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The Growing Breach in Muslim Unity: Causes & Effects

Needless to say, the global Muslim community and its “Weltanschauung” stand at the Abyss, in which Muslims are steadily approaching threshold of unimaginable chaos. This poses a mammoth challenge of maintaining unity in its ranks and files. The great ideological and ethnic divide between Shiites and Sunni on the one side, and the quest for regional hegemony between the Muslim majority states on the other, have socially and politically undermined the future of Muslims across the globe. As the world’s Muslim leaders admitted at the recently held OIC summit in Istanbul, the past 1,400 tumultuous years of sectarian fighting did not bring peace and happiness to Muslim majority lands.

Hakim Khatib*

Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi**

Analysis of History

By the year 1500, Persia was a seat of Sunni Islamic learning, but all that was about to change with the arrival of Azeri conquerors. They established the Safavid dynasty in Persia — modern-day Iran and its cultural sphere — and made it Shiite.

“That dynasty actually came out of what’s now eastern Turkey,” says Gause, a professor at the University of Vermont. “They were a Turkic dynasty, one of the leftovers of the Mongol invasions that had disrupted the Middle East for a couple of centuries. The Safavid dynasty made it its political project to convert Iran into a Shia country.”

Shiites gradually became the glue that held Persia together and distinguished it

from the Ottoman Empire to its west, which was Sunni, and the Mughal Muslims to the east in India, who were also Sunni. This was the geography of Shiite Islam, which has prevailed into the 20th century.

There were periods of conflict and periods of peace. But the split remained and would, in the second half of the 20th century; turn out to be one of the most important factors in the upheavals that have ravaged the Middle East.

“Why has there been such a long and protracted disagreement and tension between these two sects?” asks Ray Takeyh, author of *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic*. “It has to do with political power.”

In the 20th century, that meant a complex political dynamic involving Sunni and Shiites, Arabs and Persians, colonizers and colonized, oil, and the involvement of the superpowers.

It’s not known precisely how many of the world’s “1.6 billion Muslims” are Shiites. The Shiites are a minority, making up between 10 per cent and 15 per cent of the Muslim population — certainly fewer than

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250 million.

The Shiites are concentrated in Iran, southern Iraq and southern Lebanon. But there are significant Shiite communities in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India as well.

Although the origins of the Sunni-Shiite split were violent, over the centuries Shiites and Sunnis lived peacefully together for long periods of time. But that appears to be giving way to a new period of spreading conflict in the Middle East between Shiites and Sunnis.

“There is definitely an emerging struggle between Sunni and Shia to define not only the pattern of local politics, but also the relationship between the Islamic world and the West,” says Daniel Brumberg of Georgetown University, author of *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*.

Genesis of Current Polarisation

The recent rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia can be traced back to the Iranian revolution in 1979, which witnessed toppling a pro-western leader leaving a space for Shiite religious authorities to take over.

Tehran began backing Shiite militias and parties abroad, and Riyadh – concerned in the growing influence of a newly-strident Iran – strengthened links to other Sunni governments, including the formation of [the Gulf Co-operation Council](#) (GCC).

Since the victory of Iran’s Islamic Revolution in 1979, the government in Tehran has pursued the empowerment of Shiite communities in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere in the region as a defining feature of its state ideology. Partially in response, members of the GCC (with the

exception of Oman) have attempted to counteract Iran’s perceived expansionism by (publicly or privately) supporting Sunni movements, which perceive the Shiite faith as heretical, and anathematic to what they see as the real tenets of Islam. The current situation, if unresolved, threatens to undermine the stability and security of the entire region.

While the world’s eyes have been fixated on the civil war in Syria, which began as a political conflict and quickly evolved into a sectarian one, sectarian warfare in Iraq has already claimed 6,500 lives since 2013. Pakistan also continues to experience sectarian violence that routinely targets Shiites and followers of liberal strands of Sunni Islam such as Barelvis.

Violence against Ahmadis is even worse where the state is reluctant to offer protection or acknowledge its responsibility. At the same time, religious minorities in Pakistan have been targeted by the same sectarian extremists. The church bombing in Peshawar on 22 September 2015 which killed over 80 Christian worshippers, is an example of such hate-fuelled and indiscriminate terror.

The Shiite-Sunni schism, which has historically been a divisive catalyst amongst Muslims, now threatens to divide the world as global powers are picking sides in the conflicts in Syria, Bahrain, and Lebanon. Robert Fisk warns world leaders of being wary of extremists in these conflicts, especially the Salafists. “Fifteen of the 19 mass-killers of 9/11 were also Salafists” and citizens of Saudi Arabia, warned Fisk. Whereas others, such as Barry Rubin, a Tel Aviv-based journalist and editor, have labelled Iran as a greater threat.

The rivalry gained a new impetus with the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, which empow-

ered majority Shiites at the expense of the Arab Sunni minority that had ruled the country since independence. The militant group, which eventually came to be known as the Islamic State, was born in the upheaval ensued. This took anti-Shiite zeal to new heights.

Indeed, from Yemen to Iraq and Syria to Bahrain, most of the wars and political conflicts in the region today [pit Sunnis against Shiites](#). They aren't, however, over who was the rightful successor to the Prophet Muhammad, the root of the original schism. Rather, they are fought for political and economic sway within these countries and in the broader Middle East. "Sectarian tools are used in these struggles because they have greater impact," explained one of Lebanon's most senior Shiite clerics, Seyed Ali Fadlullah. "If you were to call upon people now to fight for a regional or international influence, they won't act. But people will act when it is said that your sect is under threat, or that your sanctities are going to be destroyed." Sunnis account for some 90% of the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide and have been the dominant school in the Middle East for centuries. Although Shiites are spread across the Middle East and South Asia, they constitute a majority only in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan and Bahrain.

In 1980s, tensions between Saudi and Iran escalated – Saudi Arabia backed Iraq's Saddam Hussein against Iran. Following clashes at the hajj in 1987 killing hundreds of Iranian pilgrims, Saudi Arabia suspended diplomatic ties for three years.

Iran's Middle East policy

Iran's efforts to influence events in the Middle East by supporting its allies are

often carried out in direct counterbalance to the efforts of the United States and its allies. This has been illustrated through Iran's pledge of funds to the ostracized Hamas when most western states had labelled Hamas as a terrorist organization and consequently ceased support of a Palestinian government run by Hamas. Following an initial Arab suspension of aid, Iran pledged the funds necessary to keep the Palestinian government working, with Ayatollah Khamenei calling on Muslim nations to "provide financial aid to the Palestinians". In response to a US call to suspend aid, the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal said: "it would be height of irony, at the time when we need to take care of these people who are seeking peace, that we shall fall short of doing so."

It is difficult to argue that this move was not influenced by a Saudi need to prevent Iran of taking a leadership role in the Palestinian crisis. It was also crucial for Saudi Arabia that it doesn't appear to be a puppet of the United States. Equally important has been the Saudi need to support the Palestinian people and not come across as uninvolved in helping and financially supporting them during a time when nearly all western aid donors had eliminated everything but essential humanitarian aid.

Iran's Nuclear Programme & Saudi Concerns

As Iran continues to move forward on its path of nuclear ambition toward their declared goal of energy independence, it risks increased alienation from the international community and further sanctions by the Security Council. In spite of

these risks, or perhaps in reaction to international threats, Iran has continued forward, with President Ahmadinejad asserting at every turn that not only do the Iranian people have the right to peaceful nuclear technology but also that Iran's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only. On 8 April 2008, Iran announced the installation of 6,000 new uranium-enrichment centrifuges at its nuclear facility. This addition will greatly increase Iran's capacity for producing enriched uranium, further propelling Tehran towards its nuclear goals.

The Iranian pursuit of a nuclear weapon, some analysts point out that Iran's military accelerated its missile program as a way to compensate for its inability to match the air power of potential rivals. As a result, Iran now possesses various models of various types (ballistic, cruise, et cetera) of missiles, most of which can reach well into Saudi Arabia and some of which are accurate enough to be used against military bases of various types. These missiles could also hit facilities of the Saudi oil and gas industry, as well as desalination plants, potentially dealing severe damage to the Saudi economy.

The Royal Saudi Air Force would have no choice but to eliminate Iran's many missiles as quickly as possible. The Saudis would not necessarily know which of the missile sites are home to the high-priority missiles of higher accuracy, thus forcing them to attempt to neutralize them all. If the Iranians are smart, they have prepared (or will prepare) dummy missile sites, which can serve as decoys. The Serbs did this to great effect in 1999 during the NATO attacks on their country.

Saudi- West Relations

In the post Cold War era, the US-Saudi alliance reached a new height, particularly during the Persian Gulf War in 1990-1991 when the US sent troops to the Kingdom to defend it from Saddam Hussein. It reached a new low a decade later when Osama bin Laden, a Saudi embittered in part by the presence of infidel troops in the Land of the Two Holy Mosques, orchestrated the worst ever terrorist attack on the United States by employing 15 other Saudi citizens as suicidal hijackers.

There was much loose talk after 9/11 of "nuking Mecca" — a crude way of suggesting that the United States declare war on Saudi Arabia. Such suggestions died down in 2003, when Saudi Arabia finally cracked down on Al-Qaeda after experiencing deadly terrorist attacks of its own. For about three decades, Iran-West relations remained under extreme atmosphere of suspicion and antagonism. During the span of this period, the West came closer to Saudi Arabia. The US has [already sold the Saudis](#) more than \$50 billion of weaponry in the past six years.

Any yet in the post Iran-US nuclear pacification phase, the Saudi fears about what they see as an American abdication in the Middle East in favour of Iran. They see the nuclear deal with Iran as an indication that the US has entered into a de facto alliance with a Shiite revolutionary regime that has made no secret of its desire to overthrow the Saudi royal family and to foment a Shiite revolution in its Eastern Province, where most of its oil is located. The fact that President Obama has done next to nothing to oppose the Assad regime in Syria or the Iranian-backed mili-

tias in Iraq only confirm Saudi worries.

Winds of Regional Schism

In mapping the Sunni-Shiite conflict we should differentiate between the Sunni-Shiite intra-state and inter-state conflicts. The first is focused in the Fertile Crescent even though it has repercussions in the entire Muslim majority world and beyond. The bloodiest conflict is in Iraq where the Arab Sunnis who lost their hundreds of years of hegemony are doing their utmost to prevent the Shiites from consolidating power. The fact that Sunni extremist organizations such as Al-Qaeda are based there has turned the past decade into one of the deadliest in Sunni-Shiite annals, costing the lives of hundreds of thousands on both sides.

The Shiites in Bahrain, who represent a majority, have been in a state of turmoil even before the so-called Arab spring. The Shiites in Lebanon, who represent the biggest community in that country, are trying to translate this demographic fact into a political asset.

In Syria the Alawites are conducting a determinant war of life and death. While some of this minority have been dragged into a war they had never imagined, the idea of preserving power in order to survive remains prevailing.

All in all, today two Sunni communities in Syria and Iraq, are struggling to regain power, and another one in Bahrain is attempting to hold power. On the interstate level the Sunni-Shiite strife caused deep changes in the geo-strategic map: Saudi Arabia and some other Sunni countries did not grant legitimacy to the Shiite gov-

ernment in Iraq and are in fact supporting radical Sunni groups against it. Similarly, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are aligned against Syria, conducting a proxy war against the Assad regime with the help of Sunni opposition as well as terrorist organizations. Turkey, which was Iraq's main ally until the 2003 war, turned against Iraq by supporting different Sunni personalities and opposition groups.

For their part Iran, Iraq, Syria and Hezbollah have formed an alliance, which could not be imagined only a decade earlier. Thus, Arab and Muslim majority countries in the Middle East have become divided more along religious denominations than national lines. One illustration of the dramatic change is that while in the past Iraq looked at Arab Sunni countries as its strategic depth, now it looks at Shiite Iran. The same goes for Syria.

Waning OIC's Role

The epidemic of sectarianism is poisoning the core of Islamic concept of *Ummah* (nation) imbued in the OIC's charter. This observation can be evident of the recently held OIC summit in Istanbul, Turkey. The 13th Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit closed with traditional optimism with no plan of action how to meet these expectations of unity and solidarity.

Among the — most expected — absentees was Egypt's Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, whose relations with Turkey have not seen much improvement despite Saudi's long-time mediation ahead of the OIC summit to hand over OIC presidency to Turkey. In reality, the summit featured an extremely oxymoronic slogan for a gathering of this sort: "Unity and Solidarity for Justice and

Peace”. In reality, we can talk about rare – often, à la carte – “sectarian” unity and solidarity, selective justice, and almost no peace.

In his speech of transfer of presidency, Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Shokry spoke about everything except about the actual issue at hand. Shokry even left the stage without waiting for a handshake with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan while approaching the dais to take over the presidency. The divide was so clearly visible in a summit called to address the theme of “Unity and Solidarity”.

The condemnation of the lack of unity and solidarity by 50 Muslim majority countries was loud and clear. But condemnation also came with some degree of hypocrisy, as the head of the pack of this anti-Iran initiative – Saudi Arabia – is not squeaky-clean either.

There is no good guy here as most countries and governments have blood on their hands. All exert significant efforts to further their own agenda and regional influence, especially by supporting one side over another in what has become a series of proxy wars in the Middle East.

Specifically, Muslim leaders have accused Iran of supporting terrorism and interfering in the affairs of regional countries, including Syria and Yemen.

“The conference deplores Iran’s interference in the internal affairs of states in the region and other member states, including Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, and Somalia, and its continued support for terrorism,” the OIC said in its final summit communiqué.

Only months before the Syrian crisis, the annual reports of the OIC had generously appreciated Iran’s improving research and

development sector — something most Sunni states have failed to do better. Iranian universities stand among the top universities among those in all OIC countries. At some point, former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was among the most popular Muslim leaders in the Arab streets, thanks to his anti Israel rhetoric. Iran stood second after Turkey in research and development spending according to an OIC 2012 report.

Muslims Relations with India & Israel

One of the most important factors that play a significant role regarding the inter-state relations in international politics is the diplomatic status of relationship between Muslim majority countries and India and Israel. Given this touchstone, Pakistan does not feel comfortable once it comes to note that Tehran, Riyadh and UAE form good diplomatic relations with India. Likewise, Iran does not feel comfortable to note that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other GCC states form candid relations with Israel. The present posting of Saudi’s first diplomatic envoy to Tel Aviv seems to have upped the ante. Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal was welcomed warmly by Israeli officials as he signed memorandum of understanding to become first Saudi ambassador to Israel. Israeli Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Tzipi Hotovely said:

“We are so delighted today to see that Arab mentality changes and the Arab states do not consider Israel as their enemy anymore.”

Arab League’s Role

Founded in March 1945, the League of Arab States (or Arab League) is a loose confederation of twenty-two Arab nations, including Palestine, whose broad mission is to improve coordination among its members on matters of common interest.

The Arab League has no mechanism to compel members with its resolutions, a void that has led critics like NYU Associate Professor Mohamad Bazzi to describe the organization as a “glorified debating society”. The LAS charter states that decisions reached by a majority “shall bind only those [states] that accept them,” which places a premium on national sovereignty and limits the League’s ability to take collective action. While some actions are taken under the aegis of the Arab League, they are only executed by a small faction. Bazzi says:

“During the Lebanese civil war, the Arab League had limited success trying to help negotiate a peace, but in the end it was the individual powers, in this case Syria and Saudi Arabia, that helped end the conflict by convening the Taif Agreement. Technically it was under League auspices, but it was really Saudi Arabia and Syria as the driving force.”

After WWII, the pan-Arab project gained its most charismatic champion in Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, but several critical international developments over the following decades exposed the limits of the solidarity league. The decline of British and French colonial empires and the emergence of a bipolar Cold War altered the architecture of power in the region. Inter-Arab antagonisms, the strategic implications of Mideast oil, and a US

policy of Soviet containment provided ample seeds of conflict for the newly formed League.

GCC’s Role

Despite their geographic proximity and cultural affinity, the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (with the exception of Oman) remains fraught, and threatens to further undermine regional and international stability. The on-going ideological and sectarian divergence between the northern and southern shores of the Persian Gulf is one of the main causes of the humanitarian catastrophe that has engulfed Syria and Iraq, and threatens to spread beyond these countries’ former borders. The rise of ISIL, Al-Qaeda, and other extremist groups across the region can only be brought under control if Iran and Saudi Arabia (leader of the GCC block) come to see their economic and security well being as intertwined.

Preventive Measures

The following confidence-building measures may be helpful in bridging the gap between the two sides:

- Establishing an annual Gulf Security Forum, which includes the GCC, as well as Iran and Iraq to explore common approaches and cooperation in combating extremism.
- Through the authority of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), establishing an on-going Islamic Dialogue Forum, focused on highlighting the extensive commonalities between Sunni and

Shiite Islam and the vast contributions of Iranian scholars to Islamic civilization.

- Establishing a broad Gulf Energy Forum, which moves beyond hydrocarbons to include nuclear and solar energy. Given the UAE's planned acquisition of nuclear energy production capacity (with help from South Korea) by 2017, and given the country's advancement in energy efficiency technologies, it may well be an ideal host for the above-noted forum.
- Expanding people-to-people, academic, and cultural exchanges between Iran and GCC countries that may provide strength to the notion of having cross-fertilization of ideas.
- Establishing a joint Emergency Preparedness Protocol between Iran and GCC countries, intended to address the challenges posed by earthquakes, oil spills, nuclear accidents, and other non-traditional security threats. This is especially important given the location of Iran's nuclear reactor in the Persian Gulf port of Bushehr, in close proximity to GCC countries.

Globalisation/ Secularization versus Religious Fundamentalism

The rise of scientific rationalism and the emergence of the modern technological age have in turn instigated a process that sociologists call secularization, which is

totally defied by the rising tides of religious fundamentalism. Religious fundamentalism has a total denial that there is anything amiss with existing assumptions and long held articles of faith. It is reaffirmation of traditional dogma and an unwillingness to question existing tenets as a resistance to the progression of modernity and the steady advancement of human understanding.

Thus, without interfering with efforts of organisations like Arab League, RCD & GCC, to become more effective, Muslim majority countries may start looking for broader, non-denominational forums for mutual progress and promotion of amity among them and with their neighbours. They may, for instance, revive the idea of an Asian Union, on the pattern of the European Union.

Muslim majority countries in Asia, nearly half of the total, will not be at a disadvantage in an Asian union, which will include besides the SAARC countries (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation), the Central Asian republics, China, and Japan. Closer economic relations among the members of the Asian fraternity could help Muslim majority countries to overcome their sectarian differences or legacies of colonial period disputes. Perhaps the first and foremost thing Muslim leaders should understand if they really want to resolve their problems without intervention from the "others" is that they must abandon – totally abandon – their various flavours of Islamist polity and their supremacist adherence to their own sects, religion, and ethnicities.

Iraq: Muqtada Al-Sadr Flexes His Political Muscles

In a demonstration of his political power, radical Shiite cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr engineered a huge demonstration on Saturday, April 30 inside Baghdad's heavily fortified and defended "Green Zone" – officially the International Zone. Reportedly, the general in charge of security personally welcomed Al-Sadr to the restricted area.

Why was there no armed confrontation?

Rick Francona*

Thousands of Al-Sadr's followers moved blast walls and fences, pushed their way into the zone and entered several of the government buildings that constitute the seat of power of the Iraqi government.

The zone is also the home of the huge American embassy as well as other foreign missions. The ease by which the demonstrators entered the facility is telling. Iraqi security forces are capable of defending the zone and repelling the demonstrators, but there was little resistance from the guard force.

Many of the demonstrators remarked that they were treated fairly by the soldiers and police as long as they did not pose a threat. Reportedly, the general in charge of security personally welcomed Al-Sadr to the restricted area.

Why was there no armed confrontation?

I suspect there was almost no violence because Muqtada Al-Sadr and the demonstrators are demanding the same thing

Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar Al-'Abadi has been advocating for months – the end of the rampant corruption and cronyism that permeates virtually every level of the Iraqi government.

The nonviolent demonstrations are a departure from Al-Sadr's past. The cleric has a long history of violent confrontations with the Iraqi government, and his Iranian-trained and supplied *jaysh Al-mahdi* (JAM, or Army of the Mahdi) was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of American troops between 2004 and 2007. It was only the American "surge" of 2007-2008 that saw the demise of the JAM – Al-Sadr assessed, correctly, that his thugs were no match for the newly-deployed US Army combat battalions tasked with securing Baghdad. Al-Sadr, thus, fled to Iran.

The cleric remained in Iran for over three years, returning to Iraq in early 2011. Ostensibly, Al-Sadr was in Qom to continue his Islamic studies and attain the title of ayatollah; he had been a *hawjat Al-islam* prior.

It is difficult to believe this claim was only for his followers, since he has not attained the title of either *mujtahid* – one authorized to issue *fatwas*, or religious rulings – or ayatollah. His return to the Shiite holy city of Al-Najaf, site of the martyrdom of the first Shiite imam Ali – son in law and cousin of the prophet Mu-

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hammad – was greeted with almost uncontrollable revelry in the streets.

Why is this 42-year-old such an influential figure in Iraqi politics?

Muqtada Al-Sadr is a *sayyid*. Sayyid is the Arabic word for mister, or sir. However, in Shiite Islam it denotes a person who is a direct descendant of the prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah and Imam Ali. Sayyids are entitled to wear the black turban.

The Shiites believe that leadership of the faithful should have been restricted to the prophet's bloodline, and Al-Sadr clearly qualifies. His family lineage is traceable back to the sixth *iman*, Ja'afar Al-Sadiq, and the seventh imam, Musa Al-Khadhim. The shrine of the seventh imam is located in the northwest section of Baghdad, appropriately named Al-Khadhimiyah. While Westerners sometimes dismiss the cache of direct lineage to the prophet, Iraqis do not. Coincidentally, the annual remembrance ceremony for the seventh

imam is this week. Muqtada Al-Sadr is arguably now the key power broker in Iraq. When he called his followers back from the demonstration in the Green Zone, he issued an ultimatum to Prime Minister Al-'Abadi that the Iraqi leader has until Friday (May 06) to effect changes in the Iraqi cabinet, replacing corrupt politicians with qualified technocrats.

If that deadline is not met, the demonstrations will resume. Al-Sadr has further threatened to bring down the Al-'Abadi government and force early Parliamentary elections – elections he can greatly influence.

Al-'Abadi should take Muqtada Al-Sadr seriously. The firebrand cleric has proven that he can mobilize thousands of disciplined demonstrators and create problems for the Iraqi government – at a time when the government needs to devote its time and energy to the on-going fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Terrorism: Then and Now

The year 2016 is the 100th anniversary of the Irish Easter Rebellion. Throughout the year I will try to revisit some of the lessons of Ireland's struggle for freedom. Bombs explode in a subway. The victims are everyday people who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. What follows is outrage: Track down the perpetrators. The people who set off the bombs are monsters and inhuman fanatics, thunder the authorities.

Conn M. Hallinan*

But the year is not 2016; it is 1883 during the “Dynamite War” waged by mainly Irish-American members of the Fenians against the English occupation of Ireland. The Fenian Brotherhood was founded in 1848. The “War” targeted the underground, train stations, city halls, public plazas, and factories in London, Manchester, and Liverpool. The war spanned four years, and in the light of the current terrorist attacks in the Middle East and Europe, it is an instructive comparison.

Historical Lessons to Learn

On one level there is no similarity. The “Dynamite War” killed and injured very few people, while terrorist attacks and bombs in Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, France and Belgium have murdered hundreds and wounded thousands. It is also hard to compare John Devoy and Patrick Tynan of the Fenians to the likes of the Islamic State's Abu-Bakr Al-Baghdadi and Abu Muslim Al-Turkmani.

Yet there is an historical lesson here, and we ignore it at our peril. Terrorism is a difficult subject to talk about because anything other than outrage seems like one is making an excuse for unspeakably heinous acts. And yet if we are to seriously look for solutions, that requires asking “why,” even if the answers are uncomfortable.

There are certainly easy “solutions” out there: Occupy Muslim communities and torture suspects we arrest. Unleash yet more drones, carpet bomb the bastards, and, if necessary, send in the Marines. But that is exactly what we have doing for the past three decades, and is there anyone who would seriously argue that things are better now than they were in 1981?

Did the invasion of Afghanistan muzzle terrorism? A decade and a half later, we are still at war in that poor benighted country, and the terrorism that we experienced on 9/11 has spread to Madrid, Paris, Beirut, Ankara, Cairo, Brussels, Damascus, Baghdad, and other cities. We sowed the wind in Somalia, Iraq, Libya, Yemen and Syria. Did we expect to reap less than a whirlwind?

In his book “Blowback,” the late Chalmers Johnson chronicled the ricochets from American foreign policy. We raised up the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan to defeat the Russians and helped create Osama bin Laden. We ally ourselves with Saudi Ara-

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bia, the country that supplied most of the people who flew those airplanes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, whose reactionary brand of Islam has helped create an army of jihadists worldwide.

The flood of refugees headed toward Europe is a roadmap of US interventions in Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Libya. In the case of the latter, we created a failed state, whose massive arms caches has succeeded in destabilizing significant parts of Central Africa.

Terrorism Is Not a Thing

The nature of American foreign policy—as well as those of some of its allies—is where the conversation of what to do about terrorism has to begin. This is not to excuse terrorism, but to try to understand what it emerges from, instead of playing an endless—and eventually futile—game of whack-a-mole.

For people like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz the answer is simple: terrorists are evil Muslims – although sometimes just being a Muslim is enough. But how many of our leaders ask, “Why are they doing this” and are really interested in an answer? Hillary Clinton says she doesn’t think we should torture people, but she is all for bombing the bejesus out of them and overthrowing their governments. Bernie Sanders is much more sensible, but even he voted for the Yugoslav War, which set off NATO’s eastward march and led to the current crisis over the Ukraine.

Terrorism is not a thing you can wage war against, it is a tactic employed by the less powerful against the more powerful. If you can’t defeat someone’s armies you can always blow up their citizens. Simply using military power in response to ter-

rorism is the most efficient way to recruit new terrorists. Drone strikes are supposed to be “surgical” weapons that only kill bad guys. But as the [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) has found, drones have killed thousands of civilians. Each of those civilians has a family, and each of those family (clan, tribe, etc.) members is now a potential recruit. The drone war is a perfect example of Johnson’s “blowback.”

Of course, terrorism generates its own “blowbacks.” The “Dynamite War” didn’t do much damage to the British, but it was a political catastrophe for the Irish. The English used it—along with the infamous 1882 Phoenix Park murders of the colonial authority’s chief secretaries—to pass the “Perpetual Coercion Act” and imprison hundreds of Irish activists. The loss of those leaders seriously damaged efforts by the Land League to stop a wave of tenant farmer evictions that followed in the wake of the 1878-79 crop failures.

The Blowback

Those evictions produced a “blowback” of their own. Tens of thousands of Irish were forced to emigrate to America, bringing with them a deep rage at English landlords and the colonial authorities. That fury fed the anger that many Irish-Americans still held against the British, and that led to a revival of the Fenians and the launching of the “Dynamite War.” It was [good old American know how](#) that built the bombs that blew up targets in England.

The “War” was actually similar to the current wave of terrorism, at least in conception. Rather than going after the English armed forces and police, most the bombs were set in public places with the explicit

idea of terrorizing everyday life. The plan was to transplant the violence of the colonial occupation to the home country. It did, indeed, scare people, including many English who formerly favoured the Irish cause, and turned those who were indifferent anti-Irish. It derailed the Home Rule movement for several decades.

The Colonial authorities responded with yet greater repression, much as many of the current candidates for the White House would if given a chance. But while the “Dynamite War” was ill conceived and counter productive, it was a reflection of the basic injustice of colonialism. The Islamic State is a genuine monstrosity, but it reflects a hundred years of European and American manipulation of the Middle East’s resources and politics. When Britain and France divided up the Middle East to their liking in 1916—deliberately building in ethnic, tribal and religious instability—did they really think there would never be a day of reckoning?

There are monsters in the Middle East, but we have helped create them. The question is, can we stop them?

We should know by now that more bombs and troops do exactly the opposite. To seriously tackle terrorism will take a fundamental re-examination of US foreign policy. It must start with challenging the idea that everything about this country is the “best,” the ideology of “American exceptionalism” that underlies so much of our strategic policies. That idea of “exceptionalism” gives us the right to intervene in other countries’ internal affairs, to subvert their political structures, and, if necessary, seek regime change.

We preach “democracy” to Cuba, China

and Russia, while being perfectly comfortable with Saudi Arabia and the other autocratic monarchies that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council. People take note of that contradiction and quite logically assume that it is hypocrisy and has more to do with our “interests” than any commitment to the right of people to choose how to run their own lives.

In any case our own political system increasingly looks like some grotesque caricature of democracy, where presidential candidates blithely propose ignoring the Constitution and violating international law, and where a handful of billionaires can dominate the public space.

The US is the most powerful economic and military force on the planet, so overthrowing a government or strangling its economy is not all that hard to do. At least in the short run. But the world is simply far too complex to fit into one model of government or worldview and, sooner or later, people will dig in their heels.

How we respond to that resistance is what we need to examine. If the response is force, we can hardly complain when we find ourselves the target of “asymmetrical violence”—terrorism.

The people who set the bombs have to be caught and punished, but that will not end the problem. The Irish who murdered the colonial secretaries in Phoenix Park were caught and punished, but it did not make Ireland a calm place or end Irish resistance to the English occupation. That was resolved when the British finally realized that they could no longer determine the history of another country. We must do the same. And that will take a conversation that we have not yet had. It’s time to start.

Europe's Refugee Crisis: Grapple With Complexity We Must

There is much to understand – but one way of approaching the refugee crisis is to think through the historical precedents, to consider whether they offer us pointers as to what the space is for political and public action. This is not easy, as historical precedents are never quite the same as what is going on now. But surely this is an area for analysis and debate that is currently lacking.

Richard Black*

Some have gone down this route. A recent excellent [posting](#) by Becky Taylor draws parallels between the public reaction to the Hungarian refugee crisis of 1956 and emerging signs of compassion and solidarity in Europe today, but the Hungarian uprising is hardly comparable in terms of either the geopolitical circumstances (it happened at the height of the Cold War) or the numbers of refugees involved (an order of magnitude lower, at least).

Others have suggested that the closest parallel involves the events at the end of the Second World War, as millions of people found themselves homeless or stateless, or indeed tried to move home. Certainly the period 1945-51 was a formative one: It was a crisis that gave birth to the UN Refugee Convention and established both attitudes towards refu-

gees and a policy framework to deal with them for at least two decades. Yet that was also a refugee crisis born of conflict that had engulfed the whole continent, where the sense of responsibility and urgency to find solutions was at a level that far exceeds what is likely to emerge today. Meanwhile, although the political and economic crises that are producing today's flows of refugees and migrants have their epicentres outside Europe, if we look to other major refugee crises that have happened outside Europe, whether that is Afghanistan, Rwanda, Liberia, or more recently the exodus from Iraq following US-UK intervention in 2003, all share a crucial difference – relatively few of those displaced made it out of the affected region.

Of course the fact that refugees from these earlier conflicts mostly found asylum – or were “contained”, if you prefer – in neighbouring or “transit” countries in Asia, Africa or the Middle East is not in itself a good reason for inaction on the part of European states or disinterest on the part of European publics.

But the fact that many of the countries that were places of first asylum or transit in these earlier crises – Syria, Libya, or Lebanon for example – are either no longer in a position to offer safety or se-

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curity themselves, or are at the very least fully-stretched, does force us to think differently about ways forward. And given the extent to which conflict has been “hidden” from Europe by these artificial borders, and the “burden” of hosting refugees (such as it is) has been borne by others, some might argue that this is about time too.

Yet there is a modern-day European parallel that could help us to think about how to respond to events in Syria and elsewhere in the world in political, policy and indeed research terms to current events – and that is Bosnia in the 1990s. The political crisis in Bosnia happened over two decades ago but the similarities are striking to the current situations in Syria at least: A brutal civil war, fuelled by overt or covert external interventions from various sides – the West, Russia, and the Gulf States; a territorial stalemate in that war which left ordinary citizens who had initially hoped to “stick it out” either at home or close by to abandon hope for a resolution to the conflict, however imperfect; and a confused and vacillating approach from western states both to the conflict itself, and to the refugee crisis that it generated.

But if this analogy is right, how does it help? Bosnia was hardly a crowning achievement of European refugee or foreign policy, and many of the debates we are having now about migration and refugees – about the role of trafficking, or the question of burden sharing – were unresolved then, which is perhaps why they are still current today.

I would suggest the analogy does help, though, in three key ways.

First, with the benefit of hindsight, and notwithstanding the many mistakes that were made in relation to the crisis in the

wider former Yugoslavia, Bosnia does provide an example in which hundreds of thousands of refugees were accommodated in western Europe at short notice – especially across Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the same countries most affected today – and who went home when the crisis was resolved.

I am not suggesting that either the circumstances of their reception – much less than Convention refugee status – or of their return – hardly the “voluntary” return that states and international organisations asserted – were ideal. Nor am I suggesting that the crisis in Syria is clearly temporary. However, for those worried that each refugee or migration crisis adds additional people to be housed and found work, schools, healthcare, social care on a permanent basis, the Bosnia crisis does provide an alternative model for what can happen: It gives the lie to the assertion that there is “nothing so permanent as a ‘temporary’ migrant”.

Second, what made the difference in terms of the resolution of the Bosnian conflict was when western Europe and the US started to engage with the crisis in a more coordinated way. Initially, the European approach to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia was all over the place – and nationalist politicians within Bosnia exploited these divisions and rivalries. We set up “safe havens” for displaced people without really understanding how they would be defended, with terrible consequences. The parallels with Syria are striking.

In the end, it did not need formal military intervention to end the war in Bosnia. But it did need a coordinated approach, and a clear strategy. In turn, coordination and strategy are so clearly lacking in relation to Syria – and our fail-

ure to push for a political solution ends up fuelling more violence.

Third, looking back at the Bosnia crisis, one of the problems facing western diplomacy was that it was always difficult to see which side “we” in the West should be on – as Yugoslavia’s religious, political and economic fault lines mirrored those in the wider Europe. Indeed, as political solutions were explored and parties finally brought to the negotiating table, those who took part were the nationalists from all sides. By contrast, those Bosnians who

had believed in a multi-ethnic pluralist Bosnia had been systematically sidelined. This last point sets us the most difficult challenge, since the political, economic, cultural and religious complexities of the current conflict in Syria – and indeed conflicts fuelling refugee crises elsewhere in the world – are no less than that of Bosnia. Yet grapple with complexity we must – in a way that is informed not by simplistic or ideological narratives, but by integrated understanding of the region’s politics, culture and history.

Oman in Divided Region

In a fractious, unstable region rife with conflicts, one country appears to be unscathed. It is telling that Oman emerged not only intact from the ramifications of the Arab Spring, but also shied away from the tense polarisation that has hijacked the rest of the Middle East. Oman's position on the various regional issues is self-evidently peaceful and different from the other Gulf monarchies. In fact, behind this peaceful and unique position lies a hive of activity of which many are unaware.

Fadi Elhusseini*

As part of the revolutionary wave, a series of popular demonstrations were held in Oman with the masses calling for better living standards (including lower living costs, less corruption, salary increases and job creation) and more democracy. The protests were peaceful and showed respect for the ruler. In return, Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said accepted the petitions and undertook a number of steps to contain the unrest.

His initial response was to reshuffle the governing cabinet and he promised that a legislative council would be given more powers. Among the arrangements meant to absorb youth frustration, the Diwan of the Royal Court decided to set up an independent authority for consumer protection while, in parallel, the sultan pledged

to create 50,000 government jobs and provide monthly benefits worth \$390 to the unemployed. In short, he managed to survive the ramifications of the so-called Arab Spring, although another challenge has emerged to be more critical, and that is polarisation.

With the massive on-going transformations in the region, polarisation — essentially sectarian — between two camps arose, with Shiite Iran and its allies in Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah on one side, and Saudi Arabia and other Sunni nation-states — Turkey, for example — on the other. Gulf States see Iran as an ideological threat while the government in Tehran considers Gulf States fuelling a sectarian conflict, and herewith twisting the focus away from the real danger — Israel.

A geopolitical crisis has been initiated threatening to escalate into a wide-ranging sectarian conflict. Following Saudi Arabia's execution of Shiite Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr early this year, attacks were staged on the Saudi embassy and consulate in Iran. As a result, Saudi Arabia and its allies downgraded diplomatic relations with Tehran. In March, the latest in a series of ballistic missile tests were held by Iran in a clear show of power. A few hours later, Saudi Arabia launched a massive military exercise with troops from 20 Muslim and Arab nation-states: Jordan,

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Bahrain, Senegal, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Kuwait, the Maldives, Morocco, Pakistan, Chad, Tunisia, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Malaysia, Egypt, Mauritania and Mauritius.

In the midst of such critical developments, Oman still appears as a peaceful oasis aloof from developments. When other Gulf States opposed the US-Iran nuclear deal, Oman not only supported it but also hosted secret talks between the two governments. Its neutral position gives the country a unique advantage as a mediator. Oman played an instrumental role in freeing three American hikers arrested by Iran on espionage charges in 2011. This secured Sultan Qaboos the trust and confidence of both the Americans and the Iranians and brought them to the negotiation table behind closed doors.

In July 2012, Oman hosted the first meeting between the Americans and the Iranians. Nine months later, Deputy Secretary of State William Burns met secretly with his Iranian counterpart, Majid Ravanchi, in Muscat. Clandestine meetings continued whereas Omani envoys carried important messages containing the terms of the talks between the US and Iran. Oman has played a key role.

A number of other incidents strengthened Oman's independent policy and unique position in comparison to the rest of Gulf countries. This is actually nothing new; Oman hosted secret talks between the protagonists during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. In Yemen, where the Shiite Houthis are in control of the capital, Oman remains the only Gulf country whose embassy in Sana is still open.

Oman did not take part in the Saudi-led "Decisive Storm" military campaign against the Houthis and forces loyal to

ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Instead, it kept channels of communication open. Oman also played a pivotal role in returning the remains of a Moroccan pilot whose jet crashed in Houthi-controlled territory. Not surprisingly then, Muscat would be a logical location for potential negotiations between warring parties.

Furthermore, Oman has used its neutrality to develop trusting relationships with all sides in the Syrian crisis, enabling the sultanate to serve as an acceptable mediator there. When almost every Arab and Gulf country boycotted and attacked President Bashar Al-Assad, Oman maintained relations with his regime. In August 2015, Syria's foreign minister met his counterpart in Muscat, and two months later in October 2015 the Omani Foreign Minister Yusuf Bin Alawi met Assad in Damascus. The sultanate also mediated in Algeria last year in order to help contain an unnoticed sectarian crisis between Ibadi Amazigh and some Arabs associated with the Maliki School of Islamic thought.

Oman's distinctive position emanates from profound national interest considerations. Although it is part of the Gulf Cooperation Council, it shares territorial ownership of the strategic Strait of Hormuz with Iran. What's more, with the current drop in oil prices, maintaining relations with a huge natural gas source is a strategic choice; especially that Oman is less oil-rich than other GCC member states. Thus, the strategic relationship between the two countries has risen somewhat remarkably. Muscat and Tehran are in the process of developing an undersea natural gas pipeline and a joint military exercise was conducted in January.

By and large, Oman disputes the absolute hegemony of Saudi Arabia within the GCC

and it appears that “losing” Oman is not an option for Riyadh. The tolerance of the Saudis for Oman stems from a number of factors. For a start, Oman’s foreign policy is not fully pro-Iran, but more like sitting on the fence and avoiding taking sides. Second, Saudi Arabia can’t relinquish Oman because it is a natural component of the Arab-Gulf structure with a web of interests and connections, regionally and globally. Finally, the Saudis certainly dread the prospect of having Oman allying itself totally with Iran.

It is also worth noting that Oman’s official religious denomination is the Ibadi school of thought, which covers almost 70 per cent of the population; it is one of the most tolerant within Islam. Thus, it tends to seek balance among the various parties in the region and avoid supremacy of one sect over another. It views the escalation

of sectarian strife between Shiites and Sunnis as a catastrophe for the Muslim majority world.

Nevertheless, Oman’s peaceful position is not always well received by its fellow Gulf States. Many Yemenis accuse Muscat of backing the Houthis and acting as an Iranian stooge. Saudi Arabia has also long been irked by Oman’s ties and role that it believes has undermined its efforts to isolate Iran.

However, how long this peaceful oasis can continue in such a vein is in doubt. Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al-Said is in his mid-seventies. He took power in 1970 but has no children or brothers, and is yet to name a successor. Should he die without doing so, his absence could create a power vacuum, with unknown results, not only for Oman, but also the rest of the region.

The Jihadist Civil War

The bloodthirsty jihadist organization that calls itself Islamic State (IS) sprang from the loins of al-Qaeda, once the supreme bane of the western world, which achieved its apogee with the destruction of the twin towers in New York. Over the past decade the fortunes of the two Islamist bodies have diverged, with IS apparently going from strength to strength and al-Qaeda apparently diminishing in influence. Now the wheel of fortune has turned, and as a result parent and offspring are at each other's throats.

Neville Teller*

The assault on the United States that shook the civilized world to its foundations occurred on the 11th of September 2001. An investigation by the FBI quickly determined that those responsible were directly connected to al-Qaeda. By the start of December 2001, US special operations forces had tracked the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and some one thousand of his followers, to their six square mile hideout deep in the Tora Bora mountains of eastern Afghanistan. For two weeks nearly [a million pounds of American bombs rained down on them](#). Although about two hundred terrorists were killed and fifty captured, the US operation could scarcely be deemed a success, for most the jihadists, together with

their leader, evaded capture, fled into Pakistan's lawless tribal belt and disappeared.

It took nearly ten years before a special commando force of the US Naval Special Warfare Development Group, known as SEALs, finally located bin Laden's new headquarters inside Pakistan, tracked him down and killed him. During that decade al-Qaeda groups mounted [a succession of bombings and terrorist attacks](#) across the globe.

Only a few weeks after bin Laden's death, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who had helped found Egypt's Islamic Jihad, became the new leader of al-Qaeda. In the 22 "most wanted terrorists" list announced by the US government in 2001, Zawahiri was number two – behind only bin Laden. Al-Zawahiri vowed to continue al-Qaeda's jihad against "crusader America and its servant Israel, and whoever supports them". At that time, in 2011, al-Qaeda was the supreme representation of Islamist jihad of the Sunni persuasion. What al-Zawahiri did not realize was that he was nurturing a viper in his bosom – the nascent Islamic State.

IS grew out of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. An off-shoot of al-Qaeda, dedicated to opposing any attempt by Western powers to impose law, order and a democratic framework on that unhappy country, was founded by Abu Musab al-

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Zarqawi. In the early days, it called itself simply the “Islamic State of Iraq.” When al-Zarqawi was killed in a targeted strike by the US Air Force in June 2006, into his shoes stepped Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Baghdadi had a wider vision for the militant organization he led – and his own future. In 2013 he announced that he intended to merge his “Islamic State of Iraq” with the main al-Qaeda force in Syria under Jabhat Al-Nusra, which was fighting the Assad regime alongside other rebel groups. He proclaimed that his organization would henceforth be called ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, meaning Syria and the Levant).

The overweening ambition that lay behind that title sent shivers down the spines of the al-Qaeda leadership. At that moment the two organizations parted company. Ayman al-Zawahiri denounced Baghdadi and dissociated al-Qaeda from ISIS and its activities.

But the new organization was on the up-and-up. In the space of a year, Baghdadi became the most powerful jihadi leader in the world. Ignoring the border between Iraq and northern Syria, ISIS swept across to capture territory extending from Aleppo in north-western Syria, to Diyala province in north-eastern Iraq. In June 2014 Baghdadi’s forces captured Mosul, the northern capital of Iraq, and were threatening Baghdad. Crucifixions, beheadings and amputations marked its ruthless progress.

June 2014 was when Baghdadi felt emboldened enough to take a giant step towards achieving power and status for himself and his organization beyond the wildest dreams of most jihadi leaders. In an audio recording [ISIS announced](#) that it was henceforth to be known as “Islamic State”, and that its head, Abu Bakr al-

Baghdadi, was now “the caliph and leader for Muslims everywhere”. Moreover, declared the group’s spokesman Abu Mohamed al-Adnani, “the legality of all emirates, groups, states and organisations becomes null by the expansion of the caliph’s authority and the arrival of its troops to their areas.”

Al-Qaeda and its associated jihadist groups simply refused to bow the knee to Baghdadi. In September 2015 [al-Zawahiri accused Baghdadi of “sedition”](#), insisting that he was not the leader of all Muslims, not “caliph” of the Islamic State, and was not the supremo of militant jihad.

In November 2015, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani warned Sunni Muslims that unless they pledged allegiance to the organization, they faced death. The response was a [26-minute-long video statement](#) from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in which they declared unequivocally that the Islamic caliphate promoted by IS was illegitimate.

Now the two contenders as the world’s leading Sunni jihadist organisation stood face-to-face in the ring.

Al-Qaeda seems to have regained its momentum. The withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan at the end of 2014, was the signal for al-Qaeda terrorist cells to leave their Pakistan hideaway and move back into southern Afghanistan. According to Afghan security officials, al-Qaeda chiefs are hoping to use their new Afghan base to [plot a fresh wave of terror attacks](#) against the West and its allies.

If IS had hoped to displace al-Qaeda as the jihadi vanguard, their plans have badly misfired. IS has found itself at war with its former patrons throughout the Muslim world. Nor is it necessarily winning the

battle, [suggests Daveed Gartenstein-Ross](#), a widely respected counter-terrorism expert. “The Islamic State has encountered one serious obstacle after another as it has tried to expand its presence beyond Syria and Iraq,” writes Gartenstein-Ross, “and several of its nascent affiliates have met decisive defeat”, and he proceeds to enumerate a series of setbacks suffered recently by IS.

Al-Qaeda and Islamic State seek goals which are nominally the same – “liberat-

ing” all Muslim lands, imposing their version of sharia law on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and creating a global caliphate. But each seeks supremacy. [In the words of Daniel Byman](#) of the Brookings Institute, giving testimony to a Congressional subcommittee: “The two are now competing for more than the leadership of the jihadist movement: they are competing for its soul.”

The longer the fratricidal battle, the safer the world.

What Happens When Arab Autocrats Left to Fend for Themselves?

It is a difficult task to explain everything about the Middle East in a short article. So what I am going to do is to present an important, yet sometimes provocative series of headlines for a more lively analysis.

James M. Dorsey*

The first point is that the rise of Asia shares significant responsibility for the turmoil the Middle East is experiencing. What I mean to say with this is that popular wisdom has it that a war weary, indecisive and weak President Obama's disengagement from the region lies at the root of nations with Saudi Arabia in the lead adopting more assertive foreign and defensive policies with disastrous consequences in places like Syria and Yemen and the potential to destabilize others in the region.

There is a degree of US disengagement but not out of weakness but out of strategic reinterpretation of US national interests. That reinterpretation reduces the importance of the Middle East to the

United States with some exceptions like Israel and attributes significantly increased importance to Asia. It also involves a realization that support for autocratic regimes that are fighting for survival irrespective of the cost constitutes a failed policy, a policy that has fuelled anti-Americanism and militant interpretations of Islam.

That is particularly true for Saudi Arabia with its decades-long export of Wahhabism and Salafism that has catapulted a puritan, inward looking, intolerant interpretation of Islam into an influential force across the Muslim world. In his interviews with Jeffrey Goldberg of The Atlantic, Obama noted that the Saudi campaign, the single largest public diplomacy campaign in history, has begun for example to alter the tolerant character of Islam in Indonesia witness the predicament of Ahmadis and Shiites and the conservative turn in public morals that Indonesian society is experiencing.

Which brings me to my second point, the hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is a battle for regional hegemony that has been going on at least since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. It is a battle that fuelled the Saudi campaign to export Wahhabism and Salafism in a bid to counter the revolutionary appeal of Iran and prompted Saudi Arabia to support Saddam Hussein in Iraq's eight-year long

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costly war in the 1980s against Iran. This is a battle for hegemony that Saudi Arabia lost on day one and never stood a chance of winning. Saudi Arabia's predicament was long alleviated by the fact that hostility towards Iran, think back of the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran, and subsequent international sanctions kept Iran in check for much of the last decades. All of that changed with the nuclear agreement and the lifting of the sanctions.

As a result, Saudi Arabia sees its window of opportunity closing. It explains why Saudi Arabia's main objection to the nuclear agreement was not so much whether or not it would stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons but the fact that Iran would be returning to the international community less fettered by sanctions. Saudi policy at whatever cost has since been to attempt to strengthen Iranian hardliners in the hope that they would complicate Iran's return and make it as difficult as possible for Iran to get access to technology and funding needed for the rehabilitation of its economy. Which is why Saudi Arabia refused to agree to oil production cuts that would raise oil prices without Iran being part of the agreement. Iran's goal is not price stabilization but the regaining of market share lost as a result of the sanctions.

Fact of the matter is that Saudi Arabia lacks the intrinsic building blocks to retain its regional leadership status on a level playing field. It lacks the assets that countries like Iran, Turkey and Egypt have irrespective of what state of political and economic disrepair they currently may be experiencing. Those countries have large populations, diversified industrial bases, battle hardened militaries that at least at times have performed, histories of empire

and geography. Saudi Arabia has Mecca and money, the latter in lesser amounts given the fall in commodity prices and heightened expenditure. Turkey, Iran and Egypt figure prominently in China's vision of One Belt, One Road, Saudi Arabia does not.

Saudi policy appears to operate on the principle of Marx's *Verelendungstheorie*, it's got to get worse to get better. And the worse it gets the more likely it will be that the United States will have to reengage and delay its pivot to Asia. Even if that is true, it would not be a return to the status quo ante in which US support for Saudi Arabia was absolute. The nuclear agreement with Iran has made sure of that. Granted, the outcome of the US presidential election could rewrite the landscape. Saudi efforts to avert the inevitable relies on sectarianism that threatens not only regional but also domestic stability and effects ethnic and sectarian relations elsewhere in the world and particularly in Asia. That is not to say that Iran does not nurture and support forces with sectarian identities in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. Nor does this deny the fact that Iran opposes monarchical rule, it toppled its own monarch, the first pro-American icon to fall in the region in a popular revolt, and denounces Wahhabism. The question is how Iranian policy would have evolved in the wake of the Iran-Iraq war had Saudi Arabia adopted a more conciliatory approach. All of this takes place at a time that Middle Eastern autocrats are seeking to reorder the Middle East and North Africa in ways that will ensure their survival. They are doing so in the wake of the 2011 Arab popular revolts that changed the paradigm even if the immediate consequence has been collapse, counterrevolution, and widespread bloodshed; the changing se-

curity architecture in the region as a result of the redefinition of US national interest; changing economic imperatives, and the fact that the end of oil is in sight. Most people born in the Gulf today will witness the end of oil in their life time.

There is a lot of discussion of the demise of the early 20th century Sykes Picot agreement having sparked the disintegration of states like Syria and Iraq in the Middle East. I would take issue with that. Middle Eastern nation states are fragile not because their post-colonial borders are artificial but because they were governed for so long by regimes that were not inclusive and did not deliver. Africa, the continent that was perceived to have been populated by fragile states that would collapse in a domino effect if only one state broke apart disproves the theory. Biafra, Eritrea and the Western Sahara did not spark the domino effect.

Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman who is driving policy in the kingdom is a popular figure. He represents a new generation in a country with a youth bulge. His Vision 2030 constitutes a needed upgrading of autocracy. Leaving aside economic questions about the vision, Mohammed will not be able to turn Saudi Arabia into a diversified, 21st century knowledge economy on the basis of a backward looking interpretation of Islam that harks back to the 7th century. In addition, Wahhabism is becoming an international liability given its undeniable association with jihadist ideology.

In conclusion, there are two issues worth

mentioning:

First, Saudi Arabia in the early 20th century was what the Islamic State is today. If the Islamic State survives it will become what Saudi Arabia is today. In many ways, it does not matter whether the Islamic State is destroyed or not. The key to defeating Islamic State-like groups and ideologies is tackling what makes them attractive to multiple audiences. Root causes is the latest buzzword but no government has so far adopted policy changes that truly address those causes.

Second, the ruling Al Saud family and the religious establishment are nearing a restructuring of their relationship as the cost of adherence to Wahhabism becomes domestically and internationally too costly. There is no necessarily good result from that process. The key word in arguments between the Islamic State and the kingdom is deviant. With other words, we agree on the base but you, the other, are deviating from it.

The restructuring can entail the religious establishment bending over further to accommodate the regime. That will spark more radical religious opposition and undermine the credibility of religious leaders. The Al Saud's legitimacy and claim to the right to rule is vested in the religious establishment. The 2011 popular revolts unleashed processes that are still unfolding and will take years to settle down.

While Asia may only have been a player in the kicking off of these processes in terms of American policy calculations, it certainly will not be immune to their fallout.

Trump's Doctrine Poses Threat to Human Species

If Donald Trump becomes the next US president, the Americans will come to realize that Trump's ill-conceived foreign policy agenda – hardly espoused and advocated by a wide spectrum of sane elements in the US—will signal the beginning of an unbalanced, prejudice-coated foreign policy, whose parochial propensity could undermine the image of liberal American nation globally. While Trump seems to say all sorts of things, Noam Chomsky rightly comments: "Some of them make sense; some of them are crazy. But the US is an extremely powerful state [and] if Trump means what he's saying; the human species is in very deep trouble."

Hakim Khatib*

Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi**

Future of Transatlantic Relations

In a highly anticipated speech on the heels of his primary-contest sweep across the Northeast, Donald Trump emphasised a drastic shake-up in America's foreign policy. He suggested, "getting out of the nation-building business" to demand from the NATO allies to pay their "fair share" or to be left to "defend themselves."

"It's time to shake the rust off America's foreign policy," the Republican presidential front-runner said.

In what was billed as a major policy speech, Trump called for an "America first" approach. To that theme, Trump voiced scepticism toward international

deals like NAFTA (The North American Free Trade Agreement). He claimed that a Trump administration would not allow the US to enter agreements that reduce America's ability to control its own affairs. He panned what he described as the "false song of globalism".

The speech, read from a teleprompter and focused on policy, was also heavy on campaign-season slams against President Obama and Hillary Clinton's tenure as secretary of state. He called their policies "aimless" and destructive, and criticized them for not using the term "radical Islam".

If elected president, Trump said, he would call for a summit with NATO allies and another summit with Asian allies to discuss common challenges such as migration and Islamic terrorism. He broadly called for the US to project strength in the world in order to decide who are America's allies and enemies are. Regarding Russia and China, he said: "we are not bound to be adversaries".

Terrifyingly real, a world under Trump presidency wouldn't only plummet race relations, but would also open a space for

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a looming third world war. Chomsky [re-minds us of the magnitude](#) of having a Trump presidency:

“American run [polls](#) show that the U.S is the greatest threat to world peace by a large margin.

“To have somebody who’s kind of a wild man with his finger on the button that could destroy the world or make decisions with enormous influence is an extremely frightening prospect.”

Any Resemblance?

Some of that critique came from a familiar place: The libertarian scepticism of engagement abroad and aggressive law enforcement at home expressed by Rand Paul. More telling was the bristling but insular vision of America’s role in the world presented most comprehensively by Trump and largely reinforced by Cruz. Packer says many Europeans are currently looking at Trump’s success and thinking: “Those Americans are crazy!” But Trump isn’t some strange US mutation, says New Yorker writer George Packer. He is instead, according to Packer, an evocative equivalent of European right-wing populists, à la Marine Le Pen in France and Viktor Orbán in Hungary.

While politicians like Le Pen and Orbán inveigh against “Brussels”, Trump rails against “Washington” as the symbol of a degenerate political system “that doesn’t get things done anymore”. Just like his European counterparts, Trump is calling for isolation in the form of protective tariffs, entry-bans and border-walls. He inflames tensions against ethnic minorities and offers anxious citizens an authoritarian vision of a strongman who, although ignoring democratic conventions, would

solve all problems on his own. Trump is presumably only the shrillest and most prominent embodiment of a trend that is becoming pervasive throughout the Western world.

Policy of Reorientation

Trump’s policy of reorientation braids scepticism of foreign military engagement, hostility to immigration, and resistance to free trade—what opponents call isolationism, nativism, and protectionism.

The embrace of these arguments by the two leading candidates in national polls is both a challenge to the outward-looking internationalism that has long dominated the GOP, and to the party’s internal debate that has been destabilized by an increased reliance on working-class white voters.

For decades, most Republican leaders have taken opposite views: Supporting a robust American role abroad, expansive immigration, and free trade. In recent decades, that internationalist Republican consensus was most ardently advanced by Reagan and George W. Bush, each of whom backed legalization for undocumented immigrants, expanded trade, and a vibrant American role in leading other nations toward greater freedom.

Obama the integrator, who fought discrimination against blacks and homosexuals, would be succeeded by Trump, who stirs up hatred against minorities while claiming that “political correctness” is the greatest threat to the United States. While Obama sought to explain complex problems, often sounding like an intellectual in the process, studies have shown that Trump, whose speeches are full of short,

declarative sentences, speaks at a fourth-grade reading level. Problems, according to Trump, are “totally easy” to solve.

Foreign Policy Agenda?

There are many critics of Trump’s foreign policy agenda who in Europe and the Muslim world hold the argument that his foreign policy is based on social, cultural, political, and economic exclusivism.

Their critique is not without merit. Rubin correctly noted the ludicrous idea that Trump, who has alienated Muslims, now proposes to be the Middle East’s great friend. “Having declared he wants to ban Muslims from the United States,” McCarthy wrote, “he now vows to ‘be working very closely with our allies in the Muslim world, all of which are at risk from radical Islamic violence.’” McCarthy points out that controversial to Trump’s attempt of presenting himself as a sceptic of humanitarian interventionism and nation building, specifically in Libya, he [championed](#) the military campaign against Qadafi back in 2011.

In his wholesale adoption of the agenda of anti-Muslim bigots, Donald Trump has uniquely contributed to the growing xenophobia against Muslims in America. Trump has called for “a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States,” along with expressing support for requiring Muslim-Americans to register with a government database, mandating that Muslims carry special identification cards that note their faith. The Huffington’s editors describe Trump as follows:

“Donald Trump regularly incites political violence and is a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, misogynist and birther who

has repeatedly pledged to ban all Muslims — 1.6 billion members of an entire religion — from entering the U.S.”

In 1976, Reagan argued precisely the opposite. He took on the Ford-Kissinger policy of “détente” with the Soviet Union, and criticized what he termed as the sell-out of freedom in Eastern Europe that put the US stamp of approval on Soviet domination of the region.

Kissinger declared that Reagan was “trigger-happy” and accused him of “inciting hawkish audiences with his demagoguery.” But at the party’s convention in Kansas City, Reagan won a fight to include a “Morality in Foreign Policy” plank in the GOP platform. It declared:

“The goal of Republican foreign policy is the achievement of liberty under law and a just and lasting peace in the world.

We recognize and commend that great beacon of human courage and morality, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, for his compelling message that we must face the world with no illusions about the nature of tyranny. Ours will be a foreign policy that keeps this ever in mind.

Honestly, openly, and with firm conviction, we shall go forward as a united people to forge a lasting peace in the world based upon our deep belief in the rights of man, the rule of law and guidance by the hand of God”.

That’s a very different message than what Americans are hearing from Donald Trump today. Trump has no clear foreign policy vision.

Trump’s critics include foreign policy specialists who view the Republican front-runner as erratic and misguided. Some go further to say he’s pushing ideas that endanger US interests. He has faced criticism for making campaign promises such as banning Muslims from entering

the US, forcing Mexico to pay for a border wall between the two nations and, as he suggested Monday at a rally in West Chester, Pennsylvania, making Gulf states pay for a “safe zone” in Syria. His freewheeling temperament has also been a target.

“The main takeaway for me is an unpredictability. That would be the most worrisome issue among our friends and allies around the world—what Trump says today may not be what he says tomorrow. And he does not seem to have much compunction about changing his views,” said Richard LeBaron, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and long-time diplomat who served as US ambassador to Kuwait under President George W. Bush.

“It’s very rarely a useful tool in foreign policy. It leads to misperceptions and it

leads to miscalculations by other countries in how they react to the United States.” Foreign diplomats from Europe, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia have expressed alarm to US government officials about Trump, calling his public statements inflammatory and insulting.

Given the complexities entailed by Trump’s foreign policy doctrine, it virtually appears that not only for the Americans and the administration in the White House but also for the rest of the world at large, the coming years may be very tricky and more challenging if the will of the majority of Americans during the forthcoming election resigns in favour of a hard-core Republican presidential candidate.

Globalisation Between Hope and Threat to Democracy

Does Globalization offer the hope of a better future for democracy, or is it, rather, a major threat to democracy? Those who subscribe to the first point of view argue, firstly, that the leading democratic nations do actually seek democratization of developing nations. For it is through such a process that these nations can promote and disseminate their own socio-political model, along with their values concerning individual freedom. They argue, secondly, that market capitalism, already dominant in the world, requires a similar and reciprocal political market based on the principles of competition among the individuals of the social elite. All of which means, they claim, that as the spread of economic liberalization promoting the West's influence and control of world resources, so will the odds of anchoring democracy in developing nations.

Burhan Ghalioun*

And yet, one could argue in response that there are no historical or logical reasons to support these assumptions. For although democratic nations, allegedly worried by the hegemony of totalitarian, fascist and communist regimes, speak often of spreading democracy, there is nevertheless no reason to believe that they are willing to prioritize such political ideals when dealing with other nations. For all nations, whether big or small, poor or powerful, do not base their politics on acts of good will, or the development of living conditions, or the just governance of other nations, but rather on the basis of their own strategic and economic interests.

Moreover, after the demise of the largest totalitarian regimes, there are no longer any serious or extant threats to the current democracies and their interests which could have been used to justify an organized response. Rather, the maintaining of weak, unpopular and authoritative regimes which can easily be guided and manipulated is much more lucrative to powerful nations than the presence of real democracies; especially as such political systems cannot but reflect and express the longing of Third World populations for international justice, development and equal participation in world politics.

The 20th century abounds in unfortunate examples of how modernizing projects in developing nations – whether successful or not -- seldom accomplish capital growth within the framework of international competition without implementing harsh measures to maintain low wages. For here in the Third World, economic liberalization undeniably requires a usurping of political authority. This is still evident today among the so-called “Asian

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tigers and dragons” like China and in any other nation seeking expedient capital accumulation in the modern age. The epoch of concordance between the system of economic freedom and the system of political freedom is long past. And yet the major world powers show no compunction when painting a veneer of democracy and cultural diversity over what are essentially authoritative and repressive regimes – regimes ruled by a small minority of agents who depend on outside forces and outside intelligence agencies to maintain stability and order. This beautifying veneer, which hides a rule of brutality, has become a necessary component of the now dominant world order, as it is also a specious requirement for gaining international legitimacy.

However one should not, as many critics do – making them correct only in principle – apply suppositions valid for industrial nations on developing nations. For even if globalization does threaten democracies in industrial nations, this does not necessarily mean that it threatens developing nations in equal or similar terms. True, globalization threatens democracy in industrial nations, as it tends to destroy those spaces once open to freedom for both political activity and civil society – and indeed democracy has created these individual and societal spaces. Yet globalization does not constitute the same threat to societies, which never witnessed such spaces of freedom, let alone democracy. In such societies, globalization is bound to damage some of the fortresses of the state that imprison much of society. In such cases globalization would actually promote the creation of different and newer spaces, slightly less likely to be subjugated by the apparatuses of censorship, control and group punish-

ment.

Therefore it is incorrect to simply state that the effects of globalization on democratic systems and authoritarian regimes are one and the same. Nor is it correct to reductively claim that globalization is marching along, with all societies, toward democracy. Rather, globalization – regardless of the nature of the society – has two contradictory impacts: In dismantling the nation, globalization shakes the foundations of the ethics of liberty and the state’s legality as it encourages systems of social, racial, religious and sectarian discrimination. Also, through increased polarization it destroys social, political and national accountability as it entrenches instability and tension within societies. Moreover, by centralizing wealth and resources in the hands of a few, and within a limited number of locales, it stops the economy from growing in tandem with demographic changes and deepens the chasm that separates North from South, leading to increased unemployment, or even famine.

And yet, by opening up national spaces – internally by breaking the monopoly of a system of political feudalism, and externally by connecting formerly separate spaces to each other – globalization promotes a unification of standards. This creates a shared world consciousness of the challenges facing humanity. In other words, it deepens on the democratic consciousness, making democracy a common reference for all inhabitants of the earth. Moreover, globalization gradually allows for the construction of an unprecedented network of international solidarity from which common solutions to common problems can be fashioned. The obvious discrepancy lies in the fact that globalization promotes the demands of an interna-

tional democracy, while it weakens the objective conditions for establishing viable national democratic systems.

What prevails is a globalizing democracy which functions in different registers and on different levels, and possibly transforms the classical concept of individual freedom into an illusion. Therefore, the effect of globalization is contingent on the nature of the effected societies. Globalization can rattle the old authoritarian regimes, as it can destabilize the classical democratic systems. Although we will continue to witness oligarchic regimes employing a merely executive and formal democracy, the contradictions will continue to loom larger, thus digging an unbridgeable gap between the high principles of democracy and the prevalent dysfunctional realities. These situations will necessarily lead to changes within the system of globalization itself. For globalization does not, in fact, increase or inhibit the chances for democracy. Rather, it undoes the foundations upon which the classical concepts of democracy were erected. Therefore it will no longer be possible to reconstruct democracy without an international perspective, one that surpasses the limited national/ethnic principle, which once permitted the social solidarity with which national democracies were built. And yet, we ask again: Will globalization allow the building of coalitions among international, political and social groups capable of accomplishing an international solidarity, and thus a surge of national democracies?

The answer is affirmative. For in as much as the now dominant system of liberal globalization promotes the destruction of

democratic structures and disseminates chaos in international and social relations, it will also exacerbate and instigate various movements of protest. It will give birth to various forces able to resist the dominant order – but only as long as they can construct a strategy for an international alliance able to regain the values of democracy in tangible and actual reality.

The future of democracy in the globalized world, and with it the future of human societies, hinges on the outcome of the struggle between two forces. There are those who put politics and society – i.e. the logic of humanity and solidarity – at the top of their political agenda and look beyond national borders for solidarity. And there are those forces, which deploy the logic and priorities of economic expansion, undermining the relevance of the nation state, dismantling the structure of society and promoting the monopolies of financial agglomerations and the few sham governments that collaborate with them for the sake of expedient profits.

Building an international democracy will not come about without the tenacity to face this conflict based on the gradual accumulation of the successes of international solidarity movements. Only such a diligent resistance can control the unchecked flow of globalized capital and redirect it away from the logic of unrestrained market competition and into the logic of a human society founded on the primacy of ethics of solidarity, cooperation and concordance.

Translated by Walid Sadek, Beirut

Social Media in Saudi Arabia Is Turning People Gay

Homosexuality is strictly forbidden in the conservative Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and punishable by death. The word homosexuality in Arabic means Shuthuth, which is in itself a pejoratively insulting word means anomaly or abnormality.

Hakim Khatib*

In an attempt to decrease homosexuality, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is pushing for executing gays. The Saudis suspect that social media, [Pink News](#) reported, is “making too many homosexuals”.

According to Saudi newspapers, prosecutors in Saudi Arabia are pushing to enforce the death penalty for homosexuality because social media is turning people gay.

Homosexuality in Saudi Arabia is not only illegal, but also often compared to rape or paedophilia. Saudi Arabia is one of a [list of 75 countries](#) with criminal laws against sexual activity by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people (LGBTIs), according to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA).

Only over the past six months, prosecutors in Saudi Arabia looked into 35 cases have been brought against gay people for “obscene behaviour, ‘sexual assault’ and sodomy”, while other 50 cases of cross-dressers were commenced in the past three months, [Okaz](#), a Saudi news-

paper reported.

It is difficult to determine the number of gay people in the Kingdom, and it is more difficult to confirm how many people were charged under the kingdom’s judicial system.

The new restrictions follow the Saudi authorities’ observation that an increasing number of people are becoming bolder when expressing their “abnormality” [lit. shuthuth], the Arabic word used for gays, by displaying pictures of themselves on social media sites.

Prosecutors are pushing for harsher penalties for such “strange anomalies”, especially that gays use social media, which is evidence of the spread of vice and immorality in the Saudi society, several Saudi newspapers reported.

In an ironic turn of events, a Saudi medical doctor has been arrested for flying the rainbow pride flag above his home in Jeddah, according to [Okaz Newspaper](#).

The doctor claimed that he had no idea the flag represented LGBT. He insisted that he had bought the flag from an online retailer because his children found the colours pretty.

The Saudi religious police, known as the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, arrested the man for mounting the flag on a three-meter pole above his home, which is, according to the religious police, impermissible and punishable by Sharia.

The man was reportedly bailed after an

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investigation, while the flag was removed.

According to the [2015 ILGA homophobia report](#), Saudi Arabia is one of the very few countries in the world to impose death penalty for homosexuality. Apparently, executions, imprisonment and lashings are a [common punishment](#) for same-sex activities in Saudi Arabia.

“In relation to death penalty, eight States officially legislate for it, but only five (Mauritania, Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) actually implement it.”

While a hashtag on twitter demanding the respect of LGBT rights (#المثليين_حقوق_سنحترم) went viral in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the region of West Asia, many of the tweets were violent and intolerant.

There are other tweets on Saudi gays on twitter such as “The Saudi Gay” (@TheSaudiGay), which demands changing the word “anomaly” [lit. shuthuth] into homosexuality [lit. mith-liyyeen], when referring to gays.

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