

# THE PERSPECTIVE

MAGAZINE No 2 2018

## FOCUS: THE MIDDLE EAST



ASSOCIATION OF  
FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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## EDITORS' NOTE

**So, HERE YOU** have it. The last issue of The Perspective for the operational year of 2017/2018. We have both talked about this day as something in the far distance. Like thinking about the day you will go here, or do that, but it never happens. Now the day has come and it does not feel like we imagined it would. Not as grand as we expected. There is no orchestra playing in the background, no glimmering light to indulge us, there is just the office and some lukewarm coffee. The realization sets in; a cliché, as it might sound, it is not the ending nor the beginning that should define our experience. It is the time between stepping into the office for the first time as editors and leaving for last time, that counts.

**REMEMBERING THE NERVOUSNESS** before the first committee meeting, the stress of meeting deadlines, the fourteen hour shifts finishing issues before sending them to the printers, the the frustration when choosing a team out of many, many great applicants, the privilege of working with talented and inspiring people, the joy of having engaged and committed members. The friendships made, the discussions had, the hangouts, the brunches, the pub-nights. This is what our time as editors-in-chief has given us. So, really, this is not about us, not entirely at least. We have seen engagement, energy, and time invested in this magazine greater than we could ever imagine. So, to all

those involved we can only say, from the bottom of our hearts, thank you. There have been many great editors before us, and surely many amazing people taking on the task after us. We have poured our hearts and souls into the past four issues. We had the pleasure to enjoy the ride for a little while. Hopefully, you did too.

**OUR DEAR UPF** members, our work is now finished. Here, at last, sitting in the office, comes the end of our time as editors-in-chief. We will not say do not weep, for not all tears are an evil.

For one last time, enjoy your read!



**ZIGNE EDSTRÖM & VIDE WASSBERG**

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

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LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK!

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## PRESIDENTS' ADDRESS

**WHOA, WHERE DID** the time go?!

**IT SEEMS LIKE** yesterday we were begging you to sign up to join our organisation at the student association fairs, and we are so pleased that you gave us your time. I hope you didn't regret joining us, but if you did - sorry - no refunds.

**WE WERE DISCUSSING** the other day, in fact, about what a fantastic year it has been. An organisation is only as good as its members, and we are beyond lucky to have such a fantastic bunch of people willing to dedicate their spare time to foreign affairs. It is very difficult to choose highlights, because there have been so many, and every committee seems to have pushed the boundaries of what we thought we could achieve. But if there is one highlight we can all bask in, share and brag about to our friends, it is this one: UPF has a record of 800 new members since August.

**AT THE TIME** of writing, we still have a good month left in Lund and lots of great activities on the horizon. We are sure that the UPF ball on May 5th and the Annual Election Meeting on May 12th are already in your calendars, and we look forward to sharing those occasions with you.

**FOR AN ORGANISATION** like ours, the members are everything. Whether you're a board member, active in a committee, or occasionally attend a lecture when you have the time, you're the backbone of UPF! It's thanks to all of you that we can look back at the year with such pride. To the two of us, at least, UPF has become somewhat of a home away from home in Lund, and while we're sad to be leaving, we're confident that you will take the baton forward and continue to do great things.

**ONCE AGAIN, ON** behalf of the board, thank you for a great year!



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We are named after Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews and other people at risk in Hungary at the end of World War II.

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1. REMEMBERING AN ACTIVIST

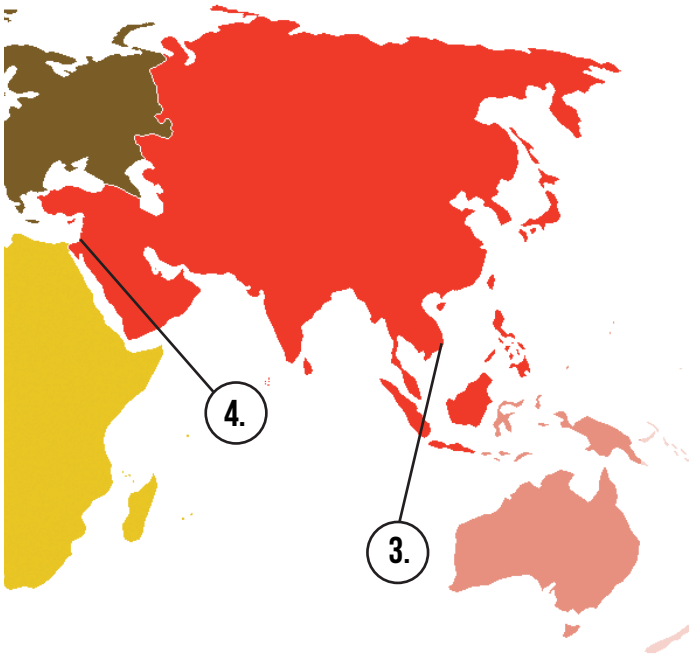
**O**n April 14 thousands of people gathered in cities around Brazil to remember Rio de Janeiro city councilwoman Merielle Franco who was murdered one month earlier. Frano, a black bisexual, feminist, and human rights advocate, openly criticized police violence in the lower income communities of Rio de Janeiro. She also spoke critically of recent security intervention by Brazil’s armed forces. But before her death, Franco faced a harsh defamation campaign on social media. She represented something that was opposite to the country’s “traditionally rich, white, and male political atmosphere.” Even though prosecutors are claiming that the case is advancing, rights groups have expressed concerns as many cases in Brazil go unsolved. The country has more than 60 000 homicides each year and only around 10 percent are resolved. “If the state fails to bring the culprits to justice it sends a message that human rights defenders can be killed with impunity,” warned Jurema Werneck at Amnesty International Brazil in a statement. The organisation documented 58 human rights defenders killed in Brazil last year. ●



2. FEED THE KIDS, FEED THE ECONOMY

**A**bout 40 percent of schoolchildren in Nigeria suffer from malnutrition, which generates a high rate of school absenteeism. To fight this problem, the Nigerian government began a new food scheme in December 2016: the Home Grown School Feeding initiative. It was launched in 2003, its aim was to improve the lives of both schoolchildren and farmers. Through the programme, the Nigerian government aimed at addressing poverty, hunger, and unemployment. The programme has been a huge success as it provides an income for thousands of people, from the local farmers growing the crops to the cooks working for the project, and all the workers involved in other phases (like the processing and transportation of the food). According to Adeleke Adewolu, the commissioner of special duties and intergovernmental affairs in Ogun state in Nigeria, the meals that are served to schoolchildren from grades 1 to 3 every school day, do not only represent an important nutrition source, but they also serve as a “social safety net”, mostly for low-income families. “If children eat nutritious food it will enhance their learning ability and this will have a knock-on effect on their cognitive development and help to encourage enrolment and retention”, he stated. This programme is currently providing free nutritious meals for about 7 million pupils in about 40 000 schools, in 20 out of Nigeria’s 36 states. ●





### 3. CHECKING CRYPTOCURRENCIES

**V**ietnam has recently urged for greater measures of checking cryptocurrency transactions and investments. A cryptocurrency is a digital form of money that can be used to pay for transactions online, where Bitcoin is the most popular one. The financial system to validate bitcoin transactions is known as the blockchain and rely on a decentralised network of computers connected online. The Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, ordered the State Bank and the Ministry of Public Securities to ensure that the management of and the activities around cryptocurrencies were tightened. His order came after officials had asked for an investigation into what could potentially be the country's largest cryptocurrency fraud so far. He further instructed banks not to provide any payment serviced related to illegal cryptocurrencies and told the Ministry of Justice to complete the legal framework for managing virtual assets. The co-founder of the bitcoin website warned, earlier this year, that bitcoin is "the riskiest investment you can make" after it reached a record high of \$19,000 a coin in December. ●

### 4. DEMONSTRATIONS AT THE BORDER

**A**t the end of March, demonstrations took place at the Gaza-Israel border. The demonstrations are calling for the 'right of return' for the Palestinians and their descendants who either fled or were forced to move from their homes after the creation of the state of Israel. The 'right of return' stems from a 1948 UN resolution, which declared that Palestinians would be able to return to their homeland as soon as possible. Based on this unfulfilled right, the demonstrations were planned to continue every Friday until a culmination on the 15th of May 2018. On this date, Palestinians commemorate the mass displacement of people during the creation of Israel, also known as the Nakba. The vast majority of Gaza's residents are refugees from this displacement, many of which engaged in the demonstrations for the right to return. Israeli forces that were deployed to the border responded to the demonstrations with rubber bullets, tear gas, and live ammunition. During two weeks of demonstrations, Israeli forces are reported to have killed approximately thirty people and injuring over a thousand. Despite both the UN and the EU demanding independent investigations of the events, Israel is claiming that the violence was justified. On Sunday the 8th of March, the International Criminal Court made an announcement that the violence against the demonstrators might constitute a war crime. The court is now following developments of the situation closely. ●

# VOLUNTARY WORK - AN INDUSTRY OF CONTRADICTIONS

In this guest article, Karolina Boyoli continues the discussion on the moral dilemma regarding volunteer work.

**I**n the last issue of The Perspective of 2017 guest writer, Isa Diamant, wrote about her moral dilemma regarding volunteer work. One of her arguments was that it's more effective to have long-term employees in schools and other institutions in developing countries rather than "western volunteers", because this inspires more confidence among the people receiving help and is better for the local community since it creates work opportunities. I agree with her that this is a moral dilemma. Another moral dilemma is the fraudulent aspects of the volunteer industry with deceivers and deceived.

**I SPENT** a semester in Sri Lanka. I decided to find some volunteer work during my period there. A friend who had worked for three months on the island strongly recommended her organization. She assured me that this organization was truly charitable, non profit. At first contact with the person in charge of the organization, everything seemed trustworthy. We even discussed the problem with foreigners coming to Sri Lanka to volunteer and paying a lot to do so. He clearly stated that he was against that kind of business.

**HE TOLD ME** that I was going to assist with the development of a school he had started as a benefactor to the poor. This was certainly not the case. After further research from a local contact, it became clear what the activities actually were. In reality, it was a public school owned by the government for people in general and not, especially, for the poor and needy. We later arrived to a point in our correspondence where the manager explicitly stated that volunteers were required to

live in a shared room in his house at the cost of 14.000 SEK per month for two persons. In comparison with the monthly wages for hairdressers and drivers in Sri Lanka that are about 600 SEK. A three bedroom flat of a high standard from a local perspective also costs 600 SEK per month. It became obvious that the man in charge invested the money he earned in his luxurious villa, building a pool, an extension to the main building among with other private upgrades. In reality, he was the recipient of naive people's charity. With less investigation it could have been easy to fall into his trap.

**VOLUNTARY WORK HAS** partly become an industry that misuses the well meaning people who pay a lot for volunteering, money that end up in the wrong pockets, or private residences instead of going to the community and people in need. This industry is of course not regulated and is difficult to control. Volunteers join an organization in order to help poor people but end up being deceived.

**THIS IS ONLY** one example of how a lot of charity work (not all) has become business at an industrial scale. Therefore, it can be risky to volunteer without doing a thorough research. I share the moral dilemma with Isa Diamant regarding voluntary work. My opinion is that if your main aim is to create a great story to tell your facebook-friends or get points for your resume, you should rethink the way of accomplishing that purpose and abstain from "contributing". On another note, I ultimately found a real charitable organization in Sri Lanka. It is possible to volunteer without harming the community or contributing to the wrong people. But that's another story.●



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**WE WANT TO YOUR  
THOUGHTS, COMMENTS,  
AND IDEAS!**



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# THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UTILE: EXPERIENCE BELARUS



UPF Lund organised an exchange with the Centre for Swedish Studies in Minsk, Belarus during the spring of 2018. Julia Bergström reflects on the experiences they had.

**I** was convinced that I would be able to last a whole week without Facebook. The KGB was not going to get to my messages, especially not my secret brownie recipe! We had all prepared what to say at the border control. I am only here for tourism. The long discussions on whether or not to meet that student organisation that was not endorsed by the state had been going on for weeks.

**I FIRST REALISED** how silly our worries had been when we arrived at the airport. Except for a small insurance mishap that cost me 10 euros, we all came through without any issues or questions asked. Two hours into the trip, I put in a Belarusian SIM card and went on social media. And so a very ambiguous Belarusian experience had begun.

**THE BELARUS EXCHANGE** project between UPF Lund and the Centre for Swedish Studies in Minsk started as a joke during a fika with a Swedish diplomat. After taking my diplomat friend a bit too seriously and receiving a grant from Forum Syd to execute the project, I was very excited for our exchange to begin. Little did I know we were set to go on three parallel journeys: one to the beautiful, sophisticated and cultured city of Minsk; one to a different and tougher political environment than my own; and one with people who were just like us but a bit more thrifty.

**THE MASK OF** a benevolent and beautiful Belarus filtered many of the visits we were granted. The most mesmerising one was the ballet, Anyuta, at the Opera House. We were glued to our chairs with enchanted looks at the Belarusian ballet

dancers flexed toes and impossible movements. The food was fantastic: comforting dumplings and draniki (potato pancakes), exciting borschts with flavours exploding in your mouth and beers for the price of a glass of water in Sweden. The buildings of the city were magnificent. Modern buildings with a Soviet design were laid out along wide avenues and the beautiful Svislach river.

**THE PRETTY EXTERIORS** of Minsk are contained to the city centre. Our Airbnb was just outside the centre in what can only be described as one giant latent construction site that sparked conversation topics such as “what’s your favourite type of gravel?”. Our host had built the house we were staying in with his own hands and anyone with eyes did not need to be told that. He seemed to have forgotten to use his spirit level, because the floor was crooked enough to turn into a waterslide with enough water. The ceiling was covered with wallpaper.

**JUST AS THE** buildings and streets, the exteriors of society were only contained on the surface. At the House of Representatives, you could see the cracks in the façade. After a meeting with the only parliamentarian from the opposition, Anna Kanopatskaya, who has been called “the token Belarusian opposition MP” by the media, we had been invited to a tour of the House. We could enter because we were foreigners, but as we arrived we were told we could not enter because we were foreigners. It was due to security reasons – they were going to host an event in two weeks. In the end, we were granted a two-hour tour of the library. The Nazi stamps in the books were a painful reminder of the many





times Belarus has been occupied by various states. All books were sent to Germany during the occupation due to the cost of paper.

**LAST BUT NOT** least, we have the people of Belarus. The Belarusians (bel-a-rus-i-ans, with a pronounced “i” unlike the sh-sound in the word Russians) were what can only be described as equivocal and utterly utile. They were open-minded closed people; some only wanted economic security and others fought for their freedom; they were angry with the government and they loved their country. They were not Russian. They were Russian. They were Belarusian. But mostly, they were kind-hearted and caring.

**BELARUSIANS, LIKE SWEDES,** have a reputation of being cold and uncaring. Nothing could be further from the truth. Maria, our host from the Centre for Swedish Studies, was the embodiment of the kind Belarusian. She never yelled at us when we were late for our visits and together with the Swedish Deputy Ambassador to Belarus, she secured visits to the foreign ministry, the (library of) House of Representatives, civil society, the EU delegation to Belarus, the UNFPA, and the Belarus State University. She accompanied us to dinners and called taxis for us to make sure we got home safe. She gave us Belarusian chocolate and the love of a mother.

**OLEG KRAVCHENKO,** THE Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus, represented all three sides of the country: sitting in a beautiful building with cheap toilet paper, he was charming and funny, but he was not afraid to speak about the hardships of the country. After the events in Ukraine in 2014, Belarus was put in a rather awkward position. Putin could no longer be trusted, and if he could annex Ukraine he would surely be able to annex Belarus, a post-soviet country with Russian as one of the official languages. After that, the attitude towards the EU thawed slowly but surely. Still, Lukashenka needs Putin, so being too close to the EU and too open to change is a dangerous move. It is a balancing act on a very thin wire.

**THE PEOPLE WHO** made the Belarus experience especially special were the civil society representatives and our visitors to Sweden. They were curious, kind, and full of fighting spirit. Sasha and her friends from a civil society group struggling for their rights showed us around Minsk and told us

about their problems with organising anything in Belarus. You need to be the top student if you want to engage in civil society and not get kicked out of university, and unless you are state sponsored there are no domestic scholarships to receive. Our visitors in Sweden were ten of the 400 students studying Swedish in Belarus and they provided more insight and laughter than we could have asked for. Their experience in Sweden and the many civil society actors in Lund sparked a flame in a few of them.

**“I KNOW NOW** that I won’t learn everything I need in school,” one of the girls told me at the end of her week in Lund. “There are more important things than a good grade, and to achieve any change in my country I need to be the change.” ●

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## MY UNEXPECTED CASE FOR THE LOBBYISTS

I have been active in UPF for three years now, and while I have attended many interesting lectures, read eye-opening articles, and gotten the opportunity to visit organizations in four countries, our study visit to lobbyists in Brussels was the first time that I really felt changed by the experience.

**I** have a long and deep running suspicion of corporations and towards the idea of a world where multinational companies have even the slightest power over politics. The idea that those already in possession of financial power are able to use that money to influence democratic politics seems fundamentally undemocratic. In line with these opinions, I have been quite worried about the lobbying industry. It seemed only to enable corruption and a simple way to make sure that the status quo of capitalism and corporate influence was kept in place. Of course, this opinion was colored by the American system of lobbying, from the pharmaceutical to the tobacco industry and their extreme influence over American politics. So, when we entered the open, light and very Scandinavian offices of Kärcher I was determined to keep my guard up and not be swayed by the first really good, strong cup of coffee of the week and the bowls of Easter candy that were strategically placed both at the reception and with even intervals on the conference table around which we all sat.

**IT IS EASY** to see how money and corporations can have an unreasonable influence over politics. In more ways than one the United States is becoming a clear and concise example of how not to

run a country, and the influence of corporations is definitely one of them. With lobbying playing a big role in that influence, it is reasonable to be wary of the role similar actors have in the European Union. The comparison does come with some clear exceptions that make all the difference. While the American lawmakers are all democratically elected the European Union is filled with bureaucrats, for better or worse. In the case of lobbying, I might argue that it is for the better. Without pending elections, those in the European commission writing the policy proposals have no need for the financial contributions on which American political candidates depend. As such the ties and dependencies are less prevalent.

**WE CAN SEE** the impact of this in some of the research on the differences in the two systems. It has, for example, shown that lobbying groups in the EU share their victories and both sides influence usually end up affecting different sides of the same legislation. The more dependent lawmakers are on the corporations represented by lobbyists, the more they need to align themselves with their interests and work entirely towards their goals. More importantly, this dependency on money for reelection causes the wealthier, corporate interests to be substantially more successful com-





pared to citizens groups or NGOs. When visiting Kärcher and FleishmanHillard they both strongly argue that their power fades in comparison to that of NGOs. While they aren't entirely fair, lobbying firms still get their way more often, the margins are very slim.

**LOBBYISTS CAN BE** an asset, and all the different companies and organizations, as well as lawmakers, that we met in Brussels said as much. This includes both those working for corporate interests, the environmental organizations, and small business owners. Political policy affects everyone, but usually some more than others. Unlike individuals, companies generally are experts on their own existence and how changes will impact them. While companies should not be allowed to dictate policy, it is always relevant to have as much information as possible when making decisions. As such, the information regarding how decisions affect a specific line of business, or specific organizations, can help alleviate issues caused by aspects that are simply missed by lawmakers without the input of lobbyists. The two lobbyists we sat down with at Kärcher stated that "the reason that lobbying is legal [...] is because politicians ask for it", and with lawmakers hopefully wanting the best, most helpful law for all, it isn't too hard to see why lobbyists are helpful in building the understanding necessary. Dan Baxter at FleishmanHillard similarly said that their work is to "translate between regulators, our clients, and society" and as such create the best possible law.

**OF COURSE, INPUT** easily turns into dependence, lobbying turn to corruption, without certain standards of transparency and control. While regulations has been unable to control the rampant mis-

use of lobbying in Washington DC it seems like the European Union work under more favorable conditions. Since 2005, the lobbyists working within the European Union are encouraged to adhere to the European Transparency Initiative. Most importantly, it grants accreditation and physical access to buildings of the European Parliament and requires the public display of goals, interests, and employers. The lobbyist we met all seemed happy to comply with the regulations, and as Baxter exclaimed; "if we're doing our job right then we have nothing to hide". It is worth pointing out that the selections we had were all companies happy to sit down with a group of educated and interested students, and so it would not represent potential deviants who would wish for a less secure, more Washington-like form of lobbying.

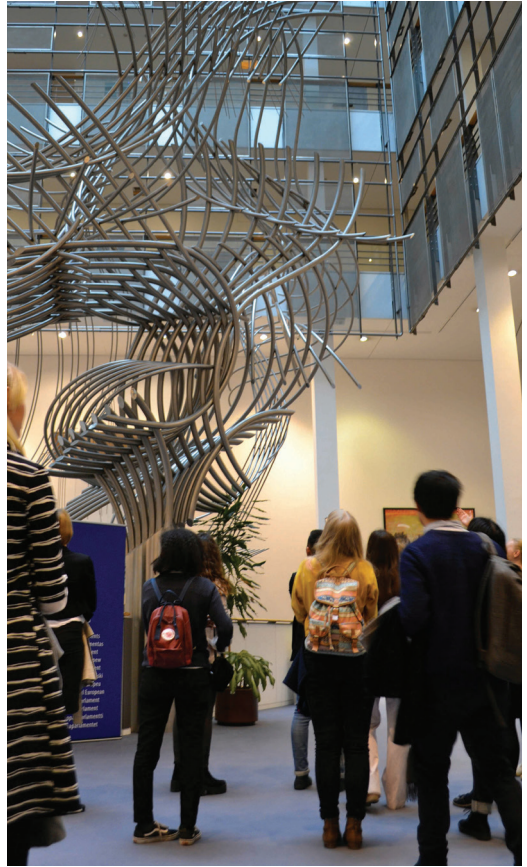
**WHILE I DO** not agree with the direction Kärcker and FleichmanHillards clients often want to steer the world in, I can still understand the need for their opinion and input. Even more important is perhaps the large number of groups representing small business owners, environmental organizations, women organizations, regions and cities, who all have relevant input for the decisions taken hundreds of miles away. The Commission might be staffed by a large number of experts, but many of them are old politicians. While politicians have many qualities, an extensive and deep knowledge of all issues and angles in their portfolio are usually not one of them. Politicians need to know a bit about a lot and hope that the experts will help them out. In a functioning system, the lobbyists can be those experts. As long as there is transparency and lobbyists representing many, and preferably all sides, it seems lobbying can do good. Which is far from what I thought a month ago. ●



Over 6 days in Brussels the UPF travel committee of the spring 2018 visited different EU institutions, embassies, NGOs, and lobbying organisations.













# MEANWHILE, IN CHINA

Inside President Xi's new surveillance paradigm,  
every day is judgement day.

**M**any are those who recoiled after the Facebook and Cambridge Analytica revelations. Everyone knew that Facebook was collecting information about preferences and behaviour, but few had realised its significance. Grasping that their likes, comments, and conversations can be used not only for commercial purposes, but social and political too, anxious questions are beginning to grow in the minds of users. What are the potential consequences of this? Could this information be exploited, and if so by whom and what for?

**MEANWHILE, IN CHINA,** extensive systems are already in use to from online behaviour infer and judge people's 'trustworthiness'. Private tech-companies like Tencent and Alibaba try to centralise online behaviour, providing platforms to send private and public messages, pay in online and in physical stores, pay bills, and manage bookings. Alibaba uses your data to give you a 'Sesame Credit'-score, the most sophisticated system as of yet, which is graded along five axes. The first three more or less reflect credit-rating scores used in all countries: whether you pay bills on time, how well you uphold financial contracts, and whether you have stable employment. The latter two, however, diverge categorically from ordinary rating systems. The fourth grades your behaviour and preferences—your 'character'. If you buy lots of video games, and spend a large proportion of your time

gaming—which, of course, the system knows—you can, as considered an 'idle person', be downgraded. If you buy diapers instead, your score can be increased because you are a responsible, care-taking adult. The fifth category rates your 'interpersonal relationships'. That is, your score can be affected by how you relate to others—positively if you comment on social media how well the economy is doing, or negatively if you befriend dissidents. Your Sesame score is also affected by the behaviour of people you are connected to. If a friend writes critically of the government or if your family members get fined or commit legal offences, your score can fall.

**THE IDEA IS** an allusion to the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, in which 'Open Sesame' is the magical phrase that unlocks the cave of treasures. And indeed, the Sesame-system primarily acts by providing an incentive-structure. With a higher score you can get access to lower-interest loans, cheaper goods and services, travel permits and visas, your profile on the dating-site Baihe can figure more prominently, and a host of similar privileges. In other words, your ability to get a loan is not only affected by whether you have previously been financially irresponsible, but by your political views, if you are a homosexual, and if a friend or family member has a drinking problem. Further, a considerable cult of social status have spawned around the scores. Hundreds of thousands of people are bragging on social media about



their high ratings, and those in the lower trenches get frowned upon. Both material comfort and social approval, in other words, can be bought with the currency of adherence to orthodoxy.

**WHILE ENROLMENT** in the Sesame-system is voluntary, and it is managed by a private company, it is, in contrast with Western alternatives, subject to national security and cyber-security laws which give the Chinese Communist Party unrestricted access to user information. Private conversations on WeChat have already been used in criminal court-cases to convict citizens to multi-year prison sentences.

**AT THE SAME** time, the CCP is currently constructing its own Social Credit-system, which will build upon and substitute private alternatives and be mandatory for all 1.3 billion Chinese citizens. The aim is to implement the system by 2020, and that in it, everything that you do, be it day or night, at home or in public, in company or solitude, will not only be seen and recorded but graded according

to the most recent five-year plan on the behaviour of the citizens. The scope will be larger than Sesame today, augmented by the CCP's massive investments in artificial intelligence-infused camera surveillance. Facial recognition software is gradually being employed on a larger scale, and "one hundred percent of Beijing is now blanketed by surveillance cameras." In this way, 'offline data' too will be used in the gradation of citizen's trustworthiness, and not at any point in time or space will the people of China gain respite from the ever-judging eyes. "The ways of man are before the eyes of the lord," as it were, "and he pondereth all his goings."

**THE SANCTIONS TOO** are likely to be tougher. Even the current version is designed so that you could, at the press of a button, make 'untrustworthy' people wholly unable to get a loan, find housing or even a job. There has been talk of restricting access to welfare services and of your score affecting the quality of the school your children can enter. Nobody knows as of yet what the CCP rendition





will entail, or whether it will be as harsh as it could be. But the government have said that their vision is that it will “allow the trustworthy to roam everywhere under heaven while making it hard for the discredited to take a single step,” and so we get an idea at least of the potential.

**IN EMPLOYING BIG** data to surveil and according to CCP-prescribed standards evaluate its citizens, China is entering a new surveillance paradigm. Control will not flow from the top down, but from the inside out. When people can get their lives ruined by simply being friends with people who disagree with the government, and algorithms will be able to scan you second-to-second for unorthodox behaviour, no guards will be necessary. When access to social and material benefits, welfare and career opportunities loom for you and your family, loyalty is a small price to pay. When everybody will be able to see your value, and will treat you accordingly, nobody wants to be left behind. “What China is doing here,” as one internet privacy expert puts it, “is selectively breeding its population

to select against the trait of critical, independent thinking.”

**OUR OWN EXPERIENCE** with Facebook and Cambridge Analytica is instructive of how this all might play out. Because all the while our personal information was being shipped off to Trump’s campaign offices, deep down we knew, and we consented. In a Faustian bargain we gave up our innermost secrets for a spoonful of likes and the convenience of messaging with our friends. The Facebook-debacle reveals the astonishing willingness of people to comply with the incentive structure of their social context at the expense of integrity and liberty. And this is what the CCP knows and counts on. This is what makes millions of people strive for Sesame Credit even while it is voluntary. And it is what will guarantee the extraordinary effectiveness of a surveillance system based on social relations, positive incentives, and self-control. The lure of approval and belonging is just too strong, and so our fate is in the hands of the lords. ●



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

# WHAT IS THE GDPR AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) will enter into force in May and is certainly already one of the most famous piece of EU legislation. But what makes it so special? With the GDPR, the EU positions itself as the world-leader in data protection and privacy.

**D**uring the Communist-era, the East-German intelligence service and secret police, the Stasi, carried out one of the deepest surveillance operations in history. It created files documenting virtually every aspect of citizens' lives. After the reunification of Germany, the EU wanted to ensure this would never happen again. In 1995, it enacted the first data protection directive. At the time, less than 1 percent of Europeans even had access to the internet. The GDPR repeals and replaces it. Martin Selmayr is more famous for his controversial appointment as Secretary General of the Commission, but he also is the main architect of the GDPR. His father headed the West-German intelligence agency during the cold war, his job was essentially to fight the Stasi. It is based on this historical and personal backdrop that Martin Selmayr has driven the reform with

the view that data protection is a fundamental right whose foundation is the concept of human dignity, thus justifying the adoption of a tough and highly protective regime.

**THE GDPR CREATES** the highest standard in the world for the protection of personal data. Its main goal is to offer data subjects, consumers like you and I, a greater control over the processing of their personal data, and to hold data controllers, like social medias, to a greater standard of transparency and accountability. Without getting too technical, I will outline the key takeaways from the reform.

**FOR CONSUMERS,** the most visible innovations of the GDPR deal with their consent, their rights to access their data and to be forgotten, as well as being informed in case of breach of their data. Do you read the terms and conditions before agree-





*Photo: Kaitlyn Baker/Unsplash*

ing to any digital service? Probably not. It is an unreadable legalese and makes you thank God you did not go to law school. The GDPR changes that: the request for consent will have to be accessible, in plain language and making clear for what purpose, where and to what extent your data will be used. Moreover, it will be possible to have access to all your personal data detained by a service provider upon request, and to ask for the erasure of this data, this is the right to be forgotten. Lastly, you will be notified within 72 hours if your data has been mishandled. For example, if your email platform gets hacked. Companies will no longer be able to hide the dust under the carpet in case of a failure of their cyber-security systems.

**FOR BUSINESSES,** THE GDPR codifies a ‘privacy by design’ mindset. The protection of privacy will have to drive the very design of information sys-

tems and data infrastructures. This aims to guarantee the ‘minimization’ of data processing, to protect against the unjustified dissemination of personal data. For example, a random app dealing with the flashlight of your cell-phone will not be allowed to access your location or your email history. What is more, the GDPR has an extraterritorial scope and creates hefty penalties. Simply put, this means that EU law will apply to every single EU citizen’s data, wherever in the world. For example, if you are an EU-citizen, even if you start living in the US, EU law will still apply to you. Companies will have to afford you a GDPR level of protection, even though US laws would not require them to do so. In effect, the EU is imposing its reform to the rest of the world. If a company fails to comply with the new rules, it faces a fine of up to 4 percent of its world-wide turnover or 20 Million Euros, whichever is greater.





**AFTER HAVING SET** the scene, let's briefly look at two practical implications of the GDPR. The economic impact of the GDPR is debated. It has been argued that it will hamper innovation and the competitiveness of European businesses, in particular in the sector of artificial intelligences. AI require huge sets of data to train their algorithms and power better services. This involves unpredictable processing of data, whose consent is nearly impossible to guarantee, and is something that GDPR greatly restricts. It would be easier for companies in China or the US to train AIs in their home markets where regulations are weaker. In turns, they would render their services more efficient compared to European ones, largely based on EU-citizens data. Another critique is that the regulation is designed for large players like Google who can afford armies of lawyers and consultants to set up strategies to remain competitive despite the tighter laws. It would thus be harder for start-ups who do not have these resources to compete. Where the GDPR seems to combat companies like Facebook, it might actually strengthen their market position by making it harder for smaller companies the data industry to grow.

**THE GDPR WILL** impact the developments in 'data-campaigning.' Disruptive techniques have been propelled in recent years via a heavy use of big-data in targeting voters. This is at the heart of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, who is accused of having manipulated the data of tens of millions of voters to influence them towards the Trump or Brexit campaigns. It has been argued this this would have never been possible if safeguards as GDPR's had been in place.

**IN THE AGE** of digitalization, when social medias permeate our lives, when privacy becomes a commodity, when surveillance is the new-normal, the EU's ambition with the GDPR is to take the lead in the race for more protection and to export its rules and influence worldwide. ●



# CUTTING EDGE

Humanitarian agencies face diverse challenges to their work - especially in war zones like Syria and Yemen. But necessity is the mother of invention and organizations like the World Food Program are employing young fresh minds to tackle the problems of today with the technology of tomorrow.



**W**hen war strikes, basic needs often remain unfulfilled. Not only do people in war zones face the constant threat of violence and death, but they also struggle with a lack of food, medical supplies, clean water and many more things. Conflict is one of the main reasons why hunger is on the rise again after a decade-long decline. In times of desperation, international organizations often take it upon them to provide some relief – especially where the state is not capable or willing to do so.

**UNFORTUNATELY, THE RELIEF** goods do not always reach their destination. In Yemen, for example, where the civil war has left millions of people, and especially children, in dire need of food aid, the UN were kept from delivering wheat and vaccines for three weeks straight in November last year. The Saudi military coalition was accusing the Houthi rebels of smuggling weapons using the relief deliveries as cover and blocked the harbours and airports close to the rebel-controlled areas. According to UNICEF, over 11 Million children in Yemen are currently in need of humanitarian assistance. The conflict between the rebels and the Saudi Arabian military coalition has become “a war against children”, says Geert Cappelaere, UNICEF’s regional director for the Middle East and North Africa.

**SYRIA IS NO** less problematic when it comes to delivering the desperately needed goods. The regime has been blocking deliveries to regions controlled by the opposition, de facto employing the UN’s hu-

manitarian relief work as a weapon to their own advantage. And even if the situation was not as politically critical, there is still a huge risk for the aid workers to enter a war zone. Now, the World Food Programme (WFP) is trying to come up with new approaches to the problem. Their Motto:

“ WE NEED TO CONNECT  
HUMANITARIAN RELIEF WITH  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
INNOVATIONS OF THE 21ST  
CENTURY

**TO DO EXACTLY** that, WFP opened the “Innovation Accelerator” in Munich, Germany. Their office that shares a building with Google helps start-ups to test out their ideas on how to disrupt hunger. They create a place for people to meet and try out their innovations in practice. The start-ups get the necessary resources and the space they need to work, and WFP staff, development experts, and researchers are there for consulting and support. The accelerator has already produced promising results that reach from rather simple solutions to common problems to highly complex technological innovations.



**ONE PROBLEM** THE humanitarian relief organizations face begins before the goods even reach their country of destination: the costly and time-consuming delivery. During the Ebola crisis in 2014, for instance, pandemic relief supplies arrived from partners in different palletized forms, with no packaging standards for size, quality, or packaging of individual items. This hindered the ability of the humanitarian response and of the supply chain to provide the right supplies on time. Inefficiencies in cargo handling and transit, as well as concerns for cargo safety, emerged as pain points during the Ebola response. To increase efficiency, the innovation accelerator in cooperation with the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot Lab (UNHRD) and private companies are developing a standardized system. This nesting storage system – essentially a box in a box – would be the first standard container for humanitarian supplies and is supposed to reduce the time it takes to deliver the goods by 20 percent.

**ON A MORE** technical note, WFP’s “Building Blocks” initiative sounds simple, but is anything but child’s play. It uses blockchain technology to supply over 10.000 Syrian refugees in the Azraq Refugee camp in Jordan with food assistance. Since the launch of the pilot project in January 2017, the refugees can pick up their food supplies from local stores and identify themselves through an eye-scan, instead of using cash, vouchers, or e-cards. By tracking the ownership of assets, without the need for costly intermediaries like banks and other institutions, WFP and its donors could save transaction costs

and costs to third parties of millions of dollars per year - if the technology is implemented on a large scale. Blockchain also mitigates the risks of identity fraud and data mismanagement, ensuring greater security and privacy for refugees as sensitive data does not have to be shared with third parties such as phone companies.

“ USING BLOCKCHAIN CAN BE A QUALITATIVE LEAP – NOT ONLY FOR WFP, BUT FOR THE ENTIRE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNITY

- WFP’S DIRECTOR OF INNOVATION AND CHANGE MANAGEMENT, ROBERT OPP

**AS THE WARS** of today continue to confront humanitarian agencies with seemingly unsolvable problems, WFP’s Innovation Accelerator sets an example in approaching challenges with a fresh mind, using the knowledge of young innovators and cutting-edge technology to cope with the crises. The times we live in do not only present challenges, they can also provide the solutions. ●



**FOCUS:**  
**THE MIDDLE EAST**

War torn, neglected, exploited, beautiful, vibrant, heaven, and hell. The Middle East is a region which is all over the news, often contested, often misunderstood. This spring, the Perspective media channels had a very interesting seminar with Tomas Andersson and Stefan Focni - the authors of *The Levant: The Middle East without borders* (Levanten: Mellanöstern utan gränser). They spoke about the region from a street-side view, how ignorant and misinformed the public, and the media, are when discussing it. This map, believe it or not, is less relevant than one might think. It is a representation of a history of colonization, struggles between both global superpowers, ancient tribes, and the scramble for natural resources. In reality, the lines drawn are transparent. As you shall see - events in one corner effects the whole region.

When conflicts turn cold, when media redirects its gaze, the people are left behind. This is our attempt to show a more just perspective on the region; a project which, to some extent, is impossible

When conflicts turn cold, when media redirects its gaze, the people are left behind. This is our attempt to show a more just perspective on the region; a project which, to some extent, is impossible



## MIDDLE EAST GRAPHIC

Scale 1:4,500,000



Airport > 6000 ft. Runway .....  
3000 ft. - 6000 ft. Runway .....





# THE LOST ENLIGHTENMENT

One of the most advanced civilizations of all time, an example of tolerance and reverence for knowledge that nevertheless fell in the oblivion of history. Now, when its legacy is seen as doomed, it is more necessary than ever to revisit its history.

Once upon a time, when Europe was plunged into darkness, the forefront of human progress was placed in the Middle East, the heart of the Islamic Empire. Although the empire reached its greatest size in 750 AD under the Umayyad Caliphate, the Golden Age dawned during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258). The foundational pillar of the empire was commerce. The Middle East is a natural bridge between Asia and Europe, and the Arabic tribes of the region had a long standing tradition of trade when the prophet Muhammad was a merchant. Due to a relatively uniform set of laws and homogenization in currencies, the transaction costs of trade decreased significantly allowing the commerce to flourish and making the Islamic countries prosper for centuries. Each year, hundreds of caravans from China and India full of species and ceramics and from Al-Andalus (South of Spain) with metal goods and wool arrived to Baghdad, the capital of the empire and a melting pot of cultures and religions. The period was characterized by remarkable tolerance, which allowed all kinds of people to live in a multicultural environment.

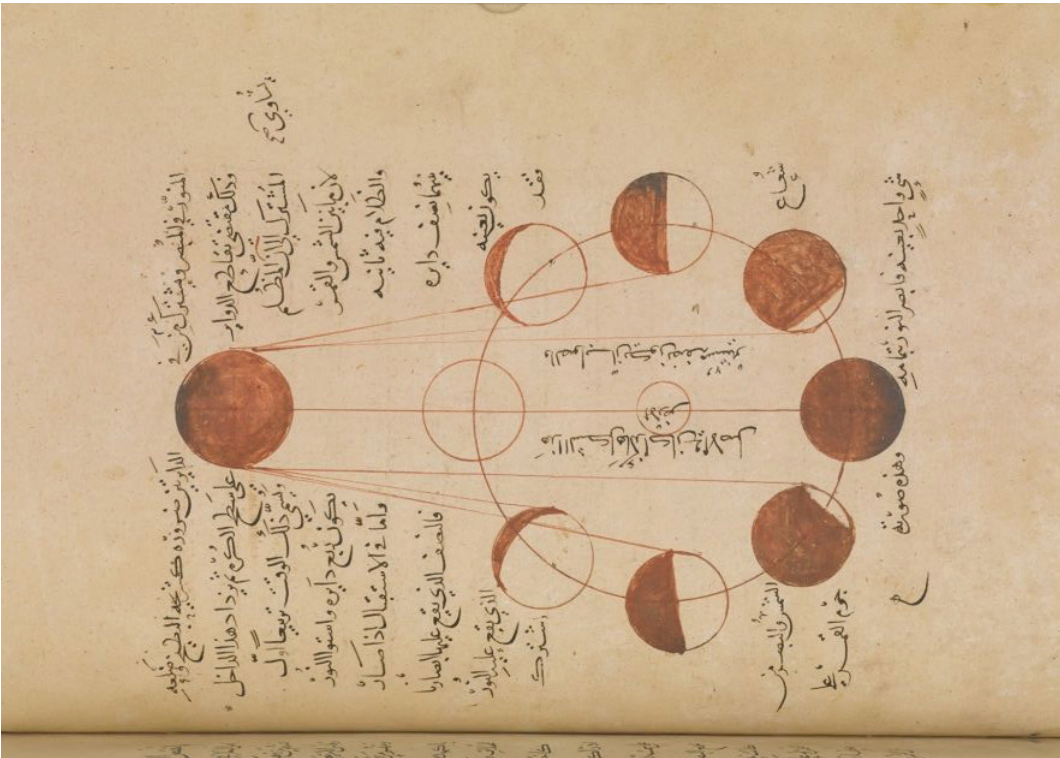
**FURTHERMORE, NUMEROUS SCHOLARS** from all parts of the empire moved to Baghdad due to the patronage of the Caliphas, who spent huge quantities of money on academic institutions, such as the House of Wisdom. There, scholars from different religions and backgrounds studied humanities and sciences, achieving numerous contributions in different fields such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics and chemistry. Especially remarkable was the translation of classic books into Arabic in order to preserve them. Thanks to these scholars we can now read Aristotle, Plato, and other Greek philosophers. This focus on the acquirement of knowledge was partly based on the rise of Mu'tazila, a school of Islam theology that relied on a synthesis of reason and revelation in order to ascertain the existence of God. Its followers believed that only speculative reasoning leads to knowledge of God. The school of theology did not become hegemonic in the Islamic world until approximately the beginning of the VIII century.

**HOWEVER, THE END** of the period of scientific, cultural, and philosophical flourishing took place in 1258 with the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols. Nevertheless, that was just the final blow, the de-

cay of the empire had already begun some decades ago, caused by a conjunction of different events. Firstly, a period of political instability arose in the empire during the last decades of the XI century, which resulted in the fragmentation of the territory into small kingdoms. Some tribes of Central Asia, like the Turkish Seljuks, took advantage of the opportunity and conquered some territories in the Eastern part of the Middle East. Furthermore, those tribes contributed to the spread of the Sunni Islam, which was experiencing a revival at those times. That happened mainly through the creation of a new education system known as "Nizamiyah", that focused on religious studies. Thereby, the Sunni interpretation of the Islam was adopted and taught in the madrasas (Islamic schools). An important figure, that was key for the articulation of the Sunni interpretation, was the great Islamic theologian, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, who lived from 1055 to 1111. In his influential work "The incoherence of the philosophers", he began to question the relation between faith and reason, arguing that doubt about both the self and the material universe is insurmountable. Instead, he explained that religious experience is the only source of intellectual certainty and the only path to God. His doctrine put an end to the compatibility between faith and reason in Islam. In the following decades, the Sunni Islam became hegemonic in the most part of the Islamic world, prevailing its predominance until now.

“ THIS SHIFT IN THE HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF POWER HAD ENORMOUS INFLUENCE IN THE FOLLOWING CENTURIES AND SHAPED THE FUTURE OF ISLAM





**FURTHERMORE, THE DISINTEGRATION** of the Abbasid Caliphate also changed the governmental structures in the Islamic kingdoms. A new military and religious elite emerged, substituting the secular bureaucracy (composed by the Persian aristocracy) that was characteristic of the Abbasids, becoming the main representatives of the civil society and controlling the evolution of the countries. This shift in the hierarchical structure of power had enormous influence in the following centuries and shaped the future of Islam because since then, Islamic countries and empires always dragged behind the West in terms of scientific knowledge.

**THE MAIN REASON** for this fall behind of the Middle East can be found in the now differential sources of legitimacy of the governments. Legitimacy involves the capacity of a political system to transmit the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society. Hence, the emergence of religious leaders as representatives of the society and their control over educational

and intellectual institutions conferred them the power of legitimizing the governments. So, their key position within the governmental structure granted them the competence of imposing the “sharia” (Islamic law) over the territory.

**THIS IS NOT** bad “per se”, but it confers huge veto power to one agent that will always defend his privileged position and can be pernicious if the interests of the agent are not in line with some developments that would benefit the country. In this case, it was harmful to the Islamic countries mainly through two channels. The first one was through trade laws, which in some centuries before had been key for the rise of the empire. However, with the rise of the Modern Age and the discovery of new commercial routes to America and Asia, the capital needed for big enterprises required that many individuals pooled their money. In Europe, join-stock companies and corporations managed to overcome those challenges. In the Middle East, however, the Islamic laws discouraged partner-



ships because the law stated that one partnership was dissolved after the death of one member. This prevented Islamic countries from benefitting from the new developments in trade routes and harmed the economic development of the region.

**SECONDLY, DISCOVERIES OF** new technologies in Europe never reached the region. The governments prevented the import of new goods that could risk the hegemonic position they had in their countries. A good example is the invention of the printing press in 1450. While it had a great importance for spreading scientific knowledge in Europe, in the Middle East it was heavily repressed. In the Ottoman Empire, it was banned for three centuries due to the pressure of the ulama (the religious elite) in order to control all the publications and to avoid the spread of “hieratical” ideas. This prevented the transmission and assimilation of new scientific knowledge over the empire and has contributed to widening the gap between the Middle East and the West. Of course there are several oth-

er factors that have worsened the situation of the Middle East, such as the division of the region after the WWI by the colonial powers and the deep rivalry between Iran and Arabia Saudi. However, those factors appeared when the Middle East had already fallen far behind the developed countries.

**AS WE HAVE** seen, belonging to a particular religion does not determine the way of living. Religious doctrines are abstract writings that leave a lot of scope for interpretation and that can therefore influence society in very different ways. Because in the end, it is the balance of power between different actors and their preferences which shapes the decisions and set the incentives. The future of Islamic countries is not yet predetermined, it will be written by its people. ●





*Photo: Wikimedia Commons*

One of the issues at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference was how to deal with the aftermath of World War I in the Middle East. The decisions made here would radically alter the political landscape of the region up to present day.

**W**ith the current troubles in Syria and, by extension, ongoing news stories of conflicts in the Middle East, it becomes necessary to reflect on the history that laid the foundation for current state of affairs. It was back in World War I, and the peace negotiations that followed, that many of the events took place that would shape the region into what it is today.

**THE MIDDLE EASTERN** front of World War I opened as a result of the Ottoman Empire's decision to ally with Germany in late 1914. This led the British to deploy forces against the Ottomans, and recruiting local Arabs living in Ottoman provinces to revolt against the empire.

**SURRENDERING IN LATE 1918**, the Ottomans found themselves in a vulnerable position, as the victorious Allies sought to impose harsh peace terms on

the defeated nations at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference. The empire was stripped of its provinces in the Levant and Arab Peninsula, and its central Turkish territories were to be mostly partitioned off as well. The hope was to ensure peace by crippling the nation's ability to make war in the future. This plan quickly backfired as resentment over these terms led to the rise of a Turkish nationalist movement that came to supplant the old Ottoman government. A war of independence to resist the peace terms ignited in the Turkish heartland, eventually transforming the Ottoman empire into the Republic of Turkey.

**MEANWHILE, THE PEACE** Conference's delegates were trying to decide what to do with the Arab provinces that had formerly belonged to the Ottomans. This issue was complicated by a series of wartime promises, made mainly by the British government to different parties, that supported seemingly conflicting claims to the same territories in the Middle East.

**AT THE TIME** of making these deals, the outcome of the war was far from clear. Desperate to secure alliances in the Middle Eastern campaign, the British had adopted an attitude of ruthless pragmatism. Deliberately vague and obfuscating language was used in negotiating these agreements, to give the impression of promising more than what the British government intended to deliver. The idea was to do whatever necessary to secure any alliance needed at the time, while hoping to maintain enough leeway to sort out conflicting promises by the war's end. This strategy might have made sense at the moment but would prove naïve and shortsighted in the long term.

**IN THE HUSAYN-McMAHON** Correspondence, the British had seemingly agreed to recognize an independent Arab nation, in return for Arab nationalists rising up in revolt against the Ottomans. This nation, under the rule of the Hashemite family, would span the entire Arabian Peninsula and the Levant. However, this seemed irreconcilable with the Sykes-Picot Agreement. Made between Britain and France to outline each country's interests in the Middle East, it made clear France's intention to claim Syria in the Levant. Likewise, the Treaty of Darin may also have conflicted with the promises made to the Hashemites. This treaty recognized Abdulaziz Al-Saud as the legitimate

“ THIS OUTCOME WAS SEEN AS A BETRAYAL BY ARAB NATIONALISTS

ruler of Nejd, in the interior Arabian Peninsula, and turned it into a British protectorate. In return, he would fight a proxy war against the Al-Rashid family, which were sponsored by the Ottomans.

**THE MOST CONTENTIOUS** point in these agreements made by the British government concerned the region of Palestine. In the Husayn-McMahon Correspondence, it was to become part of the independent Arab nation, while in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, France and Britain agreed to put it under an “international administration” to be determined later. It is then perhaps surprising that a third promise made in 1917, called the Balfour Declaration, publicly endorsed turning Palestine into a Jewish state for the Zionist national movement. This declaration was made in hopes of motivating American and Russian Jews to push their respective governments to further commit to the war efforts.

**FACED WITH THESE** irreconcilable claims, no decision made by the Supreme Council of the Peace Conference could possibly satisfy all parties. Ultimately, Britain and France were given “mandates” to govern the Middle Eastern territories in the Levant with the understanding that they would eventually be given self-rule. France got mandates over Syria and Lebanon, while Britain got mandates over Palestine (including Transjordan) and Mesopotamia (present day Iraq). In addition, Palestine was to be turned into a Jewish state.

**FEW OF THE** promises made to the Hashemites during the war were upheld at the Peace Conference. Only the region of Hejaz, on the Arabian Peninsula's west coast, became a fully independent Arab state under Hashemite rule. This outcome was seen as a betrayal by Arab nationalists. In response, Syria attempted to declare itself independent but was quickly and brutally quelled by French soldiers. Similarly, a massive insurgency against British rule in Mesopotamia led to widespread fighting, with the toll of dead or wound-





Prince Faisal (front) representing the Hashemites and Arab nationalists at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.

## “ THE EFFECTS OF THESE CHANGES CONTINUE TO BE FELT TODAY

ed natives numbering over 8000. In Palestine, as Jewish immigration rapidly increased, riots broke out both among Arab and Jewish communities. Whatever the intentions of the Peace Conference, the Middle East had become mired in chaos, resentments, and violence.

**THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT** made later attempts to mitigate the bad blood within the Arab populations, by appointing Hashemite princes, Faisal and Abdullah, as monarchs in Mesopotamia and Transjordan. But this proved insufficient as these

monarchs were still second to British authority, demonstrated when both were blocked by British interests from intervening when the kingdom of Hejaz was invaded by Nejd and transformed into Saudi Arabia.

**THE END OF** World War I saw Turkish dominance in the Middle East replaced with western imperialism, with most new national borders drawn up according to British and French preferences rather than local needs. The effects of these changes continue to be felt today, as Arab-Israeli tensions, suspicion against western meddling, and unstable national identities continue to be sources of strife and conflict.

**AS WE LOOK** back at the effects of World War I in the region, it becomes important to remember that the seeds of conflict in the Middle East were planted not just by the war itself, but also the failure to make peace. ●

# DANCE OF WAR





Saudi Arabia insists that Iran is a terrorist-funding, warmongering, dangerous country trying to export its islamic revolution throughout the Middle East. Iran responds that the Saudis invented al-Qaida, and as a puppet state to the west, works to destabilize the Middle East. Whatever the rhetoric, the bottom line is that these two powerful nations, are fighting what seems as an everlasting proxy war.

**F**or decades Iran suffered under exploitation and abuses from the west which was heavily dependent on the supplies of Iranian oil. In 1953, after an attempt to nationalize the oil sector, America and Britain orchestrated a coup which toppled the democratically elected president - an event which still resonates in Iranian politics to this day. Monarchy, under the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was reintroduced. In order to keep control of power, the Shah constructed a rigid and abusive police state with political, military, and economic support from the west. After years of protests and civil unrest, the religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini seized power in 1979 and turned Iran into a religious state of Islam. This created a ripple effect throughout the Middle East, where every American supported government felt the tensions rising. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims across the region celebrated the transition of independence; Khomeini was the personification of anti-American, anti-monarchy politics. He wanted the western cultural, military, financial, and political influences out from the Middle East through the spread of his revolution.

**THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION** was the recognition of the Iranian history and identity, showing that the people could defeat the brutal Shah regime. Iran had chosen its own direction for the future of the country: not capitalism nor communism, but the way of a strict version of Islam with the implementation of sharia laws and one religious leader with a mandate from God. Perhaps, more importantly, Khomeini politicized what used to be two old religious doctrines of Islam, the Shia, and Sunni interpretations. The revolution, although based on a pan-Islamic ambition, was indispensably looking out for Shia interests. Something which did not go unnoticed by Iran's neighbors.

**MOST VULNERABLE TO** the spread of Khomeini's revolution was the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, which had very good relations with Iran up to 1979. The Iranian revolution indirectly undermined the Saudi royal family's legitimacy, not only as rulers but also as the rulers of Islam's most holy sites, Mecca and Medina. The royal family rules every part of Saudi society, however, this has to be done in symbiosis with Wahhabis religious leaders, giving the impression that the royal family is directly connected to Islam. In reality, they got their social status from the unification of Arab tribes during formation of the Saudi state in 1932. Wahhabism is a strict form of Sunni beliefs, without any nuances, where Shiites are heretics. This is a challenging trilemma within the royal family's rule, the balance between religious tradition, modernization, and maintaining the political power.

**AS THE IRANIAN** revolutions shook the Middle East, thousands of Shiites started protests in the oil-rich eastern province of Saudi Arabia. This was what the royal family feared the most, that the marginalized Shia Saudi population would gravitation towards Iran, which in fact urged for this through state radio. The protest was violently stopped and the royal family pumped oil money into the religious sector to spread the Wahhabist thought to strengthen their domestic religious legitimacy and battle Iran's sectarian influence over the region. The new religious reforms in Saudi Arabia mainly cracked down on women's rights in the country and increased sectarian influences coming out of Saudi Arabia through increased support for Wahhabism in the Sunni world.

**IN THE BACKDROP** of this turbulent turn of events during the late 20th century, it is important to understand that the sectarian politics, coming out from both Iran and Saudi Arabia, has its roots not



only an entrenched conflict of interpretations of Islam, but also in a political power play over Middle Eastern political dominance.

**AS THE SOVIET** Union invaded Afghanistan in late 1979, the Saudis took it upon themselves to help their Muslim brothers and expand their influence in the region. Also, the Americans, determined to stop the Communist expansion, saw the religious tensions in the Middle East as a way to influence. Together they found the mutual ally in Pakistan, who decided which rebel groups to be backed inside Afghanistan when battling USSR. The lot fell to the most radical jihadist, the Mujahideen. As the war raged on for years the support for the Afghan guerrilla increased during Ronald Reagan, and Saudi Arabia encouraged volunteers to travel to Afghanistan under jihad, the most famous of whom was Osama Bin-Laden, then working under CIA directives. When the Soviet army withdrew after a decade of fighting, the Americans lost their interest and it was up to the Saudis and Pakistan to give away the governance of Afghanistan. Natu-

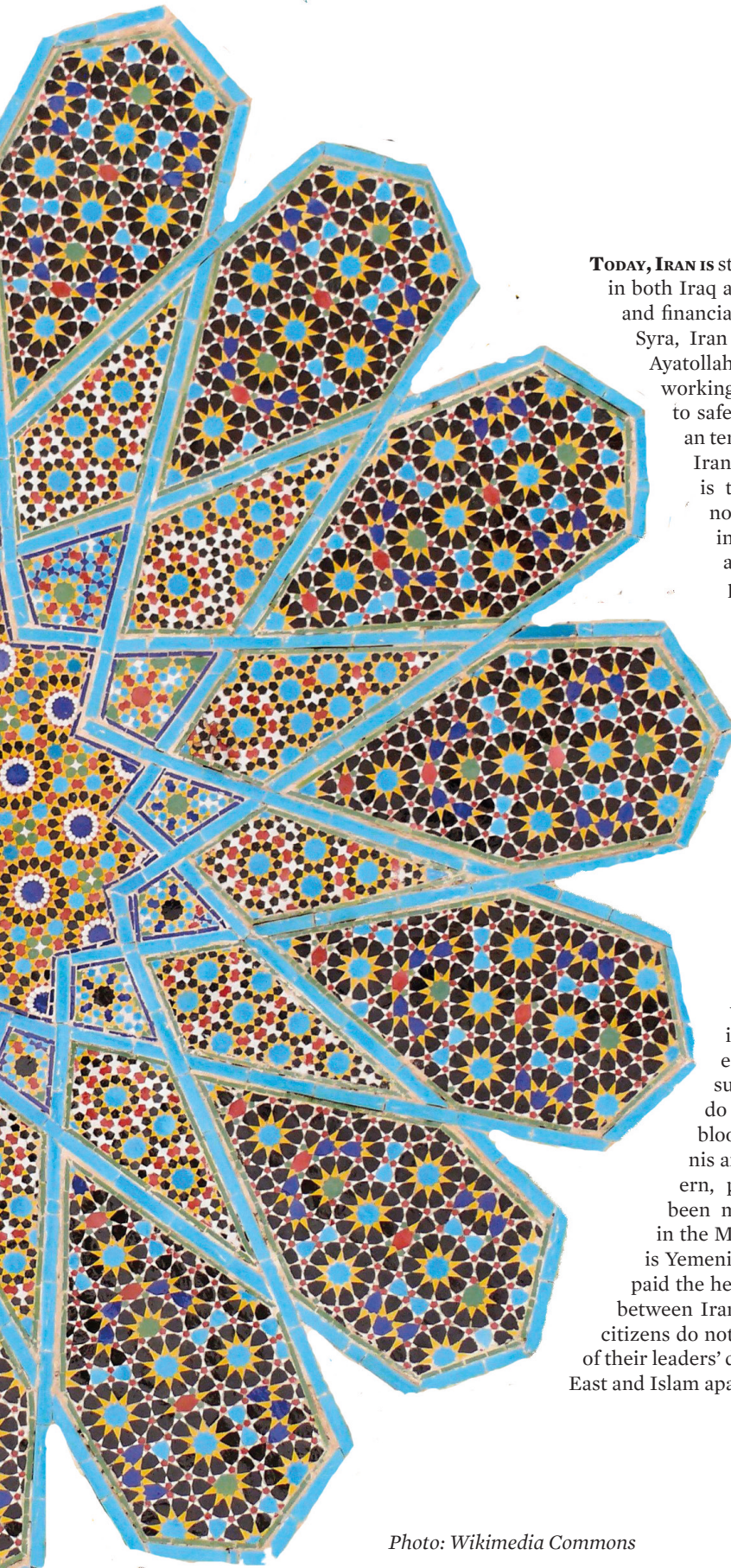
rally the Islamist extremist, anti-Shia Mujahideen were the first in line.

**WHILE SAUDI ARABIA** was involved in Afghanistan, Iran interfered in Lebanon— a country with a Shia minority. In 1982, in a hunt for armed Palestinian groups, Israel entered the country after rockets were fired from Lebanese territory. Israel advanced towards Beirut, shelling the city extensively. Iran sent their revolutionary guards in response, promoting Khomeini's cause among rural villages, spreading the ideological fight against their eternal enemy, Israel. What was born in that process was the militant and fanatic Hezbollah. Today, Hezbollah has grown to a powerful political party with a big militia with close ties to Iran.

**DESPITE CREATING SECULARIST** groups around the Middle East, what was to become crucial in the Iran / Saudi power clash was the US invasion of Iraq. The American aggression opened the Pandora's box of the Sunni and Shia divisions within Iraq. As Saddam Hussein was toppled and the Iraqi military was dissolved, former generals, and military personnel joined sectarian groups aiming at grasping power within the nation. Violence spiraled out of control and Iraq was engulfed by the ignited religious identity division driven by the Iranian and Saudi regimes. The power vacuum gave Iran the perfect opportunity to increase its influence in the region through the support of Shia militias, forcing Saudi Arabia to counteract. While supporting Sunni sectarianism, Saudi Arabia also inspired Saudi volunteers to go and fight the Iraqi Shias and destabilize the country. As the video of Saddam Hussein's execution was released with Shia hate chants at the former Sunni leader, the sectarian genie was finally let out of the bottle, elevating the dictator as a Sunni martyr, a hero, who stood up against the west and the Shias.

“THE AMERICAN  
AGGRESSION OPENED  
THE PANDORA'S BOX





**TODAY, IRAN** is standing on the side of the victors in both Iraq and Syria. By providing military and financial aid, and rebuilding schools in Syria, Iran is spreading the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini. Hezbollah is also working with Bashar al-Assad in order to safeguard Iranian interest, as Syrian territory is used as a land route for Iranian goods. Even more alarming is that military equipment could now flow from Iran through Iraq, into Syria and finally into Lebanon. This corridor is a way to pressure Lebanon's neighbour; Israel— through the support of Hezbollah, pursuing the ideological struggle against Israel.

**THE IRAN-SAUDI** divide is, of course, only one piece in the mosaic of factors behind the situations in the Middle East today. Unfortunately, this is a perspective often neglected in mainstream, western media. In order to comprehend this complex region, one needs to understand the forces at play locally. Saudi Arabia and Iran have never directly involved themselves in the fighting against each other, but rather fight through influencing and supporting proxy groups, which do the fighting on their behalf. The bloody conflicts between the Sunnis and the Shias are a form of modern, political violence. There have been more than a million casualties in the Middle East in the last decade. It is Yemenis, Syrians, and Iraqis who have paid the heavy price of the power struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Their own citizens do not feel the death and destruction of their leaders' dance of war, tearing the Middle East and Islam apart. ●





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# REENTERING THE MIDDLE EAST: IS RUSSIA HERE TO STAY?

The reinstitution of the Russian presence in the Middle East once again takes place not because of coercion or intervention, but upon invitation. It happened before during the Cold War and it is happening again decades after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. What brings Russia back after all these years? And is it here to stay?

**I**t is fair to say that decades have passed since Russia was considered a major player on the international scene. The overwhelming predominance of the U.S. has not been contested by its former antagonist for what has almost been 20 years. Similarly, the presence of Russia in the Middle East was barely visible up until recently. It seems now that Russia has been gaining back its previous influence and position in the region. But what has triggered Russia to come back and start contesting the region once again?

**THE RUSSIAN MINISTRY** of Foreign Affairs officially refers to one of Obama's replies during the press-conference in The Netherlands as a turning point in its foreign agenda. This event took place in March 2014, shortly after the change in the territorial status of Crimea. In his reply, Obama referred to Russia as "a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors, not out of strength but out of weakness," adding that he is "more concerned when it comes to the U.S. security with the prospect of a

nuclear weapon going off in Manhattan." One year after – in September 2015 – Russia starts a military intervention in Syria. But not on its own. It does it upon invitation of the internationally recognized Syrian government.

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RUSSIA IS JUST A  
REGIONAL POWER THAT  
IS THREATENING SOME  
OF ITS IMMEDIATE  
NEIGHBORS, NOT OUT OF  
STRENGTH BUT OUT OF  
WEAKNESS



**ACCORDING TO THE** 2016 foreign policy concept note, Russia's overall goal in the Middle East is to reestablish the lost status and role of the USSR. Other key points on the agenda include containment of extremism and fight against terrorism, cooperation with the resource-rich countries and attraction of foreign investments.

**RUSSIA HAS ALREADY** made progress in terms of "winning back" the loyalty of several Middle Eastern countries including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, and Yemen. The majority of countries named above have concluded a number of arms contracts with Russia, spiking its arms sales to record-high levels. Almost historically impossible, but Russia has also managed to normalize

the relationships with one of the NATO members, Turkey. The Islamic Republic of Iran, as one of the central figures and supporters of Russian policy in the region, on several occasions has provided Russians with access to their military air bases to support Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war. Furthermore, Russia's traditional support of the Palestinian National Authority in its right to self-determination and establishment of an independent state is an additional point explaining the quick return of Russia to the Middle East and the readiness of Arab countries to reestablish its ties with the legal successor of the USSR.



*Photo: Jenner Vanden Hoek*



**THE SECOND ITEM** on the foreign policy agenda – the fight against terrorism – is viewed by the Russian MFA as an issue of national security. Due to its proximity to the number of politically unstable states where terrorism flourishes, Russia takes a strong stand and commits “to contain, weaken and (ideally) crush manifestations of extremism and radicalism.” This statement is further extended to the major terrorist groups and organizations like Al Qaida and the ISIS in the foreign policy concept note.

**THE THREAT OF** radical Islamism has already taken its toll on Russia in the early 2000s in the Republic of Chechnya, the Republic of Dagestan, and some other parts of the Russian Northern Caucasus. Around 15% of the total Russian population are Muslims and there are several millions of labor migrants from the post-Soviet Muslim countries working in the country. According to the Federal Security Service and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, there are at least four thousand descendants from Russia and five thousand from the post-Soviet states that are fighting alongside ISIS as well as with Syria's state forces. Russia fears the possibility of these descendants coming back to Federation and repeating the havoc of the early 2000s.

**STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS WITH** the states possessing substantial hydrocarbon resources, namely Saudi Arabia and other members of OPEC in the region, is the third item on Russia's foreign agenda. The aim here is simple and intuitive: ensuring the stability of energy prices on the global market through coordination of actions with the oil and gas exporters.

“

THE MIDDLE EAST IS  
GOING TO BECOME A  
PROVING GROUND FOR  
RUSSIA IN ITS ATTEMPT  
TO REINSTATE ITS  
FORMER INFLUENCE

**RUSSIA DOES NOT** have any permanent allies in the region. It rather chooses to manoeuvre and meet its short-term needs in pursuit of a bigger goal – returning the influence on the global arena. Russia's goal now is to be viewed as a non-ideological, pragmatic player in the Middle East with diplomatic and military power to influence international affairs. Russians clearly understand their limitations in terms of means and financial resources in comparison with other major global players. Nevertheless, the blistering return to the Middle East has shown that we should not neglect the possibility of Russia regaining its recently lost power. Most likely, the Middle East is going to become a proving ground for Russia in its attempt to reinstate its former influence and role in the international arena. So, yes, Russia is here to stay until it fails or succeeds in its grand pursuit. ●



# THE TWO-FACED NATION

A new superpower with giant global companies and fancy sports events -  
or simply a cruel terror financier?  
-The Perspective discusses the Quest of Qatar.

**D**uring the last decade, the small emir state Qatar has moved its positions forward in the international arena. Backed-up by the seemingly endless oil supply, Qatar went from being one of the world's poorest countries to become one of the richest. Doha, the capital, transformed into an ultramodern city with grand science centres, shopping malls, and a newly-opened airport where the airline giant, Qatar Airways, has its base. In 2015, Doha was named as one of the "New 7 Wonders Cities"- a company of cities that "best represent the achievements and aspirations of our global urban civilization". What's more, the state-owned news channel, Al-Jazeera, is now one of the world's largest, and the 2022 FIFA World Cup is one of many huge sports events that will be taking place in the country. With the help of its oil, Qatar was on its way to establish a prominent position in the international political economy.

**THIS WAS TRUE** at least up until June last year when Saudi Arabia, the only neighbouring country, suddenly cut off their diplomatic relations with the small Middle Eastern state. Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates rapidly followed. The primary reason for the boycott: allegations that Qatar was a "terrorist financier". US president Donald Trump tweeted enthusiastically that this boycott might have been "the end of terror". Furthermore, the coalition demanded that Qatar cut its relations with Iran and close down Al-Jazeera; they regarded the news channel as a propaganda tool disguised as a serious, English-speaking media giant.

**"WHAT HAPPENED ON** the 5th of June was nothing else than an attempt to a Saudi-controlled coup d'état", Jamal Elshayyal, Middle East correspondent at Al-Jazeera said to Dagens Nyheter last summer.



**TO QATAR,** THE boycott was, of course, a national disaster. The countries within the coalition were all important trade partners, and suddenly, the powerful and rich Qatar stood quite alone in the region.

**THE ALLEGATIONS THAT** Qatar - by an American official called "the most two-faced nation in the world" - supports terrorism aren't new ones. In the U.S., which for a long time cooperated with Qatar financially and in defence politics, the emir state's stand against terrorists has been an issue for over a decade. During the first years of the new century, the U.S. Congress gained reports that a plethora of charities, based in Qatar, supported al-Qaeda by money laundering. In 2014, the Israeli diplomat Ron Prosor called Qatar a "Club Med for terrorists" in New York Times, claiming that the country is trying to build up a good reputation internationally by donating money to Western universities and host major sports events, while at the same time financing al-Qaeda, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.

**IN DECEMBER THE** same year, two American congressmen requested that the U.S. should implement economic sanctions against Qatar, and also gain full economical insight in the activities of individuals, charities, and organizations within the country, accused of funding terror groups. The congressmen pointed out the importance of a productive relationship between the two countries, and that Qatar had improved its counter-terrorism efforts, even though more was needed. In 2016, the Republican senator Mark Kirk criticised Qatar's lack of engagement in the so-called Jeddah Communiqué, a statement for counter-terrorism. Kirk added that Qatar remains a "permission environment for terrorist financing". Shortly after, the U.S. State Department presented a report that claimed that although Qatar participates in several counter-terrorism initiatives, "entities and individuals within Qatar continue to serve as a source of financial support for terrorist and violent extremist groups."

**THEN WHAT MADE** the coalition ready to act in June last year? According to the Financial Times, members of the Qatari royal family were captured by jihadist groups, which had Qatar paying billions in ransom. Sources claim that ransoms are a regular Qatari method of financing terror groups in Syria, and when this ransom was paid, it seemed to be enough for the coalition countries.

**ALMOST A YEAR** has passed since the diplomatic crisis escalated. Qatar is still standing in its lonely corner. In January, officials of Qatar accused the Saudi coalition of "economic warfare". In March when the country presented a terror list, which only included twelve Qatari citizens, the region was still not satisfied. The UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs tweeted that Qatar continues to prove that the main issue is its support of terrorism. Right before this edition went to the printers, reports came from Al-Jazeera that Qatar Airways during the past year has suffered substantial loss, due to the company losing access to 18 cities in countries from the coalition.

**WHEN THE EMIR** Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited the White House in April, however, President Trump took a completely different approach towards Qatar than the tweets from last summer. He called Al Thani a "great gentleman" and a "friend of mine", while also praising the counter-terrorism measures taken place by Qatar. Even though the American president is characterised by his shifting temperament, this reaction was still surprising and probably come as a relief for the Qatari regime. In four years, the "two-faced nation" will host the FIFA World Cup, the largest sports event in the world, and if this diplomatic crisis continues - nothing suggests that it won't - it will need all international support it could get. Qatar is still moving its positions forward, even though the country might take a detour. ●



# CLASH OF THE TITANS

Even though the Syrian civil war is decreasing, another deadly conflict have been looming in the war-torn country. The Israel - Hezbollah conflict is building up again as a response to Iranian military influence expanding in Syria.



*Photo: Spc. Nevada Smith*



Tensions are high, a variety of actors are involved, and the outcome will be devastating. Iran, who is a long time supporter and ally of Hezbollah, have been involved in a proxy warfare in Syria combined with Hezbollah since 2012. Hezbollah's increasing power in Lebanon, their Iranian support, and the involvement in Syria have been a gradually concern for Israel - who is feeling progressively cornered with the Iranian power growing combined with Hezbollah's new weaponry and influence. Israel argues that Iran has used the civil war as an opportunity to build up an perceptibly military influence in the region, and are now getting bit by bit involved in the conflict.

**NOT WANTING HEZBOLLAH** getting stronger, Israel is strategically targeting military shipments from Iran to Lebanon, seizing and destroying weapons in large amounts. Some weapons, however, make it to Hezbollah. Israel has mounted numerous air attacks towards Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria, trying to destabilize their network and cooperation. Although not officially at war in Syria, Israel has been increasingly more active in the aerial space in the country. Israel and Hezbollah share a lot of bad blood as the latter was established in 1980 to fight the Israeli occupation of Lebanon. Their relation is, and has been, high strung ever since, where in 2006 the two enemies fought a terrible 34-day war. Long time enemy of Israel, Iran, has steadily established influence in

Iraq, and now in Syria, they have in some ways successfully installed themselves all the way to the Mediterranean. This is worrisome for Israel. Not wanting Iran established in Syria like they had in the aftermath of the Iraq War, they are now trying their hardest to interrupt this development. Israel is saying that there is a zero percent chance they will let Hezbollah build a missile base towards Israel, provided by Iran.

**ISRAEL MADE A** "historic mistake" according to Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah when they attacked a Syrian airbase, killing at least seven Iranian soldiers. This has now put Israel in direct conflict with Iran, stated by Nasrallah. "The situation is very tense in the south and we are closer than ever to conflict," the Hezbollah official said. "The Iranians and Hezbollah are now at the borders of Israel in Lebanon and Syria; any upcoming war will be endless." As of late April 2018, there have been two military events that have escalated the situation further. Firstly, an Iranian drone was shot down in Israel. This was followed by a second round, where Israel bombed T4, an Iranian target, proving a truly shocking moment considering it was the first direct attack on the Iranians. What will the third round look like and who will commence it? Other factors include sources from the US and Israel stating that Iran is building long distance and precision missile bases in Lebanon, who shares a border with Israel, and is the biggest concern for Israel.

Benjamin Netanyahu - PM of Israel



Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah - Leader of Hezbollah



**HEZBOLLAH IS CURRENTLY** in Syria with roughly 8000 soldiers, about twice as many as in 2006. Both Iran and Hezbollah are deeply involved in the civil war, and Israel clearly does not want them gaining any influence in the area. In 2017, Israel started a 10-day military drill at the Lebanese border, the biggest one in 20 years. There are also tensions rising in regards to the new fence Israel is planning to build at the Lebanese border. “We are facing a new reality — the Lebanese Army, in cooperation with Hezbollah, the Syrian Army, the Shiite militias in Syria and above them Iran — are all becoming a single front against the state of Israel” said Israeli Foreign minister.

**EVEN THOUGH HEZBOLLAH** might be tired from fighting in Syria the past six years, the militant Islamist organization has also acquired new weapons and better military tactics. Hezbollah has been on the front lines in many battles in Syria, and has received a huge amount of training and expertise from fighting battles and training with the Quds special forces. By training and supporting other Shiite militants they have now gained a vast network of non-Lebanese fighters which includes Iraqis, Afghans and Pakistanis. Commentators from the civil war in Syria were surprised seeing such a high calibre military fighting from Hezbollah, who in the past have engaged in guerilla style warfare, where they have mostly relied on hit and run tactics. Hezbollah has several times showcased advanced military tactics and superior weaponry. Hezbollah

has refined its guerilla-style fighting and are now employing “counter-value strategies”. This strategy is deployed to target civilian and non-military targets in order to create chaos and instability. This tactic is difficult for Israel, who will go to extreme lengths to protect their civilian population and therefore will be unable to provide an appropriate military response. Israel has themselves improved on many fronts, and are now being regarded as one of the absolute strongest military powers in the region.

**A CONCERN FOR** Israel is Hezbollah’s new missiles, which they fear might cause huge destruction on Israeli soil. Same goes for Hezbollah, since the organisation is now much bigger, it is also an “easier” target for Israel and their advanced missiles, making the civilian casualties much greater.

**IN 2006, ISRAEL** tried to systematically bomb known Hezbollah whereabouts, but in 2018 this is not that easy, seeing that the organisation is spread all around Lebanon and Syria - consequently the probability of mass civilian casualties are high. Given Hezbollah’s influence and power in Lebanon, Israeli commentators say that Hezbollah and the Lebanese are very much the same. Israel points to that fact, saying that in the next military conflict Israel will not distinguish Lebanon and Hezbollah, as the country regards them as one and the same. A reason why this conflict yet is not full scale is be-



“WE ARE VERY READY FOR THE POSSIBILITY OF A WAR BREAKING OUT, AND IT WILL BE UNLIKE ANY OTHER  
- AHMAD, A HEZBOLLAH





*Photos: Wikimedia Commons*

“  
THEY (THE ISRAELIS)  
HAVE COMMITTED A  
GREAT FOLLY AND HAVE  
PUT THEMSELVES INTO A  
DIRECT FIGHT WITH IRAN  
- **SAYYED HASSAN  
NASRALLAH**

cause of the regional proxy wars, which are multi layered and very uncharted. The fear of dragging in a whole array of different actors might be dangerous.

**A MILITARY CLASH** between the military powers could also trigger other actors, such as the US and Russia, who have now something of a cold proxy warfare going on in Syria. However, one might not see a conventional full fledged war yet, armies versus armies, given Hezbollah's guerilla warfare history it might be cloak and dagger, possible dragging on for a very long time. A growing shadow warfare. The situation is complex and filled with uncertainty. With eight proxy wars ongoing in Syria, one might not realize the potential outcome of a new clash between these military giants. ●

# OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

As one closes one's eyes at night, the distant rumble of F16s can be heard, the bombings and shootings begin. Echoing into one's ears, the sounds bounce off the walls, just like the parkour free runners of Palestine do.

**F**ire flames throughout the city of Gaza as the sun sinks between half eaten buildings. Fear flows naturally, it is a city that never sleeps. Smoke surrounds the streets, drowning the war-torn buildings. Today, the Gaza Strip is home to 1.9 million individuals, including 1.3 million Palestinian refugees. The prospects for peace between the countries seem distant and non-negotiable. Tensions between Israel and Palestine have fluctuated throughout the 19th century but in the past decade the battle for land has been at its peak, escalating hostility. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, which is securing peace between the nations in the Middle East, was adopted in 1967. However, the several peace proposals and

land partitions between Israel and Palestine suggested failed to be noted as fair solutions. Since then, violent periods of conflict have been sparked, initiated by both the Israelis and the Palestinian Sunni-Islamic fundamentalist organization, the Hamas. The innocent locals of both regions are the most affected by the acts of aggression.

**MOHAMMED ALJAKHEIR**, a Palestinian parkour athlete who grew up in the hostile environment of Gaza, describes his journey from Gaza to Sweden as a refugee and the obstacles he encountered. He urges for the stories of individuals to be stretched across the globe. Safety, freedom, and opportunity have restored the conditions of his well being, conditions he did not have in Gaza. He states; "in Gaza I did not have the feeling of freedom, the dreams we had were deeply stored, locked away, as opportunity was distant and felt nonexistent. We never said 'goodnight' when going to sleep, knowing that we would wake up to the sound of bombs, shootings, and F16s. Now that I am in Sweden, I have opportunity, I feel everything is possible. I can feel peace, energy, the electricity, the water. I can travel to all edges of the globe and I can face all the inspiring people I want to face without being bombarded by questions from migration authori-



ties. Sweden has given me the possibilities to live like a human, I have the rights I feel every human deserves and I can practice my days and my life as I want.”

**MOHAMMED’S LOVE FOR** parkour was sparked in 2005 when he and his friend came across a documentary by accident, “we started practicing the sport outside and from that moment on we had an ambition stuck into our heads - we wanted to be the first to pursue parkour in Gaza - so we began training by the cemetery walls for at least five hours a day with very simple equipment such as sandbags and old car tires.” Unlike the parkour athletes of Gaza, athletes typically begin to train parkour in gyms with the safety nets of gymnastics equipment and trampolines, progressing step by step.

“**PARKOUR HAS  
ASSISTED ME IN  
OVERCOMING ALL MY LIFE  
OBSTACLES**

**I TELL MYSELF** how much much I want to jump over this wall, this problem, so I try until I achieve this goal.” This mindset has reinforced Mohammed’s perseverance and commitment to escape the hardships in Gaza and became the foundation of his motivation to come to Sweden. “We always learnt from our mistakes and never gave up on something we wanted, even when there was no equipment and no medical supplies for when we were in need of them. We faced many difficulties and injuries but we kept our heads high and did not believe in failure. I hope I’ll be able to change the factors that hindered me and instead enable the athletes of Gaza to develop themselves in sports without putting them at risk of dangerous injuries.”

**SOCIAL MEDIA PLAYED** an immense role in Mohammed’s strive for freedom. When he created “Parkour Gaza”, a YouTube channel which contains extreme forms of overcoming obstacles by jumping, running and climbing, his team grew into 14 professional members. Collectively, they captured films of the power and hope which persisted in Gaza, despite the difficulties, by displaying their high qualifications in parkour. “From that moment on people changed their mind about us and about what we do in Gaza. The social media and TV channels began focusing more attention on what we are able to do in Gaza, instead of what we are unable to do. This fueled motivation for all of us to develop more and surprise our viewers with more tricks.”





Photo: Jeremy Bishop, Unsplash

**DIGITALLY MAPPING THE** everyday life of the team, Mohammed was able to communicate more efficiently as well as make precious social connections within the parkour community. As their popularity escalated, the team began to receive invitations to join parkour events, competitions and the parkour community urged for the “Wallrunners of Gaza” to host workshops all over the globe. Nevertheless, the inconvenience and hardship having the status of a refugee restricted each one of them from attaining visas and being able to depart from Gaza, “When we were travelling we faced many, many problems when crossing between Gaza and Egypt. The borders were always flooding with people and this made our journey difficult, especially since we do not have an airport in Gaza.” After multiple applications in strive for a visa, Mohammed was able to receive visa acceptance and cross the borders through Egypt, describing it as “pure luck”.

**HE HOPES FOR** a unified Palestine in the future, and for more efforts to be made in resolving the relationships with Israel. Today he is united with his loving family in Sweden and is overflowed with empowering feelings of dignity as well as grate-

fulness. He depicts his dreams in a vivid image; “I am proud to say I worked hard to achieve my dreams and received what I believe I deserve. I am proud of what I have made and the crowd I have inspired, because today all the parkour athletes in Gaza put their goal in front of them and put effort into meeting these goals. I dream of assisting the

“ I DREAM OF HELPING  
THE PARKOUR ATHLETES  
OF GAZA BY STARTING A  
GYM

parkour athletes of Gaza by starting a gym so that the athletes can be more inspired to train and gain the opportunity to develop without facing the risk of drastic injuries.” ●



# ARAB SPRING

## WHAT HAS SHIFTED IN PEOPLE'S MENTALITY





"people want to overthrow the government"

Photo: Wikimedia commons

On one hand, the Arab spring failed to produce sustainable and functional democratic states. A lot of people lost their lives and most countries are less stable than before. On the other hand, the Arab spring brought about an important change in peoples' mindsets that cannot be reversed. It gave the region the perspective of further political development after decades of stagnation.

**O**n December 17th, 2010 a young man named Mohammed Elboauzizi set himself on fire, sparking the so called "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia. It triggered an unexpected series of political revolutions in the Arabic world, seeking deep reformations and the governments' resignation. The revolutions kept spreading from one country to the other; Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain in what became known as the "Arab Spring".

**EXCEPT FOR A** few, non-correlated incidents, the Arab region had never witnessed people's revolutions on such a scale. People had been living under authoritarian governments since the founding of their states, and they did not know any other system. Maybe partly because of that, people in the Arab world were impatient with their revolutions and lost faith in the process half way through. They had great expectations towards the movements and were hoping for immediate change. When this did not occur, many were frustrated and lost their motivation. Throughout history, revolutions rarely change the conditions immediately. In one of the most prominent revolutions, the French, instability continued for 10 years before people actually started to feel the difference.

**TUNISIA WITH 219** lives lost, was considered to have been relatively peaceful and is by many seen as the only successful revolution in the Arab spring. All others were brutal, destructive, and did not succeed to meet the peoples basic demands nor to satisfy the slogans that were raised (bread, freedom, social justice) which escalated to governments' resignations. Libya, Yemen, and Syria eventually

turned into civil wars and are still ongoing, causing the death of hundreds of thousands and forcing millions of people to flee. In Tunisia, four years after the revolution, the people elected an old president from the previous authoritarian system.

**EGYPT, AFTER ITS** first ever free election, has proven that it is very difficult to get rid of the deeply rooted regimes. The populations have been under these governments for so long that they feel safe and are afraid to challenge and, perhaps, even change it. How else would you be able to explain that Mohammed Morsi (the first free elected president) won the election against Ahmed Shafiq (the former prime minister of the government the people had just overthrown) by a very slim margin? Furthermore, the democratic system did not last for more than one year. On the 30th of June 2013, the people went out on streets supporting a coup by General Abdelfattah Elsisy who turned out to be a worse dictator than all his predecessors. Some might argue that it happened because they were not satisfied with the ideology, the reforms, and generally the performance of the new government, but they could and should have waited until the end of the elected government's term.

**DURING THE COURSE** of these revolutions, there was a major distinction between generations and how they acted. Older generations, who grew up under dictatorships, often believe in the principle of "a safe stable dictatorship is better than an unsafe unstable democracy". In fact, dictators are often using the same argument, and promote themselves as safeguards and fighters against terrorism. They create a situation in



which they will be looked at as protectors. Many from the older generation claim that the revolutions were mistakes, reckless movements by the youth who made their whole nation suffer for - what they perceive as luxurious - freedom and democracy. They say that with all the atrocities and instabilities they cause, they would never think of protesting and conducting revolutions.

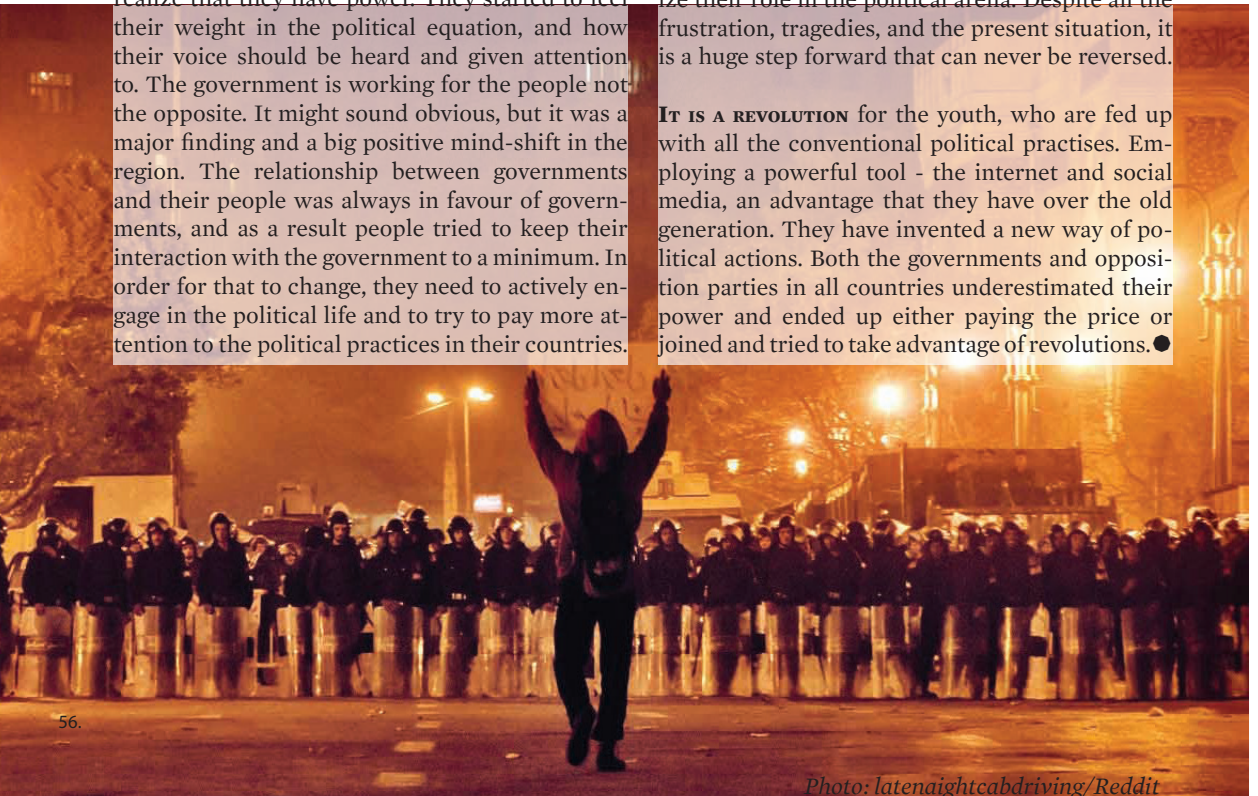
**THE YOUNGER GENERATION**, on the contrary, is exposed to and has active interactions with the outside world through various channels. Consequently, they are closer to the West and imbued with the Western values of democracy and human rights. They were convinced - to some extent - about the good outcomes and prosperity that democracy can achieve; economically, politically, and socially.

**LOOKING FROM A** broader perspective, the major mind-shifts after the Arab spring are overall positive. People in general, but mostly the youth, have started to get more involved in the political life. Previously they thought of it as a luxurious attitude that only rich, well-educated people could afford. Today they realize that their living is an integral part of politics. Politics is meant to address the needs and concerns of people. Another major positive shift was that people started to realize that they have power. They started to feel their weight in the political equation, and how their voice should be heard and given attention to. The government is working for the people not the opposite. It might sound obvious, but it was a major finding and a big positive mind-shift in the region. The relationship between governments and their people was always in favour of governments, and as a result people tried to keep their interaction with the government to a minimum. In order for that to change, they need to actively engage in the political life and to try to pay more attention to the political practices in their countries.

**ON THE OTHER** hand, there were also some negative mind-shifts, where some people - mainly for the older generation - lost faith in politics in general. They see it as a futile process. That could be - in addition to many other factors - a result of the lack of knowledge about how a state functions, how it is built, and how democracy works. Even that democracy - in its modern definition - was originally imported, and actually imposed by the West after the colonization era. But democracy is a system of governance and a process, it is not a discrete action, and reforming political systems requires time and sacrifices in order for it to start bearing fruit.

**OVERALL, DESPITE THE** frustration and the negative present picture that might appear now, this mind-shocking and disturbing experience was essentially needed to awake both people and governments in the region. It was hard and costly, and the international intervention failed to improve the situation. In fact, it made it worse, where countries like Syria and Yemen are now power battles. However, what has changed in peoples' mentalities and the lessons learnt from the revolutions have indeed changed the political equations. Governments have realized that they need to pay more attention to and start to care more about their people, and the people have started to realize their role in the political arena. Despite all the frustration, tragedies, and the present situation, it is a huge step forward that can never be reversed.

**IT IS A REVOLUTION** for the youth, who are fed up with all the conventional political practises. Employing a powerful tool - the internet and social media, an advantage that they have over the old generation. They have invented a new way of political actions. Both the governments and opposition parties in all countries underestimated their power and ended up either paying the price or joined and tried to take advantage of revolutions. ●



# AN EYE FOR AN EYE

In the wake of the retreat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, a long-awaited revenge is being carried out. Once oppressed by the Caliphate's forces, local civilians are now forming militias in order to hunt down suspected ISIS fighters. Assisted by Kurdish security forces, captured detainees are faced with the ultimate penalty.





One of the earliest legal charters is the Code of Hammurabi, the ancient king of Babylon. During his reign from 1792-1750 B.C. his code was carved in a pillar of black diorite, one of its most famous doctrines being the law of retaliation, more commonly known as “an eye for an eye.” For instance, a doctor found guilty of killing a rich patient would have his hands cut off. Likewise, a man who knocked out the teeth of a person from the same social class would have his teeth knocked out in return.

**THE MORAL PRINCIPLE** of retribution can be traced from the rule of king Hammurabi to present time in the state of Iraq. After several years of fighting, ISIS is on the run and has begun regrouping outside the country’s borders. Purged by unspeakable acts of terror and brutality, the time for vengeance has now come for all those who suffered under the authority of the Caliphate.

**A FORMER HOUSEWIFE** and widow to a husband murdered by ISIS, Wahida Mohamed has taken a role that is a rare sight in rural Iraq. She is now the commander of a militia south of Mosul in the town of Shirqat. During the intense fighting between the government’s forces and ISIS, Wahida’s militia supported in the cause of driving the latter’s troops out of Shirqat. Thereafter, collaboration between the national forces and Wahida’s men has been established, and the hunt for ISIS suspects has been evolving ever since.

**“I HAVE SHRAPNEL** in my head and legs, my ribs were broken, but that didn’t stop me from fighting,” Wahida said in an interview with The Independent. In addition, she also reveals what actions she and her militia are carrying out against former ISIS members to avenge the loss of the ones closest to them. “I fought them, I beheaded them, I burned their bodies”, she explains to CNN in an interview. The militia leader has put up both photos and videos on the Internet, one where she poses with a severed head, and another with two heads lying in a cooking pot.

**ACCORDING TO HUMAN** Rights Watch, strong evidence suggests that mass executions of ISIS fighters can be traced back to the early beginning of fall 2017. The perpetrators behind these mass killings are suspected to be Kurdish Asayish Security Forces from the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, according to a retired security force member. The prisoners, detained by Peshmerga forces, were reportedly handed over to the Asayish Security forces and driven out to a prison in the village of Shilgia, northwest of Mosul. From there, the prisoners were taken and executed near the flooded area of the Mosul Dam reservoir. Similar reports indicate further killings made by Asayish Security forces near the village of Bardiya in northern Iraq.

**AFTER THE DISCOVERY** of a mass grave in the vicinity of the town Zummar, Lama Fakihi, deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, believes that the number of victims due to these actions range up to the hundreds. She explains to Sveriges Television (SVT), that both Iraqi and Kurdish authorities should initiate an investigation of the allegations of mass executions and bring those responsible to justice.

**BELKIS WILLE**, investigator at Human Rights Watch, elaborates such actions must be subject to investigation of war crimes and the ones highest up in the chain of command must be prosecuted. “If Iraq wants to show that, unlike ISIS, it actually cares about victims, justice, and rule of law, it needs to develop a plan to fairly prosecute people for the full range of crimes they committed, and with a clear role for victims’ voices.” Although the Kurdish Regional Government has denied any involvement in the reported allegations of



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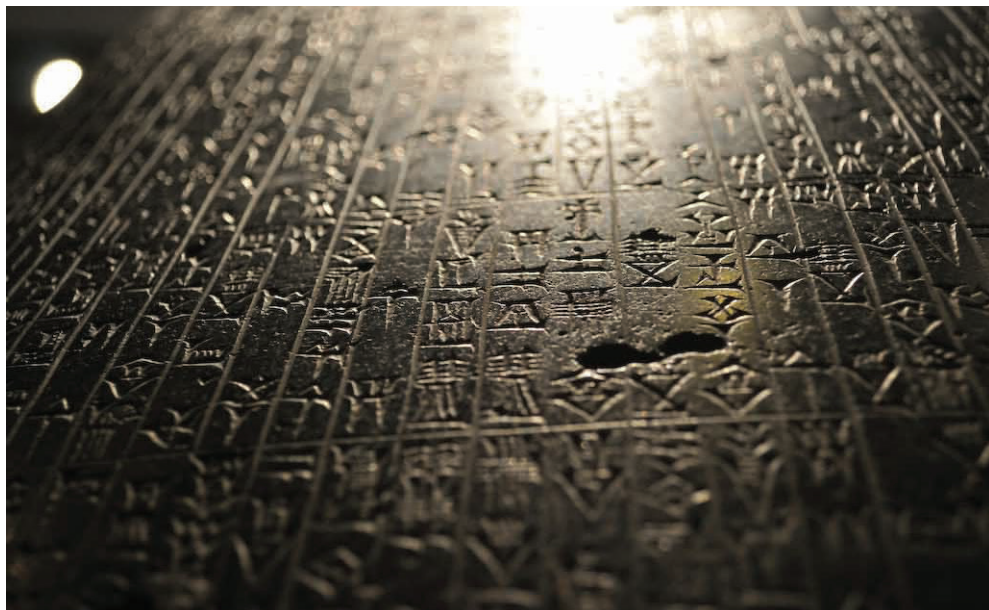
# I FOUGHT THEM, I BEHEADED THEM, I BURNED THEIR BODIES

mass executions, Wille says that the spokesperson for a Kurdish authority claims that these acts were carried out by a commander of a lower rank.

**THE DEAFENING SILENCE** from the Kurdish Regional Government regarding these acts speaks its own language. Apparently, these actions of retaliation carried out against former ISIS fighters are not seen as a disturbing element by the people who suffered during their ravaging campaign. Wahida Mohamed is one of them. “ISIS came and bombed and murdered, cut the throats of people and raped. You have probably seen all the movies. Small girls, five years old, they took as spoils of war. And in the Western countries they do anything to protect children, how would they tolerate people getting their throats cut?”

**THE MORAL PRINCIPLE** of retribution was carved in a pillar of black diorite over 3700 years ago. And yet former oppression can still bring about

vengeance in its wake. One could assume such a reaction to be originating from an instinctive, human response to past atrocities. Or perhaps as a cry from the past, proclaiming the unbroken grip of the Code of Hammurabi over the lands of ancient Mesopotamia. The contrast between king Hammurabi’s laws and the current international legal charter illustrates how the evolution of man’s mindset regarding punishment has not been a unified process. In addition, it shows the numerous challenges shifting norms of society pose against a common and globalized legal system. The roots to the principle of retribution go thirty-seven centuries deep. How does one successfully change such a norm without threatening to violate the cultural independence? Maintaining a balance between respect for cultural differences and a universal code is truly one of the great challenges of our time. ●





# BENEATH THE SURFACE

## DEMOCRATISATION IN IRAN

It has been over four months since the demonstrations in Iran sparked hopes that the country was on the brink of democratisation, but it was not its first political upheaval. In Iran, the voices for change are never far beneath the surface.

**T**o understand the struggle for democracy in Iran today, one must first understand the Iranians long and complicated history of attempts towards a political system that answers to its people. The first major uprising, The Constitutional Revolution, took place during the first years of the 20th century. The revolution resulted in the creation of a constitution establishing the formation of a parliament that was meant to check the powers of the Shah – the monarch. The new constitution was considered a first step in the direction towards a system working in the interest of the people rather than that of a few elites, but it only took two decades until the parliament had lost the control it was meant to have. Once again, moving 50 years into the future, at a time when Iran's oil industry was controlled by the British government, a nationalist movement sparked a second revolution. However, when the country's Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, a reformist who strongly supported the parliament, was overthrown in a coup largely initiated by the British intelligence service and the CIA, the Shah regained his power.

**NEVERTHELESS, IT DID** not take long until voices in Iran were speaking of winds of change again. In the late 70s, a coalition of students and academics, entrepreneurs and merchants, shop owners, and blue- and white-collar workers demonstrating against the Shah was the beginning of the Islamic Revolution. The movement was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini who many believed was a supporter of at least some sort of democratic rule. Religion was a central part of the values of the groups that supported the revolution, and their slogan read "Independence, Liberty, Islamic Republic". After the monarchy had been overthrown the Iranians voted for Khomeini and a constitution that placed him in the centre as the Supreme Leader. Khomeini was dedicated to new policies that in some ways worked in the favour of the poor, but he also actively made sure to get rid of and silence any opposition. Many of those who voted for the creation of an Islamic republic did not expect the extreme theocracy that emerged, and the third attempt to establish a more democratic political system became a disappointment. The nationwide protests against the new government began with the 1979 Kurdish rebellion, but over the years to

come the uprisings were brutally subdued and the new government began purging itself of the non-Islamist political opposition.

**DESPITE THREE FAILED** revolutions, the idea of reform remained alive. Throughout the years, voices in Iran have continued making their disapproval of election tampering, restrictions of the press, and violence towards the opposition heard. For example, in 1997, Iran elected Mohammad Khatami as president. He promised more freedoms and better rights for the Iranians. While he never challenged the Islamic republic and the regime itself, he tried to ease the country's control on political activity. However, steps in the right direction have often been followed by backlashes. When protests erupted at the University of Tehran soon thereafter, the regime's response was to send security forces into student dormitories. The harsh reaction sparked further protests, but the regime responded with intensified brutality. A large number of students was arrested, some never to return. The regime set up a massive counterdemonstration in support of the government and argued that democracy was leading to destruction and dangerous anarchism.

**KHATAMI NEVER MANAGED** to cease enough control to go through with his promises during his time as President. In the 2005 election, the conservatives won a majority and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won the presidential election. Ahmadinejad immediately cut short hopes for political reform. Instead, he introduced greater state control and militarization. Yet, he was also challenged by other politicians. Some candidates received widespread support, leading to open criticism of the government. One of them, Mir Hossein Mousavi, was expected to win, but despite the size of opposition rallies and the large turnout on the voting day, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner again. Nationwide protests broke out the day after. Iranians who had put their hopes in Mousavi, and eventually even those had been supporting other counter candidates, gathered. The protests became known as the Green Movement. Once again, the regime responded harshly and several demonstrators were killed, but nevertheless, the movement shook the country in a way it had not experienced since the revolutions.





*Photo: Wikimedia Commons*

**A DECADE LATER**, in December last year, the Iranians walked out on the streets once again and major demonstrations spread across Iran. The protests started with a focus on the failed economic and foreign policies of the government, but expanded to include political opposition to the current President Hassan Rouhani and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The demonstrations were met, just as previous upheavals had been, with violence and staged pro-government rallies. For the Iranian people, the scars from the past revolutions were still fresh, and the opposition had problems with mobilising, on one hand, themselves, and on the other hand, all social groups. In this instant, the complicated ethnic and religious composition of the Iranian society, cannot be disregarded. Furthermore, the fact that a large group of the Iranians does not support the present Supreme Leader and are criticising some of the policies of the government, does not mean that they do not support the clergy regime as such.

**ANOTHER ASPECT**, is the legitimacy of the clergy regime being based on Iran's internal religious criteria. As mentioned above, religion played a major role in the Islamic revolution, and is still very present in the lives of the Iranians. Nevertheless, within Iran's authoritarian system there is a democratic heart, with elective, presidential and parliamentary chambers, beating against the regime where the supreme leader, who holds the position for life, has the ultimate control. The system was

meant to combine democratic involvement with theocratic oversight, but in practice, the two often clash. The democratically elected president and parliament, let alone the media and the ordinary citizen, have no hope of checking the powers of the supreme leader, and they are regularly overseen by institutions staffed by clerics. Furthermore, the Iranian elections themselves are part of an impressive mechanism of social control. The Islamic republic's elite knows how revolutions start and what keeps them going. Consequently, they have designed an advanced system for demolishing social bonds, isolating citizens from each other, and raising the cost of any public action that might weaken the regime.

**EVEN SO**, the fragility of the political system reveals itself at times of crisis, and the clashes existing inside the Iranian elite become clearer. Despite the backlashes over the years, the Iranian's century-long struggle for a representative government has not been abandoned. Many of the countries that went through the Arab Spring had no alternative apparatus to replace their ousted ruling governments, but this is not the case with Iran. Surely, the opposition is scattered and disorganized, there are ethnic and religious divergences that cannot be disregarded, many Iranians still support the clergy regime, and it is difficult to say when or even if democratisation will eventually happen. However, one thing is certain; the hopes for reform remain just beneath the surface. ●

# UN INTERVENTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST — WHAT DOES THE PEACEKEEPER KNOW?



*Photo: René Kuijpers*

A total of 10 UN peacekeeping missions have been or are currently active in the Middle East. One of the longest has been the UNIFIL, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon. Tens of thousands of peacekeepers have served under this mission from 1978 until the present, one of them being my father. He recounts his experience as a UN-soldier in the Middle East.



**I**t was 1980 when my father was completing his basic training as part of his military service, then compulsory for all men in the Netherlands over the age of 18. After a couple of months of such training, recruits would be placed on active duty in one of the Dutch military operations. For most conscripts this meant servicing at an army post in West-Germany – it was the time of the Cold War, and the threats to the Netherlands and its allies were seen as coming from the east.

**HOWEVER, STARTING 1979,** the Dutch army contributed an infantry battalion to the UNIFIL, under the name of Dutchbatt. The UNIFIL peacekeeping mission itself had started one year prior, as an attempt to bring stability to the deteriorating security situation in South Lebanon. In 1975 the Lebanese Civil War had started; this very complex conflict can be seen as the result of the escalation of interior strife for power among different ethnic, religious and political groups in Lebanon, most of which were supported by foreign powers, such as Syria and Iran.

**THE SITUATION WAS** especially unstable in the south of the country after it had become the base of operations of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), then under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. From southern Lebanon, towns and cities in northern Israel were attacked, as well as alleged targets of pro-Israeli militias in Lebanon. As the Lebanese Army did not have the means to win a military confrontation with the PLO, it took control over the area and southern Lebanon became a de facto Palestinian free state. As Israel feared further attacks and a possible invasion of its territory, Operation Litani was being called into order, as to drive away the PLO from the Israeli-Lebanese border and to destroy its infrastructure.

**THE UN, HOWEVER,** saw the Israeli occupation as a further deterioration of the already unstable situation in the Middle East as a whole, and Lebanon in particular. The Security Council called for the restoration of Lebanon's sovereignty, and the establishment of the UNIFIL mission in Resolutions 425 and 426 in 1978. Even though Israel only gradually withdrew its troops from the area, and some of the occupied territories were carried over to its ally the South Lebanese Army, the UNIFIL started operations to restore security.

**MY FATHER, AT** the time a 19 year conscript from a rural area in the south of the Netherlands, had no idea of the complexities of the conflict when he got recruited for Dutchbatt. He says: "Sure, I

knew through the evening news that in Lebanon a civil war was taking place, and that there was involvement by Israel and the UN. But I had no idea about all the different militias that were fighting in Lebanon or why, for ex-



ample, the Syrian government would support the pro-Israeli militias in Lebanon. I just accepted, since completing my duty in an exotic-sounding place such as Lebanon seemed much more exciting and adventurous than completing it in Germany." Furthermore, participating in Dutchbatt was incentivized by giving conscripts a 6-month reduction in their compulsory military service.

**ABOUT 800 DUTCHBATT-SOLDIERS** at the time controlled an area between the Mediterranean Sea, the town of Haris, and territory occupied by the Defacto Forces (DFF), a pro-Israeli Christian militia in Lebanon. The most important task was to counter infiltrations in this area, and other UNIFIL-controlled territories, from the DFF, Palestinian Militias and the Israeli army, by the means of patrols, roadblocks and checkpoints. In practice, this meant that my dad spent most of his time

guarding the barracks or undertaking vehicle controls at checkpoints to counter the trafficking of arms into the area.

**“OF COURSE, IT** was far less of an adventure than what it seemed at first.” my father says. “It was not often that we intercepted arms that were being trafficked. Whether it was a Mercedes or a donkey passing by, we, of course, checked thoroughly, but some of them must have gotten through. Anyway, no major incidents really happened where I was stationed.” He considers himself lucky, to have not been involved in such incidents. Even though the troops came under crossfire almost daily, he and the other members of his unit never got seriously injured or saw anyone getting seriously hurt, or even die. Others were not so lucky; the story of the young conscript that died after the army truck he was in hit a landmine, haunted my dad and his companions.

**TIME AFTER DUTY** was mostly spend playing cards in the barracks. “Apart from an occasional visit to the local shops across the road from the barracks, we were not allowed out. Except, of course, for the time we were on official leave. During my leave, a comrade and I travelled to Cyprus, others in our unit went to the Lebanese capital Beirut. Some of those guys even shook hands with Arafat during a military parade! Of course, an entire spectacle was made of such a parade, just to show off” my father continues.

**“WHEN LOOKING BACK** at it, I see most of my time being there as pretty boring with the occasional moment of intense stress when you would hear another gunfire. Apart, of course, from the time we

were on leave and could travel.” However, when I asked if he still thought that was a good decision to fulfil his duty in Lebanon, rather than being stationed in Germany, he wholeheartedly agrees. “Actually, the most important aspect for me was the comradeship between me and the other guys. You are in the same situation, one completely different from what they – the recruitment officers – had made us believe. So you just try to make it through your time there, and you have only got each other to rely on. I am still in touch with most of the guys in my unit. Even though, we don’t see each other that often, as we live scattered all across the country, the reunions do provide for great times.”

**THE UNIFIL AND** other UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East are criticized by many for several seasons. For example, they are seen as lacking the hard power to enforce actual differences in the areas, or they are seen as taking sides, rather than being a neutral actor that protects the ‘common citizen’. My father does not completely agree with this: “I do think it did bring a certain degree of stability to the area. You know, local people living in the area were just left to be controlled by one militia after the other. When the UN-peacekeepers were there, they could continue operating their barbershop or herding their sheep, without fear of being attacked by them.” However, he also acknowledges that even after years of reading up on and watching documentaries about Lebanon, the Civil War, and the UNIFIL, he still does not grasp the full picture. “Perhaps it is best to leave it at that the intentions of the UN were as what they perceived the best interest of the Lebanese population. But what do I know?” ●



*Photos: René Kuijpers*



# FROM FERTILE TO FUTILE: THE BATTLE FOR PEAS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

For centuries the luscious Fertile Crescent region has been a hub for agricultural development and human innovation. Today, in the face of more modern ecological pressures, this former land of milk and honey has begun to take a sour turn.

**I**n the small farmer village of Terbol, nestled in the eastern pocket of Lebanon, a cadre of zealous researchers and hardworking farmers cluster into the confined space of a newly reconstructed herbarium. The group works tirelessly amidst sweltering temperatures, sifting through dusty folders containing the genetic material of flora that have flourished in the region for countless generations. Their mission: to hunt and breed ancient seed-strains capable of enduring the district's increasingly inhospitable climate.

**THE AGRICULTURAL TROOP** is a part of the 'International Center for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas' (ICARDA)—a non-profit development program, which combines traditional agrarian knowledge and experimental forms of agronomy to develop sustainable farming solutions for those living in forbiddingly hot terrains. And while the main offices of this research is now located in Lebanon and carried out by this small team of ecological experts, the organization's original operations

were once run by a much larger research society, scattered across the ill-fated city of Aleppo.

**UNTIL A DECADE** ago, ICARDA had played a leading role in Syria's agricultural development. With hopes of revitalizing the country's faltering agricultural sector, the Syrian state took an avid interest in the farming foundation's work. Its Aleppo headquarters were home to some of its most grandiose projects, most notably its central seed bank. The bank housed over 155,000 varieties of crops native to the Middle East—wild strains of assorted wheat, barley, and legumes whose genetic lineage can be traced back thousands of years. The direct impacts of these intensive undertakings were equally appreciable; for an extended period of time, Syria was almost entirely self-sufficient in wheat production.

**THESE GAINS, HOWEVER,** were not to be sustained forever. As tumultuous riots started sweeping the streets in early 2011, ICARDA's facilities contributed to the soaking up of what was left of the





*Photo: Alexandra Lukas Budimaier/Unsplash*

city's underground water, hastening a widespread drought. And when civil war began precipitating across the state, it didn't take long before ICARDA's prized scientific stations were seized. Forced to flee, what remains of these research centers is still uncertain.

**WHILE PROJECTS LIKE** those in Terbol have started anew, with the use of emergency seed copies tucked away in Norway for safekeeping, the case of ICARDA's abandoned Aleppo headquarters remains an ominous harbinger for the future of the region. The problems here are two-fold and inexorably intertwined: on the one hand, global warming has turned the once "Fertile Crescent" into splintered plains of sun-baked clay, and on the other, socio-political tensions threaten to unravel the very fabric of society.

**THE EXTENT TO** which Syria's agricultural crisis can be blamed for feeding the fire of the war is disputable. There is little dispute, however, over the impacts of global warming on the region. ICARDA's

establishments condense most heavily in the Middle East, a fact which underscores the incredible degradation of its formerly fecund land. Cutting across modern-day Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, this expansive cradle of agrarian abundance is recognized as the birthplace of agriculture and, with it, the dawn of human civilization. For thousands of years, its bountiful resources served as sources of stability for these complex human settlements, during times of both peace and peril. Only very recently has this harmonious cooperation between man and nature begun to turn sour.

**OVER THE PAST** half a century, extensive damming and drainage projects have plagued the Middle Eastern landscapes. As a consequence, the Fertile Crescent has seen a steady desiccation of its formerly overflowing Nile, Euphrates, and Tigris rivers. This has coincided with escalating temperatures and decreased periods of rain, leading to more frequent and intense water shortages. Taken together, these factors have produced large





*Photo: Alexandra Dominik/Unsplash*

expanses of arid and resource-poor land. Joining this unholy union of man-made meddling and global climate change, existing socio-political tensions have both contributed to and fed off of the deterioration of the local climate. In many countries, as the amount of arable land has diminished, that which is left has become increasingly valuable and used to fuel the rise and fall of political elites. In other words, war has made grains a priceless weapon, and owning their means of production a prerogative of the powerful, and in some cases even a prerequisite for power.

**ICARDA'S BATTLE** **THUS** highlights the complexity of challenges facing the Fertile Crescent. As global warming continues to turn up the heat, existing cracks of discord are likely to deepen. In this light,

finding adaptive solutions is pivotal, not only to abate tensions in these regions, but also to inspire areas around the world who might face similar fates in the near, inevitably warmer future. For ICARDA, the possibility of a sustainable future is rooted in seed banks— rich repositories of the region's telling history. Yet, this future is tenuous and ultimately shaped by the external forces of economics, politics and power. The future of sustainability in the region can be seen as a continuous crusade for peace and prosperity against the trials and tribulations of war and weather. ●

# THE ART OF WAR

Not everything stops when a war breaks out. People do not stop dreaming, falling in love, or creating art – all the things that make us intrinsically human. And yet, when thinking about the modern areas of conflict, we do not stop to consider the art that is created there.

The question is, why not?



When I sat down to write this article in the comfort of my family home, my mum was shocked by the choice of my topic. Why on Earth would anyone in this part of the world be interested in the Syrian cinema? Unintentionally, she had found the precise reason. Why do we allow the journalists to tell us everything we know about Syria instead of going straight to the source? We certainly do have the means. Do we simply forget that art thrives in the times of war and revolution? And there is arguably no more internationally-understood language than film – especially since the internet contributed to the viralization of videos.

**ACCORDING TO THE** Syrian filmmakers, there is no such thing as the Syrian cinema at the moment. There are only individual filmmakers, largely hesitant to be in any way connected to the official state production and distribution networks. However, Syrian filmmakers have decades of experience in working under authoritarian regimes. In the second half of the twentieth century, all Syrian films were produced by the National Film Organization. It provided training and took care of distribution, however, it also decided which topics can be brought up in films and which cannot. Despite that, this era became the “Golden Age” of Syrian cinema. As stated by one of the best known Syrian filmmakers, Mohammad Malas, “censorship is a gift because it forces one to look for new and more interesting structures through which to

speak.” Especially the fact that there used to be no clear rules about what is allowed to be spoken about and what is not, made the filmmakers both uncertain and, at the same time, unleash their creativity. After all, according to the filmmakers of that era, cinema provides a multitude of ways to engage with the forbidden themes implicitly.

**THE PROBLEM WAS** that this type of films was most appealing to the intellectuals, and the masses were expecting the film industry to represent the issues that concerned them in a more direct way. The change of power in 2000, when a young Bashar al-Assad became the President after thirty years of his father’s rules, provided a new hope for Syria, and, eventually, created the ways for the young filmmakers to work independently from the state structures. The key figure here was Omar Amiralay, who was directly involved in the short lived movement of Damascus Spring in 2000 and became famous for his groundbreaking documentaries that inspired plenty of others. That is also when the film started to be more appealing to the mainstream.

**AS EXPECTED, SYRIAN** cinema underwent significant changes starting in 2011. A lot of films started appearing online, many of them, not a form of art but rather citizen journalism, documenting important events and moments. It became a significant tool for the activists during the civil war and began to be called “emergency cinema”. However, the “artistic” filmmakers didn’t vanish, though the distinction between them is more about the way

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WHY DO WE ALLOW THE JOURNALISTS TO TELL US EVERYTHING WE KNOW ABOUT SYRIA INSTEAD OF GOING STRAIGHT TO THE SOURCE?



## THERE MIGHT BE NO MORE “US” AND “THEM.” JUST HUMAN BEINGS, SOME UNLUCKY TO LIVE IN A PLACE OF CONFLICT

of filming, length, and distribution, rather than the topics. Most of the best internationally-known Syrian films come from recent years. There are the full-length documentaries such as “Baladna al-Rahib” (“Our Terrible Country”) or “Taste of Cement”, as well as short films available online, like “Hadinat al-shams” (“The Sun’s Incubator”), and “Light Horizon.” Some of them follow the displaced Syrians, the refugees, and discuss more elusive meanings of freedom and revolution. Still, plenty of them focuses on themes that are more relatable to the Western audiences, such as relations between people, mental illnesses, or equality.

**PLENTY SYRIAN FILMMAKERS** nowadays operate from abroad. Avo Kaprealian filmed internationally-recognized “Manazil bela abwab” (“Houses Without Doors”) in Lebanon. Talal Derki fled to Germany with his wife and son but continues to travel back and forth between Syria and Berlin, which is quickly becoming a center of the Syrian film industry abroad. Finally, the best known Syrian female director and cinematographer Hala Al-Abdallah Yacoub moved to Paris after spending fourteen months in Syrian jail in the 1970s. Ever since she has worked with a number of famous Syrian filmmakers, often commuting between France and Syria. What makes her story even more unique is that not only is she one of the few females in the male-dominated industry, but also that her best known works (including “I Am the One Who Brings Flowers to Her Grave” and the most recent “Farouk, Besieged Like Me”) were released after she turned 50.

**WHAT ALL THESE** films have in common, is that their plots – mostly real life, but also fictional – focus on the human experience. Unlike with the earlier Syrian artistic masterpieces from the twentieth century which subtly imply some undercurrent issues and problems, now you do not need a degree in Film Studies to deconstruct the hidden meanings – the recent Syrian films often scream bluntly in your face what is wrong. So why is it nearly impossible to watch a Syrian film in a cinema? Sure, it might simply be the question of entertainment – these are not easy films to watch. However, plenty of people closely follow the happenings in Syria on news, and the films do not show a different story. They simply show them through the eyes of everyday Syrians, not Western (or non-Western, for that matter) journalists and politicians. This change of focus from the whole country or city to individuals brings in a human aspect and makes the stories of war much more relatable. They, too, have loved ones, friends, and families. They have dreams and aspirations, fears and limitations. They might suffer from heartbreak or deal with mental illnesses. Most importantly, there might be no more “us” and “them.” Just human beings, some unlucky to live in a place of conflict.

**THEREFORE, THE REAL** question is: Are we too scared that we might relate to the people who we work so diligently to differentiate from us? Are we too scared that we might find them too similar to us? Are we too scared, that at the end of the day, we are all human? ●





# A TALE FROM AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan, a country with a turbulent history. But what is really going on in Afghanistan? In this interview by Sofia Gjertsson, Andreas Stefansson, secretary general of the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, tells us more about his work in Afghanistan.

**T**he Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) has been active in Afghanistan since 1982, working with rural development, health care, education, gender equality, and much more. They believe in a long-term approach to development. Andreas Stefansson started working for the organisation in 2000. In an exclusive interview with *The Perspective* he tells us about how he ended up in Afghanistan, the challenges the country faces, and the development that SCA, among others, have contributed to over the past decades.

**As I understand it, you used to study in Lund. How was that experience, and what was the best falafel place?**

It was great, I loved Lund. It's where I realised my interests in international development. I think a lot of what happened outside the classes was as useful as what happened in the classes and the literature. I think the one I used to go to was Falafel Kungen, next to Ariman's. That was a regular stop for the late-night falafels before you headed home.

**How did you get involved with SCA? Was it just something you aimed for or did the opportunity fall into your lap?**

I realised, throughout my studies, that I wanted to focus on development work. My dad was a member in the Swedish Committee and used to get their magazines. I saw they advertised for what they called 'development workers' to be placed in rural areas. I found it extremely fascinating, to end up in the middle of nowhere in Afghanistan, while the Taliban were still controlling the country. So, I applied, and luckily, I got it.



I came to Afghanistan in 2000, and everything changed in the first few years, after 9/11. It went from being an area you felt had been forgotten, to suddenly having the whole world looking at Afghanistan. I got to spend a lot of time in the countryside, where most Afghans live. It was fascinating, and I fell in love with the country. I got a lot of respect for what the Swedish Committee does and how much it means to people.

**What did you find challenging when you first came to Afghanistan and also now?**

It took quite some time to understand how society works. In the absence of a functioning state, a lot of Afghanistan has been locally self-governed, built on traditional systems ruled by different influential people, such as local elders. An organic society with ancient traditions takes time to understand. I have now lived in total around 10 years in Afghanistan and I think something fascinating about this country, which also makes some of us go back, is that you never fully end up understanding everything. Today many of the challenges are related to a combination of poverty, conflict, and different countries trying to influence Afghanistan. You also have challenges with the opium mafia, the corruption, the political games. But it's also what makes, I suppose, Afghanistan intriguing.

**Do you feel as if you have seen overall improvements for the people in Afghanistan, in what sectors?**

Yes, there has been tremendous improvements, across different sectors. Though there are certain areas that improved for a while, but then deteriorated, for instance security, the police force, the army, and their lack of respect for human rights. However, infrastructure has had an enormous development over the past 15 years. There are now paved roads between most of the cities, whereas before you would have to travel on dust roads. Also, communications and basic services have improved. When the Taliban controlled the country, there were only a few hundred thousand children in school, today there are around 7 million and 40 percent of them are girls. In some conservative areas there is still some negative bias towards girls going to school, but also that is changing. Now children even in remote villages know some reading and writing which means a big change for rural areas. It helps them to organise and mobilise the local community in a different way, develop their

economy, interact with other regions and authorities, becoming more active in democracy, claiming and fighting for their rights. Health services have also improved, now two thirds of the country have access to basic health care. The Afghan Parliament has around 25 percent women representation, which is higher than the American Congress. Even though the country has a lot of challenges, there is still quite some development that has taken place.



| Andreas Stefansson

**How does SCA's work change in regard to development theories? Do you implement new theories and trends or follow your own thing?**

Well, I think we, of course, are influenced by development theory and the concepts that become more prevalent during certain periods. Though I hope that the theories that come out are based on studies of the best practices. For example, "empowerment" is kind of a buzzword, but it makes sense once you open up the conceptual box. There are different concepts and theories that are sometimes pushed through by the big development actors and sometimes they make sense and sometimes they are more of buzzwords.

The gender equality agenda is sometimes considered by Afghans as donor driven. For us in the SCA, we talk about gender equality as one of our core values. We focus a lot on empowering women, girls, children, and people with disabilities, the marginalised groups. We aim at taking small steps over a long period of time towards giving people a greater chance at influencing their own lives and taking control of their development.

I must add that most of our Afghan colleagues take their faith very seriously and, when working with the rights based approach and our gender and equality work, many of them articulate these values from within an Islamic perspective and through progressive ideas they find in their own religious context. This makes it easier for the Afghan population to relate to our work on gender equality.

**As I have understood it, the people do not feel that the state is accountable to them, but rather to the countries giving aid to Afghanistan. What are the implications of this in, your opinion?**

The Afghan state has always been quite fragile and very dependent on support from the outside. The state has had weak links to its own population, struggled to get taxation and basic services going, and faced difficulties getting a presence outside Kabul and control over the territory. The country has also been a kind of buffer state between power spheres, such as the British colonial India and Tsarist Russia, and during the cold war between the US and Soviet Union. Different powers have had interest in supporting and funding the state to keep it as a buffer, but they have also been pull-

ing Afghanistan in different directions. After the Soviet invasion in 1979 and the civil war that followed, the small state that existed collapsed. After 2001, there is now a process of state building. Of course, in the long run the government, and I think the current president knows this, needs to build and strengthen a social contract with its citizens where the state provides safety, rule of law and services, and the population pays taxes and accepts the state as legitimate. But due to its dependence on foreign support, there is currently still the risk that the state is more accountable to external donors than to its population.

**Would you say, that the foreign powers meddling in Afghanistan are somewhat responsible for the situation Afghanistan is in today?**

For sure, though it's double, because the tremendous developments over the last two decades are also due to foreign support. After 2001, Afghanistan had the opportunity to start afresh. Without the international community, Afghanistan might have continued being a forgotten and underdeveloped area in the world. However, international interference has also been part of creating the mess which Afghanistan has been in the last 30-40 years through direct invasions or proxy wars. Afghanistan has a diversity of ethnic and religious groups which some foreign powers have exploited, putting them against each other.

**On a final note, do you feel optimistic about the long-term future, around 100 years, of Afghanistan?**

I'm glad you mentioned this because if you take a long-term perspective, two or three generations, yes, I'm optimistic. I think that all countries and all people that go through war and suffering sooner or later get out of it. The paths towards development are many and conditions vary in different parts of the world. Afghanistan has a long journey ahead, but the basic structures that one day will sustain peace and development are slowly being put in place. Of course, there are a lot of clouds ahead, but Afghanistan is a country with tremendous potential and courageous people, and I really do believe that one day it will be a country free from poverty, violence, and discrimination. And the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan will keep working with and for Afghans until that day comes. ●



## CENTRE FOR EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIAN STUDIES

# Revisiting the Chinese World Order: Soft Power or the Imperialism of Nation-states

Welcome to an open lecture with Professor Prasenjit Duara,  
Duke University

There are unexpected convergences between the imperial Chinese order and the emergent global order. The historical evolution of forms of global domination since the end of the 19th century saw modern imperialism succeeded by what I have called 'the imperialism of nation-states' which represented the principal form of domination among states during much of the 20th century and in some form also through the Cold War. Despite continued warfare conducted by the US and others, post-Cold War geopolitical dominance is said to be shaped by the pull of 'soft power.' While soft power is an inadequate concept, it suggests a new balance between expressions of violent power and other modes of domination. I will examine the extent to which this notion—which is popular in the Chinese media-- has any purchase in understanding the rise of China.



Prasenjit Duara is the Oscar Tang Chair of East Asian Studies at Duke University. Born and educated in India, he received his PhD in Chinese history from Harvard University. He was Professor of History and East Asian Studies at University of Chicago (1991-2008) and Raffles Professor and Director of Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore (2008-2015). His latest book is *The Crisis of Global Modernity: Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future* (Cambridge 2014). He was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Oslo in Sep 2017. He is Vice President, Association for Asian Studies, 2019-2020.

Light refreshments will be served.

**When:** 21 May, 13:15 to 15:00

Please register by 14 May at the latest

**Where:** Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Asia Library, Sölvegatan 18 B, Lund

