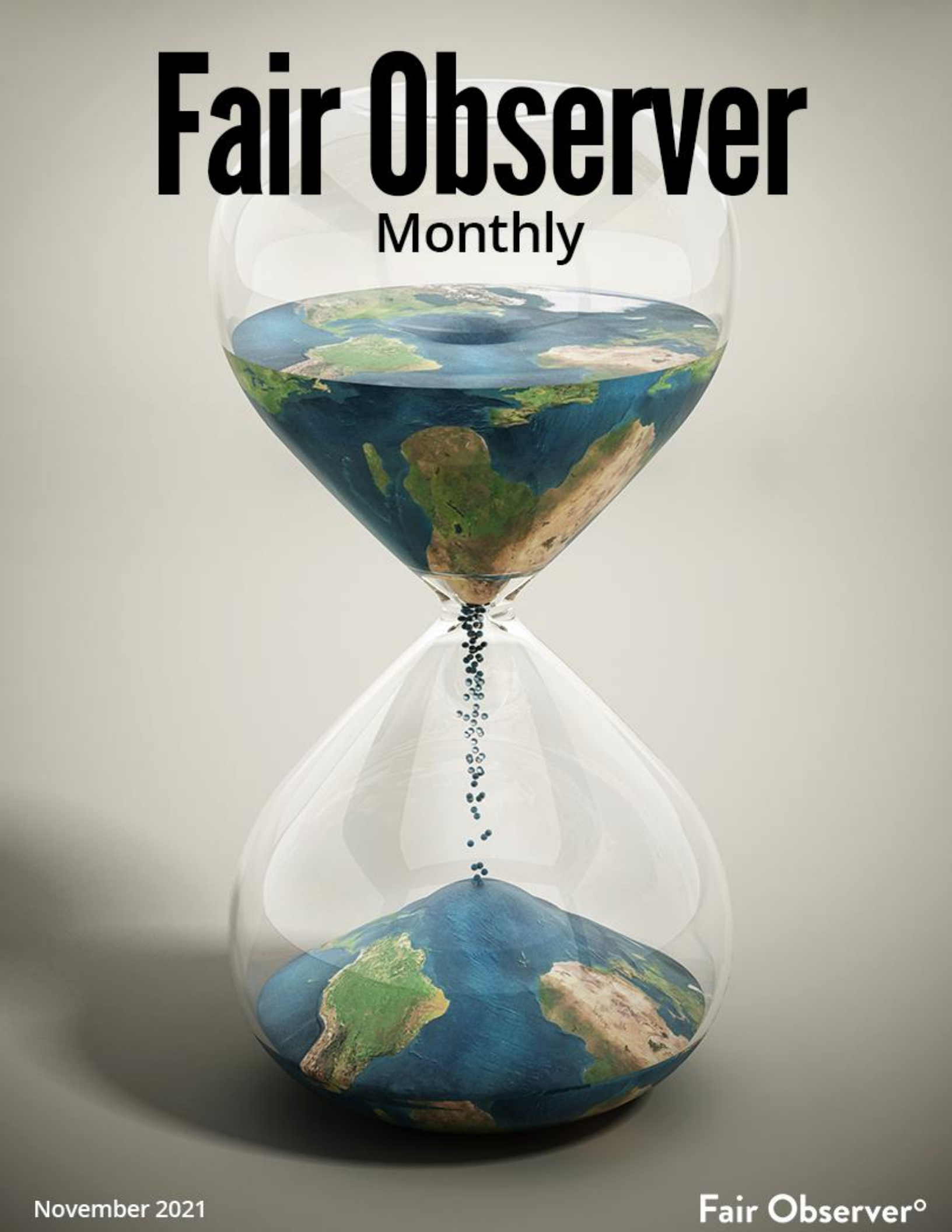
Fair Observer

Monthly



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Health Care in America Is the Best in the World

Khaled Dajani
November 3, 2021

The United States is best in class for pay, research, innovation and certain high-profile clinical outcomes.

There is an aphorism that all budding entrepreneurs and grizzled veterans alike come to intimately understand: the market never lies. Americans have among the lowest life expectancy of high-income countries — 77.3 years versus Switzerland, for example, at 83.2 years. The adult chronic disease burden stands at 24.6% of the population, compared to an average of 18% across these same countries. Obesity defined as a BMI of 30 or more is at a staggering 40% in the United States, compared to an average of 21% in the group.

Yet over a million people travel to the US every year for their medical care, including heads of state, the wealthy and elite, who presumably could have received care in their home country or anywhere else in the world. The numbers cited above do not even include the millions who are cared for by the international satellite campuses of the Mayo Clinic, Cornell, Harvard and Johns Hopkins systems, to name just a few, that have been established to bring American health care to the rest of the world.

Around 100,000 Canadians, whose nationalized health system is rated above the United States, are likely to cross the border each year for medical care. These medical tourists recognize that, on the whole, health care in the US is the best in the world.

Leading the Way

The United States leads the world as a juggernaut of medical research and innovation. More Americans have received the Nobel Prize in medicine than Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia combined, which together have double the aggregate population of the US. Half of the top 10 diagnostic or therapeutic innovations in the past 50 years have come in whole or in part from the US, along with 75% of the top 30.

When it comes to pharmaceuticals, half of the top 30 blockbusters have come from the United States alone. The advanced medical milieu that Americans enjoy has led to the world's best cancer survival rates, a life expectancy for those over 80 that is actually greater than anywhere else, and lower mortality rates for heart attacks and strokes than in comparable countries.

There are many reasons that have been put forth to explain this dominance, but the most basic and powerful is very likely money. The free-market health care economy of the US, along with lower regulatory and tax burdens, strongly incentivizes corporations to focus their business in America.

At a fundamental level, greater financial compensation also provides individuals and their families the potential for a better quality of life, while greater autonomy spurs innovation. This is why the United States is routinely listed as one of the best countries in the world to practice medicine. One-quarter of all doctors in America are foreign-trained. Licensure is a daunting process that nearly always requires "starting over" for the immigrant physician. These physicians are often fully licensed and practicing in their home country, but must now sit for the US Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) and spend years redoing all of residency and fellowship.

Despite this challenge, estimates suggest that over $2 billion is lost annually from physicians leaving sub-Saharan Africa alone to set up shop in the US. This so-called brain drain is rampant in India, Mexico and Central America and is not limited to physicians. In 2014, about 14,000 nurses left the Philippines, while only 5,000 graduated nursing school. The United States represents 5% of the world's population, accounts for around 5% of the world's disease

burden, but employs 20% of the global health workforce.

The UK and Canada

Contrast this environment with the nationalized health systems of the United Kingdom and Canada, which each year rank higher than the US. When resources are controlled by a single-payer system, the waiting time for care invariably lengthens.

In 2019, the National Health Service (NHS) in England reported that one-quarter of all cancer patients did not start treatment on time despite an urgent referral from their physician. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, wait times for medically necessary treatments in Canada averaged three months, which the treating physicians documented as one month longer than clinically reasonable.

Universal health care also leads to an increased tax burden. The tax-to-GDP ratio in the United States is 26%, which is among the lowest of 34 advanced nations. In Canada, that number sits at 32%, in the UK at 34% and in France at 45%. Some estimate that a single-payer conversion in America would potentially increase taxes by up to 20%.

For those with the means to pay, there is a booming secondary private insurance industry in most socialized health care economies, which has essentially created a two-tier system of "haves" and everyone else. Self-pay for health care in the UK rises annually by 10%, leading to a 50% increase over the last half decade, and this excludes cosmetics or costs paid by the NHS. One result is that nearly all general practices are private now in the UK, contracting their services out to the government while providing direct-pay services for the affluent.

Another outcome is that 43% of all physicians in the country are part time, which usually coincides with the switch to private practice. In Canada, one-third of all health care funding is private despite multiple legal challenges to forbid a two-tier system and resultant line-jumping.

The US Is Not Flawless

All of this is not to say that the US health care system is flawless, or that lessons cannot be learned from countries with nationalized care. Between 1975 and 2010, the number of physicians grew by 150%, while the number of administrators exploded by 3,200%; there are now 10 administrators for every physician in the United States. Administrative costs account for 25% of total hospital expenditures in the US, while the average among other affluent countries is closer to 10%.

America is also a very litigious society, at great cost to the system. The amount equals 2.5% of total health care spending or $60 billion a year, $45 billion of which is "defensive medicine" to avoid lawsuits. One-third of all American physicians have been sued in their lifetime, while that number is 1% for Canadian doctors. The average malpractice lawsuit in Canada settles for $95,000, compared with close to $400,000 in the United States. While the adjusted number of uninsured Americans is not the oft-quoted 10% — adjusted meaning those who were not eligible for any aid/coverage, and not offered insurance by any entity — but closer to 1% or around 3 million, this still should be unacceptable as health care is a basic human right.

For generations, the United States has been a shining beacon of health care hope, paving the way to healthier, longer living and whose entrepreneurial milieu has led to innovations enjoyed worldwide. While greater scrutiny over the past few decades have highlighted areas for improvement, the market never lies and recognizes that America is still the best place in the world for health care.

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Fiji's Women Are Living the Reality of Climate Change

Menka Goundan
November 11, 2021

The discussions at COP26 are far removed from the climate realities faced by Fijian women.

On November 6, Brianna Fruean and other Pacific Islands representatives marched in Glasgow as all eyes are on the United Kingdom for the COP26 climate change summit happening this month. The chilly streets of Scotland and its winter are so far removed from the reality of the Pacific that we, in the Southern Hemisphere, can neither fathom nor imagine the cold. Unfortunately, the discussions at COP26 are similarly removed from the climate realities faced by Fijian women.

The impacts of climate change are no longer just an environmental or political issue but also a complex social problem with immense repercussions for the well-being of women, girls and marginalized groups who already face injustices due to gendered power dynamics and a lack of control over the use of resources. Studies have found that women and girls are 14 times more likely to die or be injured than men due to a natural disaster. They are subject to a number of secondary impacts, including gender-based violence, loss of economic opportunities and increased workloads.

Knowledge and Understanding

Not only are women more affected by climate change than men, but they also play a crucial role in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Women have the knowledge and understanding of what is needed to adapt to changing environmental conditions and to come up with practical solutions.

But their knowledge and expertise are still largely untapped resources. Restricted land rights, lack of access to financial resources, training and technology, as well as limited access to political decision-making, often prevent them from playing a full role in building resilience in the face of climate change and other environmental challenges.

Wealthier nations, which have often used colonialism, territorialism and capitalism as means of defining progress, have caused irreversible damage to the environment, largely contributing to the deterioration of climate worldwide. Today, the Pacific Islands may be a group of nations most vulnerable to the effects of climate change, with some facing possible obliteration.

In 2021, as the fear and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to be the biggest immediate threat facing the global community, the Pacific region was not spared from catastrophic climatic events. The year began with tropical cyclone Zazu affecting American Samoa, Samoa, Niue and Tonga, and tropical cyclone Yasa landing in Fiji and Vanuatu within the span of a week.

The Pacific is most definitely experiencing more frequent and intense cyclones than ever recorded. For example, Yasa became the most powerful tropical cyclone of 2020, beating Goni with a minimum barometric pressure of 899 mb (26.55 inHg) and a maximum wind speed of 250 km per hour (155 mph). It was also the fourth most intense South Pacific tropical cyclone after Winston (2016), Zoe (2003) and Pam (2015), while Zazu dissipated into an extratropical cyclone.

With this trend of disaster in the region, the need for resource allocation is great. In 2018, Global Humanitarian Overview shows that $23.17 billion in funding was received in worldwide appeals. According to the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map, $132.11 million was committed to the Pacific in humanitarian aid that year, a mere fraction of the global effort. The

Pacific's biggest bilateral partners continue to be Australia and New Zealand.

The United Kingdom's pledge of £290 million to help countries prepare for climate change is welcome. However, past pledges by wealthier industrialized regions have failed us. For example, the commitment to raise $1 billion in climate funding has not happened and continues to be discussed at COP26. These resources are crucial for the countries and people most vulnerable to climate change.

Lived Realities

The lived realities of women in the communities are often silenced given the limited representation women have in decision-making. The stories we do not hear are of those most impacted by climate change, stories that affect the livelihood and well-being of communities. At the Women's Fund Fiji, our goal is to shift the power imbalances that prevent the full participation of women, girls and marginalized groups by providing equitable and flexible access to resources that will help women's and feminist groups, networks and organizations better respond and adapt to the climate crisis.

The women in the rural remote communities of Fiji are among the most vulnerable groups of people battling climate change in the world. Women in Namuaimada Village in Rakiraki specialize in harvesting nama (Caulerpa racemosa) — an edible seaweed, also known as sea grapes, which is found in shallow waters near the reef. The harvesting of nama is done mainly by women, who go out in fishing boats to the reefs during low tide and spend about four hours harvesting the seaweed.

According to the Women in Fisheries Network report funded by Oxfam and the Women's Fund, women are expert fishers in the coastal zone and the dominant sellers of seaweed, crustaceans and mollusks, with many fishing for household needs and selling the surplus contributing to the income and livelihoods of their families. With rising ocean temperatures, the production of these onshore and coastal marine resources will continue to decline, eventually causing loss of income and increased food insecurity for the fisherwomen.

The assumption that only the livelihoods of coastal women are affected is debunked as we investigate the plight of the fund's grantee partner, Naitasiri Women in Dairy Group, who are already experiencing the onset of climate change and exacerbated natural disasters creating both short-term and long-term hurdles to their work. The group of 31 women dairy farmers located in the interior of Fiji's main island of Viti Levu run family-owned dairy farmsteads and are shifting social norms like patriarchy and contributing to decision-making epicenters in a male-dominated industry.

Floods and tropical cyclones have continually disrupted their farm infrastructure and their ability to supply milk to the Fiji Dairy Cooperatives Limited, the nation's main dairy organization that purchases their milk on a contractual basis. With temperatures expected to continue to rise, their cattle will face greater heat stress. In hotter conditions, lactating cows feed less, leading to a fall in milk production. If climate change continues along the current trajectory, these women will be faced with income reduction and may not be able to support their families or maintain their current independence.

This is the unfortunate reality faced by women of Fiji specifically and women of the Pacific at large. Under the guise of the technical and scientific study of climate change and climate-induced disasters, the voices of women in all their diversity are often not heard. Our experiences of the many challenges we face as a group of the population that is most vulnerable are not necessarily accounted for when decisions relating to climate change are made.

This year, leaders of just three of the 14 Pacific Island states made it to the discussions to Glasgow due to COVID-19 restrictions, making it "the thinnest representation of Pacific islands at a COP ever," according to Satyendra Prasad, Fiji's ambassador to the United Nations. Given

that international negotiations are still, in the words of Britain's former Energy Minister Claire O'Neill, very much a "blokes' space," women's groups are left to bear the brunt of shrinking spaces and resources when it comes to mitigating the challenges of the climate crisis in the Pacific.

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*__Menka Goundan__ is a feminism researcher, human rights activist and development program specialist from Fiji.

The Migrant Crisis on Poland-Belarus Border Is Lukashenko's Revenge

Malwina Talik
November 15, 2021

Migrants currently trapped on the Belarus-Poland border are being used by the "last dictator of Europe" for his personal vendetta against the EU.

Hundreds of people stand in front of a barbed wire; some try to force it. Behind them are troops encouraging them to break the fence. On the other side are border security guards, ready to push them back.

This is a scene from the border between Belarus and Poland, the EU's eastern frontier, on November 8. People who are trapped between security forces pushing them back and forth had been flying from the Middle East to Belarus in the past weeks, unaware that they were being used by President Alexander Lukashenko for his personal vendetta against the European Union.

One Step Further

The current crisis has its roots in the aftermath of a highly contested election in August 2020 when Lukashenko was proclaimed president of Belarus for the sixth consecutive time since 1994. Neither the EU nor the US recognized the result because the vote, like almost all preceding ones, was assessed as neither free nor fair by the international observers. Electoral fraud triggered widespread demonstrations across the country that were brutally suppressed by the regime. By November, some 25,000 have been arrested, including 477 journalists, with widespread allegations of torture in detention.

In response, the EU imposed sanctions that include a travel ban and an asset freeze against those associated with the regime and which, as of June this year, extend to 166 individuals and 15 entities. Relations became further strained in May when Belarus used a false pretext to intercept a plane flying from Greece to Lithuania and arrested a dissident journalist who was onboard.

Consequently, sanctions were tightened, and an infuriated Lukashenko threatened with reprisal: "We were stopping drugs and migrants on our Western border. Now you will eat drugs and chase people. … Because of your sanctions, we have no money to take care of this."

Lukashenko had seen how the migration crisis of 2015 polarized EU member states, with Visegrad Group countries — Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland — opposing non-EU migration and refusing relocation of asylum seekers. From Turkey, the Belarusian president may have learned how to use refugees to put pressure on the EU. But Lukashenko, whose authoritarian rule earned him the moniker "the last dictator of Europe," went one step further, intentionally flying in thousands of people to Belarus to use them in his game against the EU.

Already in June, Lithuanian border guards observed a sudden surge in illegal crossings by people from Africa and the Middle East. Until early July, 938 migrants tried to enter Lithuania's territory illegally — 12 times as many as in the whole of 2020. Soon it became obvious that it was no coincidence: The number of flights from Middle Eastern countries to Minsk, the capital of Belarus, had intensified. Passengers were taken by buses and taxis to the border and assisted by

Belarusian border guards; local travel agencies were also apparently involved.

It is estimated that at the moment, between 800 and 1,000 people from the Middle East land in Belarus every day, with German media reporting up to 40 flights a week from Istanbul, Damascus and Dubai planned by March next year.

Lukashenko's regime targeted people from fragile countries and lured them with a prospect of easy and legal entry to the EU. This was a costly endeavor. Depending on the port of departure and destination, the price per person amounted from $6,000 to $15,000. Many migrants seem to have believed that Minsk was just a layover and that they would soon board a plane to Germany. They traveled with their entire families.

Hybrid Threat

As the number of attempts to cross the border illegally was increasing disproportionally fast, Lithuania declared a state of emergency on July 2. Lithuania and neighboring Latvia, with populations of 2.8 million and 1.9 million respectively, feared that they would not be able to cope with a sudden influx of migrants. In mid-July, Lithuania's foreign minister asked the EU to take more decisive steps against Lukashenko, invoking a "hybrid threat" and suggesting refugees being used as a "political weapon."

Latvia declared a state of emergency on August 10; Poland, with a population of 38 million, on September 2. All three states began building fences along their borders.

But all these measures did not halt the pace of illegal crossings. The statistics published by the Polish Border Guard Office show that in August, nearly 2,900 people tried to cross the border; between early August and November 4, the attempts numbered 30,000.

On November 8, as the situation at the Poland-Belarus border escalated, an estimated 3,000-4,000 people were in the vicinity of the border. A column of hundreds of people marched toward an official border crossing in Kuznica, but most were diverted by Belarusian forces to the nearby forest.

Polish forces used tear gas to stop some of the migrants from cutting the fence. As passing was impossible, hundreds set up makeshift camps along the border. Polish official sources estimated that there may currently be as many as 15,000 migrants in Belarus — the same as the number of Polish troops deployed to protect the border.

No Media, No Frontex

Although all affected countries implemented similar measures, Lithuania and Latvia allowed the media to enter emergency zones, under certain restrictions. Poland barred non-resident civilians, including journalists, from the zone and restricted access to public information, a move criticized by Reporters Without Borders and other press freedom organizations.

All information from the Polish state of emergency zone (SEZ) is provided by the authorities, local residents or, perhaps ironically, the Belarusian regime. Considering that journalists are almost always present in most active war zones and conflict areas, this is quite an unusual situation.

From the outset of the crisis, Poland has been carrying out pushbacks, a practice of forcing migrants to return to Belarus. According to UNHCR, pushbacks are a breach of international law, but the Polish parliament legalized them in October. Lithuania initially placed migrants in detention centers but soon then followed Poland's example. In mid-August, more than 4,000 people were in Lithuanian detention centers, with 1,500 people were in detention in early October in Poland.

The affected countries differ in their cooperation with Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency headquartered in the Polish capital Warsaw, which controls borders in the Schengen Area. Frontex deployed its personnel to Lithuania and Latvia, but Poland repeatedly refused help because, as it claims, it had enough troops to protect the border. Polish

officials emphasized that Frontex Director Fabrice Leggeri was "impressed by the means deployed to secure the border" in Poland.

But Frontex does more than protect borders. It has developed a special code of conduct to protect human rights and created the role of a fundamental rights officer, who monitors border guards to reduce the potential for violations of the rights of migrants.

In their attempt to reach Poland, migrants often have to cross swamps and forests, facing adversarial weather conditions; temperatures in November drop below 0˚ Celsius (32˚ Fahrenheit). Most of them wander for days or weeks, pushed back and forth repeatedly. They cannot expect assistance from humanitarian organizations, NGOs or doctors because they are barred from the SEZ. Local residents are also prohibited from helping, but many admit that they do so regardless.

In order to offer assistance to the migrants, 14 Polish NGOs formed Grupa Granica — Border Group — to monitor the situation close to the SEZ. They have documented many pushbacks, with one case in particular resonating with the public. The incident involved a group of 20 migrants, among them eight children, who in late September managed to reach Michałowo, a small town outside of SEZ. They claimed that they wanted to seek asylum in Poland. Nevertheless, they were driven off to Belarus as the entire interaction was recorded by activists and journalists.

This led to protests in Warsaw and Michałowo, supported by three former Polish first ladies. The protesters chanted, "Where are the children?" and "The place for children is not in the forest."

More Sanctions to Come

The EU unanimously condemned Belarus for "deliberately putting people's lives and wellbeing in danger" and "gangster methods." President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen declared that in response to the "hybrid conflict" sanctions on Belarus will be widened. However, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov stated that the EU should pay Belarus for stopping migrants.

Nevertheless, the EU is not open to such negotiation and relies on diplomatic international pressure and sanctions. Current attempts are directed at convincing the countries of origin to warn migrants against traveling to Belarus or to sanction the airlines who fly them. Turkish airlines already agreed to reduce flights to Belarus while Iraqi authorities offered to fly back people who agree to return.

Demands for harsher sanctions and complete closure of borders can also be heard. Such a move would paralyze international trade routes and have an impact on Russia and China — Belarus lies on China's New Silk Road — that use Belarus for transit of its goods. But sanctions are a double-edged sword, having a detrimental impact on those who impose them.

Lukashenko seems to have fewer ways out of the crisis, and many point out that he will have to surrender as the cost of his political gambling is becoming too high. There are also concerns that, in desperation and given his unpredictability, the Belarusian president may start an armed border conflict.

If Lukashenko wanted to divert attention from Belarus' domestic affairs, he succeeded. In the past weeks, reports on the crackdown against the opposition have disappeared from international debate. If sanctions are tightened and borders closed completely, not only the regime but also civil society will pay the price as Belarus becomes even more isolated.

The situation at the Poland-Belarus border is very dynamic and, in some respects, resembles a proxy war. It is where the EU and NATO encounter Russia's sphere of influence, with Polish politicians openly accusing Russia of orchestrating the crisis.

Whether legal or illegal, migrants should not be used as pawns or human shields in a geopolitical game. As desperate migrants look for other routes to enter the EU, the crisis may soon spill over into Ukraine, Belarus' southern

neighbor. Poland, Lithuania and Latvia have already joined Alexander Lukashenko as he plays with innocent lives.

But while the often-ridiculed Lukashenko managed to unsettle the EU, he has not so far succeeded in further polarizing it. Despite the breach of international law at its border, the EU stands firmly together behind Poland, Lithuania and Latvia. Time will tell if this unity remains as the crisis evolves.

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In Switzerland, the COVID-19 Certificate Divides Opinions

Hans-Georg Betz
November 16, 2021

The chasm between supporters and opponents of the Swiss government's COVID-19 measures deepens amid an increasingly polarized political climate.

Switzerland is in the news again, and not in a positive sense. Quite the contrary: In no country in Western Europe are COVID-19 vaccine skeptics as vocal and militant as in the confederation. And for good reasons. In Switzerland, most major policy questions such as defense, immigration and membership in international organizations have to be submitted to the voters via referenda and popular initiatives.

The next referendum will be held at the end of this month. The big issue: a modification of a federal law that informs the ordinances issued by the federal government to combat the pandemic. In concrete terms what the vote is all about is the COVID-19 certificate that was introduced in September. Like in many other countries, it is required if you want to eat at a restaurant, work out at a gym or go to a public library.

For obvious reasons, those who for whatever reason refuse to get vaccinated have not been particularly happy about the new regulation. On November 28, Swiss voters will be given the opportunity to either come out in support of the existing law or reject it. In the latter case, it would expire early next year. Any new law regarding the pandemic would have to be renegotiated in the federal parliament.

Patience Running Out

In the meantime, the chasm between supporters and opponents has deepened amid an increasingly polarized political climate, the general mood becoming more and more irritable. This has much to do with the dramatic worsening of the pandemic situation in Austria and particularly Germany, where new infection rates have skyrocketed within a few weeks, reaching alarming dimensions. As a result, on November 15, Austria sent its nearly 2 million unvaccinated citizens into a strict lockdown. Chances are that what is happening in Germany is sooner or later going to happen in Switzerland.

In the face of these realities, patience appears to be running out in the country. A few days ago, Switzerland's daily free newspaper 20 Minutes published the results of a survey it had commissioned. Respondents were asked their opinion on various anti-COVID-19 measures. More than half supported the notion that those who are not vaccinated should be sent into lockdown, but only if hospitals were to reach the limits of capacity once again. Given the situation in neighboring countries, this is hardly an unlikely scenario. More than 60% said that medical personnel should be obliged to get vaccinated.

Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that the opposing camp has intensified its campaign against the law, and not only in terms of rhetoric. One of the main sponsors of the campaign, a committee named "Healthy and

free," has been prepared to spend more than 1 million francs in support of the "no" campaign.

A significant part of the money comes from a Swiss billionaire couple who has organized the committee, together with one of the daughters of Christoph Blocher, the eminence grise of the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP), herself a billionaire, and other prominent personalities. The "yes" side, on the other hand, has not more than a tenth of the funds at its disposal.

Nomen est omen, as the saying goes. In this case, the name is the program — and wishful thinking. To be "healthy and free," as the past year has shown, is like squaring a circle. The intensive care units in Switzerland, Germany, the United States and elsewhere are full of patients who have paid for their freedom with their lives. Clearly, Kris Kristofferson was wrong when he claimed that "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" — at least when it comes to deadly viruses.

According to most recent statistics, cantons with the lowest vaccination rates have been recording the highest per-capita infection rates. These are relatively small cantons in German-speaking central Switzerland, the so-called Innerschweiz, such as Schwyz, Obwalden and Appenzell Innerrhoden. These cantons formed the historical core of the confederation and, as a result, liberty and independence are particularly valued here.

Vaccination Sets You Free

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that freedom is central to the opposition's campaign. The other day, Swiss households received a flyer that charged that the government, politicians and the media were exerting "enormous pressure" on everyone who doesn't want to or can't get vaccinated, concluding that with the strengthening of the COVID-19 law "one legalizes the forced vaccination of all and everybody." This, the opponents charge, not only leads to discrimination and a division of society but paves the way for the "total surveillance of the population." The result: a slow erosion of liberties and democracy.

The other day, we spent an afternoon in a small town close to Lausanne along Lake Geneva. On the way, anti-COVID-19 activists had attached posters to lampposts that were a perfect expression of the hysteria and hyperbole that informs the "no" camp. On the top of the poster, a rendition of a part of the COVID-19 certificate; on the bottom, a Chinese flag. The inscription reads: "It starts like that, and it ends like this." To add to the hyperbole, on the very bottom of the poster the exhortation says, "No to health apartheid."

Under the circumstances, it is somewhat surprising that the "no" camp has not yet pulled out the ultimate symbolic club — Auschwitz. After all, in Italy, demonstrators protesting against the government's pandemic measures saw no problem dressing up like concentration camp inmates.

Or they could take out a page from the anti-vax radical right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD), which last year managed to gain attention by posting a picture that showed parts of the entrance gate to the Dachau concentration camp. This was the part that holds the infamous and cynical slogan "Arbeit Macht Frei" — "Work Sets You Free" — only in somewhat modified fashion. Instead of "Arbeit Macht Frei" it read, "Impfung Macht Frei," exchanging "work" for "vaccination."

The appropriation of highly emotionally charged terms and symbols such as apartheid and the Holocaust by anti-vaxxers is symptomatic of the extent to which political culture in Western liberal democracies has been degraded in recent years. At the same time, it is also symptomatic of the victimology culture that pervades Western societies these days. Studies have shown that a significant number of those who refuse to get vaccinated do so because they blindly believe in the truthfulness of even the most absurd and abstruse conspiracy theories.

These are the useful idiots in the service of cynical political entrepreneurs who could care

less about their freedom and liberty, political entrepreneurs who, in the wake of the pandemic, have seen their political fortunes diminish and support at the polls decline.

The AfD is a case in point, as is the SVP. The pandemic has given little occasion to Switzerland's strongest party — which on top of it holds two ministerial portfolios in the country's federal government — to mobilize the troops. Its core issues, such as immigration and the EU, are no longer salient, at least for the moment. In this situation, the polarization over the question of how to deal with the pandemic holds significant political promise.

It is hardly a coincidence that leading SVP members are instrumental in promoting the narrative againstCOVID-19 legislation, both to rally the troops and to regain lost ground in the political arena. According to the survey mentioned earlier, SPV supporters are particularly reluctant to get vaccinated. As a result, they are most likely to succumb to the latest variant wave.

At the moment it is anyone's guess how the voters will decide at the end of the month. One thing is clear: The pandemic has opened up a deep rift in Swiss society. According to a recent survey, more than 75% of the population share this perception. To be sure, recent surveys also suggest that a majority of the electorate will vote in support of the law.

Yet past referenda have shown that surveys are not always reliable. Surprises are always possible, particularly in cases where the level of emotions is particularly high. Whatever the outcome, the "corona chasm" is likely to persist and, with it, acrimony and resentment that have started to pit Swiss against Swiss.

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Who Can Resolve Ethiopia's Catastrophic Conflict?

Martin Plaut
November 18, 2021

What began a year ago as the invasion of the northern region of Ethiopia has spread across large areas of the country.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is in Kenya on a mission that is critical to the future of the Horn of Africa. As the press release published at the start of the visit puts it, "the United States and Kenya are working together to address regional priorities, particularly ending the crisis in Ethiopia, fighting terrorism in Somalia, and restoring the civilian-led transition in Sudan."

Of these, the conflict in Ethiopia is probably the most burning issue. The forces from Ethiopia's northern Tigray region are advancing toward the capital, Addis Ababa, and panic is beginning to spread. The US has warned its citizens to leave now, saying that it will not repeat the evacuation from Afghanistan. Britain has echoed the warning while putting troops currently serving in Kenya on standby to assist.

The Somali situation has remained unsolved since the collapse of the last central government with the fall of Siad Barre in 1991. Sudan's struggle to overthrow the military who have seized power is critical but unlikely to spill over into neighboring states.

From the start of the war in Ethiopia's northern Tigray region in November 2020, there were warnings that the conflict could lead to the collapse of the country, with catastrophic consequences for the region. The day after the war began, Johnnie Carson and Chester Crocker, both former US assistant secretaries of state for African affairs, put their names to a statement signed by some of America's best-informed Africanists, warning that the conflict might lead

to the "fragmentation of Ethiopia," which would be "the largest state collapse in modern history."

They suggested the consequences could be catastrophic, and their concerns are worth quoting in full:

"Ethiopia is five times the size of pre-war Syria by population, and its breakdown would lead to mass interethnic and interreligious conflict; a dangerous vulnerability to exploitation by extremists; an acceleration of illicit trafficking, including of arms; and a humanitarian and security crisis at the crossroads of Africa and the Middle East on a scale that would overshadow any existing conflict in the region, including Yemen. As Ethiopia is currently the leading Troop Contributing Country to the United Nations and the African Union peacekeeping missions in Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia, its collapse would also significantly impact the efforts by both to mitigate and resolve others conflicts in the Horn of Africa."

Their warning was prescient. What began a year ago as the invasion of the northern region of Ethiopia has spread across large areas of the country. Maps of the fighting show areas across Ethiopia held by Tigrayan forces or fighters of their allies, the Oromo Liberation Army.

How Did the Tigray War Begin?

This is by no means simply a war between the Ethiopian government and Tigray. The conflict began with an attack on Tigray by Ethiopian federal forces, militia from the Amhara region, supported by invading troops from Ethiopia's northern neighbor, Eritrea, as well as forces from Somalia. The Tigrayans had ruled Ethiopia for 27 years until being ousted by the current prime minister, Abiy Ahmed, in 2018. The animosity between them was predictable.

The Tigrayans, smarting from their loss of power, attempted to defy the new Ethiopian prime minister. They resisted attempts to remove heavy weaponry from the Northern Command (headquartered in Tigray's regional capital, Mekelle, which they controlled). These weapons guarded northern Ethiopia (and Tigray, in particular) against any Eritrean attack. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) mobilized their citizens to block roads and prevent their removal.

However, the position of the Eritreans and Somalis requires some explanation. Tensions between Tigray and Eritrea can be traced to the liberation movements of the 1970s. Back then, the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) had an uneasy alliance, working together to fight the Ethiopian government. This culminated in 1991 with the simultaneous fall of Addis Ababa and Asmara. The EPLF provided support to the TPLF in the assault on Addis Ababa and then gave close protection to the TPLF leader, Meles Zenawi. But this alliance hid ideological and tactical disputes.

The TPLF came to power, ruling Ethiopia via the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. By 1998, this relationship had ruptured and Eritrea and Ethiopia fought a bitter war that ended in 2000, leaving some 100,000 people dead. A peace agreement was signed in Algiers, but, much to the fury of Eritrea, Ethiopia refused to accept the border drawn by the boundary commission established by the treaty.

In response, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki collaborated with the Somali Islamists of al-Shabab and Ethiopian guerrilla movements in a failed attempt to oust the Tigrayan rulers of Ethiopia. However, in 2018, internal factors finally saw the TPLF lose their grip on power in Addis Ababa, to be replaced by Abiy Ahmed.

Enter the Eritreans

Ethiopia's Abiy and Eritrea's Isaias believed they shared a common enemy in the Tigrayan military and political leadership. A series of initiatives led to an end to hostilities in 2018 between Eritrea and Ethiopia, a conflict that had simmered since the 1998-2000 border war. In a series of nine joint meetings by the Eritrean and Ethiopian leaders, they developed a joint strategy to rid themselves of the Tigrayans. It is instructive that

their final visits were held at the military bases of Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Abiy canceled scheduled elections, arguing they could not be held because of the coronavirus pandemic. But his mandate had expired and the Tigrayans said he had no right to act in this way. They proceeded with their own elections, despite being instructed by the federal authorities not to. The last straw came when Abiy sent General Jamal Muhammad to take control of the Northern Command at the end of October 2020, only to have the TPLF put him on a plane back to Addis Ababa.

The federal government and the Tigray regional authority were clearly on a collision course. Exactly what happened on November 4 last year is not clear, but fighting broke out at the Northern Command base in Mekelle, which the TPLF took control of. Tigray was under attack from the north, east and south, with reports of drones, possibly supplied by the United Arab Emirates, fired from the Eritrean port of Assab in support of the Ethiopian government's war effort.

This is not the "law-enforcement operation" described by Abiy. On November 6, 2020, he said in a tweet that operations "by federal defence forces underway in Northern Ethiopia have clear, limited & achievable objectives." Six months later, this was hardly a plausible assessment. It had evolved into a full-scale war, which the Ethiopian government and its allies appeared to be winning. After an artillery bombardment of Mekelle, Abiy could rightly claim that his forces were in "full control" of Mekelle. He said that the army's entry into the city marked the "final phase" of the conflict with the TPLF.

From Defense to Offense

In reality, the Tigrayans had pulled their forces out of the cities and had headed to the countryside and the mountains to conduct a guerrilla war — just as they had done before 1991. Mekelle had fallen, but the Tigrayan administration had ordered its forces to withdraw before the attack.

The UN, in a secret report, feared the war would become an extended conflict, characterized by irregular warfare. This is indeed what has transpired. By April 4, 2021, Abiy admitted that the fighting was far from over. Capturing the cities had not ended the war. Then, in June this year, the Tigrayans burst forth from the countryside, recapturing their capital, Mekelle, by the end of the month. Instead of leaving matters there, they continued pushing south, taking cities until Addis Ababa itself felt under threat, even though the Tigrayans are still many miles away.

The United States and European Union have been working with the African Union in an attempt to end the fighting. The US has imposed sanctions on Eritrea for its role in the war and threatened to extend these to Ethiopia and Tigray. Former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo has acted as a mediator, visiting Mekelle as well as Addis Ababa. He has had limited success.

The burden of resolving this conflict now rests on the shoulders of Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta. Whether he can succeed where others have failed remains to be seen.

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When It Comes to Climate Change, Promises Matter

Arek Sinanian
November 18, 2021

COP26, more than previous summits, has heightened the awareness of participating countries of the severity of climate change and its impact.

In life, we generally believe that words matter and that they are important. We also think promises and pledges expressed in words and made in public are really important. They show our intentions and commitment to people who matter to us. And that actions speak louder than words.

When leaders of almost 200 countries get together regularly under the Conference of the Parties (COP) banner, bringing their diverse set of social, financial and environmental challenges to solve the climate change diabolical problem, words do matter. But then those words need to be followed by action. Urgent action!

And if the previous 25 COP summits have taught us anything, it is that the promises and pledges have missed the mark, and actions have left the global problem of climate change wanting — and wanting a lot more than it has received so far. By that, I mean the promises and subsequent actions have fallen short of ensuring with a level of certainty that global warming remains below 1.5°C by 2100.

Nevertheless, the more optimistic observers believe that the 1.5°C target is still alive. But in the words of Alok Sharma, president of the recent COP26 summit in Glasgow, "its pulse is weak, and it will only survive if we keep our promises. If we translate commitments into rapid action."

The Bad News

So, what has COP26 promised future generations? Or how long is a piece of elastic band? I don't mean that to be a cynical question, because setting targets, making long-term promises in a rapidly changing world is indeed a very difficult task for any world leader. Ultimately, will the collective promises, even if implemented, be enough to keep global warming below 1.5°C?

Clearly, we won't know what the resulting carbon abatement outcomes will be. And therein lies one of the problems of all COP26 outcomes: great uncertainty. That's because there are many moving parts, many variables and unknowns, many players.

Depending on who one listens to, the likely outcome of COP26 could be anywhere between limiting global warming to within 2°C and 3.6°C. The analysis suggests widespread agreement between a number of assessments and that current policies will lead to a best estimate of around 2.6°C to 2.7°C warming by 2100 (with an uncertainty range of 2°C to 3.6°C).

If countries meet both conditional and unconditional Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for the near-term target of 2030, projected warming by 2100 falls to 2.4°C (with an uncertainty range of 1.8°C to 3.3°C). If countries meet their long-term net-zero emissions promises, global warming would be reduced to around 1.8°C (1.4°C to 2.6°C) by 2100, though temperatures would likely peak at around 1.9°C in the middle of the century before declining. But that's if all the "ifs" do actually take place.

And what happened to the 2015 Paris Agreement of limiting warming to 1.5°C? The reality is that to meet the Paris accord, coal must be phased out of the power sector in member states of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) by 2030 and globally by 2040. As there's a lot of coal "in the pipeline" in China, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Australia, there's little chance of that happening. And the best COP26 was able to deliver was a "phasing down" (not out) of fossil fuels.

The other main problem with COP agreements and pledges generally is that countries develop

and express their own promises in isolation, which in aggregate are supposed to achieve the slowing of global warming. As such promises — expressed through NDCs — are not legally binding, the best pressure that can now be applied is a new cost (the penalty for exceedance). To date, only diplomatic pressure has been used, a name-and-shame form of influence on the international stage.

Was There Any Good News?

Not that there isn't any good news — there is. The three main pillars of attention (adaptation, mitigation and finance) have been strengthened. And there's evidence that emissions are being reduced. Let's not forget that just seven years ago, it seemed quite plausible that the world was heading toward 4°C warming by 2100, and a number of factors have resulted in the warming curve being significantly flattened.

COP meetings involve numerous sessions, side events, different agendas and groups that explore, present and discuss the many aspects of climate change. So, what the general public receives is a summary and highlights of the parties' promises and pledges, and the main decisions and outcomes. So, we don't always hear about the minor achievements.

For example, a significant achievement was that more than 100 countries promised to end and reverse deforestation, which has in the recent past led to a significant reduction in much-needed carbon sinks.

The Paris Rulebook, the guidelines for how the Paris Agreement is to be delivered, was also completed, after six years of discussions. This will allow for the full delivery of the landmark accord, after agreement on a transparency process that will hold countries to account as they deliver on their targets. This includes a robust framework for countries to exchange carbon credits through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

To promote approaches that will assist governments in implementing their NDCs through voluntary international cooperation, the framework now allows a price on carbon, which countries exceeding their NDCs would bear.

As before, and necessarily, there has also been much emphasis put on adaptation programs and financial support from developed countries for developing countries already affected by the impacts of climate change.

Then there are other minor changes that will be taking place. The International Sustainability Standards Board will produce the new global standard next year to replace a confusing mixture of disclosure practices that some companies now use to assess the impact of climate change. The new standard will see companies provide a more complete view of enterprise value creation — showing the inter-connectivity between sustainability-related information and financial information. This should make the data on which investment decisions are made more reliable and comparable.

What Now?

So, what happens next? Leaders have been "encouraged" to go back to their desks and strengthen their emissions reductions and align their national climate action pledges with the Paris Agreement.

COP26, more than all previous COPs, has heightened the participating countries' awareness of the severity of climate change and its impacts, particularly on developing countries. It has led to a much higher level of awareness of the urgency of actions required. There's also now no doubt of the enormous tasks ahead to avert the anticipated global impacts.

Watch this space, while the universe looks on.

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Will the Azeem Rafiq Case Purge Britain of Racism?

Ellis Cashmore
November 19, 2021

Britain appears to have embraced Black Lives Matter more enthusiastically than the movement's native United States.

Britain is in purgatory. Its latest racial crisis is as grave, urgent and compelling as the upheaval that followed the urban riots of the 1980s and the soul-searching over the report on the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1999. But the latest scandal that has engulfed one of Britain's favorite sports and one of its best sports clubs comes only 18 months after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, in the US, that has reverberated around the world, giving impetus to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Being caught in purgatory suggests the current crisis has the ability to cleanse or purify. The case of Azeem Rafiq has the potential to do exactly this.

Rafiq is a former professional cricketer who recently revealed that, during his employment at Yorkshire County Cricket Club, between 2008 and 2014 (he also played for the club in 2016 and 2018), he was habitually subjected to racial abuse, was obliged to listen to offensive language, including the epithet "paki," and experienced "bullying." His initial complaints of institutional racism were reviewed by the club which, in October 2020, confirmed that an inquiry was underway and instructed a legal team to investigate. The findings were anodyne and, while the club apologized to Rafiq, it cited "insufficient evidence" in relation to several claims.

Rafiq escalated the matter, making an additional legal claim against the club for "direct discrimination and harassment." He had his testimony heard by an employment tribunal and, more recently, a government select committee. Key officials at the club were embarrassed into resigning, and sponsors, including Emerald Books, Yorkshire Tea and Nike, dissociated themselves, relieving the club of a valuable source of income.

Rise of the Political Athlete

Imagine if Rafiq had voiced his concerns two years ago. An individual athlete making largely uncorroborated but momentous claims, many contested by whites, from years before would have been unlikely to be taken seriously. He would have probably been dismissed as oversensitive, thin-skinned or even paranoid.

The default escape route of "banter" — that catch-all word habitually used to dismiss offense and harassment — would probably have been used to elude culpability or deny malice or aggression. A lack of hard, unequivocal evidence or confessions would not have helped his argument, and it's unlikely most people would ever have heard of Azeem Rafiq today.

Black Lives Matter has changed all that. Since the movement, which has existed since 2013, turned its focus on the Floyd murder, the world has taken notice. Its effects in Britain have been truly transformative. Statues of historical figures associated with slavery have been pulled down, entertainers from film and television have been reprimanded, shunned or canceled for characterizations that have racist connotations, every program or film is now accurately representative of Britain's culturally diverse population and practically every TV show has a disclaimer about language and scenes that may offend.

Britain already has equal opportunities legislation, but employers are probably scrutinizing how obediently they follow the letter of the law nowadays. It's doubtful whether any other country has reacted as positively to Black Lives Matter as Britain. Rafiq's case appears at a propitious time in history and now promises to batter whatever remnants of racism are left.

There is also providence in Rafiq's position. At no time in history have athletes been taken so seriously. The old stereotype about dimwitted or politically ignorant jocks has been destroyed by a generation of spirited and culturally aware athletes, who are determined to use their sports as platforms. Five years ago, this would have been unthinkable. In 2016, NFL player Colin Kaepernick, then a quarterback with the San Francisco 49ers, decided to fashion his own protest against police violence against African Americans by dropping to his knee while others stood proudly before the American flag as the national anthem played.

It was a near-seditious act at the time that barred him from the field ever since. Now, sports teams all over the world spend a few moments kneeling to signify a commitment to the fight against racism.

Athletes like Rafiq are now taken seriously. Their views and proposals on such human rights matters as child poverty, migrant workers and the National Health Service are not only listened to but, as in the case of Manchester United player Marcus Rashford's campaign for free school meals, acted upon. A blunt repudiation of Rafiq's claims from ex-colleagues impresses no one. The so-called white privilege that afforded whites credibility when denying racist behavior is fast disappearing.

Revelations that Rafiq posted anti-Semitic messages on social media several years ago do not invalidate his present claims. No one seriously believes victims of bigotry — of whatever kind — are always innocents themselves. There is also no reason to think, as Marie van der Zyl, president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews suggests, that Rafiq's apology was not "heartfelt" or "completely sincere."

Day of Reckoning for Institutional Racism?

The weakness in Rafiq's argument may turn on institutional racism, which is denied by Yorkshire Cricket, but which is, according to many, pervasive in many aspects of British society. The term came into popular use after the 1999 Macpherson Report on the killing of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager from east London. The police service as a whole was affected, concluded the report.

Institutional racism is a property of an organization, such as a firm, an educational authority or a government department. It is notoriously hard to detect, hence why it usually goes unnoticed. Let's say, for example, a government department awards lucrative contracts for the provision of services or commodities, such as personal protective equipment, to a number of firms, all of which are owned by whites. No company owned by ethnic minorities is awarded a contract, yet no one bothers to check, and the practice continues.

There may be no intention to discriminate, nor any individual may deliberately intend to disadvantage ethnic minorities. But the disparate impact is felt all the same. This is how institutional racism operates — surreptitiously.

There have been suggestions that Yorkshire County Cricket Club operates an analogous policy in hiring a disproportionately high number of white players. It is conceivable, though unlikely. While cricket is a popular recreational sport with British Asians, it offers a limited long-term career. The chances of securing a professional contract are negligible, anyway. So, while the glamour of a life in professional sport is attractive, maybe many young Asians are rational enough to make a cost-benefit calculation and arrive at the decision that their best interests will be served in accountancy, law, medicine or another profession. We at least need to consider this possibility before assuming the presence of racism.

Whether or not one agrees with the above, it is hard to miss the fact that there has been no comparable reckoning across the Atlantic. The nearest may be the case involving the Phoenix Suns owner, Robert Sarver, who allegedly used racist terms in a heated locker-room exchange. Interestingly, the incident has not been swept to prominence by Black Lives Matter. Britain, I

venture, has embraced the movement more enthusiastically than the United States.

The root and branch introspections promised in the 1980s and in the 1990s yielded change for sure. But racism was never expunged and, every so often, research would remind us that African Caribbean children underachieve at school and are overrepresented in courts and prisons, and British Asians are subject to racial profiling by the police and often fall victim to hate crimes. The visibility of racism has diminished over the decades, and its consequences are undeniably less severe. Yet it remains. But for how much longer?

The case of Azeem Rafiq is like one of those traffic signs that warns of something ahead, such as a hazard or a fork in the road. In this case, it is the day of reckoning, a time when past misdeeds are acknowledged and put right. The cricketer has already won his case, at least in a moral sense. Over the next several years, every individual, corporation and public institution will self-investigate to ensure they are faultless in their practices and that no semblance of racist behavior exists.

What of Yorkshire County Cricket Club? It will never be restored to its hallowed position in the sports pantheon and may yet become a symbol, albeit a reluctant one, of a Britain of the past, a vestige of a time when offenses could be caused without consequence, racial slurs communicated with impunity and complainants dismissed with a shrug. No longer.

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The Legacy of America’s Failed War on Terror

Kholoud Khalifa & Anas Altikriti
November 22, 2021

In this edition of The Interview, political analyst Anas Altikriti shares his insights into the events in Afghanistan and the war in Iraq.

Twenty years have passed since the 9/11 attacks in the United States. It was in the immediate aftermath that US President George W. Bush declared his infamous “war on terror” and launched a cataclysmic campaign of occupation in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2001, a US-led coalition invaded Afghanistan to dismantle al-Qaeda and search for its leader, Osama bin Laden, who were harbored by the Taliban government. The presence of foreign troops sent al-Qaeda militants into hiding and the Taliban were overthrown.

In declaring his war, Bush gave the international community an unequivocal ultimatum: to either be “with us or against us in the fight against terror.” In 2003, he took this a step further. He leveraged his power and convinced US allies that Iraq was a state sponsor of terror and its president, Saddam Hussein, had developed weapons of mass destruction, which posed an imminent threat. It wasn’t long before the world found out that this narrative was constructed by the White House as the Bush administration was determined to attack Iraq. The results were devastating: hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths, the displacement of over 9 million civilians and the political mayhem that continues to this day.

It has been argued that Islam has been conflated with terrorism not only in the media, but also in much of the political discourse. As a direct result of the war on terror, studies show that an attack by a Muslim perpetrator receives

375% more attention than if the culprit was a non-Muslim.

As these patterns grew with time, countries started to employ their deterrence capacity under the guise of the "war on terror," only to undermine those who were resisting regimes or seeking self-determination. This was seen in countries like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Even Russian leader Vladimir Putin, in 2001, quickly persuaded Western leaders that his country faced similar threats from Islamists and was dealt a carte blanche to crack down with brute force on insurgents and civilians alike.

The foreign occupation of Afghanistan ended in August 2021. After 20 grueling and miserable years, the US pulled out from Afghanistan amidst a Taliban takeover, setting a range of events into motion. Chaos filled Kabul Airport as scores of people were desperate to leave the country. The IMF suspended Afghanistan's access to hundreds of millions in emergency funds due to a "lack of clarity within the international community" over recognizing a Taliban government.

The war led to irreparable damages and hundreds of thousands of Afghans paid with their lives. The US spent over $2.2 trillion on the conflict and had thousands of its soldiers returned in body bags. Today, starving families in Afghanistan are selling their babies for money to feed their children and the world only looks on.

To understand how we got here, I spoke to Anas Altikriti, a political analyst, hostage negotiator and the CEO of The Cordoba Foundation, an organization aimed at bridging the gap of understanding between the Muslim world and the West. In this interview, we discuss America's handling of the occupation and examine Afghanistan's next steps now that the Taliban has assumed authority in the country.

Kholoud Khalifa: Joe Biden has received a certain amount of backlash from both sides of the aisle for withdrawing abruptly from Afghanistan. What do you make of his decision?

Anas Altikriti: Looking from an American perspective, I believe Biden had no choice. We tend to forget that the president who actually signed the agreement to leave Afghanistan was Donald Trump and his deadline was May of this year. Technically, you can state that Biden was carrying out a decision made by his predecessor. However, in reality — and I think that this is what's important — any American president would have found it extremely difficult and utterly senseless to carry on a failed venture. Afghanistan and Iraq were utterly horrendous mistakes. If not at the point of conception and theory, the implementation was horrid.

However, from a purely analytical political point of view, Biden had absolutely no choice. The fact that he was going to come in for so much criticism, and particularly from the American right, is no surprise whatsoever. I would like to assume that Biden's administration had the capacity to foresee that and to prepare for that, not only in terms of media, but also in terms of trying to argue the political perspective. Although in America today, I don't think that is really useful.

So, generally speaking, I'm not surprised by the fact that he got attacked, because ultimately speaking, on paper, this was a defeat to the Americans. It was a defeat to the Americans on the 20th anniversary of 9/11, the day in which the idea started to crystallize in terms of those who wanted to see American basis spread far and wide, and the whole intermittent 20 years has been nothing but an utter and an abject failure. Thousands of American troops have been killed, but on the other side, probably more than a million of Afghan lives have been absolutely decimated — either killed or having to flee their homes and live as refugees elsewhere. The cost has been absolutely incredible, and for that, I think the Americans can contend with themselves, as history will judge this to be a failed attempt from start to finish.

Khalifa: What are your thoughts on the Taliban as a political actor in today's geopolitical landscape?

Altikriti: Well, we'll wait and see. There is no question that from the military point of view, the Taliban won. They achieved the victory, and they managed to expel the Americans and to defeat them not only on the ground, but also at negotiating. For almost the past 12 years, there had been negotiations between the Taliban and the Americans either directly or indirectly, whilst at the same time, the Taliban had been fighting against the American presence in Afghanistan and never conceding for a moment on their objective that they wanted a full and complete withdrawal from Afghanistan. That, itself, is something to be taught at political science departments across the world, and it has definitely affected my own curriculum that I teach to students.

Negotiations, as well as being backed by real power, are things that have proven to be extremely beneficial and quite successful in this particular time. Now, that might be easy in comparison to catering to a nation of 40 million that have been devastated for almost three generations — from oppressive regimes to conflicts, to wars, to civil war, to occupation, to absolute and utter devastation to the rise of violence, ideological militancy, to all sorts of issues that have ravaged that nation.

Governing Afghanistan is going to be a totally different kettle of fish. It's not the same as fighting. You can say that actually fighting a war from mountain tops and caves is relatively easy in comparison with the task ahead. Whether they're going to be successful or not is something that we wait to see, and I hope for the betterment of the Afghan people that they will be.

The reality is the Taliban have won and in today's world, they have the right the absolute right to govern. Hopefully, within the foreseeable future, the Afghan people will have the choice to either hold them to account and lay the blame for whatever economic failures, for instance, or otherwise.

This struggle between nations and their regimes is a continuous one. Thankfully, where we live, in the West, that struggle is mostly done on a political plane. So, we fight politically and we hold our politicians accountable through the ballot boxes. That is not present in many, many developing countries. Afghanistan is definitely a country that needs to find its own model as to how to govern and how to create that kind of balance between people and regime. I think it is utterly hypocritical from the West to prejudge them and hold them to ransom via mistakes that happened in the past. Every administration commits mistakes of varying sorts. Our own government in the UK is now being investigated by an independent inquiry staff as to how it dealt with COVID and whether some of its decisions led to the death of thousands of people. So, mistakes can happen.

The West needs to contend with why they left Afghanistan after 20 years of absolute misery and suffering no better than when they came to it in 2001. That's a question that the West, including the UK, need to ask themselves before passing judgment on to the Taliban.

Khalifa: You mentioned something very interesting. You said we're waiting to see and we cannot judge them right now. Do we see any hints of change? Has today's Taliban changed from the Taliban of the pre-US occupation? For example, the Taliban issued a public pardon on Afghan military forces that had tried to eradicate them.

Altikriti: Well, the hints are plenty and the hints are positive. The fact that the Taliban, as you put it, issued that decree that there won't be any military trials or court marshals being held. The fact that from the very first hours, they said that anyone who wants to leave could leave and they won't stop them, but that they hope everyone will stay to rebuild Afghanistan. I think from a political and PR point of view, that was a very, very shrewd way to lay out the preface of their coming agenda.

The fact that Taliban leaders spoke openly, and I'll be honest, in quite impressive narratives and discourses to foreign media — to the BBC, to Sky — and, in fact, took the initiative to actually phoning up the BBC and intervening and

carrying out long and extensive interviews. This has never happened before. We could never have imagined that they sit with female correspondents and presenters and spoke freely and openly. Also, the fact that they met with the Shia communities in Afghanistan at the time when they were celebrating Muharram and assured them that everything was going to be fine.

I think a big part of whether Afghanistan succeeds or not lies in the hands of the West. For instance, in the first 24 hours of the Americans leaving in such a chaotic manner, which exemplified the chaos of the Taliban as we know it, the IMF said that funds to Afghanistan would be withheld. Therein begins that kind of Western hegemony, Western colonization that I believe is at the very heart of many problems in what we termed the Third World or the developing world.

The fact that sometimes nations aren't allowed to progress, they aren't allowed to rise from the ashes, they aren't allowed to recover, they aren't allowed to rebuild, not because of any innate deficiency on their part, but because of the international order that we have today in the world. We have so many restraining legal organizations — from the UN downwards, including the IMF and the World Bank — that hold nations to ransom. Either you behave in a particular way or we're going to withhold what is essentially yours. It's an absolute travesty, but unfortunately, this goes across all our radars. There is very little response in terms of saying, hang on, that is neither just nor fair nor democratic.

If you really, really want the betterment of Afghanistan and Afghan people, countries should be piling in, in order to afford help, to afford aid and to make absolutely sure that the Afghan people have everything they need in order to rebuild for the future.

But, unfortunately, the opposite is happening. We're tying the nation's hands behind its back and saying, we're just going to watch and see how you do in that boxing ring, and if you don't fare well, that will be justification for us to maybe reintervene in one way or another sometime down the line.

Khalifa: After seizing the country, the Taliban promised an inclusive government, with the exception of women. Yet the current government only comprises Taliban members. What are the chances that they deliver on forming an inclusive government?

Altikriti: I'm sort of straddling the line between being an academic and an activist, and I have a foot in both, so it's sometimes a little bit difficult. However, I would suggest that when the Conservative Party in Britain wins an election, it's never assumed that they include people from the Labour Party or Liberal Democrats in their next government. The same goes in America: When the Republicans win an election, you can't reasonably ask or expect of them to include those with incredible minds and capacities from the Democratic Party — you simply don't.

So, the hope for inclusivity in Afghanistan needs to take that into consideration. The Taliban are the winning party — whether by force or by political negotiations — and therefore, they have the right to absolutely build the kind of government they see fit. For them to then reach out to others would be an incredible gesture.

But I think it's problematic and hypocritical if the West doesn't allow the winning party to govern. If after some time it doesn't manage to, then maybe you'd expect it to reach out to others from outside its own party or from outside its own borders and invite them to come and help out. But that's not what you expect from day one.

The fact that they haven't done what many people expected, and I personally have to say I feared would happen, and it hasn't. So, until we find that media stations closed down, radio stations barricaded and people rounded up — and I hope none of that will happen, but if it does, we hold them to account.

Khalifa: Imran Khan, the prime minister of Pakistan, says the international community must engage with the Taliban, avoid isolating Afghanistan and refrain from imposing sanctions. He says the "Taliban are the best

bet to get rid of ISIS." What's your view on that?

Altikriti: If we're looking back at their track record, they were the ones who managed to put an end to the civil war that broke out after the liberation from the Soviet Union. I mean, for about five to six years, Afghanistan was ravaged with a civil war, warlords were running the place amok. I remember an American journalist said the only safe haven in Afghanistan was something like a 20-square-meter room in a hotel in the center of Kabul. The Taliban came in and created a sense of normality, once again in terms of putting an end to the civil war. There remained only one or two factions that were still in resistance, but otherwise, the Taliban managed to actually bring Afghanistan to order.

It was only after 9/11 and the US intervention that returned the country back into a state of chaos. So, if we're going to take their track record into consideration, then it's only fair to say that they do have the experience, the expertise and the track record that shows that they can bring some semblance of normality and peace.

Now, obviously, we understand that Afghanistan is not disconnected from its regional map and from the regional politics that are at play, including the Pakistani-Indian conflict. It's no secret that the Taliban were looked after and maintained by the Pakistani intelligence. I understand from the negotiations that were taking place since 2010 that there was almost always a member of the Pakistani intelligence present at the table. So, it's not a secret that Pakistan saw that in order to quell the so-called factions that represented the mujahideen, the Taliban were its safest bet.

In that sense and from that standpoint, you would suggest that the Taliban are best equipped. Much of what was going on in Afghanistan was based on cultures, traditions and norms that Americans were never ready to embrace, understand or accept. That's why they fell foul so many times of incidents, which could have been easily appeased with only a little bit of an understanding and of an appreciation of fine cultural or traditional intricacies and nuances. The Taliban wouldn't have that issue.

So, you would suggest that what Imran Khan said has some ground to stand on. It's a viable theory. But everything that we're talking about will be judged by what see is going to happen. But before we do that, we need to allow the Taliban the time, so that when we come to say, listen, they fail, we have grounds and evidence to issue such a judgment.

Khalifa: I want to shift to the US. So we know that there was a US-led coalition, and its presence for over 20 years in Afghanistan and in the Middle East led to very little change in the region. You already alluded to that at the very beginning. The US spent trillions of dollars and incurred the highest death toll out of the coalition members. What has the US learned from this experience?

Altikriti: I think that's the question we should be focused on. I fear that it has learned virtually nothing and that's very worrying. Just like we were passing pre-judgments on the Taliban, we need to do the same everywhere. If that's the kind of ruler that we're using to judge a straight line, it's the same ruler we need to judge every straight line.

We heard the statements that emerged from Washington, and to be perfectly honest, very, very few were of any substance. Ninety-nine percent, and this is my own impression, were about America looking back and how they let down the translators and the workers in the alliance government and left them at their own fate. The tears were shed, both in the British Parliament as well as the American Congress, which actually shows that these people didn't get it. They didn't get it and that is what worries me the most.

If something as huge as Afghanistan and what happened — this wasn't a car crash that happened in a split second. This was something that was led over the course of the last 17 years and definitely since President Trump signed the agreement with the Taliban in 2020. This should

have been a time for politicians and analysts to actually read the situation and read the map properly. But it seems that they never did and they never bothered to see if there was any need or inclination to take lessons from it.

I'm yet to come across a decision-maker, a lawmaker, a politician, a senior adviser to come out and say there were horrendous mistakes carried out by the occupation and by the other alliance governments that led to this, and as a result, we need to learn what to do and not do in future. But there is this arrogance and pride that forbids us from doing so, and as such, they're inclined to make the same mistake time and time and time again.

Khalifa: Given that the so-called war on terror, and more specifically the occupation in Iraq, was an utter failure, what is the probability in your opinion that America will engage in another foreign intervention?

Altikriti: From a purely political view, I find this extremely far-fetched in the foreseeable future. The reasons being that Americans had to endure bruising at every single level and because of the crippling economic crisis. So, it's extremely difficult to launch an intervention or military intervention in the way that we saw in Iraq, Afghanistan or Panama in the next two to three years. But the thing is, often, American politics is driven by corporate America.

I mean, we talk about the trillions spent, but like someone said in an article I read in The Washington Post, that those trillions were more than made up by American corporations, by American oil, by getting their hands on certain minerals in Afghanistan. Even the drug trade itself, which Britain and America thought they would quell, it was actually the Taliban who brought it under control, who actually went around and burnt the poppy seed farms. The West reinvigorated that tradeline and stabilized it. Therefore, as a friend of a friend tells me, he says many of those who were scrambling for airplanes in Kabul Airport were poppy seed farmers because they knew that they had absolutely no future under the Taliban.

So, once we count the trillions incurred by the taxpayer, we forget that there is another side that you and I probably don't even know that is gaining riches at the expense of the Afghans.

The beast now is to try out new weapons. Lockheed Martin and others will always have a vested interest in trying out the new technology, and what's better than to try it out in real-life situations? If I was to speak to any modern, contemporary, 30-something-year-old military analysts, they'd laugh me off because I'm speaking about a bygone age. We're talking now about wars where we don't involve human beings. I mean, in terms of the assailants, they're flying drones, and there's an intelligence level to it that I can't fathom nor understand.

Another aspect that no one is talking about almost is the privatization of militaries. We're coming now to find brigades, thousands of troops that are mercenaries, people who fight for a wage. Now, this is the new way to fight wars: Why would Britain employ some of its brightest and youngest when it could pay £100 a day to have someone else fight wars on its behalf? And this is now becoming a multibillion-dollar industry. It first started out as a reality in Iraq, when we had the likes of Blackwater who were guarding the airports, presidential palaces and government officials. You'd try to speak to them only to realize they were from Georgia or Mozambique or elsewhere, and they don't fall under the premise of local law. Therefore, if they kill someone by mistake, you can't take them to court and that's the contract you sign. That is where I think the danger lies.

Khalifa: In 2010, you appeared on Al Jazeera's "Inside Iraq" alongside the late Robert Fisk and Jack Burkman, a Republican strategist. Burkman described Arabs and Muslims as a "bunch of barbarians in the desert" and the Bush administration as the savior bringing change. With its failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, has the US perceptions of Arabs and Muslims changed, and if so, how?

Altikriti: I'd love to have a chat with Jack right now to see what he thinks 11 years on. To answer your question, it saddens me to say that yes, it's changed, but only because America and American society are so polarized and so divided. It only took Donald Trump to become president or 50% of Americans to defy everything that Trump said. Being anti-Trump meant standing up for Muslims when he issued the Muslim ban for flights. So, people from their standpoint of being anti-Trump said, no, Muslims are welcome. It's absolutely the wrong way to go on about it. That's not how we recognize, for instance, that racism is wrong or evil.

However, the fact is that in the past, anti-Muslim sentiments were everywhere and the feelings that Jack Burkman expressed so horribly in that interview were widespread. I personally believe they still remain because 9/11 has become an industry and that industry has many facets to it. Part of it is ideological, part is media, part is educational and obviously part transpires into something that is military or security-based.

We still have Guantanamo. Why is it that the American people aren't talking about Guantanamo to the extent that they should be? This is something that is on the conscience of every single American citizen — it is paid from their own taxes. Why no one talks about it is simply because no one dares touch the holy grail — the industry of 9/11. It's a huge, huge problem.

I still believe that those sentiments expressed by Jack back then are still prevalent, but like I said, they were mitigated by the advent of Trump and by his declaration against Arabs and Muslims. This, as well as the highlighting of certain issues by the left in America, such as the gross crimes committed by the Saudi regime and that's helped in two ways. Firstly, you expose the crimes committed by Saudis, but it's also cemented that view that Arabs are barbarians.

Khalifa: Afghanistan wasn't the only country that suffered. Iraq suffered more dire and devastating consequences from the so-called war on terror. What does a future look like for Iraq now that the US has withdrawn?

Altikriti: Oh, very grim, very, very grim. The Americans haven't withdrawn — they're less visible. There are current negotiations regarding the next Iraqi government in the aftermath of the elections that we've just had, which shows that the Americans are heavily involved.

Iraq is the playground of Iran. So, therefore, any policy of America or Britain or Europe that involves Iran has to have Iraq in the middle.

There are still about three or four American military bases, and from time to time, we hear the news that certain militias targeted this base or that base where Americans lie. Now, the personnel who are there within the bases might carry ID cards as construction workers, advisers, legal experts, bankers or whatever. But ultimately, they're all there to represent the best interests of the United States. So, America is still there.

However, Iraq is in dire straits. I think the indices that go around every year that show us levels of corruption, levels of transparency, levels of democracy, levels of happiness of people and satisfaction — Iraq is regarded as one of the 10 worst countries on every single level. I think that shows what's been done to Iraq and what's been done to the Iraqi people.

The fact is that we have at least 30% of the Iraqi people living as refugees, either within Iraq or outside of Iraq. The fact that in an election only 20% of the people choose to take part.

You have to ask serious questions. You have to say, OK, so when the Americans accused Iran — and I'm a believer that Iran is the worst of all players in Iraq. But you have to ask: So you occupied the country, why did you allow it to happen? So, you can't just brush it off and say, well, the Iranian militias and its people and its proxy agents in the sun. Well, what were you doing there? So, I think that, again, what has been done to Iraq and to all Iraqis — regardless of their faith, regardless of their sect, regardless of their ethnicity — all of what has happened is a stain. A huge, huge one on the consciousness of

everyone in Britain, America, Spain and all the countries that signed up for this and took part in this, everyone has a responsibility to answer.

I mean, obviously, when we spoke about Afghanistan, we didn't speak about the crimes, the actual crimes that were committed. The one that we come to recognize and know about is the crimes committed by the Australians, where they actually trained the young cadets to shoot at people and kill them to be acknowledged as soldiers. We didn't talk about that because there are so many of those that were committed. To speak not of Arab and Muslim barbarity, but of Western barbarity — that's something I think should be discussed.

Khalifa: In Egypt, it was a military coup in 2013 that overthrew a democratically elected government led by the Muslim Brotherhood. In Tunisia, a constitutional change led to the fall of Ennahda, an Islamist party. In Morocco, it was the people who voted out the Justice and Development Party, which ruled the country for 10 years and suffered a massive defeat in September; they went from having 125 seats to only 12. To juxtapose this, in Afghanistan, the Taliban conquered the country overnight from the US, the most powerful country in the world. What message does this send to Islamist parties in the Muslim world?

Altikriti: Only yesterday, I was discussing this with a group of colleagues, and someone repeated a statement that was sent to me by a fellow of Chatham House. He said to me something quite interesting. He said: "Don't you see that many around the world, particularly young Muslims, will be looking to Afghanistan — and three months ago in Palestine and what happened there — and think to themselves that the way forward is to carry guns." I said: "Listen, my friend, you're saying it. I'm not."

But in reality, it's unfortunate that many of my own students are saying, "It's been proven." I mean, they say, "you academics, you always talk about empirical evidence. Well, here it is: Politics doesn't work. Democracy doesn't work. The ballot box does not work. What does work? There you go, you have Taliban, you have the militias. So go figure." Unfortunately, that is the kind of discussion that I think will dominate the Muslim scene, particularly the political Muslim scene.

For the next few years, I believe, whilst we analyze political Islam and Islamic parties, whether in Egypt, Morocco or Tunisia, that will be the question. Is it a viable argument to say that these parties will have absolutely no chance, either immediately in the short run or in the long run? In Tunisia, they were allowed to run for about 10 years. In Morocco, they were in government for about 10 years. Before that, they were in opposition and they were thriving. But in Egypt, they weren't allowed to stay for more than a year. So, ultimately, the end is inevitable. So, is it the need to shift and change tactics? It's going to be quite an interesting and, at times, problematic discussion, but it's a discussion you need to have.

And last, by the way, on this particular point, the West did not allow democracy, particularly in Egypt and in Tunisia, to exist. We spoke of democracy, we spoke of human rights, we spoke of freedoms, but when they all came to be crushed, the West did absolutely nothing, which told the others well, you know what? They don't care, there are no consequences, and that is why it is that many, many Muslim youth today will say, well, there's only one way to go there.

Khalifa: And lastly, what do you believe are the core causes for Islamic extremist groups, i.e., Daesh or al-Qaeda, to still have a foothold in the region, and in your opinion, what is the best way to combat these groups?

Altikriti: Their biggest arguments, and which works well for them, is the fact that democracy failed and that they got nothing from buying into Western values of how to run their societies.

Their biggest argument now will be the Taliban and how they won. So, those are the main standpoints [for] these extremist groups; they lie on people's frustrations and their feelings that there is no other way out. That's essentially

the argument. I've seen it in groups where someone is trying to recruit for that idea. Their bottom line is it doesn't work. There is no other way — that's their only argument.

It's not theological, by the way. People think they are basing it on these Quranic verses or on hadiths [sayings of Prophet Muhammad], but they absolutely do not, because on that particular front, they lose, they have no ground to stand on. [For them,] it's the fact that, in reality, it doesn't work — democracy doesn't work. Human rights doesn't work. Because ultimately, your human rights mean nothing to those in power. So, killing us is as easy as killing a chicken. It's nothing. That is their argument.

So, it's going to be a struggle, it's going to be a big, big, big struggle for people who want to advocate democracy, want to advocate civil society and diversity. It's a struggle we can't afford not to have, we can't afford not to be in there, because the outcome, the costs will be so hefty on every single part and no one will be excluded.

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Water World: Is Climate Change Driving Our Future Out to Sea?

Anna Pivovarchuk
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As sea levels rise, hundreds of millions of people may be at risk around the world.

There is no question about it: Our planet is warming faster than ever before. Having plateaued around 280 parts per million for thousands of years, global CO2 emissions have shot past 400 ppm at the end of the last decade, an atmospheric rise set in motion by the 18th-century Industrial Revolution. Human activity in its myriad modes of creative destruction has led to a global average temperature rise between 1.1˚C and 1.2˚C above pre-industrial levels. It brought with it nature's wrath in the form of an ever-increasing number of extreme weather events — wildfires and floods, one-in-a-lifetime storms and heatwaves, droughts and rising seas.

Climate change, as the skeptics like to remind us, does occur naturally. Analysis by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) estimates that temperatures during the last interglacial period, which began 130,000 years ago and lasted somewhere between 13,000 and 15,000 years, were 0.5˚C and 1˚C warmer than in pre-industrial times and up to 2˚C or even 4˚C warmer during the mid-Pliocene Warm Period, around 3 million years ago. But while there are natural processes in place, the pace of climate change over the past century has demonstrated the devastating effect of anthropogenic activity on the delicate balance of life on Earth.

The Seas Are Rising

What is significant about the IPCC assessment is that during the last interglacial period, sea levels were likely between 6 meters and 9 meters higher, possibly reaching 25 meters during the mid-Pliocene. That may sound farfetched, but modeling suggests a 2.3-meter rise per 1˚C of warming. Globally, the average sea level has already increased by 0.2 meters since the late 19th century, starting at a rate of 1.4 millimeters a year from 1901 to 1990 and accelerating to 3.6 millimeters a year between 2006 and 2015.

This spells disaster for the coastal areas. A study published in Environmental Research Letters earlier this year suggests that, even with no net global emissions after 2020, "the carbon already in the atmosphere could sustain enough warming for global mean sea level to rise 1.9 (0–3.8) meters over the coming centuries," meaning that currently, anywhere between 120 million and 650 million people — or a mean of 5.3% of the

world's population — live on land below the new tide lines.

Even if warming is kept under the upper limit of the Paris Agreement of 2˚C above pre-industrial levels, multi-century sea level rise can reach 4.7 meters, threatening the livelihoods of double the number of people, the authors assess. In 2019, the IPCC estimated that this number could reach 1 billion by 2050. The panel predicts a rise of anywhere between 0.29 meters and 1.1 meters by 2100 relative to 1985-2005, depending on emission rates. A paper published in Nature concluded that if we stay on the current emissions course heading for 3˚C warming, we will reach a tipping point by 2060, with the Antarctic ice sheet alone adding 0.5 centimeters to global sea levels each year.

According to the authors of a 2019 study on sea-level rise and migration, rising waters are predicted to be the "most expensive and irreversible future consequences of global climate change, costing up to 4.5% of global gross domestic product." A 2018 projection by C40, a network of mayors of nearly 100 global cities, estimated that a 2˚C rise could affect 800 million people in 570 urban centers by mid-century. As the authors of a 2021 study summarize, "Although there is large variability in future sea level projections, due, for instance, to the uncertainty in anthropogenic emissions, there is consensus on the potentially catastrophic worldwide impact of SLR."

A 2˚C rise puts land that houses over half the population of Vietnam and Bangladesh and over 80% of those living in the island nations like Kiribati, Tuvalu, the Bahamas and the Marshall Islands below the tide line. The Maldives, with 80% of its 1,200 atolls not even reaching 1 meter above sea level — the world's lowest terrain, with its highest elevation point of just 2.4 meters — is particularly at risk; there is literally nowhere to hide. In May, the minister for the environment, climate change and technology, Aminath Shauna, told CNBC that if current trends continue, the island nation "will not be here" by 2100. "We will not survive. … There's no higher ground for us … it's just us, it's just our islands and the sea."

Water, Water Everywhere

It is clear that Alisi Rabukawaqa, project liaison officer at the International Union for Conservation of Nature, she has given this a lot of thought. When I ask her about the reality of climate change in what many would consider to be a tropical paradise — her native Fiji — she doesn't stop talking for nearly 10 minutes. She remembers a time when devastating cyclones were "lifetimes apart." Now, category 5 storms are a regular, looming threat.

"And if it's not cyclones, it's the drought. And if it's not the drought, it's the saltwater intrusion that's impacting where people plant; and if it's not that, it's seeping into drinking sources and boreholes from outer islands," she tells me from a Fiji so hot, everyone is bracing for another cyclone.

While for most communities affected by sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion relocation is still "further down the line," traditional land ownership laws mean that you can't just pack up and move anywhere you like, even if, unlike in the Maldives, there is higher ground. In 2017, the government's National Development Plan identified over 830 vulnerable communities, 48 of which were in urgent need of resettlement. The plan was developed a year after Tropical Cyclone Winston, which hit Fiji in February 2016, significantly affected around 350,000 people. That is a high number by any standard; here, it's more than a third of the population.

"Fiji is a small place relatively, so all those things combined, it's made us more vulnerable," Rabukawaqa says. "In the past, it was just the issue of development, thinking of proper development, like, How do we do this right? How do you ensure it's sustainable? Reforestation. Those seem like simpler times."

Saltwater intrusion is what is having a major impact on the coastal community of Barishal in Bangladesh, home to Kathak Biswas Joy, district coordinator with Youth Net for Climate Justice,

member of the advisory team with Child Rights Connect and the founder of the non-profit Aranyak. It was his work on children's rights that made him realize that "in Bangladesh, everything is related to climate change." As it exacerbates existing inequalities, driving migration from the countryside — where salinity and flooding are destroying farmland — to the coastal cities, child labor and child marriage become ever more commonplace.

So does disease. Increased salinity has been linked to numerous problems during pregnancy and child mortality, hair loss and skin diseases, dysentery, hypertension, risk of miscarriage and changes in menstrual cycles as well as difficulty with maintaining hygiene. The deadly dengue fever, already the "fastest growing vector-borne viral disease in the world" as a result of a warmer, wetter climate, has ravaged Bangladesh alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. In a country where water is everywhere, it seems to bring as little relief as it did to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ancient mariner.

Rabukawaqa echoes this sentiment. In a nation that depends almost entirely on the ocean, the traditional and cultural relationship with it is turning from "a beautiful, loving, caring one … into one where the ocean is suddenly becoming our enemy. And we don't want it to be that way."

On Your Doorstep

If you think that Alisi Rabukawaqa's and Kathak Biswas Joy's problems are far from your world, think again. While nine out of 10 top large countries at risk from sea-level rise are located in Asia, no place is safe. Many of the world's most vibrant cities already face a considerable threat from flooding by as early as 2030 — less than a decade from now. Climate Central, a nonprofit, has used data from "peer-reviewed science in leading journals" to map areas most at risk over the coming century. While the creators warn that the mapping is bound to include errors, its scope of doom is frightening.

If global warming is not halted, cities as diverse as Bangkok, New Orleans, Lagos, Rio de Janeiro, Hamburg, Yangon, Antwerp, Basra, Dhaka, New York and Dubai may see entire neighborhoods submerged. On average, coastal residents experience a sea-level rise of around 8 millimeters to 10 millimeters a year for every 3-millimeter rise in sea levels due to subsidence — the slow sinking of land that occurs in river deltas that can be exacerbated by the extraction of resources like groundwater and oil.

Tokyo, for example, sank by 4 meters over the course of last century, Shanghai, Bangkok and New Orleans by 2 meters. The Thai capital, built on what is known as "Bangkok clay," saw the water-logged areas it sits on drained to accommodate for agriculture and urban expansion, making flooding a recurring problem, exacerbated by a six-month-long rainy season.

In Shanghai alone, China's financial hub that sits in the Yangtze River estuary surrounded by lakes, nearly $1 trillion of assets are at risk as a result of rising waters, according to analysis by the Financial Times. The Pearl River Delta Economic Zone, which generates 20% of China's GDP and 3.8% of global wealth, is one of the areas most at risk of sea-level rise. In May, China's Ministry of Ecology and Environment estimated that its coastal waters were 73 millimeters above "normal" average for the period between 1993 and 2011, with temperatures 0.7˚C above the 1981-2010 range.

In Venice, the aqua alta, or "high water," usually occurs between autumn and spring caused a combination of tide peaks, sirocco winds and the lunar cycle. The city that encompasses some 100 lagoon islands has been threatened by water for centuries, but according to city data, Venice had experienced as many inundations over 1.1-meters aqua alta levels in the last two decades alone as over the whole of the previous century. The 2019 flood that submerged 80% of the city, killing two and causing devastating damage to historical landmarks and $1 billion of losses, saw the second-highest water level in its history.

Mozambique, with one of the longest coastlines in Africa that spans 2,470 kilometers and is home to 60% of the population, is in

danger of losing an estimated 4,850 square kilometers of land surface by 2040, according to an assessment by USAID. With 45% already living below the poverty line, 70% currently depend on climate-sensitive living conditions. According to a 2021 study published in the Journal of Marine Science and Engineering, 20% of the population relies on fishing as the main income, contributing some 10% of the country's GDP, alongside 5% brought in by tourism.

Coastal erosion and increasing extreme weather events like Cyclone Idai, the deadliest storm in the history of southern Africa that hit Mozambique in 2019, threaten all of this — as well as the country's fragile ecosystems like coral reefs. Idai caused $3.2 billion worth of damage; at around 22% of the country's GDP, that's about half the annual budget.

If the current projections are correct, 12 of India's coastal cities may be under 1 meter of water by the end of the century. Mumbai, the country's economic capital, and Kolkata, India's third-largest city built in the lower Ganges Delta, rely on drainage systems dating back to colonial times. Consequently, Mumbai experiences floods every year these days. According to IPCC assessment, Kolkata warmed more than any other studied city between 1950 and 2018, by 2.6˚C — ahead of Tehran's 2.3˚C and Moscow's 1˚C — and may see its one-day maximum rainfall rise by 50% by 2100.

While the United Kingdom is not exactly known for sunny climes, the Albion has been experiencing record-breaking rainfall, more frequent storms and flooding, at a cost of £1.4 billion a year in damages, or around £800 million per flood, according to government figures. With the temperature already a degree warmer than a century and a half ago, storms like Desmond, which caused £1.6 billion worth of devastation in 2015, may become 59% as likely.

In the Thames floodplain, London's iconic locations like Tower Bridge, Hampton Court and the London Eye are at risk by 2050. Earlier this year, flooding in central London influenced Queen guitarist Brian May's decision to pack up and leave, one of the more high-profile climate refugees escaping the rising seas.

In its latest report published in September, the World Bank suggested that as many as 200 million people could be displaced as a result of climate change, an upgrade from its 2018 figure of 148 million. The Institute for Economics and Peace put the number of climate refugees at 1.2 billion. While it is difficult to predict how people will respond to the new circumstances over the coming decades, analysis by Brookings suggests that of the 68.5 million displaced in 2017, approximately one-third was on the move due to "'sudden onset' weather events — flooding, forest fires after droughts, and intensified storms."

Conflicting studies on migration flows demonstrate just how difficult it is to model human behavior in the face of crisis. But we are highly adaptable and can move relatively freely (in the absence of border restrictions). In the animal kingdom faced with loss of vital habitats and fragile ecosystems, up to a third of all the world's species can go extinct as a result of climate change by 2070, or more than half under a less optimistic emissions scenario. It is a tragedy the scope of which merits its own elegy.

A Drop in the Ocean

To quite literally stem the tide, many countries are adopting new technology in the hope to secure their future. China launched its "sponge city" initiative in 2015, with the aim to absorb and reuse 70% of rainwater by 2030; some 30 cities are taking part in the scheme, including Shanghai. Egypt's historical city of Alexandria, where landmarks like Cleopatra's palace and the famed lighthouse are in danger of submersion, has opted for widening its canals and rehousing people living alongside them.

The Netherlands, a third of which already lies below sea level, has been building flood defenses for millennia, and now prides itself on one of the most advanced systems in the world, including the giant sea gate of Maeslantkering that protects the harbor of Rotterdam. Last year, Venice

managed to hold back the waters for the first time in 1,200 years with the help of the €7-billion flood barriers that have been under construction for nearly two decades.

Farmers in Bangladesh are turning to the centuries-old practice of floating farms, while Mumbai has been working to conserve its mangroves that can help absorb the impacts of cyclones and dissipate flooding.

The Maldives is planning to start the construction of the Dutch-designed Floating City in 2022, a first of its kind, to complement the artificial island of Hulhumale and its City of Hope, a reclamation project that in 2019 was home to 50,000 people. Miami is set to spend at least $3.8 billion over the next four decades to fund storm pumps and 6-foot-tall sea walls to protect against a once-in-five-years storm surge.

The Thames Estuary 2100 Plan has been developed to "protect 1.4 million people, £320 billion worth of property and critical infrastructure from increasing tidal flood risk" as well as "enhance and restore ecosystems and maximise benefits of natural floods" and enhance "the social, economic and commercial benefits the river provides."

This is all good and well, but if we don't halt the warming of the planet, all this effort will be but a mere drop in the ocean in the long run.

I ask Rabukawaqa how she feels about all these high-tech, high-cost efforts to keep back the waters. As a scientist, she thinks technology has a place, but says that in this instance, it's not enough: "If we are going to look for and promote new technology that only results in us mining and extracting more from our lands and, in our case, most likely our oceans through deep-sea mining, it makes absolutely zero sense." Across Fiji, there is widespread extraction of materials like sand and gravel, as well as copper and bauxite ore, which is only compounding the existing problems. "Maybe it's not profitable, the way we are living and moving on this planet," she says. "We need to move slower in this world."

The Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow — home to the Industrial Revolution — was hailed as the "'last, best chance' to keep 1.5˚C alive." With much fanfare and squabbling over minutiae, the summit closed with its president, Alok Sharma, reduced to tears by India's last-minute watering down of commitments on phasing out fossil fuels. On the same day, India's capital New Delhi experienced levels of pollution that forced it into lockdown. While it is already one of the world's most polluted cities, the symbolism of the timing is hard to dismiss.

Just as it is most at risk to sea-level rise, Asia — including Australia — is the world's biggest consumer and producer of coal, accounting for three-quarters of the global total. With India setting its net-zero commitment to 2070, China to 2060 and the US announcing that it is unlikely to bolster its COP26 pledges to reach net-zero by 2050 in the coming year, it feels like a losing battle for low-emitters like Fiji and Bangladesh. Biswas Joy is disappointed that world leaders ended up blaming each other instead of coming up with a concrete plan for climate financing for developing nations. "It is not a relief — it is our needs," he says. "We are not begging."

"We deserve to continue to exist. But our existence really depends on everyone in the world coming to agree," echoes Rabukawaqa. Both feel that their futures have been traded for profit margins. With just three Pacific Island leaders present in Glasgow vis-à-vis over 500 fossil fuel industry representatives, it is an unsurprising sentiment.

According to Climate Action Tracker (CAT), the Glasgow agreement has left a major credibility gap, with the planet still on course to produce twice as many emissions by 2030 as are necessary to keep the temperature rise below 1.5˚C. Without long-term target amendments, CAT calculates that we are on course for a 2.4˚C increase by the end of the century based on pledges alone. Projected warming under current policies is 2.7˚C. The most optimistic scenario, if all pledges are implemented, still has us on course for 1.8˚C by 2100.

Does all this mean that our future is out at sea? Both Biswas Joy and Rabukawaqa are hopeful. There were good things that came out of COP26, like the deforestation pledge and the fact that decades of activism by small island nations — or large ocean states, as they like to call themselves, Rabukawaqa jokes — have finally moved the needle on fossil fuels. Biswas Joy plans to continue his activism — and vote, when he is finally old enough. "Tomorrow, we come in, we try again," says Rabukawaqa. "It's big work." But for her, "Optimism is not a choice. We have to do this." She laughs, contagiously.

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What Does 60˚C Mean for the Middle East?

Saad Shannak
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Hitting temperatures close to 60˚C over the coming decades would be disastrous for the region.

Global warming is an established ongoing threat, and the Middle East is warming at twice the global average. This summer, Oman, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iraq have experienced temperatures surging above 50˚C. It is quite plausible that temperatures could rise closer to 60˚C over the coming decades. This would be truly disastrous for the region, translating into more heatwaves along with extreme drought or extreme precipitation in some areas as well as rising sea levels or wildfires.

Exposure to extreme heat can be fatal for those who have no access to air conditioning. Apart from being a direct threat to human life, the effects of climate change and high temperatures have the potential to spill over and impact all sectors of the economy.

It has been long understood that economic activity and climate conditions are related. This relationship between the climate and the economy has defined the magnitude and scope of markets in several countries, including in the Middle East. In 2020, the World Economic Forum concluded that climate change is ranked as the biggest risk to the global economy.

The Climate and the Economy

While greenhouse gases have no geographical boundaries, their impact differs significantly across the globe. A paper published in Nature indicates that under current climate policies that are on course for an average temperature rise of 2.9˚C above pre-industrial levels by the end of the century, the world's most vulnerable countries would suffer an average GDP loss of around 20% by 2050 and in excess of 60% by 2100. In the Middle East, Sudan is expected to suffer the most: Its GDP is projected to drop by around 32% by 2050 and by more than 80% by 2100 as a result of climate change.

One sector in the economy that would struggle the most is agriculture. Exposure to high temperatures could cause losses to agricultural production as heat stress negatively affects plant growth and animal productivity. Over time, heat stress is likely to increase vulnerability to disease and reduce dairy output. According to a 2018 UNDP report, crop production in the Middle East region is expected to drop by 30% in case of 1.5˚C-2˚C warming by 2025. Additionally, extremely high temperatures might aggravate an already bad situation in this sector.

On the one hand, agriculture is the largest consumer of water in the Middle East, using between 78% to 87% of all resources. Higher temperatures will add more stress to irrigation schedules in terms of both frequency and amount. On the other hand, farming activity and businesses could be wiped out as they do not contribute significantly to the regional economies, whether in terms of GDP or exports,

in proportion to the amount of resources it uses. This translates into a potential risk of economic instability and disruptions in the food supply chain.

Similarly, the tourism sector in the Middle East would lose a significant share of the market due to climate change. In 2018, tourism contributed $270 billion to the region's GDP, or around 9% of the economy. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, as of 2020, the tourism sector had, on average, a 13% share of the GDP. Although the pandemic has slowed down travel, the sector is now attempting to recover.

The impact of climate change on the sector could be irreversible. In Jordan, the Dead Sea, which used to attract some 1.5 million visitors every year, now welcomes just a few thousand after it had shrunk by almost a third due to low rainfall and high temperatures. Alexandria, in Egypt, home of one of the Seven Wonders of the World as well as a storied library, faces flooding, building collapse and loss of life as a result of sea-level rise.

Furthermore, some of the driest countries in the region suffered from flooding as a result of sudden heavy storms. For example, Jeddah, in Saudi Arabia, was hit by abrupt storms that killed 30 in November 2018. Long periods of dry weather increased fire risks in Algeria, which suffered devastating wildfires that took 90 lives in August.

Energy systems are no different than the tourism and agriculture sectors in terms of susceptibility to climate change. For example, energy demand for space cooling will rise due to average temperature increase. In 2015, it was estimated that 80% of total energy in the Middle East is used for cooling systems. These countries face challenges meeting growing energy demands, particularly during the summer months, and they could experience frequent grid failures and subsequent power blackouts.

Power shortages and blackouts would in turn cause negative societal and economic impacts. Cooling systems are necessary to sustain life during extremely high temperatures, and blackouts could significantly affect the everyday activities of the local populace.

Given the negative impact of high temperatures, in order to combat growing greenhouse gas emissions, GCC policymakers should consider an integrated climate change policy that helps enable decision-makers to allocate natural resources in a sustainable and integrated manner as well as achieve net-zero carbon emissions. The Middle East and other countries around the world must factor climate change into their strategic planning in order to secure economic development alongside a climate-resilient economy. Unfortunately, the concept of integrated climate policy is relatively new to Middle Eastern countries in particular.

Lastly, and most importantly, GCC members and other countries in the region have launched climate change initiatives to reduce emissions and adapt to high temperatures. For instance, at the end of October, Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa of Qatar unveiled the national environment and climate strategy in an effort to mitigate climate change impact. Under the plan, the country hopes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 25% by 2030.

Other targets include reducing groundwater extraction by 60%, reducing daily household water consumption by a third and the doubling of desalination via reverse osmosis as well as prioritizing high yield and sustainable agriculture production by driving more than 50% improvement in farmland productivity.

The initiative emphasizes the importance of balancing the different goals and interests among resource consumers. This will improve security and accelerate the transition toward a climate-resilient economy as well as drive climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies for Qatar, the Middle East and the world.

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