

# Fair Observer

Monthly



August 2021

Fair Observer<sup>o</sup>



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# Fair Observer Monthly



August 2021

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# ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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

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# Austerity for the Poor and Prosperity for the Rich

Ahmed Aref  
August 1, 2021

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**With fragile social protection systems in the Arab world, people have constructed their own resilience mechanisms for survival.**

**T**here has been a growing interest in social protection policies in the Arab region dating back to the 1990s. Yet the impact of such measures has not been empirically and independently assessed. Evidence shows that, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the poor have been getting poorer and the number of vulnerable groups and people living below the poverty line is increasing.

Poverty rates have risen throughout a decade of turmoil. This started with the Arab Spring in 2010-11 and intensified when the pandemic began in 2020. The situation is worse in Arab countries where there is ongoing conflict, economic hardship or political crises. These indicators of rising poverty mean the effectiveness of the social protection policies in the region must be placed under critical examination.

The Arab Mashreq is a case in point. This region, which consists of Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and, in some definitions, Egypt, has been marred by prolonged conflict, economic turmoil and political upheaval. In response to the crises, there has been an added focus on people's resilience mechanisms to cope with the socioeconomic uncertainty.

## **From Economic Reforms to the COVID Crisis**

Since 2015, many Arab governments have introduced financial and economic reform policies, supported by the International Monetary Fund. However, in the absence of effective social protection policies, these changes led to a sharp

increase in inflation. This exacerbated the hardship of the poor, caused negative repercussions for people's living conditions and led to further structural social stratification. The negative impact on the poor was accompanied by a political narrative of austerity for a better future. Simultaneously, generous policies were introduced for the upper class.

The policy response in Mashreq countries to the pandemic was not an exception from this inequality paradigm. The poor have been excluded in the design of policy responses. The fragile health sectors and the coverage gap of medical insurance generated an association between appropriate recovery and the upper class. Accordingly, access to quality care was exclusively for the rich. On the other hand, the poor had to rely on public health, which is often underfunded, understaffed and lacks sufficient resources.

In addition, government support in the form of loans and financial subsidies to recover from the economic fallout of the pandemic was directed exclusively at big businesses. This led to the shutdown of many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and caused unemployment to rise in all Mashreq countries.

Moreover, refugees and internally displaced people were left behind in the policy response. Instead of prioritizing their needs as vulnerable people, they faced restrictions on moving out from overcrowded camps due to the lockdown measures, which exacerbated their plight. In particular, they suffered from a lack of access to health services and malnutrition.

## **Resilience Mechanisms**

In the Mashreq, people have used different coping and resilience mechanisms throughout the pandemic. Yet defining what appears to be the relatively simple concept of resilience is complex. Resilience is a term that has been applied to research and practice in nearly every possible area of life and academia — from science to sociology, psychology, nursing and medicine to business and ecology. The theoretical



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definition of resilience is “one’s ability to bounce back or recover from adversity.” Research on coping with poverty emphasizes the importance of resilience mechanisms to be considered in the design, development and implementation of social protection policies for the prevention of risks associated with irrational resilience mechanisms.

Some resilience mechanisms in Arab Mashreq countries are constructive. For instance, there has been a rise in transnational family support, including remittances, and a revival in the agricultural sector due to food shortages. Dual-earner households have also increased as more women are joining the labor force. Yet the majority of reported resilience mechanisms are destructive. Seven areas are particularly important.

First, reports show increasing numbers of children who have abstained from going to school or dropped out altogether, often due to rampant poverty. In recent years, economic reform policies have included a sharp reduction of fuel, electricity and water subsidies. This has led to higher living costs. In response, children have been forced to work to earn money and contribute to the family income. The pandemic has made the situation even bleaker with the new educational setup, as not everyone has access to computers or the internet. The lack of technological infrastructure has meant the poor are excluded from the online classes introduced by lockdowns.

Second, even before the pandemic, leftover or used food markets emerged in countries such as Jordan and Egypt. At these places, the poor can buy food at reduced prices. These markets, which sell scraps of food, have become increasingly common in areas with people on low incomes. Often, the remains of meals from restaurants and hotels are offered to families at a discounted rate, with many food items unpackaged and no information as to where or when they were made. Some customers have said that no matter the quality, they are in need of the low prices as they cannot afford to buy other food products.

Third, the cut in subsidies and rising food prices have not only affected the poor. Many middle-class people cannot afford quality food due to the increase in prices and their depleted family savings. This has been exacerbated by economic hardship and the pandemic. This is particularly the case in Lebanon, where the lira (or pound) has lost most of its value, leading to higher costs of living. Lebanese people are reportedly cutting out meat from their diets or skipping meals. In Iraq, throughout the COVID-19 crisis, people have been forced to sell their furniture and personal items, just for the sake of buying food. Many Iraqis have lost jobs and the country lacks social protection measures.

Fourth, in response to the rising prices of medicine in the region, people have turned to traditional medicine and herbal remedies instead. For instance, due to the loss of more than 90% of the Lebanese pound’s value, there has been a shortage of essential medicines. The catalyst behind this was the ongoing national economic crisis in Lebanon and the state measures on lifting subsidies on medicine. Pharmacies often lack basic medications for blood pressure and even painkillers and antibiotics.

Fifth, to cope with poverty, mothers are joining the informal sector in order to have dual-earner families. Daughters have also joined the workforce. But the problem is that this sector is not covered by any social protection schemes, which means that families struggled during the height of lockdowns to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Sixth, the unprecedented rise in food prices has led some of the poor to buy their daily needs of food products via the postpaid system, or the so-called popular “note.” This system, known as shokok, is based on mutual trust between grocery store owners and residents in poor areas. As part of shokok, a shop owner archives either daily or weekly the merchant records of customer withdrawals on a note before collecting the cash at the end of each month.

Seventh, the United Nations and several media outlets have reported increased rates of crimes,

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drug abuse, robberies and rising cases of suicide as some people struggle to cope with poverty and hardship.

In light of these resilience mechanisms, social protection systems have to be rethought in Arab Mashreq countries. When left behind, most vulnerable people generate their own forms of resilience, which might be destructive. To a major extent, the policy response is designed for the poor to fund the rich. However, the unmet needs of the poor are not only affecting their wellbeing negatively, but it will also impact the state in the long term.

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## **There's No Such Thing as Plenty of Fish in the Sea**

Leah Garden  
August 3, 2021

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**Overfishing poses a threat not just to our diets, but to our ocean's ecosystems and productivity as a whole.**

I have a Friday night tradition with my family. After slogging home from work, we each order our favorite handroll from our local sushi restaurant. Accompanied by steamed veggie dumplings and a delicious avocado salad, this tradition has long served as a nice reward to a hard-worked week. Salmon rolls and shrimp tempura just always seem to hit the spot. But what if there were no salmon to sashimi? No shrimp to deep fry and roll between avocado, rice and seaweed?

The so-called tragedy of the commons dilemma unfortunately applies to this situation: When humans over-exploit a public area due to

greed, the sector eventually deteriorates past the point of productivity and we lose our once-cherished commodities. Overfishing poses a real-life threat, not just to our stomachs, but to our ocean's ecosystem and productivity as a whole. In 2020 alone, one-third of all global fish stocks were overfished. How did we get to these dire numbers? With oceans comprising 71% of the world's surface, isn't there plenty of fish in the seas?

### **Domino Effect**

There used to be. Today, the average person eats 42 pounds of fish per year, which is double the weight per person consumed 50 years ago. That's a lot of spicy tuna rolls. Overfishing, a slowly devastating response to an astronomical increase in demand from consumers, is essentially exterminating the wild fisheries. Ninety percent of large predatory fish such as tuna, sharks and marlin are already extinct. Our lack of readily available sushi aside, this has scary implications for the state of our oceans. Ecologically, eliminating the predators at the top of the food chain will catalyze an impact felt down to the microbial level, culminating in a loss of important marine life such as turtles and corals, driving further domino effects that lead to extinction.

Economically, fish is one of the most traded commodities on the planet, with a \$362-billion global industry. Ceasing to consume fish en masse would be economically devastating for most littoral countries, putting thousands of fishermen and fleets out of business. Instead, governments are attempting to regulate international waters in order to reduce overfishing and protect remaining fish stocks.

Before a ship even leaves the dock, a combination of international laws and regulations set by regional fishery management offices (RFMOs) dictate precisely how much fish may be caught, who may catch it, how it is caught, and when they are allowed to fish at all. RFMOs are international bodies made up of multiple governments with a common interest in

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managing and preserving fish stock in the oceans. However, RFMOs are failing. They were established during an era in which fish stocks were perceived as virtually limitless, and this vast oversight resulted in an inherently ineffective governing structure. Despite the existence of these regulatory bodies, overfishing continues to occur at alarming rates.

The United States is a leading member of nine RFMOs, such as the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO), as well as multiple bilateral and regional treaties like the Multilateral Treaty on Fisheries between the United States and 16 Pacific Island parties. But the management of these regional treaties and alliances has long been stranded at sea, hindered by deficient or unavailable data and inadequate systems of administration. Additionally, RFMOs consistently struggle to adequately and effectively enforce conservation efforts, rendering their data unactionable, surplus information.

### **Mindful Consumption**

Another issue is government interference through state subsidies. The logical action of allowing a fish population to replenish is skipped when countries subsidize their fishing industries, incentivizing fleets to stay out at sea longer, contrary to international agreements. RFMOs cannot properly function if state governments are actively working against treaties. The first step to managing fish stocks and conserving critical species is ending the fishing subsidies, a step the World Trade Organization is attempting to initiate. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the first slate of meetings, stalling negotiations and pausing necessary action for another year.

Eliminating fish from your diet won't end the overfishing problem — subsidies will keep legal and illegal fishing fleets out in the waters. We, as consumers, don't have as much power in this particular transaction as we would like to believe. But we can pressure our governments to do better. Spreading the message of government-funded overfishing can help hold elected and

appointed leaders accountable in the court of public opinion.

Additionally, consumers and vendors can be mindful of the fish we consume. Utilizing helpful resources like the Monterey Bay Seafood Watch app informs the everyday consumer what fish they should buy. Canadian-based conservation group SeaChoice takes this one step further, investigating seafood traceability and lobbying Canada's local and federal governments to require traceability as a common aspect of the seafood industry.

I'm not ready to forgo my Friday night sushi ritual. But I don't want to negatively impact the planet exclusively for my benefit. The global fishing industry can be influenced and reformed to improve fish stocks and maintain the economic productivity of the industry itself. Active and aggressive international compromise, as well as an informed public, provides us with a great opportunity for a productive path forward.

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## **Is America Ready to Raise the Minimum Wage?**

Timothy Rich, Bridget Beavin, Ian Milden, Olivia Blackmon  
August 5, 2021

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**The minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour has not changed since 2009, the longest without an increase since it was introduced in 1938.**

**S**ince the federal minimum wage was introduced in the United States in 1938, it has provided a level of security for workers to be able to afford a minimal living standard.

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However, the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour has not changed since 2009, the longest timespan without an increase in its history. Critics argue that \$7.25 is not a livable wage, which by 2018 was worth 14.8% less after adjusting for inflation. For nearly a decade, discussions about raising the wage have continued, with the minimum wage in 30 states now above the federal level.

Yet according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition's 2021 report, a full-time minimum wage worker, whether at the \$7.25 federal wage or higher state minimum wages, could afford a one-bedroom rental at market rate in only 7% of US counties. The report estimates that workers will need to make \$20 an hour to earn a one-bedroom housing wage.

With debates around the issue ongoing, how sensitive is the American public to a minimum wage increase? President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats' proposal for a \$15 minimum wage may be popular among workers, but fear of the consequences complicate its passage.

### **To Raise or Not to Raise?**

Businesses with razor-thin margins face a threat of closure if wages increase. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that a \$15 minimum wage would result in a likely loss of 1.4 million jobs. Likewise, the national deficit was also predicted to increase by \$54 billion over the next decade if the wage were raised. Opponents argue that a new minimum wage will create more problems than it solves, fail to alleviate poverty and transfer the extra \$333-billion cost to firms on to consumers in the form of higher prices. In contrast, Republican senators have floated increasing the minimum wage to \$10 an hour in exchange for policy concessions on immigration.

Proponents of the \$15 minimum wage assert that it will bring earnings closer to the rising cost of living expenses. A report by the Economic Policy Institute states that essential and frontline workers constitute 60% of those who would

benefit from the higher wage. A National Low Income Housing Coalition report states that with a \$15 minimum wage, some inland states would approach full-time wages that support modest rent at 30% of one's income. The CBO report estimates that 900,000 Americans would be brought out of poverty with a \$15 minimum wage. The raise would also decrease racial income inequality.

A recent survey by the Pew Research Center showed that 62% of Americans supported an increase of the federal minimum wage to \$15, with only 10% opposed to any level of increase, with clear partisan differences: 72% of Republicans expressed opposition to a \$15 minimum wage while 87% of Democrats were in favor.

In 2013, a Gallup poll showed that small business owners were divided on increasing the minimum wage to \$9.50, juxtaposed to 76% of the public supporting an increase to \$9. In 2014, analysis by CBS News found that people were less supportive of raising the minimum wage if they thought it would lead to job losses. The issue of how raising the minimum wage will affect small businesses is a crucial component of how willing people are to support an increase.

We conducted a national web survey using quota sampling and recruited 625 American respondents via Qualtrics on June 22-24. Rather than just ask about support for the minimum wage in the abstract, we randomly assigned respondents to one of four questions to evaluate on a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Targeted formulation of the statements allowed us to directly test whether support differs between \$15 as the Democrats have proposed versus the \$10 endorsed by some Republican senators. The methodology would also show whether support declines if primed to think about the potential negative impacts to small businesses.

With no mention of businesses closing, increasing the minimum wage to \$10 was more popular than the \$15 option (64.31% vs. 57.21%), reflecting that opponents of a \$15

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minimum wage favor a more modest increase as found by previous survey work. When primed to consider that some small businesses may close due to increased employment costs, support for both a \$10 and \$15 wage declined (53.13% vs. 55.77%). Regression analysis finds statistically significant drops in support for increasing the minimum wage when the increase was listed as \$15 instead of \$10 and when businesses closing was mentioned. The pattern endures when controlling for demographic factors.

### **Political Divide**

Surprisingly, a majority of Republicans agreed with raising the minimum wage to either \$10 or \$15 when we did not reference small businesses. This deviates from past survey work showing strong Republican opposition to increases in the minimum wage, signaling that conservatives may be more open to increasing the minimum wage than they have been in recent years. Additionally, non-white Republicans were more willing to support an increase than white Republicans, consistent with trends among racial minorities being more willing to support an increase than white Americans.

Unsurprisingly, a majority of Democrats supported raising the minimum wage to \$15 both when businesses closing was mentioned or not. However, the inclusion of small businesses closing had a larger effect on declining support than specifying a \$15 wage versus a \$10 wage. This indicates that Democrats are not immune to concerns about small businesses failing from an increased minimum wage but have largely accepted a \$15 over a \$10 minimum wage as the path forward. Providing protections for small businesses such as a gradual increase of the minimum wage or government financial support for businesses could garner more support for the wage hike among Democrats, making the proposed increase more feasible.

To help move the issue forward, reporting on how raising the minimum wage could help small businesses would be a meaningful way to combat concerns. The Center for American Progress

argues that higher wages will increase demand for goods, increase worker productivity and ultimately benefit small businesses in the long run with the correct support from the government. Politicians and media outlets supportive of increases could use this framing to solidify support for Democrats and perhaps strengthen support from Republicans as well.

Proponents argue that increases are necessary to make the federal minimum wage a livable one, as the inflation-adjusted value of the minimum wage peaked in 1968. An increase to \$15 would only partially address the impact of inflation and the rise in housing costs, the latter that has increased by nearly 30% since the last minimum wage hike. However, if small businesses close due to higher payouts, workers may not be any better off. Our survey findings suggest public sensitivity to broader impacts of a minimum wage increase, suggesting that gradual policies of raising the minimum wage or policies that can minimize the burden on small businesses could expand bipartisan support.

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## Joe Biden Faces a Dilemma Over Iran

David J. Karl  
August 5, 2021

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### **Biden is faced with a conundrum over eroding US deterrence and extracting nuclear concessions from Iran.**

Everything old is new again, at least when it comes to US President Joe Biden's deterrence credibility problem with Iran. This must seem like *déjà vu* to him, since he witnessed similar dynamics play out during an earlier stint at the White House.

Several weeks ago came news that the FBI had foiled a brazen scheme by an Iranian intelligence network to kidnap an Iranian-born US citizen who is a prominent critic of the Islamic Republic. The apparent plan was to abduct her from the streets of Brooklyn, spirit her to Venezuela via "maritime evacuation" using "military-style speedboats" and from there deliver her to Iran. The plan was part of a broader scheme entailing the seizure of other individuals in Canada and the United Kingdom.

The elaborate operation, which the head of the FBI's New York field office described as "not some far-fetched movie plot," is a flagrant gesture on Iran's part at a time when the Biden administration is seeking to diplomatically engage Tehran on nuclear proliferation issues. What stands out from this episode is how much Tehran is willing to extend US-Iranian hostility onto the American homeland and how little it seems to fear the prospect of retaliation.

### **The Saudi Ambassador**

The thwarted abduction is reminiscent of an even more audacious scheme on US territory by Iranian agents a decade ago. In the fall of 2011, the FBI broke up an operation to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. The plan was

directed by the Quds Force, an elite branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps that conducts clandestine operations beyond the country's borders. The plot involved blowing up the Saudi diplomat at an upscale restaurant popular among Washington's political elite, followed by the bombing of the Saudi and Israeli embassies in Washington and in Argentina. The high likelihood of mass casualties at the restaurant was dismissed by the operation's US-based organizer as "no big deal."

The plot organizer sought to outsource the bombings to the Los Zetas drug cartel in Mexico, which the FBI later described as having "access to military-grade weaponry and explosives, and has engaged in numerous acts of violence, including assassinations and murders." As part of the deal with the cartel, the organizer promised to funnel tons of opium from the Middle East to Mexico. The plan unraveled when the organizer reached out to an individual he believed was a cartel member but who was actually an informant for the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

Reporting on the foiled plot, the Washington Post commented that it resembled "an international cloak-and-dagger operation that reads like the plot of a Bond novel." Robert Mueller, the FBI director at the time, noted that "Though it reads like the pages of a Hollywood script, the impact would have been very real and many lives would have been lost." James R. Clapper, the US director of national intelligence, cautioned that "some Iranian officials — probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei — have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived US actions that threaten the regime."

At the time, the Obama administration was looking to wind down the military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as find a way to halt Iran's nuclear weapons program. Although then-Vice-President Biden described the botched assassination plot as "an outrage that violates one of the fundamental premises upon which nations

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deal with one another”, the White House did little beyond prosecuting the hapless Iranian organizer and imposing sanctions on several Quds Force officials.

### **James Mattis on Obama’s Response**

The tepid response was particularly criticized by General James Mattis, the head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which directs military operations in the greater Middle East. He was dismayed that President Barack Obama kept the details of “the enormous savagery of the intended attack” from the American public and failed to respond forcefully to the provocation.

Obama would eventually fire Mattis from his CENTCOM post, in part due to the latter’s frequent criticism of the president’s approach toward Iran. Once in civilian life, Mattis publicly lambasted Obama’s response to the attempted assassination. Speaking at a conference in 2013, he claimed the plot was the result of a decision “taken at the very highest levels in Tehran.” He further asserted that “We caught them in the act and yet we let them walk free,” and “They have been basically not held to account. ... I don’t know why the attempt on [the Saudi ambassador] wasn’t dealt with more strongly.”

In his 2019 memoir, Mattis blamed the lax US reply on Obama’s keenness to strike a nuclear deal with Iran. He also elaborated on his earlier criticism, lamenting that “We treated an act of war as a law enforcement violation.” He added:

“Had the bomb gone off, those in the restaurant and on the street would have been ripped apart, blood rushing down sewer drains. It would have been the worst attack on us since 9/11. I sensed that only Iran’s impression of America’s impotence could have led them to risk such an act within a couple of miles of the White House, Absent one fundamental mistake — the terrorists had engaged an undercover DEA agent in an attempt to smuggle the bomb — the Iranians would have pulled off this devastating attack. Had that bomb exploded, it would have changed history.”

In the end, it was Obama’s successor who delivered the kind of reprisal Mattis thought necessary. In early January 2020, the Trump administration launched a drone strike that killed Major General Qassem Soleimani, the long-time Quds Force commander, while he was on a secret visit to Baghdad. Hundreds of miles away on the very same night, a drone strike in Yemen targeted but missed Abdul Reza Shahlai, a senior leader in the Quds Force. Washington had long accused Soleimani and Shahlai of being the key Iranian officials in putting the bomb plot into motion.

### **Biden’s Conundrum**

Like Obama, President Biden now confronts a conundrum: how to shore up eroding US deterrence resolve vis-à-vis an increasing risk-acceptant Tehran while also keeping it in good enough humor to extract significant nuclear concessions. So far, he has eschewed Mattis’ advice about how to dissuade Iran from mounting further attacks on American soil.

In contrast to his outrage a decade ago, Biden has opted to keep personally silent about the Brooklyn abduction plot while his administration treats it as a matter for law enforcement. It seems unlikely that the incoming Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, will find this response a cause for restraint.

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# A Pandemic of Quitting: Why Are Americans Leaving Their Jobs?

Kiara Taylor  
August 6, 2021

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**More Americans are quitting their jobs than ever before. What does it mean for the economy?**

It's been 18 months since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are finally getting indicative statistics on its economic impact. Some of these numbers confirm what we've long suspected: that online sales boomed during lockdowns and that workers aren't all that keen to start commuting again.

There are some more surprising trends hidden in recent research, however. One of these is that resignation rates are at a historic high and that many workers are now considering quitting their jobs. According to a Microsoft workplace trends survey, 40% of Americans are considering leaving their posts this year.

This is surprising because, at the beginning of 2020, most analysts were forecasting that the pandemic would force employees and employers into a more precarious position and that quit rates would therefore reduce. However, the experience of lockdown appears to have made many people realize that their current job is not the one they really want.

A pandemic of quitting might sound like it would have dire economic consequences, but, in fact, the opposite might be true. In fact, the hesitancy of many Americans to leave their job may have held the economy back for much of the past 30 years. This means that any recent prognostications on how to save the US economy might be overlooking an important factor and that the "inflatable" economy of today is fundamentally different to that before the pandemic.

## Stagnation

In order to understand why more Americans are thinking about quitting, it's instructive to review what we know about why people quit their jobs in general — or rather, what we don't know. There is a slight correlation between economic success and employee turnover, with more people changing jobs during booms than in lean times. The rate at which people quit their jobs has been falling ever since the 1980s, and no one knows why.

That hasn't stopped economists and labor market analysts from coming up with possible explanations. Some say that the power of employers has been growing over the past 40 years, and this makes it more difficult to quit. Others point to the rise in non-compete clauses over the same period. However, these explanations don't seem that plausible when you consider that resignation rates have been falling across all industries and across all income levels, even in sectors with highly competitive labor markets.

Instead, others argue, we need to look at benefits. Benefits have become a far larger part of employee compensation over the past four decades, and it is speculated that this might be one of the reasons why wages haven't risen in the same period. Employer-linked benefits can now amount to many thousands of dollars a year, and this may make it more difficult for people to quit their jobs.

Then there is the most direct explanation, one that is the most worrying. It might simply be the case that people are languishing in jobs they don't like because they are not motivated to reenter the labor market. In other words, the majority of Americans might be just getting by, unhappy with their job but not to the extent that they would change it.

## Catalyst for Change

The pandemic might be the catalyst for that change. Research suggests that the move to home working caused by the pandemic has led many people to reassess how happy they are in their



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jobs, and their conclusions have not been positive.

This makes a lot of sense, of course. For people who were “languishing” before the pandemic, their lack of professional fulfillment may have been hidden by the everyday perks of their job like good relationships with their colleagues or the ability to travel at the company’s expense. Lockdown and remote working changed all that and, with it, employees’ attitudes.

This has been a dramatic shift. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Job Opening and Labor Turnover Survey, 2.5% of the employed quit their jobs in May. That’s down from the record 2.8% in April but still higher than at any other point since at least before 2001. Plus, consider that the quit rate was only 2.3% in 2019 when unemployment was just 3.6%, compared with 5.8% this May.

The long-term effects of this epidemic of quitting are somewhat difficult to predict, but most economists believe that they will be positive. People leaving their jobs and getting new ones generally leads to them drawing higher wages, providing a boost to the consumer sector. Equally, changing jobs affords the possibility for people to gain new skills and experience, which will have a long-term effect on the sustainability of the economy.

Equally, there are also encouraging signs that dynamic labor markets can improve equality. According to a 2020 survey conducted by Freshbooks, on average, women-owned businesses are taking nearly three times longer to recover from the financial setbacks brought on by COVID-19 compared to businesses owned by men. Such issues could be remedied by a more dynamic labor force.

### **The Long View**

Taking a broader view, of course, it could be argued that the recent increase in the quit rate is more reflective of short-term frustrations than long-term transformation. Many workers have, after all, been stuck at home for much of the past

year, and that’s a lot of time for slight annoyances to turn into resignation-level frustration.

This might be driving a lot of people to quit right now, but then normality will reassert itself. Given the spikes in the unemployment rate, we might enter into a period where people are more risk-averse and less likely to quit their jobs than they were before the pandemic.

This is certainly what employers are hoping for. In fact, at the moment, many are worried that the pandemic has fundamentally changed the relationship between employers, customers and staff. In some ways, it has accelerated processes that were already visible in the broader economy. For instance, it is now expected that 95% of all purchases will be conducted online by 2030. On the other hand, it may well be that what we are seeing in the increased quit rate is a shift in which employees can demand more from their employers.

We are already seeing this, to some degree. Many companies are finding it so difficult to recruit staff that they are offering more flexible schedules and remote work, alongside higher wages and even more extensive employee benefits. Companies across the economy, from casinos to high-end law firms, are also offering mid-year retention bonuses in hope that these special payments will be enough to keep restive employees in their new jobs.

Regardless of whether this shift is long-term or short-term, it is great news for employees. With a more dynamic labor market and the threat of a full-blown labor shortage, employees are going to see major incentives to stay in their current jobs. This, in turn, will lead to increased training and more money in the pocket of the average American. And so it might not be tech innovation that will save the economy after all but millions of people quitting their jobs.

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\***Kiara Taylor** has worked as a financial analyst for more than a decade.

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## India's COVID-19 Vaccination Drive Is Failing the Transgender Community

Preeti Choudhary  
August 9, 2021

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**The removal of vaccination data on non-binary individuals reveals just how problematic the transgender community's situation in India is.**

**A**mid a raging pandemic, India's transgender community, which numbered 5 million a decade ago, is at its nadir when it comes to vulnerability to disease and distress. The reason why there are no recent statistics is because the 2011 census was the only time that population data for non-binary persons, referred to as "others," was recorded. In 2014, transgender people were given the status of the third gender in India after a long legal battle. The NALSA verdict mandated the government to add a third-gender column to all its documents as legal recognition.

Unfortunately, transgender people are still being "othered." Most recently, the registration form on the official COVID-19 vaccine portal of the government of India has three gender categories: male, female and others. "It sounds discriminating and demeaning," Dhananjay Chauhan, a leading transgender activist from Punjab, told me over the phone.

What came as an even greater disappointment was the fact that participation data for transgender persons have been removed from the dashboard of the CoWIN online vaccine registration portal. The infographic now reflects only the data for males and females under the vaccination category, delineated in blue and pink respectively.

The figure for "others" can't even be determined by calculating the difference between the total number of vaccinated and the vaccinated

males and females added together because the dashboard lists the overall number of doses administered to date, which includes both the first and second shots. This erasure becomes a journey from "othering" toward rendering the "others" invisible, revealing just how problematic the transgender community's situation in India really is.

### No, I Haven't Been Vaccinated

On January 16, India began its vaccination drive. However, data show that by May 16, only 3.97% of "others" have received at least one shot, just 0.013% of the overall number of vaccinated. With the third wave of infections ravaging through the country, the third-gender population is still waiting for vials to get allotted for their vaccination camps. Pushpa Mai, a leading trans activist from Rajasthan, says: "So far, we have been able to vaccinate only 50 transgender persons in Jaipur and we are waiting for our another camp date. As soon as we are sanctioned the vials, we shall proceed further. Till then, what else is in hand than to wait — such is the situation everywhere."

Simran, from Rajasthan, was coughing during the phone call. She was out of the town to participate in a kinnar sammelan, the community congregation. When asked about getting vaccinated, she snapped: "Didi, why do you keep on asking the same question every time you call? Don't you know the state already? I HAVEN'T been vaccinated. Would you arrange it for me? Can you?" She said that none of her dera (community house) friends were vaccinated, which has caused a lot of problems.

Sometimes, transgender people who live in deras, those who prefer to call themselves kinnars or hijra and are engaged in traditional community-specific roles, often keep a distance from the transgender people running NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs). Simran relies on badhai for her livelihood, a practice where the hijra or kinnars — who are said to be bestowed with a divine gift — go door to door on festive occasions asking for presents and alms in

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return for blessings. During the pandemic, this source of income has largely dried up, leaving many helpless and reliant on begging and worse. A vaccination certificate would go a long way to help them return to their traditional way of life.

According to Mai, pooling in NGOs and CBOs is not enough because there are districts and villages that don't have educated transgender representation to be able to organize such camps or even know whom to approach. With large parts of the transgender population lacking education and tech literacy, many are unable to register online, which is the only option to get in touch with vaccination centers. There is a need to raise awareness through television, newspapers and other media to get transgender people to get vaccinated and convince their friends to do so as well. Mai's proposal is that besides the approach of looping in NGOs and CBOs, local chief medical health officers should take initiative to get the transgender population vaccinated in their respective areas.

Another roadblock to registering for vaccination is a lack of identity documents. Due to the stigma surrounding them, many transgender people have abandoned their parental homes at a young age or have dropped out of school due to discrimination and outright assault. This means that the majority are left with either no proof of identity at all or only with one that states the gender they were assigned at birth, which they no longer identify with. The provisions of providing them with transgender identity cards are still being discussed out by the government, which couldn't come soon enough at this critical time.

### **Vaccine Hesitancy**

Alisha (not her real name), from Chandani Chowk, had to resort to prostitution in order to survive during lockdown and is now exposed to a higher risk of catching the virus through her clients. "Initially, I was scared to death of getting this vaccination," she tells me. "But then I decided that anyhow I am going to die, better take a chance by getting vaccinated; probably I

might survive. And I contacted an NGO and got vaccinated through their vaccination camp."

This initial vaccine hesitancy Alisha describes has deep roots and is among the factors affecting the low uptake rates among the community. Transgender people often report discrimination at hospitals and public places because of their non-conformity. In colonial times, transgender people, then commonly known as eunuchs, were categorized as habitual offenders or natural-born criminals under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 and were punished for their cross-dressing practice. Historic persecution not only rendered transgender people invisible in the public sphere but also laid the foundations of a transphobic society.

To this day, transgender people are seen as a matter of curiosity. "There are various layers of discrimination in health care access in this country. The doctors are curious about the transgender identity, and so exploit them in the process," Shuvojit Moulik, founder of Civilian Welfare Foundation, a Kolkata-based NGO, told LiveMint. During my research, many reported that doctors and medical professionals would examine their genitals even when the only complaint is a cold or a cough. Many report medical negligence. It is hardly a surprise that transgender people try to evade these discriminating and transphobic spaces, preferring to rely on traditional medicine or local quacks for treatment.

Shreya Reddy, who identifies as a transwoman and works as a clinic manager at a transgender health center in Hyderabad, points out the irony that even those transgender volunteers running the vaccination camps aren't taking the jabs. This often creates further skepticism among those who come to the vaccine camps.

Exposure to hormone therapies, HIV and complex sex reassignment surgeries leave transgender people immunocompromised and thus more vulnerable, and understandably more skeptical about the side effects of a new vaccine. According to Equality magazine, "communities that are underrepresented in medical trials,

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including those for vaccines, have developed considerable mistrust in the overall effect certain medicines and products will have on their health.” This is compounded by the fact that the scarcity of doctors who specialize in gender reassignment has resulted in many transgender people reporting being treated like subjects of an experiment by plastic surgeons who lack the necessary expertise.

Reddy shares her own experience of vaccine hesitancy. She says that there is no information regarding the possible side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine, like fatigue, fever and body pain. Because of this, the severity of post-vaccination symptoms made many like herself who have undergone gender reaffirmation surgery believe that they were going to die. She herself felt pain and dizziness for two days after receiving a shot, thinking that something has gone wrong. Despite being a health worker, Reddy had no one to assuage her fears.

### **A Time for Recognition**

Following criticism of the low vaccine uptake among the community, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment issued directions to states and union territories to facilitate unhindered and indiscriminate vaccination for transgender persons. The states invited community organizations to act as a bridge to get the transgender population vaccinated. But since transphobia has them to live on the margins of society, unidentified, local authorities don't even have proper records of the transgender population and need the community to help them reach this most vulnerable group.

The complete erasure of vaccination data on a site like CoWin deals a further blow to representation and equality. It is high time that the Indian government and society acknowledge that if transgender persons are being “othered” or neglected in something as seemingly innocuous as writing, this will inevitably translate to deadly neglect in real-life terms. Thus, the primary need here is to impart their transgender identity on registration forms and certificates and abandon

the anonymous and dismissing “others” classification. There must be the inclusion of the transgender population in other sets of government data to address their needs and demands. Only then will there be a realistic hope for the emancipation of this long-marginalized community.

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## **Securing the Flow of Aid in Yemen**

Ali Mahmood  
August 13, 2021

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### **The Soqatra archipelago stands as a potential model for ensuring the flow of aid throughout Yemen.**

**A**s the war in Yemen splinters, the distribution of humanitarian assistance becomes increasingly difficult. The situation throughout northern Yemen — territory under the control of Houthi rebels — is wrapped into the conflict over restricted access to Hodeida seaport under UN Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015) and very limited access to Sanaa International Airport by humanitarian agencies.

In southern provinces, political rivalries present major obstacles to the coordination and delivery of aid. Another problem has been a failure by the international community to meet funding requests, often falling short by up to 50%. Where available, the more direct, government-driven humanitarian funding might prove to be a more effective approach, especially when it comes to long-term solutions.

Nearly seven years into the Yemeni conflict, no party is closer to a military victory, and the main tactic by all sides has been to dilute local

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authority to foment chaos. The current situation along southern provinces is clear evidence of these tactics — from Abyan to Mahra. Economic development remains stagnant, while infighting and turf wars obstruct operations by humanitarian agencies.

In Aden, for example, UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are constrained by conflict over access to ports and collection of tariffs, checkpoints, corruption and fighting at the village level outside the province. Abyan is now divided into three spheres as a result of fighting among the Southern Transitional Council (STC), pro-Islah forces and elements loyal to President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. The conflict in Shebwa has carved space for aid agencies from Turkey and Qatar working through al-Islah affiliates. Yet failure to stabilize these local environments has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis, while some profit from the war economy.

Stabilization of local environments, eliminating obstacles such as checkpoints and corruption have proved key to the effective delivery of aid and social cohesion. While political rivalries prolong conflict across Yemen, instances of political victory over rivals provide isolated models of stability.

In the case of the Soqatra archipelago off the coast of Yemen, the end of the political conflict between al-Islah affiliates and southern elements has led to an increase in the flow of aid, the absence of political strife and a gradual restart of economic activity. International organizations have had limited access to the island, but direct government assistance from coalition members has bolstered the pace of development.

### **A Direct Model**

During the conflict, donors have failed to meet funding requests from humanitarian agencies. As demand has increased, donor contributions have dropped. It is estimated that over 3.5 million civilians have been displaced from their homes, while over 24 million “are in need of humanitarian assistance.” The funding gap has

grown between 40% and 60% from 2019 to the present. The capture of humanitarian assistance by Houthis since 2019, amounting to an estimated \$1.8 billion, has also created problems for UN agencies and NGOs when donors have lost confidence and perceive their contributions will end up funding the war.

Direct funding of small projects — in the health sector or for economic actors — by donor governments could relieve political tension and contribute to local stability. The case of Soqatra again allows for potential modeling under current circumstances. Since 2015, as the armed conflict expanded, the Yemeni island in the Indian Ocean has received direct humanitarian assistance from the United Arab Emirates. Soon after cyclone Chapala struck Soqatra in 2015, the UAE delivered life-saving aid. It also supported the population after the Makunu cyclone in 2018.

Over the past six years, the UAE has delivered over \$110 million in assistance to the population on Soqatra and neighboring islands. The aid has reached areas of social and health services, transport and storage, fishing sector, construction, public education, energy and potable water.

While millions have been displaced by the war on the mainland, rapid response assistance following Chapala and Makunu prevented the displacement of hundreds of families. With help from the UAE military, organizations such as the Abu Dhabi Development Fund (ADFD), the Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation and the Emirates Red Crescent (ERC) helped build 161 residential units in Zayed City, 21 in Dafarh, 51 in Arshani, and other units in Zaheq and Dixam since the cyclones hit the islands. Assistance has also provided four power plants, a distribution network for more than 30 sites, installed solar-powered street lighting and established two solar power plants in Hadibo with a capacity of 2.2 megawatts and Qalansiya at 800 kilowatts.

Direct aid from the UAE has also reached Soqatra’s health sector. By specifically targeting the needs of the local population, after natural disasters or ordinary health requirements, the assistance has fully equipped one emergency

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facility and two surgery rooms. It has also added 13 beds and an intensive-care unit (ICU) in line with international standards and expanded the Sheikh Khalifa Hospital. The facility's bed capacity has increased to 42, including four at the ICU unit, and 16 CT scan machines have been installed.

Assistance for economic actors has also focused on the Fishing Cooperative Union and 27 fishermen's associations, helped renovate a fish market and built a fish factory with a production capacity of 500 tons per month, employing 500 local people. Financial assistance has also reached farmers, converting over 31 hectares into farmland.

### **Stability as a Model**

Civilian organizations continue to face challenges while delivering aid in remote areas of Yemen. Obstacles include funding gaps, import logistics and costs, and access to ports and roads. In the case of Soqatra, NGOs have been unable to respond to natural disasters and growing needs in the health and energy sectors.

The end of the armed conflict may be further than expected at this time, but where possible, the extinguishing of political rivalries has produced wider access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Soqatra stands as a potential model, at the micro-level, in hands of a party within the government coalition prescribed by the Riyadh Agreement, a power-sharing deal for Yemen.

As a legitimate party representing the southern people according to the Riyadh Agreement, the STC is a partner in Yemen's internationally recognized government under President Hadi. The progress achieved in securing order and promoting social cohesion could provide a model for other areas throughout liberated provinces. An essential component of success remains direct access to sustainable funding from donors.

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## **The Godfather of Fascist Terrorism**

Matthew Feldman & Bethan Johnson

August 17, 2021

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### **Why did Canada add an individual to its list of terrorist organizations?**

**F**or one of the first times in history, an individual has been designated as a terrorist entity. Late in June, Canada added a 68-year-old resident of Denver, Colorado, to its list of proscribed terrorist entities. The individual in question is James Mason; he is a thrice-convicted jailbird with a felonious "interest in underage girls," a former greeter at K-Mart now reduced to referring to his receipt of free meals at a soup kitchen for the needy as "guerrilla warfare." So why bother?

The Canadians are right to not be fooled. Nondescript and rarely captured on film since his last stint in prison ended in 1999, Mason is also the godfather of fascist terrorism. So just who is James Mason and why does an individual merit inclusion on a proscription list otherwise aimed at fascist groups?

### **Siege Culture**

By his own account, Mason has been a neo-Nazi for nearly 55 years now, joining George Lincoln Rockwell's American Nazi Party at the age of 14. Mason bounced around after Rockwell's assassination in 1967, washing up in the short-lived American terroristic group National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF) in the mid-1970s. In 1980, things took a turn for the weird when Mason embraced the imprisoned cult leader, Charles Manson, and split off from the existing neo-Nazi scene to establish Universal Order.

Among other curiosities, this tiny group argued that Charles Manson, of all people, fit the mold of a Nazi leader for the postwar American world. This would likely have been Mason's

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tragicomic fate had he not also revived the NSLF's publication, *Siege*, in 1980.

Between August of that year and June 1986, Mason published comment pieces of roughly 1,000 words each in a monthly magazine, extending to more than 210 individual items. In 1992, the fascist ideologue Michael Moynihan edited and published *Siege* as a single volume. Although scarcely a best-seller, *Siege* clearly had its admirers. For one, the leader of WAR (White Aryan Resistance), the San Diegan Tom Metzger, was all ears.

Shortly after *Siege* was released, Metzger conducted several interviews with Mason on his television program, "Race and Reason." Of especial interest to Metzger was Mason's appropriation of the anarchists' "propaganda of the deed" of the late 19th and early 20th century for right-wing extremists. *Siege* explicitly advocated this "lone-wolf terrorism," with Mason preaching the virtues of so-called "one-man armies" and "lone eagles" fully three years before the better-known Louis Beam published (and republished online in 1992) his essay "Leaderless Resistance."

In 2003, a second edition of *Siege* appeared, this time with added appendices and an internet-friendly format. One of these appendices included the transcript of a 1985 speech to Metzger's WAR, which ended with the simple injunction that had made Mason infamous amongst the American neo-Nazi movement: "until the System is destroyed, by whatever means necessary, none of these fine plans will ever amount to anything more than a dream." Turning this dream into a reality was the task of self-directed neo-Nazi terrorists, who have become, and will continue to be, a staple of 21st-century political violence.

Yet Mason's role as ideologue likely would have remained minimal and even subterranean had it not been for the emergence of the Iron March platform in 2011. Envisioned as a clearinghouse for fascist militancy, Iron March shared Mason's view that only destruction of liberal democratic systems could create the space

for fascism to emerge again — an emphatic rejection of political engagement and still less of building a movement. The moderators at Iron March gravitated to Mason's uncompromising advocacy of lone-wolf terrorism, so much so that they published a first "revision" of *Siege* in June 2015.

Just over two years later, in September 2017, a third edition of *Siege* was published under the Iron March imprint. It was identical to the 2015 version save for a new, 6-page preface by Mason, who had been located by members of one of the new neo-Nazi groups emerging from the Iron March forum, Atomwaffen Division (AWD). The latter celebrated Mason's return to the neo-Nazi scene, and in 2017 secured Mason's contributions to a website entitled *Siege Culture*. Mason ultimately wrote more than three dozen new pieces during 2017 and 2018 — before the website was taken down — in much the same style as his 1980s *Siege* writings.

### **Neo-Nazi Gravitas**

Mason's neo-Nazi gravitas and willingness to rejoin the fray was a major boon to so-called accelerationist cells, which were growing in both number and militancy. For example, by early 2018, the acknowledged leader of these loosely organized groups, AWD, had no fewer than five alleged murders ascribed to its supporters. That year, an early study of *Siege*'s influence identified "33 extremist entities — 21 individuals and 12 organizations — with ties to *Siege*. Of these 21 individuals, nine have been involved in acts of violence, four have been involved in specific murders, and four have been involved in threats or acts of terrorism."

This political violence extended far beyond AWD and the US. Other groups around the world were quick to franchise these branded terror cells, from the Antipodean Resistance in Australia, the Scrofa Division in Holland, the Sonnenkrieg Division (SKD) in the UK, and even the Feuerkrieg Division in Estonia, led by a 13-year-old boy known as the "Commander."

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While Iron March provided the means and opportunity for lone-actor terrorism, it is without doubt that Mason supplied, and still supplies, the motive. In fact, the dalliance between the neo-Nazi ideologue and a clearinghouse for fascist militancy was only consummated after the Iron March website was taken down in late 2017. In 2018, a fourth edition of Siege appeared, with nearly 200 pages of added material. Much of this material was explicit propaganda for AWD, SKD and others, including dozens of new images and threatening statements by now-imprisoned leaders of the Atomwaffen Division, Brandon Russell (aka “Odin”) and John Cameron Denton (aka “Rape”).

Put another way, the evolution of Siege, as both text and terroristic encouragement, in 2018 finally found its natural home with AWD and other accelerationists trying to help overthrow Western democracies.

In the 30 months since, this wider Siege-inspired culture has continued to hone its tactics, including violent memes now dubbed “fashwave,” and advance a post-organizational ethos. Make no mistake, this neo-Nazi doctrine is reloading, not retreating. It is becoming younger and more militant by the day, particularly in light of COVID-19. At the time of writing, Siege culture is amongst the most pressing terror threats posed within liberal democracy, just as Mason giddily envisioned in 1980 in “Later on we’ll Conspire”:

“The lone wolf cannot be detected, cannot be prevented, and seldom can be traced. For his choice of targets he needs little more than the daily newspaper for suggestions and tips galore. ... For his training the lone wolf needs only the U.S. military or any one of a hundred good manuals readily available through radical booksellers ... His greatest concern must be to pick his target well so that his act may speak so clearly for itself that no member of White America can mistake its message.”

This is the face of radical-right terror today. It will continue to persist so long as we — scholars, authorities and practitioners — continue to

misunderstand lone-wolf terrorism and, just as troublingly, discount the dangers posed by Siege culture coming from either keyboard warriors or misguided youth. The voluntarism, vehement racism and social Darwinist “proof” of individual political violence as a pathway to what is increasingly called sainthood (Saint Tarrant and Saint Breivik memes are increasingly popular) are all gathering speed online despite attempts to take down this material. Siege’s bloody heyday is likely still ahead of us.

This would mean that more mangled bodies of innocents to come, and more terrorist convictions of would-be lone-actor terrorists, many teenagers. That suits James Mason just fine, for he is nothing if not an agent of destruction. The Canadians have it right: Both the man and the movement he inspired are immensely dangerous. Banning Mason is a start — and other countries concerned about radical-right terrorism should follow suit — while both Siege Culture and the wider movement it represents must be at the top of any counter-terrorism efforts. This terroristic movement will scarcely disband itself.

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## **Afghanistan: A Final Nail in the Coffin of American Foreign Policy**

Bilal Rahmani

August 27, 2021

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**The valuable lesson President Joe Biden is teaching future allies by allowing Afghans to fall from the wings of departing jets is that the US will not defend you.**

**W**hen the United States began Operation Enduring Freedom, leading its forces into Afghanistan to empower local resistance to oust the Taliban, Afghans around the world cheered in sheer jubilation. The unipolar hero that is the United States of America had come to save the day and defeat the wicked Taliban, presided over by the one-eyed tyrant Mullah Mohammad Omar. But now, after 20 years of “missteps,” “miscalculations” and “misunderstandings,” we Afghans now wonder whether we were grossly mistaken.

The DC foreign policy community, nevertheless, has come up with predictably uncreative rebuttals to accusations of failure. We trained the Afghans wrong, the story went, ignoring the fact that Afghan soldiers have held their own for the entirety of the war. Leadership was weak, they said, ignoring the fact the US endorsed the power-sharing deal that kept those leaders in power. The Afghans couldn't build an economy, we were told, ignoring the fact John F. Sopko, the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, had been consistently putting out reports for over a decade pointing out that the US strategy needed dramatic reimagining. There was no local support and Afghans had no will to fight, they surmised, ignoring the fact that Afghan special forces continue to defend their homeland.

These excuses and reflections come as little surprise to those the United States has already abandoned: the South Vietnamese to the northern

Viet Cong, the Iraqis to Iran and the Islamic State, the Kurds to the Turks, and, most notably, the American troops who had fought and sacrificed their lives in these “forever wars” to history. All were left to perish at the hands of an evil so vile that the US had no other option but to first invade, only to later leave, suggesting that maybe the evil was not so bad after all.

Vietnam, Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan: seven different administrations, Democrat and Republican. Kabul is simply the latest victim learning the valuable lesson President Joe Biden is teaching future allies by allowing Afghans to fall from the wings of departing American jets: The US will not defend you.

All an adversary needs to do is be consistent and not give up. Time after time we have been shown that if the resistance is stubborn enough, the US will inevitably turn its back, exclaim, “What can we say, the locals just can't be helped!” while waiting for a politically opportune time — just long enough before any election so that constituents forget — and then buck and run.

China's state-run media has already begun to propagate this message to Taiwan: The US will abandon you, maybe not in five years, maybe not in 10 or even 20, but it will abandon you eventually — and we will be here. For once, China's propaganda departments are perhaps not wrong. The US can't rely on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, given its non-interference principle. Japan's self-defense forces aren't equipped to assist. South Korea has its hands full with the north. The US Navy is not built for combat with China's modern and flexible fleet, and there are no ideal places to base and supply consistent military engagement in Taiwan.

Likewise, politics will always play a role in US military engagements, but would its domestic population ever stomach a hot conflict with China over an island it shares no language, culture or customs with outside of it being a democracy?

China, on the other hand, holds the good cards. It has more ships than the US Navy.

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Taiwan is just 100 miles away, and the Chinese people are fanatical about reunification. And, just like the Taliban, Beijing isn't going anywhere.

US Vice President Kamala Harris has proclaimed that the US will not tolerate China's unlawful actions in the South China Sea, recently reaffirming Washington's commitment to its allies. But will the vice president 20 years into a "forever war" with China think the same?

It's likely that future White House administrations will have new considerations, ones that might make a trillion-dollar war with China far less palatable to the US voter base than trillion-dollar climate change legislation to end America's fossil fuel dependency. Then all the US foreign policy community has to do is look back and state that the failure was a result of "missteps," "miscalculations" and "misunderstandings," entirely forgetting that the last time these blunders were made, they vowed to learn from their mistakes, and they vowed to stand by their allies.

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## **Afghans Have Been Left at the Mercy of the Ruthless Taliban**

Sakhi Khalid  
August 27, 2021

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**The people of Afghanistan have been left with a group that has a reputation for human rights abuse.**

**O**n August 15, Taliban militants entered the outskirts of Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. It was the worst thing that could have happened to former Afghan employees of foreign institutions, women and

civil rights defenders, religious and ethnic minorities, local journalists and even ordinary people.

Now, with the final withdrawal of US and NATO forces, nearly 38 million Afghans have been handed over to a group that has conducted suicide attacks, oppressed women and massacred minorities.

Chaotically, people packed their bags and hurried to Kabul International Airport, apparently the only way left to get out of the country. Some did not even have visas and passports, without knowing their destination. The only thing they wanted was to get as far away from Afghanistan as possible. Some Afghans boarded planes, but others were unable to get on and desperately clung to an American aircraft that was about to take off. While some managed to safely arrive in other countries, others fell from the plane. This included a 19-year-old Afghan national footballer who lost his life.

In a matter of weeks, the Taliban have managed to dismantle an army built by the United States over the past two decades. Officially, the Afghan forces were at least four times the size of the Taliban and had greater combat capabilities. This failure was unpredictable for the Afghan people and anyone involved in Afghanistan. How is it possible for such a costly army to kneel before a relatively irregular terrorist group after receiving training from the world's most powerful military?

### **Why Did the Afghan Army Kneel?**

There are many possible reasons for this catastrophic defeat. This includes the lack of NATO air support for Afghan troops, low morale and faith in resisting the Taliban, widespread corruption in the army and among politicians, illegal deals and mass desertions. Reports indicate that some brigades and corps of the army had not fought a war against the Taliban in some provinces. This meant local forces who took up arms were on the front lines in key cities were without support from the Afghan army. Soldiers in the 209th Corps in Mazar-e-Sharif left their

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base without informing their allies. The local commanders in this strategic province later called the army's withdrawal a betrayal and conspiracy.

Over the years, Afghanistan's defense and security institutions have become increasingly corrupt and inefficient due to the interference of politicians. This is according to Munira Yousefzada, the former deputy defense minister. In an interview with BBC Persian, she claimed that decisions at all levels of the army were illegally taken from the Ministry of Defense and assigned to the office of Hamdullah Mohib, the national security adviser. These included critical decisions over war, intelligence, the appointment of officials, training and personnel matters. Therefore, "the Ministry of Defense had no role in the war," she said, "and all commanders, from district commanders to commanders of corps, had to be close to Hamadullah Mohib."

### **An "Unpatriotic" Fugitive**

Ashraf Ghani, the now-former president, made the national army an incapable institution by unnecessarily dismissing and appointing personnel during his rule. The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF), as the military was officially known as, was not disintegrated by the Taliban, but by the mismanagement of Afghan politicians. Ghani used his position to marginalize non-Pashtun actors from the government. When the Taliban began their operation of seizing districts, large cities and then the capital, commanders of corps and divisions surrendered one after another without putting up a fight.

In an interview with Afghanistan International, General Yasin Zia, the head of the joint chiefs of staff in the Afghan government, said that Ghani had betrayed the soldiers by making wrong decisions and fleeing the country during a war. Mohammad Mohaqiq, the former security adviser, also told the broadcaster that the president was the main culprit in the defeat of ANDSF. For the past seven years, Mohaqiq said, Ghani was overwhelmed by the illusion of power, made wrong decisions and, upon witnessing

Taliban fighters reaching Kabul, fled the country with \$169 million in cash.

Ghani's presidency will be remembered as one of the worst points in Afghan history. Thanks to his mismanagement and the crimes that took place during his rule, Afghans have accused Ghani of committing suspicious acts against national interests. His political opponents have long considered him as one of the biggest obstacles to peace.

In particular, the president did not back down when US politicians, almost all members of the Afghan High Peace Council and even Taliban leaders gathered in Qatar and called for an interim government. In early March, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken wrote a scathing letter to Ghani, saying the threats are too high and that a UN-led peace agreement with the Taliban should be signed. If this was not done, Blinken warned, the security situation in Afghanistan would spiral out of control. Shortly thereafter, several high-level US delegations, including Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III, visited Afghanistan to speak to Ghani about reaching an agreement with the Taliban. The warnings went unheeded.

### **Can the Taliban be Trusted?**

Since seizing power, the Taliban have announced a general amnesty for all people in Afghanistan, including employees of foreign institutions. According to this, everyone has immunity. As per Taliban leaders, women can return to work by observing Islamic law. Media outlets can also operate freely, as long as they follow Islamic principles. Nevertheless, it cannot simply be concluded that the Taliban are trustworthy. In the coming weeks, it will become clearer if they are tolerant toward women, minorities and activists.

In 1996, the Taliban announced an amnesty as they entered Kabul and took control of Afghanistan; they ruled the country until the US-led invasion in 2001. Yet soon after, the Taliban launched a retaliatory campaign. The worst crimes against humanity took place during the Taliban's rule. In August 1998, thousands of

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Hazaras, an Afghan minority, were massacred in Mazar-e-Sharif. Pakistani writer Ahmed Rashid described the killing as “genocidal in its ferocity.”

Taliban leaders who have appeared in the media portray a more moderate regime. They speak of forming an inclusive government, tolerance toward minorities and respecting women’s rights. But this is far from the reality.

Taliban militants are still committed to the group’s core ideology. Their fighters follow extremist thought, such as the Deobandi school and jihadi Salafism, one of the most basic principles of which is intolerance toward other Islamic sects. There have been reports of jihadists from Pakistan and other countries fighting alongside the Taliban. According to the United Nations, there are between 8,000 and 10,000 foreign fighters in Afghanistan who are either affiliated with the Taliban, al-Qaeda or the Islamic State in Khurasan Province (IS-KP).

### **Afghans Are Left at the Mercy of the Taliban**

The Taliban have so far worked closely with terrorist groups operating in Central Asia and South Asia. Needless to say, this cooperation is likely to continue in the future. The Taliban’s view of religious principles is at odds with human dignity and civil rights. In particular, the Taliban’s definition of women’s rights and freedom does not apply to Afghan society.

The group’s fighters have no faith in democracy and elections, and they are suspicious of women and minorities. Taliban leaders try to portray the group as tolerant in the media and talk about women’s rights to gain international support. In practice, their fighters on the ground believe that “women are mindless in general knowledge and religion.”

The Taliban do not have a development-oriented mindset. They do not have a plan or even skilled followers to govern, and they certainly cannot manage the country’s shattered economy. A Taliban government would presumably be accompanied by widespread

opium cultivation, drug trafficking and human rights violations.

The theory that the Taliban have changed is just an illusion. The Taliban have already begun targeted house-to-house inspections searching for Afghans who worked with US and NATO forces. There are also reports indicating that people, despite a general amnesty, have been arbitrarily persecuted publicly. Four former Afghan commanders and a relative of a Deutsche Welle journalist have reportedly been killed by Taliban fighters.

The Taliban have not treated ethnic and religious minorities well either. Just one night after their takeover, the Taliban’s unbridled fighters destroyed a statue of Abdul Ali Mazari, a Hazara religious and national leader, in Bamiyan province where the Taliban demolished two 1,600-year-old Buddha statues in 2001. According to Amnesty International, the Taliban brutally massacred nine Hazaras in July this year after seizing the rural village of Mundarakht in the Malistan district of Ghazni province. Six of them were allegedly shot dead and three were tortured to death by Taliban fighters.

The Taliban have no suitable personnel and capacity to run a country, and their only means of maintaining power is carrying out large-scale violence and ruling through fear. Under the Taliban, media will be censored and civilians will be forced to live like people in the dark ages. With the Taliban taking power, poverty, violence and organized repression will rage in the country. During their rule, civil rights advocates have no chance of survival.

Afghan civilians have been left defenseless and helpless at the mercy of one of the world’s most notorious terrorist groups.

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