

Fair Observer

Monthly



April 2024

Fair Observer^o
Independence, Diversity, Debate

Fair Observer Monthly



April 2024

Fair Observer | 237 Hamilton Ave | Mountain View | CA 94043 | USA
www.fairobserver.com | info@fairobserver.com

The views expressed in this publication are the authors' own and do not necessarily reflect Fair Observer's editorial policy.

Copyright © 2024 Fair Observer

Photo Credit: Suzyanne16 / shutterstock.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

International Standard Serial Number (ISSN): 2372-9112

CONTENTS

About Fair Observer	6
Share Your Perspective	7
The West Risks a Disastrous Nuclear World Conflict With Russia	8
Kanwal Sibal	
An Open Letter From an IIT Graduate to Narendra Modi	10
Kartik Lalitkumar	
Is It Time to Rally Round the Flagged Items?	13
Peter Isackson	
Iran’s Proxy Militias Now Threaten Stability in Jordan	15
Shehab al-Makahleh	
Latest Elections Show Turkish Democracy Is Alive and Kicking	20
Nathaniel Handy	
South Africa Now Faces a Pivotal Election	22
Martin Plaut	
Does India Oppress Muslims? Not Now, Not Ever. Here's Why.	25
Prashant Sharma	
Seleucids: The Valuable Architects of The Middle East	28
Sven Christoffersen	
Bono Goes to Las Vegas: Let There Be Light	31
India Nye Wenner	
The Indian Opposition Now Faces Modi State by State	36
Shirin Akhter, C. Saratchand	

The Truth About Uighurs: Has China Really Committed Genocide?	43
Pierre-Marie Meunier	
Iran and Israel Shift From Proxy War to Direct Conflict	45
Josef Olmert	
How to Tell Between an Iranian “Proxy” and an Ally	47
Mehdi Alavi	
Will the Freedom Flotilla, Now in Istanbul, Reach Gaza?	50
Medea Benjamin	
Fascism Is Back and With a New Weapon: Conspiracy Theory	52
Maciej Bazela, Cheyenne Torres, Tara Yarwais	

ABOUT FAIR OBSERVER

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

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

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

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

SHARE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

Join our network of 2,500+ contributors to publish your perspective, share your story and shape the global conversation. Become a Fair Observer and help us make sense of the world.

Remember, we are a digital media platform and welcome content in all forms: articles, podcasts, video, vlogs, photo essays, infographics and interactive features. We work closely with our contributors, provide feedback and enable them to achieve their potential. Think of us as a community that believes in diversity and debate.

We have a reputation for being thoughtful and insightful. The US Library of Congress recognizes us as a journal with ISSN 2372-9112 and publishing with us puts you in a select circle.

For further information, please visit www.fairobservers.com/publish or contact us at submissions@fairobservers.com

The West Risks a Disastrous Nuclear World Conflict With Russia

Kanwal Sibal
April 01, 2024

EU member nations are pledging more lethal weapons to Ukraine. Because it conflicts with their comfortable war narrative, they refuse to accept Moscow's insistence that Russia has no intention to attack NATO. This could be a serious misjudgment capable of plunging the world into nuclear disaster.

Any objective, non-Western observer of geopolitics would be baffled by the conduct of European nations in the Russo-Ukrainian War. The United States and its Group of Seven (G7) partners seem determined to prolong the proxy war with Russia. They believe that by supplying increasingly lethal weaponry to Kyiv and raising the level of confrontation, they can force Moscow to the negotiating table. The logic appears to be that this strategy will force a negotiated solution, rather than inexorably lead to a conflict between Russia and NATO.

The West has progressively raised its involvement by supplying long-range artillery, advanced air defense systems, tanks and air-launched cruise missiles, as well as sea-based weaponry, to hit Russian targets. Satellite intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) has been provided to Ukraine for more accurate strikes.

Western escalation is brewing

The New York Times has revealed, somewhat surprisingly, that the CIA has been “financing” and “partly equipping” several underground bunkers near the Russian border. Their goal is to gather vital information on defenses and equipment, as well as assist the Ukrainian military in directing fire. Despite strong warnings from Russia, the Dutch have announced their decision to supply 18 F-16 aircraft to Ukraine.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told Radio Free Europe that Ukraine's right to self-defense includes attacking legitimate Russian military targets outside Ukraine. Elsewhere, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz revealed that UK and French special forces are on the ground in Ukraine to operate the advanced equipment supplied to Kyiv.

Scholz seems opposed to the supply of long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine. If these warheads are used for strikes inside Russia, it may draw Germany into direct conflict with Moscow. However, the leaked exchanges between German officers suggest a huge disconnect within the German establishment. They seemingly discussed the efficacy of using Taurus missiles to target the Crimean Bridge and ammunition dumps to its north. They also deliberated about how to launch these strikes without directly involving the German government, suggesting that the missile's manufacturer, MBDA Deutschland GmbH, could act as a front.

Another potential step could seriously exacerbate the situation. On February 26, at a summit of 20 European leaders in Paris, French President Emmanuel Macron aired the possibility of putting European troops on the ground in Ukraine. This disregards Russian warnings that such a move could trigger a direct war between NATO and Russia.

The US, Germany, the UK, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, among others, have ruled out the possibility of sending their troops to fight in Ukraine. Macron, however, believes that the people decrying this idea today are the same ones who decried the supply of tanks, aircraft or long-range missiles to Ukraine two years ago. In the face of rebuffs and political opposition at home, Macron insists that what he said was fully contemplated and that the intention is to put Putin in a “strategic dilemma.” He did not explain what that could be or why it would be only one-way.

Ukrainian support and Baltic aggression

The thought behind the proposals to increase EU military support for Ukraine is that European countries must take more responsibility for their own security. This is especially true considering the possibility of Donald Trump being re-elected as US president in November. He warned Europeans that if they do not ramp up their defense spending, rather than relying on the US for security, he will leave them to fend for themselves against unstated Russian threats. EU members are now increasing their defense budgets even when their economies are under pressure. Germany and the UK are facing a recession and social unrest is spreading in several European countries, as indicated by widespread protests from farmers.

France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Italy, Denmark and Canada have signed bilateral security agreements with Ukraine. What these precisely entail is not clear. However, it seems the objectives are to give assurances of support to Ukraine, should there be a change in the US administration; to give Kyiv confidence that despite flagging public support for the conflict in European societies, aid will continue and to signal to Russia that the EU’s investment in the conflict will continue regardless of Ukrainian losses and the war of attrition favoring Moscow. There is also a hint that Ukraine’s entry into NATO may not be

imminent. Kyiv needs assurance that individual European countries are willing to commit themselves to Ukraine’s defense.

The Baltic states are the most vociferous in pushing for a confrontation with Russia, both within the EU and in international conferences. Many countries of the Global South believe that the Russo-Ukrainian War is a European affair. This has adverse consequences for them economically because of the disruptions it is causing in food, fertilizer and energy supplies. The Europeans argue this conflict goes beyond their continent and involves the international community as a whole, claiming that it violates the UN Charter, international law and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. This is not a convincing argument; European nations are themselves guilty of such transgressions, and there is no guarantee that this will not continue in the future.

Russia has not attacked the Baltic states, which are members of NATO and have the bloc’s troops stationed on their soil. These countries are hardly central to international geopolitics, have a combined population of only six million and have negligible military strength. Given their deep grievances against Soviet rule, their desire to drive an increasingly dangerous conflict in Europe, along with Poland, Finland and Sweden, is concerning to non-Western countries.

Russia may not escalate its warfare

The argument that Russia will attack other countries if it defeats Ukraine is fictitious. Putin has been in power for 24 years now, NATO has expanded five times and the bloc’s troops and US missiles are stationed close to Russia’s borders. Russia has only aggressively responded to Georgia and Ukraine. In both cases, Putin warned that Russia would take action if these two countries were drawn into NATO.

Putin's repeated declarations that Russia has no intention of attacking any European country are being dismissed, as they do not fit the narrative of Moscow's threat to Europe. Why Russia would enter into a conflict with NATO is not explained. As for Russia's imperial ambitions, it has refrained from tightening control in erstwhile Soviet territories in Central Asia. Armenia is the most recent example.

The other argument Europeans champion — that a Russian victory over Ukraine will embolden China to intervene militarily in Taiwan — is equally trumped up. The Taiwan issue long predates that of Ukraine. China will judge the rapport between Taiwan, the US and its regional allies, then make its decision based on that. Washington has committed itself to the "One China" policy, though it is against the use of force by Beijing to conquer Taiwan. China also has to take into account that the US is its biggest trading partner.

The prevailing belief among European nations is that, considering Russia's past reactions to the West's incremental support for Ukraine, Moscow is unlikely to escalate militarily. Even if the West continues to do so by supplying Ukraine with additional weapons to potentially damage mainland Russia, they likely will not exacerbate the conflict. This may explain why Europeans are undeterred by Russia's formidable nuclear arsenal. But this could be a serious misjudgment, potentially leading the West to drag the world into a nuclear nightmare.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Kanwal Sibal has over 40 years of diplomatic experience. He has served as India's foreign secretary, as ambassador to Turkey, Egypt, France and Russia, and as deputy chief of mission in Washington, DC. From 2008, he sat on India's National Security Advisory Board. Sibal is currently a board member of the New York-based East-West Institute, an executive council member of the Vivekanand International Foundation, and is also an adviser to the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum.

An Open Letter From an IIT Graduate to Narendra Modi

Kartik Lalitkumar
April 02, 2024

Kartik Latikumar, an accomplished graduate of Indian Institutes of Technology, pens an open letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Latikumar argues, contrary to Modi's speech at the IIT, that India achieved historically important feats in the founding period after independence.

Dear Prime Minister Narendra Modi, I am proud to have had the opportunity to study at an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). At the age of 16, I was completely transformed by this intellectually challenging and life-building experience. Afterward, I built a successful career in the US for over forty years. I have now returned home and begun making a contribution to improve our country's Human

Development Index by contributing to many worthy causes. These include helping to improve primary healthcare, education and equipping Indians with skills to build careers. With some colleagues, I have set up a platform that helps how these program interventions can have measurable outcomes. Mirroring the United States, I ask if we can adopt affordable technology and most importantly, sustainable funds for our projects. In order for our country to get a seat at the UN Permanent Security Council or a Seat at the G7 (+1), we cannot have 250 million citizens living on less than \$ 2/day. We cannot have 35% of our children under 5 years stunted. We cannot have a Global Hunger Index ranking of 111/125. And we cannot have 58.9% of adolescent women suffering from anemia.

I heard your speech at the India Today Annual Conclave in Delhi. It reminded me of when I heard your speech at the 54th Convocation of IIT Kanpur on December 28, 2022. Hearing your intervention back then made me nostalgic for my experience at IIT. But I was surprised at some of your statements. You said that no general development took place in India during the first 25 years after independence. You claimed that our country made no effort to rebuild itself after 200 years of being pillaged by Britain. I am sure the young graduating students must have believed what you said about our country. I am concerned about how your words may affect their perspectives. I give you the benefit of the doubt since this seems to be an error on the part of your speechwriters. If you could hand over this letter to them, as a guideline for your next speech, I would be grateful. After all, one cannot erase history.

I was even more shocked when I heard your speech at the Conclave. You said that whilst your government has done more for India's development in its eight years of governance than in the entire 75 years since independence, you enumerated the first 75 days of 2023. The

highlights were winning an Oscar and the Women's Under-19 World Cup in cricket. In fact, you made me wonder if we perhaps had gained independence in 2014 and you were the lone freedom fighter. Very few leaders in the last 100 years have single-handedly taken the credit for the success of their country on a global platform except for a few who should not be named. This to me seems like a questionable and audacious move.

Here are some stellar examples of the solid foundation laid down by our visionary leaders:

1. The construction of the famous dam Bhakra Nangal began in 1948 and finished in 1964. The dam's irrigation provided the backbone of the Green Revolution which allowed our country to have surplus food grains. The Food Corporation of India was established on January 10, 1964.

2. Five IITs (one in every region of the country: Kharagpur, Bombay, Madras, Kanpur, and Delhi) were started from 1950 till 1964. There are now 23 IITs that produce engineers who work at the world's leading corporations and academic research institutions.

3. Three Indian Institutes of Management were started in the first 25 years, providing post-graduate studies in business administration. They operated on par with Harvard Business School and University of California, Berkeley. There are now 20 IIMs that provide senior leaders to the world's largest corporations.

4. Many prestigious national laboratories for fundamental scientific research were started during the infancy of the republic, like the National Chemical Laboratory, the Indian Institute of Science, the Central Salt and Marine Chemical Research Institute Jamnagar and the Physical Research Laboratory.

5. Atomic research started with the establishment of the Bhabha Atomic Research Center under the Atomic Energy Commission. Thus, we became self-reliant in atomic energy.

6. Crucial research laboratories like the Defence Research and Development Organisation, Armament Research and Development Establishment, Akron Rubber Development Laboratory and the like were started with a vision to make our country self-reliant in defense.

7. Many companies and organizations of strategic importance were started. Hindustan Aeronautics Limited, Bharat Electronics, Central Electronics Limited, Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, Hindustan Antibiotics Limited, Oil and Natural Gas Corporation, Indian Telephone Industries Limited and many more were established in the first 25 years of independence.

8. The Indian Space Research Program was launched and the Indian Space Research Organisation was established during this period. This has paid rich dividends to our country! We are now not only Aatmanibhar (self-reliant) in all our space missions, but we also provide this service to other nations.

9. The Indian Council for Medical Research was established in 1948. Many research and medical institutes set up under the Council in various areas of health sprouted across the country during the first 25 years. India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi was set up in 1956.

Sir, the list goes on and on. Our democracy invested its energy, blood, sweat and toil in the first 25 years to lay the foundation of this country. All this was done in spite of being raped by our colonial rulers. Poverty (75%), illiteracy (72%), lack of primary health care, a short life expectancy (27 years), epidemics and natural disasters leading to famine tested the strength of the Indian people

and continue to the present. Hats off to the vision of our freedom fighters and leaders of our young country who made great strides despite the odds. As Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru said, as the clock struck 12:00 midnight on August 15, 1947: “Long years ago we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially.”

I don't know what to make of it. All I know is, without exception, everyone seems to be afraid, afraid of the outcome of the upcoming elections. Emotions are everywhere. What will happen to our lives if you retain power? When you do not respect the truth of India's history, you really make a mockery of our intelligence.

As Indian citizens, let us recall the opening sentence of our constitution: “We the people.” India is the world's largest functioning democracy. Our leaders should know this, and we will remind them of it collectively, lest they forget.

Prime Minister, I must speak my mind. To call it what it is. Even if I am labeled unpatriotic or an anti-national, I say this with confidence: I am really, truly proud to be Indian!

[[Gwyneth Campbell](#) edited the piece.]

Kartik Lalitkumar is a retired entrepreneur and an IIT alumnus who returned to India after a successful career spanning 35+ years in the U.S. He aims to spend the rest of his life giving back to India, the country that made him an IITian, by providing an opportunity for those less privileged than him.

Is It Time to Rally Round the Flagged Items?

Peter Isackson
April 03, 2024

An article by Matt Taibbi sums up much that has gone wrong with the idea of freedom in US culture. The problem plays out on several levels, notably legal, economic, technological and political. Artificial intelligence plays an increasingly significant role, but, at least for the moment, in the background. In the foreground, it's the platforms and their operators who control how we interact and transact.

Matt Taibbi long ago earned his stripes as a crusader for free speech. In his latest foray, Taibbi now cites the sad tale of Google's censorship of Naked Capitalism, "a popular site containing economics commentary and journalism ... a home for smart, independent commentary about a financial services industry that is otherwise almost exclusively covered by writers and broadcasters who'd jump at a job offer from the companies they cover." In other words, the kind of site that exemplifies the democratic ideal of an independent press that "informs the public, holds leaders accountable, and provides a forum for debate of local and national issues."

Naked Capitalism's Yves Smith posted the text of what Taibbi calls an "ominous letter from its ad service company" on the journal's website.

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

Flag:

Formerly the carefully composed symbol displayed by a group of people to signify their presence and their unity, now the badge of shame of people whose thinking and expression fails to conform to strictly defined norms.

Contextual note

Smith explains that the incriminating "URL is for a cross-post from Tom Engelhardt about Chalmers Johnson ... a mild critic of US foreign policy" who "has nothing whatsoever to do with health or health care policy. That creates the appearance that Google regards 'anti-vaxx' as a showstopper, and is for some reason desperately applying it to this site, which is not vaccine-hostile. Google has blatantly mislabeled unrelated content to try to make that bogus charge."

Although Fair Observer depends on donations from our readers and refuses ad revenue, we also regularly publish cross-posts from Tom Engelhardt. Undoubtedly, Google will judge that we fail to meet its recondite criteria for ad-eligibility. Because we do not solicit ad revenue, we feel safe but nevertheless compelled to denounce the abuse this represents.

Smith sees this development as particularly sinister, warning that "the Censorship Industrial Complex is now extending its tentacles into commercial relationships. This appears to be going well beyond the 'kill a chicken to scare a monkey' strategy of deplatforming and demonetizing particularly strident voices."

In another article, Smith points to the fact that this is the result not necessarily of some human agent's decision-making but of the AI algorithms Google not only uses but uncritically enforces. "We consulted several experts," Smith explains. "All are confident that Google relied on algorithms

to single out these posts. As we will explain, they also stressed that whatever Google is doing here, it is not for advertisers.”

This last point highlights how incoherent such policies can be, since this kind of censorship is detrimental not only to those who publish, but also to those who pay Google — the advertisers. Google should be aware of this fundamental economic reality: Both the publishers and the advertisers are Google’s golden geese who fill the platform’s coffers with their golden eggs of content and advertising.

As with all crimes, one must ask *cui bono*, who is benefitting? Even though Google keeps the advertising cash for itself when it punishes content providers for not respecting its rules, in a rational world, Google would have no longer-term interest in applying such algorithms. Why kill any of its geese that lay golden eggs? Smith, like Taibbi, is right to detect another logic in the background: that of the Censorship Industrial Complex, an ideological as well as economic power structure.

Historical note

The economist and former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis calls the type of economy Google, Facebook, Amazon and other platforms have now imposed on humanity “technofeudalism.” It’s a system in which power is concentrated behind the impenetrable walls of virtual castles held by a small number of unaccountable barons of the consumer economy. These lords employ an army of technologists to exploit the surrounding population and defend the castle.

Matt Taibbi describes how that army functions in the age of AI. “Technologists are in love with new AI tools, but they don’t always know how they work. Machines may be given a review task and access to data, but how the task is achieved is

sometimes mysterious.” In other words, the lords make the laws, the technologists create the machinery to apply the laws, and their algorithms play the role of law enforcement.

Taibbi describes a system in which, far more effectively than in traditional feudal times, our freedom of expression is controlled. Prophet though he was in many ways, George Orwell failed to pick up the clues that were already present when he wrote 1984 thanks to rising influence of Madison Avenue. The Censorship Industrial Complex doesn’t require a highly visible central authority to command what constitutes legitimate thought.

“Companies (and governments),” Taibbi explains, “have learned that the best way to control content is by attacking revenue sources, either through NewsGuard- or GDI-style ‘nutrition’ or ‘dynamic exclusion’ lists, or advertiser boycotts.” This is the equivalent of sanctions that governments use as a substitute for war.

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church was the principal vector of censorship, but thanks to the emergence of universities, the church itself and its masters of theology became themselves a source of contradictory dialogue. They enthroned “disputation” as the means of discovering the truth. Satire was omnipresent in the culture of the times, in its poetry, storytelling, songs and painting. Irreverence played a noble role alongside reverence.

The church did respond to heresy, judicially and even militarily, but though some of those campaigns could be spectacular, they were few and far between. The church also exerted pressure on the aristocrats who owned the lands and raised armies. That rivalry between secular and spiritual power kept everyone on their toes and, as often as not, discouraged intellectual conformity.

That spirit of disputation prepared the intellectual terrain for writers such as Rabelais, Montaigne and Pascal in the 16th and 17th centuries. That led directly to the French Enlightenment of the 18th century which in turn spawned political revolutions in the industrializing West and implanted the belief in democracy.

The modern world battled its own heresies — fascism and communism — through two world wars and a lengthy cold war before our purely secular authorities could discover the miraculous properties of technologies that appeared to answer their dreams by providing them with effective means of homogenizing culture and all forms of intellectual ambition.

That's where we are today. Technofeudalism combines and consolidates the secular authority of governments managed by political parties, themselves controlled by the economic elite, with the invisible but omnipresent power of the “platforms.” Thanks to the social media environment provided by the platforms, debate is possible, but it is easily marginalized, thanks to a brilliantly structured complicity between corporate media and the platforms on which everyone depends.

To the extent that marginalized independent voices manage, in spite of everything, to establish their presence, they will live in permanent fear of being demonetized and cast into cultural limbo. Governments, media and platforms work hand in hand to preserve an abstract “freedom of expression” while enforcing a system that effectively tolerates only conformist thought and expression.

Now it should be clear to everyone why, at Fair Observer, we do not advertise.

*[In the age of Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain, another American wit, the journalist Ambrose

Bierce produced a series of satirical definitions of commonly used terms, throwing light on their hidden meanings in real discourse. Bierce eventually collected and published them as a book, *The Devil's Dictionary*, in 1911. We have shamelessly appropriated his title in the interest of continuing his wholesome pedagogical effort to enlighten generations of readers of the news. Read more of [Fair Observer Devil's Dictionary](#).]



Peter is Fair Observer's chief strategy officer. He is an author and media producer who has worked on ground-breaking projects focused on innovative learning technology. For

more than 30 years, Peter has dedicated himself to innovative publishing, coaching, consulting and learning management.

Iran's Proxy Militias Now Threaten Stability in Jordan

Shehab al-Makahleh
April 05, 2024

Bordering both Syria and Iraq, Jordan faces unique security challenges. Its strategic alliance with the United States plays a pivotal role in bolstering its security. Iran, the US's chief regional adversary, is now putting pressure on the Hashemite kingdom.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan finds itself in a precarious position as it grapples with an array of security concerns emanating from its borders with Syria and Iraq.

Iranian-backed proxies and militias operating in these neighboring countries have become a significant threat to both Jordan's stability and its strategic alliance with the United States.

In addition, the recent conflict between Israel and Gaza, as well as the attacks on Americans in Syria, Iraq and Jordan's Tower 22 (T22), underscore the urgent need for concerted efforts to address these challenges. T22 is an important location northeast of Jordan where Jordan's borders meet Syria and Iraq. Tower 22 is near the Al Tanf garrison in Syria.

Jordan's border regions with Syria and Iraq have long been a source of concern due to the presence of Iranian-backed proxies and militias. These groups, such as Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces (Al-Hashd al-Shaabi) and Kata'ib Hezbollah, enjoy support from Iran and have been involved in smuggling weapons and drugs along with other illicit activities across the border. The influx of arms and drugs not only destabilizes Jordan but also poses a direct threat to regional security. Since Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, on Israel, more than 160 attacks on American troops in Syria and Iraq have been reported.

The recent conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza serves as a stark reminder of the potential spillover effects that regional conflicts can have on Jordan. Since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, tensions have been escalating, with even further increased risk of radicalized individuals and groups operating within Jordan's borders, inspired by the violence and seeking to carry out attacks against both Jordanian and American interests. The attacks on Americans in the region serve as sobering examples of the real and immediate threat posed by these actors.

Jordan has consistently found itself caught between regional threats, domestic socioeconomic

pressures and international conflicts. The country faces a range of significant challenges and concerns, including the ongoing impact of the Syrian crisis, the deadlock in the Israel–Palestine conflict and the rise of radicalism in the Middle East as a result of economic and political factors.

The US is a crucial ally

For the United States, Jordan is a crucial ally in the region, providing important intelligence, military cooperation and acting as a stabilizing force amidst the volatile Middle East. The security of Jordan is directly linked to American interests in the region, making it imperative for both nations to collaborate closely in addressing the challenges posed by Iranian proxies and militias. Strengthening intelligence sharing, enhancing border security measures, and bolstering counterterrorism efforts should be top priorities for both Jordan and the United States.

To effectively address these security concerns, a multifaceted approach is required. First and foremost, Jordan should continue to strengthen its security apparatus and enhance border control measures to prevent the smuggling of weapons, drugs and illicit activities. Furthermore, closer coordination and intelligence sharing with partners, such as the United States, Israel and other Arab states, will be essential in identifying and neutralizing threats posed by Iranian proxies.

Likewise, diplomatic efforts should be pursued to highlight the destabilizing role of Iranian proxies and militias in the region. Jordan, with support from its allies, should work to raise international awareness and garner support for measures that curb Iran's influence and should hold it accountable for its support of these groups. Jordan's security concerns regarding Iranian proxies and militias operating near its borders in Syria and Iraq are significant and require urgent attention.

The recent conflict between Israel and Gaza, coupled with attacks on Americans in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, highlight the immediate threat faced by both Jordan and the United States. Through enhanced intelligence cooperation, strengthened border security and diplomatic efforts, both nations can work together to mitigate these challenges and ensure the stability and security of the region.

Impact of Iranian proxies' activities on Jordan

The activities of Iranian proxies and militias near Jordan's borders not only pose security threats but also have significant economic implications. The smuggling of weapons and drugs disrupts legitimate trade routes, hampers economic development and fuels corruption. Jordan's efforts to secure its borders and curb illicit activities are crucial for safeguarding its economic interests.

The presence of Iranian-backed militias and their involvement in regional conflicts exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in Syria and Iraq.

The displacement of civilians, destruction of infrastructure and loss of life have far-reaching consequences for Jordan as it continues to host a large number of refugees from neighbouring countries. Managing the humanitarian fallout and addressing the needs of vulnerable populations further strain Jordan's resources. Iranian proxies and militias often operate along sectarian lines, exacerbating existing divisions within the region. This can fuel tensions and create a fertile ground for radicalization, sectarian violence and the spread of extremist ideologies. Jordan's efforts to maintain social cohesion and religious harmony within its borders become increasingly challenging in such a volatile environment.

The activities of Iranian proxies and militias reflect broader regional power struggles, particularly between Iran and its rivals, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Jordan, as a key regional

player, finds itself navigating through these complex dynamics. Balancing its relationships with various actors while safeguarding its national security interests poses a significant diplomatic challenge. Addressing the security concerns posed by Iranian proxies requires close collaboration with regional partners. Strengthening regional cooperation can enhance collective security and contribute to a more stable Middle East.

Given the threat posed by Iranian proxies, Jordan has prioritized robust counterterrorism strategies. These strategies encompass intelligence gathering, law enforcement cooperation and pre-emptive measures to identify and neutralize potential threats. Sharing intelligence with the United States and other allies is crucial for effectively countering transnational terrorist networks.

In addition, Jordan has sought to address security concerns through multilateral diplomatic channels. Engaging in regional forums, such as the Arab League and the United Nations, provides platforms for voicing concerns, garnering support and seeking diplomatic solutions to regional conflicts. Multilateral diplomacy can further amplify Jordan's efforts to address security challenges.

Jordan's approach to security and regional security initiatives

The United States has been a key partner in supporting Jordan's security efforts. Through military assistance programs, capacity-building initiatives and intelligence cooperation, the US has played a vital role in helping Jordan enhance its border security, counterterrorism capabilities and overall stability.

Jordan has consistently emphasized the importance of regional stability and security. Given its location in a volatile region, the country

has actively sought to address security challenges through diplomatic means, regional cooperation and collaboration with international partners.

Jordan has been an active participant in global counterterrorism efforts. The country has taken steps to prevent and combat terrorism by enhancing its intelligence capabilities, strengthening border security and implementing counterterrorism legislation. Jordan has also cooperated with international partners, sharing intelligence and participating in joint operations against terrorist groups.

Jordan has actively engaged in regional security initiatives, fostering cooperation and dialogue with neighboring countries and regional organizations. These platforms provide opportunities for discussing security concerns, coordinating strategies and developing joint initiatives to address common challenges.

Jordan has developed strong military partnerships with various countries, including the United States and other Western allies. These partnerships involve military training, joint exercises, and the provision of military equipment and assistance. The cooperation aims to enhance Jordan's defense capabilities, strengthen its border security and improve its ability to respond to security threats.

Jordan has played an active role in the pursuit of peace in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The country has hosted peace negotiations, including the historic Jordan-Israel peace treaty signed in 1994. Jordan's commitment to a two-state solution and its efforts to promote dialogue and reconciliation in the region have been key elements of its approach to security.

Jordan–US military cooperation

Jordan's military partnership with the United States has significantly contributed to the enhancement of its defense capabilities in several ways.

Firstly, the United States has provided substantial military aid and equipment to Jordan, including advanced weaponry, armored vehicles, aircraft and surveillance systems. This assistance has helped modernize and strengthen Jordan's military capabilities, enabling it to effectively address security challenges.

The US military partnership has also involved extensive training and education programs for Jordanian armed forces. Jordanian military personnel receive training in various areas such as counterterrorism, intelligence gathering, special operations and logistics. These training programs improve the skills and professionalism of Jordan's armed forces, enhancing their operational effectiveness.

The United States and Jordan regularly conduct joint military exercises that involve the participation of both countries' armed forces. These exercises promote interoperability, facilitate the exchange of best practices and enhance coordination between the two militaries. They also provide an opportunity for Jordan to learn from the US military's experience and expertise. The partnership facilitates intelligence sharing between Jordan and the United States. Information sharing on security threats, terrorist activities and regional developments enables both countries to have a more comprehensive understanding of the security landscape and take proactive measures to mitigate potential risks.

Jordan and the United States have collaborated closely in the fight against terrorism. The US provides intelligence support and operational cooperation to Jordan's efforts to counter terrorist

organizations such as ISIS and other extremist groups. This cooperation has been crucial in preventing terrorist attacks, disrupting terrorist networks and promoting regional stability.

The US has assisted Jordan in improving its border security measures, including the deployment of surveillance technology and the training of border protection forces. This support has helped Jordan better monitor and control its borders, preventing the infiltration of militants and illicit activities.

The US partnership has also contributed to the development of Jordan's defense industry. Through joint ventures and technology transfers, Jordan has been able to develop indigenous defense capabilities, including the production and maintenance of military equipment. This enhances Jordan's self-reliance and strengthens its defense industrial base. Overall, the military partnership between Jordan and the United States has played a crucial role in enhancing Jordan's defense capabilities. It has provided vital military aid, advanced equipment, training and intelligence cooperation, enabling Jordan to address security challenges, combat terrorism and maintain stability in the region.

Jordan's security concerns in a volatile region have been met with steadfast cooperation from the United States, resulting in a robust partnership that has significantly bolstered Jordan's defense capabilities. Through military aid, advanced equipment provisions, training and education programs, joint exercises, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism cooperation, the United States has played a vital role in helping Jordan address security challenges, combat terrorism and maintain regional stability.

The US-Jordan military partnership stands as a testament to the shared commitment to regional security and the recognition of Jordan's strategic

importance. This collaboration has not only strengthened Jordan's ability to defend its borders and counter security threats but has also fostered interoperability, knowledge exchange and the development of indigenous defense capabilities.

Furthermore, the US support has extended beyond military assistance to encompass various aspects of security cooperation, including border security, counterinsurgency efforts and involvement in the peace process. Such comprehensive cooperation underscores the depth of the relationship and the mutual understanding of the complex security dynamics in the region.

As Jordan continues to navigate its security challenges, the unwavering cooperation with the United States remains a cornerstone of its security strategy. The partnership serves as a model for effective collaboration between nations, promoting stability, countering terrorism and advancing shared objectives in the pursuit of a secure and peaceful future for Jordan and the wider region. However, Jordan's security concerns stem from being a buffer zone between Israel and Iran.

[[Erica Beinlich](#) edited this piece.]



Shehab Al-Makahleh is a senior journalist who has written for various media outlets and newspapers around the world. He is also a senior advisor at international think tanks. He is currently working as political advisor for a number of countries. Al-Makahleh is the author of *Into the Terrorist Mind* and *His Majesty King Abdullah II's Trait: Teacher and Leader*.

Latest Elections Show Turkish Democracy Is Alive and Kicking

Nathaniel Handy
April 06, 2024

The international media have touted the opposition success in Turkey's recent local elections as earth-shattering and even historic. This is overblown. In reality, incumbent mayors held onto their seats. However, the latest elections are significant because they reveal Turkish democracy to be still functional. Furthermore, they may have thrown up personalities who could take on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2028.

If you flicked through the international media reaction to Turkey's recent nationwide local elections, you could be forgiven for thinking that a political revolution had just occurred.

The victory of opposition candidates not only in the megalopolis of Istanbul and the capital, Ankara, but also in the third city, İzmir, as well as huge swathes of the rest of the country dominated headlines.

The message was clear: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had received a huge rebuke from his electorate only ten months after his decisive victory in the national elections. Then, he convincingly retained the presidency, fending off a concerted challenge from a broad opposition coalition named the Nation Alliance.

You can read the above narrative pretty much anywhere. What is more useful to an interested observer is to consider what has practically

changed due to these elections and what this might tell us about the Turkish political landscape going forward.

The incumbents won

In fact, the election results were not as seismic as the international press would have the idle, skim-reading observer believe. That's not to say they weren't significant. But we should place these results in context.

First and foremost, let us examine the victory of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) candidates in the mayoral elections in both Istanbul and Ankara.

This was not a victory over Erdoğan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), but rather the reelection of the incumbent mayors. Both Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu and Ankara Mayor Mansur Yavaş first won in the 2019 local elections. Those results were seismic. İmamoğlu took Istanbul for the opposition after 25 years of AKP rule.

İmamoğlu's victory, especially, had real resonance in 2019. Istanbul is Erdoğan's home turf. The Turkish leader made his name nationally as the mayor of the city from 1994 to 1998 before he became prime minister and then president. The loss of Turkey and indeed Europe's biggest city felt symbolic. Erdoğan reacted by annulling the election result, which led to a rerun. İmamoğlu won the rerun with an increased majority.

Things took a darker turn a year later. In December 2020, the Court of Cassation handed İmamoğlu two-year, seven-month and 15-day prison sentences and a ban from politics. Note that the ban has not been implemented to date and echoes the courts' treatment of Erdoğan's in 1999.

While Imamoğlu was convicted of insulting public officials, Erdoğan was not only convicted but also imprisoned. At the time, the CHP was in power and its secular political system found Erdoğan guilty of reciting an Islamist poem at a political rally. In Turkey, history seems to revolve in circles. Many see Imamoğlu as a new leader in the Erdoğan mold.

Not only did the opposition impressively retain Istanbul and Ankara, but it also retained the mayoralty of İzmir. However, anyone who knows Turkey knows fully well that this is a non-story. İzmir has always been a CHP stronghold.

Victory for incumbents is a tendency in many parts of the world. Furthermore, candidates of the ruling national party tend to do badly in local elections worldwide. In a nutshell, the results of the Turkish elections are not exceptional and certainly not historic as the BBC and others claim.

Opposition revival?

The latest results might not be exceptional, but it is impressive that the opposition has bounced back after its humbling defeat in the 2023 national elections.

Coming on the centenary of the Turkish Republic, those elections had been billed by the coalition opposition Nation Alliance as a make-or-break moment. The opposition's narrative was simple: If they couldn't unseat Erdoğan, Turkish democracy would be lost forever. The coalition duly nominated Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, a longtime CHP leader, as its presidential candidate. This uncharismatic leader had already lost elections to Erdoğan earlier and was a poor choice.

Despite an attempt to portray Kılıçdaroğlu as a humble man of the people, a mere civil servant who had come out of nowhere to attempt to unseat the "sultan," the opposition's campaign failed to

ignite. Erdoğan won again, and the results were much the same as in many previous elections.

Such a lackluster performance could understandably have plunged the opposition into the doldrums of introspection and made it ineffective for years to come. Certainly, that would have been Erdoğan's keen hope. The opposition's strong performance in the local elections dashes Erdoğan's hopes and is a significant achievement.

The CHP has fared like many opposition parties in midterm local elections in functioning democracies. Yet the key lesson for the opposition is simple: Personalities matter.

As many in the international media were also saying this week, both Imamoğlu and Yavaş are now seen as viable presidential candidates for 2028. For many political observers in Turkey, the reaction to that notion might understandably be: At last!

It was clear in the buildup to the 2023 presidential elections that other candidates were far more of a threat to Erdoğan than Kılıçdaroğlu. In particular, the charismatic Imamoğlu had a backstory that made him the perfect heir apparent to the Erdoğan throne. His campaign could have had the ring of a timeless fairy tale.

Thankfully for Erdoğan and the AKP, Imamoğlu was not the opposition candidate. In the last national election, the opposition did not understand what the AKP realized long ago: Personalities win elections. Erdoğan understands the power of personality. That is why he has maintained such a stranglehold over the AKP for so long and has pushed out many other major figures, such as former president Abdullah Gül and former prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu — not only from office but also from the party.

Erdoğan has demonstrated that he is a serial winner. What the opposition needed in 2023, and will need in 2028, is someone who is also a winner — or at the very least, someone who is not seen as a loser. The local election results have offered them even more evidence of who might fit that role.

The biggest success of these local elections is that they reveal Turkish politics to be still competitive. Ironically, that is good for both incumbent and opposition parties. This might seem counter-intuitive in the zero-sum majoritarianism of Turkish democracy today, but ultimately, total consolidation of power is never good for the effective functioning of any state.

The opposition CHP has a long history of over-consolidation of power. The party could tell the ruling AKP a thing or two about where that road leads. It would be an error to imagine, as many in the international press do, that Turkish politics is simply divided between an oppressive regime and a liberal and democratic opposition. Everyone in Turkish politics has dirt on their hands. And yet democracy is still functioning if not thriving. That is good news for Turkey.



Nathaniel Handy is another academic and writer with over ten years of experience in international print and broadcast media. He has published many scholarly articles on the evolution of Turkey's political structure.

South Africa Now Faces a Pivotal Election

Martin Plaut
April 09, 2024

The ruling African National Congress (ANC) elite has plundered state resources and lost public support. An era of coalition politics at the national level beckons even as Russia and China seek to interfere in the May election to prop up their ANC ally.

The speaker of the South African parliament, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, appeared in court in the past week, pleading not to be sent to prison for 12 counts of corruption. The former speaker, who resigned after being charged, argued that she should be given bail. Her argument was that the country's overcrowded prisons would not be safe for her. These prisons are unhygienic, and riddled with disease, crime and sexual violence. Mapisa-Nqakula should know: she was the minister overseeing South African prisons from 2009 and 2012.

The former speaker is not alone in facing justice. Lonwabo Sambudla — the former chief executive of the African National Congress (ANC) Youth League's financial arm and, perhaps more importantly, a son in law of Jacob Zuma, South Africa's President between 2009 and 2018 — was before a court attempting to hang on to his three luxury vehicles. Sambudla wanted to hold on to a Bentley, a Ferrari and a Rolls-Royce despite the fact that he was apparently unable to pay for them.

The ANC elite plundered state resources

The two incidents above are just a snapshot of the quagmire into which the ruling ANC elite has descended into. The depth of corruption and cronyism were revealed in stark detail by a government commission led by Justice Raymond Zondo. Its reports revealed how the South African state has been effectively “captured” by the ANC elite.

As the BBC reported, the commission detailed in over 5,000 pages how the elite plundered state resources.

The evidence revealed how ANC leaders, including former and current government ministers, allegedly participated or encouraged looting at a massive cost to the country.

This included crippling the country's revenue service, bringing the national carrier South African Airways to its knees, looting the agency that runs the country's passenger railways, and interfering with the public broadcaster, the SABC.

The secret service was also weakened through the appointment of senior spies who prevented investigations from taking place at the behest of Zuma and others who were seen as close to him.

"The blurring of lines between the ANC and the state was laid bare, party interests were prioritised, crucial government departments were used for the benefit of individuals, resulting in manipulation and political influences," said South African political analyst Dr Mcebisi Mdletyana.

The political price of “state capture”

The South African public has long resigned itself to the failure of Eskom, the state electricity provider, to provide an uninterrupted supply of electricity. Power goes out for hours at a time. Sadly, in recent months, water has become equally scarce. Johannesburg, and its neighbouring black suburb of Soweto, have been chronically short of water for sometime now.

This failure of the ANC administration to provide essential public services explains the collapse in support for the party as the Brenthurst Foundation lays bare in a detailed analysis. February polling, the third in a series, showed ANC support declining to below 40% for the first time. The foundation provided the following summary.

A national survey of voters conducted on behalf of The Brenthurst Foundation has found that the ANC's support has fallen to 39%, making a coalition government highly likely following the general election in May this year.

The biggest gainers have been the Democratic Alliance (DA), which has risen to 27% from 23% in October last year and Jacob Zuma's MK party which has 13% of the vote, making it the third largest party with the EFF falling from 17% in October last year to just 10%.

With 33% of the vote, the Multi-party Charter (MPC) coalition (DA, IFP, ActionSA, ACDP and FF+ among others) is just 6% behind the ANC.

Other polling suggests the ANC's share of the vote will be higher and the electoral outcome is very much dependent on the size of the turnout.

Even so, few polls give the ANC more than 50% of the vote.

Frans Cronje, the director of the Social Research Foundation, says that overall recent surveys give a sense of where the country is going. “If you average out all the polls done, it’s clear the DA will end up at around 24% ... the ANC at around 45%, but after the emergence of the MK Party [of Jacob Zuma], this is down to 42%,” he says.

Certainly, the ANC’s share has been on the slide. It won 57.50% of votes in the last general election in 2019, down from 62.15% in 2014.

In South Africa’s proportional representation system and dip below 50% will leave the ANC dependent on political allies. It would be the first time since the National Party won the 1948 election, and brought in apartheid, that a governing party would require an ally. Few doubt the ANC will be the largest party after the May election. The real question is who will be the ANC’s allies in a coalition.

Unstable coalition politics likely at the national level

South Africans are unfamiliar with coalition politics at a national level, but have become all too familiar with them in the country’s provinces and regions. There were 32 regional and local coalitions running administrations in March 2024. Many are chaotic and unstable, especially those in Johannesburg, Tshwane and Nelson Mandela Bay.

The coalitions are often sustained by just one or two votes from tiny local parties who can hold their larger allies hostage. These tiny parties are always threatening to quit or change sides and bring the administration down. How an alliance government might operate at a national level is something South Africans have no memory or experience of.

These problems come as there is growing international involvement in the election process. In the past, politicians have mobilised social media for political ends. Bell Pottinger, the British public relations firm, collapsed after it was exposed for attempting to stir up racial hatred. The firm had been hired by Zuma’s allies.

Currently, the Russians and Chinese are threatening to use disinformation in an attempt to keep their ally — the ANC — in power. Karen Allen, who earlier worked for the BBC, summed up the South African situation.

In the current environment, now supercharged with artificial intelligence (AI), Russia is accused number one in information operations, using experience from its international troll farm — the Internet Research Agency. Russia also appears to consider Africa an attractive target, given the weak checks and balances in many of the continent’s fragile democracies.

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies identified 23 campaigns targeting Africa since 2014; 16 linked to Russia. The Digital Forensic Research Lab warns that the “political and social instability caused by influence operations” has ramifications beyond countries’ borders.

Given the tensions and uncertainties surrounding the May 2024 election it will take all the resources of the Independent Election Commission to ensure that there is a free and fair election. There is a great deal at stake and the future of South African democracy hangs in balance.



Born in South Africa, **Martin Plaut** is currently senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies and holds the same post with King's College London. He studied

at the Universities of Cape Town, Witwatersrand and Warwick before joining the Labour Party as secretary on Africa and the Middle East.

Does India Oppress Muslims? Not Now, Not Ever. Here's Why.

Prashant Sharma
April 11, 2024

In a 2023 piece for TomDispatch, Priti Gulati Cox and Stan Cox argued that India oppresses its large Muslim minority. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, India is a secular state that not only follows a policy of religious non-discrimination but also gives its religious communities, especially Muslims, considerable legal autonomy.

This piece is a response to “What Happens When Nationalists in Israel and India Team Up,” a piece from TomDispatch that Fair Observer republished on December 21, 2023. The authors of the piece made several allegations against the Indian state and society. Without providing any evidence, they asserted that the Indian state oppresses Muslims. The authors referred to the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) as “occupied Kashmir.” They alleged that India commits “atrocities” against Kashmiris, and claimed that “New Delhi has all but abandoned the Palestinians.” They fatuously compared Indian counterterrorism operations in J&K with Israeli

actions in Palestine that the UN deemed a “genocide in the making.”

The authors then delved into Indian society, claiming that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu organization formed in 1925, engages in violence against “unarmed, unsuspecting civilians ... using batons, machetes, strangulation, sulfuric acid to the face and rape, among other horrors.” They drew an ill-considered comparison between Israel’s illegal settlements in the West Bank and the actions of cow vigilante groups affiliated with the RSS.

The authors also referenced the horrors of the 2002 Gujarat riots but presented a biased account of the train compartment burning, an event that incinerated 58 Hindu sadhus. They labeled the communal riots as “state-sponsored terrorism.” The authors further alleged that the US has turned a blind eye to the “antidemocratic and all-too-violent national visions” of India and Israel.

As an Indian student, I’ve identified numerous inconsistencies in the article. I find many of these allegations baseless and inconsiderate. Therefore, I am presenting a point-by-point rebuttal of the article.

Muslims receive special treatment despite Islam’s violent past

India's geographical landscape has a complex history shaped by over a millennium of military campaigns. During these, the Islamic invaders progressed relatively slowly compared to the rest of the world. For instance, the Arabs invaded Sindh multiple times starting in 636 AD, and finally seized the province in 711 AD. It took Islamic forces over 300 years to capture Kabul and nearly 500 years to conquer Delhi. Nonetheless, after a valiant resistance, the Brahman Shahi Sultanate of Kabul fell to the Ghaznavid Empire in 1026 AD.

After that, Islamic invasions in the Indian heartland became more brutal and frequent. After the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192 AD, Islamic rule was established in Delhi. It lasted until 1858 when the Mughal Empire was replaced by the British Empire. During these 650 years, it was the minority Muslims — mostly Turks, Central Asians and Persians — who ruled over the majority of Hindus. During this period, the official language of India was Persian and the religion was Sunni Islam. Muslim rulers desecrated and demolished countless Hindu temples. Surprisingly, this historical context is completely overlooked in contemporary debates of Hindu-Muslim relations.

From 1858, the British exhibited a preference for Muslims, recruiting them into civil and military positions in disproportionate numbers. This is evident in the Census of India, 1911 data: Muslims constituted only 21.24% of India's total population but made up 41.94% of the “service of the state,” and 50.33% of the police force. Even in higher salary ranges, Muslims were disproportionately represented, with 37.9% earning more than ₹400 salaries compared to 41.3% for Hindus. According to Pakistani military historian Major Agha H Amin, this policy of preferential recruitment became a fundamental reason for the Partition of India.

The extraordinarily tolerant Republic of India

Driven by the demands of the Muslim League, the Partition of India resulted in the bifurcation of the ancient geography along communal lines. Post-partition India embraced Hindu values of inclusivity, tolerance and peace. This is reflected in Part III of the Constitution, containing four articles under fundamental rights to protect the freedom of religion. These articles serve as the foundation for India’s engagement with all religions, granting every religious group the right to manage their religious affairs without state interference.

Furthermore, the constitution safeguards the rights of minorities under Articles 29 and 30, with the latter specifically designed to protect the rights of religious and linguistic minorities. However, the world’s longest constitution does not define the term “minority.” This empowers the Muslim community to establish and manage religious and educational institutions such as madrasas — schools that specialize in Islamic teachings — with little or no oversight. These schools also receive funds from the secular government of India, yet the state is not empowered to decide their curriculum and recruitment patterns.

Additionally, madrasas also receive largely untraced foreign funding. India even allows establishments such as Darul Uloom Seminary, situated in Deoband, Uttar Pradesh. This madrasa is infamously known as the ideological origin of the Taliban. After independence, India disregarded any perceived animosity towards Muslims and granted them equal rights, if not more, in the newly established democratic republic.

Indian Muslims are governed under the Sharia

While independent India granted equal rights to all citizens, it faced challenges in reforming the Muslim society. The successive governments did not replace the British-era Shariat Application Act of 1937. Initially designed to create distinctions between Hindus and Muslims in the lead-up to the partition, this legislation granted numerous privileges to Muslims.

The act permits a Muslim man to have up to four wives, stipulates that Muslim men only need to pay alimony for three months, allows double inheritance for sons compared to daughters and includes several provisions that can never be permitted in other democracies. (Triple talaq, an Islamic form of divorce whereby a Muslim man can legally end a marriage by saying “talaq” — “divorce” in Arabic — three times, was allowed

until the Indian Government repealed it in 2018.) The successive governments also viewed Muslim society as a vote bank. They continue viewing Muslims through the lens of maulvis, Muslim doctors of law. This meant abhorring any possibility of reforming the Muslim Personal Law. Hence, Muslims of the world's largest democracy are still governed under Sharia.

In 1973, the Muslim society formed the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB). This body acts as the highest religious and legal authority over Islamic laws in India. The AIMPLB's stated objective is to "eradicate all non-Islamic rituals and customs in [the] Muslim community."

This body is predominantly filled with ulemas, groups of Muslim scholars with special knowledge of Islamic theology and law. Their qualifications are generally shady. The AIMPLB has a checkered history: The organization has opposed yoga, the right to education, an increase in women's marriage age and interfaith marriages. They support Taliban return to Kabul and desire to open sharia courts in a constitutional democracy, the latter of which would create a second judicial system that would diminish the value of the first. Most recently, the body called Hamas terror attacks a "natural reaction to Israeli atrocities."

While AIMPLB lacks executive powers, their influence on Muslim voters makes them an extremely important part of Indian politics.

The Government of India also introduced a distinctive safeguard for Muslim religious bodies through the Waqf Act. First implemented in 1954, this globally unparalleled legislation grants governing rights over religious and charitable lands to Muslims. No other religious group in India has such a favorable regime for religious land management.

The necessity for this legislation arose in the aftermath of the Partition of India. Many Muslims migrated to Pakistan, leaving their properties in India behind. Consequently, the Indian Government decided that their properties should be allocated exclusively to Muslims. The Waqf Act, 1954 established waqf boards, Muslim committees that dedicate property permanently to religious or charitable ends, to oversee this process.

This act was later replaced by the Waqf Act, 1995. It granted expanded powers to the waqf boards. Under this act, waqf boards practically have the authority to claim any land in India as their own. Unsurprisingly, they rank as the third-largest landowners in India, following the army and railways. The shrewd nature of this act has drawn criticism from legal luminaries and scholars, with concerns about its constitutionality. Regardless, it is still in effect in India.

As a result, the Muslim society enjoys not just constitutional equality but also preferential treatment in the form of Sharia-driven laws, AIMPLB and the Waqf Act, from the Indian state. Considering this, writers who make exaggerated allegations about discrimination against Indian Muslims demonstrate a poor understanding of history and contemporary events. When the Indian Government decides to reform Muslim personal laws, regulate the obscure functioning of madrasas and form AIMPLB to ensure proper representation of Muslim society, it is blatantly ignorant and hypocritical to claim oppression.

Too many communities engage in hate speech but the Indian state does not discriminate

In recent years, India has witnessed several incidents of hate speech against Muslims. The judiciary and central government have understandably noticed such events and have enacted stringent legislation to address this menace.

Regrettably, acts of hate speech have been a facet of India's ugly political landscape, given its multi-ethnic composition. In South India, social activist EV Ramaswamy was known in his heyday for making vociferous hate speeches against the Brahmins. A spokesperson from the DMK, the ruling party of the state of Tamil Nadu, recently made a speech calling for Brahmin genocide.

Radical Muslim groups are equally involved in several incidents of hate speech. Just two years ago, Muslim groups rioted, committed arson and openly called for the beheading of Nupur Sharma after she quoted Ḥadīth verses — statements of words and actions of the Prophet Muhammad — from Sahih Bukhari, a key Islamic text. In some parts of India, every few months, radicals call for “sar tan se juda.” This Islamic slogan means, “separate the head from the body,” and is a call for the decapitation of blasphemers.

Therefore, it is essential to understand that these incidents of hate speech do not necessarily reflect the larger policy of the state or a community. Many such incidents arise due to the politicization of local sentiments. Hence, these hate speeches should more appropriately be viewed as law and order issues rather than indicative of the national sentiment.

The status of Indian Muslims remains unchanged, resembling the situation before. Consequently, India is a unique place where all varieties of Muslims, including Shia, Sunni and Ahmadiyya coexist as equal citizens in the republic. They represent diverse ethnicities such as Pashtun, Punjabi, Bihari, Gujarati, Bengali, Kannada, Kashmiri, Tamil and more. They have equal opportunities for education, work, mobility and sustenance, like other religious groups. In fact, Indian Muslims have far greater rights than Ahmadis in Pakistan, Sunnis in Iran and Shias in Saudi Arabia. Critics of India in *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, the BBC,

Al Jazeera and Fair Observer might do well to note that everyone in India, including Muslims of all denominations, are equal in the eyes of the law.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Prashant Sharma holds a bachelor's degree in physical science and a master's degree in defense studies. He has interned at the National Maritime Foundation and the United Service Institution of India in New Delhi. Currently, he is employed as a Border Management Analyst at the Centre for Internal Security and Analysis (CISA), New Delhi.

Seleucids: The Valuable Architects of The Middle East

Sven Christoffersen
April 12, 2024

The Seleucid Empire, emerging from Alexander the Great's conquests, played a significant role in shaping the Middle East culturally and politically. It also bridged the knowledge gap between Europe and India.

The often-told narrative of the Middle East focuses on the rise and fall of empires like the Achaemenids, Abbasids and Ottomans. Alexander the Great's conquest of the Achaemenid Persian Empire in 330 BCE is another well-known chapter. Yet, a significant power that emerged in the wake of Alexander's death — the Seleucid Empire — remains largely obscure.

Founded by Seleucus I Nicator, one of Alexander's Macedonian generals, the Seleucid dynasty carved out a vast kingdom. They and Alexander's other successors, collectively known as the Diadochi, vied for territory within the empire after Alexander's chosen regent, Perdiccas, failed to hold onto power. When the dust settled, the Seleucids found themselves in control of the lion's share of the empire. At its peak, the Seleucid Empire stretched from Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) to the Indus Valley in India.

Despite its geographical dominance and lasting influence, the Seleucids are often relegated to a footnote in discussions about the Middle East. They are overshadowed by their Egyptian counterparts, the Ptolemies, who are famous in the West for collecting the Library of Alexandria and for the exploits of their last member, Cleopatra. The Seleucids enter Western narratives primarily in the context of their eventual defeat by the Romans.

This neglect has resulted in a significant gap in our understanding of the region's development. The Seleucid Empire played a crucial role in shaping the Middle East, both culturally and politically.

Architects of the Hellenistic world

The Seleucids' impact extended far beyond the battlefield. They played a crucial role in bridging the gap between Europe and India, fostering cultural exchange and inadvertently shaping the world through their interactions with other powerful empires.

The Seleucids were heirs to the vast Hellenistic cultural tradition. This influence manifested in their grand architectural projects, characterised by a blend of Greek, Mesopotamian and Egyptian styles. Cities like Antioch, their capital, boasted impressive public spaces, colonnaded streets, and

temples adorned with statues in the Greek tradition.

Seleucid architects also played a key role in the development of urban planning, with a focus on geometric layouts and civic amenities. In philosophy, the Seleucids embraced the intellectual currents of the Hellenistic world. Epicureanism, Stoicism and Scepticism all flourished under their patronage, attracting scholars and fostering lively debates.

One of the most significant contributions came from Megasthenes, a Seleucid ambassador stationed at Pataliputra, the magnificent capital city of Indian monarch Chandragupta Maurya, in the 3rd century BCE. Credited as one of the first Europeans to write extensively about India, Megasthenes's work, the *Indica*, became a cornerstone for understanding the subcontinent.

His accounts, despite potential biases inherent in any ambassador's view, remain a valuable source of information. Megasthenes's detailed observations on Indian society, including the complex caste system, the role of elephants in warfare, and the practice of sati (widow self-immolation), as well as politics and geography, provided a window for Europeans into a previously unknown world.

Megasthenes's work wasn't just a standalone account. It served as a foundation for later writers like Strabo, who used and interpreted the *Indica*. It shaped European perceptions of India for centuries to come. Strabo cited Megasthenes' descriptions of outlandish creatures, likely misinterpretations of real animals or cultural practices, which fueled European fantasies about the exotic East.

The Seleucids may not be a household name, but their enduring legacy is undeniable. They were facilitators of cultural exchange, purveyors of knowledge and patrons of art, architecture and

philosophy. Their influence transcended geographical boundaries and temporal limitations, leaving an indelible mark on the ancient world.

The Jewish rebellion against the Seleucids

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the Seleucids, however, comes from their interaction with a small but ancient people in the southwestern corner of their empire: the Jews.

The Seleucids cast a long shadow over Judea in the 2nd century BCE. Under the oppressive reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who earned the punning epithet "Epimanes" (the Mad) for his increasingly erratic and oppressive religious policies.

Antiochus deeply offended his Jewish subjects. He desecrated the Second Temple in Jerusalem, erected a statue of Zeus, and mandated the worship of Greek gods. He sought to hellenize Judea by promoting the Greek language, customs and religious practices. This included the suppression of traditional Jewish practices such as circumcision and Sabbath observance, a direct assault on Jewish identity and faith.

This oppression ignited a rebellion. In the small village of Modin, a Jewish priest named Mattathias Maccabaeus and his sons refused to comply with Antiochus' decrees. Their defiance sparked a wider uprising. Skilled fighters with unwavering faith, the Maccabees adopted guerilla tactics against the Seleucid army. Their deep familiarity with the Judean terrain and religious fervour proved advantageous, leading to early victories. Judas Maccabeus, Mattathias' most prominent son, emerged as a charismatic leader, uniting diverse Jewish factions against a common enemy. His leadership and military prowess were instrumental in the early successes of the rebellion.

The Maccabean Revolt transcended the battlefield; it was a struggle for the very essence of Judaism. This period had a profound impact on Jewish thought and identity. The trauma of the Seleucid persecution prompted the creation of apocalyptic texts such as the Book of Daniel and the Book of Enoch. These works expressed themes of divine judgement, righteous suffering, and eventual deliverance, reflecting the anxieties of the Jewish people.

The Maccabean spirit of resistance against tyranny and unwavering faith in the face of oppression continues to resonate with Jews today. Their story serves as a potent reminder of the lengths to which communities will go to defend their beliefs.

Two books, now known as 1 and 2 Maccabees, became a part of the Christian canon of the Bible and told the tale of the Maccabean revolt to subsequent generations. Likewise, the Jewish tradition of Hannukah continues to commemorate the successful resistance of the Maccabees against their Hellenistic overlords.

The repercussions of the Maccabean Revolt extended far beyond Judea's borders. The weakened Seleucid Empire presented an opportunity for the Romans, who exploited the conflict to expand their own regional influence. By using Judea as a pawn in their power struggle, the Romans undermined the Seleucids. By the 1st century BCE, the Romans had made themselves masters of Anatolia, Syria and Palestine.

While Judea dominates the narrative of the Seleucids' struggles in the West, the empire's eastern borders also faced challenges. In their Iranian territories, revolts aimed at reviving Persian customs posed a significant threat. Ultimately, the Seleucids failed to maintain control of Iran, paving the way for the rise of the indigenous Parthian and Sasanian dynasties.

This set the stage for a division of the Middle East between the rival Roman and Iranian empires, a pattern which would not be altered until the Arab Muslim conquest of the Levant and Iran seven centuries later.

[[Ali Omar Forozish](#) edited this piece.]



Sven Christoffersen is a master's degree student of history at the University of Oslo. He completed his bachelor's degree at the same place. When not busying himself with constructing his master's thesis, he spends his free time playing video games, reading, and mucking about in Oslo.

Bono Goes to Las Vegas: Let There Be Light

India Nye Wenner
April 13, 2024

In an exclusive interview, U2's singer Bono reflects upon the band's opening of the Sphere entertainment arena. He meditates on the emotional, spiritual and political themes of his groundbreaking show in Las Vegas.

On March 2, 2024, the Irish rock band U2 performed its final of 40 shows in a concert residency at Sphere, a cosmic kaleidoscope of lights and Las Vegas's newest crown jewel.

When I stepped out of the airport and into Las Vegas, I felt like I had entered the outer edge of

the universe. The low skyline met with the ancient seabed, and the city seemed to float in the azure sky. It was as if I were in a snow globe with toylike monuments — the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building and a pyramid were all around me. As night fell, the proprietors of the globe flicked a switch, lighting Las Vegas up. "Sin City" swaggered to center stage out of an innocent daytime.

And then there was Sphere. It was like its own planet within the galaxy of Las Vegas. Its phantasmic exterior lighting made it appear as a giant, extraterrestrial eye. U2 wielded Sphere to eclipse the typical characterizations of the infamous city.

U2's shows at Sphere went beyond concerts; they were full-body journeys that enveloped each audience member with wraparound illusions. This held true even at the very outset, as the dome was made of faux cathedral stone that seemed to spiral to the stars above.

Although drawing from multiple albums, the shows centered on U2's 1991 album *Achtung Baby*. The band, with lead singer Bono, had previously staged the album in the 1992 Zoo TV Tour. Sphere, decked out with the world's largest LED screens and costing \$2.3 billion to construct, opened the door to a new type of concert.

Intensity vs intimacy and meeting past selves

U2's performance style had taken a turn in 1992, escalating from relatively unembellished stage setups to sensory overload. With their revolution of rock show techniques, fans grew concerned that the spectacle could diminish the music. That's why it is paramount to learn how the band approached its new show in this regard.

After my trip to Las Vegas, I had the opportunity to interview Bono about the show.

India Nye Wenner: The first topic I want to discuss is U2's relationship to the audience in the fresh Achtung Baby production, and how you dealt with the immersiveness of Sphere.

Bono: Originally, when Achtung Baby came out, we had a tour called Zoo TV. Part of it was deliberately disorientating. We wanted not to have a friendly relationship with our audience. It was a kind of confrontational relationship. We bombarded our audience with media; I shapeshifted into your worst-nightmare rock star. It was the time of grunge, and everyone was kind of thinking, "We're really authentic, man, we're wearing plaid and we don't believe in even a light show." We said to ourselves, "We'll go in the exact opposite direction and be the opposite of authentic, and we'll bombard our audience." These were more art principles than music principles.

With this show, it's the same. It starts in what's known as Plato's Cave. But it starts, really, at the invention of fire, if you want to think of it like that — early experiences of cave paintings, aloneness. I walk out on stage without any glasses and I sing this ancient Irish melody, and it feels like you're in a cave. And then it quickly moves to a nightclub in Berlin in the 90s and it gets all very kind of decadent and fun and playful, and we become your worst nightmare of rock stars — which is kind of fun, too, 'cause playing that up is fun. So we let the ego run rampant for a while, so even that's not super connected. In the middle [...] you have songs like "One," which do connect. But it doesn't become truly intimate until we get to the bit where we turn off the technology.

Wenner: As an attendee of two of U2's Sphere concerts, I can attest to the energy shift that accompanied the middle of the show.

Bono: We break things down into this kind of acoustic, radical intimacy, I would call it. Because of the acoustic technology in Sphere, Sphere itself

is a speaker. And no matter where you are in Sphere, you get perfect sound. You're able to whisper and be heard at the very back. So we realized that the acoustic set where we're just playing acoustic guitar and these deconstructed versions of our songs is as powerful as the big visual extravaganza. Because you had been so disoriented by the first part of the show coming at you at full throttle, when we got to this moment of intimacy, it was really intimate. People started to sing, people got very emotional and they opened up more.

Then we get to this bit that I'm just talking to you about: the breakdown acoustic set on [musician] Brian Eno's stage, a turntable with algorithms that change its colors. Then we get back into more visuals and then finally into this cathedral of the natural world, which [stage designer] Es Devlin designed with all the endangered species of Nevada. And people get really emotional at that point. And I'm looking out there, and there are people with tears in their eyes — a lot of them are men. And sometimes I'm one of them.

Wenner: Each U2 show at Sphere lasted a little over two hours. With over 20 songs, 120 minutes, 18,600 attendees and 1.2 million LEDs, I'm curious to hear how you made sense of such vast potential.

Bono: The arc of the show is the thing that's most successful. In theater, you have a sort of arc. And to get to what the Greeks call catharsis, you have to go on a journey. So I think that's why this show worked well. I think you allow the visuals to overpower the music because in the end, the music comes back and [...] wins. I wondered: If it was like that all the way through, would it have been as powerful? I don't think so. It's the arc, this theatrical arc.

You just always enjoy a three-act structure, believe it or not, even though most rock 'n' roll bands are like jukeboxes. They just play their songs, and it's great, because it might be different every night. With [rock singer] Bruce Springsteen, you never know what you're gonna get when you see him play, which is amazing. Bruce is so clever. He creates a three-act structure just with his music every night. But to do it with visuals of this scale, you have to lock in a few things. And so in that sense, it's a little restrictive. But I think it's a worthwhile compromise to make.

Wenner: In your Zoo TV Tour of Achtung Baby, you were 32 years old. Now you're 63, and you've just performed the same songs you wrote 31 years ago.

On top of revisiting the past, as lead singer, you were tasked with maintaining harmony as a pillar amidst the tsunami of Sphere's visuals. U2 was just four men within the universe of lights. What did you learn about yourself as a performer throughout the show?

Bono: I have to confess to you that I still suffer from a kind of stage fright. I can wake up in the morning, and it's not that I think I can't sing the songs — it's just I wonder if I'll have the essential energy to really make tonight the best night. U2's grandiosity or arrogance, or whatever you want to call it, is [that] we want every night we play to be not just a Friday night, we want it to be New Year's Eve. Every night. That's our insanity. We go out with that kind of commitment.

What I was so surprised by performing those sounds was stepping inside the songs. I discovered the person who wrote them 20 years ago, 30 years ago, whatever it was. And it was a challenge — you meet your different selves. I could see some ways that I'd grown and become, I think, a better version of myself. But I could see in others where I hadn't grown.

In order to sing these songs, I have to really get inside them. The songs towards the end are very emotional; they're quite operatic. To be able to sing them, I gave everything I had — and I discovered that I didn't want to go out after the show. Or I couldn't meet anyone before. When I was younger, even ten years ago, I'd be the guy who'd be saying hello to everybody, going out afterwards, having a laugh. But this show was very demanding, so I accepted that while I'm here, this show owns me. My best friends would come by and I wouldn't get to see them. I'd be preserving my voice. So it's been quite challenging on that front. But when I'm on stage and with the band, I am so alive. And I'm okay if it's just two hours a day that I'm fully alive.

Achtung Baby's new relevance and the perils of love

Early in the show, a projected stone wall cracks apart. This is a nod to the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. It allows brilliant light to seep through its cracks and set the venue aglow. Today, in contrast to the unity that came in 1989 in Germany, walls are being built up across the world. Bitter divides have gone up in the Middle East, social battlements mortared with intolerance in America. And Russia continues to brutally encircle Ukraine.

By putting the spotlight onto Achtung Baby again decades later, U2 urges listeners to hear the songs in the larger context of our modern world.

Wenner: What made Achtung Baby, as opposed to The Joshua Tree or Songs of Innocence, the album to be re-energized and to bring Sphere to life?

Bono: We'd made two albums before Achtung Baby: One was The Joshua Tree, and another was called Rattle and Hum, which was really an extension of The Joshua Tree. So we really wanted to move away from a focus on the United States,

on America and its mythology, to a more European perspective. It just felt fresh for us to get involved in electronic music. We went to Berlin just as the wall was coming down and the Soviet Union was ending, and freedom was growing around the world. It was a very exciting moment to be in Berlin, when the wall came down and the world changed shape almost overnight. It was an astonishing moment in history.

Even though our song, “One,” was written with very personal themes — “We’re one, but we’re not the same, we get to carry each other” — it resonated in Berlin because East and West Germany were coming together. That song has gone on to mean a lot to people who are at odds with each other or trying to move towards some kind of union that’s difficult, whether it’s in a marriage or a country. And it just seemed that Achtung Baby and the album that followed it, Zooropa, was the right thing for us to do in the 90s.

It’s like an artist does a retrospective because they want people to remember their earlier work. A museum will curate their work from a period and you go and re-experience it some years later. It felt like that. It was like an anniversary. It was the right time to remind ourselves, as well as the rest of the world, that we’ve made this album. And some of the themes of unity, or the lack thereof, were present again — because now the wall is starting to be built back up. So I think that song in particular might be newly relevant.

After an opening of staggering lights and illusions, Sphere wrapped itself in solid-colored wallpapers, and the music took hold of the room. The song was an unsettling one. As silhouettes of butterflies began fluttering against the cobalt blue backdrop, Bram van den Berg — filling in on drums for Larry Mullen Jr, who was recuperating from surgery — struck up a quiet but gripping rhythm. The foursome, including van den Berg,

Adam Clayton, David “Edge” Evans and Bono, began to play “Love is Blindness.”

Wenner: What was your thinking behind pairing “Love is Blindness” with the mise-en-scène of butterflies and brooding blue?

Bono: The short answer is it’s setting up what comes later: the ode to the natural world, the Nevada Ark, Es Devlin’s work. But we made it a little eerie and a little spooky. I’m very interested that you should mention “Love is Blindness.” We did the best version we’ve ever done in our life last night. I couldn’t believe it. Sometimes a song can come into itself 20, 30 years later. I’m really enjoying singing that at the moment, and it’s such a bleak song in one sense. How love can turn in on itself. Love is blindness. This thing that should be light itself, love, can turn sour and lead you into a dark place.

You’ll see this in relationships. I imagine you’ll see it in some of your own or your friends’. They’ll get into relationships... and they’re just not good for them. It can overpower you. When I was writing it, I was throwing in some terrible, frightening images, like car bombs. It’s very melodramatic stuff, but it’s like a cabaret song.

Have you heard of the chanson tradition? I had these really extreme images which I’d taken from Ireland as we were dealing with terrorism and trying to get a peace agreement with paramilitaries. Last night, I was singing it, asking myself, “Where did these lyrics come from? How did I write them?” They’re so intense. And there is something about grasping the nettle. It’s okay sometimes to stare at the world and see that occasionally, it can have a dark heart. You don’t want to stay there, but it’s okay to look at it at times in your life and just say, “Here’s a problem. Here it is. I’m stating it, and this relationship is not going well. It’s not good. It’s going to blow up my life.” And the person who’s writing the song, the character at the

center of the song, the protagonist — his relationship is destroying him.

Finding awe in nature and people

As the audience sat in Sphere, transfixed by the lights and absorbed into the music, we suddenly found ourselves outside. The walls had become transparent like a crystal ball, and our attention fixed upon a surreally mundane vicinity: a drab car lot, hotels and a fluorescent Ferris wheel. And before our eyes, in a stop-motion erosion of time, Las Vegas began to disappear. From top to bottom, the framework of each building was exposed and dismantled, until we were returned to the sweeping desert that lay beneath the glamorous city. Water sprung from sandy fissures and washed over the land until Las Vegas was rendered a placid sea, the ancient ocean floor it once was.

Bono: Making the building disappear and then making Las Vegas disappear came to me very early on. I realized that the resolution of the screens was so high that if you showed people what was going on outside, at the same time, people would confuse reality, and it would look like the building disappeared. And from that we had this idea: What happens if then we deconstructed Las Vegas? What if we brought Las Vegas back 100 years? Then what if we brought it back a million years? Because the Nevada desert wasn't the desert then; there was water over it.

The show was a spiritual experience in itself, complete with cathedral-like imagery consistent with the motif of faith present in many of U2's songs. Prior to the band taking stage, Sphere projected the stonework of a gothic cathedral that appeared to stretch all the way to heaven. As the show started, the stone panels were traded in for codes of neon numbers. They flickered as they proliferated into a digital age church, a rainbow of integers that rose to a peak. They closed in on the

audience, locking viewers into a sort of digital infinity.

Elvis Presley then swooped in to free the audience from this box, rocketing them into a celestial stained glass window of glamor and allure, joined by gilded displays of gamblers and ravishing women. After Las Vegas's debauchery, the audience ended with exultation in a cathedral of the natural world, filled with the endangered creatures of the Mojave Desert. At the center of each distinct cathedral stood one continuity: the preacher U2, guiding guests along the pilgrimage through each facet of human nature.

Wenner: What did you want people to take away from the church of U2?

Bono: We wanted people to understand that every one of us has many different selves. From a very egocentric self, to a playful self, to an earnest, caring, change-the-world self. The thing that we wanted people to leave the building with was a word that you Americans have ruined. And the word is "awe." It's one of my favorite words, but I know everyone says, "everything's awesome!" And I always laugh saying the word, but I actually like the word. But we use it too lightly. It's not just Americans; Irish people do, too. But awe is, I suppose, wonder?

And the thing that U2 has always challenged, in all our different incarnations, was jadedness. Being bored. I have never been bored. Maybe I was bored when I was 16 in school, but once I joined U2, I could write songs, and there was always stuff for me to do. And I just wanted people to wake up in the world, and realize it's awesome, and realize that the world is fragile. It's a fragile ecosystem. We have to take care of it and we have to take care of each other.

The sins of Las Vegas are just more obvious. What's going on in Las Vegas does not stay in Las

Vegas. It is going on all over the world. There's that kind of hard commerce, but there's a lot of people who work really hard. I always try and thank people, the taxi drivers, the servers. The people who work there, they work around the clock for people who probably don't work as hard as them. And it's a little microcosm of America.

We live in a time where people are very judgmental of each other — your politics, where you're at in your life. And if this show succeeds, people will come out caring about the person they're walking out with a little more, and a little less cynical at the world around them. As people are leaving, as well as being in awe of the natural world and being alive, I'd like people to notice each other more, be grateful to each other. And as they look around at this sort of adult playpen, kind of smile at the human condition, and go, "Yeah, we are funny. We're funny, us human beings."

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



India Nye Wenner is an editorial intern and an author with Fair Observer. She is a high school student at the Brearley School in New York City. India has grown up

with a passion for writing and editing. She is an active contributor to her school newspaper, *The Zephyr*, and writes everything from short stories to poems and edits others' work in her free time.

The Indian Opposition Now Faces Modi State by State

Shirin Akhter, C. Saratchand
April 20, 2024

A few months ago, many of India's opposition parties joined together to form the INDIA alliance to compete against the BJP in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. However, challenging the BJP will not be easy. The BJP has won big majorities in the past two Lok Sabha elections and INDIA will have to play its hand carefully to avoid a three-peat.

People tend to explain electoral trends on the basis of single factors, especially individual leading personalities. In India since 2014, this means the personality of incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, such an approach cannot survive scientific scrutiny. It is instead a manifestation of efforts to fabricate a personality cult. Instead, let us attempt to dispassionately analyze electoral trends in India.

In Indian elections, a diverse set of regional interests coalesces around the states. Thus, a large number of regional and national parties that oppose the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came together to form the **Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA)** in July 2023.

Across the various states, there are four different kinds of challenges that the opposition faces:

1. In some states, the BJP and more broadly the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) are not a serious contender, namely, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Punjab.
2. In some states, the Indian National Congress (INC), as the main political party in INDIA, takes on the BJP directly, namely, Telangana, Karnataka, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan,

Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Assam.

3. In a third group of states, INDIA faces off with the BJP, but led by parties other than the INC or even non-INDIA parties. These states are West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra and Delhi.
4. In the last group of states, regional non-INDIA parties face the BJP, or the the BJP is a junior partner in an alliance. These states include Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

INDIA should take into consideration the varied political dynamics across these four groups if it is to have any hope of competing with the BJP at the national level.

For the sake of brevity, this piece will examine each of these four groups by using a few large states as examples.

States where the BJP is not a serious contender

The three states where the BJP is not a serious contender are the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the Western Indian state of Punjab.

In the case of **Tamil Nadu**, significant shifts have marked the political landscape due to the All India Anna Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)'s decision to end its alliance with the BJP. Among other factors, BJP state leader Kuppuswamy Annamalai's vociferous criticism of AIADMK leadership led to the split. Significant efforts by the BJP national leadership to maintain the alliance did not succeed.

For the AIADMK, the move may be an attempt to reclaim its independent political identity. For the BJP, the split makes building its presence in the state an uphill battle.

In contrast, INDIA in Tamil Nadu, led by the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK), has concluded seat-sharing talks with its alliance partners. INDIA has been undertaking a vigorous political campaign against national government's the economic agenda, including the implementation of many welfare schemes. The DMK, for its part, has also strongly critiqued the overall performance of the Modi government.

There is a strong possibility that the AIADMK-BJP split will favor INDIA. As a result, alliance is likely to perform strongly in the 39 Lok Sabha seats of the state.

In the state of **Kerala**, the principal contest is between the INC-led United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) to the UDF's left. Although both the UDF and the LDF are part of INDIA, they do not have seat-sharing arrangements for the national elections.

The Kerala BJP, on the other hand, is narrowing its focus on six of the total 20 Lok Sabha seats in the state. This approach involves assigning national government ministers to oversee these constituencies directly.

In recent years, the INC has compromised with certain BJP policies, such as the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA), that have been perceived as unfavorable to religious minorities. This has enabled the BJP to attempt to polarize the electorate along sectarian lines. Though the effort has not completely succeeded, the BJP has gained an opening to exploit in the state.

The political opening comes at a time when LDF, which is in government in Kerala, enjoys popularity due to its defense of the welfare system. Thus, the INC will likely have to share seats with LDF in this state. Despite its efforts, the BJP will at best emerge as a distant third.

Finally, in **Punjab**, the INC is in opposition to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). Although both parties are part of INDIA on the national level, have not formed an alliance at the state level. There was speculation about a possible alliance between the BJP and Punjab's third party, Shiromani Akali Dal (Badal), but disagreements over seat-sharing have prevented any electoral understanding.

Punjab remains the epicenter of the peasant upsurge that forced the BJP national government to overturn three farm laws that were seen as enabling corporate encroachment into agriculture. Thus, it is unlikely that the BJP will be able to make much headway in the state.

A brief glance into the political dynamics in the three states reveals the various reasons the BJP has a marginal presence. As a result, INDIA is in a position to exploit the BJP's weakness to maximize its seat tally.

States where the INC faces the BJP directly

The states where the INC faces the BJP directly are Telangana and Karnataka, which belong to South India, as well as Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Assam, which belong to the eastern, central and western parts of India.

In the last two Lok Sabha elections, held in 2014 and 2019, it was these states that helped the BJP attain a two-thirds majority in the Lok Sabha rule the nation for ten years. A close look at the dynamics in these states in this group may provide an clue about whether this may happen a third time.

In **Telangana**, the INC leads both INDIA and the state government. While the INC has been able to achieve a seat-sharing arrangement with the

Communist Party of India (CPI) there is no such arrangement with the CPI(M). Both leftist parties have a long history of popular support in the state, so an incomplete seat-sharing arrangement may not be optimal for INDIA.

The Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) which is the principal opponent of the INC in Telangana, has a significant presence, and so does the BJP. The defeat of the BRS in the state assembly elections late last year has weakened the party to an extent. Factors responsible for the defeat include neglect of education, unemployment and rising autocratic tendencies of the BRS leadership. The electoral prospects of the INC and BJP depend on which of these two parties will emerge as the principal beneficiary of the weakening of the BRS.

In **Karnataka**, the political landscape ahead of the 2024 elections has witnessed significant developments, with the BJP and the Karnataka-based Janata Dal (Secular) (JD(S)) forming an alliance. As a result, the JD(S) has been allocated four out of 28 Lok Sabha seats. Despite the challenges this alliance poses, INDIA has some reasons to be hopeful.

Sections of the JD(S) have broken away to gravitate towards INDIA. The BJP has recognized the diminished political stature of the JD(S). Perhaps this is why the party has been allotted such a paltry number of seats. Moreover, as the governing party in the state, the INC has restored some degree of welfare policies to push the electorate towards it.

In order to consolidate its position, INDIA may need to aim for the widest possible unity of non-BJP parties in the state, articulate alternative, non-neoliberal policies that challenge the BJP and where necessary focus on a selected number of seats in order to try to be victorious.

Haryana as well has seen a change in political alliances with respect to the previous election. The alliance between the BJP and the Jannayak Janta Party (JJP) has collapsed. Meanwhile, the INC and AAP have come together as part of INDIA. The AAP has been allotted one out of the 10 seats in the state.

INDIA may choose to politically challenge the BJP on a number of issues including the promise of guaranteed minimum support price for crops. INDIA could also if required selectively target some seats in the state.

The electoral contest in **Rajasthan** involves some novel developments. In a break with past practice, the INC has entered into seat-sharing agreements with the Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI(M)) as part of INDIA. Furthermore, the INC has entered into an alliance with the Bharatiya Adivasi Party (BAP).

The INC has also recently formed a strategic alliance with the Bharatiya Adivasi Party (BAP), which espouses issues of tribal people and is influential in a few districts in southern Rajasthan. The collaboration aims to consolidate tribal votes, which is pivotal in these regions. However, there is some internal resistance within INC to the alliance due to fears that BAP's rise might undermine INC electoral prospects in future elections.

The BJP in Rajasthan is afflicted by some internal divisions, with Vasundhara Raje, who was the most important in the state level, seeming to have been sidelined by the party.

To enhance its electoral prospects, INDIA may need to consider the possibility of forging alliances with the widest possible number non-BJP forces and also politically challenge the BJP on livelihood issues such as a guaranteed minimum

support price for crops and conduct of a caste census in the state.

In **Madhya Pradesh**, the INC, as part of INDIA has entered into an alliance with the Samajwadi Party. However, factionalism has severely impacted the state party, with reported differences between Kamal Nath and Digvijay Singh, the two most important leaders of the INC in the state.

In general, the BJP has performed strongly in the past few elections. Hindutva ideology is popular here, providing a strong platform for the BJP. The Madhya Pradesh INC must avoid the temptation to turn to soft Hindutva in order to win votes. The state party should instead focus on livelihood issues, thus decisively challenging the BJP politically while seeking to deal with problems of internal factionalism. Where required, INDIA could seek to selectively target some seats to try and increase its seat tally in the state.

Gujarat will see direct competition between the INC and BJP in all 26 Lok Sabha seats. A BJP political stronghold, Gujarat gave the party all 26 seats in both the 2014 and 2019 general elections. In the state assembly elections of 2022, the BJP retained power with a commanding majority, winning 156 out of 182 seats.

However, the INC and the AAP have entered into a seat-sharing pact for the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, with AAP contesting from the seats of Bharuch and Bhavnagar and the INC fielding candidates for the remaining 24 seats. This move aims to consolidate opposition votes and challenge the BJP stronghold, hopefully thereby preventing a repeat of the previous elections. INDIA may seek to concentrate resources on selected seats and focus on livelihood issues in order to try and deal with the organizational cum political strength of the BJP.

In **Chhattisgarh**, the BJP has indirectly sidelined its top state leader, Dr. Raman Singh, by getting him elected as the speaker of the state assembly.

The Chhattisgarh INC faces divisions, though to a lesser extent than in Madhya Pradesh. The state party is seeking to improve its electoral prospects by nominating prominent state-level leaders as candidates. The INC may seek to challenge the BJP by focusing on livelihood issues while being open to building a wider alliance with non-BJP parties.

In **Assam** the INC is leading a coalition of 16 political parties called the United Opposition Forum, which behaves like the state-level INDIA alliance. The alliance has agreed on common candidates in all the 14 Lok Sabha seats.

A principal challenge confronting INDIA is the CAA. For decades, Assam has received many migrants from neighboring Muslim-majority Bangladesh. Issues of religious identity, citizenship and land ownership intertwine, making the CAA a particularly divisive issue in the state. The United Opposition Forum may seek to politically challenge the BJP on the CAA while also focusing the political debate on livelihood issues.

In the present group of states, the fundamental challenges faced by INDIA are threefold. One is the organizational weakness of the INC. The second is the political weakness of the INC in the battle of ideas, with the party struggling to formulate an alternative to the BJP's neoliberal and Hindutva policies. The third is the lack of opposition unity. With the exception of Telangana, the states in the current group are those where the BJP had established an overwhelming dominance in the Lok Sabha elections of both 2014 and 2019. Unless INDIA finds a coherent strategy to challenge BJP in the present group of states, a

majority in the parliament may be out of reach for the alliance.

States where parties in INDIA other than the INC face the BJP

The states where parties in INDIA other than the INC face the BJP are the eastern states of West Bengal, Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, the Western Indian state of Maharashtra and the Northern Indian state of Delhi.

The results may depend on the way in which both the NDA and INDIA deal with the multiple political parties in their midst.

Bihar is the third-most populous state in India. It has seen Chief Minister Nitish Kumar quit INDIA to rejoin the NDA. Likewise, Chirag Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) has rejoined the NDA, while the BJP has marginalized another party led by his uncle Pasupathi Paras within the NDA. Seat-sharing talks in the NDA are complete.

Seat-sharing talks within INDIA are also complete, as the opposition announced through a press conference in March. The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) lead INDIA in Bihar. The INC, the CPI, the CPI(M), and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist Liberation) also form part of the alliance.

The principal political issues that INDIA could touch upon include the inequities that were documented in the recent state-level caste census, the extension of the rural employment guarantee scheme to urban areas and guaranteed minimum support prices for agricultural products.

In **Jharkhand**, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) has already finalized its seat-sharing plan with the INC as part of INDIA. The RJD and the CPI(M) also form part of the alliance in this state. However, the exit of the CPI is a setback.

The NDA in Jharkhand principally consists of the BJP and JD(U). The incarceration of former Chief Minister Hemant Soren (belonging to the JMM) by the national government has raised questions as to whether the arrest of a sitting chief minister so close to elections politically motivated. However, INDIA may need to foreground livelihood issues to effectively combat the NDA.

Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state of India and thus elects the largest number of Lok Sabha seats. In the last few months, the NDA has added a number of small parties as its allies, notably including the Rashtriya Lok Dal, many of whose voters supported the 2020 farmer protests. INDIA in the state consists of the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the INC.

Another party is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), whose support base seems to be in persistent decline. However, the decline of the BSP is not the only issue that the opposition needs to worry about in Uttar Pradesh. Competition for the same key voter groups between INDIA, the BSP and alliances like the PDM Nyay Morcha may fragment the electorate. The broader political fragmentation might impact the opposition's functioning as the non-INDIA parties behave as spoilers in certain areas rather than as substantial contenders.

There are three circumstances under which the opposition has a chance to challenge the BJP: (1) The SP successfully consolidates the electoral support of oppressed communities who were formerly BSP voters; (2) A broad opposition coalition is able to bring all parties together against the BJP; (3) INDIA runs a campaign grounded on livelihood issues such as employment and raising the guaranteed minimum support price for crops.

Maharashtra is the second-most populous state of India. Here, INDIA principally consists of the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Bal Thackeray) (SS(UBT)),

the Nationalist Congress Party (Sharad Pawar) (NCP(SP)) and the INC. At the state level, INDIA is known by the name Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA). However, the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) which was one of the partners within INDIA in Maharashtra could not be accommodated within INDIA.

The MVA, which includes Shiv Sena (UBT), the INC and the NCP, finalized a seat-sharing deal for the Lok Sabha elections, with Shiv Sena (UBT) deciding to contest 21 seats, Congress 17, and NCP (SP) 10 respectively.

The NDA in the state consists of the BJP, Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) (SS(ES)) and the Nationalist Congress Party (Ajit Pawar) (NCP(AP)).

The schism of Shiv Sena has resulted in a situation where the bulk of its activists and support base remains with the SS(UBT) while the bulk of its legislators are with the SS(ES). The Nationalist Congress Party split has resulted in the bulk of junior leaders supporting the NCP(AP) while the support base of the party is relatively more committed to the NCP(SP). This is reflected in the use of Sharad Pawar's portraits by the NCP(AP) during the election campaign which the NCP(SP) halted through judicial intervention.

The principal issues in the state revolve around livelihood. INDIA may try to stitch together the broadest possible unity of non-BJP forces in order to achieve significant electoral success.

In **Delhi**, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and the INC, as part of INDIA, have entered into a seat-sharing agreement. A principal issue that is confronting the state is the sudden arrest of Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal by the central government.

Other issues confronting the state include the persistent efforts by the central government to

stymie the Delhi government and livelihood issues such as employment. For INDIA to be competitive in Delhi, it needs to challenge the BJP on the ideological plane.

In **West Bengal**, INDIA has not been able to arrive at a seat-sharing agreement. The Trinamool Congress (TMC), which is the ruling party in the state, has announced its own candidates for the Lok Sabha elections, but the leftist parties (led by CPI(M)) and the INC have entered into an electoral agreement.

The BJP is facing a setback due to internal divisions. The key political issues in the state revolve around the CAA and livelihood issues. If possible rise in the vote share of INDIA impacts the BJP more than the TMC, then the BJP is unlikely to achieve a meaningful advance in the state.

For INDIA to challenge the BJP in this group of states, it may need to resolve a few issues. One issue is the absence of broad-based opposition unity in Uttar Pradesh. More generally, the issue is whether the opposition will be unite to challenge the BJP in all of these states. These issues may well determine the results of the elections.

States where non-INDIA parties face the BJP

The states where non-INDIA parties face the BJP are the southern state of Andhra Pradesh and the eastern state of Odisha.

In **Andhra Pradesh**, the alliance of the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Jana Sena Party (JSP) with the BJP has resurrected the NDA. The parties have reached a seat-sharing agreement for the upcoming elections.

This alliance faces the Yuva Jana Sramika Rythu Congress Party (YSRCP) which is heading the

government in Andhra Pradesh. INDIA is the third coalition, which has reached a seat-sharing agreement. The principal issues in the state revolve around livelihood and the resource crunch confronting the state after the bifurcation of united Andhra Pradesh into Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

In **Odisha**, there was a serious possibility of electoral unity between the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) (the party in government in the state) and the BJP (that is the principal opposition party in the state). However, this did not transpire due to lack of agreement on seat-sharing. The INC is the third alternative in the state.

The BJP may try to weaponize the advancing age of beloved Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik (of the BJD) to further its prospects in the state. The INC can only confront this effort by re-centering the political debate in the state around livelihood issues.

The YSRCP, TDP and BJD may unexpectedly reorient themselves after the elections in the case of a close outcome where neither the BJP nor INDIA achieves a clear majority.

A myriad of regional dynamics, strategic alliances and ideological battles will shape India's 2024 elections. The formation of INDIA marked a significant attempt by opposition parties to consolidate their collective voter bases in order to challenge the BJP, which won two supermajorities in 2014 and 2019. If the opposition is able to function as a unit, deftly navigate state specific political issues and present a substantial ideological and policy challenge to the BJP, it has a solid chance of success.

[[Aniruddh Rajendran](#) edited this piece.]



Shirin Akhter is an accomplished associate professor in the economics department at Zakir Husain Delhi College, University of Delhi, India.

She has degrees from the University of Delhi and Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi, India. With nearly two decades of experience, she has been a faculty member at the University of Delhi since 2003.



C. Saratchand is a professor in the economics department at Satyawati College, University of Delhi, India.

He has been educated at St. Stephen's College and Jawaharlal Nehru University. Saratchand has taught many courses, including comparative economic development, India's economic history and political economy.

The Truth About Uighurs: Has China Really Committed Genocide?

Pierre-Marie Meunier
April 21, 2024

China denies accusations that it represses the Uighur people. The country's demographic statistics, however, paint a picture that suggests possible genocide.

Lu Shaye, the Chinese ambassador to France, recently appeared on French television. He described China's repression against Uighurs — a Turkic ethnic group — as

“storytelling,” “lies” and “bullshit.” What he denied, however, are official Chinese data. Has the country been betrayed by its own bureaucracy?

As a matter of fact, bureaucracy is often the Achilles heel of totalitarian systems. Analysis of certain Chinese data may suggest foul play; it is more eloquent on the situation in the Xinjiang region than Lu. That is unsurprising, as the ambassador is best known for his diatribes in defense of China, and he vigorously rejects everything that harms Beijing's interests.

Official statistics suggest Uighur genocide

China is responsible for the mass internment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, which the country legitimizes by the needs of a firm and repressive anti-terrorist policy. In May 2022, Lu had already stood out by drastically downplaying the attacks on this population's rights in prisons or detention centers. He called them “interns” in “educational and professional training centers.”

Beyond this, China is accused of torture and forced sterilizations against these populations. Committing these atrocities would act directly on the demographics of a particular ethnic group. As stated in Article II of the UN's Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide: “Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Murder of group members; (b) Serious attacks on the physical or mental integrity of members of the group; (c) Intentional subjection of the group to conditions of existence intended to bring about its total or partial physical destruction; (d) Measures aimed at hindering births within the group; (e) Forced transfer of children from the group to another group.”

The last two acts listed are likely to worry China, knowing that there is no need for murder or

mass extermination to define a genocidal policy. The country has vehemently rejected these accusations for years. But to Lu and China's chagrin, the most compelling evidence of their misconduct comes from China itself. The National Bureau of Statistics of China tells us, for example, that the natural increase rate — the difference between the birth rate and the death rate — in the province of Xinjiang increased from 11.08 per 1,000 in 2016 to 11.40 in 2017, and suddenly dropped to 6.13 in 2018, then finally fell to 3.69 in 2019.

As China rightly maintains, Xinjiang's overall population continues to grow, but more slowly than before. The rate of natural growth of a region with 25 million inhabitants was reduced by roughly two-thirds in just two years. With the mortality rate barely changing, this decline is largely due to the drop in the birth rate between 2017 and 2019, falling from 15.88 per 1,000 in 2017 to 8.14 in 2019, a reduction of 47% in two years. The birth rate would have fallen below six per 1,000 in 2020, but this figure is difficult to confirm; China stopped detailing its statistics after 2020. The 2021 edition no longer provides birth rates by region, instead listing only the national rate for the entirety of China.

China's unsourced explanation

China has an explanation for the decline: This drop of almost 50% would be the consequence of women's minds being "emancipated" as "gender equality and reproductive health [have] been promoted." This assertion is based on a single source: a 2021 report on Xinjiang. Special researcher Li Xiaoxia produced this report at the Xinjiang Development Research Center. General media owned by the Chinese state published it, not a peer-reviewed publication. The report provides no data or sources, simply stating, for example: "fertile women accept tubal ligation and IUD operation spontaneously." It goes on to add: "In

2018, both fertility rate and natural growth rate of ethnic minority population (the [Uighur] population in particular) in Xinjiang decreased significantly. All of these can be attributed to the strict implementation of the family planning policy." The terms "spontaneously" and "strict implementation" should be clearly and concretely explained.

Beijing's line of defense can be summed up thus: China has succeeded in achieving an "accelerated demographic transition" in Xinjiang. Except that, normally, this type of phenomenon takes at least a few generations. One would hardly find a demographer that has witnessed such a major birth rate drop elsewhere in the world over such a short period. Not even Iraq in the 2000s, Syria since 2011, Yemen currently or Germany after 1944 compare.

There is currently no satisfactory, legitimate explanation for such a massive drop in the Uighur birth rate. This opens the door to accusations of genocide about which China is already beginning to erase its statistical traces. The country's real intentions make this situation distressing. The birth rate risks becoming the Chinese power's main problem for decades to come. Such repression of births of a particular ethnic group is a subject of international interest on which Chinese denials are now bordering on negationism.

[[Lee Thompson-Kolar](#) edited this piece.]



Pierre-Marie Meunier is a former French military intelligence officer. He is currently director of operations for STRATINFO, a communications consultancy firm in Paris. In 2006, he graduated from the Académie militaire de Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan with a double master's

degree in information & communication and international relations.

Iran and Israel Shift From Proxy War to Direct Conflict

Josef Olmert
April 23, 2024

In April, both Iran and Israel launched air strikes into each other's territory for the first time. This is a significant escalation in a decades-long cold war that has seen Iran put pressure on Israel via Arab proxy militias. While the direct strikes have inflicted no casualties yet, the adversaries have now crossed a line they cannot uncross.

On April 1, a targeted Israeli strike killed two Iranian generals and five other personnel in Damascus. In response, on April 13, Iran attacked Israel directly, launching over 300 drones and missiles. Israel, with its Iron Dome air defense system, was reportedly able to intercept 99% of the incoming weapons and suffered no casualties. On April 19, Israel retaliated with a limited strike in Isfahan, in central Iran, also with no casualties.

Iran and Israel have not yet killed each other's citizens on their own soil with these strikes, but they are coming dangerously close to war. How did we get here?

“Death to Israel”

Conflicts do not just erupt out of the blue. There is always history involved, especially in the Middle

East. The State of Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran have a history of bad blood that dates back to the latter's very inception in February 1979.

The Islamic Revolution changed everything in Iran, obliterating the legacy of the failed monarchy. The monarchy had followed a foreign policy rooted in Iranian nationalism. In this context, Israel was not an enemy, but rather a very helpful collaborator. Iran's new leaders, the mullahs, however, adopted an Islamist foreign policy. In their picture of the Middle East Israel was the enemy, the Little Satan, and the regional sub-contractor of the Great Satan, the US.

The mullahs pursued the strategy of proxy war against Israel from the very beginning. The first area of this indirect collision was Lebanon, where already in 1979 the Shia movement called Islamic Amal became the nucleus of the pro-Iran forces in Lebanon. Later, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Hezbollah took on this role, leading the struggle which finally drove Israel out of Lebanon in 2000. Clearly, this strategy paid them off with Hezbollah becoming the most powerful force in Lebanon. From Iran's perspective Hezbollah became an unofficial wing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, tasked both with the gradual weakening of Israel and also supporting the Assad regime in Syria and anti-American Shi'i forces in Iraq. Later, Iran also supported the Shia Houthi insurgency in Yemen.

Iran has been systematically building up forces around Israel with the aim of using them against the “Zionist Entity” when the time comes. Simultaneously, it has relentlessly continued its quest for an atomic bomb. Such a weapon would play two important roles for Iran. First, it would serve as a deterrence against Israel, the US and their Arab allies. Second, it would be the ace up Iran's sleeve in case conflict with Israel ever got out of control.

The failed Israeli policy on Iran

The top question emerging from all the above is: Why has Israel allowed this state of affairs to take shape?.How has Iran succeeded in mobilizing all these forces against Israel?

Here is the answer. For the last 15 years, Israel's leader has been Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. For him, the nuclear threat posed by Iran is the most important challenge to Israel's security and survival. For Jews who still remember the Holocaust less than a century ago, the annihilation of the Jewish people is a real fear, and it is legitimate and understandable that they connect that fear with an existential threat like Iran.

However, there are three main problems with Netanyahu's policy. First, he did not offer a viable strategy to deal with the Iran nuclear program, an absence which became dramatic following the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 and the subsequent US abandonment of the treaty under President Donald Trump. Second, despite all of Netanyahu's rhetoric about preparing an independent Israeli military option to deal with the Iranian nuclear project, Israel has to date prepared no such alternative. Thirdly, while the Iran nuclear program was the uppermost topic on his agenda, Netanyahu neglected dealing with the gradual strengthening of Hamas and Hezbollah, and under his watch both organizations became full-fledged armies. The results of this development have been in clear display since the October 7, 2023, Hamas assault on Israel.

Yes, Netanyahu did carry out an air campaign in Syria with the stated aim of hampering Iranian presence there and arms shipments via Syria to Lebanon, but while this campaign yielded tactical local successes, it failed strategically. Iran has had the upper hand, and it managed to solidify a circle of active, effective enemies around Israel. Most

importantly, it has continued the race towards the bomb uninterruptedly.

Interpreting the April strikes

It is in this context that we should look at the current skirmishes between Iran and Israel. Both parties have abandoned long-held policies. Iran, for the first time, attacked Israel directly and not through proxies. Israel directly attacked Iran in a justified retaliation, albeit a muted one — though the choice of target still gives a wink towards the nuclear program; Israel destroyed a radar system protecting nuclear facilities near Isfahan. So, the strike was clearly an escalation.

Iran lost tactically, as its attack was mostly thwarted, while Israel proved capabilities which show potential for more. But, that is merely tactical failure and success. What about the strategic results?

Here we are in the guessing game .What are the lessons learnt by the two sides?

I will offer my guesses. Iran will not abandon the policies and goals it has pursued since 1979. The Islamic regime has turned them into a question of its very *raison d'être*. They will continue to use proxies and will directly engage at their choosing. In their minds, they have already crossed the Rubicon, and they can thus continue to attack Israel directly.

The onus falls on Israel. The Israeli leadership is still with Netanyahu, but most of them already have their minds on the post-Netanyahu era (after the next elections which I believe, actually hope, will be around the autumn of 2024). They will have to make difficult decisions. Will Israel go all the way against Hezbollah or not? How will Israel finish the job of eliminating Hamas in Gaza? Above all, what will Israel do about the Iranian nuclear program?

With such choices and dilemmas facing the two protagonists, we can unfortunately be certain that the last round of hostilities was not the beginning of the end; maybe not even the end of the beginning. Stay tuned.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]



Josef Olmert is a Middle East scholar, former Israeli peace negotiator, political insider, published journalist and author, as well as a seasoned public speaker.

He is an adjunct professor at USC-University of South Carolina. Olmert was a member of the Israeli delegation for talks with Syria in the Madrid Peace Conference and subsequent Washington, DC negotiations.

How to Tell Between an Iranian “Proxy” and an Ally

Mehdi Alavi
April 23, 2024

Western media habitually label Hamas, the Houthis, and Hezbollah as Iran’s proxies. One could just as reasonably consider European countries to be proxies of the US. Such a blind approach only serves to further erode the media’s credibility. A more accurate description for these groups would be “allies” or “partners” of Iran.

William Randolph Hearst, who built the United States' largest media conglomerate, famously declared, "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." Hearst pioneered yellow journalism, a style characterized by its extensive use of bold headlines and exaggerated narratives, often rooted in speculation and dubious information.

Sensationalism plagues the American media. The dramatization of news stories to attract a wider audience and generate revenue is a persistent trend. The media habitually deploy misleading information, propaganda and unverified rumors.

This penchant for sensationalized reporting has become so ingrained that even some formally independent media outlets can be drawn into this vortex. Fair Observer purports to champion balanced and truthful reporting. However, during the recent coverage of escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, this author noted with surprise the editorial oversight that allowed contributors to refer to Iran's allies and partners as proxies.

The terms “proxy,” “ally” and “partner” all describe relationships between actors on the international stage, but they are not synonyms. A proxy is an entity acting on behalf of another, often with a degree of subordination. In legal contexts, a proxy typically grants the designated individual general discretion throughout the matter at hand.

An ally, by contrast, is a party that provides assistance or support in a shared endeavor. Formalized agreements between states for wartime support are what alliances often become in the legal realm. In the context of Iran's Axis of Resistance, this can include non-state actors as well.

Finally, a partner refers to an entity associated with another for the joint execution of an activity

that offers mutual benefit. In legal terms, a partnership is an agreement between two or more parties to engage in mutually advantageous projects.

Iran's Axis of Resistance comprises entities such as the Houthis, Hamas and Hezbollah. These groups should not be categorized as Iranian proxies, but rather as allies or partners. (While their alliances with Iran may lack formal agreements, their actions demonstrate a level of cooperation.) Most importantly, each group retains its own decision-making authority. The Houthis pursue independent governance in Yemen. Similarly, Hamas, a Sunni group, has a history of conflict against Iranian-backed forces in Syria to overthrow Syrian President Assad. Hezbollah receives financial and military aid from Iran, yet it maintains its independent decision-making capacity.

Iran firmly bases its policy on ethical grounds when it supports the restoration of Palestinian control over Palestine. Analogous to the shared democratic values purportedly uniting the US and the EU, Iran and its allies share a common goal: the cessation of Palestinian occupation and the facilitation of a coexistence of Palestinian Christians, Jews and Muslims without unequal Jewish power.

The era of colonialism has concluded. Should the Western coalition, led by the US, seek to dismantle Iran's Axis of Resistance, they must stop colonizing Palestine, thereby letting Palestinians to govern their own territory. Failing this, the resistance will grow stronger and force the West to retreat in disgrace, as seen in Vietnam and Afghanistan.

The proxy narrative is a misconception in Middle Eastern politics

The ongoing conflict between Israel, backed by the US, and the Palestinians in Gaza has garnered global attention since the October 7 attacks by Hamas on Israel. While not directly implicated in the October 7 assault, Iran's allies or partners in Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Yemen and other nations have aligned themselves with Hamas in the aftermath of the incident. The adversarial stance of the United States and its media towards Iran often unjustly characterizes these entities as Iran's proxies. That is just another lie to instill public anger against Iran.

In a report spanning 20 pages, Michael Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy asserted that Iran typically refrains from imposing its will on groups such as the Houthis, allowing them autonomy in their decision-making processes. Knights contends that the Houthis are neither direct proxies of Iran nor opportunistic wartime allies. They align with Iran based on shared ideological beliefs rather than coercion. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi movement, considers himself equal to Iran's supreme leader.

The Council on Foreign Relations' study too found that mutual consent, not proxy servitude, forms the basis of Iran's associations, which further debunks the notion of Iran's dominance over its partners.

The persistence of Palestinian resistance

The Houthis, Zaidi Shia Arabs known for their robust determination and autonomous disposition, remained unsubdued by British dominion over Yemen for 129 years. They are combatants who resist oppression, something evident in their solidarity with the oppressed Palestinians in Gaza. Although, like Iranians, they are Shia Muslims,

Iranians are predominantly Twelver Shias. The two sects diverged in the 7th century, and so are separated by more historical distance than Catholics are from Protestants or Orthodox Christians.

Currently, the Houthis are attracting attention for their strategic blockade of the Bab al-Mandab strait in the Gulf of Aden, aimed at Israel and its allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Their actions are underpinned by a principled stance, conditioning the lifting of Israel's internationally condemned blockade of Gaza as a precondition for de-escalation.

Since 2007, Hamas has effectively governed Gaza following the 2006 parliamentary elections, catalyzed by US President George W. Bush's endorsement of Palestinian electoral processes. To the US' surprise, Hamas won the election in Gaza. Instead of endorsing it, the US opted to finance and endorse violence against Hamas, instigating internal conflict among Palestinians. Subsequently, Hamas consolidated control over Gaza in 2007.

Despite Israel's awareness of Hamas as a resistance movement aspiring to reclaim Palestine, it seized upon Hamas' ascension to perpetuate Palestinian disunity and thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state. Under Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership, Israel supported Hamas to prevent the realization of a Palestinian state. In return, Hamas purportedly endorsed a Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel, notwithstanding its status as a resistance entity.

Lacking progress on the two-state paradigm, hostilities naturally escalated between Hamas and Israel. Despite agreeing to a ceasefire and lifting the blockade in 2008, Israel broke the agreement, launching a ground invasion and aerial bombardment of Gaza, subsequently reinstating the blockade. Since then, Israel has invaded and bombed Gaza. The October 7 assaults represented

Hamas' desperate bid for liberation from Israeli subjugation. Predictably, Israel's responses have been disproportionately forceful, seeming even genocidal to observers in many corners of the globe. However, US media persists in hiding the truth, perpetuating Israel's customary falsehoods and propaganda.

Iran's allies share a common objective with Iran: the liberation of Palestine from prolonged oppression under Western colonization. This aggression has perpetuated regional instability, engendering numerous casualties and extensive devastation.

A wake-up call for transparency

Israel has committed atrocities that lay bare a disturbing reality: Media conglomerates are complicit in perpetuating a narrative that shields Israel from accountability, serving as an extension of US policy. Chief among these entities is The New York Times, which actively disseminates falsehoods and propaganda to obfuscate the crimes committed by both the United States and Israel.

We must recognize that the deep state influences the US government and its affiliated media conglomerates, making them untrustworthy as information sources. Therefore, individuals should cross-reference information from these sources with independent media outlets and alternative sources to verify their truthfulness.

Independent media like Fair Observer must vigilantly avoid falling into the deceptive narratives that mainstream conglomerates perpetuate. They must conduct rigorous independent research to maintain the accuracy and integrity of their reporting. Accountability is a moral imperative. And even if we do not hold ourselves accountable in this life, we all will be accountable before God.

[Ali Omar Forozish edited this piece]



Mehdi Alavi is an author and also the founder and president of Peace Worldwide Organization, a non-religious, non-partisan charitable organization in the United States

that promotes human rights, freedom, and peace for all. Annually, it releases its Civility Report, reporting on all countries that are members of the United Nations.

Will the Freedom Flotilla, Now in Istanbul, Reach Gaza?

Medea Benjamin
April 25, 2024

The Freedom Flotilla, carrying thousands of tons of humanitarian aid for Gaza, is awaiting departure from a Turkish port. Will Turkey stand up to the US State Department and allow it to set sail? If it does, will Israel allow the flotilla to land without another horrific display of deadly violence by Israel?

The Freedom Flotilla Coalition is an international effort to bring aid directly to Gaza. At press time, we are preparing for departure to Gaza from Turkey.

The non-violence training to join the Freedom Flotilla Coalition's ships to Gaza has been intense. As hundreds of us from 32 countries gathered in Istanbul, our trainers briefed us about what we

might encounter on this voyage. "We have to be ready for every possibility," they insisted.

The best scenario, they said, is that our three ships – one carrying 5,500 tons of humanitarian aid and two carrying the passengers – will reach Gaza and accomplish the mission. Another scenario would be that the Turkish government caves to pressure from Israel, the United States and Germany and prevents the boats from even leaving Istanbul. This happened in 2011, when the Greek government buckled under pressure and our ten boats were stalled in the country. With our boats docked in Istanbul today, we fear that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who recently suffered a crushing blow in local elections, is vulnerable to economic blackmail the Western powers might be threatening.

Another possibility is that the ships take off, but the Israelis illegally hijack us in international waters, confiscate our boats and supplies, and then arrest, imprison and eventually deport us.

This happened on several other voyages to Gaza, one of them with deadly consequences. In 2010, the Israeli military stopped a flotilla of six boats in international waters. They boarded the biggest boat, the Mavi Marmara. According to a UN report, the Israelis opened fire with live rounds from a helicopter hovering above the ship and from commando boats along the side of the ship. In a horrific display of force, they killed nine passengers, and one more later succumbed to his wounds.

To try to prevent another nightmare like that, potential passengers on this flotilla have to undergo rigorous training. We watched a video of what we might face — from extremely potent tear gas to ear-splitting concussion grenades — and we were told that the Israeli commandos will be armed with weapons with live rounds. Then, we divided up into small groups to discuss how best to react,

non-violently, to such an attack. Do we sit, stand or lie down? Do we link arms? Do we put our hands up in the air to show we are unarmed?

The most frightening part of the training was a simulation replete with deafening booms of gunfire and exploding percussion grenades and masked soldiers screaming at us, hitting us with simulated rifles, dragging us across the floor and arresting us. It was indeed sobering to get a glimpse of what might await us. Equally sobering are Israeli media reports indicating that the Israeli military has begun “security preparations,” including preparations for taking over the flotilla.

Who’s involved in the effort?

That’s why everyone who has signed up for this mission deserves tremendous credit. The largest group of passengers is from Turkey, and many are affiliated with the humanitarian group, IHH, an enormous Turkish NGO with 82 offices throughout the country. It has consultative status at the UN and does charity work in 115 countries. Through IHH, millions of supporters donated money to buy and stock the ships. Israel, however, has designated this very respected charity as a terrorist group.

The next largest group comes from Malaysia, some of them affiliated with another very large humanitarian group called MyCARE. MyCARE, known for helping out in emergency situations such as floods and other natural disasters, has contributed millions of dollars in emergency aid to Gaza over the years.

From the US, there are about 35 participants. Leading the group, and key to the international coalition, is 77-year-old retired US Army colonel and State Department diplomat Ann Wright. After quitting the State Department in protest over the US invasion of Iraq, Wright has put her diplomatic skills to good use in helping to pull together a

motley group of internationals. Her co-organizer from the US is Huwaida Arraf, a Palestinian American attorney who is a co-founder of the International Solidarity Movement and who ran for Congress in 2022. Arraf was key to organizing the very first flotillas that started in 2008. So far, there have been about 15 attempts to get to Gaza by boat, only five of them successful.

The incredible breadth of participants is evident in our nightly meetings, where you can hear clusters of groups chatting away in Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Malay, French, Italian and English in diverse accents from Australian to Welsh. The ages range from students in their 20s to an 86-year-old Argentine medical doctor.

What brings us together is our outrage that the world community is allowing this genocide in Gaza to happen and a burning desire to do more than we have been doing to stop people from being murdered, maimed and starved. The aid we are bringing is enormous — it is the equivalent of over 100 trucks — but that is not the only purpose of this trip. “This is an aid mission to bring food to hungry people,” said Huwaida Arraf, “but Palestinians do not want to live on charity. So we are also challenging Israeli policies that make them dependent on aid. We are trying to break the siege.”

Israel’s vicious attacks on the people of Gaza, its blocking of aid deliveries and its targeting of relief organizations have fueled a massive humanitarian crisis. The killing of seven World Central Kitchen workers by Israeli forces on April 1 highlighted the dangerous environment in which relief agencies operate, which has forced many of them to shut down their operations.

The US government is building a temporary port for aid that is supposed to be finished in early May, but this is the same government that provides weapons and diplomatic cover for the Israelis. And

while US President Joe Biden expresses concern for the suffering Palestinians, he has suspended aid to UNRWA, the main UN agency responsible for helping them, after Israel made unsubstantiated claims that 12 of its 13,000 employees in Gaza participated in the October 7 attacks.

Given the urgency and danger this moment presents, the Freedom Flotilla Coalition is entering rough and uncharted waters. We are calling on countries around the world to pressure Israel to allow us “free and safe passage” to Gaza. In the US, we are asking for help from our Congress, but having just approved another \$26 billion for Israel, it is doubtful that we can count on their support.

And even if our governments did pressure Israel, would Israel pay attention? Their defiance of international law and world opinion during the past seven months indicates otherwise. But still, we will push forward. The people of Gaza are the wind in our sails. Freedom for Palestine is our North Star. We are determined to reach Gaza with food, medicines and, most of all, our solidarity and love.

[[Anton Schauble](#) edited this piece.]



Medea Benjamin is the co-founder of both CODEPINK and the international human rights organization Global Exchange. She is the author of eight books,

including *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* and *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

Fascism Is Back and With a New Weapon: Conspiracy Theory

Maciej Bazela, Cheyenne Torres, Tara Yarwais
April 26, 2024

Neofascist politics are on the rise as an increasing number of Western nations boast ultra-right leaders. Social disillusionment has pushed center-right voters towards extremist leaders who advertise conspiracy theories. Irrationally, neofascist leaders appeal to voters who fear the end to their individual freedoms.

The world is beginning to see a shift. Ultra-right politics and ideologies are emerging from the fringes of the political spectrum. It is a dangerous shift to see, especially knowing the trajectory of fascism in the 1920s and 1930s. Despite its association with militarization and territorial conquests, modern fascism — often labeled as neofascism — has abandoned imperialist ideologies. At the same time, it seems to have taken on a quite interesting weapon: conspiracy theories.

World leaders such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and former US President Donald Trump perpetuate conspiracy theories that polarize voter bases and support ultra-nationalistic ideologies. It seems like fascism has taken upon a new face. No longer are conspiracy theorists and neofascists confined to backwoods musters or clattering away in some dank corner of the internet. Elected officials are now increasingly normalizing and mainstreaming far-right ideas. Across the global stage, far-right groups have quietly breached the mainstream without the cacophonous fury of a coup d'état.

The junction between neofascism and conspiracy theory

Benito Mussolini introduced the ideology of fascism in the 1920s. Fascism was a reactionary response to communism, socialism and liberalism. Neofascism is its modern iteration.

Neofascism encompasses a spectrum of ultra-nationalistic beliefs and practices, but it rejects left-wing, center-left and center-right positions. This modern form of fascism is marked by racial supremacy, populism, authoritarianism and nativism. It strongly opposes liberal democracy, Marxism, communism and socialism, often promoting xenophobic ideas and anti-immigration views. Neofascists have a fanatical focus on their country and its issues, which they blame on immigrants, liberals and those of different racial identities.

A common tool of neofascism is the conspiracy theory. Conspiracy theorists posit that a situation or event is the result of a clandestine plot by influential actors, often with political motives. Not every theory about a conspiracy is a conspiracy theory; rather, the term suggests a reliance on prejudice or insufficient evidence. Often, conspiracy theories are reinforced by circular reasoning where evidence contradicting the conspiracy is reinterpreted as supporting it. Numerous neofascist factions employ conspiracy theories to radicalize individuals and fuel their agendas. The process of radicalization then involves presenting ideas of danger and loss. Neofascists seek to convince people that their way of life is in immediate danger.

Renaud Camus's "Great Replacement" theory posits that an "elite" is orchestrating the replacement of white Europeans with non-Europeans. Brenton Tarrant, before he perpetrated the Christchurch massacre, endorsed this theory in a manifesto. The Great Replacement is intricately

linked to the "White Genocide" narrative, emphasizing white racial supremacy and propagating fear of demographic displacement.

Neofascist groups use these theories to directly radicalize people by perpetuating fear. Right-wing parties often nurture and propagate these ideas to secure voter support for a strong state to play the role of savior.

Therefore, neofascism and the propagation of conspiracy theories go hand in hand. They reinforce each other to establish a new social compact between two groups: a part of society that views a liberal democratic world with fear, and political parties that see the return of neofascism as the only way to stop the decadence and chaos of the world.

The return of fascism in Europe

Orbán's Fidesz Party has been in power since 2010. Under his leadership, Hungary has become not only one of the most anti-European, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese countries in the European Union but also one of the most conservative and anti-immigration, under the supposed defense of traditional and Catholic values.

Despite being a member of the EU, Hungary sees the EU as threatening their vision of a strong, nationalistic society and economy. In 2019, during the European election campaign, the Orbán government launched a poster campaign with the faces of Hungarian philanthropist George Soros and President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker. The poster read, "You have the right to know what Brussels is planning to do." Juncker's chief spokesman Margaritis Schinas accused Hungary of peddling conspiracy theories against the EU.

The poster referred to the compulsory migrant relocation quotas established by the EU. In the

eyes of Orbán's Fidesz Party, Juncker is using his influence and capital to destroy European culture through plans for the mass reception of refugees. The EU even ruled Hungary's deportation of immigrants as illegal, but Hungary continues to cite the EU with attacks upon its country's values.

Hungarian citizens fear their values, culture and identity as a people are under attack by the EU. The leaders in Brussels have effectively isolated Hungarians, making them disillusioned in the leadership the EU provides. How could they follow a leader that doesn't seem to protect their national identity? This is where the seductiveness of a leader like Viktor Orbán comes in.

The simplicity of his moral narratives further bolsters Orbán's charisma, offering a clear direction and scapegoating the EU government for erasing Hungarian ethnic identity. This fosters a cult of personality in which Orbán is the perfect representative of Hungarian identity. Coupled with Orbán's strong leadership persona, this attracts moderate Hungarians who perceive him as determined to uphold Hungary's identity and values.

Orbán this appeals to moderate Hungarians and attracts them towards the right, threatening the democratic principles of Hungary.

Orbán's charisma comes from conspiracy theories that allow the disillusioned and radicalized to reallocate blame and responsibility. His conspiracy theories posit that the EU government is determined to erase Hungarian ethnic identity. As cognitive dissonance sets in — "These leaders are supposed to support us, but they're not!" — Orbán offers an alternate direction. "If the leadership proves to be bad, it must be replaced," he stated at a conference of European right-wing citizens.

For a disillusioned Hungarian who feels their identity is threatened, the right-wing, neofascist Orbán offers shelter. A lack of appealing leaders turns moderate citizens towards courageous and anti-systemic political leaders offering sharp, revolutionary solutions to systemic problems. As more and more previously moderate masses turn towards radical, neofascist leaders, democracy is on a perilous precipice.

Democracy in the US is under attack

The phenomenon of neofascism is not constrained to Europe's borders. Despite a myriad of legal troubles, Donald J. Trump is the Republican frontrunner to win the White House for the second time to become the 47th president of the United States. Much may still happen between now and the election time in November 2024, but all significant polls give Trump a lead over other candidates. He leads in most swing states. He is perceived as more trusted on the economy than Joe Biden.

It is also clear that Trump has mostly stayed the same since he left the Oval Office. To begin with, he is a firm election denier. He still defends the theory that the 2020 elections were "stolen." Despite 91 criminal charges, including a federal case about organizing a conspiracy to defraud the US electoral system, Donald Trump maintains that he is "a victim of one of the biggest smear campaigns in the history of the US," an expression he uses frequently in his rallies.

There are no facts to support a stolen 2020 election. Yet many groups, organizations, media platforms and paramilitaries on the ideological right still support him. Trump's candidacy is firmly rooted in the aspirations and ideas of the MAGA movement. Among them, one can find the supporters of the Great Replacement Theory, according to which there is an international conspiracy "to engineer the migration of non-white

people to historically white countries in an attempt to ‘replace’ whites with a more pliant racially inferior population.” The idea is to emphasize the suspicion generated by the fear of “others” who are different from “us”.

For a population who is already deeply concerned about the US Federal government

eradicating individual freedoms, racial conspiracy theories offer a way to quell the disillusion of the center-right. Much of the social anger of white male conservatives is displaced. Fearing for their freedoms, conservatives displace their anger from the government to races they deem as a threat. As of now, politics no longer means rationality.

Moderate, centrist or even right-leaning political leaders no longer appeal to the agitated right-wing voter base. Trump is the perfect candidate to fill that vacuum. The charisma of a leader like Trump comes from a seductive idea of protecting the purity of the “real” nation from external degeneration.

Right-wing voters in the US increasingly see their moderate political leaders as unable to offer practical solutions to the problems they see in society. This paves a perfect road toward populist, extremist leaders like Trump. To the extreme right wing, no other option is viable.

A way forward

Extremist, neofascist leaders fuel violent conflicts within already-polarized societies. The challenge, therefore, lies in restoring moderation. A “healthy” critical, rational and mature conservatism must be rescued from the irrationality of neofascism and the disillusioned people.

Governments must begin to take social grievances seriously. We must revisit everything

from concrete conditions like the daunting cost of living to deep issues like the prioritization of systems over the individual. Only vigilance and active participation in civic culture and public life can repress the scourge of neofascism.

We must learn our lessons from the dangerous rise of neofascism. Until then, the world watches with bated breath.



Maciej is Chair of the Social and Political Environment Department and Academic Director of Executive Open Enrollment Programs at IPADE Business School. He holds a

Global Master of Arts in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a Doctorate in Philosophy from Regina Apostolorum University.



Cheyenne Torres is an assistant editor at Fair Observer. With a passion for literature, she graduated from Saint Mary's College of California with a bachelor's in

English, Creative Writing. She has experience in playwriting, fiction, creative nonfiction, short stories, essays and journalism.



Tara Yarwais is a Kurdish American. Born in Baghdad, she immigrated to the US in 2007. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology at Belmont University,

Nashville, Tennessee, and a master's in terrorism, security, and far-right extremism at Richmond University, London, England.

Fair Observer^o

Independence, Diversity, Debate