

# Fair Observer

## Monthly

August 2020

Fair Observer<sup>o</sup>

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August 2020

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

Fair Observer is a nonprofit media organization that engages in citizen journalism and civic education.

Our digital media platform has 2,500 contributors from 90 countries, cutting across borders, backgrounds and beliefs. With fact-checking and a rigorous editorial process, we provide diversity and quality in an era of echo chambers and fake news.

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

As a nonprofit, we are free from owners and advertisers. When there are six jobs in public relations for every job in journalism, we rely on your donations to achieve our mission.

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## Russia Has Planted Seeds of the EU's Demise in the Balkans

Amra Sabic-El-Rayess  
August 6, 2020

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**Under the malign neglect of the Trump presidency, Vladimir Putin has crafted for himself a unique window of opportunity within which to instigate violence in the Balkans.**

**E**arlier this year, Kosovo elected Albin Kurti as prime minister. Progressive, pro-American, pro-justice and anti-corruption, Kurti was precisely the kind of politician Americans would ordinarily wish to see in power in the region. And yet the US has orchestrated what Kurti has called “a parliamentary coup d’etat” to replace him with Avdullah Hoti, who, as soon as he was installed, reversed the measures Kurti had taken to promote reciprocal sovereign relations between Serbia and Kosovo.

Emerging out of the protests in Kosovo against the failures by the EU and the UN to address the massive corruption and pro-Serbian bias undermining peace negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina, Kurti had staunchly refused American requests that Kosovo remove the import tariffs it had imposed on Serbia’s goods for its refusal to recognize Kosovo as an independent state. But if Kurti wanted to garner the same respect for Kosovo that Serbia was getting from the West, and the Trump administration in particular, his recalcitrance soon proved costly.

Congressional Republicans, with Trump’s blessing, threatened Kosovo with the loss of \$49 million in US support, along with US peacekeepers still deployed in the country. And so, after less than two months in power, Kurti was labeled anti-American and swiftly ousted in a vote of no confidence. Unsurprisingly, Hoti, as Kosovo’s new prime minister, made immediate

concessions to Serbia under the guise of aiding peace negotiations.

### **Ad Hoc Border Redrawing**

A few weeks ago, an ad hoc White House summit between Serbia and Kosovo intended to promote the idea of land swaps within the region was abruptly canceled after a special prosecutor in The Hague hijacked the US plan with a surprising move by indicting, on June 24, Kosovo’s president, Hashim Thaci, for war crimes in the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor’s Office even before the pre-trial judge’s confirmation of the charges. This indictment may or may not prove legitimate according to due process, but it did achieve the immediate result of removing the one remaining obstacle to a rushed peace treaty from which Kosovo was unlikely to benefit.

Thaci’s role as president is largely ceremonial, but his early leadership of Kosovo’s liberation from Serbia and his standing as one of the country’s most prominent politicians of the last 20 years would have made him a formidable peace negotiator.

The conspicuous timing of this indictment, then, was entirely to the advantage of Serbia and, by extension, Russia. The peace negotiations will go on with Kosovo’s delegation being limited to Hoti, a bit player likely to agree to whatever is put on the table. Serbia, on the other hand, is led by a rising authoritarian, Aleksandar Vucic, whose party has just won a parliamentary majority in an election the integrity of which has been broadly questioned by the country’s opposition.

Serbia’s minister of information in the late 1990s, Vucic, is credited with banning foreign media and any criticism of the government. Equally sacrosanct is his relationship with Russia. Vucic recently hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin in Belgrade, gifting him, perhaps symbolically, with yet another puppy. In return for this kind of clearly demonstrated loyalty, Putin has been good to Serbia, delivering anti-aircraft weapons but also actively arming

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Bosnian Serb police and training paramilitary units to strengthen the voices of separatists in the region.

Putin has similarly turned Milorad Dodik, the current representative of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina's (Bosnia) tripartite presidency, into a political puppet. Emboldened by Trump's deference to Putin, Dodik has undermined all of Bosnia's efforts to join the NATO alliance. He has even promised to Bosnian Serbs that he would break up Bosnia and annex nearly half of its land to Serbia, which Serbia — along with Bosnian Serbs — has already ethnically cleansed of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) during the 1990s genocide. Dodik's continued destabilization of his own country reflects the extent to which Putin dominates the region. To bolster Dodik's power, in April of this year, Putin stunned Bosnia and Herzegovina's government by sending Russia's military units into the country, uninvited.

If it was not already clear enough, it is now: Putin has successfully enlisted Donald Trump as a pawn in Russia's long-term geopolitical game in Europe. And with an unfettered Russia free to make such moves as Putin chooses, we may soon be witnessing another round of serious bloodshed in the Balkans. The threat has not gone unnoticed.

### **European Concerns**

Europe saw Thaci's indictment as an opening to inject itself into the peace talks between Kosovo and Serbia. Only a day later, the president of the European Council met with Kosovo's prime minister; the "1st physical visit since coronavirus" by the president of the European Commission was also with Hoti. Having now been summoned by the EU and perhaps overwhelmed by the pressure brought to bear by his western neighbors, Hoti agreed to participate in new Europe-led peace talks with Vucic that would take the place of that canceled White House summit.

The EU was rightly concerned with the direction of the peace talks led by Trump's envoy, Richard Grenell, and the consequent

violence that might have ensued had the peace agreement legitimized the idea of land swaps, as Trump's former national security adviser, John Bolton, has now confirmed were being discussed. As far as Bolton is concerned, "This happens in history, that's just something you have to live with."

But Europe is far less indifferent to the kind of bloodshed such land swaps might trigger in the Balkans. The EU, after all, now includes Croatia, a country bordering Serbia, which, if drawn into a conflict, would undermine the long-term viability of the already weakened transnational organization. In short, a peace treaty endorsing the land swaps would open a Pandora's Box of tensions reigniting Serbs' old claims over territories in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and beyond. Violence of this kind in the Balkans will assure Putin's ultimate goal of destabilizing Europe. Once again, Russia will have a point of reentry into Eastern Europe, through its own backdoor — the Balkans.

Under the malign neglect of Trump's presidency, Vladimir Putin has crafted for himself a unique window of opportunity within which to instigate violence in the Balkans, capitalizing on likely Serb secession from the handful of nations born out of the fall of Yugoslavia. Serbs in Montenegro, Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbs in Croatia and Serbs in Kosovo have long hoped to join into a Greater Serbia, an ethnically cleansed and imagined nation void of religious diversity. It was this same Serb ambition of ethnic purity that led to several wars and the unforgettable genocide against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s.

### **The Bells of Hate**

Today, the bells of hate chime more widely yet, drawing upon white supremacy throughout the West. Aided by Russia and a half-witting Trump, an authoritarian-led Serbia is entirely capable of initiating bloodshed as relentlessly and dangerously as it did in the 1990s — perhaps even more so.



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Setting aside Trump's own race and religion-based sympathies for Serbian nationalism, American national interests in no way align with Serbia's agenda of redrawing borders in the Balkans. But with Putin pushing for it, Trump has been in a hurry to help out however he can. And why wouldn't he be, just ahead of a November election in which his Russian friend may once more be able to play a critical role?

So while Europe and the US continue to trip over each other, this is the perfect opportunity for Putin to legitimize the idea of redrawn borders. Serbia and Kosovo are one thing, after all, but validating the concept for implementation elsewhere? This would really be something, taking geopolitics back to a mode in which military conquest and ethnic cleansing, rather than aspirations to democracy, human rights and social justice, are what shape the fortunes of nations.

Putin is a long-term strategist who, while no one was watching, has actively planted the seeds of the EU's demise in the Balkans. And make no mistake: Neither a canceled meeting in the White House nor another summit hosted by Europeans this summer is going to stop him. In the wake of Richard Grenell's White House summit debacle and the EU leaders' evident panic for what comes next, the only thing meaningfully standing in Putin's way is the tiny NATO-protected country of Montenegro. Last year, Russian military intelligence agents were convicted for their role in a 2016 coup d'état aimed at thwarting Montenegro's attempt to join NATO. Though the attempt failed, Putin didn't stop there.

In 2018, only three days after the infamous off-the-record meeting between Trump and Putin in Helsinki that shocked the world, President Trump stunned us all yet again when he proclaimed that NATO's insistence on protecting this newly admitted member, Montenegro, would trigger a war of global proportions. Few were inclined to take this seriously at the time, but watching Trump's hastened interest in appeasing Russia with the peace treaty between Kosovo and Serbia, America's indifference toward the rise of

Putin's control over Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the recently announced costly withdrawal of American troops from Germany in the midst of America's own national crisis shines a light not only on Washington's shifting alliances but also new dangers on the horizon.

While the US president insists on enabling serious mischief in the Balkans, Europe can only watch in fear, too weak to stop what may be coming next. Bearing in mind the fact that it was Franz Ferdinand's assassination by a secret Serb military organization that triggered the First World War, we would do well right now not to look the other way.

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\***Amra Sabic-El-Rayess** is an associate professor of practice at Columbia University's Teachers College

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## **When COVID-19 and Hurricanes Collide**

Kayly Ober  
August 7, 2020

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**It is critical that migrant workers have access to economic opportunities to be able to help their communities recover from the deadly combination of COVID-19 and natural disasters.**

**I**t is hard to think of impending natural hazard-related disasters in the middle of a global pandemic. But it is absolutely essential that policymakers do so. This year, due in part to climate change, scientists predict one of the most active Atlantic hurricane seasons on record.

In fact, nine tropical storms have already formed out of the western Atlantic in 2020, something that has never happened this early in the hurricane season before, with Hurricane Isaias striking just this week. This is especially

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worrying as COVID-19 cases drastically increase and the pandemic continues to affect the capacity of states to respond to non-coronavirus emergencies.

Of course, this challenge isn't only in the Americas. Other parts of the world have already grappled with the intersection of COVID-19 and large-scale disasters with varying results. From Cyclone Harold in the Pacific to Cyclone Amphan in India to severe flooding and locust swarms in East Africa, some key trends have emerged. By studying and learning from them, policymakers in the Western Hemisphere may be able to prepare more effectively for the worst.

### **Straining Supply Chains**

The COVID-19 pandemic is putting supply chains under strain, even for basic household goods. Where supply chains are particularly stressed, the prices of essential goods have skyrocketed, making it harder for humanitarian workers to provide much-needed aid for long-standing global relief needs.

Adding large-scale natural hazard-related disasters like cyclones and hurricanes to the mix only exacerbates these already fragile systems. Strict lockdown and decontamination procedures, for instance, held up much-needed rapid delivery of emergency supplies in Vanuatu during Cyclone Harold and also delayed relief by up to two weeks in some hard-to-reach islands. In addition, COVID-related cancellations of intra-island transport, including planes and ships, coupled with Cyclone Harold's destruction of main roads to further delay aid delivery.

Natural hazard-related disasters, likewise, impact the delivery of COVID-related supplies. In East Africa, where record-setting floods displaced more than 1.1 million people in May, important infrastructure, including a number of key bridges and roads, were destroyed or damaged. This created a nightmare for humanitarian agencies attempting to deliver relief supplies, including those meant for COVID-19.

In the face of these challenges, aid organizations have carried on, but their budgets

and impact on the ground are in jeopardy. To date, by and large, commitments for funding humanitarian emergencies, COVID-related or not, have fallen short by at least a third as compared to this time last year. For example, funding appeals for flooding and locust relief in East Africa have a combined gap of \$325 million, and the amounts raised represent less than 20% of the articulated need. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' (UN OCHA) appeals in Ethiopia are underfunded by more than 84%.

In addition, Refugees International's own reporting shows that this year's Cyclone Harold, when compared to 2015's Cyclone Pam, has received far less attention and humanitarian funding, even though it displaced more than 27% of Vanuatu's population. According to the UN OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, in 2015, Vanuatu received more than \$37.2 million in humanitarian assistance for Pam; this year, only \$4.8 million has been donated for Harold.

Yet, another layer of vulnerability for those displaced by disasters has emerged as governments around the world have moved to expel migrant workers to limit the spread of COVID-19. For example, in the Sundarbans in southern India, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers returned home from urban centers in March before Cyclone Amphan hit. Now they've been left stranded without job prospects as their community struggles to recover. This is especially worrying, as remittances from migrants are often a dependable lifeline during disasters.

Migrant workers who have not returned home but who may have lost jobs during shelter-in-place orders by authorities have similar challenges. In fact, the World Bank predicts that remittances sent back home may shrink by more than 20% this year. This means that places such as Vanuatu, where seasonal workers normally send home more than \$19 million annually, will have fewer funds from family members to rebuild and recover after the fall out of this year's Cyclone Harold. The ability to send money back

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home is further hindered by the fact that migrant workers are also often not eligible for COVID-19 social protection schemes.

### **What Does This Mean for Policymakers?**

While the COVID-19 pandemic and large-scale disasters are being handled differently all across the world, there are undeniable trends that speak to a larger challenge that policymakers must face. First, our humanitarian supply chains are woefully underprepared for any sort of major disruption. Second, national governments and international organizations that often lead the charge to help those most in need are falling short. Third, policies to address the crisis of COVID-19 may actually exacerbate others.

Donor countries, such as the United States, must move urgently to invest in disaster relief and recovery — COVID-19-related and otherwise. The United Nations estimates the cost of protecting the most vulnerable from the worst effects of the pandemic is about \$90 billion. While this amount seems high, it represents less than 1% of the amount of world stimulus packages that rich countries have begun to implement. Thus, a significant contribution from the US of \$20 billion in emergency funding would not only be reasonable but also consistent with America's expressed commitment to humanitarian leadership.

Substantial and rapid injections of aid also make long-term economic sense in fragile settings dealing with other disasters. For example, the World Bank estimates that the locust challenge alone could cost the greater Horn of Africa region, including Yemen, as much as \$8.5 billion by the end of this year. A rapid response could cut that loss by more than \$6 billion.

National governments should not summarily expel migrant workers or make it impossible for them to remain, as such actions or omissions are more a result of fear and prejudice than sound public health policy judgments. Indeed, it is critical that migrant workers have access to economic opportunities — in both urban centers

and abroad — to be able to adequately help their communities recover from the deadly combination of COVID-19 and disaster. In order to ensure migrant workers are best able to do so, policymakers must include them in recovery planning and economic assistance measures regardless of status.

Finally, there is the need to decentralize humanitarian operations, as some aid organizations working on the ground have already signaled they will do. Building up the capacity of local people — especially in the communities that are often affected by big storms — is essential. Doing so decreases the high costs of getting to harder-to-reach communities and maximizes humanitarian aid while reducing response times.

As we begin to witness the impacts of the Atlantic hurricane season, taking to heart these lessons will be a matter of life or death for millions.

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\***Kayly Ober** is the senior advocate and program manager of the Climate Displacement Program of Refugees International.

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## **Beirushima: What Lebanon Needs to Survive**

Munir Saeed  
August 10, 2020

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**National unity in the face of Beirut's disastrous explosion is the silver lining that may ultimately save Lebanon.**

**I**t will be a while until we know what or who triggered the explosion destroyed the Beirut port and, with it, half of the Lebanese capital, on August 4. What we know for sure is who the ultimate culprits are, and, unfortunately, none of them are included among those under house

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arrest or currently being interrogated: the corrupt political mafia that has controlled and exploited the lives of ordinary Lebanese for many years. Each one of those in power, directly or indirectly, has contributed to the blast that not only killed at least 200 people and wounded more than 6,000, but also destroyed Lebanon's desperately needed economic lifeline, turning the country into a beggar state that must survive on external charity.

The fact that the petition launched on the eve of President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Beirut calling for Lebanon to return to the French mandate gathered 50,000 signatures in the first 24 hours is representative of the hopelessness that has pervaded this small, but historically proud, creative and industrious nation. The fact that regional and international scavengers have come closer, circling the Lebanese wagon, seeking to complete their meal, is testimony to the dangers that lie ahead as Lebanon must try to protect the last remaining elements of its sovereignty against another assault.

This assault will further compound the UN Security Council ruling that overruled Lebanon's parliament in the case of Rafiq Hariri, the former prime minister assassinated in 2005 — a process that has lost both its respect and even its entertainment value.

### **Last Line of Defense**

But that is a discussion for another day when the delayed ruling is announced. For now, in the midst of one of the most destructive episodes in the country's recent history, the Lebanese people find themselves faced with not only the greatest challenge to their survival as a nation but also the loss of what they fought hard to defend in the face of foreign usurpation: their ability to continue as a creative nation of free thinkers and artists and, above all, as partakers of a free political process that is the envy of all those subjugated to dictatorships in the region.

Just two days apart, 75 years ago, in Hiroshima, Japan, another proud and industrious people were smitten by unprecedented magnitude. While the nuclear bombings of

Hiroshima and then Nagasaki were a deliberate act of premeditated evil, the jury is still out on Lebanon's Beirut. The jury is also still out on whether the Lebanese will follow the footsteps of their predecessors to rebuild their country into a vibrant and transparent economic regional player, but without surrendering the strength that first liberated most of their land and now continues to protect its territorial integrity — the last line of defense for what remains of Lebanon as a nation.

Beyond that imperative, nothing must be held sacred if reform is to be the true way forward. Losing that imperative is what many of the country's regional enemies will seek to force upon Lebanon, exploiting the opportunities this very dark hour provides them. This will indeed prove to be a challenge that requires strong leadership that must protect Lebanon from foreign intervention.

As shock turned into more street anger, Lebanon's fragmented society has forgotten its religious and sectarian divides and united against a common internal enemy: the corrupt political system that has abused its democratic process and misruled Lebanon for far too long. This display of national unity is the silver lining that will hopefully ultimately save Lebanon.

The entire political system must be overhauled if Lebanon is to survive as a nation. And the onus of leading the way lies with the people and not the leadership. Lebanese politicians have proven themselves to be one of the most corrupt political elite in the region, owning or being involved in everything ranging from garbage collection to power generation to banks that lend money to the government at exorbitant rates. The structure has created a ruling class with everything to lose and nothing to gain from economic reform. These are not the people trustworthy of leading the transformation the country so desperately needs.

### **Pulling the Trigger**

On top of everything else, its ailing economy is loaded with more than 1.5 million refugees, the result of Israeli occupation, the Syrian Civil War

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and many regional conflicts that Lebanon is made to pay the price for. It is, therefore, not surprising that highly explosive ammonia nitrate abandoned at the port of Beirut for six years would be allowed to lie hidden and become a powder keg waiting for something or someone to trigger what Brian Castner, the lead weapons investigator for Amnesty International's Crisis Response Team, called "the biggest explosion in an urban area in decades" that made 300,000 people homeless.

In a country where economic indicators have lost their meaning, where law and order are decided by a judicial mafia, where the role of both political business leadership has lost its demarcations and where a foreign president is popularly welcomed where a native is banished, it is clearly a time to fold and start all over again. And only the street, now prompted and indeed strengthened by a massive explosion, can lead the way. Whether the blast that devastated the nation's capital has also wiped away the corruption that brought Lebanon to its feet, only time will tell. For if it hasn't, nothing ever will, and the noble, generous and hardworking Lebanese will become a nation that once was.

This is, of course, assuming it was something, not someone, who pulled the trigger. Should it, in the end, become evident that the explosion was another act of premeditated evil, then all bets are off. Our worst fears will become true, and Lebanon, and the entire region, will go up in flames. Let us hope Donald Trump was once again wrong when he suggested the blast had been an attack, and let us hope that foreign election campaigns have not been the reason Beirut blew up, with the potential to take with it the rest of what's remaining of our region.

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\***Munir A. Saeed** is the former president of TAWQ, a Yemeni nonpartisan pro-democracy movement. He is retired and currently lives in exile.

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## **Shamima Begum: The Sensitive Case of IS Returnees**

Kristian Alexander  
August 10, 2020

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**Although revoking citizenship may prevent the return of foreign fighters in the short term, it does not solve the problem and may also be illegal under both national and international laws.**

**B**orn in the UK to Bangladeshi parents, Shamima Begum left London as a 15-year-old in 2015. Using her British passport, she traveled to Turkey with two of her friends from school. From there, Begum and her friends crossed into Syria, where they met their Islamic State (IS) contacts. While in Syria, Begum married an IS fighter. On February 19 this year, the Special Immigration Appeals Commission had stripped Begum of her citizenship as she was deemed to be a national security threat. On July 16, however, UK authorities granted this now adult British woman, who had joined a terrorist group as a teenager four years earlier, the right to return to Britain to challenge the UK government's removal of her citizenship.

The commission ruled that the decision to revoke Begum's British citizenship did not render her stateless as, by default, the United Kingdom also considered her a Bangladeshi citizen "by descent." However, the Bangladeshi Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that it did not consider her as a citizen of that country. A statement released by Begum's British lawyers argued that she indeed had never visited Bangladesh, nor had she ever applied for dual nationality.

In the meantime, the press has chastised Begum, who remains a detainee in a camp operated by ethnic Kurdish militias in northern Syria, for making controversial statements such and saying that seeing her first severed head did

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not faze her “at all” and suggesting that people should “have sympathy” toward her for everything she has been through.

### **Why Women?**

England’s Court of Appeal, in turn, unanimously agreed that Begum should be granted the right to have a fair and effective appeal of the decision to strip her of her citizenship, but only if she is permitted to come back to Britain. Of course, that does not guarantee the reinstatement of her citizenship rights, just that she has a right to present her case in person. Regardless of the legal wrangling and the debate about the legality that her case has sparked, this example sheds some light on the issue of contextualizing female IS supporters and terrorists and the legality of stripping Western-born suspects of their European or North American citizenship.

There has been some academic discussion of why women, especially young women, who were born, raised and educated in the West, migrate to IS-held territory and join terrorist groups, leaving behind family, friends and a way of life while abandoning liberal values and opportunities that countries such as the UK offer them. It is difficult to ascertain whether a particular female, such as Shamima Begum, was a victim of IS, an active supporter or both. The widely circulated stories of “jihadi brides” have projected an image of confused and naïve girls and women traveling to join the Islamic State. While certain dynamics lured a number of females to IS-held territories, many went of their own free will. Yet it is highly debatable to what extent a 15-year-old understands the realities of this extremist group.

Muslim women have migrated to IS-held areas for a multitude of reasons, including the romantic ideal of marrying a “lion” — a supposedly brave and noble warrior — looking for an adventure and contributing to the establishment of an Islamic “caliphate” regulated by strict enforcement of Sharia law. The sense that joining the Islamic State empowers people to live meaningful lives draws many of the migrant women. One study suggests that besides issues of

belonging and identity — and a skewed interpretation of Islam — it is, in the case of young women like Begum, online social networks that appeared to be the primary venue and driving factor for radicalization. It turns out that the vast majority of foreign women who traveled to Syria and Iraq served IS primarily as one of several housewives or sex slaves.

It is only by understanding the motivations and experiences of those who have gone to fight abroad that governments can prevent the recruitment of another generation of terrorists and terrorist sympathizers. The enemies of the Islamic State have ostensibly defeated the group in the Middle East, yet unknown numbers of surviving IS fighters have found the means to relocate to Afghanistan. Permutations of IS and other extremist groups are also active in many African countries like Burkina Faso, Chad, Nigeria and Somalia, among others. Aside from Afghanistan, other places in South Asia are not immune.

### **Displaced Burden**

The UK, the US and some other countries have chosen to prevent the return of foreign fighters by revoking their citizenship. Although such actions may prevent the return of foreign fighters in the short term, they do not solve the problem and may also be illegal under both national and international laws. In several instances, this will simply displace the burden and force weakened states such as Syria and Iraq to deal with the consequences of radicalization. It may also instill further grievances and act as a trigger for radicalization into surviving Western-born radicals who may plot terrorist attacks against Western targets.

In certain cases, citizenship revocation has led to concerns over statelessness. Rendering an individual stateless runs against Western legal principles and is contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In several legal systems, there is a lack of sufficient evidence to prosecute female returnees because of their domestic roles in Syria and Iraq. Another

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challenge associated with prosecutions of foreign fighters lies with demonstrating intent. This applies both to the intent of the actions committed while in the war zone and the intent of travel for aspiring foreign fighters. There is also an argument that many such individuals, especially the juveniles, were victims of human trafficking.

A more fruitful approach would be to allow a panel of experts to determine whether an individual returning to the home country is dangerous or disillusioned. The prime example of this approach is Denmark, which has already implemented assessment protocols that allow authorities to determine the individual circumstances for each returnee. Based on the results of such screenings, Danish police, together with social services, develop a plan of action for each returnee. Together, they decide whether a returnee is imprisoned, placed in a rehabilitation program or is assigned a combination of both approaches. It is extremely difficult to separate a victim from a perpetrator, and the boundaries can be particularly murky for foreign fighters.

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## When Is Hot Too Hot?

Arek Sinanian  
August 10, 2020

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### Who will be affected the most by prolonged heatwaves in summer, and how will we adapt?

One of the many difficulties in understanding global warming and climate change, and their impacts, is that they are complicated. Climate change is not

linear over time and it is inconsistent across different regions.

As I explain in my book, “A Climate for Denial,” the nonlinear characteristics of climate change mean that, over time, its impacts will not take place in a linear fashion. For example, heatwaves will not increase in frequency by, say, one every year. Likewise, the average global temperature will not rise by one degree each year. In addition, the effects will not be the same everywhere around the world, not even around the same region.

Another problem in understanding climate change is that it is — and will be — difficult to predict accurately due to the many variables involved. Global greenhouse gas emissions will depend on things like economic growth, population growth, technological changes, solar activity and climate feedback loops. This is why highly-sophisticated predictive models that, in fact, include a huge array of variables provide an upper case, a lower case and the most likely case.

What we know with a high degree of certainty is that the planet is getting hotter. Given the levels of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and our current emissions, it will continue to get hotter. But the increase in heat and intensity of heatwaves, as well as their frequency, will not occur equally and consistently throughout the year or around the globe. And to complicate the impact on our lives, some people will be more prepared and more resilient to the increased heat than others.

Human populations, including the infrastructure and services that support them as well as the ecosystems, have inbuilt resilience and can, to varying degrees, adapt to climate change. But those with less adaptive capacity may suffer dramatically.

We also know, with a great degree of certainty, that some areas of the world will experience more heatwaves and, in particular, intense ones with significantly higher temperatures. This could be exasperated with increased humidity due to more rainfall.

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So, for example, a region may have historically experienced an average of three consecutive days of temperatures above 95 F (35 C) each year. Now, assume that due to climate change, the same region experiences five consecutive days of temperatures above 100 F. The consecutive aspect in this example is significant because systems and our bodies are less able to recover from the stress of extreme heat over long periods.

How will this hypothetical scenario affect people and the essential services they receive? Let's take a simplistic look at a few groups of people in this hypothetical situation and how heatwaves will impact them and the infrastructure in their region:

- a) White collar workers and students in air-conditioned offices and schools
- b) House-bound people, including the elderly and dependent people, living in places without air conditioning
- c) People who work outside in urban areas (council workers, gardeners and landscapers, builders, trades workers)
- d) Farmers and workers in external rural areas
- e) Health care workers

### **Group A**

Office buildings and their mechanical services (air conditioning, elevators, security systems) will most likely cope with prolonged higher temperatures. But some air-conditioning units may struggle to attain comfort levels, some systems may stop operating completely and air conditioning will also consume significantly higher levels of energy.

The regional area infrastructure will also probably cope with higher temperatures, although the electricity supply may struggle, depending on the level of peak energy supply availability. This

is because the hotter temperatures will mean a higher demand for power and, therefore, put more stress on the power supply system. There may be blackouts when the supply of electricity is not able to cope.

In times of prolonged high temperatures, other infrastructures are known to suffer, including public transport. Rail lines have been known to buckle, resulting in prolonged delays in services and disruption to the national economy. Blackouts may also result in water supply and communication system failures, again disrupting the economy.

The workers will, therefore, cope depending on the likelihood of blackouts. In which case, they will have to work under conditions with no air conditioning and possible heat stress.

Children in schools where there is no air conditioning may close due to the risks of heat stress on children. Outside activities for children may be stopped.

This scenario will increase the likelihood of wildfires. In turn, this will pose risks to lives and livelihoods and could result in property damage, and it will put more pressure on emergency services such as firefighting and health care.

### **Group B**

This group is more vulnerable than Group A, mainly because those affected are less resilient and less able to cope with extreme conditions. If there is no air conditioning in a home or facility with physically or mentally disabled, dependent and elderly people, these individuals are particularly vulnerable to heat stress.

Less developed and remote communities who lack the support services and backup systems are also more vulnerable, particularly when they are unable to cope with extended hot days. Heat stress on the elderly and other vulnerable people may put additional stress on the health care system, which could struggle to keep up with the additional demand.

As with Group A, power, water and communication systems may also be affected. And there is an increased risk of wildfires



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breaking out, with added pressure on emergency services as well.

### Group C

People who work in the field and in unprotected external areas are particularly vulnerable to extreme temperatures and prolonged heatwaves. Working conditions significantly affect those who work outside, and people may need to take additional measures and protective strategies against heatwaves. These include taking more breaks, working fewer hours and, in extreme cases, stopping work altogether.

### Group D

Farmers are used to working outside and for long hours in the field. But heatwaves put pressure on their crop, their machinery and, of course, their own health and safety. Prolonged, extreme heat and heatwaves may significantly affect their production, livestock and crop yields. This is particularly the case in the event of coincident drought, which is another impact of climate change.

### Group E

As heatwaves increase, more pressure is put on health services and workers due to increased admissions, particularly of elderly and vulnerable people who are less able to cope with heat stress. If remote areas are struck with heatwaves and this leads to increased demand for health services, depending on their capacity, these facilities may not be able to operate effectively. This situation is particularly the case in underdeveloped countries and regions of the world.

In sum, as the climate continues to change and extreme weather events such as heatwaves increase in frequency and severity, all the above conditions will worsen. Adaptive capacity and resilience are terms often used in climate change risk assessments. Infrastructure, essential services and our own bodies have inbuilt resilience and adaptive capacity. Yet these may be stretched to their limits when heatwaves occur, particularly in places and on populations that are less resilient,

especially as heatwaves are expected to become more extreme and prolonged.

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## Belarus Election Unleashes Unprecedented Anti-Government Protests

Rejeanne Lacroix  
August 11, 2020

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**Even if this round of opposition is quashed, it will undoubtedly emerge again, perhaps at a time when the authorities may be ill-prepared.**

**T**he victory of Alexander Lukashenko in Sunday’s presidential election in Belarus was expected. It would take a certain level of naiveté to believe that any opposition candidate could unseat the strongman who has ruled over the post-Soviet state for over a quarter of a century. The institutional system of Belarus — the security services, the constitution, the courts and election officials — are firmly under the president’s control. After all, he is nicknamed “bat’ka,” a familiarly affectionate term for “dad” — the father of modern Belarus. However, the incumbent’s dire approval ratings in unofficial polling earned him another nickname, “Sasha 3%,” which has been appearing as graffiti across cities, on homemade signs and t-shirts (as a portmanteau with the Russian word for “psychosis,” ПСИХО3%.)

Those in Belarus who were visibly ready for change took to the streets already in the run-up to the election. Complaints over economic stagnation have been perennial, but these are more apparent in this period of a global financial

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crisis. The people of Belarus look to neighboring Poland and its vast social services programs with some envy, even though the government of Andrzej Duda has just faced its own headline-grabbing election.

Belarusians are also frustrated with Lukashenko's approach to COVID-19. He did not mandate a national lockdown, allowed the continuation of sporting events with crowds in the stands, stating that vodka, banya (sauna) and tractor work in the fresh air acted as protection, and called proactive measures "a frenzy and psychosis." Still, the virus found its victims, with over 69,000 infections and 592 deaths to date. Lukashenko himself claimed he survived the virus.

### **Public Anger**

The protest movement that brought massive crowds onto the streets before the election is unique in many ways. Its leader, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, a teacher and interpreter, is not a politician by trade. She registered as an independent candidate after her husband Sergey, a presidential candidate running against the incumbent, was arrested and jailed by the authorities. The mother of two said her decision to continue her husband's campaign was done "out of love" for him.

The rise of a female politician — in fact, all three challengers to Lukashenko's presidency were women — exposed issues rooted in misogyny. While stating his overall respect for women, Lukashenko expressed the opinion that a woman was not prepared to lead a country like Belarus because its "society is not mature enough to vote for a woman," only to add that any theoretical female president would "collapse, poor thing." These sentiments were echoed by reports that female political challengers typically face threats of sexual violence, assault and state intervention into their families.

Tikhanovskaya stated that she indeed was on the receiving end of such intimidations and sent her children abroad in fear they would be taken from her and placed in an orphanage. (In a video

released following her disappearance the night after the election, Tikhanovskaya, visibly distressed, mentions children again, saying she hopes no one ever faces the choice she had to make, suggesting pressure.) But even despite these threats, Maria Kolesnikova, a member of the campaign team for another detained opposition figure, Viktor Babariko, and Veronika Tsepalo, the wife of former Belarusian ambassador to the United States, Valery Tsepalo (another barred candidate), joined forces with Tikhanovskaya and led the rallies.

These eruptions of public anger were the largest and most prolonged since the demonstrations over the so-called law against social parasites, which mandated that those who work less than six months a year compensate the government \$250 for lost taxes, forced a U-turn. Tens of thousands took to the streets of Minsk at the end of July, with momentum spreading to other major cities like Brest, Gomel, Grodno and Vitebsk. In the capital, some 63,000 people attended a pro-Tikhanovskaya rally in what some suggested could have been "the most massive political rally in Belarus history" not seen since the 1990s. However, Belarusian law enforcement and security services wasted no time in making numerous arrests.

A recent event demonstrated just how unprepared the Lukashenko administration is to counter such a vast protest moment. Days prior to the election, the government planned a music fest in central Minsk to bolster support ahead of the election. Some 7,000 protesters organized on social media and showed up to the event with the intention to disrupt it. In a show of solidarity, sound engineers Kiryl Halanau and Uladzislau Sakalouski played the song "Changes!" by the Soviet rock band Kino, one of the anthems of the final years of the USSR, followed by chants of "Long live Belarus!" from the crowd. Halanau and Sakalouski were consequently arrested and convicted to 10 days in jail, but the incident showed that the police struggled to cover all protest locations at all times.

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## No Peaceful Exit

Once the electoral commission announced that Lukashenko had been reelected with 80.23% of the vote compared to 9.9% accrued by Tikhanovskaya, the streets of Belarus filled with voices of discontent yet again. No one accepted these results as legitimate, and Tikhanovskaya even points out there were cases in which she led by 70%-90% at certain polling stations. In fact, Tikhanovskaya considers herself the winner, though she does not seek power. Rather, her ideal situation includes talks between a unified opposition and the government so that Lukashenko can have a peaceful exit from power.

Even before the polls closed, military and police vehicles were on display throughout Minsk, with law enforcement and security services cracking down as protests began to spark across the capital and beyond. While the use of rubber bullets and flash grenades is in line with Western policing measures, as seen in the protests that have rocked the United States recently, but the limits of acceptability in one jurisdiction do not necessarily apply in another.

Over 3,000 protesters were arrested, with the Belarusian authorities reporting 39 police and over 50 civilian casualties, including one death, which the Belarusian Ministry of Health slammed as “fake news.” The Belarusian Association of Journalists reports over 50 instances of detention and beating of journalists since August 4, and an internet blackout has been imposed as the clashes began on Sunday night. In the meantime, Belarusian state TV streams footage of badgers and other forest-related activities.

So, where does the Belarusian protest movement go from here? The organizers have stated that they are committed to long-term protests. It will be interesting to see how all these plans unfold, given the severity of the government response. Tikhanovskaya has already fled to Lithuania, issuing what appears to be a forced statement calling for an end to violence, following her detention at the central electoral commission office on Sunday. Lukashenko has vowed to quash any and all opposition protesters.

As usual, the president claimed the protesters were “sheep” manipulated by foreign powers and entities who did not know what they are doing, claiming many of them were high on drugs and drunk. The 65-year-old authoritarian went on to assert that “We will not allow them to tear the country apart.” This sentiment should be juxtaposed with a protester who told a member of law enforcement in the midst of protest: “You are humans! You are also Belarusian!”

It is difficult to determine exactly who wants to tear the country apart when the opposition movement states its intended purpose is to produce a viable future for Belarus. Lukashenko shows no intention of resigning or even lending an ear to complaints espoused by the people. If the protest movement is to continue, one should expect more arrests and detentions.

Belarus finds itself in a political crisis that must be managed with the utmost care. Neither side seems willing to budge on its demands, and so it comes down to who has the most endurance in terms of power and energy. Lukashenko has the power of government and its vast repressive apparatus at his disposal. The protest movement is energized and full of voices that have united in the sole goal of a change of leadership. Alexander Lukashenko cannot afford to make concessions as it would mean his hold on the presidential office is shaky.

As it currently stands, even if this round of opposition is quashed, it will undoubtedly emerge again, perhaps at a time when the authorities may be ill-prepared.

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## Should Schools Rely on Ed Tech?

Criscillia Benford

August 12, 2020

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**The pandemic upended education as we know it. The ed-tech industry says its “innovative” products can ease our pain. Research says otherwise.**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed their doors this spring, impacting the lives of 1.5 billion students around the world and sending teachers and school administrators scrambling to keep students connected to learning opportunities. To do this they deployed a range of old and new technologies, including radio, television, USB drives, CDs, cellphones, tablets, laptops and even paper packets. Some called it “crisis schooling,” and rightly so.

Crisis schooling surfaced an always-important yet little-discussed fact about so-called brick-and-mortar schools: As physical spaces, schools provide far more than academic instruction. When children attend school, teachers and other support staff have an easier time identifying abuse, neglect, psychosocial distress and suicidal ideation. Children interacting with peers and teachers in school have an easier time developing social and emotional skills. Schools also provide stability, reliable nutrition, opportunities for physical activity, special education services, and mental health and physical/speech therapy. And, of course, public schools are safe, free settings for child care.

As I write, schools worldwide are developing their learning plans for the fall, and they are facing immense pressure to resume in-person instruction. The United Kingdom’s Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health has warned that keeping schools closed “risks scarring the life chances of a generation of young people.” A statement by the American Academy

of Pediatrics reminds decision-makers that the “importance of in-person learning is well documented, and there is already evidence of the negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020.”

School closures pose particularly fierce challenges for families with primary care-givers who must work away from home, as well as families without homes. UNESCO affirms that disruptions caused by school closures “exacerbate already existing disparities within the education system” and are “particularly severe for the most vulnerable and marginalized” children and their families.

In some countries, schools remained open despite the COVID-19 outbreak, and more than 20 countries reopened schools just months after closing them. Researchers at Science magazine looked to schools in these countries for patterns that could indicate likely best practices for keeping students and school staff safe. What they found is not surprising: masks, smaller class sizes, hand washing, adequate ventilation, testing and physical distancing help reduce the spread of the COVID-19 disease in learning environments. And it appears that younger children are less likely to transmit the disease or become infected.

Yet despite this promising news, it is likely that many schools will remain closed or deploy a mix of in-person and remote instruction for the foreseeable future. There are many reasons for this, mostly having to do with space, planning, time, money and uncertainty. To follow physical distancing guidelines, a school would need access to more physical space, or mandate that students attend physical school in shifts. In many jurisdictions, schools still lack comprehensive plans for safely opening buildings, as well as the time and financial resources needed to implement such plans. And because there remains so much uncertainty regarding COVID-19, many parents, teachers and staff believe that returning to school buildings is too risky to tolerate.

In the midst of our collective anxiety and grief, pixelated “vampires” have appeared. These dangerously virtual substitutes for physical

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schools, made glamorous by the ed-tech industry's rhetoric of innovation, efficiency and cost-savings, promise to save us from the disruption caused by the pandemic. All we need to do is invite them in. But please don't. I wrote this article to explain why.

### **What Is Ed Tech?**

Education technology — known as ed tech — is a global industry serving the full spectrum of the education market. This includes pre-school; K-12; higher education; corporate, enterprise, continuing education; assessment and verification; and informal learning. Venture-backed ed-tech companies worth hundreds of millions of dollars are based in the United States, China, India, Indonesia and the European Union.

These firms sell content and hardware such as interactive whiteboards, laptops and tablets. They also provide software designed to mediate communication between stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, parents, administrators), and they extract or accept hand-entered data in order to algorithmically manage student behavior and/or deliver algorithmically-generated reports, instruction and guidance. The poster vampire (ahem, poster child) of the industry is a software-enabled, data-driven (and sometimes gamified) instructional approach called “personalized learning.”

What does gamified personalized learning look like in action? Personalized learning transforms teachers into guides on the side who assist students as they interact with YouTube-style recommendation algorithms that select assignments and determine when a student moves on to the next level of the curriculum. Gamified personalized learning seeks to increase student engagement through the incorporation of game-like elements, such as badges, avatars, storylines, competitions, progression bars, “power-ups” and even the ability to earn in-game cash.

Products like these are being touted by advocates for the ed-tech industry as one-stop solutions to all COVID-related educational challenges. Dissatisfied with your school's

reopening plan or worried that physical schools are unsafe? Try virtual schools! Lack space for physical distancing? Try blended learning! Baffled by disengaged students with varying preparedness levels? Data-driven personalized learning to the rescue! Worried about your students' psychosocial distress? Let tech-enabled emotional surveillance help with that! Facing budget cuts or teacher shortages? Let artificial intelligence (AI) teach the kids! Crazy by platform overload? Come buy! Come buy! Sounds great, right? Not so fast. While ed tech's marketing rhetoric is appealing, its track record is dismal.

More often than not, ed tech fails to deliver on its promises to improve equity and learning outcomes. Many platforms ignore children's real needs, and some may even violate children's rights. Others simply waste (or even steal) funding that could have been used for more impactful initiatives. While anecdotes describing ed tech's shortcomings abound, research seeking to understand the industry's impact supports unfavorable individual verdicts: ed tech disappoints.

Since 2013, the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) has published an annual report documenting the growth of the ed-tech sector in the United States and examining the year's research on virtual education. Each year, researchers find that full-time virtual schools and blended schools produce worse outcomes than brick-and-mortar public schools, and that industry claims regarding cost savings are not supported by available research. Research evaluating instructional models used by virtual schools and describing student experiences is sparse, and what is available is methodologically questionable and, in other ways, subpar. Accordingly, the NEPC recommends that policymakers “slow or stop the growth in the number of virtual and blended schools and the size of their enrollments until the reasons for their relatively poor performance have been identified and addressed.”

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NEPC researchers aren't alone in their skepticism. A June 2020 report by McKinsey warns against "uncritically" accepting ed tech as a solution to COVID-related educational challenges, and it urges careful planning and preparation to increase the probability that an initiative will be successful. "These lessons hold true regardless of geography," the report states.

The World Bank makes a similar claim in its "knowledge map" of the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on learning and achievement. "In general, despite thousands of impact studies, the impact of ICT use on student achievement remains difficult to measure and open to much reasonable debate," the bank states. Writing for the fifth volume of the "Handbook of the Economics of Education," George Bulman and Robert Fairlie, who are researchers based at the University of California, Santa Cruz, state that evidence of ed tech's effectiveness "appears to be strongest in developing countries" and the outcome depends upon the "characteristics of the intervention."

So, what does a successful ed-tech intervention look like? Tusome, a USAID-funded program adopted by the Kenyan government and described in a 2018 article for *The Economist*, offers clues. Tusome means "let's read" in Kiswahili, a Bantu language spoken in East and Central Africa and the official language of Kenya.

As an ed-tech intervention, Tusome consists of more than hardware and software. Tusome includes a custom-reading curriculum, custom books and detailed lesson plans. Human teachers deliver the lessons in physical classrooms, while coaches log information about the teachers' and their students' performances into the Tusome platform using a tablet. Coaching advice based on data entered by the coach is dispensed through the tablet. All entered and processed information can be reviewed by the county offices that run the local schools. The program costs about \$4 per child a year, and research shows that thanks to Tusome, the portion of Kenyan grade 2 students

who could read 30 words-per-minute doubled, rising from one-third to two-thirds.

Programs like Tusome succeed because they are designed to specifically address local educational challenges — in this case, insufficient teacher training, lack of teacher oversight and teacher absenteeism.

Ed-tech initiatives usually fail to live up to their hype. This is in large part because the characteristics of such initiatives are neither aligned with established research explaining how children learn, nor with local reality. Unsuccessful initiatives are hobbled by core design assumptions that are simply wrong for usage contexts, assumptions regarding things like cultural norms, relevance to existing curriculum, relevance to student experience, connectivity availability, available time on tasks, prior student knowledge and available teacher-training resources.

Consider, for example, the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) initiative. Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the MIT Media Lab, launched the program in 2006 with the intention of putting inexpensive but durable laptops in the hands of poor children around the world. "We will literally take tablets and drop them out of helicopters," *The Economist* quoted him as saying.

The program got a lot of people excited. However, it was ultimately a failure in more ways than one. The laptops were more expensive and less durable than Negroponte had predicted, and his plan for selling them was blinkered by Western hubris and lack of global perspective. Most importantly, however, the OLPC laptops did not lead to improved learning outcomes in math and language, though such improvements were the declared objective of the program.

Negroponte's initiative is a classic example of hardware dumping, a presumptuous and ultimately wasteful way of "improving" education through the introduction of technology. Hardware dumping assumes that hardware and connectivity access alone will improve learning outcomes. Research and experience show that this is simply untrue.

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Tech for tech's sake in educational settings diverts money, time and attention from meeting the learning needs of students. Arguments supporting this approach wrongly imply that mere exposure to today's technology will translate into tomorrow's upward mobility.

The Los Angeles Unified School District learned the hardware dumping lesson the expensive way in 2013. The district introduced a \$1-billion initiative to give every student an iPad loaded with a curriculum developed by Pearson, a textbook and standardized test publisher. Before the roll-out period was over, students had figured out how to circumvent security locks, allowing them to exit Pearson's walled garden and visit non-educational sites. The district eventually demanded a refund from Apple, citing what WIRED described as "crippling technical issues with the Pearson platform and incomplete curriculum that made it nearly impossible for teachers to teach."

Michael Trucano, the global lead for innovation in education at the World Bank, decries hardware dumping in a 2010 article entitled "Worst Practice in ICT Use in Education." Though the article is a decade old (ancient in internet years), it remains relevant. In addition to hardware dumping, three additional worst practices are particularly relevant to the COVID era. First, it is common to assume technology alone can make equity issues disappear. Second, we are failing to estimate the total cost of operation of an educational technology initiative. This estimation ought to include not just the purchase price of hardware and software, but also maintenance costs, training costs and more, including a calculation of the difference between the cost per participant and cost per graduate. Finally, we are failing to ask what else could be done with the financial and other resources potentially allocated that would have a greater impact on educational goals.

### **Let Them Eat Tablets**

These are the kinds of questions that ed-tech advocates sidestep with rhetoric. Such rhetoric

appeals to our collective desire to remain relevant in the future, our intuitive sense that something is deeply wrong with education in its current form, and our moral sense that all children have the right to a good education.

Consider, for example, how the following rhetorical pyrotechnics front-load the old saw that education today is outmoded while obscuring ed tech's other agenda items. First up, a few lines from a statement called "The Future of School" by the Center for Education Reform (CER), an ed-tech advocacy group based in the United States: "We must change the way we educate and in myriad ways strive to deliver education using the very technologies that are tracking and delivering our food, our supplies, and so many other necessities of life." (Translation: Education today is old fashioned. Let's update it by treating students like Amazon packages.)

A sponsored article in Forbes more directly connects the case for ed tech to the case for closing the digital divide, describing the internet as the portal to "new tools" for interacting with students in "new ways that both enhance the teacher's ability to teach and gives students the flexibility to learn in ways more suitable to the 24/7, always-on society we live in today." (Translation: Education today is old-fashioned. Let's update it so that even children regard the boundaries between online/offline life as blurred.)

Writing for The Washington Post, Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, suggests that if public funds intended to help schools become COVID-ready were instead used to pay for laptops and connectivity, "students would be better prepared for the learning platforms of college and the workforce. Teachers would be able to deploy more innovative and personalized instructional strategies." (Translation: Education today is old-fashioned. Let's update it so that teachers can help children, no matter their income, become accustomed to taking orders from the kinds of machines that will sculpt their lives as adults.)

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Such visions of the future give me goosebumps, and not in a good way.

Ed tech has long used rhetoric laced with technophilia and future-proofing to lay the groundwork for increasing its share of the education market. This rhetoric casts ed tech's products in a rosy light while simultaneously disparaging teachers, their unions and brick-and-mortar schools. Deploying such anti-teacher/anti-school rhetoric while the world still reels from COVID-19 to lobby for the use of public funds to further the industry's growth agenda — funds that could go to purchasing personal protective equipment (PPE), hiring additional staff to support physical distancing, and adopting other measures that would improve the safety of physical schools — reeks of disaster capitalism. As defined by activist and author Naomi Klein, disaster capitalism involves the use of “large-scale crises to push through policies that systematically deepen inequality, enrich elites, and undercut everyone else.”

To be clear: I am not against closing the digital divide. What I am against is reckless profiteering, especially in the form of hardware dumping and a privatized version of public education that pretends to serve the needs of children while, in fact, invading their privacy, treating them like lab rats, impairing their academic achievement and undermining their development as humans.

Temptations to recklessness are great. The ed-tech industry receives little oversight and continues to grow, despite a history marked by startling amounts of waste. Moreover, as the 2019 NEPC report makes it clear, lack of regulation isn't the worst problem. To date, nobody has even imagined how to regulate the industry in ways that “will increase accountability, identify efficient and cost-effective best practices, and eliminate profiteering.” Policies at the state, local and federal levels regulating the collection, use and storage of student data do not always align. Moreover, ed-tech companies know that schools do not always read terms-of-use statements

closely, introducing yet another moral hazard. Effectively, the ed-tech industry operates in a 21st-century Wild West.

When people think about education, they see children and perhaps even themselves preparing for the future. When investors in the ed-tech industry think about education, they see “a critical source of human capital for global growth” and a large market ripe for digital disruption. Publicly-available estimations of the size of this market vary, from HolonIQ's 2018 figure of \$5.9 trillion to TechCrunch's 2019 projection of \$10 trillion. According to GSV Ventures, the ed-tech industry currently represents 2.3% of the global education market. Due to COVID-driven changes in market conditions, the ed-tech industry is now projected to capture 11% of the market by 2026 — up from a pre-COVID 4.5%. The pandemic is boosting the sector's growth from 100% to 400%.

Why are venture capitalists so excited about the education market? In addition to the size of the market, there are several reasons, including scalability opportunities, a relative lack of competition (especially in mobile-first) and relative ease of identifying “pain points.” Business models vary. Most of us are familiar with freemium platforms that ask users of a free product to upgrade to a paid version. These platforms are used in a bottom-up strategy whereby the company pursues early adopters who then help market the platform by word of mouth. Expensive ed tech is usually part of a top-down business model, whereby a company's products are marketed directly to the administration.

But when it comes to profit sources for tech companies — even ed tech companies — the elephant in the room is big data. Ed tech is an exciting sector because machine-mediated student/teacher relationships and student/curriculum relationships produce new and valuable data resources. Of course, personalized learning relies on data extraction and analysis. However, educating children is only part of the picture when it comes to ed tech as a for-profit industry.



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As students use ed tech platforms to learn, those platforms collect what author Shoshana Zuboff calls “collateral data.” Such data points might include (depending on the product) a student’s location, click patterns, dwell times, time to complete a task, browsing and search history, biometric data, photos, textual, and voice communication content and history — the list goes on. A given platform may collect 50,000 data points or more per student per hour.

In addition to feeding the platform’s recommendation algorithms, this data can be used to make informed budget decisions and “optimize” the platform. Most importantly, it can be used to inspire and guide the development of new, more futuristic platforms. That’s why, along with the new opportunities for data collection portended by future school closures, ed-tech investors anticipate the advent of highly-adaptive ed tech in the form of AI tutors, immersive games that teach subliminally, Hollywood-style educational videos, and even à la carte university degrees whereby students purchase individual courses from a pre-determined group of separate online institutions.

What is unlikely to motivate investors is the selling of personally identifiable data for marketing purposes. Ed-tech companies don’t need to. (Although, Google used to mine student emails to sell targeted advertising, and other ed-tech companies have been caught abusing student data.) These days, there are more sophisticated ways to use big data.

Ed-tech companies don’t need to sell personally identifiable data to make big money because they can use the troves of aggregate data they collect to create and sell “prediction products” designed to forecast how children in a given demographic will think, feel and behave. Such forecasting products are useful to any industry seeking to maximize profit and minimize risk — e.g., advertising, insurance, health care, entertainment, finance, retail, transportation. Hello, disaster capitalism! Meet surveillance capitalism.

## **When Children Become Users**

I say surveillance capitalism. Ed tech says personalized learning. Rhetorically, the term personalized learning is meant to position recommendation algorithms that match students to learning material as an “innovative” solution to old-fashioned, clueless teachers who are unwilling or unable to connect with students as individuals with individual needs.

In addition to what it calls personalized learning, ed tech also uses gamification to solve what it imagines as problems caused by bad/overwhelmed teachers. Gamification is a type of persuasive technology that is player-centered, rather than user-centered. The term refers to the application of game elements and design principles to non-game contexts.

Together, the terms personalized learning and gamification allow ed tech to conjure visions of delighted, motivated students interacting with data-driven technology that knows what they need to learn and meets those needs in a timely fashion.

But here’s what’s really happening: Under the banner of “innovation,” gamified and data-driven personalized learning platforms are engineering the behavior of children. Gamified platforms are everywhere, not just in ed tech. They work similarly. Like any behavior-change app — from diet apps to social media platforms like Facebook — gamified ed-tech platforms create an absorbing human/computer interaction made all the more attractive by the dispensing of “rewards” on a variable schedule.

Variable reward schedules are a proven way to orchestrate the release of dopamine in humans and animals. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter that makes learning possible. It is key to goal-directed behavior, motivating us to act by helping us make associations between actions and outcomes. It is triggered even when we simply anticipate a “reward” that we never receive, or when a reward is not as satisfying as we anticipated.

The behavioral psychologists and user-experience (UX) designers who work together to

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create gamified ed tech understand all of this quite well. They also know that human brains are wired to crave the instant feedback that gamified platforms provide. And they know that we humans — especially when we’re feeling uncertain or overwhelmed — are attracted to the explicit goals, objectives, and paths to mastery (e.g., “skill trees”) that characterize game-like learning environments.

Advocates for gamified ed tech like to imply that such platforms can help a student build self-esteem because they minimize the impact of “failure” while “rewarding” the completion of target behaviors and the adoption of target attitudes.

Researchers at Ohio State University found otherwise. Over time, students receiving a gamified curriculum felt less motivated, less satisfied and less empowered. No wonder. Engineering engagement through automated, instant feedback risks reducing intrinsic motivation by triggering what psychologists call the “overjustification effect.”

Enterprise/corporate ed-tech companies already incorporate into their pitches this understanding of the negative impacts of gamified platforms. They tell potential corporate clients that they need them, because younger workers have spent so much time on games and gamified platforms that traditional motivators don’t work on them.

Here’s an example of this kind of logic at work in a pitch that proposes gamification as a solution to (as well as a cause of) millennial demands for constant feedback. Here’s an example of that kind of logic at work in a pitch that proposes gamification as a solution to “bad parenting” as well as the millennial “need for engagement” and demand for constant feedback and fun in the workplace.

We can do better than rely upon gamified platforms to “engage” our children in school.

It’s one thing to play a game for fun, or use a gamified informal learning app now and again. It’s quite another (and frankly a quite terrible thing) for schools receiving public funds to

participate in engineering into students an intolerance of complexity, an inability to set their own goals and a profound need for external motivators. All students deserve an education that supports, rather than stunts, their intellectual and personal development.

Students understand this kind of critique. In New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut and Kansas, students have organized to protest against the Summit Learning Program, an ed-tech platform developed by Facebook engineers and backed by the for-profit Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. In a letter to Mark Zuckerberg published by The Washington Post, students attending Brooklyn’s Secondary School for Journalism wrote: “Unlike the claims made in your promotional materials, we students find that we are learning very little to nothing. It’s severely damaged our education, and that’s why we walked out in protest.”

In her award-winning book, “Race After Technology,” Ruha Benjamin wrote: “[T]hese students have a lot to teach us about refusing tech fixes for complex social problems that come packaged in catchphrases like ‘personalized learning. They are sick and tired of being atomized and quantified, of having their personal uniqueness sold to them, one ‘tailored’ experience after another. They’re not buying it.” And neither should we.

### **Let’s Go Outside**

Today’s ed-tech marketing taps into collective fears about sharing space with humans, as well as the frustration with the hodge-podgy usage of technology that characterized many crisis schooling efforts. Yet there is a better path: Making use of outdoor space on school grounds, nearby land, public spaces (like football stadiums) or at home with guidance from schools. Schools with plans to open full-time and those with plans for a mixture of in-person and remote instruction could walk this path.

Outdoor learning environments offer solutions to many COVID-related educational problems. Research suggests that COVID-19 is less likely

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to be transmitted outdoors. Other studies indicate that being outdoors reduces children's stress levels and improves their motivation and wellbeing. Outdoor learning environments also provide children with much-needed opportunities for movement and play as well as a chance for place-based learning activities. Moreover, exposure to outdoor environments helps human brains stay in calibration because brains are optimized for high-bandwidth, three-dimensional, continuous-time processing of sensorimotor inputs. Outdoor schools can provide everything that brick-and-mortar schools can and much more.

Outdoor education is an old idea, traditionally practiced across Asia and Africa. It gained popularity in Europe and North America during the tuberculosis epidemic of the early 20th century, spawning the Open Air School Movement. Schools were set up in repurposed structures, tents, prefabricated barracks and purpose-build pavilions. Some schools consisted simply of rows of desks outside.

Today, schools in Denmark, Finland, Singapore, New Zealand, Scotland, and Bangladesh have turned to outdoor learning environments as a way to meet COVID-related educational challenges. In Bangladesh, children have been involved in the redesign of their school courtyard for outdoor learning. That intervention was a success, improving not just the children's engagement with the curriculum, but also their attainments in math and science.

In the US, outdoor learning tied to public schools could make up for the pandemic-driven loss of outdoor programs conducted by nature centers, parks and outdoor science schools. Facing budget shortfalls, many of these programs are in danger of closing. Those that remain open have plans to freeze subsidized programming, scholarships, grants and fee waivers. It is estimated that by the end of the year, 11 million children in the US will have missed out on outdoor learning opportunities, about 60% of them from communities of color or low-income communities. Around 30,000 outdoor educators

across the country have already lost their jobs. Advocates recommend that using public funds to redeploy these educators to K-12 public schools would be a boon to children and their families.

### **Say No to Vampires**

Traditionally, schools have been oriented toward extrinsic motivators: grades, test scores, teacher approval, status, little prizes and rewards. When I was an elementary student, one of my teachers gave the student with the highest spelling score that week a tiny ceramic animal that my teacher had made herself.

Ed tech's gamified personalized learning platforms turbo-charge this strategy. In this sense, such platforms are not innovative at all. Rather, they are simply new ways to do old things — old things that don't work very well.

Pairing data-driven "personalization" with gamification is a quick fix solution to a problem that sits at the core of public education today. Groaning under the weight of high-stakes testing, today's public schools crush student excitement in learning for its own sake.

What if we did away with high-stakes testing? These tests have many problems, from baked-in cultural bias to an over-emphasis on those curricular standards that are easy to test at the expense of less-quantifiable ones. What if we just got rid of them? Surely there are other ways to assess performance. High-stakes tests have already been canceled all over the world this year.

And while I am sharing my dream of public education truly reimaged, I would like to also pose this question: What if during this time of uncertainty and fast change, we, in our various localities, determined from the ground up the role that technology ought to play in our public school systems? By "from the ground up," I mean asking students and teachers about their own technology use. How has tech helped them? How has it gotten in the way? I suspect the answers will surprise many.

It's time to shift the focus of education away from the needs of corporations (workforce needs

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and others) to the needs of children. What do children need to thrive? We know the answer. Children thrive when they experience shared attention, build life skills through developmentally-appropriate challenges, experience a sense of belonging, and are allowed to personally contribute to learning activities.

Let's help children thrive by making outdoor learning available in public schools. And let's not stop there. Let's help children thrive by hiring more teachers and support staff for our public schools. Let's help children thrive by giving teachers the support they have asked for to translate live, onsite instruction to remote instruction. That support need not take the form of an ed-tech initiative. It can take the form of training, increased time for planning and uniform policies regarding what remote instruction should look like.

I realize all of this will cost money. But then again, so does ed tech. Let the vampires go to the workplace. Don't invite them into our schools.

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\***Crisillia Benford** is an educator, media theorist and evangelist for offline experiences.

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## **Israel-UAE Deal: Arab States Are Tired of Waiting on Palestine**

Gary Grappo  
August 14, 2020

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**The announcement's unspoken message to Ramallah is to get on with it — to negotiate and settle with Israel while there's still some chance for an independent Palestinian state.**

**T**he August 13 announcement of normalized relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates breaks the quarter-century standstill in Arab-Israeli relations and shows that Arab states will no longer hold

their interests hostage to the long-dormant Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. President Donald Trump made the announcement of the establishment of relations between the two countries from the White House, suggesting that his administration played an instrumental role in the action. He referred to a call the same day with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates.

The exact American role in the deal — other than giving the agreement a name, the Abraham Accord, in honor of the prophet important to both Judaism and Islam as well as Christianity — is unclear.

What is most apparent is that the two countries, which have had substantial informal interactions in fields like trade, technology, health and security for years, have finally moved to normalize those ties. The immediate upshot is that for the first time in nearly 26 years, an Arab state has formally recognized the Jewish state. Moreover, the UAE becomes the first Arab nation that has relations with Israel but no shared border. Egypt and Jordan, which each share borders with Israel, established ties in 1980 and 1994, respectively.

### **Why Wait?**

Previously, Arab states, including the UAE, held out the prospect of normalized relations on condition of the establishment of two states, Israel and Palestine, along the borders that existed prior to the 1967 War. With its decision today, the UAE is saying it is no longer willing to wait for such an outcome, especially when its own interests are advanced by opening formal ties with Israel. Despite the Trump administration's announced "deal of the century" — officially Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People — to much fanfare in June of last year, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations have made no headway since Secretary of State John Kerry's failed year-long effort six years ago.

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The UAE extracted one apparent concession from Jerusalem: Netanyahu will suspend annexation plans for the West Bank. That gives the Emirates the political cover it needs not only for its own population — by now probably agnostic on the whole Israel-Palestine dispute — but also for other Arab states, especially those more likely to criticize Abu Dhabi's decision (likely few outside the usual pariahs). In fact, aware of the benefits that accrue to normalizing ties with the nation now considered the most powerful and technologically advanced in the Middle East, other Arab nations are now more likely to follow the UAE's lead.

Moreover, nations recognizing Israel are also more likely to earn Washington's — and especially this administration's — favor. In the case of the UAE, which already enjoys close ties with the US, that won't mean a great deal immediately. Down the road, however — that is after the November election — it could mean attractive baubles like a free trade agreement or expanded security ties, regardless of who comes out on top in the American election.

### **A Boon to Bibi in Troubled Times**

Traditionally, when nations establish diplomatic relations, they open embassies in respective capitals. For Israel, that will mean a new embassy in Abu Dhabi, and probably a consulate in Dubai as well, given its economic prominence in the country. But the UAE must decide where to locate its embassy. Will it be in Tel Aviv, where most nations of the world have had their embassies after Israeli independence in 1948, or in Jerusalem, Israel's official capital and where the US relocated its embassy in February of 2018? Other nations also have opened embassies in Jerusalem, but no other major country. By setting up an embassy in Jerusalem, Abu Dhabi would implicitly recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, effectively a double win for Israel. That decision will be a thorny one for the wealthy Gulf state. It may wish to hold out for further concessions than just the annexation postponement.

Annexation has been on indefinite hold since early last month when Netanyahu failed to act on previous pledges, reportedly because of Washington's cold feet. Taking it off the table now is, therefore, hardly a sacrifice for Netanyahu. Even in Israel itself, it was viewed with mixed emotions.

The ever-wily Bibi turned what had looked to be a political loss into a fairly significant foreign policy win for the Jewish state. And he needed it. Since early summer, thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets, mostly in Jerusalem, to protest against Netanyahu and call for his departure. Most of those critics are on the political left, which poses little threat to his continued rule. But he is also facing heat from his right, which presents far more of a threat. The conservative prime minister has historically drawn his support from the powerful right of Israel's political spectrum, which dominates Israel's electorate. So, getting this victory today — recognition by a major Arab state — allows him to again show his remarkable ability to advance Israel's interests.

That's doubly important in view of the declining state of affairs between him and his erstwhile partner in government, Benny Gantz. Netanyahu's ongoing corruption trial, a budget dispute between him and Gantz, and the recent surge in COVID-19 infections in Israel have cast a shadow over the unity government. Were it not for today's announcement and Gantz's declining political support within Israel, a new election, which now seems likely, Netanyahu's 11-year reign might have been facing its denouement.

### **Nothing for the Palestinians**

Pointedly, in the entire announcement event at the White House, Palestine was not mentioned. Trump was accompanied by a parade of other administration officials, whose involvement in the accord was never made clear. None of them referred to either Israel-Palestine relations or to the annexation postponement. This is bad news for President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinians. The annexation postponement is a

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mere short-term sop, and they know it. Given the ambitions of those on Israel's political right, annexation will be a fact of life. A Joe Biden win in November might stall it, but only for a while. A Trump victory will make it inevitable and likely soon.

The real message to Abbas is that Arab governments are tired of waiting. The UAE has made the first move. Other Arab states are likely to follow suit in the near future. Two in particular, Qatar and Oman, have already shown interest in expanded ties with Jerusalem for the very same reasons as the UAE.

The announcement's unspoken message to Ramallah is to get on with it — to negotiate and settle with Israel while there's still some chance for an independent Palestinian state. The previous Arab conditions to the normalization of ties with Israel have exceeded their shelf life. Arab states are moving on. Abbas and the Palestinians need to do the same. Even a Biden victory won't change this.

Iran was briefly mentioned in the proceedings, by former administration Iran point man, Brian Hook, who resigned earlier this month. He needn't have done so. Tehran can't be pleased with the decision of the Emirates, which are located barely 25 miles across the Strait of Hormuz from Iran. Israel is likely to gain greater cooperation and coordination with the UAE armed forces, which already maintain very strong ties with the US. In addition, Israel will likely gain a prime observation perch for intelligence gathering on the Islamic Republic.

Today's announcement amounts to a significant setback for Iran. It may go too far to say that Washington's dream of an Arab-Israeli anti-Iran alliance is in the works. But if one other Gulf state acts similarly, that's exactly how the Trump administration will portray it — and how Iran may come to view it. That may be a good thing for the US, Arab nations and Israel, even if the likelihood of such an actual alliance is remote.

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\***Gary Grappo** is a former US ambassador.

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## **Why Kuwait Rejects Normalization With Israel**

Tyler B. Parker  
August 18, 2020

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### **Three factors lead Kuwait to stand out as the only Gulf state to reject normalization with Israel.**

**O**n August 13, the United Arab Emirates agreed in principle to normalize relations with Israel in exchange for suspending the annexation of portions of the West Bank. This US-brokered deal reflects years of growing ties between Israel and Gulf states that have long rested just below the surface of official relations. Saudi Arabia has shared intelligence, Bahrain has called for peace and the UAE has penned deals with Israeli defense companies. For their part, Qatar previously maintained commercial ties with Israel and Oman has hosted Israeli leaders over the years. Although their means and motivations differ, it is clear that Gulf-Israeli relations are rising.

Yet one Gulf state rejects this trend: Kuwait. According to Al-Qabas, a Kuwaiti newspaper, government sources affirm that "Kuwait maintains its position and will be the last country to normalize with Israel." Beyond Kuwaiti officials, analysts and academics, few have addressed Kuwait's position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Adam Hoffman and Moran Zaga acknowledged in February that Kuwait is "the only Gulf state that opposes even discrete normalisation with Israel." In January 2019, Giorgio Cafiero wrote that "Kuwait has become the one GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] state that refuses to see warmer ties with Israel as prudent." Even White House senior adviser Jared

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Kushner said to Reuters that Kuwait is “out there taking a very radical view on the conflict to date in favour of the Palestinians.”

Why does Kuwait take a different approach to Israel compared to its Gulf neighbors? Kuwait’s democratic institutions, historical ties to Palestine and pan-Arab ideals are three factors that lead both its government and society to reject normalization.

### **Parliament and Parlors**

Kuwait’s most unique aspect is its semi-democratic institutions. The national assembly wields significant power and channels public sentiment against normalization. Notably, Speaker Marzouq al-Ghanim chastised Israeli Knesset members in 2017 as “occupiers and murderers of children.” Parliamentarian Osama al-Shaheen declared in late April 2020 that “Kuwait is against any cultural, political, or social normalization with the ‘Zionist entity.’” This statement is emblematic of the relative autonomy of Kuwait’s Islamist political opposition and their position in parliament. As of August 18, 39 of Kuwait’s 50 parliamentarians signed a statement stressing their view against normalization with Israel.

In addition to the formal institution of parliament, Kuwait’s distinct political culture is also reflected in diwaniyya. These gatherings in parlors attached to homes represent the intersection of political campaigning and social commentary in Kuwait. Diwaniyya are more autonomous from government oversight than other Gulf majlis gatherings, resulting in a more free exchange of ideas. Among the Gulf publics, Kuwaiti civil society has been most able to pressure the government against normalization.

### **Palestinian Community**

Another factor that distinguishes Kuwait is its link to one of the Gulf’s largest Palestinian communities. Beginning with immigration in the 1940s, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians settled in Kuwait and ties improved after Yasser Arafat founded Fatah while living in the country

from 1959. However, Arafat’s support of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 degraded relations severely, resulting in the expulsion and exodus of most of Kuwait’s 400,000 Palestinian residents.

Ultimately, relations improved in 2013 when the Palestinian Authority opened an embassy in Kuwait City. During a recent international conference, Palestinian Ambassador Rami Tahboub praised Kuwait as “proactive in supporting the Palestinian cause.” Today, around 80,000 Palestinian residents remain as an integral aspect of Kuwait’s normative commitment to Palestine.

### **Pan-Arab Solidarity**

Perhaps the strongest aspect of Kuwait’s position is that its leaders, especially Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, remain dedicated to Arab nationalism and Muslim solidarity. Kuwaiti officials have been more forceful in their condemnation of Israel than their Gulf peers. In July 2018, Mansour al-Otaibi, Kuwait’s ambassador to the United Nations, condemned Israeli use of force “against unarmed Palestinian people” as “war crimes and crimes against humanity.” In February 2019, Kuwait’s deputy foreign minister, Khaled al-Jarallah, was quick to affirm that a group picture taken during the Warsaw security conference, in which Kuwaiti and Israeli representatives were part of, was not indicative of normalization.

Kuwait has also broken from Gulf consensus toward American peace initiatives to end the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Kuwait boycotted the “Peace to Prosperity” workshop in Bahrain in June 2019. Members of its parliament criticized the gathering as “consecrating the occupation, imparting legitimacy onto it, and charging the Gulf and Arab states with the expenses and burdens of installing it.” Following US President Donald Trump’s unveiling of the so-called “deal of the century,” Ghanim criticized the plan and theatrically dropped it into a proverbial “dustbin of history.”

### **A Steady Stance**

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Kuwait completely rejects the expanding cultural, diplomatic, economic and security ties characterizing broader Gulf–Israeli relations. Arguments related to divergent threat perceptions are insufficient to explain Kuwait’s exception considering it has historically been just as, and perhaps even more, vulnerable to jihadi attacks and Iranian subversion as its southern neighbors. What makes Kuwait unique is its democratic tradition, historical links to Palestinian political movements and the commitment to pan-Islamic and Arab nationalist ideals.

The Kuwaiti exception holds two implications for the study of international politics in the Middle East. First, Kuwait reveals that small states can wield sizable ideational power in international institutions. Second, Kuwait challenges a recent claim that “Arab states have lost interest in the Israeli-Palestinian issue because there’s a whole host of other things going.” When analysts address Arab-Israeli relations, it is important to explore the causes and qualities of states’ distinct approaches. As its Gulf neighbors warm to Israel, Kuwait stands out.

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\*Tyler B. Parker is a PhD student in International Politics at Boston College.

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## Britain Fails Its Exams

Rupert Hodder  
August 27, 2020

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**The A-level fiasco exposes the humbug swirling around the UK education system and the cynicism with which the government treats the people it claims to represent.**

**T**he Advanced Level Certificate (A-level), together with the General Certificate of Education (GCSE), is one of two sets of

exams students across England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Scotland has its own system) sit in the summer. The GCSE is a ticket to spending two years studying for A-levels, itself a ticket to university, where 40% of England’s schoolchildren end up. The results are released in August by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual.)

This year, there were no exams because the United Kingdom locked itself down against COVID-19. Instead, teachers supplied predicted grades. Teachers make these predictions every year, and it is with these in mind that universities make the offer of a place. Offers are made either unconditionally or with the proviso that the predictions are realized or bettered. In recent years, more and more offers have been made unconditionally, and these now comprise around a third of the total.

Universities do this because they are dependent upon the fees each student pays: no students, no fees, no university. The pressure rises as universities expand, and each finds itself having to attract a greater share of a shrinking number of school leavers. Restrictions imposed by a hostile immigration service on international students’ movements, and now in response to COVID-19, have made matters worse.

### The Algorithm

This year was also different because, when the results were issued on August 13, it was obvious that Ofqual had intervened. The grades awarded to many students bore little resemblance to the schools’ predictions. Worried that teachers were being too generous and that this would undermine the credibility of the exams, Ofqual devised and applied a mathematical formula to moderate the results. The algorithm took account of the students’ mock results and the performance of each school in previous years, amongst other variables. The calculations determined that 40% of grades should be reduced. This threw offers and plans into doubt, causing umbrage among students, parents, teachers and universities.



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Gavin Williamson, the education secretary, stuck resolutely to his guns. By August 17, he had abandoned them, and the original predicted results were reinstated. Williamson had been blindsided by Ofqual, he claimed, and only became aware of the full implications of the recalculations over the weekend. Ofqual struck back, saying that Williamson had known difficulties were brewing ever since March, when he ordered the regulator to adjust grades if they appeared inflated.

It was then made known that the head of Ofqual, Roger Taylor, established and ran a firm implicated in the Mid Staffs Hospital scandal. His firm, Dr Foster, had come up with an algorithm enabling the hospital to present its mortality rates as low when, in fact, they were dangerously high and its patients were being dreadfully mistreated.

Just what had Williamson been levelling at? The entire mess was completely avoidable and unnecessary. No exams had been taken, so there were no exams to be brought into disrepute. And there had been no exams because of exceptional circumstances. So why treat the teacher's predictions as an assault on standards, especially when predictions are made every year and unconditional offers are issued to a fair proportion of students as a matter of course?

Whatever the answer, the response was immediate. Gasps of disbelief at the secretary's sheer incompetence ("He's fucking useless," declared one vice chancellor) were combined with emotional outbursts from students worried that their lives had been ruined, from parents trying to deal with the fallout at home, and from university staff whose summer breaks were interrupted.

All parties most likely suspected that things would eventually sort themselves out if only because chancellors are desperate to fill seats. Having said that, the government and Ofqual displayed a complete absence of trust in teachers and schools. Most disgraceful was the treatment of students with potential and drive who had worked hard against the odds in schools assessed as poor over the last few years. At a macro-level,

it meant that the proportion of the most deprived pupils (the bottom third) who achieved a Grade C or better fell by nearly 11%, while the independent schools saw their proportion of A and A\* grades increase by nearly 5%.

An education secretary, whose only claim to the job is that he was not educated at an independent school and did not go to Oxford or Cambridge, willfully took away the ladder from the very kids it is meant for. A more callous and spiteful decision in the name of equality is difficult to imagine. However, the farrago matters for another, even more important, reason. It illustrates just how superficial education has become.

### **Grades Are Everything**

The A-levels are not just a passport to university. A school whose students' average grades fall too far will come under greater scrutiny from the government, which can end in sanctions of one sort or another. These include changing staff pay and conditions; removing staff and governing bodies; turning the school's budget over to an interim board; closing the school; or handing it (minus its former staff) to an academy. Academies, though state-funded, have more control over management, curriculum, pay, the selection of students and staff, and the freedom to attract money from private sponsors.

Of the 3,400 or so state-funded secondary schools (3.25 million pupils), nearly three-quarters (about 2.3 million children) are now academies. If an academy fails, then it, too, is either absorbed by a more successful one or closed. Independent schools judged to be failing can also find themselves in trouble. For instance, they may be prohibited from taking on new pupils, fined or closed. Proprietors who do not respond adequately to enforcement notices can end up in prison.

Grades, then, have come to mean everything. And because they mean everything, what they are supposed to signify has come to mean very little at all. The education system — and "system" is a good description — barely manages to educate.

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Where a good education is found in English schools, it is provided by teachers and parents despite the vast amount of nonsensical instructions (misleadingly entitled “guidelines”) issued by the government. In these oases of levelheadedness, staff teach outside the system’s narrow confines, helping children to explore more rounded and deeper understandings of the world, introducing them to new ways of thinking.

The problem is not just that teachers are weighed down and worn out by red tape. To avoid falling foul of the government and its quality enforcers, teachers must consume millions of words of legislation, statutory instruments, notices and guidance that lay out in extraordinary detail everyday practice within the school. It is that education — or rather the fulfillment of standards dictated by the government — has become a bureaucratic procedure, a glorified exercise in form-filling, in which content, imagination, experimentation and sustained and unconventional thought no longer matter.

Children and teachers must do what they are told to do in the way they are told to do it. “Best practice” holds sway over fresh thought. The student must see the world as directed. Thus, for instance, a play is a composite of meaning shaped by literary and dramatic devices. History is an unstable melange of constructions arrived at by historians through their interpersonal relationships. The economy must be studied through the application of the correct economic models. Only by breaking the mind into a kaleidoscope of skills through which patchworks of information are collected and assembled, declare geography teachers, can social and natural worlds be understood. Facts, interpretations and evidence are set out in neat bullet points so they can be memorized and marshalled in the correct way and in the correct place.

All of this and more — such as precisely defined “command words” like “analyze” and “suggest,” and the marks to be awarded for each correctly placed fact or argument — is found in

thick, glossy volumes of “specifications,” “amendments,” “sample assessments,” published “resources,” “mark schemes,” “specimen papers,” “exemplar material,” “schemes of work,” “skills for learning and work” and “topic materials” produced by exam boards for each subject.

Officialism smothers all schools. But when parents are well educated and bring up their children to read, learn, write, talk and think coherently, teachers have an easier time of it. Children are confident, and this shows in class and in their work. Teachers know that as far as the exams are concerned, their students can, to all intents and purposes, teach themselves. A teacher’s immediate job is to make sure a child is practiced in the bureaucracy and is given the required information. This will deliver the grades.

The second, and more important job, is to lead their children out and well beyond those limitations. It is this — a passion for their subject and a willingness to go further — that really prepares the child for university and beyond. Most, though not all, of these schools are independent and selective.

State-funded schools are far more constrained by the system, and it is all they can do to meet its demands. The bureaucracy does not allow them the time, freedom, money or incentive to instill in children and parents the outlooks, values, beliefs, practices and confidence that will enable them to see beyond the government’s petty world view.

I should say that the distinction I make between independent and state is too stark. There are some excellent state schools, and there are some terrible independent schools — unhappy little communities tucked away in some old building in the countryside. My point is simply that education, rather than its bureaucratized version, is found unevenly and rarely, and is more likely where teachers and parents have the wherewithal and determination to play the system and so keep it from dragging them and their children down into a mire of niggling and pointless tasks, boredom and despondency.

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British universities have not been much help. Rather than find common cause with schools and encourage them in fostering a university-style education, universities have gone along with government reforms all too easily and are becoming more like brash, over-confident schools. The university has become a brand, an experience, a rite, designed to extract as much cash as possible from students. Walk away with a good degree, the student is told, and our brand will confer upon you a charisma, a light, a duende that will set you up for life or at least give you a foot in a door so that you show an employer what you can do. Meanwhile, behind all the pizzazz, the content of the degree is scratched away at and the process through which the certificate is awarded becomes more bureaucratic.

The trend is especially obvious in universities without a well-established pedigree. Why should a student pay tens of thousands of pounds for a certificate from a university no one has heard of? The answer is “relevance,” and relevance means “skills.” As the degree is hollowed out, the space is filled with an omnium-gatherum of skills: cognitive skills, intellectual skills, key skills, transferable skills, employment-related skills, practical skills, applied skills, inter-personal skills, writing skills, reading skills, thinking skills, networking skills, team-working skills, observational skills, speaking skills, speech-making skills, analytical skills, editing skills, note-taking skills, research skills, computing skills, entrepreneurial skills, lab skills, creative skills, leadership skills, work ethic skills and ethical skills.

Choose a verb or adjective, put the word “skill” after it, and it becomes teachable, assessable and marketable. To write an essay or a thesis or to take an exam is to engage in a piece of bureaucracy, an updated form of medieval scholasticism, in which all these skills are stitched together, tracked and traced.

By lifting a corner of the veil, the A-level fiasco exposes a little of the humbug swirling around the government’s education system and

something of the cynicism with which the government treats the people it claims to represent. Just how deep this cynicism goes, however, is revealed by a matter from which the farce distracted public attention over the last week — a week that I suspect will prove deadly. I say deadly because it will be difficult in the time left to deter the government from repeating the same mistakes it made at the start of the pandemic that cost over 40,000 lives.

At present, the UK government and its scientific advisers are busy saturating the press with its claim that the “life chances” of children will be damaged irreparably if schools stay closed. A generation of children will “fall behind,” many of those who rely on schools to feed them will go hungry, and many others, forced to stay at home, will be at greater risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse.

The government’s chutzpah is breathtaking. To indict the produce of its own policies and then use that indictment as cheap blackmail in support of those same policies is surely the height of contempt. A fifth of the population is poor because of government actions and inactions over many years. It is these “ordinary” people, as ministers like to call them, who are most under pressure to go work because of cuts to welfare, changes in benefit rules and threats from government.

It is also they who, last time around, suffered most from a virus allowed to run loose. And it is their children who are most likely to bring it back home after struggling on public transport and spending hours in crowded classrooms working on pointless and soul-destroying bureaucratic techniques. The only strand of reasoning that makes some kind of sense in this tangled web of lunacy is a ruthless one: the primary function of the education system is to keep Britain’s labor force — and especially its cheaper end — at work.

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