

Welcome to the Post-Palestine Middle East**By Hussein Aboubakr****commentarymagazine.com****October 2020****The anti-Israel cause is losing its power over the Arab world.**

When I was a 14-year-old jihadist wannabe in Cairo in 2003, I didn't care about Egyptian politics, Arabs, Hosni Mubarak, regional powers, Arab monarchy, Arab republicanism, capitalism, or any of the issues that animate worldly observers of Middle East politics. I cared about one thing and one thing alone: Palestine. All I needed to hear was the word "Palestine" in order to pledge my immediate unconditional loyalty to whoever was speaking. Few words—none, really—were fused with the fascinations, aspirations, emotions, longings, and mystical forces that the term "Palestine" summoned in me. Palestine was never merely a disputed geographical territory; it was a claim to the absolute fulfillment of the Islamic political vision, an eternal moral truth, secularized in Arab nationalism and sanctified in Islamism. Palestine meant el-helm el-Arabi (the Arab dream), the taji 'alras (the crown on top [of Arab-ness]), and the beating heart of Islam. To evoke Palestine was to evoke Islamic brotherhood and Arab honor, for it was a reservoir of identity and a proof of faith. Palestine was the fulfillment of a state of spiritual purity of the Muslim individual and the whole body of Islam. The Arab will to Palestine was a Nietzschean will to power. It was the epistemological glue of the disparate components making up Arab political consciousness.

And I wasn't alone. To the political and religious Arab minds of the 20th century, the idea of Palestine was everything. The dream of Arab nationalism, which had come to represent Arab-ness itself, and the cult of Islamism, which posed as the religion of Islam, both chose Palestine as their primary cause. This essentially consecrated Palestine as the psychological bond between Arab identity and Islam.

Much has changed in the past decade, however, and we are now entering the age of a post-Palestine Middle East. And as the region moves on to its post-Palestine reality, the world will move on to post-Islamism, and Islam itself will exert an ever-smaller influence over international politics. For the ideological forces that once caused terror in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Amman, Beirut, Cairo, London, Madrid, and New York are slowly shrinking in history's rearview mirror.

But before we can sketch a fuller portrait of post-Palestine reality, we must first examine the fantastical and once sacred notion of Palestine that fed the Middle East's most lethal pathologies.

WHEN I talk about a post-Palestine reality or post-Palestine-era politics, I refer to the Palestine that was a

constant psychological phenomenon dominating the Arab political imagination. It was a consistent presence through consecutive and varying political projects. It has been at the core of Arab nationalism, secular Arab revolutionary ideology, the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist jihadism, Iranian Islamism, and Turkish regional aspirations, to name a few.

In the Arab political vision, Palestine was the embodiment of moral truth. In the always-shifting Middle East, where every day can bring a new coup and yesterday's heroes are suddenly today's traitors, Palestine was an anchor. It was the object of longing for the anxious Arab and Muslim intellectual and a means of belonging for the Arab and Muslim everyman. The status of Palestine was akin to that of the Messiah in Jewish mysticism. "When Palestine is lib-erated" was a modern colloquial Arabic phrase for "when the Messiah comes."

It was in Palestine that the architects of Baathist Arabism, the engineers of Nasserism, the visionaries of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the pioneers of jihadism all chose to vest their competing claims. For each, Palestine was the sole and final representation of the essence of the Arabs and of Islam. It was also, more practically, what legitimized their own claims of eternal rule over Arab peoples.

The mythical power of Palestine was further enhanced by the grotesque volume of blood that many Arabs and Muslims poured into it. For the cause of a liberated Palestine, countless men chose their own doom, as was demanded in the fatwas of even "moderate" Islamic clerics in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. They all spoke of the permissibility of suicide bombers during the first and second intifadas. Islamist terrorist organizations in Israel, such as the al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigade, are revered by Arabs and Muslims in Jerusalem, Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Amman, Mecca, Baghdad, Tehran, and Ankara—and also in Birmingham, London, Detroit, Minneapolis, New York, and Southern California.

The liberation of Palestine played a role in every Arab coup and counter-coup of the past 70 years. It was the same cause that devastated coffee shops, buses, and restaurants in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. It manifested in a threat to the life of King Hussein in Amman in 1970 and took the life of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in Cairo in 1981. It was for Palestine that Iraqi soldiers, many of them illiterate peasants, marched into Kuwait in 1990. For decades, nearly every four-year-old Arab has known that the road to Jerusalem went through Kuwait—or Beirut, or Damascus, or Baghdad. It was this vision of Palestine that inspired the Islamic Army for the Liberation of the Holy

Places, which tore through Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam in 1998. It was this sacred Palestine that helped send al-Qaida terrorists (once known as the World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders) into the skies over New York City and Washington on the morning of September 11, 2001. And it is the very same Palestine that today inspires the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran.

The countless deaths, oceans of blood, and endless human suffering were perversely woven into tales of heroic martyrdom to bolster the myth of Palestine. All the religious, intellectual, and political maladies of the Middle East were swiftly justified by religious and political leaders as necessary to the cause.

THIS VERY abbreviated summary of devastation and fanatical violence should help explain why Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, is one of the most courageous and heroic men to have walked the sands of the present-day Middle East. In August, the United Arab Emirates, led by bin Zayed, announced the normalization of relations with Israel. In the eyes of the Islamist, he betrayed Islam itself and stabbed the entire Islamic world in the back. And for the Arab nationalist, he sold Arab dignity cheap to Zionism. But to the Arab infant or the Arab yet to be born, he is the best hope for salvation and a better tomorrow.

For this regional Arab power to formally accept the Jewish State of Israel is to inaugurate the end of the long Arab march toward self-destruction and catastrophe that has devastated the region. The promise of bin Zayed's decision will reverberate in Tehran, Doha, Ankara, and beyond. It could well save the region from its native predatory powers, secure the legitimacy of standing Arab states, and even rescue Islam from the lunacy of Islamism. In future history books, the years between 1948 and 2020—which saw the rise of Arab nationalism, Islamism, jihadism, global Islamic terrorism, a theocratic Iran, and the Arab Spring—will be viewed as the Palestine age. And it is the Arab powers that were able to survive the Palestine age that are now declaring its death.

To make the transition to a post-Palestine Middle East is also to move the world into a post-Islamist future. In such a future, Islamism and its ideological and theological foundations will gradually become obsolete along with the fantastical cause that Islamists once so highly revered. This transition will be painful and costly, and it will take time. Remnants of Palestine-era politics will continue to live on; the two largest and most obvious examples are the bellicosity of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the hegemonic ambitions of Turkey.

Regional terrorism, religious and otherwise, is likely to continue so long as both countries proceed on their present courses. This means that Middle East tensions will grow in the foreseeable future. But as the emerging post-Palestine Middle Eastern order develops strategies for mutual security, probably through a formal military coalition, it will be better able to isolate and contain (and perhaps eventually eliminate) the threats posed by both

countries. This future coalition could even form the basis of a future regional organization to replace the dysfunctional Arab League, a remnant of the past era. As it gains in strength and competence, the new coalition could increasingly compensate for the attenuated American presence that would result from a more secure region. This could significantly reduce Arab dependency on U.S. military support and create a new homeostasis.

Elements of Islamic extremism and terrorism will also live on in Arab society. But these should gradually diminish as terrorists and ideologues lose their state sponsors in the post-Palestine era. And the pull of pan-Arab politics should also wither as the idea of a single and beleaguered Arab mass will no longer apply to the regional reality. In its place, we are likely to see the rise of state-based nationalism. This is not without its obvious dangers, but it will also allow Arab states to be more open and transparent about pursuing their national interests. Such openness could rescue Arab politics from endemic suspicion, conspiratorial thought, and pathological mistrust. After all, the open acceptance of a non-Arab Jewish state into the organic geopolitical fabric of the region will render much of the Middle East's characteristic paranoia obsolete. If not at first, certainly once Arab countries find themselves benefiting from their deeper ties to Israel.

As Muslim public opinion adjusts and accommodates the new political reality, we shouldn't be surprised if conditions improve for non-Muslim minorities in the region. Ethnic and religious diversity, a source of severe historical tension, may come to be seen in a more positive light.

As for the actual Palestinians, their historical rejectionism toward Israel will cease to be the asset it once was. Neighboring Arab states will no longer be held hostage to the fiscal needs of the Palestinian leadership. As the new reality sets in, Palestinians will have to decide between having total power in a dead fantasy world or some power in a real place. The new dispensation could, in time, force them into real negotiations. This, in turn, would shake up the ranks of Palestinian leadership and put an end to the disastrous politics of the Palestine dream. Palestinian terrorism would, in all probability, still persist, requiring joint action by Israel and the new Palestinian leadership to suppress it. But as Israelis and Palestinians move further away from the poisonous dream of a maximalist "Palestine," improving security conditions could have a transformative effect on their relationship.

FOLLOWING the usual course of history, political reality is merely catching up to what is already understood in Middle Eastern society. On the so-called Arab street, the transition to a post-Palestine reality began about a decade ago. Among Arabs who pay attention to such things, it is already banal to note that Palestine is not the most pressing issue in the region. Palestine lost its centrality with the advent of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war. Today, Arab countries are focused on

issues of security, stability, and, increasingly, the Iranian threat. The Arab Spring, in which politics began to challenge dominant totalitarian philosophies, marked the breakdown and atomization of political doctrine in the Arab world. The question of tradition vs. modernity has been supplanted by issues of human rights, the condition of women in society, sectarianism, and economic development. Religion is increasingly understood as a component of the sociological realm and not an overarching deterministic principle. In the post-Palestine Middle East, Islam itself will have an opportunity to detach itself from politics and settle more firmly into the sphere of society. Such a shift would be a historical leap forward and, if it solidifies, will go down as the most important development in Islamic history since the inception of the first Islamic political community in seventh-century Arabia.

The post-Palestine era will finally create an opportunity for an open internal examination of Arab and Islamic history, free of the ideological determinism of Palestine-era politics. This, too, could produce a paradigm shift, replacing a stale but widely held understanding of tradition with a modern one. Such a process would allow for a fuller recognition of those elements of Islamic tradition that have stunted the progress of many in the Arab world.

Indeed, if we are very lucky, it will no longer be appropriate to speak of an “Arab world,” as Arabs themselves will recognize that they are made up of distinct regional and cultural clusters and political identities. As traditional Arab societies in wealthy monarchies continue to move toward urbanization, they will inevitably lose their tribal character and modernize politically. Political modernization, ironically, will be a bigger challenge for those Arab countries that are not kingdoms. Less wealthy than the monarchies, they will need help with economic development if they are to enact political reforms as the threat of Islamism diminishes.

This is the future of the post-Palestine Middle East as I see it. Of course, we are only in the middle of its birth. While the baby looks beautiful so far, this is largely because of the ugliness of what came before. But most Middle East observers never believed they would witness a moment of such promise in their lifetime. This is, then, a time for realistic optimism, not gauzy dreams. Indeed, the promise of a post-Palestine Middle East is to be found in the official renunciation of a very dark fantasy.

Mr. Aboubaker, a former political refugee, works for the Center of Combating Anti-Semitism and is a graduate student of International Affairs at George Washington University. He is the author of Minority of One: The Unchaining of an Arab Mind.

Israel's Vulnerable New Friends Are Drawn to Its Strength

By Martin Kramer

marinkramer.org

September 18, 2020

Bahrain and the UAE fear demography, Iran, and a withdrawing U.S.

Most Israelis, if they know anything about the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, know that they're rich, vulnerable, far from the conflict with Israel, and dangerously close to Iran. It's this combination of factors that made possible this past week's White House ceremony.

What many don't realize is the source of that vulnerability. Just as Israel frets over demography, so too do the Emirates and Bahrain. And any problem that Israel has pales in comparison to theirs.

The United Arab Emirates has a population only slightly larger than Israel's, about 9.8 million people. But Arab citizens of the country form only about 12 percent—around a million-plus. The rest are migrants who've come to work, but don't have Emirati citizenship or any prospect of getting it. About 60 percent of the country's inhabitants are South Asians (Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis); the rest are a mix of Filipinos, Nepalese, Egyptians, and others.

In most Arab countries, zealous nationalist regimes oppressed or threw out religious or ethnic minorities, many of them sources of initiative and wealth. In the UAE, by contrast, the Arabs turned themselves into a small minority. They needed migrants to leverage their massive oil wealth into fast-paced development.

Otherwise, their huge resources would have languished in distant banks.

So they imported working hands in the millions, confident that they could manage the influx and preserve their own identity and solidarity. So far, it's worked.

Bahrain is a smaller-scale version of the same dynamic. The population is only about 1.7 million, of whom less than half are Bahraini citizens. The majority are expatriates, although a substantial portion is Arab.

Bahrain's citizens are divided between a Sunni ruling minority and a Shi'ite majority. The latter share religion and sometimes ethnicity with Iranians, and constitute the source of most opposition in the kingdom. So far, the monarchy has held its own against opponents, although it relied heavily on Saudi (and UAE) backing to fend off a popular challenge during the “Arab Spring.”

Both countries look stable, but demography is an abiding concern. The combined citizen populations of the UAE and Bahrain probably don't come to two million, less than that of greater Tel Aviv. The Jewish population of Israel is three times the Arab populations of the UAE and Bahrain combined. Likewise, there are as many Arab citizens of Israel proper as there are of the UAE and Bahrain. The Arabs of these two countries form only half a percent of the 400 million Arabs in the world. And Emiratis and Bahrainis are but a drop as compared to the 82 million Iranians next door.

The very rich are different from you and me

They'd have reason enough to feel vulnerable if those were the only numbers in the game. But there are more.

Thanks to Abu Dhabi's oil wealth, the UAE has a gross domestic product of over \$400 billion. Much of this flows to the resident expatriates, but it primarily sustains the affluence of the citizen minority across the seven emirates that make up the union. Bahrain, which also relies heavily on oil (as well as banking and finance), isn't that far behind the UAE. Just for proportions, the combined gross domestic product of the UAE and Bahrain is equal to Iran's—and Iran has a population of 82 million.

Over the years, not a few observers have declared that such huge disparities of wealth, and its concentration in the hands of ruling minorities, couldn't be sustained.

A sample of this view can be found in the book *After the Sheikhs*, whose author (British academic Christopher Davidson) concluded that the UAE's rulers "have suffered a serious and likely permanent loss of legitimacy," and that Bahrain's monarchy has "the bleakest future" of the Gulf monarchies. His conclusion (in 2012): "Most of these regimes—at least in their present form—will be gone within the next two to five years" (emphasis in source).

The end-is-nigh trope is an old one. In fact, the rulers are perfectly aware of their vulnerability, unlike those Arab rulers who were toppled during the "Arab Spring." So they have perfected survival strategies that work amazingly well.

The most important is to secure and keep the support of the West, and especially the United States, as a counterweight to the forces of envy that surround them.

But it goes beyond that. After all, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak had U.S. support, and it didn't save him. So the UAE, in particular, has tried to look, sound, and feel like a showcase of the West. True, it can't embrace democracy, but it's embraced a degree of cultural and religious tolerance that has impressed the West.

Whether it's a branch of the Louvre museum (visited by the recent Israeli press delegation to the country), or an

outpost of New York University, such talismans are there for a rainy day. Should the UAE get in trouble with grasping neighbors, public opinion in the West will say: "Let's save them, they're one of us."

A friend of a friend

It's here that normalization with Israel fits in. Yes, Israel has lots to offer the UAE and Bahrain, and they have much to offer in return. But the real attraction of normalization for the UAE and Bahrain is that good relations with Israel are the default of all enlightened Western countries. An Israeli embassy goes perfectly with a branch of the Guggenheim art museum.

Why now? The United States is pulling back from some of its Middle Eastern commitments. From some, but not all—and certainly not its commitment to Israel, which Americans of all stripes see as "one of us," even if they disagree with some of its policies. Full and normal relations with Israel raise the UAE and Bahrain to a new category: from "friendly Arab countries that sell us oil" to "best Arab friends of our own best friend, Israel."

Not only does that strengthen the U.S. insurance policy, it also lines up the pro-Israel lobby in America on the side of the UAE and Bahrain. They've always had their own hired lobbyists in Washington, but they never had any grassroots support in America. Now they will.

It's an upgrade, and it's become a need-to-have in a time of American retrenchment. It's also an open-sesame for bigger and better arms deals, and a deterrent against would-be aggressors, above all Iran.

Israel reached this landmark because it's strong. The Gulf Arabs have reached it because they're vulnerable. Israel seeks to translate its strength into recognition. The Gulf Arabs seek to translate their recognition into strength. Just how the two sides will negotiate this unequal partnership isn't in their formal agreements. It's in the politics ahead.

Last Week's Peace Agreement Sends a Clear Message to the Palestinians

By Douglas Feith

foreignpolicy.com

September 16, 2020

And refutes notions that have shaped U.S. Middle East policy for more than half a century.

The agreements to normalize relations include opening embassies in each other's countries. They are the most stunning developments in Arab-Israeli affairs since the 1993 Palestinian-Israeli Oslo Accords. Gulf Arabs—businessmen, athletes, and officials—have increased both clandestine and open contact with Israelis over the last decade or so, but full normalization between nations is a large leap forward.

The agreements to normalize relations are the most stunning developments in Arab-Israeli affairs since the 1993 Palestinian-Israeli Oslo Accords.

The accords reflect common apprehension of strategic danger from Iran. A number of Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain, see Israel as a valuable ally in opposing

that threat. Israel already counters Iran by military and cyber means, as well as diplomatically, especially in Washington. This had drawn the UAE, Bahrain, and Israel closer. As reflected in Trump's Middle East peace plan, officials believed that the Iran threat created an opportunity for Israel to normalize its relations with Arab states. "Enhanced strategic cooperation" among them, the plan said, could help counter Iran, serve U.S. security interests generally, and increase chances for peace.

In that plan, published in January, the administration identified the parts of the West Bank they believed Israel would retain in any realistic peace deal. Trump said it was very important that the United States "recognize Israeli sovereignty" over those areas if the Palestinian side continued to reject peace deals that Israel proposed.

On the assumption that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was largely about Palestinian control over the West Bank, successive Israeli governments tried unsuccessfully to make peace with the Palestinians based on a division of the territory. Israel and the Palestinians both have historically based legal claims. Jordan conquered the West Bank in the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war and Israel then conquered it in the 1967 war. Israel has controlled the West Bank since 1967, but has not formally extended sovereignty over it.

In 2000, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat a peace deal including control over an area at least 95 percent of the size of the West Bank. Arafat turned it down. In 2007 and 2008, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert offered Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas a peace deal including approximately 94 percent of the West Bank and a so-called land swap from pre-1967 Israel equal to another 5 percent, together with other concessions. Unhappy with the land swap specifics and insistent that Israel take in millions of descendants of Palestinian refugees, Abbas rejected it.

In light of this history, the Trump team rejects the view that the West Bank is the essence of the conflict. It sees the key to peace as Israeli strength and Palestinian resignation to Israel's permanent existence. When Trump promised to recognize Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank important to Israeli security, he was warning the Palestinians that continued rejectionism would lose them ground. He was showing support for Israeli security and, in effect, minting currency that Israel and the United States could use with the Palestinians or the Arab states.

The Trump team rejects the view that the West Bank is the essence of the conflict. It sees the key to peace as Israeli strength and Palestinian resignation to Israel's permanent existence.

Trump's promise to recognize Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank triggered debate among Israelis on how and when they might change the legal status of parts of the territory. Some call it "annexation," others "extension of sovereignty." The issue became a hot controversy throughout the Middle East and around the world, creating a diplomatic opportunity which Emirati and now Bahraini officials have seized.

They have an interest in opening diplomatic, technological, commercial, and other connections to Israel. The controversy allowed them to strike a deal with Israel in return for Israel's agreeing to "suspend declaring sovereignty" over parts of the West Bank. It appears that the Israeli government would have been happy to apply Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank with U.S. support, but it was even happier to suspend the action in return for a peace deal with the UAE—and one with Bahrain to boot.

Israel did not renounce its claim to sovereignty in the West Bank. It has agreed only to suspend formally extending it, without specifying a time period. In return, Israel wins the benefits of recognition from the UAE and

Bahrain, hoping it also will lead to normalization with Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and other states. As a practical matter, Israel already controls the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley, anyway. It has kicked down the road the problem of when and how it might suspend its suspension.

Despite decades of extravagant rhetoric—"We reaffirm that the Palestine Cause is the entire Arab nation's main priority," the Arab League declared in 2018—the Arab states never actually subordinated their own interests to those of the Palestinians. In the last dozen years or so, when there have been no serious Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, the Gulf Arab states have quietly expanded cooperation with Israel, with only occasional public displays, for example at sporting events.

With increasing boldness, they are now showing a willingness to ally with Israel. They are shedding even the pretense of deference to Palestinian politicians. The UAE-Israel and Bahrain-Israel deals make this reality undeniable. The countries say they will not only work together against Iranian threats; they will also do business, investing jointly and working together to manufacture goods, grow food, and organize cultural events. They have spoken of medical cooperation and forging scientific and technological ties. They seem intent on making their peace far more normal—involving lots of people-to-people interaction—than has been the case with Israel's so-called cold-peace relations with Egypt and Jordan.

There is sympathy for ordinary Palestinians, to be sure, but Arab state officials have (yet again) lost patience with Palestinian politicians whose corruption is surpassed only by their ineptitude. The Palestinian economy is poor and growing worse. Endemic corruption discourages investment and initiative, and there is much wasteful spending that includes paying huge sums to the families of those whom Israel convicted and imprisoned as terrorists or killed in action.

More and more Gulf Arab state officials recognize that the Palestinian people, the Arab states, and the United States (not to mention Israel) would all be better off if new, more constructive Palestinian leaders came to power. At the same time, there is less and less adherence to the conventional view that Israel must make peace with the Palestinians before it can make peace with the Arab states.

By noting that greater strategic cooperation between Israel and the Arab states against Iran would "set the stage for diplomatic breakthroughs," the Trump peace plan anticipated the UAE-Israel and Bahrain-Israel accords. It implied that such deals could usefully increase pressure on the Palestinians to reform their politics, which is the key to a breakthrough on the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The message to the Palestinians from yesterday's White House signing ceremony is that they need a political upheaval—new leaders, new institutions, new ideas—or

Visit suburbanorthodox.org for the current issue.

they are going to become utterly irrelevant in the eyes of the world. The message to the Palestinians from yesterday's White House signing ceremony is that they need a political upheaval—new leaders, new institutions, new ideas—or they are going to become utterly irrelevant in the eyes of the world, including the broader Arab world. As they lose attention, they will lose diplomatic support and economic aid. If they cannot make war and they will not make peace, their hopes to shape their own future will diminish to nothing.

A venerable strategic maxim says that if a problem is too hard, expand it. Trying to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict by focusing only on the Palestinians and the tiny slice of land between the Jordan River and the

Mediterranean Sea is a mission impossible, but the two new peace deals point the way to a wider and wiser approach: encourage greater cooperation between Israel and the Arab states and enlist those states in pressing the Palestinians to empower new and better leaders.

That is the most reasonable means to advance U.S. interests and to make Palestinian-Israeli peace possible. The UAE and Bahrain deals with Israel are so full of promise that the U.S. policy that helped bring it about should be continued no matter who wins the presidential election in November.

Mr. Feith is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. He served as the undersecretary of defense for policy under George W. Bush.

The Dangers in a New Era of Territorial Grabs

By Yaroslav Trofimov

Russia, China, Turkey and other countries are making claims on their neighbors' territory, and the consequences could be dire.

When the founders of the U.N. gathered in San Francisco after the Nazis' defeat in 1945, they made a bold decision: to outlaw territorial conquest, the method by which many of the world's borders had been shaped. The new U.N. Charter barred members of the world body "from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

For decades afterward, the inviolability of existing international borders—regardless of how well they matched a region's ethnic makeup or served historical justice—was one of the most widely invoked principles of global affairs. The broad U.S.-led coalition to restore the independence of Kuwait—annexed in 1990 by Saddam Hussein's Iraq as its wayward 19th province—stood as a testament to the endurance of that postwar proposition.

A new willingness to try to alter borders by force is arising just as the U.S. is pulling back from its global commitments.

But today, in a newly unmoored international order in which the strong increasingly exercise raw power over the weak, old territorial grievances are bubbling up to the surface again. This new willingness to try to alter borders by force is arising just as the U.S., which for decades guaranteed the stability of the international system, is pulling back from its global commitments and the institutions that it helped to forge in the wake of World War II. In many major capitals, an irredentist ambition to grab the territory of neighbors is driving policy once again.

"Our habit that borders remain fixed is the product of a very recent past, of the second half of the 20th century and the Cold War. If you look at European history, there has not been a single century when borders didn't shift in a radical way," said Fyodor Lukyanov, chairman of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, a Moscow think tank that advises the Russian government.

wsj.com

September 17, 2020

"A principle of international relations is not some commandment from Moses. It's the product of a balance of power and interests," he added. "When someone is able to ensure that those rules and principles are observed, they are observed. When this ability ends, they are no longer observed."

Countries have invaded each other since the dawn of history, but irredentism—a belief that historic parts of one's country under supposedly unjust foreign rule must be reunited with the homeland—is a much more recent invention. The term was coined in 1877 by the Italian politician Matteo Renato Imbriani. Speaking at his father's funeral, he pledged not to rest until all of Italy's "terre irredente"—"unredeemed lands" then under the Austro-Hungarian crown—were liberated.

Irredentism quickly grew into a potent political force, legitimizing demands for territorial conquest and helping to spark both world wars. The most consequential irredentist movement, of course, arose in Germany, where Hitler promised to reunite the German Volk, newly divided by supposedly unfair post-World War I frontiers, into a rejuvenated Third Reich.

The horrors unleashed by the resulting war triggered a profound reset of international norms—and a hard-won belief that insisting on fixed, inviolable borders would help to ward off future aggression and conflict. African states that became independent in the 1960s and 1970s universally agreed not to challenge their frontiers, many of which were arbitrarily drawn by colonial powers. In 1970, West Germany accepted the loss of what is now western Poland. Argentina's irredentist invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982 ended in a military rout and the downfall of its military dictatorship. While the breakups of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the early 1990s caused several civil wars and created a half-dozen separatist enclaves, the existing administrative borders of the component Soviet and Yugoslav republics remained as the internationally recognized frontiers of newly independent states such as Georgia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Then came Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014—the first irredentist change of borders in Europe since World War II. This major breach of established global rules met with only halfhearted international repercussions, such as mild sanctions by the U.S. and the European Union. Russian President Vladimir Putin's territorial grab was followed later that year by a semi-covert invasion of Russian forces into Ukraine's eastern Donbas region.

'If you are a small country, what do you really have except international law and its prohibitions on aggression and changing borders through force?'—Toomas Hendrik Ilves, former president of Estonia

"We have chipped away at the foundations of international law by doing nothing, or doing very little, in response," said Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who served as president of Estonia in 2006-16. "It is a very dangerous trend, especially for small countries like mine. If you are a small country, what do you really have except international law and its prohibitions on aggression and changing borders through force?"

Mr. Putin, who sees himself as the "gatherer of Russian lands" unfairly lost during the Soviet Union's collapse, has repeatedly called Ukraine an unredeemed part of the historic Russian homeland. He holds the same view of Belarus, now undergoing an unprecedented democratic upheaval. "I believe that the Belarusians, the Russians and the Ukrainians are one people," he said last year.

Russia's brazenness in Crimea went a long way to embolden China's communist leaders. Much like Mr. Putin, President Xi Jinping is focused on restoring his country's erstwhile glory. He has already erased much of the distinctiveness of Hong Kong, a former British colony, and is becoming more vocal about absorbing Taiwan, a former Japanese possession that has never been ruled by the Chinese Communist Party.

"Crimea certainly had an impact on China because it showed that the West was powerless to stop a territorial grab," said Minxin Pei of Claremont McKenna College. "Eastern Ukraine also gave China some ideas that you could run a 'hybrid warfare,' making the life of Ukraine—or Taiwan—very miserable without crossing the line of a real war."

Beijing is also making irredentist claims over swaths of north India, where Chinese troops engaged in a deadly clash with Indian forces in June, and the South China Sea,

where China has erected outposts in areas claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam and others. This year, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's foreign ministries protested after official Chinese publications described large parts of their countries as historic Chinese territories that should return to the motherland.

"China is certainly a very revisionist power," said retired Rear Adm. Sudarshan Shrikhande, a former chief of India's naval intelligence. "It's quite astounding how China seems to be wanting to simultaneously rub so many countries the wrong way."

Smaller powers are showing irredentist leanings too. Over the past three years, the Turkish military has occupied some parts of Syria and Iraq that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said should have remained in Turkey after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire a century ago. In recent weeks, Turkey also came close to a military confrontation with Greece over Ankara's expansive new claims over the Eastern Mediterranean, a crisis that has prompted some senior Turkish officials to question Greece's sovereignty over Greek islands close to the Anatolian mainland such as Rhodes. "Our civilization is one of conquest," Mr. Erdogan thundered in August.

Meanwhile, Hungary's nationalist leader, Viktor Orbán, regularly decries the 1920 Trianon treaty that left large ethnic Hungarian minorities outside of Hungary's borders. Since 2017, he has blocked Ukraine's formal cooperation with NATO over the status of Ukraine's ethnic Hungarian minority.

Even the U.S. is no longer universally committed to the principle of the inviolability of international borders. Last year, President Donald Trump recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, which Israel took from Syria in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Israel had been prepared to return the land to Syria for peace as recently as the mid-2000s. The Kremlin happily noted that Mr. Trump's shift on the Golan indirectly validated Russia's seizure of Crimea.

The need to counter this drift toward greater acceptance of territorial conquest is becoming increasingly urgent, warned Daniela Schwarzer, director of the German Council on Foreign Relations. "It's a very grim picture that is emerging," she said. Unless the trend can be reversed, she added, "the gate will be open for chaos in many regions of the world."

How America Helped Iraq Fall under Iran's Grip

By Michael Pregent

mosaicmagazine.com

September 22, 2020

The U.S. has repeatedly chosen the wrong allies in Iraq. Now Iran is poised for total control over its old adversary, a development that carries grave costs.

Forty years ago today, Iraq launched an invasion of neighboring Iran, beginning a war that would drag on until 1988 and leave hundreds of thousands dead. This anniversary falls in the midst of what might be considered a second Iran-Iraq war, which—in stark contrast to its

predecessor—has been fought in the shadows, involves political maneuvering as much as brute force, and has largely escaped the notice of the Western news media. While Baghdad launched the first Iran-Iraq war, this second one was begun by Tehran with the aim of gaining control of the Iraqi state, driving the Americans out, and securing Iranian domination of the entire region. The U.S. seems to have put its hopes in the new Iraqi prime

minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, to help turn the tide. Whether these hopes will pan out, only time will tell.

To understand the predicament that America now faces in Iraq, it's necessary to go back to 2003, when America took the fateful decision to oust Saddam Hussein, and to the bloody insurgency that followed. In doing so, we must set aside the still-bitter arguments about the wisdom of that decision, as well as the usual narratives found in the press, which often obscured more than they revealed.

When the U.S. and its allies entered Iraq, they knew who their enemy was: Saddam and his army. The coalition made short work of defeating the Iraqi military, but, as everyone knows, the worst was yet to come. Elite units that escaped death or capture shed their uniforms and disappeared into the population to regroup as guerrilla forces. Soon, members of the regular army joined them, convinced that, given their connections to the defeated regime, they had no future in the new Iraq the U.S. wished to create. This emerging insurgency also made common cause with Sunni jihadist groups connected to al-Qaeda, who likewise opposed America and didn't want to see the Shiites—long repressed under Saddam—come to dominate the country. In a country of 26 million, the U.S. now faced an enemy that could hide in plain sight, one it was ill-prepared to fight. While America struggled to find its footing, Iran knew what to do, and had the perfect weapon at its disposal.

During the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, Tehran built up a militia of Iraqi Shiite defectors and former prisoners of war to fight against Saddam. This militia, known as the Badr Corps, proved invaluable for its ability to conduct sabotage operations and assassinations deep inside enemy territory. In 2003, amidst the chaos following the American invasion, Tehran dispatched some 10,000 Badr Corps fighters into Iraq to ensure that the country would never again threaten Iran.

Thus, while the U.S. and its allies were distracted by the Sunni insurgency, and trying to train an Iraqi military that could aid them in this fight, the Badr force began assassinating Iraqi pilots without regard for religion or ethnicity. Their goal was to make it impossible for Iraqi aircraft to bomb Iranian cities as they had in the 1980s. Badr would ensure that the only pilots taught to fly American planes would be the ones they had vetted themselves.

The assassinations were merely one tactic of a strategy based on exploiting Iraq's sectarian divide. While precise numbers are hard to come by, Shiites make up about 58 percent of the population, and Sunnis 37 percent. (The proportion of Shiites among the Arab population is even higher.) Although Saddam Hussein's regime and its ruling Baath party were nominally socialist and secular, their upper echelons were overwhelmingly made up of Sunni Arabs. Thus Iran, a Shiite theocracy, could take advantage of Shiite resentment in Iraq, while Sunni Iraqis without much love for Saddam still saw his fall as a loss for their

own sect. Nonetheless, it was not inevitable that Iraq would come apart along sectarian lines; rather Iranian scheming and American insouciance made it do so.

The coalition forces needed help in fighting a counterinsurgency, and came to rely on those who were most willing to provide it: members of the Badr Corps' political wing, the Supreme Council of Islamic Resistance of Iraq. They spoke English; they wore suits; and they smiled. Most importantly they were exactly what coalition forces needed: local partners who would fight alongside them against the insurgents. By cooperating so publicly with the Americans, they convinced many Sunnis that Washington was siding with Tehran—and some of these Sunnis began to see the insurgency as more appealing than the alternative.

This new relationship with Shiite leaders would lead to the welcoming of Badr militiamen into the new Iraqi military the U.S. was building, and funding to the tune of millions of dollars a year. Having assisted in purging the ranks of mostly Sunni Baathists, Badr saw that members of its militia were placed in both the rank-and-file and the officer corps, strategically taking over those units that could suit its purposes. Now Badrists in the Iraqi army could report to their masters in Iran about U.S. troop movements and activities. They also obtained positions in the civilian government, especially the defense and interior ministries.

But even as they played the role of helpful local allies to the Americans, their affiliates were killing Sunnis in Baghdad, leading to reprisals by the insurgents. At the same time, Washington found itself partnered with a new prime minister who would get the better of it for the next decade, to the benefit of Tehran and to the detriment of the Iraqi people. Nouri al-Maliki became premier in 2006 to replace the transitional government installed by Washington following Saddam's removal. A weak and relatively unknown leader of a Shiite religious party that had aligned with Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War, Maliki was a compromise candidate. But he skillfully managed to stay in the good graces of both the U.S. and the Islamic Republic, maneuvering himself into a position of strength while solidifying Shiite militias' control over the security service.

From the perspective of Iraqi Sunnis, the U.S. had ousted a Sunni ruler, installed a pro-Iranian Shiite in his place, and was backing attacks on their coreligionists. The Americans wouldn't fully grasp the gravity of their mistake until 2014. But even in 2005, before Maliki was sworn into office, it was clear something was wrong.

On average, 50 zip-tied bodies of executed Sunnis would be dumped in Baghdad every evening. Soon the city would be sharply divided along sectarian lines. The extrajudicial killings of 2005 and 2006 changed its demographics; Sunni neighborhoods adjacent to Shiite ones became Shiite or mixed. While this project of religious cleansing would never get the attention later garnered by Islamic State's made-for-TV beheadings, or its

dramatic attempts to eradicate Christians and Yazidis, it was every bit as brutal. The city's Sunni residents came to feel like second-class citizens. Worse still, Badrists in the government provided Shiite death squads with official vehicles, badges, and uniforms—making them appear as if they were operating with the imprimatur not just of the civilian government, but of the U.S.

For American forces, the priority remained the insurgency. But their efforts to fight it using predominantly Shiite forces heavily infiltrated by Iran-backed militias resulted in limited security gains while increasing popular support for the insurgents. These Shiite forces had no problem conducting aggressive military operations in Sunni areas, but had no interest in holding territory and protecting the Sunni population from al-Qaeda, let alone from Shiite militias. They saw every Sunni male between the ages of fourteen and sixty as an insurgent or collaborator, and often acted accordingly.

Only after it became clear that the Shiite-dominated Iraqi army could not achieve any lasting gains did the U.S. change its approach. It began reaching out to Sunnis—many former insurgents among them—who were fed up with al-Qaeda's brutality and bloodlust. This new partnership resulted in what became known as the Sunni Awakening. Moved to help America bring some measure of tranquility to their troubled country, participants in the Awakening made for good allies, intimately familiar with the neighborhoods where insurgents were hiding, connected to local tribal leaders, and concerned about the wellbeing of the populace. In the end, those who participated in the Awakening—not the Iran-backed Shiites—helped the U.S. kill or capture the diehard rebels.

This force quickly grew to comprise more than 100,000 U.S.-vetted Sunni fighters. Besides playing a crucial role in defeating al-Qaeda in 2008, it also protected Sunni civilians from vicious attacks by the Shiite militias. Unsurprisingly, Iran and its Iraqi allies saw it as a direct threat to their hegemony.

To fight back, the pro-Iranian militias, who were quickly becoming more of a threat to the U.S. mission than al-Qaeda, accelerated their lethal attacks on American servicemen, under the direction of, and with assistance from, Iran's Revolutionary Guard commander Qassem Suleimani and Lebanon-based Hezbollah. Prime Minister Maliki, meanwhile, maintained his alliance with these militias, using them to marginalize, isolate, and intimidate his rivals. And while Sunni forces were helping to defeat the insurgency, Maliki purged the most effective Sunni officers from the army, often by charging them with supporting al-Qaeda and its affiliates. These officers frequently found themselves not just stripped of their ranks but arrested or "disappeared." Soon the army divisions operating in Baghdad and key areas around it were transformed into de-facto extensions of Maliki's Dawa party and Badr.

Between 2008 and the U.S. exit from Iraq in 2011, Maliki succeeded in effectively dismantling the Awakening.

The absence of both the Americans and the moderate Sunni forces created a major power vacuum, one that Islamic State (IS) came rushing in to fill. When IS—built out of the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq—came rolling into Mosul, it was welcomed by Sunni tribal leaders and ex-Baathists, who hoped it would right the wrongs of Maliki's sectarianism. But this new, ruthless jihadist force also systematically hunted down those Sunnis who had worked with America, labeling them "collaborators." Without either the U.S. or the pro-American Sunni force to protect them, they were left defenseless, caught between the Shiite hammer and Islamic State anvil. IS only began to lose popular support when it started publicly executing those Sunni leaders who were initially willing to cooperate with it, but not to pledge loyalty.

With IS ascendant, the U.S. repeated the same mistake it had made a decade earlier, partnering with Shiite jihadists to fight Sunni ones, thus empowering Iran while turning potential Sunni allies into enemies. By carrying out airstrikes against IS forces fighting Shiite militias, the American planes were serving, as David Petraeus quipped, as Qassem Suleimani's air force. Despite Washington's demand that Prime Minister Maliki step down in 2014 as a pre-condition for aerial support, the troops on the ground were still Badrists in Iraqi army uniforms—regardless of who was prime minister. Suleimani's militias happily took credit for every IS defeat, even as the U.S. did most of the heavy lifting.

Moreover, what started in Iraq didn't stay there. Syria, torn apart by civil war, presented the ayatollahs with another opportunity. To prop up their ally Bashar al-Assad, Iran organized loyal militias along the same model it had used in Iraq, and supplemented them with Shiite fighters from Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Hezbollah, meanwhile—thanks to a decade of bungled U.S. policy—had gained supremacy over Lebanon. With the war against Islamic State, Tehran cemented its power in Iraq, making it part of the emerging "Shiite Crescent," a land-bridge from Tehran through Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, with Jerusalem as the hoped-for final destination. Suleimani now had a corridor to move troops, rockets, and precision missiles into Syria to be used against Israel.

This brings us the fateful Iraqi elections of 2018, by which time Islamic State had lost most of its territory and was on the retreat. Riding on their role in the campaign against IS—a role they generously embellished—the Shiite militias created a political party known as Fatah, which emerged as the second largest party in the country. Meanwhile, the American-backed candidate and his party came in fourth in the parliamentary elections and were quickly marginalized by Maliki and Fatah, which was led by the Badr commander Hadi al-Ameri.

Under Suleimani's tutelage, Fatah allied itself with a collection of smaller parties to form the largest voting bloc in parliament—one openly loyal to Tehran and its supreme leader. Bear in mind that to Iran, Islamic State was a threat,

but America was (and remains) the Great Satan, and reducing its influence was the foremost strategic goal. It should then come as no surprise that this Iranian-controlled bloc, newly secure against Islamic State and the Sunnis, would shift its focus to driving the U.S. out of Iraq.

With control of the Iraqi political system and primacy over the security apparatus, Suleimani directed a militia rocket attack on a U.S. military base south of Kirkuk on December 27, 2019. In retaliation the U.S. carried out strikes on several militia positions along the Iraqi-Syrian border. These were the same militias, and even some of the same positions, that Israel has been attacking systematically on the Syrian side for years.

Rather than back down, Suleimani's militias rolled into Baghdad's protected international zone and attacked the U.S. embassy, laying siege to it for 36 hours. The Badr Corps demonstrated its influence over the government and the military by ordering the security forces—America's supposed "partner"—to stand down during the attack. This proved to be a miscalculation: Washington responded with further airstrikes, one of which killed Suleimani. Of course, the only reason the strike on Suleimani was successful was that Washington didn't give the Iraqi government advanced warning—otherwise, there is little reason to doubt that somebody would have tipped the Iranian generalissimo off.

Iraq's parliament and its prime minister—Abdel Abdul Mehdi, the former member of Badr's political wing—condemned the killing and threatened to expel American forces. Already reeling from criticism at home and abroad for his tacit support of the militias' draconian suppression of protestors in 2019—while stubbornly denying that it was happening—Mehdi stepped down. Like Maliki before him, he was a compromise candidate who had disappointed American hopes.

Iran's militias have obtained a controlling position in the political, military, and economic sectors. Having exchanged fatigues for suits, its commanders sat in parliament, where they could select Mehdi's replacement. They chose a candidate approved by Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah and Suleimani's successor, Ismail Qani: Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the former director of Iraqi military

intelligence. In the war against IS, he had proved himself a willing and effective ally, except when it came to confronting the militias. He'd failed to warn the U.S. of the impending embassy attack or of other Iran-backed attacks about which he doubtless had some foreknowledge. And even if Kadhimi decided to try to change his tune, the same militias have placed their members in the highest echelons of his government, with access to its most highly classified information. They'd find out quickly enough.

And now? Iran and its militias seek to destabilize the Levant, to replace America's presence, and to attack Israel. One of their foremost goals is to move precision-guided missiles through Iraq and into Syria, where they can be aimed at Israeli cities and strategic targets. Because of the increased threat from the militias, the U.S. has redeployed its troops from al-Qaim in Iraq and al-Tanf in Syria to bases where U.S. air-defense systems can protect them from attacks. That is, protect them not from IS but from entities within the Iraqi security apparatus, forces commanded by Tehran, accommodated by Baghdad, and paid for and equipped by both. Thus, after largely defeating Islamic State, the American military is now retreating from a pro-Iranian force it worked with and helped to put into a position of political power.

The pro-Tehran militias in Iraq are operating with impunity. They pose a threat to the Iraqi people, to Israel, and to the region. Ultimately, their goal is to undermine U.S. interests. Iraq today is no better off than it was when the campaign against Islamic State began. Moreover, the very conditions that led to the rise of IS remain, and if anything they are more pronounced than they were a decade ago. The U.S. must communicate to Baghdad and Prime Minister Kadhimi that Iraq has two choices: tilt away from Iran or be treated like Iran. The Iraqi people, both Shiites and Sunnis, have already decided. The slogan heard at last year's protests was Iraq Hurra! Iran Barra!—Iraq free and Iran out. Let's hope American politicians will listen to them.

Mr. Pregent, a retired intelligence officer, is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington, DC.

Visit [suburbanorthodox.org](https://www.suburbanorthodox.org) for the current issue.

Qatar Supports Hamas, Spreads Anti-Israel Propaganda, and Is Cozy with Iran

By Edy Cohen

besacenter.org

September 14, 2020

Not a potential friend.

The Arab world is far less divided today than it has been in recent years, and is moving in a positive direction toward conciliation and unity. Just one Arab country—Qatar—stands out like a sore thumb against this renewed Arab consensus through its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, cozy relationship with Iran, and funding of terrorist organizations. Doha is the only Arab capital to oppose normalization and peace between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, and it will likely reject any further peaceful developments between Jerusalem and other Gulf States.

Because of its support for the Brotherhood and Iran, which manifests in constant attempts at subversion and pot-stirring intended to undermine Arab regimes, the Gulf states imposed heavy sanctions on Qatar to isolate it diplomatically and economically. This siege had the effect of pushing Doha even more deeply into the warm embrace of Tehran and, eventually, Ankara.

Qatar, which has rendered itself an outcast in the eyes of fed-up Arab regimes, is the main loser from the Israel-UAE and Israel-Bahrain agreements. All the other Gulf states fell in line in support of the treaty, either explicitly or

tacitly. Qatar, alone in its vehement objection to Israeli peace with the Gulf Arabs, has unleashed incessant vitriol against the normalization agreements, mainly through its state-owned broadcaster Aljazeera.

Aljazeera stopped pretending to be objective long ago. There are innumerable examples of this, but its lack of coverage of the protests in Iran and fulsome praise of Qassem Soleimani, a mass murderer and terrorizer of Arabs, clearly demonstrate that Qatar has rejected its Arab identity in the sphere of Iranian influence. Aljazeera demonstrates its hypocrisy openly by broadcasting completely different messages to different audiences. When addressing the West it presents a liberal façade, but in Arabic, it fervently disseminates outrageous incitement against Israel and its deals with the UAE and Bahrain.

Aljazeera has always viciously incited against Israel and encouraged violent Palestinian “struggle.” Its reports invariably present the Palestinians as the victims of an evil, merciless Israeli regime. The fact that most of Aljazeera’s employees, including more than a handful of anchors, are of Palestinian descent gives this incitement a strong tailwind.

Yet Qatar was the first Gulf State to open its gates to senior Israelis. Shimon Peres visited the emirate, and Israel opened a trade bureau there in 1996. So what changed?

Russia Extends Its Influence into Lebanon

By Oved Lobel

aspistrategist.org.au

Putin wants to be the Middle East’s indispensable intermediary.

Although it has neither the desire nor the financial or military capacity to actually displace the United States in the Middle East, Russia has become adept at planting itself firmly in the middle of crises and conflicts and establishing itself as an indispensable intermediary at relatively little cost. This has been most visible in Syria and Libya, where Russia and other regional powers manage the complicated political and military dynamics while the US focuses on counterterrorism operations.

Less often discussed, however, are Russia’s attempts to become a key player in both the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and Lebanon. Recent developments in both arenas may well give Russia the space to finally make itself a vital fixture.

The successful Russian intervention in Syria in 2015 is ground zero for Moscow’s ever-expanding presence. Coinciding with abortive US attempts to form an alliance with Russia against jihadist groups in Syria in September 2016—a deal that implicitly guaranteed Bashar al-Assad’s continued rule and allowed Russia to turn its attention elsewhere—Russian President Vladimir Putin offered to host a summit in Moscow between Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Relations between the Palestinians and Russians picked up dramatically, however, following US President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s

When Qatar’s previous emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, handed over rule of the country to his son, Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, in June 2013, relations with Israel became clandestine. Contacts between the two countries were excused as efforts to mediate between Hamas and Israel, and the reason for this was its dependence on Iran and Turkey due to its isolation.

Israel’s warming of relations with the Gulf region is a major achievement for both Jerusalem and the Gulf States involved. This rapprochement, which is reflected politically, culturally, and economically, shows that they desire peace and want to support the Trump administration’s policies toward Iran and the Palestinians. Gulf relations with Israel are a deterrent to the Iranians, and are thus looked at with disfavor by Doha. Qatar and its Aljazeera mouthpiece must not be allowed to drive a wedge between Israel and the Gulf.

Dr. Cohen is fluent in Arabic and specializes in inter-Arab relations, the Arab-Israeli conflict, terrorism, Jewish communities in the Arab world. He is author of The Holocaust in the Eyes of Mahmoud Abbas (Hebrew).

September 16, 2020

capital in December 2017, which led the Palestinian Authority to cut off all contacts with the US, including security ties with the CIA. Abbas himself led a high-ranking delegation to Russia in early 2018 to discuss a new multilateral format for Israeli–Palestinian negotiations with Russia at its centre.

In 2018, Russia also began meeting directly for the first time with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, an Iranian proxy it once reportedly considered a terrorist group. Direct contact with Hamas, which Russia never considered a terrorist group, also increased, culminating in an intra-Palestinian summit involving all factions in Gaza and the West Bank, including the Palestinian Authority, in February 2019. Although Russia failed to get Hamas and Islamic Jihad to sign up to its ‘Moscow declaration’, which was intended to push back against US announcements, close consultation with all the Palestinian factions continued, with Russia pressing them to unite under the political program of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

While that goal is likely impossible, Russia did manage in a phone call in July 2020 to persuade Jibril Rajoub, secretary-general of the Fatah Central Committee, to hold a joint videoconference with Hamas to present a united front. Since late August, Russia has consulted almost daily with senior Palestinian leaders from several major groups, culminating in a 3 September videoconference between the 14 major factions. Both before and especially since the videoconference, Russia has been pushing all the factions

to attend another pan-Palestinian summit in Moscow to help nudge unity efforts along.

On the centrality of Russia to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, at least, the factions are already united. Senior Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzuk stated in July 2019 that only Russia could help the Palestinians against the US, while Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki said in June this year, ‘We trust President Vladimir Putin ... Palestine is willing to have talks with Israel via video conferencing and under Russian auspices.’

Russia’s growing presence in Lebanon flows out of its intervention in Syria, with which Lebanon has been inextricably entwined for decades. A 2019 investigative report by Novaya Gazeta found that a business jet associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin—the nominal owner of ‘Wagner’ mercenaries who are fully controlled by the Russian military intelligence agency GRU—had been making monthly flights to Beirut since at least December 2016. From there they would fly to various Wagner theatres of operation in Syria and Africa. Coupled with claims that GRU chief Igor Sergun’s sudden death in January 2016 occurred in Lebanon and not in Moscow, there’s circumstantial evidence to suggest Beirut is an operational centre of Russian activity in the Middle East.

Russian attempts to become a major political player in Lebanon mostly failed until late 2018, when Lebanon accepted an important, if symbolic, US\$5 million in Russian military aid. Although Moscow has thus far been unable to get a Lebanese signature on a draft military agreement, the two sides have since 2019 grown closer politically and Russia has become more active in Lebanon’s energy sector.

Yet, until the recent explosion in Beirut and subsequent resignation of the government, Russia was

simply not a significant actor in Lebanon. The political vacuum that has now developed, and Moscow’s close relations with all sides, may have opened a door for Russian influence in Lebanese politics. For instance, on 17 August, former Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri sent an adviser to consult with Putin’s Middle East envoy Mikhael Bogdanov on future political developments in the country. Bogdanov also had phone conversations with Hariri, Druze powerbroker Walid Jumblatt and the Free Patriotic Movement’s Gebran Bassil, and met in Moscow with Lebanon’s ambassador to Russia and with an adviser to Lebanese President Michel Aoun, with final consultations taking place on 27 August. A new prime minister, Mustapha Adib, was designated on 31 August, though the actual future of the government is still unknown.

It is unclear whether the crushing US sanctions on both Iran and the Assad regime, which necessarily have an impact on Lebanon, along with severe international pressure for reform, will hinder or help Moscow’s influence. What will certainly help it, though, is its increasingly close partnership with France, which has taken the lead role in Lebanon after the Beirut explosion across a spectrum of political and military issues, as well as its alliance with Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, the most relevant actors in the country.

As Lebanon sets out to rebuild its capital, Russia, the only country to maintain close relations with every state and non-state actor involved, could become supreme arbiter as it effectively has in Syria and Libya.

Mr. Lobel is a policy analyst at the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council. Image: President of Russia.

Dozens of NGOs Urge UN Action to Free Gaza Peace Activist Detained by Hamas

By Algemeiner Staff

algemeiner.com

September 21, 2020

Dozens of NGOs issued a joint statement on Monday calling on the UN Human Rights Council to seek the release of a Palestinian peace activist held by Hamas for holding a Zoom meeting with Israelis.

Rami Aman — a 38-year-old journalist from the Gaza Strip — was arrested by Hamas in April for what the Gaza-ruling terrorist group called “holding a normalization activity with the Israeli occupation” after he participated in a two-hour meeting with Israelis titled “Skype With Your Enemy,” which advertised itself as a way to “open a channel of communication between Gazans and Israelis.”

Aman was also a founder of the Gaza Youth Committee, a part of the Alliance for Middle East Peace, which seeks to bring Israelis and Palestinians together to promote reconciliation.

The statement on Aman’s arrest was signed by 70 NGOs, including the Global Human Rights Defense, the Forum Méditerranéen pour la Promotion des Droits du Citoyen and the Japanese Association for the Right to Freedom of Speech, as well as groups from France,

Pakistan and Morocco, among other countries. It was accompanied by a complaint registered with the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention.

In the statement delivered before the Human Rights Council by Hillel Neuer, head of the watchdog group UN Watch, the groups said, “Aman has been arbitrarily detained in Gaza for 165 days, in flagrant violation of international law.”

“Our joint complaint demonstrates how the due process rights of Mr. Aman are being egregiously violated,” they noted, pointing out that Aman “has not yet been charged, and never had an opportunity to challenge his detention in court.”

“The detention of Rami Aman constitutes an arbitrary deprivation of liberty on multiple grounds,” the groups charged.

“UN treaty bodies have held the Palestinian Authority responsible for Hamas activity in Gaza,” they concluded. “Will the Working Group hold both accountable?”

Renewing the Alliance of the Periphery

By Eyal Zisser

jns.org

September 21, 2020

The growing friendship between Israel and Africa is starting to erode a major weapon in the Palestinian arsenal—the automatic majority against the Jewish state in international forums.

With the excitement and historic nature of the Abraham Accords, signed last week on the White House lawn, the growing intimacy between African nations and the State of Israel has gone largely unnoticed.

But connections to its African neighbors can play a huge role in helping Israel to reduce the abuse heaped on it in international forums, forging peace in the region and elevating Israel's deserved status as a world leader.

Both Chad and Malawi have stated in recent weeks they are ready to open diplomatic missions in Jerusalem. Formal relations with Sudan look to be only a matter of time, especially after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with chief of Sudan's Sovereignty Council, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, earlier in the year.

This is significant because Africa was always considered very much a part of the bloc of nations that would automatically vote against Israel in international institutions and were reticent to be seen as growing too close to the Jewish state.

This was largely a result of threats over oil and trade, and the power of the bloc of 57 Islamic nations and 22 Arab nations that dominate the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) of developing countries at the United Nations. The coalition gave Islamic nations an "automatic majority" in the NAM, which itself has the majority of member states at the United Nations and other international institutions.

Nevertheless, it wasn't always like that.

Israel and African nations had good relations during the 1950s and 1960s, based on a shared fate—they had all thrown off colonialism to reestablish independence.

Israel and sub-Saharan Africa faced similar challenges with increasing desertification and a lack of water resources. The young State of Israel was among the first countries to extend substantial assistance to the newly independent countries and their liberated peoples.

Israel's aid was provided in fields from agriculture, medicine and defense to infrastructure projects, such as the construction of airports, the establishment of shipping companies and educational and professional training institutions.

This ended in 1973 when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) begrudgingly bowed to Arab pressure during the oil crisis of 1973. For the next few decades, African nations were manipulated to become a major source of antagonism toward Israel in multiple international institutions, like the United Nations, where the NAM could guarantee passage of any anti-Israel resolution.

Since that time, the most notable commodities Arabs have exported to sub-Saharan Africa have been terrorism, jihad and Islamism. Terrorist groups like Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and other offshoots of Al Qaeda and Islamic State have cost thousands of African lives. These groups remain a constant threat to sovereign nations in Africa.

However, Israeli intelligence, experience and knowledge have played pivotal roles in ensuring greater security for African nations, and have thwarted many potentially deadly attacks.

In addition, the Israeli government, through its international aid and development agency, MASHAV, has been helping African governments and people to find solutions for the challenges of water scarcity and food security through advances in agricultural, food and water technology. Israeli experts are at the forefront of providing electricity to rural villages through solar power, desalination and ensuring food grown locally has a longer shelf-life.

These blossoming ties have improved diplomatic relations, with African representatives expanding their missions in Israel, attending numerous Israeli tech events and starting to side with Israel in the international arena. In recent years, numerous African nations have voted with Israel or at least abstained on resolutions against the Jewish state that they would previously have supported instantly.

During the annual Israel-hate fest held every year—"International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People"—many African nations, including Cameroon, Nigeria and Rwanda, changed their votes in favor to abstentions or votes against.

As increasing numbers of Africans are beginning to understand—based on shared roots, mutual interests and growth of evangelical Christianity—the State of Israel is not just an ally, but a beloved nation. In Kenya, presidential candidates fight over who is more pro-Israel; one visits the Western Wall in Jerusalem on the eve of elections. In Zimbabwe, one of the presidential candidates is pictured wearing a Jewish prayer shawl and makes opening of an embassy a core election promise. Many African leaders talk of the fraternal bonds between the Jewish and African peoples.

In recent years, standing against Palestinian diplomatic bullying tactics, African nations have begun to realize that Israel is a committed and reliable ally in the battle against the effects of climate change and terrorism, and can help these countries progress and develop.

The friendship between Israel and Africa is also starting to remove a major weapon in the Palestinian arsenal—the automatic majority against Israel in international forums.

During Israel's early years, when it was constantly attacked militarily, economically and diplomatically, it created the Alliance of the Periphery. This strategy called for Israel to develop strong ties with nations beyond the Arab bloc, such as in sub-Saharan Africa. With Israel no longer at war with many of its neighbors and the Arab League Boycott all but ended, the diplomatic war on Israel is all that remains. Now, with its extensive achievements in Africa, this final pillar of Palestinian rejectionist strategy is being dismantled.

While the automatic majority remains at the United Nations for now, it is being steadily eroded as a result of the impotence of Palestinian threats, the rejectionist bloc

slowly losing power and successful Israeli diplomatic achievements.

Most importantly, Africa is steadily moving away from the Palestinians and their maximalist positions, and one by

one its 54 nations are moving to support and collaborate with Israel.

Mr. Sinkinson is President of Facts and Logic About the Middle East, which publishes educational messages to correct lies and misperceptions about Israel and its relationship to the United States.

Hizballah Is Moving Its Drug and Money-Laundering Operation to Paraguay

By Emanuele Ottolenghi

thedispatch.com

September 22, 2020

Helping Latin American cartels to smuggle “black cocaine.”

Last month, Dutch authorities raided a lab in a small village where Colombian cartels turned charcoal-camouflaged cocaine briquettes back into drugs. The charcoal that most Americans burn in their barbecues is not the stuff they would normally associate with organized crime, yet evidence is mounting that in recent years charcoal—a key Latin American and African export—is fast becoming a cover to masquerade cocaine. In particular, the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah’s involvement in moving black cocaine—a term referring to this particular disguise—is well-documented. The global charcoal trade constitutes an ideal cover for drug smuggling and terror finance.

Drug traffickers constantly devise new ways to conceal drugs. Black cocaine—the compound used to turn cocaine into charcoal briquettes—needs to undergo a chemical process in order to appear similar to the actual product, before traffickers hide it at random in larger bags of authentic charcoal. Sometimes cocaine is hidden inside large chunks of charcoal, but increasingly, traffickers shape the cocaine like charcoal briquettes and color it black, requiring chemical engineers at both ends of the trade. Once the disguised cocaine is delivered, experts transform it back to powder before it hits the streets. It is an ingenious cover.

Authorities have seized black cocaine shipments for years. In March 2012, Spanish and Portuguese police seized 380 kilograms of cocaine disguised as charcoal in a cargo from Argentina. In May 2013, Spanish authorities seized 50 kilograms of cocaine hidden in charcoal bags coming from Latin America through the Spanish port of Valencia. Peruvian authorities seized a record six tons of cocaine hidden in a cargo of charcoal in August 2014. In December 2014, Spanish authorities again seized 390 kilograms of cocaine in Santiago de Compostela. The charcoal came from Paraguay. In March 2015, Guyanese authorities found cocaine hidden in a US-bound 40 feet container of charcoal bags. Colombian authorities seized 306 kilos of coca paste disguised as charcoal in Barranquilla, on April 10, 2015. In June 2015, Colombian authorities seized another 634 kilograms of cocaine disguised as charcoal briquettes, whose destination was Belgium. Two of the containers were seized in Barranquilla, again, and the third in Cartagena. In February 2016, Spanish authorities in Valencia raided a lab in charge of separating cocaine from charcoal. In February 2017, Australian authorities seized cocaine and amphetamines

hidden in charcoal worth \$186 million Australian dollars. In January 2019, Canadian authorities seized almost five kilograms of cocaine hidden inside bags of charcoal in transit from Panama to Israel. And in September 2019, Malaysian authorities seized twelve tons of cocaine hidden in charcoal bags.

Policymakers should worry about charcoal exports for a variety of reasons. Its production is one of the many factors driving deforestation in both Africa and Latin America—especially Paraguay, the seventh-largest exporter of charcoal in the world with a 3.6 percent share of the global market. Even if it weren’t contributing significantly to climate change, it’s also a cover for drug trafficking. Perhaps most ominously, evidence ties this activity to Hezbollah financiers who, in the past, used charcoal shipments from Latin America as a cover for cocaine.

Hezbollah’s involvement in the drug trade is well-documented. American law enforcement discovered Hezbollah’s direct involvement by coincidence in 2007, when Colombian wiretaps monitoring a Medellin-based cartel picked up Arabic conversations. The Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) brought in a translator, who quickly realized that Hezbollah was arranging multi-ton shipments of cocaine to the Middle East.

In the ensuing investigation, codenamed Operation Titan, the DEA realized it had opened a Pandora’s box, leading to Project Cassandra, a decade-long U.S. operation that sought to stop Hezbollah from trafficking drugs into the United States and Europe. Hezbollah’s conduct was not a small sideshow by loosely affiliated individuals but a multibillion-dollar worldwide operation orchestrated by top officials within Hezbollah’s inner circle that involved close cooperation between the terrorist group and the cartels.

The DEA revealed the full extent of Hezbollah’s terror-crime nexus and its centrality to Hezbollah’s organizational structure in 2016, when Operation Cedar, a DEA joint effort with European law enforcement agencies across seven countries, came to fruition in January 2016. The operation targeted a large Hezbollah money-laundering network that included Hassan Mohsen Mansour, a Lebanese-Canadian charcoal merchant operating out of Colombia. French court documents reveal that Mansour used his trade as a cover to move dope and launder cash back to Colombian cartels. Mansour is also implicated in a drug-trafficking and money laundering investigation by Canadian authorities, and he has been indicted in Florida. Inexplicably, French authorities

released him and he remains at large. Regardless, when French authorities arrested Mansour, we can assume that Hezbollah lost access, at least temporarily, to his contacts in Colombian customs and ports who protected his containers from inspection. But the terrorist group already had similar arrangements in Paraguay off of which it could build.

With cartels constantly trying to outsmart authorities in their game of hide-and-seek, it is possible that, after temporarily losing Mansour's cover in Colombia, Hezbollah saw the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, with its well-established money-laundering infrastructure, as the ideal place to rebuild the black cocaine supply lines that Operation Cedar had temporarily disrupted. The region has been described as having "the largest illicit economy in the world."

Hezbollah, after all, continues to be a key partner to cartels in Latin America. When it comes to such business connections, Hezbollah is "the Gambinos on steroids," as a former DEA official described the organization. Yet one law enforcement operation, no matter how disruptive, will not deter Hezbollah's ongoing dealings with criminal cartels.

Other criminal organizations are adept at producing drugs, running protection rackets, and monopolizing illicit businesses, but they lack global networks for shipping and distributing goods and laundering the proceeds. That is where Hezbollah comes in, along with its willing collaborators in various Lebanese diaspora communities around the world.

There are good reasons to believe that this area is fast becoming an important hub for black cocaine operations. Paraguay is a large exporter of charcoal—and so is nearby Argentina. Evidence of this emerged in July 2018, when Paraguayan authorities raided a lab run by three Colombians whose specialty was turning cocaine into charcoal briquettes. They were getting ready to send a

shipment of these briquettes to Latakia, a Syrian port under the nominal control of Bashar al-Assad's regime and frequently used by Hezbollah. While their case was never conclusively tied to Hezbollah, it clearly indicated that Colombian cartels viewed Paraguay as a significant enough opportunity to set up a cocaine-to-charcoal lab in country.

In 2016, a Lebanese drug trafficker was arrested in the Tri-Border Area and later extradited to Miami. The culprit, Ali Issa Chamas, revealed in court documents that his boss was based in Colombia, though he operated out of Paraguay. Peruvian and Bolivian cocaine production have also been on the rise for years, and with Brazil becoming an important consumer, as well as transshipment point, Paraguay—which borders Bolivia and has very porous frontiers with all its neighbors—is an ideal transit country.

Turning to Paraguay's charcoal production as a cover for cocaine shipments is, therefore, a no-brainer for Hezbollah.

Much like with other disguises, this is first and foremost a problem of increasing border and customs controls at both ends of shipments when it comes to certain products. Charcoal, much like other disguises (cartels have also used pineapples, bananas, and avocados in recent years to smuggle cocaine from Ecuador, Colombia, and Belize) is not the type of merchandise that draws suspicion. Yet it should.

More fundamentally, a change of mindset is needed from authorities. Interdicting these shipments is not just part of the war on drugs and the battle against transnational criminal networks in America's backyard. It is about disrupting terror finance as well—the lifeblood of terror plots that have killed and threaten to kill more Americans. Black cocaine looks like charcoal. We would do ourselves a disservice if we did not take a second look.

Mr. Ottolenghi is a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a Washington, DC-based, nonpartisan research institute focusing on national security and foreign policy.

For a Growing Number of Arabs, Iran—Not Israel—Is the True Threat

By Hussain Abdul-Hussain medium.com/@hussainabdulhussain

September 21, 2020

One family, twice made refugees by the mullahs' depredations.

Because Iranian-sponsored militias in Iraq forge real estate deeds and threaten judges and government employees who challenge their forgery, my father sold our family house in Baghdad and deposited the money in Lebanon, where another Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, has kept the country in a state of perpetual war, forcing the economy to nosedive, as banks went insolvent.

My father's lifetime savings are now gone. The money covered the expensive medical care of my brother, who suffers from diabetes and Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Medicine is running low in Lebanon because the country's foreign currency reserves have dried up.

My sister, who saw her salary lose three fourths of its value in Beirut, luckily relocated to Dubai. From there, she

now spends whatever she can spare to buy medicine, not only for our brother, but for all other relatives, especially older ones in need of medication for heart, blood pressure and other health problems. My other sister and I, both in the US, have been drawing contingency plans on how to fly our parents here if crime rates continue their upward climb in Lebanon.

Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden has promised to rejoin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as the Iran Nuclear Deal. US sanctions on Iran will be removed and Tehran's coffers will be topped up. Hezbollah will thrive and further tighten its grip on Lebanon.

Iran, Hezbollah and their friends in Washington argue that Lebanon's economic free fall is the result of its ruling corrupt oligarchy, but this is only partially true.

My late grandfather was a wealthy merchant in Baghdad. In the 1950s, He feared that a Communist takeover might cost him his fortune and started relocating his assets to Lebanon, where he used to take his family for summer vacation, and where my father met my mother. Between its independence in 1943 and 1969, Lebanon lived its golden years, even though the country was ruled by the same corrupt oligarchy. Yet despite the corruption, Lebanon's economy was growing strong as the country won the epithet "Switzerland of the Middle East." Lebanon maintained "regional neutrality" and sat out the biggest Arab war with Israel in 1967, which resulted in a humiliating Arab defeat.

Reeling from the defeat, late Egyptian President Gamal Abdul-Nasser embarked on a "war of attrition," and leaned on Jordan and Lebanon to let Palestinian militias launch cross border attacks into Israel. The illegal militias eventually became statelets with their private armies that threatened the state. In 1970, late Jordanian King Hussein ejected the Palestinian thugs. Lebanon never did, until in 1982, when Israel invaded to do what Beirut should have done long before. Late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat left Lebanon with his militias, but that was not the end of it. Iran inherited Arafat's cadres with which Tehran built Hezbollah. Like Arafat before it, Hezbollah engaged in inconclusive wars with Israel, while using its arms to overpower the state.

The continued presence of Hezbollah, a terrorist organization under US law, kept Lebanon in a state of perpetual war. This stifled growth and forced the government to fund itself through borrowing from local banks, thus using depositors' money. And to buy off the oligarchy and make it support its unconstitutional militia, Hezbollah used the state to reward loyal oligarchs. State reform thus became impossible, and made corruption inseparable from the very existence of Hezbollah.

Realizing the adverse effects of the "resistance state" model that Iran has imposed on Lebanon and Iraq, and aware that politicians were either bought off or too scared to speak up, top clerics called for disbanding Tehran's proxies. In Lebanon, Christian Maronite Patriarch Beshara Al-Raii demanded that Hezbollah be disarmed and the policy of "regional neutrality," which worked so well for the country until 1969, be restored. In Iraq, top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani also called for disbanding Iran's proxy militias.

This is why my sister, my wife, myself and many of our Lebanese-American friends felt disappointment when reading Biden's promise to rejoin the nuclear deal with Iran, and give Israel more arms to defend itself against Iranian proxies. Biden's statement signaled that he does not plan to help the Lebanese and the Iraqis get rid of Iranian militias, but only to manage and contain them.

All of us are registered Democrats. We donate and vote for Democratic candidates, and yet, we have to watch people we choose run foreign policy that goes counter to our interests in the Middle East.

Unlike how some media argues, a two state solution for the Israelis and the Palestinians is not the key to "true peace" in the Middle East. In fact, whatever happens to Palestinians does not affect our families and friends in Lebanon, Syria or Iraq. What happens to the Iran regime, however, does. In our world, Israel is not the enemy, the Iran regime is.

That the Democratic Party assumes that Arab-Americans or Muslim-Americans are monolithic blocs with identical foreign policy interests is a problem. Maybe Mr. Biden should rethink his position on Iran, and realize that the real estate dispute between Israelis and Palestinians is not an issue as pressing as Iran's proxies that are sowing discord and chaos throughout the Middle East, and around the world.

**Current issue also available at suburbanorthodox.org.
If you see something, send something" –editor**