consumes over 17% of an over \$18 trillion GDP and achieves rather poor outcomes.

Furthermore, the budget's health insurance scheme took everyone by surprise. It was reminiscent of the government's earlier announcement to impose demonetization. While it may be a product of original thinking by government, the fact that the scheme was utterly unflagged is reflective of a secretive nature of functioning. It appears that a close coterie comes up with ideas but does not bother to run it by subject matter experts or those

responsible for implementing this project.

There is another minor matter. In India, private health care providers are arguably at least as rapacious as in the US. They notoriously provide shoddy treatment at high prices. Worryingly, they provide "kickbacks for referrals, irrational drug prescribing and unnecessary interventions," profiting from the sick in a most unseemly fashion. Such is the state of affairs that an estimated 40% of private care is provided by unqualified providers. Even reputed corporate hospitals are guilty of running rackets. If implemented poorly, private hospitals would profit far more from the budget's insurance scheme than poor villagers. Besides, the budget does not reveal how much this scheme will cost, where the money would come from and who would administer this scheme.

Similarly, neither MSP nor rural markets might end up benefiting farmers much. State governments are in-charge of agriculture, and their ability to implement policies or schemes are suspect. Besides, the budget is unclear as to the cost of increased MSP or its impact on inflation, deficit and the environment. If farmers are assured of MSP on rice, what stops them from growing this water guzzling crop in semi-arid areas such as Haryana and Punjab?

Despite potential pitfalls, the focus on issues such as health and rural infrastructure is indicative of a socialist bent of mind. At a time when US

President Donald Trump is cutting taxes, the supposedly market-friendly Narendra Modi is courting the poor and the marginalized. He is cutting expenditure in defense and education while continuing subsidies and dispensing goodies.

Unlike the Fabian Socialism of Nehru, this is Sanatan Socialism of Modi. Just like Sanatan Dharma, this is an ingenious and indigenous form of socialism. A party long identified with the priestly and trading classes is now focusing on India's impoverished millions. However, instead of entrusting India's bumbling bureaucrats with the commanding heights of the economy, Modi's government is relying on formalization and financialization to deliver benefits to the people.

In the pursuit of formalization, the government is bringing an increasing number of individuals and companies into the tax ambit. To achieve its goal of financialization, over 310 million new bank accounts have opened under the prime minister's Jan Dhan Yojana.

These accounts are linked to their unique identification numbers known as Aadhaar and to their mobile numbers. This linking of accounts, Aadhaar and mobile numbers allows the government to deliver financial subsidies directly to citizens, eliminating intermediaries, inefficiencies and leakages. Of course, financialization carries risks too. If Indian banks go the Americano way and invest in toxic assets, they might drag down depositors in the same way.

Finally, the political ramifications of this budget are the elephant in the room. This year, 10 different states will face elections. Many expect an early national general election by the end of the year. Some anticipate direct cash transfers to new bank accounts as a last-ditch effort to win votes.

India is now fairly and squarely in the midst of election season and all political parties are striving to win over voters. Yet even as the government has showered rural and marginalized voters with goodies, it has left the urban middle classes high and dry. These classes are traditional supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party and are seething with rage. It is too early to tell if they will vote for the opposition, but they no longer love Modi as they did in 2014. If Sanatan Socialism does not seduce India's poor and needy, the next elections might prove just a tad tricky for the man with the self-proclaimed 56-inch chest.



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Berkeley and been a visiting professor of humanities and social sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology, Gandhinagar. He studied philosophy, politics and economics at the University of Oxford on the Radhakrishnan Scholarship and did an MBA with a triple major in finance, strategy and entrepreneurship at the Wharton

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abroad raise serious questions about Britain's approach to tobacco control. The UK government is playing a double game, publicly committing to snuff out smoking while continuing to support British tobacco manufacturers in their overseas business ventures behind the scenes. If this blatant hypocrisy continues, a smoke-free world may be a long way away.

For years, the UK has made a show of promoting anti-tobacco measures. The country ratified the World Health Organization (WHO) Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which sets out specific measures like banning tobacco advertising and requiring health warnings for packaging, in December 2004. It funded a program helping developing countries implement the FCTC and will host a working group in March on successfully enforcing the convention. Smoking in indoor public places has been banned in the UK since 2007. In July 2017, the government unveiled various additional measures to create Britain's first "smoke-free generation," from mandating plain packaging to imposing high taxes on tobacco.

At the same time, members of the UK government tend to get a little too cozy with Big Tobacco. Recently sacked international development secretary Priti Patel lobbied for British American Tobacco (BAT) before becoming an MP, advising the tobacco giant on how to influence the Conservative Party and lobbying MEPs against the European Union's tobacco directive. Longstanding

Health at Home, Death Abroad

Polina Popova
February 12, 2018

When it comes to Big Tobacco, the message is that British companies' profits are more important than lives in developing countries.

Recent troubling revelations that UK diplomatic staff lobbied for Big Tobacco

MP and former health secretary Ken Clarke earns more than £100,000 a year as a director of BAT. British MPs' pension fund's single largest beneficiary is BAT, and MPs held a variety of receptions for tobacco titans, including in parliamentary dining rooms.

While it is true that these were actions of individual politicians, recent revelations that the UK has been complicit in BAT's extensive overseas lobbying efforts expose the full extent of the government's irresponsible duplicity. Reports demonstrate that UK policymakers displayed a consistent willingness to turn a blind eye to a disquieting pattern of misbehavior in both the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade.

In 2012, the Financial Times released a letter sent by the British ambassador to the Panamanian trade minister that contravened both UK diplomatic guidelines and FCTC Article 5.3 requiring governments to protect their public health policies from the tobacco industry's commercial interests. It parroted common tobacco industry arguments and complained about the trouble that tax increases had caused for BAT, which the ambassador identified as "one of the most important British companies."

In response to this incident, the Foreign Office released new guidelines for embassy staff, which were quickly violated as well. The British high commissioner to Pakistan sat next to BAT's head of international trade and

fiscal affairs at a March 2015 meeting exhorting the Pakistani finance minister to abandon pictorial health warnings on cigarette packages. That same month, UK government trade adviser was seconded to BAT's offices in Budapest, while the British ambassador to Hungary conveyed BAT's concerns to several Hungarian ministers. Another senior British diplomat encouraged the Bangladeshi government to settle a tax dispute with BAT out of court in 2017.

Similar contacts are known to have taken place in Venezuela, Poland and Laos over the years, but it seems likely that UK diplomats promoted BAT's interest in other countries where it carries out extensive operations. Particular candidates are Kenya and Rwanda, where the UK is among the largest foreign investors and where BAT allegedly paid bribes to secure favorable regulation. The message that the UK government sends with this two-faced attitude is that British companies' profits are more important than lives in developing countries.

This latest illustration of how deeply BAT's interests have penetrated the British government comes as BAT and its peers fight to influence another policy area: the European Commission's proposed track and trace legislation. The track and trace system advanced in December would fight the widespread illicit tobacco trade by marking each tobacco packet with a unique identifier generated by an independent third party. It is a significant improvement over bilateral anti-smuggling deals with

Big Tobacco companies that it replaces, which had provoked a warning from the FCTC secretariat.

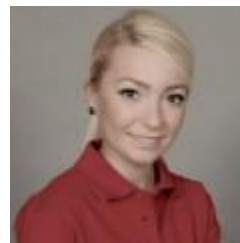
Serious concerns remain, however, that the current draft leaves room for industry interference. One major point of contention is what constitutes an independent third party. Commission proposals would consider a company that receives less than 20% of its income from the tobacco industry as “independent.” This might provide industry-supported systems like Codentify, developed and patented by tobacco giant Philip Morris before being suspiciously rebranded, with a back door.

The fervency with which the tobacco industry is lobbying for Codentify should raise more than a few red flags. Big Tobacco continues to pull out all the stops to push this system, from making a substantial donation to Interpol to securing their support for Codentify to joining forces and ensuring that the system they control is implemented, contrary to WHO guidelines.

It's not too hard to imagine why the tobacco industry so desperately wants to be in charge of the labelling system. BAT was fined as recently as 2014 for deliberately oversupplying certain markets to evade tax. The company is complicit in cigarette smuggling on such a massive scale that it has developed a whole lexicon of euphemisms for internal memos: illicit cigarettes were referred to, for example, as “general trade.” Clearly, involving the tobacco

industry to any degree in the EU's efforts to cut down on tobacco smuggling could be catastrophic. With all the revelations unearthed by the BBC or Reuters of Big Tobacco's efforts to undermine the WHO protocol, one can easily imagine the opposition to any independent track and trace system.

These dirty tricks and relentless attempts to subvert critical legislation underscore how shameful it is for the UK government to be promoting Big Tobacco's agenda overseas. As Deborah Arnott, CEO of UK health charity Ash, noted: “The word hypocrisy hardly does it justice. We are saving lives at home and promoting death abroad.” It's long past time for the government to put its money where its mouth is and cut all ties with this harmful and dishonest industry.



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Climate Change Denial Is a War on Humanity

S. Suresh

February, 12, 2018

The Trump administration's rollbacks on environmental policies are a crime against future generations.

There was no doubt that America would regress on multiple issues when it elected Donald Trump as its 45th president. While opinion is divided on his intellectual capacity and mental stability, the president himself opines that he is a stable genius. Yet with every action and tweet of his, he does his best to belie the opinion that he is stable, let alone a genius.

The most damaging of Trump's egregious actions is the appointment of Scott Pruitt as the head of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Prior to assuming the leadership role as its 14th administrator, Pruitt had sued the EPA 14 times as Oklahoma's attorney general. Time and again, Pruitt has refused to acknowledge the scientific consensus that human activity is a primary contributor to climate change. As attorney general, he had taken the position of a "leading advocate against the EPA's activist agenda." It is a travesty of justice that Pruitt is now heading the EPA.

Pruitt wasted no time in changing the agency soon as he assumed the helm. The phrase "the United States plays a leadership role in working with the other nations to protect the global

environment" was removed from EPA's updated mission statement. This categorically announced to the world that America no longer intends to be a leader on climate change. The Trump administration unequivocally announced a plan to pull out of the historic Paris Climate Agreement, signed by all but two countries — Syria and Nicaragua (both of which have since committed to the accord.)

A comparison of the current EPA website with the one that existed before Pruitt's administration took over shows how unabashed the administration is in its parochial view of America's short-term well-being over humanity's long-term survival. Gone from the EPA are the stated priorities in seven areas to address the environmental challenges facing the world.

The first year under Pruitt's leadership has seen unprecedented number of environmental regulations rolled back. A recent New York Times article mentions 67 regulations that have been reversed or are in the process of being rolled back. The list includes a freeze on coal leases in public lands; anti-dumping rule for coal companies; offshore drilling ban in the Atlantic and Arctic; decisions on Keystone XL and Dakota Access Pipelines; endangered species listings; a hunting ban on wolves and grizzly bears in Alaska; and protections for whales and sea turtles. The breakdown of these regulatory rollbacks across the board by the Environmental Integrity Project, a nonprofit watchdog advocating effective enforcement of

environment laws, makes for a depressing and terrifying read.

THE MYTH OF “CLEAN COAL”

“Clean coal” is a political lobbyist term popularized in 2008 by the coal industry to influence public opinion. It actually refers to the nascent technology, carbon capture and storage or carbon capture and sequestration (CCS). CCS traps 90% of carbon dioxide emissions produced from using fossil fuels for generating electricity and other industrial processes, preventing it from reaching the atmosphere. This is an expensive technology still in its infancy, being used at just one coal plant, Petra Nova, in Texas.

In a sad reflection of the current state of affairs, President Trump touts clean coal that he interprets in the most literal sense — coal that is washed and cleaned. Notwithstanding Trump’s understanding of the term, even America’s coal baron, Robert Murray, admits that clean coal is “neither practical nor economic.” Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence linking global warming to carbon dioxide emissions, Scott Pruitt refuses to acknowledge the connection. Instead, he recommends that we should “continue to debate, continue the review and analysis.”

Upon careful analysis, it will become clear that the position and view point of Trump administration on global warming, carbon dioxide emissions and clean coal have several contradictions.

If, as Pruitt believes, carbon dioxide emissions are not a contributing factor to global warming, then what would be the need for the expensive CCS technology? The problem CCS solves is essentially trapping 90% of carbon dioxide emissions and preventing them from entering the atmosphere. By promoting clean coal, the political synonym for CCS, Pruitt effectively acknowledges carbon dioxide emissions are indeed a contributing factor to global warming, even if he refuses to say so in as many words.

After being a climate change denier for years, Pruitt took a different tack in his recent interview with KSNV News 3 Las Vegas, where the head of the EPA questioned if global warming “is necessarily a bad thing.”

Discussing whether climate change is an existential threat or not, Pruitt said: “I think there’s assumptions made that because the climate is warming, that necessarily is a bad thing. Do we really know what the ideal surface temperature should be in the year 2100, in the year 2018? That’s fairly arrogant for us to think that we know exactly what it should be in 2100.” This statement is an implicit acknowledgment by Pruitt that temperatures are indeed rising as a consequence of global warming, even though recognizing climate change is anathema to him.

In the same interview, Pruitt mentions several times the role of the EPA as a regulator is one of administrator of statutes, “recognizing federalism,

partnership with states, focusing on process.” He also adds that the EPA overstepped its role to “declare a war on coal and fossil fuel industry,” something that the Trump administration had just ended. Since Pruitt is so particular about procedure, it would only be appropriate if he steps aside when it comes to interpreting scientific findings and let scientists do their work. Pruitt would do well by being the bureaucrat that his role demands, not conducting exercises challenging science that is beyond his comprehension.

TO LEAVE THE WORLD A BIT BETTER

Pulling out of the Paris accord with the excuse that it is a bad deal for America is an arrogant display of misguided nationalism. America is the largest consumer of resources in the world and the second largest greenhouse gas emitter in the world. It is only fair and appropriate that in any reduction of excesses America leads the way by doing more than its share in the international community, not walk away from it.

The actions of the Trump administration in rolling back environmental regulations, pandering to business interests with flimsy excuses and shortsighted economic growth, is a brazen attack on humanity, not just Americans. It is a sad irony that the perpetrators will be long gone when the consequences of their actions are faced by the future generations.

If only Pruitt and Trump would reflect on this poignant Ralph Waldo Emerson’s quote that “To leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know that even one life has breathed easier because you have lived — that is to have succeeded.”



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Turkey’s Difficult Dance with Russia in Syria

Nathaniel Handy

February 13, 2018

Weaknesses and inconsistencies in Turkish strategy leave it exposed to Russian objectives in the Syrian civil conflict.

In November 2015, a Turkish F16 fighter jet shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M on the Syrian-Turkish border, sparking a

diplomatic row that resulted in painful Russian sanctions against Ankara. Two recent incidents in the Syrian War illustrate not only how international that conflict has become, but also how opaque and surreal it is.

First, a Russian-made missile was blamed for the destruction of a Turkish tank and the killing of eight soldiers in the single largest loss of Turkish lives in the Afrin offensive to date. On the same day, a Russian fighter jet was shot down in Idlib province. All the evidence suggests that the Syrian rebels who did so have strong links to Turkey.

What is termed the Syrian Civil War is now a convoluted set of interrelated conflicts occurring in the geographical space internationally recognized as Syria. The contortions now being performed by some of the outside actors in these conflicts can only magnify for the Syrian forces involved their plight as pawns in much bigger strategic games.

The responses to the latest incidents highlight the importance placed upon Russian-Turkish relations in the context of the conflict. Both sides wish to maintain an engaged stance with each other. Not only was there no Turkish reaction to the suggestion of Russian materiel being responsible for Turkish deaths, but the Russians responded to the downing of their jet by Turkish allies by asking the Turks for assistance in the repatriation of the pilot's body.

Russia has since asked for Turkey's further cooperation in recovering the jet

and establishing what sort of device was used to down it. This strangely gentlemanly behavior among large powers on different sides of the Syrian conflict calls the entire war itself into question. How long can conflict be sustained if the opposing international backers are inching closer and closer together?

ASYMMETRIC ALLIANCE

This question highlights a recurring issue at the heart of Turkish foreign policy since the Arab Uprisings, not only with relation to Russia, but the United States as well. For all President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's posturing for his domestic audience, the hard truth is that Turkey is a junior partner whenever it steps to the negotiating table with either major power.

The stark difference between Russian-Turkish relations today, and relations in 2015 following the Turkish downing of a Russian bomber, is the result not of rapprochement so much as the weakness of the Turkish position.

As has been witnessed since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Russia's position remains virtually static. It backs President Bashar al-Assad's forces. All other actors are illegitimate. Most are active targets under the catchall of "terrorists."

Turkey has always been the most hawkish among the nations that lined up behind the US in support of the rebel uprising. It has maintained that Assad

must go in order for any political settlement to take place. It has actively backed rebel groups, and its forces are now fighting on Syrian soil for territory. As they do so, they get closer and closer to Russian forces.

Yet they do so with Russian largesse, and it is clear that such largesse has its limits. Russia controls the airspace and appears reluctant to give Turkey a free rein in the Kurdish enclave of Afrin. Yet Turkey is useful to Russia. It has control over portions of the Syrian rebels. It is also a major country within the NATO alliance, offering an opportunity for disruption that is a key strategic goal of the Vladimir Putin regime.

By bringing Turkey into the peace talks it has conducted with Iran, Russia plays at presenting Turkey as a powerbroker with a place at the top table. It buys the talks credibility whilst simultaneously undermining and isolating the US. It also pushes Turkey into the same corner the United States had previously been pushed into — that of feeling the pressure to accept Assad as a fact on the ground.

SETTING THE AGENDA

Turkey is not the United States. It has fewer resources at its disposal with which to resist Russian power. With the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek emphasizing on February 9 the Turkish desire for a “unified, stable Syria” above all else, it appears that the diplomatic trajectory is on a collision course with Turkish goals in Syria. The

insistence on the removal of President Assad has softened as the conflict has drawn on. Others concessions may soon follow.

Turkey seems close to the point where it might theoretically accept Assad’s forces, with the backing of Russian airpower and Iranian militias, overrunning the Kurdish YPG militias all the way to the Turkish frontier.

There is, however, one problem: The role of spoiler — so often the preserve of the Russians — is now being played in Syria by the United States.

While many predicted that US support for the Syrian Kurds would evaporate with the defeat of the Islamic State, it seems that the Trump administration sees the Syrian Kurds as the best way of maintaining leverage within the Syrian state. The attempt to form a US-trained border force made up ostensibly of Syrian Kurdish YPG militiamen is a case in point.

The result is that Turkey has been forced across the border into Syria, in pursuit of its own strategic objectives.

Yet this move has brought it directly into conflict with Russia, an external player with a far stronger hand in Syria, and one that has recently faced down the Turks in the diplomatic row that followed the 2015 downing of the Russian fighter jet. Turkey is loath to isolate itself from Russia again. The result is an awkward dance in Syria that is likely to get a lot more difficult.



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Technology: Turning Challenges into Opportunities

Steve Westly

February 16, 2018

Today, we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to recapture some of the space we need make our cities more livable.

Americans love cars and shopping malls, but changes on the horizon suggest that this love affair will not last. Technology is triggering massive transformations in our economy, and changes in retail and transportation are

creating both significant challenges and opportunities. We need to change how we use space in our cities, both to build more housing and to open up public green spaces in our urban centers for generations to come.

The retail industry is changing dramatically. Analysts project that one out of four malls will close down within the next five years. Major national chains like Macy’s have laid off thousands of workers over the past year. As more shopping shifts to the internet, more changes are in store. Today, over half our households use Amazon Prime, and that number is only going up.

These changes call for new thinking. We have built cities around large shopping malls, and our local governments depend on sales tax revenues from these outlets. Now government needs to reimagine how we use the massive amount of retail space that will be coming free. Given the shortage of good quality housing nationally, local governments should rezone land currently used for retail to make it available for housing.

We should also be broadening our tax structure to recognize we are becoming a service economy and think about how we tax online sales. While Amazon now pays sales taxes for shipments in every state that collects such taxes, it does not require third-party sellers to do so. Other online marketplaces do not collect any sales tax. Federal and state governments should close these

loopholes to ensure local governments retain the revenue they need for public services.

The transportation industry is changing. We're moving toward a world in which most Americans don't own their cars, but instead share autonomous vehicles. Since the average car is only used 3% of a given day, we could be using autonomous cars instead of driving to work and parking. This will take cars off the road and dramatically reduce the amount of parking we need. Houses and apartment complexes that dedicate significant space to parking will no longer need that space.

A massive amount of parking in our downtown areas is about to come open. We should plan for how to turn that space into infill housing and green spaces. For example, in California, Los Angeles County has more than 200 square miles of parking spaces, equivalent to 14% of the county's incorporated land area. This land could be repurposed for public parks or housing. As millennials move to urban centers, we have an opportunity to recapture parking lots and turn our cities green.

When I started working at a small online start-up called eBay in 1997, people asked: Will people ever really buy things on the internet? When I said yes, it sounded as crazy then, as their question sounds to us today. Our economy is changing faster than most of us understand. Today, we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to recapture some of

the very space we need to build housing and to make our cities more livable. There is no doubt that technology poses some great challenges, but it also creates some great opportunities. It is time to turn some of those challenges into opportunities.



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We Need a #MeToo Moment for School Shootings

Ellis Cashmore
February 16, 2018

Does the #MeToo movement offer a model for overcoming our compassion fatigue with mass shootings?

How long will it be before the next mass killing on American soil rips our hearts open and has us begging for a change in the US gun laws? Be warned: It will be soon.

Only last November, a gunman (the killers are almost always male) opened fire on a small church in Texas, killing 26 people and an unborn child. A month before this, Stephen Paddock sprayed gunfire on a crowd of 22,000 at a Las Vegas concert. Since the shooting at the

Columbine High School in Colorado in April 1999, in which 12 children and one teacher were killed, barely a season has passed without some sort of atrocity.

Mass killings are uniquely terrifying because they seem to happen spontaneously, and only later do we discover they have been planned. They also happen in the most unlikely places: not the mean streets of Chicago or South Central LA, but in schools or universities — places conventionally associated with innocence and enlightenment.

Each killing meets with condemnation of the gun laws and an instant diagnosis of the killer as a psychopath. We react with shock, though perhaps with less surprise than the time before. The killings disturb us, but perhaps with diminishing returns. In other words, we're becoming inured to mass killings.

COMPASSION FATIGUE

In the early 1990s, the term compassion fatigue captured the indifference to charitable appeals on behalf of suffering people, such as the homeless or populations afflicted by drought and starvation. The “fatigue” referred to our exhaustion: We didn't so much stop caring, just grew weary of the persistence and the frequency of the appeals. Every visit to a supermarket was accompanied by the jangle of money in charity boxes. A walk on the high street was impossible without at least one approach by a charity worker.

We marched past them, ignored the television appeals and guiltlessly threw away those envelopes bearing images of skeletal children. We didn't feel cruel, hateful or merciless — the repetitive invocation to contribute had simply worn us out. Our minds were transformed and provocations had little or no effect. I wonder if this is happening again. The killings should provoke us more than they do. Think about Parkland again.

The suspect, Nikolas Cruz, 19, had been expelled (what the British call “excluded”) from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. He returned to the school carrying a simple black duffel bag and the kind of backpack that practically every teenager has; his was loaded with cartridges. He arrived in an Uber cab and pulled out a semiautomatic AR-15 rifle, which he had recently bought, completely legally. After he'd completed his killing spree, Cruz walked to a Walmart store and then to a Subway, where he bought a soft drink.

He also stopped at a McDonald's. The police eventually arrested him as he walked calmly down a street. The mundanity of this makes it arguably more chilling than any of the mass killings of recent years. Cruz was arrested as he walked down the street having finished his Subway drink. This should chill us to the bone every time we take our children to school and see dozens of other kids, many of them slurping from cans, with backpacks. It should prompt us into wondering if the world is as safe as we imagined. It

should force us to think whether reasonless seemingly recreational abominations like this just normal parts of our everyday landscape.

The distance between Parkland and our homes appears untroublingly great. The truth is, it isn't. We don't know our neighbors very well, we have relationships that we count as friendships but are probably superficial associations, we hug, kiss and greet others as if long-lost relatives, even though we probably saw them yesterday. Much of our lives gives an impression of intimacy where there is really remoteness. Perhaps this is how we satisfy ourselves that "it couldn't happen here." We live in a similar state of disunity to the United States; we just like to believe otherwise.

AN ANTIDOTE

Is there an antidote to the fatigue? Something to vitiate the existential anesthesia that leaves us insensitive to the pain that belongs to others, but should be shared? Does the #MeToo movement offer a model?

When sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein broke last year, few people outside Hollywood, or without a working knowledge of the film industry, would have known about Weinstein. But it became the biggest news story of 2017, and its aftermath turned it into arguably the most comprehensively covered event since September 11, 2001.

The #MeToo movement played no small part in preventing the Weinstein case becoming just another addition to the litany of episodes involving powerful men who use their positions to procure sexual favors from women. #MeToo used social media to promote awareness that not only had this kind of arrangement been commonplace for decades, but it was actually going on today. In a self-fulfilling way, it encouraged women, who might otherwise have remained silent, to reveal themselves and speak openly about their experiences. In the process, their abusers were named and, sometimes, humiliated.

#MeToo became a conduit for the pent-up anger of the ages, a way of shocking people, especially women, into realization, a method of conferring strength on groups that might otherwise consider themselves weak and helpless. The movement stayed sensitive and perceptive, not by imposing agendas or programs, but by simply offering a platform. Values, views, perspectives and just plain, simple thoughts swept around the world virally. #MeToo was adversarial, but not forceful: Ordinary human beings with smartphones, tablets and computers at their fingertips did all the bidding. It deliberately perplexed and provoked. That's exactly what we need at the moment.

When psychologists, neuroscientists and health professionals bamboozle us with endless studies about the addictive properties of screens and the dire consequences of staring at them, and

about how our preoccupation with digital devices will bring about the ruination of community life, we should respond, Me too! They may not have heard of it, of course; they usually have little interest in cultural context. But it has been a glory.

If ever we needed an equivalent to jolt us out of our tiredness with killing, it is now.



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Cyril Ramaphosa and the Future of the ANC

Hayley Elszasz

February 19, 2018

The ANC's ability to pivot and unite around a new candidate displays a degree of unity that bodes well for its ability to weather future electoral contests.

On February 14, Jacob Zuma resigned as president of the Republic of South Africa, a position that he had held since 2009. The African National Congress (ANC) leader is leaving behind a legacy marred by graft on a grand scale, economic malaise and heightened racial

tensions. While many are happy to wish Zuma good riddance, the level of optimism regarding his successor, Cyril Ramaphosa, is mixed.

Some consider the changing of the guard a new dawn for South Africa. Zuma's time in office, during which he became embroiled in a dizzying number of scandals, was generally deleterious for the ANC in terms of political support. In the 2016 municipal elections, the ANC saw its worst electoral performance since the end of apartheid in 1994.

The party's reputation fell, along with Zuma's approval ratings, due to events such as the 2012 Marikana Massacre, Nkandlagate and allegations of state capture by the influential Gupta brothers. The Zuma era saw a deepening of corruption and of political and economic divisions between South Africans that will take significant time and effort to remedy.

Cyril Ramaphosa provides hope to those who believe in ANC regeneration. He is famous for his business acumen and for being Nelson Mandela's chosen successor. He is one of the wealthiest men on the African continent and has a history as a former union organizer, longtime ANC member and deputy president under Zuma.

One of the most significant scars on Ramaphosa's resume is his implication in the Zuma administration's most egregious tragedy: Ramaphosa was on the board of the Lonmin mine at the time

of the Marikana Massacre, and some say he may have pushed for police intervention, which led to escalation and the death of 34 striking miners. Although he was absolved of guilt in the official inquiry, this story contributes to the perception of Ramaphosa as someone who has benefited immensely from a political and economic system that has left out so many, especially black, South Africans. In other words, he is, as Norimitsu Onishi writes in *The New York Times*, a “symbol of an A.N.C. elite that had lost touch with its base,” who failed to substantively critique President Zuma until it was no longer in his political interest to fall in line.

Despite Ramaphosa’s faults, pushing Zuma to step down and swiftly mobilizing around his successor was a smart move for the ANC as it contemplates the 2019 elections. Ramaphosa will likely grant the ANC a higher degree of electoral stability and a potential to extend its control of the country for the foreseeable future. ANC dominance — while bruised by Zuma’s presidency, pervasive economic inequality and lack of mobility for many black South Africans — remains virtually assured due to the strong historical ties between the party of Nelson Mandela to the end of apartheid era. The ANC’s ability to pivot and unite around a new candidate displays a degree of unity that bodes well for its ability to weather future electoral contests.

It remains to be seen what a Ramaphosa presidency will mean for South Africa, politically, economically

and socially. On a hopeful note, Ramaphosa has used his first speeches to underlie his commitment to serving the South African people and to addressing the problems of corruption and state capture. However, graft has been endemic in South African politics, and it requires more than a single individual — no matter how powerful — to undertake systemic reform.

Stamping out corruption depends on how serious Ramaphosa, his party and other South African leaders are about eliminating this scourge from the country’s political culture. What is clear is that Zuma’s departure does not mean that all ANC failures have been absolved. After all, as Stephen Groots writes in the *Daily Maverick*, “Ramaphosa is no hero ... the ANC is still corrupt.”

It will take time and concerted action on the part of South Africa’s leadership to fix what is broken and ensure a better future for all South Africans.



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The Magical, Mystery Tour of the Middle East

Gary Grappo

February 19, 2018

One of the many unique advantages America still has — if it chooses to exercise it — is its remarkable convening power.

Reflecting on his predecessors' Middle East efforts dating back to Henry Kissinger in the 1970s, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's recent tour of Middle East capitals — in Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey — appeared sadly strained and overwhelmingly, well, underwhelming.

It wasn't for lack of issues. There were issues aplenty for America's chief diplomat, now one year into his rocky, criticism-plagued tenure in Foggy Bottom. To name but a few:

1) Egypt's troubled economy, contemptible human rights record, and ongoing and heretofore unsuccessful struggle with a host of Sinai-based terrorists

2) Saudi Arabia's ill-fated three-year effort to defeat Houthi rebels in Yemen, creating one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, and an almost single-handed, irrational effort to break up the Gulf Cooperation Council with the Qatar blockade

3) Iraq's extraordinary needs to confront a colossal rebuilding project (approaching \$100 billion) after decades

of Saddam Hussein's corrupt mismanagement, civil war and ugly Islamic State insurgency

4) Jordan's continuing challenge as host to hundreds of thousands — unofficial estimates suggest maybe a million — Syrian refugees (both officially recognized and not), as well as the threat of an unstable and threatening Syrian neighbor

5) A Lebanon trapped between the Scylla and Charybdis of Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia and Syrian refugee encampments it cannot sustain

6) Perhaps most troubling, a major fallout with NATO ally Turkey over US support for Kurdish Syrian rebels whom Ankara violently opposes

Did I mention the 500-pound, fire-breathing dragon in the room? It's unclear whether Secretary Tillerson did either. (That would be Syria's civil war, of course.)

WELCOME TO THE WORLD'S CRISIS ZONE

Just to kick off the secretary's Middle East travels, the region welcomed him with a direct confrontation between Israeli Air Force (IAF) fighter aircraft and Syrian surface-to-air missiles following an allegedly Iranian-engineered drone mission over Israel proper. The drone and Syrian rocket battery were reportedly destroyed and the vaunted IAF lost one F-16. The incident marks an ominous development in Syria's

seven-year civil war, potentially pitting Iranian and Israeli forces against one another.

Another incident around the same time resulted in US aircraft killing “scores” of Russian “contract” troops attempting to assault positions held by US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces and American soldiers in northern Syria. “Great power confrontation,” the dreaded bane of the great powers since World War II, now looms in the Middle East.

If Tillerson hadn’t known it before, he should now. This is the world’s most fraught, crisis-ridden region, a ticking time bomb packed inside a powder keg enclosed in a tinderbox set to blow at any moment. Yet he and the Trump administration seem woefully unprepared, unengaged and, dare we say, disinterested. The right words about stability, growth and peace are mouthed. And, as Tillerson did apparently so well, they appear to listen. But their actions suggest something else.

AND THE ACTION PLAN IS...

In Cairo, the secretary pointedly and sadly dodged a question at a media event about President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s abysmal human rights record. He predictably spoke about America’s support for free and fair elections in advance of next month’s presidential elections in Egypt, as multiple credible opposition candidates mysteriously have withdrawn their candidacies.

And we heard little about progress on the Sinai front, which is eroding public support for Sisi and presenting a threat on Israel’s southern border, thought to be secure since the 1978 Camp David Accords.

In Kuwait, at an international Iraq pledging conference, Tillerson reminded the audience of America’s already \$1 trillion investment — and the meter is still running — to return that country to the Iraqi people and stability. Most of that, however, came from the cost of the US military’s war effort during the eight-plus year occupation. It was a fair and understandable statement, but as the former Exxon CEO should know, it’s a sunk cost to put it bluntly. If Iraq is to be spared more instability and unrest, Iraqis will need economic opportunity and that will mean investment. The \$30 billion pledged — in so far as we know, none by the US — will be insufficient, Mr. Secretary.

In Amman, he teased the media — there were no details — and no doubt terrified Palestinians by announcing the now-dubbed “Kushner plan” for Middle East peace is “fairly well advanced.”

Tillerson and State Department officials pointedly avoided discussing the Trump administration’s decision in December 2017 to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, which from the Palestinian perspective undoubtedly prejudices any ideas coming from Washington. There was no hint of what they might receive in compensation regarding their oft-asserted claim on Jerusalem. And while

Tillerson dangled the possibility of restoring past years' funding, Jordanians were left cringing over what to do with the 2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan who might have to do without support from UNRWA, whose US contributions may be slashed \$45 billion this year.

In Beirut, Tillerson delivered a message that Lebanese don't need to hear: Hezbollah is a threat. The existence of the US-designated, Iranian-backed terrorist-political-social welfare-mercenary organization in Lebanon has been an uncomfortable fact of life in that country since the end of its own 15-year civil war in 1990. Saying it in Beirut standing next to Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri does not make it any more understandable or palatable for the Lebanese, nor defuse the issues it has raised with Saudi Arabia. The secretary of state offered no solutions, however, which will mollify Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah but few others.

Tillerson met with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara, to address what may be the most strategically confounding challenge for the US: the falling out with a fellow NATO founding member over US support for Kurdish Syrian fighters along Turkey's southern border.

The feud between NATO allies is unprecedented. Defense Secretary James Mattis was meeting almost simultaneously with his Turkish counterpart in Rome and then Brussels

over the same matter, lending further gravitas to the problem. From both Ankara and Brussels, the message was better. The stakes are so much higher with NATO's integrity and unity on the line. Still no solution — at least none announced — but the two historic allies must talk and must resolve this issue, for the sake of the relationship as well as Syria. Amidst all the criticism of him, however, one has to wonder whether the diplomatic neophyte Tillerson is up to the task.

Surprisingly left off the itinerary was Israel. Given the downing of the Israeli fighter jet, one would have expected America's chief diplomat to rush to counsel with his Israeli counterparts and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Yet no such stop appeared in the offing. Worth noting, perhaps, is that the secretary apparently has not been part of the Trump administration's efforts to bridge the Israeli-Palestinian divide. That apparently is being left solely to the president's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and Middle East Envoy Jason Greenblatt.

AMERICAN ABDICATION

So, what to make of the secretary's Mideast excursion?

For an America seemingly disengaged from the region — and, diplomatically speaking, perhaps from the world — it seemed to underscore its retreat. Wrapped up at home in budget debates, government shutdowns, immigration battles, White House scandals,

senseless gun violence, furtive investigations into Russian election meddling, and hyper-partisan skirmishes on a myriad of fronts from gender politics to infrastructure spending, America appears to have abandoned the field as the global leader, despite its many formidable advantages in so many areas. It is an irresponsible abdication of not only a duty, but also of the trust many around the world placed in the US. Americans also should know that it means a decreased ability to advance their interests and their values around the world.

Tillerson's inexplicable hatchet job on his own diplomatic service, the Foreign Service — 60% of its most senior diplomats have been forced out or retired out of frustration — further speaks to this administration's shocking disregard for diplomacy and global leadership.

One of those many unique advantages America still has — if it chooses to exercise it — is its remarkable convening power: the ability to bring together allies and adversaries alike to work out and solve tough issues. It need not have the solutions always. But it needs to be able to cajole, entice, stroke, arm-twist and demand that nations come to the table and talk. Nowhere is this more needed than in the Middle East, beset as it is with a long rap sheet of grave and enormous problems.

That might have been a worthy leitmotif for Tillerson's magical mystery tour.

Sadly, the magic may only have been that he came at all. The mystery... why?



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The Bigger Problem within Oxfam's Sex Scandal

Shelley Briggs Callahan
February 21, 2018

Who is monitoring the charities that the public perceives as moral leaders?

Oxfam, one of the UK's largest and best known charities, is currently entangled in a scandal following revelations that senior staff members engaged in sexual misconduct during the 2010 Haiti earthquake recovery effort and had hired prostitutes while working in Chad in 2006. The report revealed that aid workers held sex parties, turning a villa

rented by Oxfam into a makeshift brothel, with senior officers allegedly attempting to cover up the behavior.

Roland van Hauwermeiren, the man at the heart of the scandal, was head of operations in both Chad and then Haiti, resigning from that last position in 2011 following an internal investigation by Oxfam. Since the story broke, four staff members have been fired, and three others have resigned, including Oxfam's deputy chief executive, Penny Lawrence, who was the organization's program director at the time of the Haiti earthquake.

While alarming that Oxfam, or any NGO for that matter, would cover up such distressing acts, what is of equal concern is that van Hauwermeiren, who admitted to the claims of his involvement in the Haiti scandal while disputing the exact allegations against him, had, in 2004, left his position with the Merlin charity in Liberia amid reports of using prostitutes. The question of why he was allowed to pursue another job working with vulnerable populations is confounding: How did an aid worker whose career objective is to provide support for people living in poverty get the opportunity to exploit them on more than one occasion? The answer lies within the broken system of the global aid industry and leads to questions of who is monitoring the charities that the public tends to perceive as moral leaders.

NGOs are built around public trust. It is vital to their missions to prove they are

using donated funds appropriately, reporting to charity watchdogs annually and showing full transparency in their financial statements. But it seems as though those same standards may not be required when it comes to employees' conduct while on the job. Oxfam aid workers not only took advantage of their positions of power while working in Haiti, but their abhorrent actions have not been met by any punitive measures. In its most basic, they got away with exploiting the same people they set out to help.

Haiti and its people have faced exploitation for hundreds of years. Once one of the richest nations under French rule, France refused to recognize the nation's independence following the Haitian Revolution of 1804. It finally did so in 1825, and then only under the condition that the Haitian government agrees to pay compensation in the amount of roughly 150 million golden francs — 10 times Haiti's annual revenue then, or about \$17 billion in today's money — to French landowners for the loss of plantations and slaves.

At the same time, the United States government placed an embargo against the island, refusing to acknowledge the newly independent nation, even though up until that point the US had been selling more goods to Haiti than any other country in Latin America. In 1915, fearful that a politically unstable Haiti would not be able to repay its debts, the US occupied the island, remaining for 20 years.

In the 1950s, Haiti came under the dictatorial rule of by François “Papa Doc” Duvalier, whose son, Jean-Claude, would remain in power until 1986. By this point the country had been be plagued by decades of political corruption, its land stripped of natural resources and tens of thousands of citizens thought to oppose the government had been killed. By the time the January 2010 earthquake hit, Haiti was already relying heavily on foreign aid, which accounted for 30-40% of its government’s budget.

Haitians aren’t the only ones being exploited by foreign aid workers, and Oxfam is not the only organization that has confirmed that staff members have engaged in sexual misconduct in recent years either. Save the Children, the British Red Cross, Christian Aid and the UN have all published reports of both inappropriate and criminal sexual behavior by staff.

More than ever, now is the time to change how the global aid system is monitored and how inappropriate behavior is handled. If something is not done now, beyond being a public-relations nightmare, Oxfam and other big NGOs are at risk of losing out on funding.

With something this explosive, everyone loses. Stories such as these reinforce negative stereotypes of the countries where the disgraceful behavior took place, it harms individuals who were taken advantage of and it shakes the public’s faith in the non-profit sector.

Scandals such as these do more than just give a few NGOs a bad reputation: They put a mark on all of them. The big players at the top have the means to bounce back from bad publicity, but smaller charities don’t have that luxury. If faith in aid organizations as a whole is undermined, and enough supporters back away from a cause, then smaller charities risk folding completely.

If there aren’t changes in accountability within the global aid system, in the end those of us who work to deliver humanitarian assistance with ethical and moral standards risk losing our ability to do so, which only hurts those we set out to help in the first place.



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