

A close-up photograph of a person's face, focusing on their green eyes and the top of a white medical mask. The mask has yellow straps. The person's skin is fair, and their hair is dark.

# THE PERSPECTIVE

Nº 03

NOVEMBER • 2020

## **EU BORDERS**

Boundaries of European solidarity?

## **DOCUMENTING THE UNDOCUMENTED**

How do Mexican immigrants  
experience the COVID-19 pandemic  
in Los Angeles County?

## **THE HEALTHCARE HEROES OF THE BEIRUT BLAST**

And why they want to leave

# HEALTH/SECURITY



# EDITORS' NOTE

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Dear reader,

Welcome to THE PERSPECTIVE, the print publication of The Association of Foreign Affairs or, in short, UPF. This issue marks the first magazine of our time as Editors-in-Chief – so by the time you're reading this, we have probably resurfaced from a well-deserved rest.

We're living in wild times: a new decade, a new global pandemic.. and we are constantly left wondering what this may mean for global health and security overall? That is why we have decided to dedicate this issue to topics relating to health and security.

Our vision for this year is to highlight the off-mainstream topics. Delving into underreported issues and aiming to create compelling content that keeps your mind boggled, that teaches you new things and that allows for discussion.

Our reporters, sub-editors and layout-editors have gone above and beyond: From interviewing undocumented immigrants in the US, to delving into the cybersecurity dangers the health sector is facing, investigating the Abraham Accords and speaking to a volunteer ambulance driver in Beirut.. all wrapped in a fresh layout.

We truly believe you're in for a good read!

Producing the magazine is really a team effort and we're proud to have you flicking through the embodiment of the hard work our committee members have put in. With all that said, go, dive in!

Stay safe and enjoy the read!

Yours truly,

Victoria & Agnieszka  
Editors-in-Chief



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# PRESIDENTS' ADDRESS

February 8th marked the 85th anniversary of UPF. In a time where celebrations were supposed to take place, we were instead faced with a new way of living that entailed drastic lifestyle changes. We find President Obama's last State of the Union address highly applicable to describe the times we live in:

*We live in a time of extraordinary change—a change that has reshaped the way we live, the way we work, our planet, and our place in the world. On that note, we sincerely hope that you who read this have, to some extent, got to experience positive change.*

Struggling with the adjustment to a new way of operating, this year started a bit slow for the organization. Saying that we have started to get a hang of it and our operations kicked off properly. For this, we want to praise our entire board—for their hard work and great creativity during the past months. It is difficult enough to conduct successful events during normal circumstances. Therefore, managing to do so during a pandemic is extremely impressive.

Furthermore, we want to emphasize that you, our members, are the reason we are able to continue our operations. For this, we would like to thank all of you—everyone who stayed with us as well as all new members—thank you for wanting to be a part of the UPF community!

As the Presidents of UPF, our main job is to manage the board and ensure that we work for the interests of you, our members, and therefore, we try to carefully consider them in all aspects of the work we conduct. Our vision is to create a community in which you are encouraged to speak your voice and supported in achieving your ambitions.

Inclusivity, growth, and sustainable engagement are issues close to our hearts. Inclusivity is something we consider a core component of running an organization—to make sure that everyone feels welcomed and included. As for growth—our aim as an organization is to create a platform for all students who are interested in growing their knowledge of foreign affairs, no matter their level of previous experience or knowledge. We try to keep sustainability in mind throughout all of our operations, to make sure that engaging in UPF is fun and educating, never a burden.

Lastly—we are extremely excited about this operational year. Saying that we are not concerned about leading the organization through these difficult times would be lying, but we assure you that we will do our very best to make sure the organization gets through this, stronger than before. We look forward to getting to work together with all of you on making this another great year in the history of UPF!



Soha Kadhim & Hedda Carlsson  
President & Vice President

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Gabriella Gut



# COMMITTEES OF UPF LUND

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## ACTIVITY

The Activity Committee plans study visits, sittings, pub nights, and physical activities such as hiking & ice skating. Its field trips featured the Nobel Peace Prize Center in Oslo, Christiania, the UN headquarters in Copenhagen, and the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Activity's biggest event of the year is the UPF ball which is usually held during the spring term.



HENRIETTA  
KULLEBORN

MILJAEMILIA WALA

## CAREER

The Career Committee gives our members an insight into a career in foreign affairs, the pathways to get there, and provides networking opportunities. It offers two different programs that take place in the Spring Semester: The Prep Course and The Mentorship Programme.



EMMA BAKER  
ANNA MIZSER

## LECTURE

Every week throughout the academic year, the Lecture Committee invites guests to speak on a diverse range of topics. As a member of UPF, you can attend all of our lectures for free, and the lectures are open to everyone at an entrance fee of 50 SEK for non-members. Past lectures notably featured Kofi Annan, Margot Wallström, and Jan Eliasson.



DEMI BYLON  
KARIN MIZSER  
FRIDA LINDBERG

## MAGAZINE

The Perspective is our printed, and quarterly published magazine. We aim to inspire and to encourage our writers & readers to develop an interest in politics and to gain an alternative insight into the world of foreign affairs. The Perspective features a variety of grasping stories coming from both national and international politics.



AGNIESZKA GRYZ  
VICTORIA BECKER

## POD&RADIO

The Pod&Radio Committee produces live radio shows (broadcasted every other week) focused on ongoing news and developments—both foreign and domestic. When it comes to podcasts, you are free to produce episodes about virtually anything relating to international affairs! We love seeing, listening to, and delving into diverse and unexplored subjects.



CLARA KARLSSON  
SCHEDVIN

MAXIMILIAN  
ONKENHOUT

## PR

The Public Relations committee is responsible for all things revolving around the marketing of UPF Lund and manages the Association's social media and website. UPF can be found on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Active members are encouraged to give their input on design matters, take over social media, and take the lead in their own creative projects!



GABRIELLA GUT  
ROJA MOSER



# COMMITTEES OF UPF LUND

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## TRAVEL

Every year, UPF Lund organizes two trips—one short and one long—to places of political interest all around the world. Previous destinations included Washington D.C., London, Cairo, and Athens to name but a few. On a typical UPF trip, we are entertained by an abundance of meetings with relevant actors of political and cultural interest.



**MAGUETTE FALL  
THEA SANDIN**

## WEBZINE

The Webzine is the online branch of THE PERSPECTIVE. Anyone who wants to gain experience in writing—or to utilize their already developed skills—is welcome to join the Webzine at any time. Having an open and welcoming environment is very important to us, meaning that our active members are a diverse bunch of wonderful writers!



**KERIME  
VAN OIPIJNEN  
  
DANIEL BERGDAL**



## THE PRESIDIUM

The Presidium consists of the president and the vice president. Furthermore, the secretary who is in charge of sending out our weekly newsletter—among other things—the treasurer who is in charge of all things finance as well as the UFS Representative who is the bridge between UPF Lund and UF Sverige, our umbrella organization.

**PRESIDENT: SOHA KADHIM  
VICE PRESIDENT: HEDDA CARLSSON  
SECRETARY: CARL COTTON  
TREASURER: LOVISA LUNDIN ZIEGLER  
UFS REPRESENTATIVE: MARA GLAS**

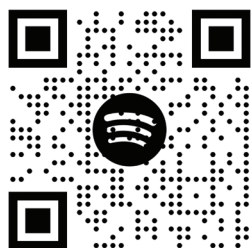


**THE UPF BOARD OF 2020/2021**



# UPCOMING UPF EVENTS

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## POD&RADIO

If you want to take in foreign affairs news via audio, please have a look at THE PERSPECTIVE Pod&Radio Committee!

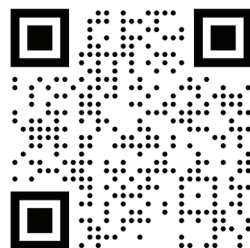
We publish podcasts on a number of subjects related to foreign affairs such as climate policy, extremism, international diplomacy, war crimes and many more. You can find our podcasts on Spotify as well as [theperspective.se](https://theperspective.se)



## CAREER

The UPF Prep Course provides an intimate opportunity to learn about internationally aimed career paths. It consists of a series of seminars with a variety of speakers and will be taking place throughout the spring semester. Get inspired and get the chance to speak those working in your dream job!

APPLY HERE UNTIL NOV 15:  
[tinyurl.com/y59zcfol](https://tinyurl.com/y59zcfol)



## WEBZINE

THE PERSPECTIVE is also available online.

The Webzine is publishing new articles every Tuesday! You can find the articles on Facebook as well as on [theperspective.se](https://theperspective.se). Scan the QR code and you will be directed straight to the latest news on foreign affairs and contemporary politics.

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## ACTIVITY

This December, the Activity Committee will hold their first in-person sitting of the semester. We are bringing back the Nobel sitting theme and hope to see many members attend!

The sitting will be organized in a corona-friendly manner. The date for the event is December 11, so follow our social media to stay tuned!

## DO YOU WANT TO BECOME A MEMBER?

Memberships are FREE for the 2020/2021 operational year.

You will get:

- Access to all lectures
- 4x THE PERSPECTIVE
- Access to opportunities e.g. the Prep Course and Mentorship Programme
- Right to vote in meetings

You will also be able to join and participate in any of our committees.

Requirements:

Studentlunds membership

If you are not a member yet, you can register online or sign up at a nation or student union (Studentkår).

The only exception are Swedish gymnasium students (Secondary School).

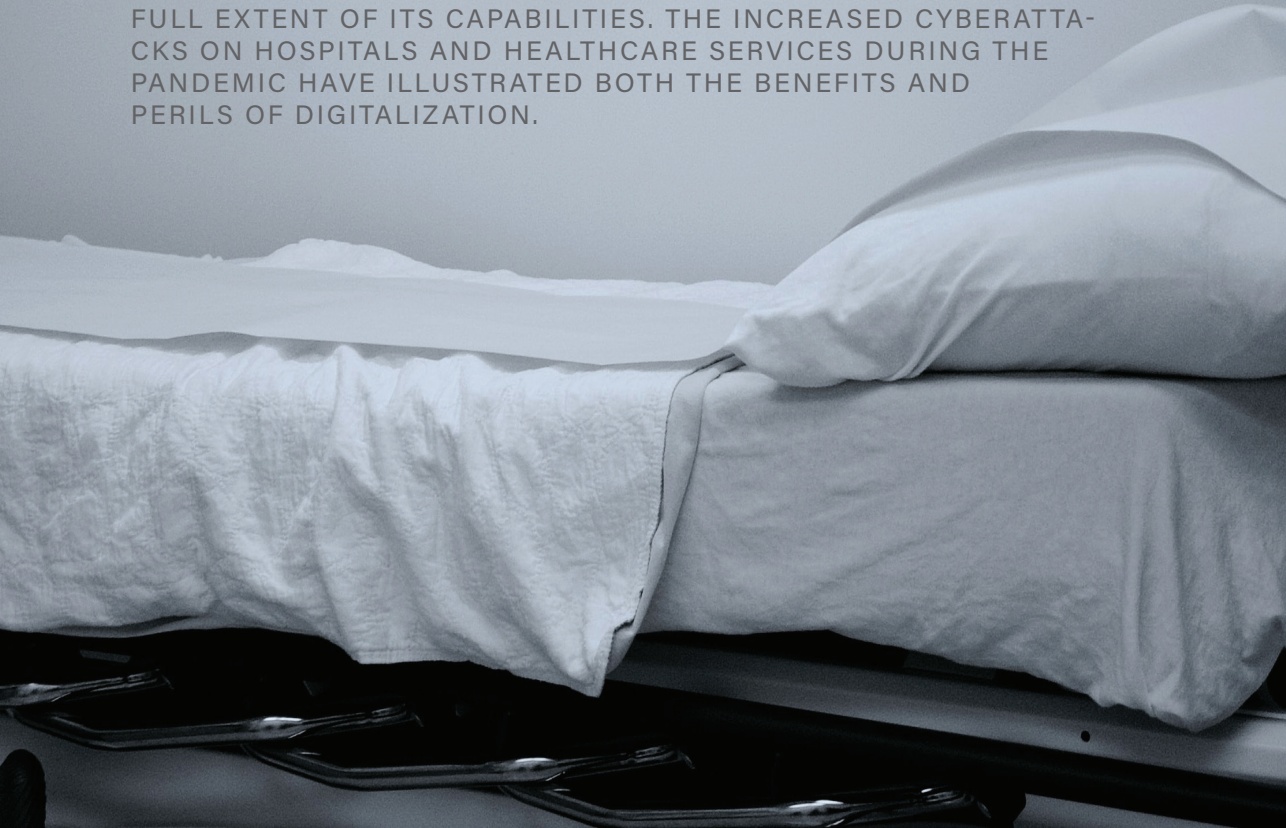
Joining UPF Lund means you will become a part of a student association that will help make your time at Lund University the time of your life!

ENYA ZIBELL | FEATURE

# HACKING HOSPITALS

THE DANGERS OF  
OUTDATED  
CYBERSECURITY

THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC SWEEPING THE GLOBE HAS BROUGHT MANY CHALLENGES RANGING FROM QUARANTINE AND ONLINE SCHOOLING TO CYBERSECURITY THREATS. WHILE DIGITALIZATION HAS ENABLED SOCIETIES TO TRANSITION TO ONLINE OPERATIONS, IT ALSO HAS ITS DARK SIDE. TECHNOLOGY IS USED WITHOUT KNOWING THE FULL EXTENT OF ITS CAPABILITIES. THE INCREASED CYBERATTACKS ON HOSPITALS AND HEALTHCARE SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC HAVE ILLUSTRATED BOTH THE BENEFITS AND PERILS OF DIGITALIZATION.





January 2020 not only marked the start of a new decade, it also marked a new way of life. The rapid digital adoption driven by COVID-19 continues to impact all aspects of life, especially the healthcare industry. While hospitals have been fighting tooth and nail to keep patients alive and ensure healthcare professionals' safety and well-being, the industry faced an unprecedented risk of cyberattacks: most commonly in the form of phishing emails and ransomware, a type of software blocking access to a computer system until a payment has been made.

While most people feel immense gratitude towards hospitals and healthcare workers, as seen by residents in Spain and Italy who applauded from their windows, cyber attackers treat the pandemic as an opportunity to exploit, victimize and profit from the vulnerabilities of the medical system. Their malicious attacks restrict access to clinical and research data needed by medical workers and researchers, resulting in financial losses, privacy breaches and in some cases, even death. The International Criminal Police Organizations (INTERPOL) Secretary General, Jürgen Stock warned that with increased online dependence "cyber criminals are developing and boosting their attacks at an alarming pace, exploiting fear and uncertainty caused by the unstable social and economic situation created by COVID-19."

At the onset of the crisis, there was an increase in phishing emails and WhatsApp messages directed towards the healthcare sector. Between January and April alone, INTERPOL estimated some 907,000 spam messages, 737 malware incidents and 48,000 malicious URLs—all of which were related to COVID-19. These were sent under the guise of important information related to COVID-19, including fake claims of having N95 masks and selling lifesaving ventilators.

These attacks threatened hospitals' ability to provide patient care, thus putting patient safety at risk.

In April, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published information regarding the increasing threat of phone scams and phishing attacks as multiple hospitals and healthcare workers in the USA had fallen victim to these malicious attacks. Similarly, The Japanese Times on October 19 reported that some Japanese research institutions developing a COVID-19 vaccine were hit by phishing emails believed to be sent by Chinese cyber hackers.

Hospitals are particularly attractive targets for increasingly sophisticated ransomware attacks: They collect and store large volumes of sensitive data, including names, personal identification numbers, home addresses and birth dates. Hackers can use this data for identity theft and fraudulent billing. Knowing that hospitals will do whatever it takes to regain medical services, attackers purposefully target their services—putting patients' lives at stake.

The pandemic has led the healthcare industry to accelerate in the innovation and adoption of new technology solutions. At the start of the pandemic, everyday interactions in many countries shifted to digital platforms. The growing use of network-connected electronic medical devices and equipment has exposed hospitals to new risks that need to be managed and endpoints to secure. The growing menace of cyberattacks creates an indispensable incentive to strengthen digital health systems. The increased prevalence of ransomware attacks targeting hospitals has brought the contrasting medical and technology professions' ethics to the forefront. While the medical profession was bred upon the "First, do no harm" principle, the tech industry—specifically, Silicon Valley—developed its own ethos: "Build it first and ask for forgiveness later."

While technological innovations such as MARVEL—a high-definition 3D endoscope which provides surgeons a precise 3D view of tumors during their resection—have propelled mankind towards higher standards and quality of life, it cannot be ignored that there are two sides to this coin.

Technology has a dark underbelly. It is important to note that tech companies are not responsible for the ransomware attacks. However, a majority of the technology created is made available to the public with neither full disclosure nor full comprehension of the extent of these technologies' capabilities. Each day, new possibilities—both good and bad—are being discovered. Over the past years, it has become more evident that technological tools can be used to exploit individuals, companies and institutions. Hospital ransomware attacks are the latest iteration of this. In recent months, in the Americas alone, countries have experienced 26 affected government websites, 40 phishing schemes, and 3700 active cyberthreats, according to INTERPOL.

In March 2020, The Wall Street Journal reported that a hospital in the Czech Republic fell victim to a cyberattack that disrupted their administering of COVID-19 tests. The same month, Champaign-Urbana public health district in Illinois, which serves 210,000 people, was forced to pay hackers \$350,000 to decrypt data. Other medical industry sectors such as testing laboratories, deliveries of critical supplies, and manufacturing have also been subjected to ransomware attacks since the pandemic broke out. In 2020, Black Book Survey reports that healthcare data breaches will cost up to \$4 billion. Not only is this a financial loss, but it also costs people their lives. On September 18, 2020, Düsseldorf University Hospital (UKD) in Germany was subjected to a cyberattack that disrupted their emergency care systems. In a statement the hospital said that

the hackers attacked "via a security gap in standard software, which allowed attackers to penetrate the system and sabotage the network."

The ransomware encrypted 30 servers disabling their ability to provide patient care. At this time the hospital had a female patient in critical condition requiring emergency care. As the hospital could not provide any intensive care, she was sent to Wuppertal hospital 20 miles away which delayed her care by an hour—a delay which cost her her life.

This is one of the first cases where a death has been directly linked to a cyberattack, and, unfortunately, will probably not be the last. Germany's Federal Agency for Security in Information explained: "The attackers breached the hospital using a hole in Citrix software that was patched last January. Because the hospital failed to update its software, cybercriminals were able to use the flaw to break in and encrypt data."

Cybersecurity experts, both in Germany and around the world, hope that the visibly lethal consequences of ransomware attacks will act as a wake-up call to IT administrators, signalling that more needs to be done to protect clinical data and that continuing to underestimate these threats will have deadly consequences. International organizations such as INTERPOL describe the cyber attackers targeting hospitals as "heartless" with "no honor among thieves" and recognize the imminent and deadly threat these attacks have. INTERPOL has issued a "purple notice" alert to member-countries' law enforcement to support their fight against these attacks. Continuing to fight against and develop new cybersecurity strategies will be an important task for years to come. The pandemic has illustrated just how vulnerable even some of the best systems can be.

With a second wave making its way across the globe, hospitals are once again preparing for battle and bracing for impact.



# COVID-19 & HUMAN RIGHTS



## RAOUL WALLENBERG INSTITUTE

OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN LAW

**How does COVID-19 affect social inequalities? How are workers' rights affected? What is your right to information? Read the latest updates from our human rights experts on COVID-19 and human rights issues at [www.rwi.lu.se/category/covid-19-human-rights/](http://www.rwi.lu.se/category/covid-19-human-rights/)**

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# EU BORDERS

## BOUNDARIES OF EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY?

SINCE LATE FEBRUARY, THE CONDITIONS FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS AT THE EXTERNAL BORDERS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY CRITICAL. AS GREECE HAS TRIED TO SHIELD ITS BORDERS, NGOS ARE REPORTING ON VIOLENT AUTHORITIES AND ILLEGAL DEPORTATIONS. THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19 AND SUGGESTIONS FOR A NEW EU-MIGRATION PACT AGGRAVATE THE SITUATION. THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO AN ASYLUM SEEKER, AN ACTIVIST AND A RESEARCHER ON HUMAN RIGHTS TO GLEAN THEIR INSIGHTS ON THE MATTER.

**T**he new normal" has often been used as a phrase to describe the changes that the coronavirus has brought upon Europe and the rest of the world. The closing of international borders is only one part of these restrictions. In March, when the outbreak of the virus reached an international peak, many countries imposed travel bans. This included the Schengen area—a radical change in the daily lives of many who, all of a sudden, found themselves stuck in one country, unable to travel freely.

Yet what has become "the new normal" for many people all over the world has long been a much more serious reality for others. Layla, who is called differently in real life, is one of them. Together with her husband, the young woman from Iraq tried to get to Western Europe on three different occasions since March this year—but as of today, they never made it farther than North Macedonia. In late February, Turkish President Erdoğan declared he would not stop asylum seekers stranded in Turkey from entering the European Union anymore, as it

was originally specified in the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016. As a result, thousands of migrants in Turkey set off to Greece's border. Soon after the announcement, Greek authorities started to shield the country's borders and tried to prevent refugees from entering.

Layla and her husband made it to Greece several times—but never for long. The Greek police stopped them and other asylum seekers on the street, she remembers. "They took everything: our money, our phones, food and clothes. And they were beating some boys." Afterwards, they were taken back across the border to Turkey by bus. This happened to them twice, she tells THE PERSPECTIVE. Alexandra Bogos has heard stories like Layla's many times. As an advocacy officer for the NGO Mobile Info Team in Thessaloniki, the 32-year old Romanian informs asylum seekers about their rights and assists them with their applications. Together with other networks, such as the Border Violence Monitoring Network, the Mobile Info Team has started to collect testimonies from asylum seekers like Layla about their experiences with Greek





Encounters of Greek authorities with asylum seekers have been reportedly violent.

© Fotomovimiento/Flickr

authorities. "They are fishing for people," Bogos tells THE PERSPECTIVE. In the Diavata camp, only about ten kilometers away from Thessaloniki, they discovered that the local police have been raiding the camp, actively looking for reasons to single out people and fine them. But not only that: "We realized people got picked up by the police and ended up in Turkey," she says. This did not only happen in the camps; asylum seekers also got picked up on the streets, like in Layla's case. At first, everything seemed to be "disorganized and messy", Bogos says. But after a while, that appeared to change, when officials started to raid camps and bring away large groups of people in buses regularly.

The testimonies of the asylum seekers Bogos spoke to were strikingly similar in their accounts of how the police operated, she says. They are also backed up by numerous media reports about illegal push-backs at the Greek-Turkish border since February: the use of violence, seizing asylum seekers' belongings, and forcing them into buses

that return them to Turkey. Neither of those individuals Bogos talked to had a valid asylum seeker card, she remembers. Some of them managed to cross the border to Greece again after being deported—while trying not to run into Greek authorities again—others made their way to Istanbul somehow.

## When the train arrived, someone pushed me.

Layla to THE PERSPECTIVE

The flight of Layla and her husband came to an abrupt ending in North Macedonia. After having entered Greece for the third time, they were afraid of being pushed back to Turkey again, Layla says. Therefore, they went to North Macedonia and gave money to someone to get them on a train and later to the border to Serbia. But they never made it onto the train. According to her memory, there was a huge crowd waiting with them. "When the train

arrived, someone pushed me," Layla remembers. Her leg got severely injured and her husband had to get her to a hospital. For Alexandra Bogos, work has gotten increasingly difficult since February: "Access to asylum has become almost impossible now." The reason for this development is that the processes of determining asylum statuses are very slow and access to the necessary forms has become highly restricted, she says. Before, applications for asylum could be filed directly at police stations. Now there are only online forms made available by the asylum office. To fill these out, a so-called "asylum willingness number" is needed: a code not automatically issued by the police upon the asylum seekers' arrival. Consequently, this makes asylum seekers very much dependent on the good graces of individual police officers, Bogos criticizes—which could be all the more problematic in light of asylum seekers' accounts of mistreatment by Greek officials.

What can be observed in Greece is not coming as a surprise, as Dr. Eleni Karageorgiou, lecturer of law at Lund University and researcher in human rights, explains. "Practices of deterrence and confinement" in Greece have been on-going since 2015, when the number of asylum seekers, especially from Syria, was particularly high. What is rather new, according to Karageorgiou, is the reaction of the EU: "The denial of entry to asylum seekers by Greece, especially Syrians, was in a way condoned by the EU," she says, referring to comments by the European Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen in March, who stressed the need to support Greece and protect the EU's external borders. Even though the reported use of violence was officially condemned in other statements, there seems to be a silent acceptance of border protection at all costs, Karageorgiou observes. "It's interesting how a while ago, Greece has rather been the 'black sheep' of the EU because of its broken asylum system and bad human rights record and suddenly it is being praised as the 'EU's shield.'"

Alexandra Bogos shares this view: when the violent practices were gaining increasing international attention, she observed that the raiding and push-backs seemed to stop, but then continued shortly after. "This has a lot to do with the EU commission stating their support for Greece," she says. In her opinion, this gave the authorities reassurance that they would not have to expect any serious consequences for their treatment of asylum seekers.



Is European solidarity at stake?

The outbreak of the coronavirus worsening the situation in Greece "came as the perfect excuse," Bogos states. It acted as an excuse to justify even more restrictions of asylum seekers' rights and expand police presence in the camps, which then resulted in the push-backs. Changes and restrictions for civil society further aggravated the situation. Despite existing opposition from local residents against asylum seekers, Bogos observes even more hostility and outbursts of violence now. "People are more concerned about their own welfare and well-being now," she elaborates.



According to Karageorgiou, the developments since February indicate how fragile the readmission agreements with third countries for the return of asylum seekers that the EU's migration system relies on are. The reaction of Greece has been justified as a defense to what the Greek government perceived as an organized attack against their sovereignty encouraged by Turkey, she argues. "But international law is built on the assumption that most asylum



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seekers don't have the authorization to enter." In that sense, the right to seek asylum is an exception to the principle of state sovereignty—which is why examining asylum seekers' claims closely before denying them entry

or sending them back is crucial, she explains.

Karageorgiou is critical of the suggestions of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum recently made by the European Commission—particularly plans to speed up procedures to examine asylum applications. These pose a further risk to the rights of asylum seekers, she finds. And it would not ease the tensions at the EU borders: "In the case of Greece, reality will continue as usual," she argues. That is because of practices like pre-entry screenings, containment at the border and returning people to "safe

third countries" where they could have sought protection first according to their status.

How responsibilities should be shared between member states is one of the most contested questions. "The new pact does not resolve the main inequality in-built in the system," human rights researcher Karageorgiou argues—the Dublin Regulation. According to this regulation, those member states where asylum seekers first arrived in are also responsible for their application. The pact would also steer the attention to returns, she points out. This would be likely to encourage rather than limit movements and push the EU borders even further into third countries. "The success of the system is measured by how low the numbers of asylum seekers are," she observes. Therefore, both the ongoing health crisis and the "new" suggestions of the EU only aggravate already existing flaws of the European migration system, Karageorgiou and Bogos conclude. However, it is still unclear to what extent the member states will accept the new suggestions made by the Commission. While the Commission made compromises and allowed for flexibility with the suggestions in many of the proposals, Karageorgiou is skeptical as to how such flexibility will be compatible with the principle of European solidarity. Alexandra Bogos finds even clearer words for her thoughts on European solidarity these days: "They hijacked this word." Solidarity only plays a role among member states and not towards asylum seekers, she says.

Meanwhile, Layla is recovering in a hospital in North Macedonia. She does not sound very hopeful when talking about prospects to continue on her way. "We just wanted a normal life," she says. "Normal and without war." But it is not only the physical restraints imposed on her which are holding her back. Having experienced deportation several times already, it is also the external borders of the EU—and thereby, the boundaries of European solidarity.

THEODORA-CRISTINA CANCIU | FEATURE



# POSTPONEMENT OF THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX HOLY COMMUNION

POLITICAL INTERFERENCE OR A SHIELD  
AGAINST COVID-19?

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THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS HAS AFFECTED EVERY PERSON AND COMMUNITY GLOBALLY, BUT IT HAS NOT DONE SO EQUALLY: THE TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF THE HOLY COMMUNION OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH DURING THE PANDEMIC PROVOKED HYSTERIA ALL ACROSS ROMANIA, LEADING TO NUMEROUS PROTESTS AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. **THE PERSPECTIVE DISCUSSED THE ISSUE OF HEALTH SECURITY WITH SPECIALISTS FROM THE RELIGIOUS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FIELDS, AS WELL AS A SPOKESPERSON FOR THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) AND A POLISH ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN.**

A critical point of this scale can reorder society in dramatic ways. Dealing with the unforeseen challenges, such as the educational crisis or the social summons, caused by this biological calamity coerced the world to understand the necessity of strengthening public health security. Following distinct political ideologies, national governments tried to create protective shields—school closure, lockdown, limited free movement—in a way to defend their country.

Romania's population of 19.6 million inhabitants has been drastically affected by the virus, scoring the highest COVID-19 death rate in the EU at the beginning of September, according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The safety of Romanian citizens was particularly threatened by Orthodox Church activities: contagious droplets from the shared spoon during Holy Communion and a widespread refusal to wear masks—or "muzzles" as critics deemed them.

### **The Romanian Context**

Although Romania was spared from the virus for a time, this began to change in February when people decided to return to the safety of their homeland from Italy—site of the largest outbreak of infections at the time. Considering the uncertainty of the period and the lack of specific COVID-19 preparedness, the Romanian government managed to mobilize fairly quickly and institute various initial measures aimed at keeping control over the spread of the virus.

Like many other European countries, the Romanian government decided that the establishment of a state of emergency at the national level—a first since the fall of Communism in 1989—would be the most feasible way of fighting against the virus. "As difficult as it may be to adapt to limitations, the state of emergency is the only way to save the lives of our beloved ones," stated Klaus Iohannis, the President of the country. Therefore, all ways in which the population could have been even more endangered began to be assessed and restricted. This led to schools being shut down, a national lockdown and strict free movement limitations—implementations which roughly affected all industries.

The Orthodox Church was not exempt in being forced to adapt to the new decision—it had to transform itself into a COVID-proof place, considering the religious Orthodox traditions. The church congregation receives the consecrated Body of Jesus (in the form of bread) and the consecrated Blood of Jesus (in the form of red wine) from one sanctified shared spoon, which as stated in the Orthodox Bible does not spread diseases. On 27 February 2020, the Romanian Orthodox Church came forward with some suggestions to those "whose faith is weak" or those worried that they might come in contact with the virus after touching the common Spoon, as stated by Patriarch Daniel of Romania, the most important figure of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

"Those who fear during this period of illness may temporarily avoid kissing church icons and may come with a spoon for the Holy Communion from



home", Romanian patriarchy advised. However, The National Institute of Public Health proposed, as a special precaution, to avoid offering and receiving communion altogether in conditions where individual spoons and disposable glasses could not be provided. This recommendation provoked protests both among many Christians and members of the Holy Synod.

THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to a priest and university lecturer at Dumitru Stăniloae Faculty of Orthodox Theology in Iași, Romania, who preferred to remain anonymous. Being of the most discreet and disciplined ilk, he would not provide his opinion

about the governmental decisions—namely, whether or not he judged them as part of a political game, whether or not he thought their decisions were correct, and whether or not the people who chose not to take part in the Holy Communion should consider themselves less religious. "The specifications made by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church—which can be seen on their website—are normative and therefore followed," he mentioned. "It is important to remark on the flexibility of the Church and its desire to cooperate to overcome the situation; to acknowledge correct information; and to observe all sanitary rules and the rights of our congregation,

the priest pointed out, notably refusing to divert from the official church canon.

## Digital Misinformation

Digitalization became essential during the atrocious first outbreak of COVID-19, with social media becoming the key tool for communication and transmitting information. For the first time in peacetime, the Romanian Orthodox Church was closed for Easter, Christians having the only possibility of virtually attending the Resurrection Service. In Romania, this virtual world contributed to seeds of doubt being sown about preventive measures among the population. "Some people appeared in the mass-media with opinions that lacked scientific basis, including doctors who are not specialized in COVID-related fields, arguing against preventive measures," Raed Arafat, the head of the Romanian government's Department for Emergency Situations affirmed.

In comparison with the rest of the continent, whose upsurge in infections was mostly due to the relaxation of rigid controls on gatherings, the coronavirus spike in Romania was being fuelled by disinformation, corona-skeptic campaigns and conspiracy theories that spread through social media "at least partially," said Arafat. This led to



Cluj, Romania. Taking the Medicine of Immortality on February 29, 2020.  
© Raluca Ene/Basilica.ro

the result of a public opinion survey by Eurocomunicare revealing that 41% of Romanians believe COVID-19 was a US-made bioweapon. The study demonstrated that the lower the participants' educational level was, the higher their belief in conspiracy theories.

THE PERSPECTIVE spoke to psychologist Vasilica Varga. "Education and common sense are essential during a period of crisis... The 'winners' are the adaptable ones," she remarked, adding, "it was the spread of misinformation and rumors on social media that led Orthodox Christians to be divided into two major groups:

those against the government, and those for." During anti-COVID protests, hundreds of Romanians categorized the decisions as a political game. In their view, President Klaus Iohannis and Prime Minister Ludovic Orban's government planned to utilize the pandemic in order to gain absolute power over governmental decision-making and limit both democracy and human rights. Moreover, another lambasted aspect was the President's allegiance to the Evangelical Lutheran church, which led to

his incomprehension of Orthodox Church traditions.

### **The Reaction of the Romanian Orthodox Church**

During the lockdown, most of the restrictive measures were strictly respected. However, Vasile Bănescu, spokesperson for the Romanian Orthodox Church,

It is not only important to think of how the virus spreads, but when and where it transmits. By doing so, we can identify the ways to minimize our risk.

A WHO Spokesperson to THE PERSPECTIVE

subsequently mentioned that "the issue of Holy Communion is one that belongs exclusively to the Church." No sooner said than done: by mid-March, many churches in the country welcomed dozens of Christians back for Holy Communion.

"One of the aspects that contributed to the significant differences between people's behavior was the insufficient preparedness of the Church to react and modify its protocols during crisis conditions," Vasilica Varga pointed out.

Not only in Romania did the ritual remain unchanged: several other Orthodox countries, such as Greece, Poland, Georgia, and Ethiopia, also continued to administer Holy Communion rituals during the pandemic.

The government acted virtuously because "it is not only important to think of how the virus spreads, but when and where

it transmits. By doing so, we can identify the ways to minimize our risk," a World Health Organization (WHO) spokesperson said to THE PERSPECTIVE.

For a better understanding of the decision-making process concerning the risk present in religious situations, she provided a Risk Assessment

Tool for mass gatherings during the pandemic. One of the key questions of the Risk Evaluation is: "Will the religious event or celebration include practices that include the touching or sharing of artefacts (crosses, prayer rugs, communion vessels, etc.)?" Following the answers, the decision matrix generates a score which indicates the overall risk of COVID-19 spread in relation to current modifications in governmental protocol, making it easier for national governments to evaluate the events.

## Safety vs Religiosity

Another crux of the debate in Romania is whether a person who decides not to go to church during the pandemic should be considered less religious than the people who continue to take Holy Communion from the shared spoon.

THE PERSPECTIVE talked to Ewelina Oksiuta, a Polish Orthodox Christian, who shared similar experiences in Poland. "People who prefer to avoid the church during this period should consider themselves thoughtful. "It has nothing to do with religious standards," she concluded, pointing out that "there should

not be any difference between Christians." Vasilica Varga added: "Psychologically speaking, people are afraid of the unknown. They may compare this issue to other situations: hermits who lived for years in the desert or other harsh conditions, or sanctified priests who survived in the communist prisons—people who prepared the Communion mentally without seeing or physically touching the sacred objects."

In short, an individual's choice to comply with regulations in this religious context should be seen as a well-considered personal decision. The Church, as an institution, should not criticize those who choose not to participate

in the Holy Communion, as that participation has real consequences for community health.

It is notable that most religious groups were innovative and found creative ways to communicate alternative ways of practicing religious traditions. However, some recalcitrant religious congregations accelerated viral transmission. Being part of these controversial churches, Romanian Orthodox Church attracted the attention of mass media and protesters.

Just as health specialists and political figures try to explain their suggestions, experts in theology need to elaborate on religion-oriented judgments that impact behaviors relevant to viral spread.



Bucharest, Romania. "I believe in God, not in COVID-19" Protest, May 15, 2020.

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A close-up photograph of a person's face, focusing on their green eyes and the top of a white surgical mask. The mask is secured with yellow tape. The background is a warm, brownish-orange color.

KETRIN JOCHECOVÁ | FEATURE

# CZECH ELECTIONS IN THE SHADOW OF THE PANDEMIC

**CAPITALIZING ON CORONA?** HOW THE CZECH GOVERNING PARTY USED CORONAVIRUS TO WIN THE ELECTION

WHEN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CONFINED THE CZECH REPUBLIC FOR THE FIRST TIME, IT PARALYZED EVERYTHING, INCLUDING POLITICS. NOW THE COUNTRY IS BEING HIT BY A SECOND WAVE AND POLITICIANS ARE WORKING HARD TO USE IT TO THEIR ADVANTAGE. THE LATEST ELECTIONS HAVE SHOWN HOW THE POPULIST GOVERNING PARTY ANO 2011 USED THE HEALTH CRISIS TO MAINTAIN POWER.



**B**ack in March, the Czech government put the country into strict lockdown when there were just 293 confirmed cases of COVID-19. However, the measures that followed throughout the spring can be

characterized as chaotic and uncoordinated: one of the many examples was the closure of bars and restaurants in the middle of March, announced overnight and coming into effect the following morning. Czechs were also forbidden from leaving the country, which triggered strong memories for those who lived through the communist era.

People were obliged to wear face masks everywhere in public, but, like everywhere else in the world, the country faced a shortage. "There are enough masks," assured Health Minister Adam Vojtěch at the end of January, when the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in Europe. But when the pandemic reached the Czech Republic, all the masks were sold out in a matter of days. So, the Czechs started to make their own. Homemade masks hanging outside on trees for anyone to take came to be known as "mask trees," and became a symbol of solidarity as well as of failed help from the government.

This situation was favorable for the PR of the governing party ANO 2011 (Ano, bude líp - Yes, it will get better), demonstrated by a great deal of national live-streamed press conferences featuring Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (ANO 2011) and epidemiologist Roman Prymula. The latter was presented as the rigorous force behind the fight against coronavirus because of his strict lockdown approach and statements about his support for keeping the borders closed for two more years. A few weeks later, Prymula changed his mind and supported the idea of establishing herd immunity. "Risk groups should continue to be protected, but the rest of the population should be exposed to the disease—either go through it or show they are immune," he said in an interview with DVTV. Nevertheless, the lockdown restrictions remained

in place. With its resultant number of cases, the Czech Republic was presented as a winner by the government, attributing the result to the governmental approach embodied by Babiš and Prymula.

After the month-long lockdown, life started to get back to normal—arguably too quickly. While people in most countries were asked to keep their masks on during the summer, Czechs were allowed to take them off. As of 8 June, the only remaining restriction was the limit of 500 people for public gatherings. The assumed end of the pandemic was celebrated in late June with a "farewell party" on the Charles Bridge in Prague, where thousands gathered at the half kilometer long table to have dinner together.

Fast forward to September, the daily growth of cases went over 1000 for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic. That did not stop the prime minister from announcing that the Visegrad Group countries, which includes the Czech Republic, were "Best in COVID" at the international Bled Strategic Forum at the end of August. However, the opposite has come to prove itself true: in October, the situation worsened to the point that the country's daily infection rate became one of the highest in the world. On October 23, more than 15,000 new cases were recorded, which is the highest number recorded in the country so far. At this rate, the country is worried about the collapse of the health-care system, with provisional hospitals being built.

"While the government approach in the spring was completely chaotic, now we know what to do by ourselves. There is enough protective equipment and we know how to prepare for the ill patients," says Tomáš Vymazal, Head of the Department of Anaesthesiology and Intensive Care at the Motol University Hospital in Prague, to THE PERSPECTIVE. According to him, the biggest problem in the spring was that the hospital restricted its functioning to prepare for a massive influx



of patients based on the hysteria in the media. "This luckily did not happen, but today we are in the opposite situation. The hospital now restricts its normal functioning based on actual needs and this is happening all over the country," he added.

The need for strengthened measures was already obvious in August, but in contrast to spring, the government's reaction in summer was slow. New "soft" measures were imposed in September, such as mandatory masks in public transportation and attendance limits for public events. Strict measures, like closures of the restaurants and schools, took place in October. On October 22, the government announced a second lockdown. The politicians seemed to have taken up a strategy of blaming each other for the gravity of the situation. The six-party opposition blames the prime minister. Petr Fiala, chairman of one of the opposition parties, Civic Democratic Party (ODS), is prepared to table a vote of no confidence. "It is unacceptable that the country should be led by a prime minister who is personally responsible for the current hopeless situation, and who obviously does not know how to lead the country out of it," said Fiala (ODS) at the press briefing. Prime Minister Babiš refused to take responsibility and blamed the supposedly non-compliant public: "People's opinion on wearing masks has changed, and 7% of Czechs never wear one," he said in a press conference at the beginning of October.

While the people's growing frustration with COVID-19 restrictions is a world-wide phenomenon, in the Czech Republic it is also linked to the traditionally low trust in elected representatives. According to The Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM), only 41% of the population trust the current government. The lack of communication and confusion in the response strategy did not help, since the trust of Czechs in the efficiency of COVID-19 measures sank from 86% in June to 48% in September. In addition to the worsening situation, the government

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Petr Fiala (ODS)

had to think about the then-approaching regional and Senate elections at the beginning of October. Two weeks before the polls opened, the popular epidemiologist Prymula became health minister, after his forerunner, Vojtěch was heavily criticized. "Vojtěch was ready to introduce stricter measurements, and it was Babiš who lifted it and allowed the situation to escalate," said Czech political expert Otto Eibl from Masaryk University to THE PERSPECTIVE. According to Eibl, this replacement might have served as a tool to distract the voters from the fact that the prime minister Babiš did not agree with reimposing mask requirements in all public places.

"On the one hand, some could perceive the health minister changeover as the government admitting that something was wrong. On the other hand, we have to realize who replaced him. It is Roman Prymula, a living symbol of the successful fight against coronavirus," Eibl elaborates. Political expert Vlastimil Havlík adds: "We can see this as Babiš's effort to disclaim his responsibility for the solution of the crisis and shifting it to Prymula and expert decision-making." Earlier this year, the government also announced a plan to distribute



Prague, Czechia

© William Zhang/Unsplash

5000 Czech crowns [~around 180 Euros] and send a pack of masks to every citizen over 60 years old. "Distribution of protective equipment to people over 60 is clearly part of the election campaign and can be seen as a gift for the voters. Some would say it is clear bribery," adds Eibl.

The majority of ANO voters are senior citizens—a COVID-19 risk group. The fear of getting sick in the polling place may have kept elderly citizens at home, which might have badly affected the election results for the governing party. The results show that despite less senior citizens having come to vote this year, the governing party won 10 of 13 regions.

Whether or not the decisions taken by Czech politicians were influenced by the latest elections, the COVID-19 certainly worked as a catalyst for further populist gestures, just as similar crises in recent times have. Migrant crisis, the Ukrainian crisis, or Brexit—all of them commanded the election space of multiple countries, simply due to the fact that they could not be ignored.

"Crises are moments that can bring about a turnover in domestic politics. Governments and political parties are usually rewarded for tackling the crisis or punished for their failure," says political expert Vlastimil Havlík.

The Czech Republic is not the only country where politicians have tried to use the COVID-19 crisis to their advantage: in May, the Polish government introduced the "Corona-safe" postal ballot with no physical polling stations only a month before the scheduled presidential election—a move which was later negated by the upper Chamber senate for lacking a proper legal basis. The American elections are also utterly dominated by the pandemic and many other countries as well face the politicization of the coronavirus. While still living through this crisis, we can only guess how it will affect society and politics—but we can be sure that the COVID-19 crisis is already being capitalized upon by governments all over the world.



# CAMCORDERS vs COLONIALISM

## HOW STORYTELLING IS USED TO FIGHT THE COLONIAL LEGACY IN GREENLAND

WITH DEBATES ABOUT COLONIAL LEGACY AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION RAGING ACROSS THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE, THE OFT-FORGOTTEN INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF NORTHERN EUROPE ARE ONCE AGAIN SIDELINED. BUT CHANGE IS HAPPENING—THOUGH THE PATH TO EMANCIPATION HAS NOT BEEN FOUGHT ON THE STREETS, BUT RATHER THROUGH CULTURE AND STORYTELLING.

**T**he question of indigenous rights is not only a question of morality. Issues such as high suicide rates and substance abuse disproportionately affect indigenous communities—not least of which those in the circumpolar region. However, while mental health issues amongst the circumpolar indigenous communities is a serious issue, it is often met with ridicule and lukewarm interest.

The source of mental health issues is of course difficult to pinpoint, but a multitude of papers pointed to the importance of preserving and

developing indigenous culture, as well as combating societal inequalities.

THE PERSPECTIVE reached out to Emile Hertling Péronard, a Greenlandic-Danish documentary filmmaker known for the documentary SUMÉ—the Sound of a Revolution, to better understand how and why culture plays such an important role in the fight against the colonial legacy in Greenland.

Emile, who has a Greenlandic mother and Danish father, grew up in Nuuk before moving to Denmark to study film. "A product of the Kingdom of Denmark, for better and worse," as he himself



describes it. "Upon completing my studies, I felt that I wanted to go back to Greenland, though I didn't actually plan on becoming a filmmaker. It was in this sort of quest of reclaiming my Greenlandic legacy that I rediscovered SUMÉ, and I thought to myself, 'Why hasn't anyone done a film about this yet?' So, I contacted a Greenlandic director and asked him if he wanted to make this film." Emile offered to work as the producer, with a self-described "figure it out as we go" attitude. The director took the bait, and they got to work.

SUMÉ, for those unfamiliar with Greenlandic rock history, is not just any other band: "SUMÉ were like the Beatles of Greenland, and they had a huge impact on Greenlandic culture and politics," Emile explains. "People were shocked to hear rock music sung in the Greenlandic language, incorporating Greenlandic drums in the 70s modern rock style." SUMÉ's debut album was bought by around 20% of the Greenlandic population, quite an overwhelming portion of the market. "When we released the movie in 2014 and toured it around the communities in Greenland, I was really surprised about the impact the film had, a film about ourselves by ourselves." Emile explains that Greenlandic film history has otherwise mostly been non-Greenlandic: films about Greenland, but by foreign filmmakers and for a foreign audience. "When screening the movie around Greenland, that's when it really dawned on me how important it is that we tell our own stories on film."

Besides his filmmaking with Nuuk-based production studio Ánorák Film, Emile also helps run Levende Grønland—a free, online-based educational tool intended for Danish teachers to combat the lack of educational material about Greenland. Documentaries, like those created by Emile, play an important role as educational material. The idea behind Levende Grønland came about when Emile, like many other Greenlanders

who move to Denmark, realized that most Danes know next to nothing about Greenland. "It can actually be a bit scary how Danes think that Greenlanders are either these proud hunters living off the earth or alcoholic child abusers." Emile places the roots of these harmful stereotypes in a lack of education: "The Danish educational system doesn't really take our history seriously, and most of the little educational material there is focused on the geography and not on us as a people... So, we thought that 'Ok, we got these movies, and when we screen them, we usually end up having really meaningful conversations, so why not turn this experience into something teachers can use?'" When talking to Emile, THE PERSPECTIVE also asked if he thinks there has been a shift in cultural awareness in Greenland.


"Oh yes, very much so!" Emile explained how the history of Greenland has traditionally been taught from the Danish perspective, starting in 1721 with the colonization of Greenland.

"However, with the penetration of internet in Greenland, and of course social media, we suddenly find ourselves with a network of other indigenous people like the Inuit in Canada and Russia" Internet and new-found connections with other circumpolar communities have facilitated a reconstruction of circumpolar culture by filling in the blanks created by centuries of colonial rule. "We in Greenland, for example, managed to maintain our language, which Inuit in other places haven't. It goes the other way around as well, with the Inuit in Canada and the US still having a large part of their music and culture left which was previously lost in Greenland."

There is also a shifting view on native culture as something to take pride in. "One of the most interesting things that have returned is Inuit tattoos, which is something that you previously would only see in really old photos or on mummies. But now, they are super popular in Greenland."

Inuk Silis Høegh (Director, right) and Emile Hertling Péronard (Creative Producer, left).

© Angu Motzfeldt, Sumé - The Sound of a Revolution  
Press Kit



Lastly, THE PERSPECTIVE asked Emile if he intended for his filmmaking to have a political undertone when he first started out:

"When we started out, it wasn't for idealistic reasons. It was purely based on interest."

However, Emile quickly became aware of the responsibilities that indigenous filmmaking brings. "It's impossible to not be political or have an activist undertone when making indigenous film—even a romcom in Greenlandic would be a change, and political in a sense."

"I think that we in Denmark and Sweden have to get better at telling stories, and working for story-telling to be accessible for empowering minorities—that not all stories have to be told by white men."

Emile is certain that more could be done to improve the situation. "There is a general lack of funding, with Greenlandic filmmakers unable to access Danish state -funds, so I think there is a lot that could be done to improve the position of indigenous story-telling."

Malik Høegh, Sumé vocalist, guitarist and lyricist, during a Sumé concert, 1975.

© Birgitta Hedin, Sumé - The Sound of a Revolution Press Kit







# EU4HEALTH

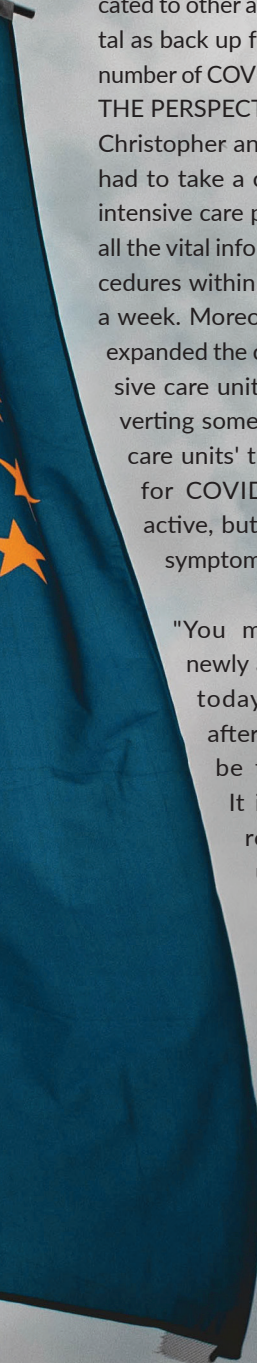
## A RECIPE FOR A HEALTHIER AND SAFER EUROPE?

COVID-19: A TRAGICALLY HIGH FATALITY RATE AND DANGEROUSLY GROWING INFECTIONS LED TO EXTREMELY OVERWHELMED HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS—THE EU REACTED BY ANNOUNCING THE 'EU4HEALTH PROGRAMME' IN MAY.

THE PERSPECTIVE SPOKE TO HEALTH-CARE PROFESSIONALS, THE EUROPEAN PUBLIC HEALTH ALLIANCE AND THE CRITICAL FDP-POLITICIAN WIELAND SCHINNENBURG TO EXAMINE THE PROPOSAL'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.







It was physically and mentally draining as we go to work every day, facing the battle against an invisible enemy," remembers Christopher, a young operating theatre nurse in Brussels. "Half of us were relocated to other areas of the hospital as back up for the increasing number of COVID-cases," he tells THE PERSPECTIVE.

Christopher and his colleagues had to take a crash course for intensive care patients, learning all the vital information and procedures within the span of just a week. Moreover, his hospital expanded the capacity of intensive care units (ICUs) by converting some areas into 'mid-care units' that were put up for COVID-patients with active, but not too critical, symptoms.

"You might see your newly admitted patient today and the day after they might not be there anymore.

It is an emotional rollercoaster for us, and especially to the families who cannot visit their loved ones," adds the Belgium-based nurse.

Davide is a young physiotherapist working in a hospital in the severely hit region of Lombardy, Italy. He did not experience the pandemic on the front line like Christopher, but was in contact with COVID-19 patients before their transferrals: "Organizational procedures have changed frequently, too little was known about the virus and I was always afraid of putting my family and/or other patients at risk of infection." Despite several shortcomings, Davide thinks the Italian government still responded in a relatively organized fashion. However, he considers it important "to organize common protocols in order to respond in a more coordinated fashion and not leave the choices to individual regions."

Davide and Christopher are just two examples out of millions of health-care workers. In addition to an increasing number of positive cases, a supposed powerlessness of the EU was also hotly debated in the news. According to a public opinion survey commissioned by the European Parliament, 69% of EU citizens agree that the union should have more competences to deal with crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In May, the Commission reacted: the presented proposal of the 'EU4Health Programme' aims to significantly improve the EU's

ability to respond effectively to major transnational health threats. European policy making can be described as a bureaucratic enigma, far away from actual beneficiaries, healthcare workers, and future patients. However, the current crisis highlighted more than ever that it is indeed vital to examine how the EU seeks to help healthcare systems.

The 'EU4Health Programme' is discussed in the Trilogues, which consists of the European Council, Parliament and Commission. It is part of 'Next Generation EU', the €750 Billion recovery plan that was passed on 21 July 2020.

It is expected to prepare national healthcare systems for future crises and aims to fix the problems that COVID-19 unveiled. This entails expanding coordination among the member states and further investment in the health sector.

The program will enable the EU to "invest in creating reserves of medical supplies in case of a crisis; create a reserve of healthcare staff and experts that can be mobilised to prevent or respond to health crises throughout the EU; train healthcare professionals for deployment across the EU; step up surveillance of health threats, and improve the resilience of health systems to ensure better health outcomes for all."



Healthcare professionals all over the globe are trying to combat COVID-19.  
© Irwan Iwe/Unsplash

Aside from responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan also seeks to prevent and decrease the impact of non-communicable illnesses such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases or diabetes.

It is important to note that the budget will not be automatically distributed among national governments. Instead, member states, non-governmental- and international organizations will have the possibility to apply for funding in the "form of grants, prizes, and procurement as well as through indirect management by the European Commission and EU executive agencies," reports the EU's Press Office on Health and Food Safety. The funds will

be distributed based on the different program objectives, priorities and needs. It is now to be debated by the groups in the European Parliament. Once it is passed, it will be implemented on 1 January 2021.

At the heart of these discussions, however, is the significantly reduced budget. EU4Health was initially planned with €9.4 billion which made it the most substantial health program ever in financial terms. Now, after intense quarrels and criticism of the skeptical and so-called frugal countries—Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands and Sweden—the European Council reduced it to €1.7 Billion, a staggering 7.7 billion euros less.

"We need to make our new 'EU4Health Programme' future-proof. This is why I had proposed to increase funding and I am grateful that this Parliament is ready to fight for more funding and remedy the cuts made by the European Council," declared Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, in her latest State of the Union Address.

This significant reduction of funding was also echoed outside the EU buildings. The European Public Health Alliance (EPHA) represents public health NGOs, patient groups and healthcare professionals. The Alliance generally calls for more EU action on health—and therefore regrets the Council's decision to reduce the budget. "This shows that not the right conclusions were drawn from the coronavirus pandemic. The new, ambitious financing was subject to closed-door negotiations at the highest level and apparently economic, financial and other interests overshadowed the interest in health," explains Zoltán Massay-Kosubek, policy manager for Health Policy Coherence (EHPC). In times of a pandemic, health protection and promotion should come first, he underlines. "We have the momentum now; if we are not ambitious enough, after five years, people might forget about the seriousness of the current crisis, so there is no guarantee that it will be improved later."



# Recent statements by Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen show that she wants more powers.

Wieland Schinnenburg

An outspoken skeptic of the program itself is the liberal German politician Wieland Schinnenburg, member of the Committee on Health of the German Bundestag for the (neo)-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). While the budget is discussed by the EU, Schinnenburg criticizes the program from a national point of view.

The Federal Government of Germany currently holds the European Council Presidency and attaches great importance to health within the European Union. The FDP-politician, however, remains skeptical when it comes to possible consequences to the national healthcare system. He suspects the EU Commission could exert considerable influence through the design of the funding criteria and the evaluations of the health systems of member states. "Recent statements by Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen show that she wants more powers," warns Schinnenburg.

Disputes of institutional competencies and the role of respective nation-states aside, it is questionable if and how even a budget-cut program would benefit healthcare workers, like Davide and Christopher, and consequently their patients in need of care.

Zoltán Massay-Kosubek (EPHA) assumes that the health workforce would still benefit from concrete measures, such as imposing new rules about joint procurement of medical devices or ambitious action resulting in less antibiotic-resistant infections in hospitals.

"But an ambitious Health Union could also offer more for the health workforce in countries where the healthsystem is underfunded—European solidarity is needed here as much as in the just transition of the Green Deal," he adds.

As for Davide, he is satisfied with the funds assigned to the most affected states, also because they were especially important to restart the economy. "But I hope

that there is a way to start collaborating more between individual states also in matters related to health so that one can face similar situations in a more efficient and uniform way," concludes the physiotherapist from Lombardy.

Whether or not the 'EU4Health Programme' has the ability to become an effective antidote for struggling national healthcare systems, professionals and patients remains to be observed. Yet it provokes intense side-effects already: monetary questions, the role of individual states and disputes over power led to conflicts within institutions over the EU's capacity to act. While the discussion in various European institutions continues, healthcare workers like Davide and Christopher continue serving their communities while "facing the battle against an invisible enemy."



Ursula von der Leyen  
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# DOES COVID-19 ENDANGER OUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS?

APPLICATIONS GEO-TRAFFICKING OUR STEPS, CONFINEMENTS PROHIBITING GATHERINGS AND BORDERS CLOSED SHUT: COVID-19 HAS MEANT THE ABATEMENT OF SOME OF OUR MOST FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS. THE PERSPECTIVE DISCUSSES THE POLITICAL PROCEDURES IN EUROPE THAT HAVE AFFECTED OUR FREEDOMS DURING THE ONGOING PANDEMIC - WHILE ALSO SAVING LIVES.

COVID-19 has brought a health crisis of unprecedented nature into our lives. Governments, stunned by the rapid wave of events unfolding as the virus spread, were forced to adopt abrupt measures to protect their citizens. The EU alone has a reported figure around six million infections at the point of writing, with countries like Spain or France suffering from approximately one million cases each. To exacerbate matters, we are now approaching what appears to be a second wave of infections as COVID cases begin to intensify once more. Some of the worst hit countries in the EU, such as the Czech Republic or Belgium, have recorded over 70,000 new cases in just one week.

In their endeavour to stop the virus from further expanding, infecting more people and collapsing entire healthcare systems, the governments of heavily affected countries, such as Italy or Spain, were forced to initiate a state of emergency. The World Health Organization officially declared the spread of the virus a pandemic on March 11.

These then proceeded to take action against the virus through the isolation of most of the population, submitting its people to rigorous control and limiting our mobility. Such was done for the greater good of the community, to ensure utmost safety and guard those considered to be at a higher risk of death. While saving lives is always the main priority,

those efforts to control the virus created a major conflict within our liberal system of society. Albeit unintentionally, they posed a challenge to our most fundamental freedoms.

British philosopher and economist, John Stuart Mill and his Harm Principle teaches us that individuals ought to be free to do as they wish as long as their actions do not harm others. COVID-19 has posed a huge dilemma to this avowal as democratic leaders are confronted with the challenge of ensuring that their civilians live up to their responsibilities of not harming others—by passing the virus onto another person—and the preservation of their most basic liberties.

The use of apps to collect our data and location helps governments to track how the virus spreads—but it may present a clash with the right to privacy if these are made compulsory. The obligation to isolate at home reduces the spread of the infection, but also interferes with our right to free movement, association and assembly. Although these measures are backed by the law of emergency, the debate certainly offers an interesting reflection on the priority of safety against the importance of fundamental ideas.

Arguably one the most controversial responses to the virus was the use of surveillance instruments that avail of GPS and Bluetooth to track people's

location. Various governments, such as those of the UK, Germany and Poland, have utilized these to track the movement of people who are infected, identify those who may have been exposed to the virus and ensure that citizens are complying with self-isolation instructions.

The apps are being developed all around the globe and in some cases, for greater efficacy, these are directly connected to the health system. For instance, the UK recently developed a smartphone app linked to the National Health Service as a means to trail its citizens' activity during the pandemic. Over 10 million people in England and Wales have downloaded the app, over 6 million within the first day of its launching, according to the British government. We can then safely affirm that, although controversial, the proposal has been welcomed by the public, as they seem prepared to collaborate with government measures.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the objective of these apps is to provide information about the virus and testing sites; to track the spread of the infection; to warn vulnerable communities; and to understand the impact of policies such as social distancing and confinement. It is therefore clear that there are obvious benefits to the employment of these technologies.

Some of these apps have been more questionable than others. The Polish government, for example, developed an app—that later became mandatory—for those complying with quarantine measures. It involves uploading a selfie stipulating your whereabouts for law enforcement to be able to pinpoint the exact location of their citizens, ensuring that the latter are complying with self-isolation measures. If citizens failed to provide valid proof that they were at home, police would turn up to their houses to confirm their location. The fact that the app was made compulsory, tracks your location

continuously and also demands an image as proof has been considered an outrageous violation of privacy by the public.

According to Karen Melchior, member of the European Parliament, currently militant in the liberal Renew Europe Group, it is clear that the efficiency of a technical solution is much preferred to other proposals, for example having police turn up to people's houses to check if they are obeying government orders. Nonetheless, in the case of Poland, both measures were being adopted. European Liberal Forum, she argued in favor of using every measure to secure safety against the virus—including tracing apps, and insisted that it is certainly possible to have such an approach as long as we maintain very high standards of data protection and, equally important, of openness about what information is being extracted.

Even so, the issue still raises concern amidst liberal ideals. An outspoken skeptic is Diego Naranjo, Head of Policy for the European Digital Rights. He contended, also in the European Liberal Forum, that citizens are able to comply with restrictions without necessarily having to be constantly supervised by the "parental" figure of the state. He agrees that a certain degree of data collection may be beneficial, yet, such must be quite limited and closed to future purposes once the pandemic is over in order to maintain the highest possible level of citizen freedom given the difficult circumstances.

While not all countries have implemented it, another highly disputed measure has been the compulsory isolation of many European citizens in their houses. In normal times, our freedom of movement, association and assembly are guaranteed in Article 12 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Now, because of the health risks that the virus presents and the importance to stop its spread, most people have calmly accepted the need to self-isolate at



home and have (willingly) surrendered these rights.

However, this situation could potentially be dangerous to our democracies if governments refuse to understand that such emergency legislation is only temporary and they take advantage of this newly found power to pass unpopular laws, as citizens cannot peacefully gather and protest these political moves.

For instance, the European Parliament accused Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of using the coronavirus pandemic to hoard authoritarian-like powers. During this period, his government assumed the authority to declare a "healthcare emergency," a policy through which he could rule by decree. The state of emergency was finally lifted as members of the Hungarian parliament requested its termination. Nonetheless, a bill was approved allowing the government to impose an additional state of emergency in the event of a further health necessity. These issues pose a serious challenge to liberal democracies, and therefore, need to be contested by the public through the right to protest peacefully, otherwise the basic functions of democracy are made redundant.

It will not be easy, but we must be able to find a balance between protecting the lives of those who we love and care for, while ensuring the preservation of our liberal rights. Like any liberal democratic system, the measures put in place during the pandemic must have a certain degree of checks and balances.

For example, apps should always be voluntary, whilst implementing privacy-friendly technologies using only anonymized data. These apps should also be interoperable and cyber-secure, as well dismantled as soon as they are no longer needed so as to reduce risk of violations into our privacy.

Further, the rights to free movement, association and assembly, although available to the population, must be kept to a minimum and always under social distancing and health parameters, i.e. the use of medical masks, or the proper sanitation of hands and gloves. Still, these freedoms must be present, and must be kept as an option if necessary.

To avoid examples like Hungary's case of authoritarian democracy, we cannot consent the pandemic to become an excuse for a decrease in the legislative powers of our democratic systems. In addition, a complete state of transparency within the executive power must be kept, together with the requisite of a clean and free media communication, to ensure that our liberal rights are respected during these difficult times.

The debate is rather an intricate one. We, as members of liberal societies, have entered an era of unparalleled circumstances in which the discourse surrounding our democratic systems has once again come to light. The challenge that COVID-19 has prompted into our lives threatens the very bedrock of our social and political structure. This confusing time has made political decisions ever so difficult, as we question our position between the protection of our health and the respect for our most fundamental rights.



U.S. Chief of Protocol Cam Henderson assists President Donald J. Trump, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bahrain Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Minister of Foreign Affairs for the United Arab Emirates Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan with the documents during the signing of the Abraham Accords Tuesday, September 15, 2020, on the South Lawn of the White House. © Andrea Hanks/The White House

## "LITTLE SATAN" MAKING FRIENDS?

# THE ABRAHAM ACCORDS

The Abraham Accords, a "peace agreement" signed on September 15, 2020, between Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, probably qualifies as one of the more noteworthy happenings of 2020—and that says a lot, considering the roller-coaster qualities of this year.

As the agreement stirred up a plethora of questions and emotions throughout the world, THE PERSPECTIVE discussed with Peace and Development professor Michael Shultz on what a post-Abraham Middle East could look like.

**T**he agreement, brokered by the United States, is supposed to open up full diplomatic relations between the two Gulf countries and Israel. "Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain will establish embassies, exchange ambassadors, and begin the [sic] cooperate—and work together so strongly to cooperate as partners across the broad range of sectors, from tourism to trade, and health-care to security. They're going to work together. They are friends," said Donald Trump after signing.

In a panel discussion hosted by the Arab Center Washington DC on 21 October 2020, panelist Abdullah Baabood, a renowned Omani academic, stated: "If you look from east of the Middle East to the west of the Middle East, there is conflict everywhere, and any kind of attempt of creating peace and normalization is in general welcome."

However, only two Arab states have signed peace agreements with Israel before: Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. This led to the ban of Egypt from the Arab League for a decade. So whilst peace in the Middle East is highly sought after, making agreements with "Little Satan"—the infamous nickname allegedly given to Israel by Ruhollah Khomeini in 1979—has at least previously been seen

as too high of a price to pay for it.

The Abraham Accords are arguably many things: a stab in the back of the Palestinians and their allies, with protests erupting in Bahrain and Morocco shortly after the signing of the accords. The Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini said in a speech after the announcement of the deal that the UAE

## "betrayed the Islamic world and the Palestinians."

The Accords were a win for the Trump administration, as President Trump "can tell his followers, particularly his more gullible followers, that he has brought peace to the Middle East" as was well-stated by Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic*. But whether or not it's a peace deal is contestable since the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Israel have never been at war with one another.

The deal will likely be more than about kosher food being served in Dubai restaurants: if fellow Gulf giant Saudi Arabia chooses to follow along with the normalization agreement, we are looking at far more interesting changes

in Middle Eastern power dynamics. Let's not forget that on the other side of the Persian Gulf, another titan follows this blooming trilateral friendship of "Little Satan" with unease—namely, Iran.

With that said, the interest for the Abraham Accords probably lies not so much in direct flights between Bahrain and Israel, but rather in how the agreement impacts the Palestinian cause: specifically in terms of further Israeli annexation of Palestinian land and the Arab abandonment of the Palestinian quest for full independence. The agreement also throws a spotlight on the effect it may have on regional security and power dynamics.

A whole range of questions pop up concerning the latter of these two mind-twisters: Is Saudi Arabia on the verge of taking a public step closer to Israel, thereby alienating Iran to the point of no return? Is Iran going to follow through on its threats of retaliation? What the hell is going to happen now?

Michael Schulz is a senior lecturer in Peace and Development Research at Gothenburg University and is considered to be one of the leading researchers in conflict resolution and the Middle East. *THE PERSPECTIVE* asked him about his assessment on the freshly signed accords.





Benjamin Netanyahu, Donald Trump, Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani, and Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan attend the Abraham Accords ceremony in The White House. Washington DC, USA, September 15, 2020.

© noamgalai/Shutterstock

Schulz did not raise his eyebrows as the world got word about the Abraham Accords; the Gulf states had already started showing interest in moving closer to Israel in the early 90s. The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian question has further enabled a redrawing of the Middle Eastern political map. "Security considerations have taken over. We've ended up a long way from the visions of Shimon Peres of a Middle East characterized by friendly relations, democracy and trade cooperation. Instead, the animosity and polarization has increased, and unlikely friendships have been forged such as that between Israel and Saudi Arabia," he stated.

Whether or not Saudi Arabia is on the verge of taking a public step closer to Israel is a hotly debated topic. Schultz explains that Saudi Arabia has been thought to be the

last Arab state to ally with Israel—but that this is no longer the case.

"Saudi Arabia tried to meddle between Hamas and Fatah in 2007, and when they could not stick to the agreement, the Saudis took it as a betrayal. This betrayal has justified them to approach Israel," he elaborates.

Although Schultz thinks that the Abraham Accords should be understood as a peace deal, he is not sure if it will actually benefit peace and stability in the Middle East: "It may very well lead to further polarizations. It is not a secret that Netanyahu for a long time [has] been trying to form an alliance with Saudi Arabia, both because of the Iranian threat but also because it would wipe out the Palestinian question from the agenda of the Arab League."

Schultz says that even if there is always a risk of escalation of violence during polarization, no state in the Middle East is ready for another war at this point in time.

The future of the Middle East has become hard to foresee. Schultz believes that it is in the interest of Israel, the US and Saudi Arabia to continue the trend of normalization and cooperation between the Arab states and Israel in order to control Iranian influence.

"This, however, will lead to further polarizations. The future of the Middle East remains unclear."



## New Democratic Elections or a Polarizing Repeat of 2006?

# A Palestinian Plan for Partisan Peace

The conflict between Israel and Palestine is well known, but few know of the long-enduring conflict within Palestine. Split in two, the government has struggled to unite since 2007. It has been 14 years since the last elections took place, but early next year new elections may commence. The road toward them, however, is long and uncertain. THE PERSPECTIVE exclusively interviewed the Palestinian Ambassador in Sweden, an EU lobbyist and a writer from Gaza to learn about the prospect for peace.

**A**s recently as 24 September, Fatah and Hamas, the two biggest parties in Palestine, met in Turkey to discuss the unification of their two governments which rule, respectively, the geographically separated West Bank and Gaza. This process of Palestinian unification has been 14 years in the making, but in light of the United Arab Emirates now normalizing relations with Israel and with Trump's unilaterally written "Vision for Peace," the first legitimate democratic elections since 1996 may be on the horizon.

### An Excerpt From Palestinian Past: The 2006 Elections

Without digging into 70 years of complex conflict and war timelines, the 2006 Palestinian democratic elections serve as a starting point. Fatah, the ruling party controlling the non-violent Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian

Authority (PA), served as the majority governing party before 2006. Hamas, a political party (labeled as terrorists by the EU and the US) that uses violence towards the Israeli state which it ardently resists, participated in the election for the first time. Fatah, having been in power for so long that the party was suffering from an internal divide, decided to run with two separate competing lists. As the election got closer, the polls indicated Hamas was taking the lead. Israel and the Quartet on the Middle East (the UN, EU, USA, and Russia) became worried that an Israel-hostile party was going to seize power in Palestine, obliterating years of peace negotiations. Hamas unexpectedly won the election.

Five days after their victory, the Quartet demanded that the new government adhere to their three principles for continued economic support. These principles were non-violence, recognition of Israel's right to exist, and acceptance of all treaties and agreements signed between the PLO and Israel



(all of which today still are an issue for Hamas). Hamas kept to their political agenda, which led to the international community to exclusively support Fatah/PLO instead. The European Union also established a no-contact policy towards Hamas in order to motivate them to accept the requirements. The effectiveness of the no-contact policy has been increasingly questioned by diplomats, scholars, and think tanks, but is still in effect to this day. With support from the Quartet, Fatah attempted a military coup d'état in 2007 but was violently ousted by Hamas. This resulted in two parallel governments in Gaza (ruled by Hamas) and the West Bank (ruled by Fatah/PA). During an interview with THE PERSPECTIVE, Martin Konečný, director for the European Middle East Project, said that he believes this intervention in the Palestinian election is “perhaps the biggest blunder in EU’s policy on this conflict over the past 15 years, and we are still bearing the consequences.”

Ever since there have been 14 years of reconciliation attempts to unify the Palestinian parties and people. Different talks and efforts have failed—Mecca Agreement 2007, Sana’a Declaration 2008, Cairo Agreement 2011 and 2017, and many more informal talks—which stems from deep disagreements between the two parties as well as from a mutual lack of respect and acknowledgment of legitimacy. There has been trauma-inducing violence between the parties (600 killed the first days of violence, and numerous political prisoners), and there is a deep distrust of each other’s intentions. Far too many times have reconciliation efforts been drowned out by escalating blame-games between Fatah and Hamas.

### **Implication of the Split**

The split of Palestinian governance has made peace between Israel and Palestine difficult to achieve. There have been many talks between Israel and

Fatah/PLO in the last 14 years. However, Israel only recognizes the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinian people (very different from actually recognizing Palestine as a state) and denounces Hamas as a terrorist organization. When negotiating with Israel, the PLO is then put in a difficult position of trying to accommodate both Israel and Hamas.

### **Imagine the following scenario**

Your neighbor wants to build a pool that covers part of your backyard, and you need to negotiate to reach an agreement. At first, you simply refuse your neighbor entry, but eventually you find holes in the ground on your side. You knock on the neighbor’s door to discuss the matter, only to see that someone has egged the neighbor’s windows. Your neighbor is furious with you. You come to find out that it was your partner who decided to apply the eye-for-an-eye method. The conflict escalates.

You want to keep things peaceful—the neighbor decides to communicate solely with you, but your partner is adamant about their principle of one egg thrown per one hole dug. You and the neighbor strike some deals, such as allowing the neighbor to run water into parts of the pool that are already built. However, each time you agree with the neighbor on something, your partner (whom you love dearly) counters with pouring caramel colorant into the water, effectively making the pool unusable.

This confirms the neighbor’s suspicion that you and your partner are not to be trusted. How much easier would it be to resist the neighbor’s pool construction if you and your partner were united in your decision-making and method of resistance?

### **Prospects of Intra-Palestinian Peace**

In the Palestinian Embassy in Stockholm, the Palestinian Ambassador, Hala Husni Fariz, told THE PERSPECTIVE that the Palestinian people and parties are “cautiously optimistic” about holding new

elections in Palestine. However, she stresses again that this is during broad political discussions among Palestinian factions; the reconciliation is a current and ongoing process. How the talks between Fatah and Hamas are developing could change in two weeks, and almost certainly after the US election.

She describes the general mood of the Palestinian people as "unified in the sense of urgency for unification of the political actors." When similarly asked about the unity of Palestine right now, Martin Konečný, the European Middle East Project Director, says that "if you look at the public opinion polls, the first priority that the Palestinians always stress is reconciliation" and that "the problems are more among the parties than among the people." This urgency and unity is mainly due to Trump's infamous and unilaterally imposed "Vision for Peace," the imminent threat of Israeli annexation plans and the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Experiencing less support from the Arab League and with the US supporting Israel, the Palestinians need to unite to face these existential threats.

The road towards unity is taking form. On 24 September, Fatah and Hamas negotiated on neutral ground in Turkey without any third party present; the will to unite comes from within Palestine. "We are taking charge of this," the Ambassador asserted, referring to the Palestinian parties' respective negotiators. In this meeting, they confirmed their common goals of ending the Israeli occupation, gaining Palestinian independence and on the re-establishment of 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as the capital. They also agreed that "apart from the political and the legal and the diplomatic means, all of this falls under resistance, which includes popular resistance."

When pressed further, specifically on non-violence (since Fatah and Hamas differ on this point), she emphasized: "I know that everybody likes us to

keep repeating non-violent resistance, non-violent resistance. We, on the other hand, we would like to again say that resistance is a right that is incorporated in the UN-Charter for all those who are under occupation."

The election is simply one step towards uniting the nation-state, but Fatah and Hamas have agreed on a broader consensus on how to move forward. The Ambassador also mentioned that given the long 14 years of attempted reconciliation, "this might not be resolved right now," even though the process towards political agreement has already started. She says that the framework agreement made now will hopefully pave the way toward elections. Now, the presidential decree that formally announces new elections was originally supposed to happen before the US election, but there are voices already slowing down the current discussions.

THE PERSPECTIVE sat down with Gaza journalist Muhammad Shehada at a café in Lund. He is an expert on Hamas and has written for the likes of VICE, Aretz and Al Jazeera.. He identifies one factor that puts Palestinian elections at risk: the US election. With Joe Biden as the president of the United States of America, there would be a risk that Fatah and the PLO feel as if their positions of power are less at risk, and that this, in turn, would make them less inclined to unite with Hamas in a unity government.

Mr. Shehada also puts heavy emphasis on the Palestinians' distrust in the political elite: both with the PLO leadership in Ramallah for its nepotism and lack of contact with the reality, as well as with the Hamas leadership in Gaza. The Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas "tore his heart out and threw it out" as Abbas betrayed his own people for luxury and power, according to Mr. Shehada. Hamas may have won an election in 2006, but now when either party organizes a rally only a few hundred people show up.

This is in fact central to why Mr. Shehada thinks elections should happen. He paints a dire picture of the deep divide between Fatah and Hamas, but despite political deadlocks and empty symbolism, he believes the opportunities outweigh the risks. If anything, it gives the frustrated Palestinian youth an opportunity to seize power from the old political elite. The Ambassador also stated that a new election would allow the Palestinian people to place trust in their government,

**"because the people are really the granters of [our] mandate."**

The risk of a poorly managed election would be a repetition of 2006, creating an even more divided and polarized Palestine. Martin Konečný believes that the EU should "deprioritise Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, which currently cannot succeed, and focus on getting the Palestinian house in order." Muhammad Shehada agrees that the EU holds the key to incentivize a future election. "Fear and anger are not as unifying as opportunity and incentives," he states.

The Palestinian Ambassador called on the international community: "Until this exceptionalism [of Israeli settlements and annexation from international law] ends, we are going to see more bloodshed and more suffering. ... What is happening now is that there are forces led by the Trump administration that are bent on undermining the rules-based order, and this is dangerous. Not just for us, the Palestinian people, but to everyone, and everyone should feel threatened and

everyone should feel obliged to do something about it."

All three experts agree that the role of the international community within Palestine is pivotal. For elections to take place, many negotiations between many moving parts and people need to be successful. The importance of getting Palestine's house in order cannot be stressed enough, but regional and international political interests makes that process difficult. Only when the election is formally announced will the two-months-long preparation period start. Indeed, all the political negotiations mentioned were only on how to proceed with election preparations—if an election will be announced at all.

As it stands right now, all parties to these negotiations understand that the Palestinian people have few options other than to unify the government in order to resist the current external threats to their territory, identity, and people.

When they will agree to finalize these efforts through an election is unclear, but a roadmap to those elections has been formed and, unless radical changes happen, the first steps down that path have already been taken.



THE PERSPECTIVE reporter Eje Brundin interviewing the Palestinian Ambassador to Sweden, Hala Husni Fariz. © Eje Brundin



# THE HEALTHCARE HEROES OF THE BEIRUT BLAST

## AND WHY THEY WANT TO LEAVE

It was just another Tuesday evening. At St George Hospital, in the heart of the Achrafieh district of Beirut, Dr. Omar Zmerli, a junior doctor and researcher at the Division of Infectious Diseases, was finishing up his rounds. He was on the second floor of the building, inside the special COVID clinic. While his colleagues were having a meeting in the hallway outside, he still needed to check the results of a patient. The clinic had large panoramic windows facing the port of Beirut and the Mediterranean. As he stood there, he was thinking about his research. Wednesday was going to be a big day. He was launching a new COVID unit to improve testing and surveillance of the disease. He was particularly excited about the new IT-system the unit was going to use.

After checking on the patient's results, Omar was on his way out from the clinic to join the meeting. That is when he heard the first strange noise. It wasn't that loud, and he thought it must have been a patient falling over in the hallway. He reached the waiting area adjacent to the examination room. Seconds later, there was another sound



Lebanon, Beirut, October 12, 2020. It is a bit more than two months since the devastating explosion in Beirut Port shook the city on 4 August. Since then Lebanon Red Cross has been responding to the needs of the people affected.



—this time deafening. Omar was violently thrown to the ground, blinded by dust. What he had just felt was the pressure wave from the explosion of 2750 tons of ammonium nitrate, left unattended for years by the government in the Beirut harbor. The explosion was felt in Cyprus over 200 kilometers away, and shook the Beirut ground with seismic waves equivalent to a 3.3 magnitude earthquake according to the US Geological Survey. Engineering experts at Sheffield University say it was one of the most powerful non-nuclear explosions in modern history. At the modern ten-floor St George hospital, even handles were rent from doors, which themselves were split in half by the force of the explosion. The whole panoramic window, frame included, was forced into the COVID Clinic. Parts of the ceiling also collapsed. "It was a matter of minutes. Had I been inside that room, that window would have killed me instantly," says Omar. Seventeen people—among them staff, patients and visitors—were killed on impact. Many more were injured.

### The Switch

While making his way down to the ground floor, Omar was convinced some sort of shelling had hit the hospital. He describes it as a feeling of the complete unknown and his instinct told him to wait for the next missile to hit. When he found his colleagues, one of them was bleeding badly from his head and neck. Omar and another physician brought their injured colleague to the Emergency Room only to discover that there was nothing left of it. "That's when this switch in my head went off," says Omar. "Maybe that's the beauty of the profession. You go from this extreme state of panic and fear, but then you see that people around you need help. You could say that it suppresses your emotional understanding of what is going on. So we just switched into full drive trying to help whomever we could, with whatever we could and with whatever tools we had."



The response started with assessing the situation, Search and Rescue as well as providing first-aid to the injured people. Thousands of people were transported to the hospitals with the help of LRC volunteers and ambulances. © Lebanese Red Cross



Soon, residents from all over the neighborhood with a wide range of injuries poured into the hospital, not knowing it was also badly affected by the blast. Omar and his colleagues performed CPR on a patient in the street and several persons with severe injuries were emergency-intubated on the sidewalk. "In my entire medical career, I never thought that I would use medicine in that way. Having to do those procedures on the street is something you could never imagine doing as a doctor. Having to give up any sort of sterility, having to use equipment on multiple patients, especially the intubation equipment."

### **"It was total chaos"**

At roughly the same time, Paul Abu Nader, a lawyer by day and a Lebanese Red Cross (LRC) volunteer by night, arrived in Karantina, a semi-residential area just north of the explosion site. He was running late for his regular night shift as an ambulance driver for the LRC Gemmayzeh division, having just finished his day job for a London-based law firm. Paul was on the road from his home in a mountain suburb to Beirut when he felt the shockwave from the explosion rock his car.



Paul Abou Nader at his Gemmayzeh LRC station. © Paul Abou Nader

Earlier that day Paul had received a phone notification telling him about a fire in the harbor area of Beirut. He quickly came to the conclusion that the explosion must have happened there.

Paul was determined to check on a friend who lives in Karantina, but was forced to park far away as the streets were covered with rubble and destroyed vehicles. Paul always keeps two first aid kits in his car, just in case. "I picked up my first aid kits and I ran," he recalls. "While running, I started looking left and right and I saw a lot of people that were wounded. I wasn't expecting this at all. A lot of buildings were destroyed, and buildings were actually falling down around me as I was running. It was total chaos. I felt a lot of adrenalin, a lot of fear, a lot of emotions, all at the same time."

Similar to Omar, Paul immediately took care of the wounded he saw with the few medical materials his first aid kits contained. With the help of some residents, he entered every building he passed to check for injured people. "When I ran out of bandages, I started opening peoples closets and taking their shirts and their ties. I tried to close the wounds with anything I could find." In one building he broke off a door that was hanging on its hinges to use it as a stretcher for a woman unable to walk. As the only active first responder at the scene, people were relying on him to tell them what to do. "I didn't have my team with me, but I could form one on the scene," he says.

### **Coordinating in the Disaster**

At first, phone connections were dead and Paul could not reach his Chief at the Red Cross in Gemmayzeh. When Paul finally got hold of him, he asked for ambulances to be sent to him in Karantina. "At that point I didn't know that the exact same thing was happening in Gemmayzeh, in Achrafieh. It was happening all over Beirut." Not all of the Gemmayzeh division ambulances had survived the



blast and debris blocked ambulances from other divisions from reaching him. Instead Paul coordinated with his superior, sending severely injured people in regular cars to hospitals that he knew were undamaged and still functional. “The first thing the Red Cross operator told me was, ‘the hospitals in Beirut are destroyed’”

Back at St. George Hospital, Omar was dealing with the problem Paul tried to avoid: Some ambulance services were unaware that St George’s had been critically damaged by the explosion. They kept dropping off patients in need of medical attention, but the hospital was already overwhelmed. For Omar, one of the most difficult parts of that night was having to reject patients for whom the hospital was unable to care. “I recall screaming at an ambulance driver, ‘Can’t you see we don’t have a hospital?! Where would I take this patient?’”

In Lebanon, the Red Cross and the National Defense provide the main ambulance services but other organizations and private actors also provide emergency transports, which makes coordination difficult in a disaster like this. In the hours following the explosion, ambulances circled around in Beirut for hours trying to find a hospital. However, St. George Hospital closely coordinated with the Lebanese Red Cross, which owns the largest fleet of ambulances and is one of the best-organized emergency transport providers in Beirut. An hour past sunset, around 8:30 PM, the medical staff had managed to set up a makeshift hospital in two parking lots close by. In the darkness of the night, equipped only with flashlights, they had started the difficult

procedure of evacuating around 200 patients from the damaged hospital when the LRC ambulances arrived. These ambulances helped with the evacuation and picked up injured people from the parking lot, transporting them to functioning hospitals in and outside of Beirut.

### **An Emergency Response System that relies on volunteers**

At the end of the night, the Lebanese Red Cross had transported and treated more than 2000 injured people. In a post on Instagram on the 4th of August, LRC urged all its ambulance personnel to report immediately to their stations and many of those who responded were young volunteers just like Paul. In fact the bulk of the LRC workforce are volunteers; 12 000 compared to only 450 regular employees according to numbers given by the LRC PR office. Like many others, Paul became a volunteer when he was 19 years old—the same year he enrolled at university. “It is with the dedication and time of the volunteers that we have been able to build what we have in the Red Cross today,” says Paul. Living in a European country, it might be hard to imagine a 20-something volunteer who is not a trained paramedic driving your ambulance. Why is the Lebanese emergency response system so heavily reliant on volunteers?

Part of the answer is the general weakness of the public sector, which has seen NGOs and private actors step in where the state could not. Many Lebanese agree that the roots of the problem can be found in the confessional political system created

**I recall screaming at an ambulance driver,  
'Can't you see we don't have a hospital?!  
Where would I take this patient?**

Omar to THE PERSPECTIVE

while the country was under French mandate. Confessionalism—which in the case of Lebanon purports that the President must be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of Parliament a Shi'a Muslim—was reinforced with the signing of the Taif agreement, along with the adoption of a general amnesty law, that concluded the civil war in 1991. The end of the war saw the emergence of a political elite of "recycled warlords" who supported their families, friends

different actors providing healthcare are mostly private, which means that multiple different interests are at play, explains Jade Khalife, a PhD-student and researcher at the Department of Social Medicine and Global Health at Lund University. Within this system, some politicians have tried giving advantages to certain hospitals affiliated with their regions or political parties. "This is a legacy of allowing some of the same people who participated in the war to run the country," says Jade.



Now after two months the response has shifted more to providing food and hygiene parcels as well as cash grants to the most vulnerable families. LRC keep providing psychosocial support for those in need of emotional or mental health support.

© Lebanese Red Cross

and communities in exchange for votes and favors, something which has been a focal point for the protests in Lebanon that started in October 2019. The same clientelism and corruption that has characterized Lebanon's state-building process since the end of the civil war has permeated all key sectors of the economy—including healthcare. Healthcare is primarily publicly financed but the

Although the Ministry of Public Health has implemented a number of reforms since 2009 aimed at tackling corruption, there are still problems that are amplified by the current challenge of COVID-19 and the economic crisis.

## Beirut Lies in Pieces

Paul ended up staying in Karantina for five hours before reaching his Lebanese Red Cross headquarters and witnessing the complete destruction of the restaurants and bars along with his LRC station in Gemmayzeh. "The roof of the Gemmayzeh Division had collapsed; there were no windows anymore. It was a miracle that everyone was okay." He stayed there until noon the next day, continuing to help wounded people at a field hospital set up by the LRC.

At 2 AM, completely exhausted, Omar headed to his car. Part of a brick building had fallen on top of it, shattering the windshield. The remnants of somebody's destroyed kitchen—pots, pans, spoons and forks—were littering the roof. As he drove home, head stuck out the driver's side window for the whole ride, the full scope of the disaster dawned upon him. "It was a tough moment. It was me realizing that shit had hit the fan. Me realizing that Beirut was destroyed."

The next day at 7 AM, he was back at the hospital. It was not the Wednesday he had expected it to be. His minilab was gone, and so was a large part of his research. Beirut is the most densely populated area in Lebanon with about half the population living in the capital. Lebanese authorities estimate that at least 200 people were killed in the explosion, and another 6500 were injured. 300 000 were left homeless and about 50 000 homes, 9 hospitals and 178 schools were damaged. A two-week long state of emergency was announced and prime minister Hassan Diab, along with the cabinet, resigned amid widespread protests on the 10th of August. Like many others in Beirut, Omar and Paul had witnessed horrific events on the night of the explosion and their stories have many commonalities. One of them is how grateful they are towards the residents of Karantina and Achrafieh who helped

them even without medical know-how, and who continued to help with the clean up afterwards.

"Achrafieh was literally cleaned up by the people. There was no government presence," says Omar. The cost of rebuilding Saint George Hospital is estimated to be more than 40 million USD. Despite the cleaning efforts, splintered glass is still stuck to the ceiling in some of the rooms. The efforts of rebuilding, the dual economic and political crises, along with the COVID-19 pandemic, entail unprecedented challenges to healthcare in Lebanon. "Pre-explosion, we were one of the leading centers in COVID-treatment and management. Now we are trying to regain some form of normality, and are trying to respond to COVID again," says Omar. After the explosion, all medical staff were tested for COVID, but to everyone's surprise there had been no transmissions. "From a research perspective, these results are interesting," says Omar. He is still worried about the situation of COVID-19 in Lebanon as hospitals are already at their full capacity and the number of available intensive care beds are down to two digits. According to Jade, who together with other concerned Lebanese health-professionals recently launched the Independent Lebanese Committee for the Elimination of COVID ([zerocovidlb.com](http://zerocovidlb.com)), a big problem is that the government is lacking a comprehensive long-term strategy to tackle COVID. Yet Jade is also hopeful: "COVID can be a uniting issue for the Lebanese. Health can be a uniting issue", he says.

## An Outflow of Human Resources

Jade notes that the healthcare sector is specifically reliant on imports. Hyperinflation and the extreme devaluation of the Lebanese currency has led to a situation where medicines and medical supplies have to be imported at a loss. "In recent weeks, medical importers have warned of a shortage of supplies," he says. But there is also another



daunting prospect: the outflow of human resources, especially doctors and nurses. Prior to the current multiple crises, Lebanon compared well with some European countries in international health-care rankings, with a high ratio of physicians and nurses per capita. In 2017, the ratio was 34 nurses and 31.1 physicians per 10 000 inhabitants. But this is rapidly changing. "What is currently happening is a severe outflow, especially among the younger generations," says Jade.

Omar and Paul are both 26 years old and well-educated. Both are planning to leave the country as soon as they can. "The healthcare situation in Lebanon is not ideal, but with everything that is going on right now, it's still something to be proud of," says Paul. He thinks that despite all of the difficulties, he and his peers' motivation has not dwindled. Yet he has noticed the effects of the economic crisis, since medical equipment is scarcer than before and daily life is tougher. "I'm a first responder, but I'm also a Lebanese citizen, and I have to live in this country. So yeah, eventually, I'm going to leave," he says.

Omar—apart from trying to get by on a salary that has been slashed to the extent that an iPhone now costs fifteen times his monthly income—is still thinking about his research. Research requires money and opportunities, both of which Lebanon lacks, and that, he says, is the main reason why he would leave. "The youth, they are not going to grow into these middle-aged people who are going to stay and continue with the country and what little the country has to offer."

Recently, and almost exactly a year after he left office because of popular protest, the former prime minister Saad Hariri has been reinstated. Many young Lebanese see Hariri as a representative of the "old system" and that his reappointment signals a step backward. They feel the governing system has no dignity and that those who have ruined the nation should at least admit it.

The Lebanese diaspora is already massive: around 8-16 million individuals are living abroad and it is estimated that a mere 4-6 million remain in Lebanon. Those who have left play an important

economical role, sending 4.3 billion USD in personal remittances in 2019 according to the World Bank, and an average of 7 to 8 billion USD in total remittances per year according to a variety of other estimates. The diaspora will continue to be of great importance in the rebuilding process, but Lebanon also needs skilled



The view from the helipad of St George Hospital. The dust from the blast is clearly visible.  
© St George Hospital



CCTV footage of the Emergency Room Entrance at St George Hospital.

© St George Hospital

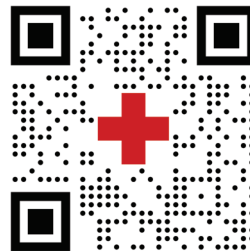
people to stay. The Lebanese ability to recover is world-famous and gives due credit to a people that has lived, and is still living, through all kinds of hardships. Yet the concept has almost achieved a mythical status. Following the blast, Lebanese politician, Nabih Berry, wrote in a poem published by Al-Jadeed television channel: "Beirut does not burn, does not drown, it drinks patience and rises like the phoenix." Many were outraged by the statement, coming from a political elite that again and again relies on the youth and on the people to clean up their mess. "This Lebanese resilience they talk of... It's really a big illusion," says Omar. "Eventually, it's just about pushing through. In Lebanon, when you

wake up in the morning, you have to pick a fight for that day. Either you worry about the dollar, or you worry about getting your medication at the pharmacy or food on your table. Or you want to go to work which has been devastated by the explosion. Every day, you have to deal with all of these different crises".

For many Lebanese still in the country, the explosion has prompted their decision to leave.

The people of Karantina were lucky that Paul was there that day. The Lebanese government is lucky, at least for a little while longer, that Paul and Omar—and others like them—are still there.

VISIT **WWW.STGEORGEHOSPITAL.ORG/STGEORGE-DONATION** AND **WWW.REDCROSS.ORG.LB/** IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE OR WISH TO DONATE.

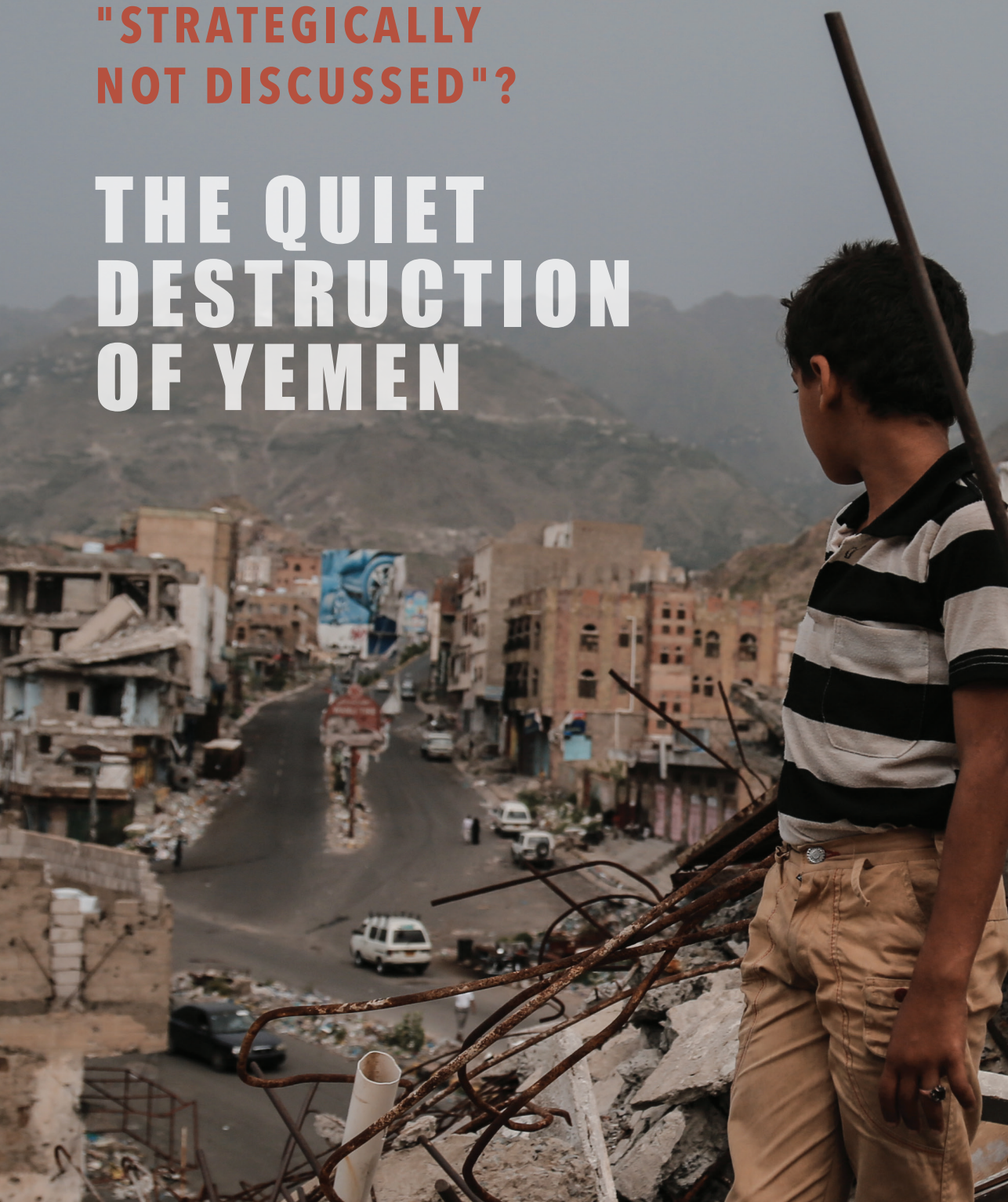




CHRISTOFFER BODFORSS | FEATURE

"STRATEGICALLY  
NOT DISCUSSED"?

# THE QUIET DESTRUCTION OF YEMEN





**Y**emen is currently the center of the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, according to the United Nations. Upwards of two-thirds of Yemen's 30 million inhabitants are starving while also being threatened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, we rarely see news articles about the war which continues to ravage the country. THE PERSPECTIVE spoke with author and professor Isa Blumi about the issue.

Situated at the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, bordering Oman and Saudi-Arabia, Yemen is located next to the Red Sea, which hosts one of the world's most important trade routes. The country is rich in oil and natural gas—yet despite these promising features, Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Middle East due to corruption and conflicts.

As is the case with many of today's so-called "underdeveloped" countries, colonialism and imperialism have played key roles in Yemen's misfortunes: the British took control over the southern city Aden in 1839, which served as a strategically important base for trade and extracting resources from Yemen. At that time, both the Ottoman and British Empire had competing interests in the region. During the first half of the 20th century, the country was split into two republics. In the North, there was the Kingdom of Yemen. In the South, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

Aden gained independence from the British in 1967 and the country was unified in 1990. However, Yemen is still struggling to remain independent in the face of larger powers, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, which vie for political and economic influence.

The roots of the ongoing war can be found in the Arab Spring of 2011, when massive protests swept through countries like Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Libya. Some leaders, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, were deposed as a result of the protests. Syria, on the other hand, descended into a bloody civil war.

In Yemen, people also took to the streets demanding better standards of living and an end to corruption. This led to the fall of the authoritarian president Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled since 1990. Tragically, the lives of Yemenis did not change for the better: Vice President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi succeeded Saleh, but was ultimately confronted with many domestic problems. Among a severe shortage of food and high numbers of unemployment, Hadi also had to grapple with jihadist and separatist groups opposing his rule. Furthermore, sections of the military were still loyal to the former president.

Today, much of the war centers around the Houthi-movement, also called Ansar Allah, a militant Shia-Islamic group fighting the Hadi government and the Saudi-led coalition which includes the Gulf states and the United States. The Houthis were a part of the uprising that deposed President Saleh. After the transfer of power, however, they allied with members of former president Saleh's army, opposing the new Hadi government which they believed to be incompetent and illegitimate. The Houthis managed to take over Yemen's capital Sanaa in 2014.

Born in former Czechoslovakia, Isa Blumi is an Associate Professor of Turkish and Middle Eastern Studies at Stockholm University and the author of the 2018 book "Destroying Yemen: What Chaos in Arabia Tells Us About the World." THE PERSPECTIVE interviewed Professor Blumi about the current state of Yemen.

A Yemeni child witnesses the destruction of homes in the city of Taiz due to the war. Taiz, Yemen, August 22, 2016. © Akram Alrasny/Adobe Stock

His remarks are marked in italics.

*Militarily, there are some fronts that are just stagnant. In the East—towards the big oil operations—the Houthis have been scoring major victories. Along the Red Sea, the Saudi-led coalition has taken control of some ports and are occupying parts of the coastline. The war has destroyed the civilian population's ability to feed itself. The Saudi blockades of Yemen are making it impossible for food supplies from coming in and the ones that do, as is often the case, are old and stale. Even the pharmaceuticals are often expired. Recently, the United States suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic could be so catastrophic that American troops needed to be sent in to stop the war, but that was not implemented.*

The war is often considered a proxy conflict due to the involvement of Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Persian Gulf separates the strictly Sunni-Islamic theocracy from the Shia-Islamic theocracy of Iran. The two neighboring giants have long been bitter rivals in what has been dubbed "The Middle Eastern Cold War." Yemen is called one of the fronts in this conflict.

A report presented by the UN Security Council in 2015 claimed that Iran has been providing the Houthis with arms, money and combat training



Dr. Isa Blumi spoke to  
THE PERSPECTIVE  
© Gulf Research Meeting 2020

for the past decade, though greater involvement has been denied by Iran. Saudi Arabia, sees the Houthis as a major threat to their country and has consequently

formed a coalition, primarily with other Gulf States, in order to crush the Houthi movement and allow Hadi to regain power. The Saudis and their allies' strategy has been dominated by a massive campaign of airstrikes in Yemen. Officially, they claim to target enemies but many hospitals, schools and critical infrastructure like water facilities have become collateral damage. This war is more complex than a simple a power struggle between a rebel group and the

## One of the long-term barriers to a solution is the belief that we need to negotiate with Iran.

Isa Blumi to THE PERSPECTIVE

government, though Professor Blumi believes that there is a need to simplify the conflict and change the narrative in order to spread awareness:

*The war is about capitalist imperialism trying to subdue one of the last remaining resistant societies in the world against globalization and neoliberalism. These people have, throughout the 20th century, tried to keep a level of independence from a system that has now consumed the larger world. I think people would acknowledge that there is in fact a cohesive global economy if you will. Sweden, for example, has been a large part of this. Think about IKEA, Volvo or H&M—they have benefited from the integrated world, but not everyone has. Yemen has massive amounts of unexploited oil and gas reserves so the attempts to make them join the global economy is not just to be able to build malls and H&M stores there. The global economy wants access to their resources and inclusion in trade but this is on conditions that would eliminate Yemen's sovereignty—their ability to negotiate.*

The war has resulted in an ongoing famine, which the United Nations has deemed to be the worst in a century. An estimated twenty-four million Yemenis, half of them children, are in need of humanitarian assistance. Accurate numbers are very hard to find due to the continual chaos, though the charity Save the Children estimated that 50,000 children died of hunger or disease in the year 2017 alone.

Due to the lack of insight into Yemen and its constant turmoil, news organizations often have to resort to rough estimates of fatalities and warnings of impending famine rather than actual numbers of deaths. Professor Blumi believes that this is not only due to the difficulty of finding information:

*Yemen is too vital as an objective for very powerful interests to allow for public sympathies—for outrage—to get in the way of achieving the long-term ambitions of those actors involved. The few occasions we hear about the war, it is strategically not discussed in ways that people on the ground understand it to be... We are told it is Iranian influence and [an] attempt to stop the Iranians from gaining influence and shaping politics of the area, while in the meantime, even though it is strategically left off the analysis, there are other factors clearly at stake.*

The famine is not the only crisis plaguing Yemen: the destruction of water and sanitation facilities has led to huge outbreaks of cholera; sea, land, and air blockades enforced by Saudi Arabia are also preventing medicine and food from reaching the starving population. One might think that matters could not possibly get worse, but sadly, Yemen is not spared from the COVID-19 virus. As of writing, Human Rights Watch has reported that around 2000 cases have been confirmed but explains that the actual number is "impossible to determine." In light of the outbreak of the pandemic, the Saudi-led coalition agreed to a ceasefire in April. Despite this agreement, they carried out dozens of airstrikes

the following week and are continuing the bombardment. Professor Blumi is not optimistic about Yemen's future, stating:

*Yemen is already destroyed. The infrastructure that had taken hundreds of years to build will never be replaced—the wells, dams and channels. And when there is no more food being grown and no more coming from the outside, these next one or two years will lead to not tens of thousands dying every year but hundreds of thousands. Though, something that is likely to happen is that the Saudi-led coalition may break apart due to the fact that the war is very costly and destructive.*

When asked about potential solutions, he responded:

*One of the long-term barriers to a solution is the belief that we need to negotiate with Iran. If we put pressure on Iran then the conflict ends, but the right solution is actually addressing the people in Sanaa in Yemen. Talking to and trying to negotiate with Iran instead of more key elements in this issue—the ones who actually stood up to former president Saleh for years—is preventing a resolution of the conflict.*

Trying to understand the war in Yemen is difficult. There are conflicting narratives regarding the motives, goals and actions of both sides. Even the number of dead, injured and sick is accompanied by uncertainty. What remains indisputable is the fact that millions of Yemenis are suffering and are in desperate need of aid. Politicians and the media cannot allow the fear of antagonizing Saudi Arabia, Iran or other actors to stand in the way of preventing human suffering. Ultimately, saving the lives of innocent civilians must be the highest priority. Otherwise, future generations may ask the same questions as we do about the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. How could this happen? Why didn't the international community act in time?



# DOCUMENTING THE UNDOCUMENTED

## HOW DO MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS EXPERIENCE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY?

JANUARY 22ND, 2020: LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA EXPERIENCED ITS FIRST REPORTED NOVEL CORONAVIRUS INFECTION. ALMOST ONE YEAR LATER, THE COUNTY CONTINUES TO WITNESS RISING CASES, WITH LATINX COMMUNITIES BEING DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTED IN TERMS OF BOTH TOTAL CASES AND MORTALITY RATE. WHILE RESOURCES HAVE BEEN MADE AVAILABLE TO LEGAL RESIDENTS AND CITIZENS, THE COUNTY CONTINUES TO FALL SHORT OF PROTECTING ITS MOST VULNERABLE INHABITANTS: UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS.

THE PERSPECTIVE INTERVIEWED AND SURVEYED MEMBERS OF THIS MARGINALIZED AND DISENFRANCHISED COMMUNITY TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES DURING THE ONGOING PANDEMIC. THEIR NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO ENSURE ANONYMITY AND SAFETY.





Being undocumented is a scary thing, especially in these times. It's a daily fear for us trying to live a 'normal' life," expresses Maria, a 27-year-old mother of one. "Not having the same help or resources as most people" is a struggle that she attributes to her undocumented status. When asked what is the hardest thing about living during the pandemic, Maria replied that her household finances have been negatively impacted, which has also affected her housing situation.

Maria is not alone. Throughout Los Angeles County (LAC), many undocumented immigrants are experiencing losses in work hours, drops in sales from privately-owned businesses, and difficulties paying rent. While legal California residents and citizens who have lost their jobs can apply for unemployment benefits that include a monthly \$600 bonus, undocumented immigrants are ineligible. Still, they are expected to make rent payments all the same. Despite the California legislature passing a bill to ban evictions on tenants who cannot pay rent through February 2021, harassment and intimidation from landlords as well as illegal lockouts continue to occur.

Reporting harassment is a difficult situation for many undocumented immigrants because this means coming into contact with the government—the very institution that deems their presence in the country unlawful. This legal gray-area makes members of this community fearful and vulnerable, especially as the Trump administration has bolstered the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. ICE serves as the main federal law enforcement agency for deportation of undocumented immigrants with a mission "to protect America

from the cross-border crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety."

Even for those undocumented immigrants that have obtained legal working permits, finding the resources to maintain financial stability has been difficult. Rosa, an expecting mother who works part-time and is enrolled in college courses, receives a renewable two-year period of deferred action from deportation. Despite holding a work-permit, she—like Maria—finds that the most difficult aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic is the effect it has had on her household finances.

Rosa was among the 17% of women and 18% of Latinxs within LA County who—according to the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research—lost their jobs in the early months of the pandemic. When Rosa was eventually called back into work, she was offered less shifts and reduced hours. With bills to pay, she was faced with the decision of taking the offer "to keep getting paid or not get paid at all." The reduction in household income also has meant she and her partner have cut out "luxuries" such as cable, cell phones and online video subscription services.

These luxuries are in fact services that market research company Invoke has found to be important among Americans for dealing with the stresses of unemployment and social distancing. One of Invoke's participants stated: "I'm so grateful that we had so many options for at-home entertainment during the pandemic. I can't imagine how much worse the quarantine would have been without it." While the lack of home entertainment options is a struggle Rosa faces, it is not the most distressing thing for her. "Thankfully, being pregnant helped

Los Angeles, California, United States.  
© Jay Wennington/Unsplash





me access medical. However, due to the pandemic, it took longer for everything to process. The downside with the pandemic also causes delays in appointments and it takes longer to receive prescription medication."

It would be unjust to suggest that LA County and the State of California have been completely negligent of the problems facing the undocumented immigrant community. "In California, immigrants and Latinos [sic] are among the most likely to contract and die from this virus," acknowledged Mayor Robert Garcia of Long Beach in a press release on September 22, 2020. Mayor Garcia further notes: "Immigrants and the undocumented, especially in this moment, are incredibly fearful of the government, the medical response, and losing their job in the workplace."

Because of this, the city of Long Beach and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights Los Angeles (CHIRLA) have decided to bring free and mobile COVID-19 testing to places with high Latinx and

immigrant populations. The tests are conducted anonymously to encourage and protect the vulnerable community.

This is a much-needed approach: Latinx communities, not only state-wide but LA County specifically, are disproportionately more likely to have COVID-19 cases as well as high COVID-19 mortality rates. Angelica Salas of CHIRLA explains that in Long Beach, "The positive rate of infection among Latinos is 51.9% where the [percentage of the] total population of this community is 43%."

Excluding Long Beach, statistics from the Department of Public Health for LA County show that Latinxs make up 49.3% of the total population and account for 38.2% of COVID-19 cases and 51.4% of deaths associated with the virus.

"My message to my immigrant brothers and sisters is get tested. It's easy, it's safe, it's confidential and it will save lives," says Salas.



The bills continue to pile up, but money is short.

© Annie Spratta/Unsplashd



Additionally, the state of California released a one-time-only, first come first served \$75 million financial relief program. Officials estimated that about 150,000 undocumented immigrants would benefit from this aid. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, applications could only be filed via telephone. Within hours the phone lines crashed, leading to many frustrated and desperate callers. One of them is Ernesto, who came to Los Angeles from Mexico as a teenager and now owns a small streetwear clothing company. After trying to file for an application for what he says "felt like forever," he eventually decided to give up. "I had to put my business on hold for the time being. Now I'm back working with my dad doing construction," he reflects.

While \$75 million in aid for 150,000 undocumented immigrants is a step in the right direction, 2017 statistics from the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP) show that there are approximately 2.6 million undocumented immigrants residing in California. In LA County alone, the estimate is roughly one million undocumented persons. According to the Migration Policy Institute, 60% of these immigrants are of Mexican origin.

According to ITEP, undocumented immigrants within LA County contributed \$543,990,900 in local taxes and \$443,640,400 in state taxes in 2017. In this light, even if undocumented immigrants from LA County alone had received aid from the \$75 million relief program—worth just 17% of total state taxes the community contributed in 2017—it would mean that only 15% of them would have been able to receive any relief stipends. In reality, the statewide chances for an undocumented immigrant to receive aid were much less favorable than even that.

While LA County and the State of California have made efforts to relieve some of the pressure placed on their undocumented communities, the pandemic is not over, and it continues to disproportionately

affect this already disenfranchised and stigmatized community. Rosa expressed, "All people, whether undocumented or not, are going through hardships due to the virus. However, it would be amazing if the resources and financial help was available to everyone alike."

In the gaps left by the government, nongovernmental organizations and nonprofits have stepped in to provide resources. California Immigrant Youth Justice Alliance, a self-described "immigrant youth-led organization that strengthens local and statewide grassroots organizing efforts to build collective power," has composed a list of resources available to undocumented immigrants and provides vital information regarding the community's legal rights.

Magdalena, 46, immigrated to LA County almost 30 years ago. She has also had her work hours cut and finds it difficult to stay on top of her bills. She has said that during the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the biggest changes related to her experience of being undocumented is that she has noticed and experienced increasing instances of racism. This has only served to compound her vulnerability and feelings of stigmatization. When asked if there was anything else she would like people to know, Magdalena replied:

**"No somos mala personas como el presidente dice, solo somos personas que queremos trabajar para vivir."**

*We are not bad people like the president says, we are only people who want to work to be able to live.*



# JUSTICE FOR VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE BEYOND THE COURTROOM

## HOW THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT IS PLEADING FOR A CRIMINAL LAW REVOLUTION

**T**he Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) is not a single-issue movement, despite its central focus on racist police violence. It questions the whole criminal law system and whether justice is being fairly distributed by all—in the USA and beyond.

In this critical moment, many reflect on whether the criminal law system is synonymous of justice for the victims of sexual violence. Associations such as Critical Resistance, INCITE! or Spring Up provide insight into how alternative forms of justice are not only possible, but are already being practiced in some communities.

The Black Lives Matter movement

advocates for civil disobedience in the face of racist police brutality, being responsible for the massive popular reaction to the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others. Despite this central focus on police violence, this movement has revealed itself to be a Pandora's box in which everything citizens across the world assumed to be rightful, democratic and egalitarian about their criminal systems was put into question. Calls to defund the police spread like wildfire among protesters throughout the USA, with crucial repercussions—in Minneapolis, the site of George Floyd's murder and birth of this year's protest movement, the local police pledged to dismantle the department entirely, as City Council members

declared they would "end policing as we know it." This has, until this moment, mostly meant the reallocation of some resources towards the Minneapolis health department and not complete abolition, which has garnered various reactions. Such arguments for police and prison abolition, while never before as mainstream as they are now, are not new in the USA context. They have originated mostly from the anti-racist movement in which activists have advocated for the idea since the 1980s.

It is not a coincidence that this debate primarily arose in the United States. With a prison population of around 2.3 million people - or one-fifth of the world's incarcerated, according to the consequences of having been, for decades, a society that has



relied heavily on a punitive justice system. The debate is rendered even more divisive upon considering the history of a hegemonic "tough on crime" rhetoric spearheaded by both Republican and Democratic US Presidents - from Reagan's megalomaniac "War on Drugs" to Clinton's 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act that resulted in the largest increases in federal and state inmate populations of any president in American history, according to the Justice Policy Institute; the situation found its climax in Trump's hostile discourse towards BLM protesters. As the discussion becomes increasingly complex, a particular dilemma arises for feminist movements and for all those wishing to support the prison and police abolitionist movements but also maintain their commitment to ending sexual violence. According to Mithu Sanyal in her book "Rape: From Lucretia to #metoo", while the European feminist movements have historically focused more intensely on issues such as reproductive rights and childcare provisions, the US movements have for decades prioritised the issue of sexual violence, making the national context of anti-sexual violence-oriented feminism particularly relevant. The issue for these activists at a crossroads lies in determining what will happen to those who

commit sexual violence acts if abolitionism is embraced, or how the fight against sexual violence will adapt to accommodate abolitionism. Fighting to incarcerate sexual offenders has been a crucial motor for the USA's feminist movements, with both material repercussions for the safety and healing process of victims, and symbolic repercussions for the recognising of sexual violence as a serious societal issue. It was only in 1978 that a man was accused (but not convicted) of marital rape in Oregon v. Rideout, and the critical response that ensued, from feminists and other social movements, was vital to enable the criminalisation of marital rape in all 50 states (though only as late as 1993). This is a mere example of how victories through criminal law reform, expanding the sexual violence acts that are punishable by law, have been essential for the movement. However, abolitionism urges these activists to reflect on the kind of justice provided by the current system and whether law reform that enables increased incarceration is still a strategy worth pursuing.

### **Rethinking the assumption that criminal law and justice are synonyms**

A question worth asking is whether the current criminal system has been successful in protecting

victims of sexual violence, offering them justice, and preventing the victimization of more people. Author Miriam Perez-Putnam at Transform Harm, a website compiling resources on alternative forms of justice, poses the question in an autobiographical essay: "People try to poke holes in the prison abolition movement by asking 'What about rapists, do you want them just wandering around?', but they already are."

Data from RAINN (2017)—Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, the largest US anti-sexual violence association—indicates that out of 1000 sexual assaults, 995 will not lead to convictions, with as many as 770 going completely under the radar and not being reported at all. In Alliance for Justice's first ever national survey of victim's views on safety and justice (2016), it was found that "by a margin of 3 to 1, victims prefer holding people accountable through options beyond prison, such as rehabilitation, mental health treatment, drug treatment, community supervision, or community service," meaning that the victims themselves do not seem to see their own interests and needs reflected in a punitive system.

"It often seems that we are asking the judicial system to serve an emotional and social

"The whole Black Lives Movement exploding feels like a fire that was waiting to be lit by yet another abuse of power by White People."

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purpose it was not created for, and seems unlikely to be able to satisfy," Mithu Sanyal stated in her 2019 book "Rape: From Lucrecia to #metoo".

Moreover, the criminal system itself can be a site for sexual violence victimization. Referring to her personal experience of incarceration for political reasons in 1970 in her book "Are Prisons Obsolete?", Angela Davis, anti-racist, anti-fascist and feminist scholar-activist, describes how the standard technique of body searches in prisons and detention centers is a practice that violates women's bodily autonomy and right to sexual self determination.

Acts of sexual violence committed by police officers are also not a rare occurrence: Kimberlé Crenshaw, the scholar and feminist activist who has developed the concept of intersectionality, has recently attempted to challenge the perception of BLM as an anti-racist police brutality movement being solely focused on Black men as victims of police violence.

Attempting to recenter the struggles of Black women in the movement through the #SayHerName campaign, she stresses that one often overlooked form of violence is that of sexual violence toward women—particularly Black women—perpetrated by police officers, as is starkly

illustrated by the case of Daniel Holtzclaw, an Oklahoma police officer convicted of 18 charges of sexual assault against black women.

### **Grassroots organizing for systemic change—what alternatives to incarceration?**

Even if the current highly punitive criminal justice system in the USA and other countries reaps little benefit for victims, perpetrators and communities, it takes a deeply imaginative and critical outlook to even consider alternatives to the prison system and to the intense policing of our societies. It is worth illustrating this challenging task with the activities of those who have attempted to practice alternative ways of justice—ways that emphasize repairing harm done to victims and stress the importance of prevention. In the USA context, INCITE!, an organization of (trans) women of color focusing on ending gender-based violence, is a notable example

of feminist intersectional organizing towards achieving non-punitive strategies for dealing with sexual violence. They work towards developing "responses to sexual and domestic violence in [their] communities that do not solely depend on a racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic criminal justice system and fuel the right-wing agenda of 'get-



A protester holding a sign in protest, quoting "I can't breathe", George Floyd's infamous last words.

ting tough on crime' through the proliferation of prisons, unrestrained police brutality, and the mass incarceration of communities of color." Critical Resistance, an organization co-created by Angela Davis in 1997, provides an online toolkit for Community

Accountability for Survivors of Sexual Violence, where they list a series of readings on the topics and catalogue associations involved in the development of grassroots projects of restorative justice, which they define as "a model that aims to repair harm by engaging community members and restoring community balance by calling on shared

local community organizers to explore and practice responding to harm and violence without punitive measures through community accountability". Providing workshops on cultivating sexual consent culture—for example, to university students - is also a way to bring about social transformation and justice, according to their values. In Barnard Center

responsible for each other's well being. Across the USA, several organizations are already simultaneously dedicated to the abolitionist values mainstreamed by the BLM protests and to providing safety, closure and justice to victims of acts of sexual violence, navigating the complex interactions of these different needs in local communities.



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for Research on Women's webpage, a video titled "Everyday Practices of Transformative Justice" describes how transformative justice is not just political in the macro sense, but is rather a daily practice. It fosters a long-term understanding of violence, that moves past the immediacy of emergencies and considers the causes and processes that lead

Though the official legal system is still one of punitive criminal justice and of mass incarceration, they practice daily insurgencies by involving victims, perpetrators, bystanders and whole communities in taking responsibility for social issues and deciding on the best ways to solve them, with the dedication to repair harm done to all rather than focus on punishing perpetrators. It may be useful to know that other kinds of justice are not just in the realm of dreams and imagination and that concepts such as restorative and transformative justice can and are being incorporated into the daily workings of communities across the USA and beyond.

values, principles, and practices of accountability."

Other associations, such as Spring Up, prefer the concept of transformative justice, which includes offering a "4-month long Transformative Justice for Gender Based Violence class for

to those emergencies. In this sense, transformative justice starts by small gestures such as mediating conflicts in your community, being mindful of those vulnerable to violence and providing ways to keep them safe, among other tools of community accountability—being

? If you are interested in exploring these new concepts of justice, you can

- start by asking yourself: how do you feel justice would be best offered to victims of sexual violence and what role can you play in that?



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