

VOLUME 14 ISSUE 3 | SUMMER 2020

*in*FOCUS

QUARTERLY

COVID-19: The More Things Change...



Mark Meiowitz on U.S. Leadership | **Mark Dubowitz**, **Behnam Ben Taleblu**, and **Richard A. Goldberg** on the Maximum Pressure Campaign Against Iran | **Stephen Blank** on Russia's Middle East Ambitions | **Simon Henderson** on Saudi Arabia | **Entifadh Qanbar** on Iraq's Protest Movement | **Aykan Erdemir** on Erdogan's Power Grab | **Lenny Ben-David** on Israel's Resilience | **Yossi Kuperwasser** on Regional Threats to Israel | **Ofir Winter** and **Tzvi Lev** on COVID-19 in Egypt | **Dan Blumenthal** and **Linda Zhang** on China's Worldwide Propaganda | **Hanin Ghaddar** on Hezbollah's Influence in Lebanon | **Shoshana Bryen** reviews *Fight House*

Featuring an Interview with Brig. Gen. **Assaf Orion**, IDF (Res.)

LETTER FROM THE PUBLISHER

We're beginning to peek through the COVID-19 cloud. The world is slowly becoming something recognizable – at least in some places – and the beauty of summer beckons. The world is likely irrevocably changed from what it was at the dawn of 2020, but COVID-19 isn't the only thing in it. Different priorities for some, different resources for others. Different allies, different adversaries. Strengthened and weakened allies, strengthened and weakened adversaries. All of these will need to be understood and accounted for.



The Summer 2020 issue of *inFOCUS* looks at changes in our world and how the United States should proceed.

The elephant in the room is China. Brig. Gen. (Res.) Assaf Orion spoke with JPC Senior Director Shoshana Bryen about China in the evolution of security relations and technology security between the U.S. and Israel. Russia, Iran, and the Multi-National Force and Observers in Sinai work their way in there as well.

Dan Blumenthal and Linda Zhang track China's increasing repression at home and aggressiveness abroad. Mark Meirowitz calls for strengthened American leadership, and Stephen Blank shows us why with his look at Russia in the Middle East. Yossi Kuperwasser takes the broad view of the

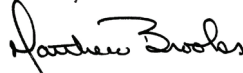
region, while Mark Dubowitz, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and Richard A. Goldberg make the case that Iran isn't finished yet, although it's close. Simon Henderson, Aykan Erdemir, and Ofir Winter and Tzvi Lev consider the Persian Gulf, Turkey, and Egypt, respectively. The government of Iraq, writes Entifadh Qanbar, is America's enemy; its people are not. Hanin Ghadar limns the Lebanese banking system and the systematic looting of the people's resources – even before the virus dissipates.

And Lenny Ben-David reminds us that what is now has been before with a look at early 20th century Palestine and trials of the Jewish people on the land more than a century ago.

Shoshana Bryen lightens the atmosphere politically with her review of Tevy Troy's new book, *Fight House: Rivalries in the White House from Truman to Trump*.

If you appreciate what you've read, I encourage you to make a contribution to the Jewish Policy Center. As always, you can use our secure site: <http://www.jewish-policycenter.org/donate>.

Sincerely,



Matthew Brooks,
Publisher

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The World Needs American Leadership After COVID-19

by **MARK MEIROWITZ**

International affairs are not currently a high priority. Instead, Americans are focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, its impact on the U.S. economy, and on the domestic turmoil in the nation. However, it is imperative for America to address the immediate and fundamental issue of whether the United States will continue to lead the world following the pandemic to ensure world stability and the rule of law, or whether a China-dominated world order will prevail.

China does not countenance criticism or challenge to its rising power and influence.

The pandemic has awakened Americans and the world from wishful thinking concerning China's actions. China withheld vital information about the origins of the COVID-19 virus in China. Further, Beijing co-opted the World Health Organization (WHO), which failed to properly address the pandemic because China's actions might come under criticism or be exposed. China acquiesced in a resolution at the World Health Assembly (WHA) to look into the causes of the pandemic, a useless gesture since President Xi Jinping's government will likely never cooperate with such an investigation.

In addition to its internal repression, and its actions and claims regarding Hong Kong and Taiwan, China has expanded its power and influence through

the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), involving infrastructure development and investments throughout the world.

Further, in the South China Sea (SCS), China has sought to assert wide-ranging legal rights over the resources of the SCS, ridiculing international legal decisions debunking China's arguments for the expansion of its regional rights (such as the so-called "nine-dash line"). For example, a Chinese official called the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling against

China in the Philippines case related to the Scarborough Shoal a "piece of trash."

China does not countenance criticism or challenge to its rising power and influence. When Australia called for an investigation into the causes of the pan-

The pandemic has awakened Americans and the world from wishful thinking concerning China's actions.

demic, China, Australia's largest trading partner, imposed crushing tariffs on Australian barley imports and stopped accepting beef from various Australian producers. Indeed, a Chinese official

was quoted saying that Australia is like a piece of chewing gum on the bottom of one's shoe that needs to be kicked off.

China has used its veto in the UN to prevent actions being taken that it opposes. In international institutions, Chinese involvement has concentrated on ensuring Chinese influence and control.

China has used its "sharp power" to undermine democracies and democratic institutions worldwide. "Sharp power" has been defined by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) as the "aggressive and subversive policies employed by authoritarian governments as a projection of state power in democratic countries, policies that cannot be described as either hard power or soft power." The NED report highlighted that "China has spent tens of billions of dollars to shape public opinion and perceptions around the world, employing a diverse toolkit that includes, but is not limited to, thousands of people-to-people exchanges, wide-ranging cultural activities, educational programs (most notably the ever-expanding network of controversial Confucius Institutes), and

the development of media enterprises with global reach."

What should be done to address these and other challenges and threats to American leadership?

■ **International Institutions**

The United States needs to follow China's lead and remain in these institutions to influence and control them. Pulling out is not effective since, as we saw with the WHO, when the U.S. pulled out, China jumped in with a \$2 billion commitment to fight the coronavirus.

We must restructure international institutions. The UN was formed after WW II based on a specific threat from the Axis powers and was oriented toward collective security. The UN has, for the most part, not satisfied this objective. Indeed,

internationalism, and without ineffective arrangements like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or the Iran Deal). The Trump Doctrine emphasized "America First" and also insisted that allies must be supportive of American interests and pay their fair share of regional arrangements such as NATO. By working with America's allies, the Trump Doctrine 2.0 can become a sort of "America First Plus," where American leadership in the world is empowered by America's allies, and which will be indispensable to world peace and stability.

behavior shows why countries should avoid economic overreliance on China and should guard their critical infrastructure from CCP [Chinese Communist Party] influence." A Heritage Foundation report recommended a three-fold approach: establish a transatlantic 5G consortium; block untrusted companies; and build a coalition to confront China's "military-civilian interaction."

• **Countering China's Belt and Road Initiative ("BRI")** – Washington should support countries that resist the overreaching of the BRI. The BRI has been promoted by China in the guise of "soft power" intended to be beneficial especially to poorer countries, yet when looked at more carefully, and as a result of the economic catastrophe engendered by the pandemic, many of these projects have been halted. China has made billions of dollars worth of loans and grants for infrastructure throughout the world. Many state beneficiaries of China's BRI are now unable to repay these loans, their economies having been destroyed by the pandemic. In many cases, the loan arrangements are being cancelled or reviewed.

The BRI conundrum is exemplified by Tanzania's president canceling a \$10 billion port project signed by his predecessor that provided China would gain full control of the port with a 99-year lease (Tanzania's president stated

We can have American leadership without globalization, internationalism, and without ineffective arrangements like the JCPOA... A sort of "America First Plus," where American leadership...is empowered by America's allies.

China has been among the main malefactors, hiding behind the veto. We can no longer allow China to use its control of international institutions such as the WHO to empower or protect itself. Perhaps the entire UN structure needs complete revision. If the world body is a debating society, remove the veto, let debate ensue, and don't allow the organization to take actions (or prevent actions) to empower China. Former U.S. Senator and UN Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan even called the United Nations "a dangerous place" due to the damage of which the UN was capable.

Some possible areas of cooperation are as follows:

• **Countering China's 5G efforts** – We need to form a coalition between America and its allies to push back against China's 5G efforts. China threatened to punish the British bank HSBC and to break

If the [UN] is a debating society, remove the veto, let debate ensue, and don't allow the organization to take actions (or prevent actions) to empower China...

■ **Trump Doctrine 2.0**

What we need now to assure continued American leadership in the world and the preservation of the rule of law is a "Trump Doctrine 2.0" which asks our allies to join with the U.S. to counter China's rising influence, since America can't do this alone. We can have American leadership without globalization,

commitments to build a nuclear plant in the United Kingdom unless London allowed Huawei to build its 5G network. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently stated that China's "aggressive

that these were conditions that only a "drunkard" would accept). As with the other BRI projects, China clearly intends to achieve control, not benefiting the people of Tanzania.



• **Countering China's Influence and Expansion in the South China Sea (SCS)** – The United States should create a South China Sea alliance with countries in danger of losing their SCS rights to resources to China, and to prevent China's militarization of the SCS. How ironic that Vietnam, which fought a war with the United States, now seeks American help and that of the international community in countering China's legal claims in the SCS. Their concerns are exacerbated by the ramming and sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat by a Chinese vessel near the Paracel Islands.

China's SCS claims were rejected outright by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) and found to be without any basis in international law. Washington must support states that stand up to China's claims of sovereignty over continental shelf resources. The United States should also continue freedom of navigation operations (FONOPS) which provide the clear message that international law must prevail in the SCS.

■ **Containment 2.0**

The words of George F. Kennan in his famous 1947 "X" telegram relating to the USSR surely have applicability to China. "It will be clearly seen that the Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence." We need a "Containment 2.0" that counters and challenges expanding Chinese influence and that will help to ensure American leadership in the world. America does not, however, need a "Cold War 2.0" with China, merely a way to push back and counter China's influence, working with America's allies. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd observed that "it may not yet be Cold War 2.0, but it is starting to look like Cold War 1.5."

Accordingly, the United States must be careful to use "smart power" strategies (combining "hard power" and "soft power") to counter China, and not allow the competition with China to descend into a purely "hard power" conflict. China also must be cautioned that the world will not countenance aggression in Taiwan, repression in Hong Kong or, for that matter, the continued utilization of "sharp power" by China to undermine world democracies. American leadership, supported by America's allies, is indispensable in this effort.

Since, as Kennan said, these issues can't be "charmed or talked out of existence," America and its allies must take immediate steps to re-assert American leadership in the world and ensure the continuation of an American-led anti-totalitarian world order and the preservation of the rule of law.

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Maximize Pressure on Iran: Fortify the Sanctions Wall

by **MARK DUBOWITZ, BEHNAM BEN TALEBLU and RICHARD GOLDBERG**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is in crisis. U.S. sanctions have crippled the country's economy. Protests over the regime's failed policies continue. The Islamic Republic has reportedly even reduced force levels in Syria, thanks to punishing Israeli military strikes and U.S. economic pressure. These developments come as the coronavirus continues to ravage Iran, infecting roughly 140,000 people and causing more than 7,500 deaths, according to

its nuclear ambitions, foreign aggression, and grave human rights violations.

From the beginning of his 2016 presidential campaign, Donald Trump insisted that the JCPOA was a bad deal. Rather than permanently blocking Iran's pathway to nuclear weapons, the deal opened a patient path; if the JCPOA endures until its key provisions expire (or "sunset"), Tehran would emerge around 2025 with an industrial-scale nuclear program, a short path to a bomb,

to fund its destructive activities. The Islamic Republic no longer had to make painful budgetary choices between guns for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Lebanese Hezbollah, and pro-Iran militias in Iraq, as opposed to butter for its citizens. Cash did little to transform the Islamic Republic's leaders into more responsible global citizens or improve their treatment of the Iranian people.

By contrast, the Trump administration has drained hundreds of billions of dollars from the Iranian treasury. U.S. sanctions did not need support from allies to work, as JCPOA defenders had long maintained. Put to the choice between the U.S. market and the U.S. dollar on the one hand and the Iranian market on the other, multinational companies cut their ties with the Islamic Republic. The key economic indicators demonstrate clearly: from GDP to inflation rates, oil exports, accessible foreign exchange reserves, the value of the Iranian rial relative to the U.S. dollar, and more, U.S. unilateral sanctions have inflicted a greater cost – and in less time – than previous multilateral penalties. Market forces, even more than political consensus, can sometimes achieve national security objectives.

The administration also broke taboos long observed by Washington's foreign policy establishment, including an aversion to designating the IRGC in its entirety as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), blacklisting Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and sanctioning Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister. These were

...the Trump administration has drained hundreds of billions of dollars from the Iranian treasury.

official statistics, and many times those numbers, according to reports.

Iran's economic and military misfortunes reflect the success of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign, which began in May 2018 following the president's decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Trump administration has adopted a policy of maximum pressure to address the full range of threats from the Islamic Republic. The administration's objective is a better agreement that addresses the JCPOA's fatal flaws. The way to secure such an agreement is to escalate all forms of pressure on the clerical regime until it faces a stark choice between its own survival and the abandonment of

ballistic missiles to deliver that bomb, a conventional force newly equipped with foreign weapons, and its economy immunized against future sanctions.

The administration also dispensed with the fiction adopted by its predecessor that the nuclear agreement would moderate the mullahs by flooding them with cash and integrating them into the global economy. That theory of "moderation through economic seduction" failed miserably with the Chinese Communist Party and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Islamic Republic has been at war with the United States for decades, murdering Americans and seeking to dominate the Middle East through its terrorist proxies. The JCPOA only supercharged such malign conduct by returning tens of billions of dollars for Tehran



President Donald Trump displays his signature on an Executive Order to place further sanctions on Iran Monday, June 24, 2019, in the Oval Office of the White House. (Photo: Joyce N. Boghosian/White House)

political “firsts” that further boxed in the regime. President Trump’s decision to kill IRGC-QF commander Qassem Soleimani intensified the operational and psychological pressure while avoiding the “World War Three” that his critics predicted. In addition, the administration’s successful campaign to get the United Kingdom and Germany to blacklist Hezbollah as a terrorist organization demonstrated that both pressure and diplomacy could work against Tehran’s most deadly Arab proxy.

Despite these successes, the current policy has vulnerabilities. Europe remains committed to defending the JCPOA as it hunkers down in the hope that former Vice President Joe Biden will succeed Trump as president and return America to the deal. A Biden administration might prefer to employ America’s newfound leverage to negotiate a better agreement, rather than rushing back to the JCPOA. And it might find that leverage diminished if Iran reaches the JCPOA’s first sunset – the expiration of

the UN arms embargo – this October.

Indeed, on its campaign website, the Biden campaign assiduously avoids committing itself to a return to the JCPOA. Instead, the campaign talks about “rejoining a diplomatic agreement to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, if Iran returns to compliance with the JCPOA.” That could be a return to the JCPOA or a return to something like the interim agreement, or Joint Plan of Action, reached in 2013, which provided more limited sanctions relief.

Still, either way, the Trump administration should do more to strengthen its “sanctions wall of deterrence,” whose purpose is to deter market players from returning to business with Iran even if the United States rejoins the JCPOA. The designation of the Central Bank of Iran for funding terrorism, the designation of the IRGC as an Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), and the redesign of many of the sanctions to make them based on terrorism, missile proliferation, or connections to the

IRGC will pose significant risks to all multinational companies. Few believe the risks of Tehran’s illicit conduct will diminish, even if a Biden administration lifts sanctions.

More lawmakers can reinforce these political and market risks by supporting Senate and House resolutions introduced in May 2019 marking the one-year anniversary of the withdrawal from the JCPOA and co-sponsored by 22 Republican members of Congress. Each resolution “rejects the reapplication of sanctions relief provided for in the JCPOA.” This would underscore how companies will be whipsawed again, as they were between 2015 and 2018, if they return to Iran without bipartisan support for a new agreement that addresses the JCPOA’s fatal flaws.

Washington needs to establish clear red lines to head off further Iranian escalation as the maximum pressure campaign continues. Last summer, Washington did not respond to Iranian regional and nuclear escalation, culminating in a

cruise missile and drone strike on Saudi Arabia that knocked offline almost 6 million barrels of daily petroleum production. While the killing of Soleimani shocked Tehran after its militias killed an American in Iraq, Washington since has absorbed repeated rocket and mortar attacks from pro-Iran militias, even after two American and one British soldier were killed. The red line against the taking of American lives must be enforced. But even this high bar for the use of force can make allies skeptical about American staying power in the region while incentivizing Iran-backed Shiite militias to continue their attacks.

The administration has adopted the right policy, but it must safeguard gains and add to its wins. First, it should not offer Tehran any premature sanctions relief. Diminishing American leverage led to the fatally flawed JCPOA in the first place and has not worked in the administration's negotiations with North Korea, in which Trump's summit diplomacy undermined the pressure campaign. Washington should defend its sanctions wall against a new administration by designating more Iranian entities and economic sectors under multiple sanctions authorities. The Treasury Department should enhance audit and due diligence requirements for any firm auditing the books of a company that maintains ties with Tehran. This

on Iran's regional and non-oil trade, which is where Tehran is generating revenue while under sanctions.

Washington also needs to step up its support for the Iranian people, whose disdain for the regime is growing with more frequent and broad-based protests, to which the regime has responded with even greater violence. There are numerous ways the United States can show its support: more targeted designations for human rights abuses and corruption; platforms to help Iranians circumvent

State Mike Pompeo is preparing a diplomatic campaign to maintain the international arms embargo on Iran. The end of the arms embargo is one of the many key international restrictions on Iran scheduled to expire over time.

Yet it makes little sense to lift an arms embargo on a regime that has steadily increased its violent behavior over the past year, ranging from cruise missile strikes on Saudi oil infrastructure to mine attacks on tankers in the Persian Gulf and rocket attacks on

The most immediate sanctions target is to tighten the noose on Iran's regional and non-oil trade, which is where Tehran is generating revenue while under sanctions.

Internet restrictions; humanitarian relief efforts through international non-governmental organizations to bypass the regime; public messaging that supports a peaceful democratic Iran; and respect for human rights as a key condition of any comprehensive agreement. Such a policy of "maximum support" will reinforce maximum pressure.

Finally, Washington faces a showdown on Iran at the UN Security Coun-

American and British forces in Iraq. Meanwhile, the regime continues to support terror and proxy groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip, all of which perpetuate conflicts and add to regional instability and civilian suffering. The Pentagon reports that Beijing and Moscow are planning to sell Iran fighter jets, main battle tanks, attack helicopters, and modern naval capabilities. Tehran is also likely to step-up its proliferation of this advanced weaponry to the likes of Lebanese Hezbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen.

Accordingly, the first phase of Pompeo's plan is to propose a new UN Security Council resolution to extend the arms embargo on Tehran indefinitely. Russia and China are expected to block the proposal, because the end of the embargo will unshackle their efforts to employ billions of dollars in arms sales as a means of turning Iran into a client state.

Phase two of Pompeo's plan circumvents Russian and Chinese obstruction. He intends to use the self-destruct – or

Washington needs to establish clear red lines to head off further Iranian escalation as the maximum pressure campaign continues.

will deter companies that may not do business with the United States or in the U.S. dollar but do need audited financial statements from accounting firms, which will not be able to meet this enhanced standard. The most immediate sanctions target is to tighten the noose

cil, where the administration can either strengthen its maximum pressure campaign and sanctions wall of deterrence or have them undermined by Russian and Chinese intransigence. In line with a request by 387 members of the U.S. House of Representatives, Secretary of

“snapback” – mechanism of the nuclear deal to block the sunset of the arms embargo, removing the need for an extension. This mechanism gave all original parties to the nuclear deal – including the United States – the right to snap all UN sanctions and embargoes back into place if the Iranian regime ever breached its nuclear commitments. Such breaches are now indisputable. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported in March that Iran has tripled its production of enriched uranium since November and is denying nuclear inspection

access to suspicious sites. Even though the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal, it retains the right to initiate a snapback. Specifically, UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which put the UN imprimatur on the nuclear deal, defines the term “participant State” to include the United States. According to a State Department legal opinion, Resolution 2231 does not contemplate a change in that definition even if America ceases participating in the agreement. This was not an accident, but a rare case of foresight on the part of the nuclear deal’s negotiators. Indeed, the Obama administration heavily marketed this unconditional snapback prerogative as a key feature of the plan in 2015. Unsurprisingly, Russia and China object to this inter-

can empower purported moderates and divert Tehran from its decades-long quest for nuclear weapons capabilities.

Time is running out for the Trump administration as the November election looms. A second Trump term will likely give it more time to realize its maximum pressure campaign against a regime in Iran suffering political, military, economic, and health crises and a challenge to its domestic legitimacy. But to prevent a Biden administration from reversing its extraordinary gains against the Islamic Republic, the Trump administration must double down on the pressure and fortify its sanctions wall of market and political deterrence.

The Pentagon reports that Beijing and Moscow are planning to sell Iran fighter jets, main battle tanks, attack helicopters, and modern naval capabilities.

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pretation. They are hoping Europe will persuade Washington to relent. London, Paris, and Berlin readily acknowledge the flaws of the nuclear deal, especially its sunsets, but they remain wedded to the belief that engagement on any terms

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Russia in the Middle East: Are We at an Inflection Point?

by **STEPHEN BLANK**

Recent developments in Russia's relations with Middle Eastern states suggest an impending inflection point in those ties. Since 2015 when it intervened in Syria, Moscow has prospered in the Middle East. As virtually every analysis points out, Russia is now an indispensable and trusted interlocutor for almost every Middle Eastern state and has hitherto adroitly managed to avoid taking sides in any of the terrible consequences that pervade this region. As everyone's "dialogue partner," Russia has successfully made major political and strategic gains, obtained lucrative arms and energy contracts, consummated deals with OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), become a reliable interlocutor for Iran and Israel, coordinated with Turkey in Syria, created enduring power

coincided with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, may presage a reversal of fortune for Russia in the Middle East. These events have revealed the limits of its military and energy power to the world at large and may lead to a reconfiguration of Middle Eastern relations with Russia and of Russia's policies in the Levant.

■ **Syria and Turkey**

In February-March 2020, Syrian forces aided by Russian aircraft launched an offensive against Turkey's troops in Syria, a crisis stemming from the fundamental incompatibility of Russo-Turkish interests there. Russia's interests are that President Bashar al-Assad regain control over all or as much as possible of Syria and ultimately eliminate the Idlib salient in the northwest that, on the ba-

supply and air support, provided training of Iranian mercenaries and launched an offensive operation. The purpose of the operation is to penetrate Idlib through large gaps between Turkish strongholds and create their [own] strongholds. And with the support of Russian-Assad aviation, defeat the pro-Turkish forces without engaging in battle with the Turkish army. Thus, the Turks would be forced to enter into negotiations on a settlement in Idlib with [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and Assad, and Assad would be able to regain control there. The first key target of the offensive was the city of Serakib and the area around it, through which one of the strategic highways goes.

...despite the fact that Presidents Erdogan and Putin remain in close contact on Syria and other issues; there is no doubt that further crises will occur...

projection capabilities, gained military bases in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa, and challenged the U.S. role as the "security manager" of the region. Moreover, it has made lucrative economic deals with many Gulf states to circumvent Western sanctions, and the UAE (United Arab Emirates) has become an enabler and "advertising agent" for Russian power projection in Africa.

However, new developments in Syria, and Moscow's reckless and ill-advised "oil war" against Saudi Arabia that

sis of previous agreements with Turkey, contains the last remnant of Assad's opposition who Moscow regularly calls terrorists. Thus, when Assad mounted this offensive into this zone, he was clearly supported by Moscow and the Russian Air Force that inflicted serious casualties on Turkish forces. According to a Ukrainian source:

Russia carried out a reform of the Assad forces, took full responsibility for reconnaissance, command,

Nevertheless, Russia and Assad apparently miscalculated and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan refused to accept Assad's offensive. Erdogan launched a counter-offensive that inflicted even greater losses on Syrian forces and their Russian-made equipment, forcing Russia to intervene diplomatically, and raising the prospect of a major Russo-Turkish clash. Previously, Russia had accepted accords on Idlib to give Assad time to gain control of other "liberated" areas. But now Russia's resolve to destroy the "terrorists" and secure Assad's rule clashed directly with Turkey's plans to create a long-term buffer zone in Syria wherein it can resettle the millions of refugees who crossed into Turkey and have now become a burden for it, and also prevent the Syrian Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units), which it charges are terrorists,

from linking up with Turkey's own Kurdish opposition, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party).

Therefore, and despite the fact that Presidents Erdogan and Putin remain in close contact on Syria and other issues, there is no doubt that further crises will occur and that the agreements on March 5 to suspend the fighting are purely tactical. Moreover, both the Turkish and Russo-Syrian-Iranian sides have recruited terrorists, tribesmen, militias, etc. to their side, all the while charging that the other side is failing to suppress terrorism. The use of these proxies in Syria, as in Libya, can only increase the possibility of prospective resumption of fighting among the proxies that can then drag their sponsors into conflict, criticize him openly as happened in southern Syria. Consequently, we will see more crises and this struggle between the two incompatible visions of Syria's future is by no means over.

■ **Assad's Hold on Power**

Moreover, Assad's insistence on recovering his authority over all of Syria without making any concessions to any faction in the country has finally led Russia to criticize him openly, if not in the name of the government. Indeed, we now hear reports (clearly authorized by the Russian government for publication, even if they are not verified) that Russia, Iran, and Turkey have all decided to unseat Assad. Since Assad cannot even pacify other areas of Syria, the civil war is not over despite a clear Russo-Syrian-Iranian victory over many of the rebels. In southern Syria, terrorist assassinations, killing many Syrian soldiers, continue with impunity. At the same time, Russia, Iran, and Turkey have each built up proxy forces in Syria – aside from their own regular forces – and the rivalry among Russian and Iranian proxies fuels the violence.

Each is striving for control over territory, rackets, and markets. Assad cannot stop the violence and the rival proxy forces will not stop it. Consequently,



Russian President Vladimir Putin meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for the Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council in 2017. (Photo: kremlin.ru)

neither Assad, nor Iran, nor Russia can presently pacify Syria. That fact alone helps justify Turkey in its belief that it can and must set up this northern buffer to prevent more refugees and Syria's Kurds from linking up to Turkey's own Kurdish opposition.

In addition, since the pacification of Syria and the beginning of its reconstitution as a state are nowhere in sight, divisions among Russian policymakers have evidently surfaced. Allegedly, the Ministry of Defense and military-intelligence apparatus are fighting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its research centers. The aforementioned public critique of Assad clearly represents the fact that those elements of the Russian government that are disenchanted with him have obtained political cover for expressing their views about his inflexibility and corruption in public to warn him that Moscow's support may not be immutable. Moscow's difficulties also come from Iran, which has communicated its unhappiness about being excluded from the March 5 agreements with Turkey and has long been unhappy that Moscow will not shield it from Israeli raids on its positions in Syria.

Thus, it is clear that Russian, Iranian, and Turkish military forces will

continue to conduct operations in Syria. Moscow is even establishing a new helicopter airbase in northern Syria in Raqqah province. Helicopters are much more useful than strike aircraft for the kinds of low-level but deadly ambushes, skirmishes, and battles that can and will transpire in northern Syria. And this new base also represents a veiled warning to Turkey. While there have been at least seven of the newly established Russo-Turkish patrols in Syria agreed to under the March 5 plan, the plan itself failed to obtain a legal basis when the United States vetoed it in the UN Security Council. It remains, then, merely a bilateral agreement. There are numerous signs of domestic and rebel opposition to the patrols that will likely increase and interfere with their missions in the future. Therefore, it increasingly looks like Syria could become the quagmire President Barack Obama (albeit far too early) predicted it might become for Russia.

■ **The Saudi Connection**

In early 2020, Moscow also launched an oil war with Saudi Arabia. As the coronavirus forced declining energy demand in China, demand was already declining due to a warm winter, and American shale producers

were capitalizing on energy prices of about \$60-70 per barrel (Bbl.). Moscow spurned Riyadh's offer of jointly cutting production to keep prices high. Instead, Moscow prepared to increase production and strike at Saudi and other OPEC members' market share even though its real target was U.S. shale producers. At higher prices in 2019, American producers were cutting into Russian markets.

Given the high cost of shale production, Russia, and in particular Igor Sechin, boss of Russia's energy giant Rosneft, attacked support for high prices as subsidizing these American producers. Sechin was also fuming because U.S. sanctions on Rosneft in Venezuela forced the company to sell its shares to the Russian state (netting Rosneft \$9.6 billion). He wanted revenge. He also convinced

Bbl. any time soon. As a result, Moscow has suffered what can only be termed a catastrophic defeat. Its cash reserves are draining away. The ruble has fallen precipitously, and its economy is estimated to lose 5-6 percent of GDP this year. Worse yet, as of May, Saudi Arabia continued to undercut Russia in European, Asian, and even the U.S. market.

■ Conclusion

These developments may well presage an inflection point in Russian policy. To be sure Moscow is not leaving the Middle East. It has made serious investments in Syria and has gained leverage throughout the Middle East and Maghreb (Arab North Africa) and will fight to both maintain and extend its influence whenever possible. Nonetheless,

he has repeatedly threatened to do, that outcome might be reversed. Encouraging Iran in Syria carries its own risks, as Israel will not desist from destroying Iranian military infrastructure there and Moscow will not tangle with Israel to bail out Tehran.

At the same time, Riyadh now has reason to be even more suspicious of Moscow's ambitions and judgement regarding energy and the Middle East, two closely interrelated issues. Russia's continuing partnership with Iran against the United States has not previously dissuaded a Saudi-Russian dialogue and they cooperated on energy from 2016-19. But the last crisis exposed both the defects of Russian policymaking and Saudi Arabia's ability to dominate energy markets with U.S. support, even if Washington had to twist its arm.

These events will redound not only through Syria and in bilateral relations with Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, but will have effects that go all the way to sub-Saharan Africa. Russian successes there were in no small measure due to its previous successes in the Middle East and those have now been seriously tarnished.

But the strategic stakes are too high for Moscow to abandon the field, and the structural pathologies of both regions that invite foreign intervention may actually get worse due to the coronavirus. Moreover, nothing is forever in the Middle East and all manner of astounding *renversement des alliances* (reversal of alliances) have occurred and may easily reoccur. Nevertheless, Moscow's capabilities and judgment have taken a serious and lasting hit so it probably will not, despite its intentions, be able to cut the same figure in the Middle East as it has since 2015. Although we are living in interesting times, that does not mean that peace will break out in the Middle East. But we may be seeing the beginning of a new stage in that region's endless dramas.

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The coronavirus is rampaging through Russia...
the state's response, frankly, has been pathetic with
Putin essentially hiding in his dacha.

President Putin that flooding markets with cheap oil would not only destroy American producers but also Saudi Arabia. He and his supporters believed that Saudi Arabia needed a price on oil twice that of Russia to make a profit, and therefore could not withstand Russian flooding of the market.

They made a catastrophic mistake. Saudi Arabia preempted Russia by flooding the market itself. As Riyadh is an old hand at the market share game this should have been predictable and it soon became clear that Saudi Arabia, not Russia, could better withstand the enormous plunge in prices precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic. Moscow ultimately had no choice but to accept a solution engineered by President Donald Trump (whose interest was in rescuing American producers). Demand has stayed low since March 2020 and prices are not going to rebound to \$60/

its resources may not be up to the task.

The coronavirus is rampaging through Russia, eating up government savings and the economy. The state's response, frankly, has been pathetic with Putin essentially hiding in his dacha. The defense budget, not to mention foreign adventurism, will come under severe pressure whatever the policy response.

Second, if Moscow really is thinking of ousting Assad, it eliminates the reason it intervened in the first place. If the Afghan, Iraqi, and Vietnamese examples are relevant, his ouster will not stabilize what has become an international proxy war on top of a civil war; a truly Hobbesian state. Moscow also cannot oust Turkey from Syria unless it wants a direct clash with Ankara. One-on-one in overall military strength Ankara is no match for Moscow. But in Syria, particularly if Erdogan closes the Straits (Dardanelles and Bosphorus) as

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States Under Stress

by **SIMON HENDERSON**

Geography can be deceptive. On a map, Saudi Arabia rivals Iran and Iraq in size and dwarfs its Gulf Arab neighbors. Figures for oil reserves can also be misleading. According to the 2019 edition of the *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* (compiled by British Petroleum Corp.), the three countries are almost in a different league from the rest of the Gulf littoral countries, with Saudi Arabia way out front of the other two.

The reality is that it has often been more appropriate to consider the kingdom as just another self-effacing Gulf monarchy with a relatively small citizen population, propped up economically by a large expatriate workforce, with oil and/or natural gas being the magic ingredient that keeps the whole edifice afloat.

Unlike Iran and Iraq, the kingdom, along with the other Gulf Arab states – Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman (to list them from

west to east) – is a unique political and economic system. The member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are hereditary and tribal rather than republics. And they are the quintessential rentier states, meaning that they depend on oil income, rather than developing their own non-oil economies or, heaven

forbid, taxing their own citizens (though that may be starting).

■ *Breaking the Old Model*

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the political and economic fabric of the Gulf was under stress, a consequence of future forecasts of oil prices trending downward. But a countervailing force has emerged in the last few years. It is the vision for his country of Saudi Arabia's new de facto leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, often known simply as MbS. He wants to break the old model for Gulf statehood and make Saudi Arabia into a technological powerhouse. And he also wants Saudi Arabia to be perceived as the most important country in the Middle East, not only by the regional states but also the international community. This is a huge challenge but is arguably the most important template for a discussion on the region's post-pandemic future.

slope. And it is no consolation that the most likely scenario for higher prices is political tension, particularly in the Gulf area itself!

Nevertheless, even if, for the purposes of this analysis, the oil price and associated factors are put to one side, they cannot be discarded completely. As part of MbS's project, Saudi Arabia is due to host the G-20 economic summit later this year. Its membership is a consequence of its oil wealth, not the fact that it claims leadership of the Arab and Islamic worlds.

The summit may turn out to be (yet another) virtual event but MbS will try to put on a good show. Coping with the coronavirus will be a reflection of the quality of modern healthcare in the kingdom. The flight of expatriate workers will be an opportunity for Saudi citizens to fill the gaps. Weak incoming revenue flows will be shrugged off as less important now that his Vision 2030 project is moving in the right direction. The fact that the Vision may now be better dated as 2040 or even 2045 will conveniently go unmentioned. No one will protest. The fate of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi is remembered even if it is not discussed.

The other Gulf states may struggle more. MbS has changed the social contract in his kingdom but most of the other sheikhdoms and emirates – Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar and Oman – are less hierarchical. The action though probably will be in the ruler's *majlis* (salon) rather than on the streets. Only Bahrain, majority Shia but Sunni-ruled, could be really challenged. Riyadh, along with Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE, have the financial reserves to see them through. Bahrain and Oman

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the political and economic fabric of the Gulf was under stress, a consequence of future forecasts of oil prices trending downward.

west to east) – is a unique political and economic system. The member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are hereditary and tribal rather than republics. And they are the quintessential rentier states, meaning that they depend on oil income, rather than developing their own non-oil economies or, heaven

Although the ability to export oil and/or natural gas at a good price is the largest and key variable for predicting the future of the Gulf states, forecasting that price, at least in the short-term, is a fool's game. It is sufficient to say that the longer-term demand for hydrocarbons appears to be on a downward



Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman greets Argentina's President Mauricio Macri at the 2018 G20 summit in Buenos Aires. (Photo: Hernan Nersesian)

will be looking for handouts, as will the sheikhdoms of the seven-member UAE other than oil-rich Abu Dhabi and the commercial hub of Dubai.

Arguably the most interesting and immediate factors at play, unimpeded by the coronavirus particularly for Saudi Arabia, are how to cope with the unfolding threat of Iran, and relations with Israel, with the associated attitudes toward the Palestinian cause. These are issues which will not be left for a post-pandemic era. Their immediacy is further emphasized by the November elections in the United States and the possibility that the Republican administration of Donald Trump will be replaced by a Democratic one led by Joe Biden.

■ **The Iran Factor**

The main political uncertainty within the Gulf is the behavior of Iran, where the coronavirus has also hit hard, although meaningful analysis of comparatively how hard is awkward because of the absence of good quality numbers and other data. Worryingly, Iran's capacity for destabilizing activities appears undiminished either

by the virus or by increased U.S. sanctions on its nuclear program, oil exports, and financial transactions.

Worse still, Iran's capacity for asymmetric warfare is not only undiminished but may be accelerating. Last September's drone attacks on Saudi Arabia's main oil processing facility at Abqaiq and another installation shocked military types across the world. The technology was comparatively low-tech and cheap, undermining the notion that countries like the United States have an in-built mili-

tary advantage because of their superior technology and financial resources. The United States won the Cold War by outspending the Soviet Union. This seems unlikely to work with Iran.

Iran's nuclear ambitions are a separate issue. Sanctions may well be delaying what is generally recognized as a nuclear weapons project, hidden behind a civil nuclear program. But even here, there is justifiable anxiety. Using much the same technology, both to obtain highly enriched uranium and a missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead, neighboring Pakistan became a nuclear weapon state in 1998, 22 years ago. And Pakistan's nuclear device had been ready for testing for at least the previous 10 or so years.

Washington's diplomatic tensions with its European allies – Britain, Germany, and France – over how to deal with Iran remains a weakness only too obvious to Tehran, which already counts Russia and China as being effectively supportive. The challenge facing Washington is how to deal with Iran in a manner which is perceived – by Iran, by regional allies, as well as by the wider world community – as being effective and therefore a deterrent, rather than moves by a fading superpower.

■ **How Iran Sees Itself**

It is too simplistic to merely label Iran as a troublemaker. Rather it is important to try to understand Iran's behavior, which is part historical and part a factor of the Islamic regime that took power at the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah. A key aspect is that Iran sees itself as the natural main power in

Iran sees itself as the natural main power in the region, of which the name of the Gulf, the Persian Gulf, is a key piece of evidence.

the region, of which the name of the Gulf, the Persian Gulf, is a key piece of evidence. (The Gulf Arab states call the waterway "the Arabian Gulf," but the United States' official name for it is the

Persian Gulf, recognizing that Iran's coastline is the dominant one.)

Additionally, the Islamic republic is Shia Muslim, the minority sect in Islam, and wants to rebalance the subordinate relationship of Shias with majority Sunnis. In particular, Shia Iran thinks it has a role in supporting Shia communities across the Middle East that have been historically disadvantaged. This prin-

strain because of the economic conditions, administrative incompetence, and the Islamic leadership's determination not to allow more than a limited range of political sentiment. But this is balanced by what appears to be a determination to deepen the roots of the Islamic regime and a further tilt towards the hardliners of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in terms of political attitudes.

Israel is increasingly seen as a natural trading partner with an overlapping vision of cooperation on technological options for the future.

ciple goes a long way to explain Iranian interests in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as well as Bahrain and the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and will probably be strengthened by the pandemic.

The flip side of this is an in-built religious and historical rivalry with Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Sunni Islamic world as well as Islam's physical center by virtue of Saudi control of Mecca and Medina, the two holy places of Islam. (The King of Saudi Arabia also carries the title of Custodian of the Two Holy Places. In the years following the Iranian revolution, there was tension in Mecca and Medina when Iranian Shia pilgrims travelled there.)

A particular aspect of the Islamic republic's view of the Persian Gulf region is that Tehran regards the security of the region to be the joint responsibility of the countries of the region, a formulation which does not include the United States, nor other foreign countries like the former quasi-colonial power, Britain. This is in direct contradiction with Washington's principal *raison d'être* for being in the Gulf, which is to safeguard the flow of oil from the area to the rest of the world.

Domestically, the trends are confusing. Broadly, the general population's support for the government is under

Despite the internal and external strains and stresses, Iran does not appear to be on the verge of political change, either deep rooted or in terms of policy. The view appears correct that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is sitting out what he judges to be the final months of the Trump administration, expecting if not hoping for a Democratic administration. Washington's focus on the pandemic and the racial tension prompted by the killing of George Floyd in Minnesota could well mean Tehran's judgement is right. But don't expect Iran to be well-behaved, the temptation to take advantage of perhaps temporary weakness in its adversaries will be too great.

■ *The Israel Factor*

The major change that has emerged in the Middle East in recent years has been Gulf attitudes toward Israel. Ties are no longer completely predicated on the resolution of Palestinian demands, which have been chiefly Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines as well as those Arabs claiming to be refugees being allowed to return to Israel itself.

Furthermore, the shift, which has been led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, cannot be simply attributed to concern about Iran and the attractiveness

of collaborating with another country which shares that perception. Instead, Israel is increasingly seen as a natural trading partner with an overlapping vision of cooperation on technological options for the future. When MbS was visiting the United States in 2018, at least one person at a closed-door gathering of Jewish leadership fell off his chair when the Saudi crown prince shared this dream.

MbS's other winning card in terms of perceptions, along with that of his UAE counterpart, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of Abu Dhabi, known as MbZ, has been to advocate moderate Islam and move against the hardline Islam which seemed to define the kingdom for so long. Live entertainment and women driving have been signature developments in Saudi Arabia. The head of the Mecca-based Muslim World League, Mohammed al-Isa, has also worked tirelessly on interfaith issues, including visiting the Auschwitz death camp in January, along with American Jewish leaders.

Opinions vary on the substance and meaning of this reaching out to Israel and Jews in the rest of the world. Whatever is reality, the stance is about to face two tests: Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank and the possibility that President Trump will not win a second term.

One particular concern, or should be a concern, to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, is the extent to which Gulf public opinion supports its leadership's changing attitudes toward Israel. Attitudes, to the extent they can be measured, appear to be less than enthusiastic. The changed economic circumstances brought on initially by low oil prices and then by the coronavirus have already strained the local social contracts. Ever opportunistic, Iran may find itself presented with a new weakness to exploit.

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Iraq Tries to Separate Itself from Iran

by ENTIFADH QANBAR

To understand Iraq and talk about its future, you first have to understand Iran.

The Iranian regime is oppressive, tyrannical, and totalitarian. In this kind of dictatorship, disasters and catastrophes do not play as out as they would in an open society like the United States or other Western countries. Given the degree of oppression and suppression of information and lack of transparency, it's difficult for outside observers to be certain even of what they're looking at. We will never know the truth about a lot of things happening in Iran, including the result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the reinstated U.S. economic sanctions on the government. Add to that the international drop in oil prices and the country's restless population and there is a lot of misinformation out there.

Being an Iraqi-American with a lot of friends in Iraq who go back and forth to Iran, I hear stories. I believe there is a massive amount of coronavirus spread inside Iran, but we don't know the number—whether it is hundreds or thousands or hundreds of thousands or millions. But it definitely will cripple the regime. How much will it hurt and in what ways? I don't think we will know until the effects appear outside the borders.

As I said, you never get the truth, but very clearly, the disease is creating mayhem and problems inside Iran, especially in light of the maximum pressure policy [Ed. Note: *The U.S. restoration of sanctions*] and the economic collapse—which is almost total. As the problems add up for the ruling clerics, it is important to understand that they don't care

about the people. They will let people die, put out propaganda to cover it up, and in the end blame someone else.

■ *Iraq's New Government*

Iraq is making an extraordinarily strong anti-mullah, anti-Iran statement with its new government. The anti-government and anti-Iranian demonstrations, which started in October 2019, are still going on today despite the pandemic. It has been almost eight months, and the demonstrations remain a strong, daily occurrence. What has not been reported in the United States is that thousands of young Iraqis have been killed and 20,000 to 30,000 people are injured or missing – and yet, the protests are still going.

Another thing people in the West may have missed—or what wasn't properly reported—is that the demonstra-

very important message.

The message is clear. The Iraqi Shi'a and Iraqis in general refuse Iranian hegemony and they made that statement in a way that cannot be ignored. Interestingly, President Donald Trump did catch up with it and tweeted about the burning of the shrine.

■ *Saddam's Demise and 'Maximum Pressure'*

That would have not happened without two important events.

The first is the “maximum pressure campaign” that President Trump has imposed on Iran. It has not only weakened Iran economically, but it has also shaken its image. Perception in the Middle East is a big deal. The Iranian regime had been perceived as powerful and unchallengeable during the Obama administration, because of the way President

The Iraqi Shi'a and Iraqis in general refuse Iranian hegemony and they made that statement in a way that cannot be ignored.

tions came from the Shi'a heartland of Iraq. This is very significant because the Iranian government used to claim that only the Iraqi Sunnis were against them, or the Kurds were against them, or both were against the Shi'a. But these Iraqi demonstrators are hardcore Shi'a believers, and they are burning the Iranian consulate in Karbala—which is the cradle of Shi'ism, which contains the shrine of Imam Hussein [Ed. Note: *Shi'a Islam's founding martyr figure*—and that sent a

Obama acquiesced to the regime's actions. That spread the fear in the Middle East that the Iranian regime was able to bring the United States to its knees.

Most distressing were the pictures of the U.S. Navy sailors kidnapped by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the Persian Gulf and the video of them sitting on their knees with their hands behind their backs. Then, the shameful method of their release sent another message to the people of the



The Turkish restaurant “Mount Uhud” is one of the symbols of the Iraqi October protest movement. (Photo: Mondalawy/Wikicommons)

Middle East that Iran was the strong man and that the United States was weak. So, the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure campaign” was necessary to destroy the image. It worked, and it has led to the rise of the people of Iraq.

■ On the Streets of Iraq

It also has to be said that along with the “maximum pressure campaign,” we would not have this revolutionary moment—this uprising—if it had not been for the removal of [Iraqi dictator] Saddam [Hussein] in 2003 by the U.S.-led coalition. The people who are out in the streets of Iraq now, the revolutionaries, are all millennials who did not live under Saddam. They have lived under freedom and violence, but most important, they have lived with freedom of information.

Yes, there is mayhem. There is chaos. There is terrorism, but there is not a totalitarian regime that could oppress them or suppress their ideas. If it had not

been for the liberation of Iraq, we would not be seeing this revolution. And let me be clear, this revolution has hastened the weakening of Iran, and we are seeing signs of that every day.

The most important event that weakened the Iranian regime was the killing of the most notorious terrorists of at least the last 40 years, Qassem Soleimani and with him Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. *[Ed. Note: Soleimani headed Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force and Iran’s chief means of international force projection and terrorism support. Al-Muhandis was deputy leader of Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces, mostly Shi’a militias allied with Iran. They were killed in a U.S. drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3.]* Their deaths emboldened the people of Iraq against Iran. If we continue this policy with Iran, we will see the end of Iran’s hegemony in Iraq, but not without a hefty price.

■ Iraq’s New Prime Minister

Now there is a new prime minister, Mustafa Al-Kadhimi. Some people in Washington view him as friendly to the United States. I have known Mustafa Al-Kadhimi very well since the 1990s. As a person, he is a nice guy, but he is very mediocre, he is very limited. His education is extremely limited, and he is not known to be a strong personality.

Iraq today needs someone willing to throw himself into the fire to liberate the country. There are major issues in Iraq to be resolved. Most important, the biggest elephant in the room, are the Iranian-sponsored militias. The Shi’a militias are an existential threat to Iraq as an independent country.

In addition, al-Kadhimi must tackle the issue of money laundering on behalf of Iran and the draining of the Iraqi Treasury to Iran through the dollar auction by the Central Bank. This is not an issue that Americans are very familiar

with, but they are areas in which he must act right away—if he doesn't do them, or can't do them, he will not be effective.

There is more. There are two issues that every post-war or post-revolutionary country has to deal with in order to create a proper society. These are the

the parliament in Baghdad was entirely selected by Qassem Soleimani before his demise. *[Ed. Note: Al-Muhandis had been a member of parliament.]*

Iraqi voter participation in the February 2020 election was below 25 percent, and there was tremendous electoral

first-time terrorist militias are funded by a national government; even Hezbollah in Lebanon does not get funding from the government. The United States is subsidizing the situation by giving the Iraqi government aid without conditions. Washington should always have conditions—if Iraq needs financial help from America, it should stop paying the militias. The policy must be very pinpointed and very strict with no blank check and no “wiggle room.” In the interest of U.S. national security as well as regional security, Washington should call the government in Baghdad to account for every step and every action and every dollar.

And, perhaps most important, Americans should understand that the protest movement, against Iran and against corruption in Iraq, is still viable, still very strong, still very solid despite the arrests and deaths suffered at the hands of the government and the militias. The young people are not fooled by empty promises. They are not going to be swayed by cosmetic changes. They want to overthrow the corrupt Iraqi regime. They want to end the hegemony of Iran over Iraq.

The current prime minister, despite the hopes of a lot of people, never mentioned Iran's hegemony, the number one demand of the demonstrators, including Shia protesters. In May, demonstrators burned every Shia party headquarters or building in the southern cities of Iraq for the 10th time – or maybe the 20th time. They have sent yet another message that they refuse parties who are proxies of Iran.

The United States should look at this and understand what the Iraqi people want, not what bureaucrats in the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad decide in coordination with corrupt officials in the Iraqi government.

The latter is not what the Iraqi people want.

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Government officials are using the United States to protect the regime and the establishment of corrupt officials, rather than using the United States as a friend and ally.

punishment of people who perpetrated crimes against the protesters, and the release of peaceful protesters who have been wrongly accused of heinous crimes.

These are all challenges Mustafa Al-Kadhimi has to face. I am very skeptical. I hope he will succeed, but at the same time I am skeptical. And in my skepticism, I am going to keep my eye on him.

He made a promise, for example, that the first day he was in office he was going to release all the peaceful protesters in Iraqi prisons. But the spokesman of the Iraqi High Court said, “We do not have any peaceful protesters in prison.” Of course not, first, because they were falsely accused of violent crimes, and second, because many of protesters are in the hands of the Shi'a militias who work for Iran. The court is not prepared to admit that either is the case, so it simply rejects the idea.

Will al-Kadhimi stand up to the courts as well as to Iran? We must wait and see, but in the meantime, I recommend that people in Washington not overpraise him or overstate what he can do.

■ *Iraq as U.S. enemy*

Let me be very, very honest, and clear: Iraq today is an enemy of the United States. The current regime in Iraq is an enemy of the United States. Why? Iraq, constitutionally, is a parliamentary system, with parliamentarians—in theory—chosen by the electorate. But

fraud. Many of the names on the voter rolls were forged and most of the parliament, if not all of it, was selected, not elected, but selected, by Soleimani. Even if we have a good prime minister, it will be very difficult for him to do anything in light of a legislature whose members stood weeping and crying inside the parliament building for hours the day after Soleimani was eliminated.

At this moment, the Iraqi government is closing its eyes to attacks by militias against the Americans. Government officials are using the United States to protect the regime and the establishment of corrupt officials, rather than using the United States as a friend and ally. America should appeal to the Iraqi people, not to Baghdad. The United States should always appeal to the people—it is always the case that the United States wins when it does that.

■ *The People of Iraq are America's Friends*

The people of Iraq are friends of the United States. The government of Iraq is not friend; it is an enemy. Any policy made toward Iraq by Washington has to take this into consideration. The United States, for example, is helping Iraq financially at the same time the Iraqi government is using part of its budget to fund Shia militias – \$2 billion for salaries and \$3-4 billion in logistical support.

Iraq today, I believe, represents the

COVID-19 and Erdogan's Power Consolidation

by **AYKAN ERDEMIR**

Since the rise to power of the Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey in 2002, its leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used successive crises as pretexts to consolidate power that has facilitated his increasingly autocratic rule. From Turkish history's biggest corruption scandal in December 2013 to a failed coup attempt in July 2016, Erdogan—first as prime minister and then as president—has succeeded in turning existential threats to his rule into an opportunity to eliminate political opponents, undermine checks and balances, and amass greater personal power. It is, therefore, no surprise that the Turkish president exploited the COVID-19 pandemic as yet another pretext for strengthening hyper-centralist rule—a

government's first impulse, like that of Iran, was to delay announcing the first official case and underreport infection and fatality figures.

Following suit with other authoritarian regimes, the Erdogan government employed tactics of scapegoating and repression to silence critics and deflect responsibility for the COVID-19-induced public health and economic crises. Turkey's religious minorities and LGBT+ individuals received blame for the pandemic, leading to a spike in hate crimes.

Turkish authorities have arrested over 400 individuals for allegedly inflammatory social media posts about the coronavirus outbreak. They have also detained and interrogated journalists for reporting on COVID-19. Erdogan even filed a criminal complaint against the

their parliamentary status before arresting them on June 4. Despite passing a bill on April 14 to release some 90,000 inmates, including mob bosses, racketeers, and looters, to reduce the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak in crowded prisons, the Turkish government has kept political prisoners behind bars, including former presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtas of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and scores of other HDP lawmakers, mayors, and party officials.

Erdogan and his ultranationalist allies in the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) also saw the crisis as an opportunity to change Turkey's election laws and further tilt the uneven electoral playing field to their advantage. In May, the MHP suggested amendments to make it more difficult for newly established parties to run in elections, a move that aims to prevent two splinter parties established by Erdogan's former colleagues—former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu's Future Party (GP) and former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan's Remedy Party (DEVA)—from diverting votes from Erdogan's AKP-MHP alliance in the event of a snap election. In June, the government took a further step to start drafting a bill which aims to introduce three separate electoral thresholds at the local, national, and electoral alliance levels to further restrict opposition parties' and electoral alliances' ability to win seats in parliamentary elections.

Turkey's parliamentary-cum-presidential elections are not due until June 2023 and Erdogan is known to dislike calling early elections, which he sees as

Erdogan's steps... go beyond moves to manipulate election calendars and laws, disenfranchise the opposition, and extend into repressive measures.

development likely to exacerbate rampant authoritarianism at home and beligerence abroad.

■ **Political Consolidation**

Turkey reported over 174,000 cases of COVID-19 as of June 12 and is the second worst-hit country in the Middle East behind Iran, and the 12th-worst worldwide. Following the onset of the novel coronavirus, the Turkish

anchor of Fox TV's Turkish subsidiary for "spreading lies and manipulating the public on social media," after the anchor suggested in a tweet that the government might require all bank account holders to provide contributions to the campaign against the coronavirus.

The Turkish president also targeted elected officials, removing eight opposition mayors from office on March 24 and stripping three opposition lawmakers of

a sign of weakness. Nevertheless, he has given in to such pressure before. In June 2018, Erdogan's ultranationalist partners, fearing the potential consequences of Turkey's imminent economic downturn, convinced him to hold early elections, although they were not due until November 2019. The ruling Islamist-ultranationalist alliance managed to secure a new mandate six weeks before the country's currency meltdown on Aug. 10, 2018, known as Black Friday, which resulted in the Turkish lira losing 44 percent of its value from the beginning of the year.

Erdogan's steps to consolidate political power go beyond moves to manipulate election calendars and laws, disenfranchise the opposition, and extend into repressive measures. On June 11, the Turkish government pushed a bill through parliament that granted greater powers to over 20,000 "neighborhood watchmen," a loyalist force outside regular military and police units, which analysts compare to Iran's *Basij* and Venezuela's *Colectivo*.

Given Erdogan's move to annul Istanbul's mayoral election, which his candidate lost in March 2019, and hold a rerun, which the AKP again lost two months later, there are growing concerns that the Turkish president is preparing not to concede defeat even if he loses the next parliamentary-cum-presidential elections. The Turkish president's systematic campaign through media and courts to criminalize the entire opposition is a worrying sign about the dark turn Erdogan's ongoing consolidation of power can take in the near future.

■ **Economic Ruin**

Turkey's economy was in dire straits long before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, as mismanagement by Erdogan and his unqualified son-in-law, Finance and Treasury Minister Berat Albayrak, resulted in a currency meltdown in 2018 and a recession in 2019. The U.S. Federal Reserve's tapering of quantitative easing in 2018 led to a dollar liquidity

squeeze, ending the global liquidity glut, which until then allowed Turkey to access cheap capital made available in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis.

As a result, Ankara—just like its emerging market peers—has found international capital markets less willing to fund its chronic current account deficit. Ankara's economic woes prevented Erdogan from offering substantial assistance to Turkish citizens, prompting him to declare, "Turkey is a country that needs to continue production and keep

depleted its net international reserves (excluding swap lines) in April. Ankara's \$15 billion lira-riyal swap deal in late May with Qatar, one of its last remaining allies, and the central bank's borrowing of \$17 billion from local lenders through its swap facility year-to-date were futile attempts to mask the significant decline in the country's foreign reserves.

A week after Ankara reported its first COVID-19 case, economy czar Albayrak—who shares Erdogan's unorthodox economic approach—appeared ir-

...the Turkish president's near-total control over the central bank means his unorthodox economic views end up dictating Turkey's monetary policy.

the wheels turning under all conditions and circumstances," a move that exacerbated the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the Turkish president's near-total control over the central bank means his unorthodox economic views end up dictating Turkey's monetary policy. Erdogan, who denounced interest as "the mother and father of all evil" in 2018, not only sees interest rates as a "tool of exploitation" and compares them to "heroin trade," but also insists that high interest rates lead to higher inflation. In keeping with his anti-Semitic and conspiratorial worldview, the Turkish president even believes an "interest-rate lobby" led by Jews is aiming to tank Turkey's economy.

Add to this his son-in-law's fixation with defending the Turkish currency's exchange rate, first at 6 and then at 7 liras to the dollar, by forcing Turkey's state banks to sell about \$44 billion of hard currency in the first four months of 2020 and some \$77 billion since the beginning of 2019. Albayrak's ineffective defense of the currency has proved catastrophic as Turkey's central bank

rationally exuberant in stating that he had no concerns about meeting the government's growth, budget, and inflation targets for 2020, predicting 5 percent growth for the year. Turkey's central bank, similarly downplayed the pandemic's threat, declaring, "With its dynamic structure, the Turkish economy will be among those that will get over this process with minimum damage and in a short time."

International observers could not have disagreed more. On April 30, the German daily *Die Welt* warned about the possibility of a Turkish sovereign default. As of May 10, the price of Turkey's 5-year credit default swaps (CDS), which insure against a default on Turkish sovereign debt, rose to 643, its all-time high, implying over 10 percent probability of default. Turkey's debt ranked as the world's third riskiest at the time after Venezuela and Argentina. *The Wall Street Journal* cautioned on May 12 that the pandemic threatened to push Turkey into a full-blown balance-of-payments crisis.

The Erdogan-Albayrak team's dismal economic policies have eroded

investor confidence, triggered capital flight, and scared away potential capital inflows. Over the past 12 months, foreign investors have withdrawn more than \$10 billion from Turkey's local-currency bond and equity markets, the biggest outflow since January 2016. This year alone, international investors have sold \$7.9 billion worth of Turkish government bonds, more than halving their holdings. Although this trend spells disaster for Turkey, an economy increasingly disconnected from the global markets provides Erdogan an opportunity to bring the commerce further under his command and continue its transformation into state-cum-crony capitalism.

■ *Withdrawing from the West*

For decades, analysts have argued that Turkey's great fortune was not to be afflicted by the resource curse of its neighbors in the Middle East, whose rentier economies, dependent on hydrocarbon revenues, precluded institutionalization of democratic governance and competitive free market economies. Turkey's need to finance its chronic current account deficit through an export-oriented economy and tourism, many believed, would provide an antidote to the authoritarian ambitions of the likes of Erdogan.

Furthermore, many hoped, steady Western investment in the Turkish economy would not only keep Western finance and business professionals vested in the country's financial governance and prospects, but also keep Western officials vested in the country's democracy and rule of law. This no longer seems to be the case as Erdogan's erratic policies have already pushed a significant number of foreign investors out, and as a Reuters report argued in May, Turkey's "diminished importance for investors in developing economies ... has greatly reduced the risk of contagion across emerging markets."

Turkey's ongoing drift from the Western politico-economic sphere and free market principles has limited Erdogan's

ability to exploit the threat of economic contagion and play the "too big to fail" card in relations with the country's treaty allies in the transatlantic world. But it has offered the Turkish president greater ability to consolidate economic alongside political power. Erdogan appears open to the idea of being in charge of a poorer country, as long as it is more strictly under his Islamist tutelage. Turkey's GDP per capita in current U.S. dollars has been declining consistently from its all-time high of \$12,519 in 2013 to \$8,958 as of 2019, 75th in the world. During the same time, the world's GDP per capita rose from \$10,771 to over \$11,300.

As part of his push for greater control of the economy, the Turkish president has already taken steps to introduce protectionist measures, pick business winners from among his loyalists, and reshuffle wealth in the country from Turkey's pro-Western business elite to his cronies. On May 20, Ankara imposed an additional tariff of up to 30 percent on imports of more than 800 items, including steel and iron products, spare parts, and work and agriculture machinery, in a move analysts interpreted as Turkey's return to its policy of import substitution, characteristic of its Cold War economy until early the 1980s.

Erdogan also started probing the idea—for the fourth time within the past two years—of taking over Turkey's largest private bank, which has so far protected its reputation for good governance and a pro-secular ethos. There are also reports that Erdogan might nationalize a number of his vanity projects, in which the Turkish government's leasing, purchasing, and turnover guarantees to public-private partnership companies amounting to \$142 billion were beginning to develop into a financial quagmire.

Meanwhile, the Turkish president continues to use Turkey's sovereign wealth fund as a parallel budget not subject to audit by parliament or the Court of Final Accounts. Overall, these steps and others have the potential of providing

Erdogan with greater control over the workings of the Turkish economy, offering him greater opportunity to bolster his patronage networks and hyper-centralized rule, and paving the way for greater consolidation of political power.

■ *Grim Outlook*

Together with his ultranationalist allies, Erdogan's ongoing monopolization of political and economic power have further undermined Turkey's already weak checks and balances, eroding what little is left of his government's accountability. The resulting impunity on the home front has also led to a more belligerent and irredentist position in foreign and security policy in the Middle East and North Africa. Ankara's assertive stance in the Eastern Mediterranean even prompted the Turkish Foreign Ministry on May 12 to identify France, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates as an "alliance of evil." The Erdogan government today appears more emboldened to use gunboat diplomacy, military deployments, and proxy forces to push its Islamist-cum-ultranationalist agenda to the detriment of its neighbors and treaty allies in NATO.

Erdogan's consolidation of a hyper-centralist regime that gives him sweeping power over domestic politics, economics, and foreign and security affairs will inevitably prove disastrous for Turkey. The current trend is likely to exacerbate capital flight and brain drain, and pivot Turkey further away from NATO allies and transatlantic values. It is possible that Erdogan can entrench himself and his circle of cronies despite his weakening electoral support, but the Turkey he would end up dominating would inevitably be poorer, highly volatile, and more isolated, following a well-established pattern with other Islamist and authoritarian regimes.

AYKAN ERDEMİR is a former member of the Turkish parliament and the senior director of the Turkey Program at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

“A Partnership to Nurture”

An *inFOCUS* interview with BG ASSAF ORION, IDF (Res.)

Brigadier General Assaf Orion, IDF (Res.) is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv, serving as director of the Israel-China program. He is also an International Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, BG Orion served as head of the Strategic Division in the Planning Directorate of the IDF General Staff, where he was in charge of policy, strategy, international cooperation and liaison with neighboring militaries and peacekeeping forces. He led the IDF team to the tripartite meetings with UNIFIL and the Lebanese army, took part in the U.S.-Israel security dialogue, and represented the IDF in talks with the Palestinian Authority. *inFOCUS* editor Shoshana Bryen spoke with him in late May.

***inFOCUS:* TO JUMP RIGHT IN, HOW MUCH INFLUENCE DOES THE UNITED STATES HAVE OVER ISRAEL'S DECISIONS ON SECURITY TRADE WITH ANY OTHER COUNTRY, NOT JUST CHINA, BUT ANY OTHER COUNTRY?**

BG Orion: The U.S. is our closest strategic and defense partner, just about an ally except without the treaty. American opinions, positions, concerns are well heard in Israel. I think the issue here is, when do you get to an exclusive either/or situation? And the answer is, not yet, and not on everything. The U.S. has influence on Israel, but how to adapt to fast moving, dramatically moving, environment and landscape is still open, both here and in America.

***iF:* DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL TO SIGN A FORMAL DEFENSE PACT?**

BG Orion: Most senior defense officials and others in Israel generally stop short of that because, on the one hand, our main ethos is protecting and defending ourselves, by ourselves. We spill our own blood in our own wars, and we don't expect the U.S. to fight for us under any circumstance, while we very much appreciate America's material support enabling us to do so. And, on the other hand, we don't do expeditionary wars. All of our fighting is around our homes – we are only about two hours' drive

between anywhere in Israel and the frontiers where we are fighting.

What we should consider is something in keeping with today's challenges, which is a strategic innovation and technology alliance. And that means putting together our forte – innovation, startup industry – the inventive part of our two nations, so to speak.

[We need] a fine delineation of the red or “absolutely not,” the green, the “absolutely yes,” and all the yellow that “we still need to think about.”

***iF:* IN THAT REGARD, ISRAEL HAS OPENED A COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER STRATEGIC TRADE WITH OTHER COUNTRIES AND TO SEE WHAT MIGHT HAVE NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS. CAN YOU TALK TO US ABOUT WHAT IT IS SUPPOSED TO DO, AND WHETHER YOU ACTUALLY SEE IT DOING THAT?**

BG Orion: It is an advisory committee on national security issues in foreign investment. In Israel there are professional regulators in many parts of the government, including infrastructure, finance, insurance, communication, etc. And these regulators did, and still do, have

the authority to decide on the eligibility of an investment. But now they have an advisory committee in the Treasury Ministry, with the participation of our security agencies to consider the national security aspects of such investments.

But the committee's ruling is not binding. On top of that, technology in Israel is generally unregulated except when it is defense related. So, the chief

concern on the U.S. side, which is non-directly defense related technology, is not addressed by the mechanism. The U.S. definition of national security related matters has widely expanded, while Israel's remained rather narrow.

The last point is that the American intelligence community's priority for many years has been China, which was never a top priority target for Israel; it's not an enemy, it's not on our top list. We do Iran, we do regional Middle Eastern trouble, military issues, proliferation. China as China is, perhaps, a concern, but is not seen as a severe and direct national security threat. The intelligence picture in Israel on China is far behind

what we have on our top priority targets, and miles away from what the U.S. has. So, in order to professionally address American concerns, Israel will need better intelligence, perhaps with American support.

iF: HOW BROADLY DOES ISRAEL DEFINE NATIONAL SECURITY? DOES IT INCLUDE THINGS LIKE FOOD SUPPLY, WATER SUPPLY, MEDICAL SYSTEMS? IS THAT CHANGING?

BG Orion: We have quite a wide national security definition, but it is more of a moving target. In the good – or bad – old days, Israel and the U.S. reached an understanding about defense and military and dual use exports to China, and none of those have been happening since at least 2005.

So, it is clear cut where the traffic light is red.

But what used to be either red or green in each nation is now divided into three colors. The American red is much wider than it used to be. On communications, Israel was clear very early on: we don't have serious foreign influence or access to our communications in third and fourth generation technology, let alone 5G. So actually, Israel is an outlier here and I think we're well-known for being rather strict on traditional security.

The tricky part is that what used to constitute military, defense, and dual use items was quite limited in scope. Now everything is dual use. From the American perspective, almost everything can be used for military purposes. Our data is definitely security connected. Medical issues now are perceived as security, finance is perceived as security. Everything is perceived as security.

Each nation needs to strike the right balance between economic benefits and security. In Germany, we saw the government step in and move against sales of a robotics factory, KUKA, to China because it didn't want to lose the technological edge and economic future. It



Brigadier General Assaf Orion, IDF (Res.)

is a very wide discussion that cannot be ruled technically, it needs a fine delineation of the red, or the “absolutely not,” of the green, the “absolutely yes,” and all the yellow that “we still need to think about.”

We need to understand that the lines are moving in the U.S. and it needs synchronization and coordination with its partners.

iF: SENATORS TOM COTTON AND GARY PETERS, A REPUBLICAN AND A DEMOCRAT, PROPOSED THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A U.S.-ISRAEL OPERATIONS TECHNOLOGY WORKING GROUP PRECISELY TO TALK ABOUT WHERE THE LINES ARE AND

HOW THEY GO. NOT A TREATY, BUT RATHER A WAY ISRAEL AND THE UNITED STATES COULD OPEN THAT DOOR AND WIDEN THE ROAD FOR CONVERSATION.

BG Orion: It's beyond conversation. It is actually reframing our relationship according to what is now at the top of the American list and the main issues shaping the global order.

During the Cold War, we knew our definitions and we fought over here, and it well served the U.S. grand strategy against the Soviets. During the Global War on Terrorism, Israel was a willing partner in many things; we saved a lot of lives together. In the current context, which

is the Great Power Competition, the U.S. put a target on China. We need to move from the point where most of the dialogue between Israel and the U.S. is centered on prohibitions: “We expect Israel not to do this, not to do that,” and into an alliance mode, which means: “How can we work together and synergize?”

We can actually do quite a lot of things together. Most of our high-tech industry is Westward looking. There’s a lot of cooperation going on, a lot of Hebrew on the West Coast, in Silicon Valley. It’s already quite robust, but we can and we must take it to the next level. At some point, it will become a more crystallized coalition policy. I expect Israel, together with other advanced technology nations, to camp out with the U.S. and widen the Western wagon circle.

It doesn’t mean that Israel will see China as an enemy or a rival, turning against it, but it means that our relations with the U.S. will focus on what we do best, and that’s advanced technologies.

IF: I’M GOING TO CHANGE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITIONS. THERE WAS A SUGGESTION IN THE PENTAGON THAT THE UNITED STATES MIGHT REMOVE THE AMERICAN CONTINGENT FROM THE MULTINATIONAL FORCE AND OBSERVERS (MFO) IN SINAI. GIVEN THE STATE OF RELATIONS WITH EGYPT, PERHAPS THAT FORCE ISN’T NECESSARY ANYMORE.

BG Orion: I’ve just coauthored a paper on the MFO for the Washington Institute called *Avoiding an Epic Mistake*.

This has been a disproportionately beneficial mission at relatively low risk and low cost. Most of the MFO budget is divided between Egypt, the U.S., and Israel in more or less equal shares. There is partner participation by other nations, so the 450 American troops are the backbone of a force of more than 1,100. The strategic benefits are outstanding. Rather than being superfluous now that relations between Israel and Egypt are great, it actually explains how the relations got

here despite the crises and tremors of the last decade.

It started with the poetically named “Arab Spring,” with the fall of the Mubarak regime, with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood regime, with the return of the al-Sisi government, which is actually the Egyptian establishment returning. During that period, security in Sinai was, and still is, quite badly affected. The rise of terror organizations, insurgency in the peninsula, and the rise of ISIS Sinai Province all produced a rough ride for both Israel and Egypt. We had several attacks on our borders, we had casualties on both sides, we needed to tamp things down and liaise.

We saw the Egyptian armed forces needing a stronger military response in Sinai and needing to exceed the treaty limitations between us [*Ed. established as part of the 1979 Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty*]. And the MFO, as an international umbrella with an American core was an asset for diplomacy, verification, military presence, and so on, helped us

in Djibouti in the Bab el Mandeb Straits at the southern part of the Red Sea. In Egypt itself there are all sorts of projects. In May, we heard that Russia would provide Egypt with Sukhoi-35 jets [modern multi-role fighters], and it is building Egypt’s first nuclear power plant.

The U.S. is sitting with a force on a strategic waterway. Pulling up anchor and ceding ground to Russia and China seems like the wrong thing to do and the wrong time to do it.

So, you have an Israeli reason to keep that going. You have an Israel-Egyptian regional stability reason. And the Israel-Egyptian treaty is probably the crown jewel of American diplomacy in the Middle East. For America’s own interest, both in Middle Eastern terms and in Great Power Competition and Indo-Pacific terms, you risk a disastrous loss for a very small saving.

IF: CAN YOU TALK ABOUT IRAN AND SYRIA, AND RUSSIA AND SYRIA? GIVEN IRAN’S ECONOMIC AND

The U.S. is sitting with a force on a strategic waterway. Pulling up anchor and ceding ground to Russia and China seems like the wrong thing to do and the wrong time to do it.

to navigate through that choppy water.

Saying, okay, we don’t need it now because Israel and Egypt are grownups, is the wrong conclusion. We need it. Without the U.S. it will collapse. Without the MFO, relations between Israel and Egypt will be tougher to maintain. And bottom line, the main idea behind the withdrawal of American assets from the MFO is its relevance to the American National Defense Strategy, which is focused on Great Power Competition.

China is economically active in Egypt. It’s growing its maritime presence

CORONAVIRUS PROBLEMS, CAN IRAN CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN ITS PRESENCE IN SYRIA?

BG Orion: Iran has a commitment to Syria going back to at least 1979, when Hafez al-Assad sided with Iran against Iraq in their decade-long war. Going farther back, as an ancient empire the Persians always wanted access to the Mediterranean Sea. Iran’s commitment to the Levant is deep-rooted and it’s not expected to wither anytime soon.

How they do it is developing over

time. It used to be mostly through supplies, logistics, financial support to the Assad regime, and to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the flagship of their proxy [terrorism] industry. Since the beginning of the war in Syria, they have ratcheted up their involvement. And in 2017, Iran decided to try to establish a military base for itself in Syria and thus have a frontier with Israel.

Israel has been running against them for years, developing the concept of “the campaign between the wars,” or actually a long campaign to counter Iran’s long campaign. There was a gradual buildup and growth in the Iranian presence in Syria, but then came an air-strike campaign and an erosion of their capabilities, troops, units, factories, arms transports, caches, and so on. This is an ongoing contest, with fewer resources available to Iran now because of the sanctions regime. Starved of oil revenues and finding it very difficult on the coronavirus front, Iran has problems. But Iran also knows how to bleed thousands of people without being staggered and it is a ruthless regime. It maintains itself, adjusts the pace and means, and remains focused.

So they reorganized and tried to deploy more proxies and fewer Iranians. They redeployed from west to east, they changed their ways and their logistic lines, and so on. They suffered a huge setback losing Soleimani – America did a great service to all the peace-loving people in the Middle East. But this is a marathon. I don’t expect Iran to stop anytime soon. It will tune down and up, adjust and adapt, and continue. So will Israel.

Russia is also a long story, beginning during the Cold War, if not back in Czarist times. Syria was a protégé of the Soviet Union. Since the early 1970s, Russia has felt pushed out of the Middle East, but in 2015, President Vladimir Putin identified a great opportunity for a comeback. With a small force but without any scruples, he used it ruthlessly, relentlessly. Together with Iran, the [Bashar al-]Assad regime and

Hezbollah, which provided the foot soldiers, the Russian air force and special forces actually turned the tide. Syria under Assad was saved, and Russia gained a port on the Mediterranean, several air bases, some economic prospects, and an opportunity to tackle Turkey from the south, actually pull it away from NATO a bit, and shake it. He tried to make Syria a great diversion from the war in Ukraine and leverage for Russian influence in the Middle East to promote Russian arms sales.

So, Israel woke up one day with a new military neighbor on our northern border. We wisely created deconfliction channels and wisely managed a useful strategic dialogue. We have our differences; I don’t think we have illusions that Russia will do Israel’s work there. But unlike Turkey, even when a Russian plane was in our airspace, we were wise enough not to shoot it down, but to escort it out, professionally, and preserve our relations.

There’s no question on which side of the Great Power Competition Israel stands, but not every issue has to be decided exclusively. So, we can have a great alliance with the U.S., we can have good understandings with Russia and military deconfliction in Syria, and we can have reasonable and seemingly friendly trade relations with China, without any illusion that China will ever support us in the United Nations, or that it will prefer us over the great majority of Arab and Muslim states and populations. China knows its math.

We’re muddling through this, but there’s no question who our strategic ally is in this equation.

iF: TURKEY?

BG Orion: We should do our best to avoid open hostilities; we should do our best to tamp down the tensions. But we cannot overlook the fact that [President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan has quite a clear ideological view: he backs Hamas, he backs the Muslim Brotherhood, he

supports a lot of bad things happening in Gaza. Things have come to a very low point, but we still have reasonable trade exchange and we’re trying not to get onto a collision course.

We find ourselves in the Eastern Mediterranean, aligned with actors that Turkey sees as its competitors, if not rivals, with Greece, with Cyprus, with Egypt in some manner on the gas project. And Turkey seems to be quite aggressive in its approach, alienating many, many others. You can now see it playing out in Libya and how it plays the refugee card against Europe. Turkey and Russia sometimes hit it off together, but most of the time they tread carefully. They move between crises, understandings, coercion, and the next crisis. There is no love, but there are some interests that they can pursue together.

iF: HOW DOES ISRAEL LOOK AT THE THREAT HEZBOLLAH POSES IN LEBANON AND IS THERE ANYTHING YOU CAN IT DO ABOUT IT?

BG Orion: I wouldn’t say that we’re not doing anything about it. But we certainly don’t go to war because as [Defense Minister and former Chief of the IDF Staff] Benny Gantz used to say, “Operations we do when we can; wars we do when we must.” War is not the first choice of our policy options. It is our boys and our families in the line of fire.

The number one conventional threat to Israel is Hezbollah. But Hezbollah is an operational part of a strategic system whose great potential comes from Iran: the industry, the science, the finance, the arms, the technology, the logistics – all of it comes from Iran. You need to understand the full picture.

Second, Hezbollah has grown something like tenfold since 2006. However, since the Second Lebanon War in that year, both sides have enjoyed the longest calm period along the Blue Line, the border between us. They are deterred and we have no business going to war by choice. Actually, both sides would rather

not go to war, because they also understand there will be an unprecedented level of destruction. An article I coauthored about that in the Atlantic Council was entitled “Counting the Cost.”

So, what does Israel do?

First, it's a spatial problem, spread from Tehran and its industries all the way to Beirut, not just Southern Lebanon, but all of Lebanon. Since their rockets and missiles include heavy missiles with a range of hundreds of kilometers, and they can also launch from Syria and Iraq, we can't do a Southern Lebanon-focused operation and get rid of it for good. Like in your garden, if you cut a weed without uprooting it, it will grow again, unless you take care of the logistics, the roots, the veins. Hezbollah is a regenerating hydra; it grows heads as soon as you chop other heads off. This is why Israel is trying to work within “the campaign between wars,” to apply or encourage financial pressure, sanctions, and to disrupt logistical efforts. We go after the weapon transports, factories, warehouses, in all the supply lines.

Syria has seen hundreds of strikes during those years. [Hezbollah Secretary General] Hassan Nasrallah, said in a recent speech, “Israel's focus in Syria is going after the missile factories, and the missile assets.” Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu, went to the UN General Assembly and showed the production sites of the precision missiles and said, “You need to move it, otherwise we'll take care of it.” They apparently moved it while denying it existed.

If you compare what Hezbollah and Iran planned to have ready by now with what they actually have, they have probably been set back several years. Israel's strategy is not going to war needlessly or too early, at the same time not sitting idly and watching the enemy build up, and trying to disrupt it all the time while remaining under the threshold of war. That's a fine balancing act. If you go too hard and too fast, you'll find yourself in a war that you'd like to avoid.

Israel, from birth, has had many

threats around it. The most direct-action cases were when we saw nuclear capabilities budding or coming to fruition in enemy countries. Iraq in 1981, Syria in 2007. And Israel's position on Iran's nuclear program is well-known, and thankfully shared by the U.S., that it will not be permitted to get there.

Hezbollah is a piece of that machine and we're dealing with it separately, while seeing the system as a whole. We deter it, so it is restrained, we find ways to expose it, although it tries to stay concealed. Our intelligence collection there is relentless, and we know much more about the Hezbollah than they'd like us to know. And should the war start, the massive precision strike that Israel will launch against Hezbollah will be staggering. It doesn't mean that we won't get a bloody nose, but the damage to Hez-

We have some idea of what UN can and can't do. It's been improving in that it's been telling the truth more since [former U.S. Ambassador to the UN] Nikki Haley successfully carried through UN Security Council Resolution 2373 in 2017. Since then, UN[IFIL] reports have greatly improved, providing a good factual base from which to discuss policy issues, policy differences, things that should be done, things that can be done. We should be thinking about how to apply more pressure on Hezbollah, and at the same time to stabilize.

UNIFIL today suffers serious gaps between its size and its authority and its local permissions. My own suggestion is to either expand its authority to fit the mandate and its spirit or downsize its force and its budget, according to what it is permitted by Lebanon to

The Lebanese government has to understand that it can't go on ... impeding UNIFIL's mission and failing to protect it, while enjoying the cloak of legitimacy...

bollah, to Lebanon, to Southern Lebanon, to the Shiite areas where it chose to embed its military assets, and Beirut, will be unprecedented. It's something best to avoid.

IF: DOES THE UN INTERIM FORCE IN LEBANON (UNIFIL) HELP OR DOES IT HURT?

BG Orion: Both. It helps in diffusing tensions through liaison, avoiding tactical incidents flaring up to full scale escalation. On the other hand, UNIFIL's work has been impeded wherever it is really important. Hezbollah harasses the UN patrols, impeding their movement and access, deterring them from documentation, from exposing its illicit military assets and operations, and so on. And the Lebanese government and its army are playing a very convoluted game there.

do. The Lebanese government has to understand that it can't go on like this, impeding UNIFIL's mission and failing to protect it, while enjoying the cloak of legitimacy and material benefits of an oversized UN mission.

IF: THE LAST AREA IS THE GULF STATES AND WHAT APPEARS TO BE AN OPENING TO ISRAEL. NOT FRIENDSHIP, BUT AN OPENING THAT SUGGESTS ONE OF TWO THINGS: EITHER THAT THEY'RE INTERESTED IN ISRAEL AS AN ALLY AGAINST IRAN; OR THEY HAVE FINALLY DECIDED THEY'RE NOT GOING TO GET RID OF ISRAEL SO THEY MIGHT AS WELL LEARN TO LIVE WITH IT.

BG Orion: Every nation has its own priorities. All Middle Eastern rulers are trying to navigate between their people



Troops stationed with the UNIFIL mission during a training. (Photo: Italy Defense Ministry)

and their reading of their national interest. After the last decade of upheaval, most of the Middle East looked around and said, “First we worry about our public and how we stay alive as regimes.” Look at Cairo, Damascus, Yemen, Libya – these ended badly for the rulers, their people, or both.

Second, around us are two loci of radicalism. One is Shiite radicalism, led by Iran, a systemically destabilizing actor, trying to subvert and undermine all the Gulf regimes, to terrorize them and coerce them, and finally to topple them. The other is Sunni radicalism, let’s code name it ISIS, but it is everything from Al-Qaeda and branching northward.

Realistically, Arab leaders came to understand, and sometimes even to admit, that the Palestinian cause doesn’t play a real role in their interests except in the public domain, public sensitivity, public emotion. Palestine does resonate in Arab politics and narratives as a case of injustice, of Muslim and Arab humiliation to a Western entity, to something that they perceive as being external or

foreign to the area. Leaders themselves, around the Gulf, and each is a bit different, say the following, “When we look at the real life around us, Israel is not our problem, it’s not attacking us, it’s a good resource, it’s a good security partner, it helps against Iran, it helps against radicalism.”

I read media reports that terror elements in the Sinai are complaining that they are struck from above, perhaps by Israel. I guess that if it’s true, Egypt both sanctions it and enjoys it, and at the same time probably denies it. That’s fine. Everybody is treading a fine line between their actual reading and what the public would like to know. Middle Eastern politics are like a double decker bus: what people do quietly in the lower deck is seldom expressed explicitly in the upper deck.

iF: AS A CLOSING REMARK, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO SAY TO OUR READERS? WHAT SHOULD THEY KNOW ABOUT ISRAEL THAT PERHAPS THEY DON’T KNOW?

BG Orion: It is a fascinating young state of an ancient people. It is pioneering in unbelievable ways. It has quite a few challenges within and without. After its fantastic human capital, what it really needs are like-minded allies and partners with similar values – meaning the U.S.

Going back to the beginning of this conversation, to China and the framing of, “Israel needs to choose.” People do not choose between their family and their friendly grocer. They stick with their family and buy at their grocer. I think the U.S. and Israel enjoy the status of family. And that’s a partnership to nurture into the future.

iF: ON BEHALF OF THE JEWISH POLICY CENTER AND THE READERS OF *inFOCUS* QUARTERLY, I WANT TO THANK YOU FOR AN OUTSTANDING CONTRIBUTION TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST.

BG Orion: You are very welcome.

Resilience: Israel's Reaction to the COVID-19 Epidemic

by **LENNY BEN-DAVID**

The Mayo Clinic has a definition of “psychological resilience” that is appropriate for Israel. “The ability to adapt to difficult situations. When stress, adversity, or trauma strikes, you still experience anger, grief, and pain, but you’re able to keep functioning — both physically and psychologically.”

While the Mayo Clinic adds to its definition that resilience also requires the ability to **seek** help, Israel has added a new feature: the ability to **offer** help, take the offensive, improvise, muster human and financial resources, and defeat the adversity.

Yes, those actions sound like they apply to battlefield emergencies. Indeed, they have been applied to such military purposes as developing the Arrow and Iron Dome missile defense systems, investing in cyber defenses and offenses, designing the Merkava tank and its reactive and active defenses, and more. But the threat of and response to the invading coronavirus required the same resilient and early responses in closing borders, quarantining likely carriers, establishing field hospitals, training staff, and employing the Mossad [Israel’s external security service] to secure vital medical supplies. The government deployed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to close infected neighborhoods, create hostels for Covid-19 patients who did not require hospitalization, deliver supplies to elderly shut-ins, and even babysit for the children of essential healthcare workers. Immediately, IDF and government-sponsored laboratories were redirected to design and build emergency respirators and hospital robots for patient care. Laboratories were reassigned to research possible vaccines.

Obviously, “resiliency” is the most important word to describe the Jewish people immediately after the Holocaust. Defiance, vengefulness, heroism are also apt descriptions, but not one of those words by itself can explain the formation of a Jewish state only three years after World War II better than the Jewish people’s “resiliency.”

■ **Complacency and Resiliency in Palestine**

The contradictory traits of resiliency and complacency were exhibited during the near eradication of the Jews of Palestine in the early 20th century. They were ravaged by a locust plague, starvation, malaria, cholera, typhus, expulsion, and the Ottoman Empire’s forced conscription, cruelty, and persecution that bordered on a repeat of the Armenian genocide. Epidemics were spread by the deployment of disease-carrying Turkish troops throughout the Middle East, and the diseases struck the Jewish populations hard. In Jerusalem, the situation was so desperate that hundreds of Jewish women, desperate for food and care for their children, and not knowing the fate of their husbands, turned to prostitution and, as one historian has written, “went to the wrong with German and Turkish troops.”

It can reasonably be argued that the epidemics of 100 years ago were spread by the movement of Turkish armies across the region. “Widespread epidemics consumed Ottoman soldiers and civilians alike during the Great War,” contended Prof. Melanie Schulze-Tanielian of the University of Michigan. “The fact that soldiers often had to march to and from the front made it difficult for

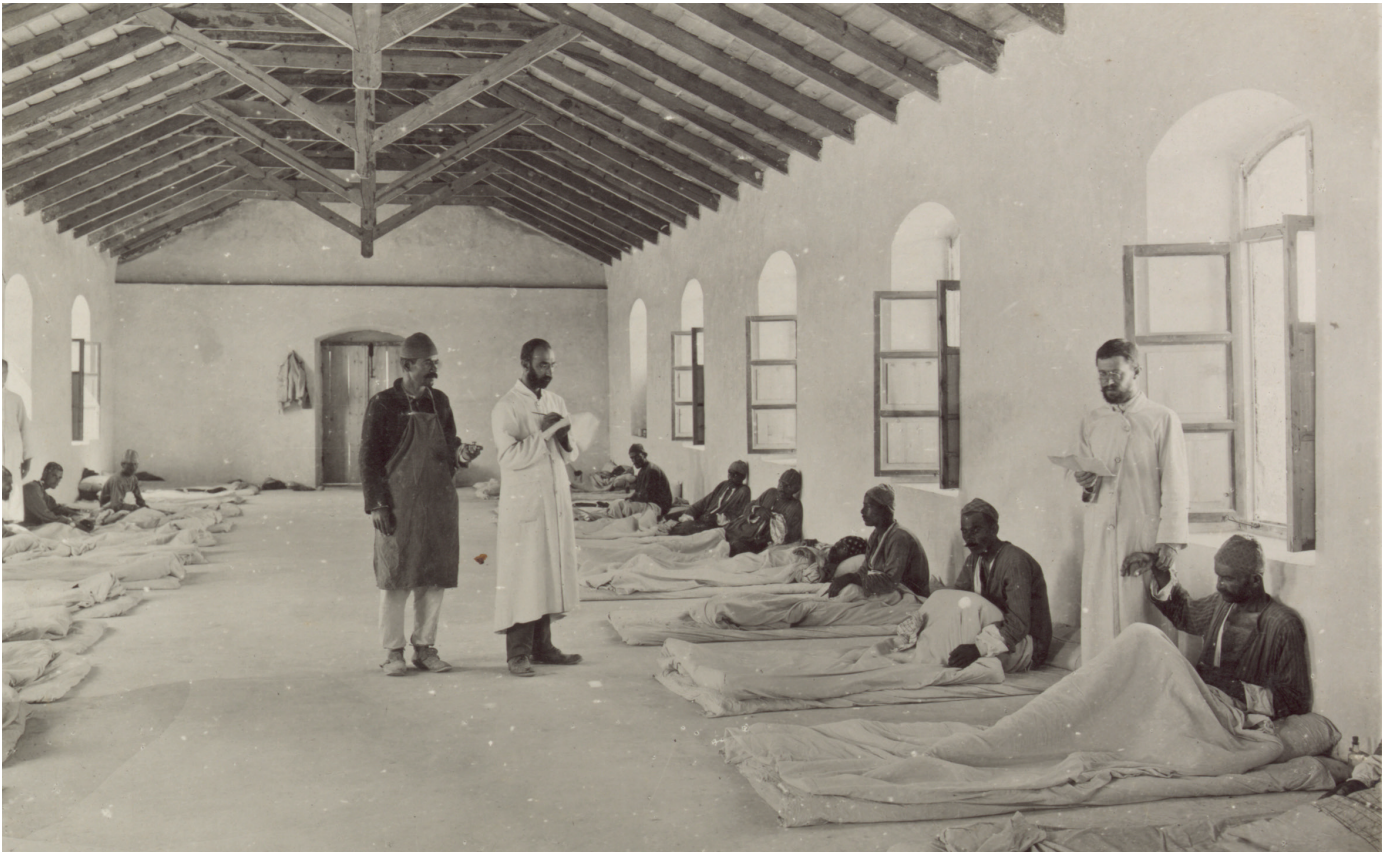
Ottoman sanitary officials to maintain adequate hygiene. It was during these marches that soldiers would at random mingle with civilians, picking up or leaving behind germs and microbes...”

German General Otto Liman von Sanders, who would command the Turkish-German forces in Palestine during World War I, reported on the medical state of “poor or even non-existing hygiene, vermin infestations, and rampant sicknesses among the troops. There were no bathing facilities in the barracks; military hospitals were in an appalling state. A permeating stench and overwhelming dirt met him as he entered overcrowded hospital rooms. There was no separation between patients with physical injuries and those infected with diseases; men slept in the same beds or crowded on the floor.”

Von Sanders was faced with the complacency and carelessness of the Ottoman Army. His suggestions to the Ottoman military command to improve the health crisis were “ignored, evaded, or met with outright resistance from higher officers of the military,” according to Prof. Schulze-Tanielian.

Hemdah Ben-Yehudah, the wife of the pioneering Hebrew scholar Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, provided further details on the situation in Jerusalem, in her article, “Jerusalem: Its Redemption and Future,” a 1918 volume of eyewitness essays:

Ten-thousand Jews left Jerusalem in one week. The streets were filled with the exiles who had no carriages and conveyed their baggage on their own backs. Most of the houses were closed because the inhabitants were dead, or deported, exiled, or in



A Turkish military hospital in Magdabah Sinai, 1916. (Library of Congress)

prison. Deserted were the streets. The women kept house underground; but there was little food to prepare. They had forgotten the appearance of a loaf of bread. The babies died for lack of milk.

Some 3,000 orphans were wandering the streets of Jerusalem out of a community of 26,000 people, according to a writer, Chen Malul, of the National Library of Israel.

Almost miraculously, according to Mrs. Ben-Yehuda, the British Army arrived in Jerusalem on Chanukah Eve, 1917. She related the resiliency that she witnessed in Jerusalem's remaining population:

...an impulse of life after the reign of death. The first to obey this overwhelming impulse were Jewish youths, the remnant that had been concealed hidden like the seed in the earth and had thus escaped the general persecution. These young men

demanded the privilege of fighting side by side with the English, in the conquest of their own country. Their desire was granted. A battalion of native Jews was immediately enlisted, and the [numbers of] recruits increased.

Other Jewish units arrived from overseas, including volunteer units to the Jewish Brigades in the British Army as well as volunteer medical teams from groups such as Hadassah and the American Joint Distribution Committee.

But the resilience of the Jewish community was not found in other communities in Palestine recovering from disease and war.

According to researcher Ella Ayalon of Tel Aviv University, who wrote on the crisis of Jewish orphans after World War I, "The [Jewish] Palestine Orphan Committee followed a progressive agenda and aspired to place the children under its care with families, and not in an orphanage."

■ Afterword

How did the Jews of Eretz Yisrael recover and move forward after World War I, the Holocaust, the War of Independence, the Yom Kippur War, and all the other crises such as the coronavirus pandemic? I suggest a trait of resilience in their DNA or psyche.

I once had a discussion on religion with I. L. (Si) Kenen, the founder of AIPAC and my mentor. Si was notoriously non-religious. "I don't believe in God," he told me.

"What do you believe in?" I asked.

Si responded, "I believe in the eternity of Israel."

"Si, You're no less religious than I," I answered. "We just call it different things."

Today, I call it resiliency.

LENNY BEN-DAVID served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the Embassy of Israel in Washington. He is the author of *American Interests in the Holy Land Revealed in Early Photographs*. He is currently writing *Secrets of World War I in the Holy Land Revealed in Early Photographs*.

COVID-19 Has Not Eased Threats to Israel

by **BG YOSSI KUPERWASSER, IDF (Res.)**

Despite the potential for change that the novel coronavirus pandemic creates, it seems that most players in the Middle East view it as just an imposed break. Their official reports assert only limited damage so far, regardless of the continuing spread of the disease. Pandemic or no, they keep promoting their interests.

Tensions between rival camps in the region and their attitudes toward Israel have not changed and are not expected to change. The main clash is between the pragmatic Sunni camp and the three radical elements—Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Turkey, Qatar, and the Gaza Strip; the Iran-led axis; and Islamic State followers. These factions continue to fight each other in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, with some involvement of the major foreign powers. Israel is aligned with the pragmatists and is considered an enemy by most radicals.

The country in the region most affected thus far is Iran. Many in Iran believe that the dangerous reality of the coronavirus is the result of the conduct of the clerical regime. Meanwhile, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei tried, with very limited success, to turn the battle against the disease into a tool to coalesce public support and solidarity behind him. He blamed the United States for his government's shortcomings and presented Tehran's support for terrorist elements such as Hamas (Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement) as useful in the fight against the pandemic.

The ongoing American "maximum pressure campaign" has created economic difficulties for the mullahs' regime, forced it to cut expenditures slightly on their proxies in Lebanon and Iraq, and make some changes in the characteristics of

Iran's military presence in Syria. This allowed their opponents in these arenas, including Israel in Syria, to put more pressure on Iran and its surrogates. In Iraq, the new prime minister seems to somewhat limit Iran's control of the government and in Lebanon anti-Hezbollah demonstrations keep their momentum.

But the mounting pressure has not forced Iran to change its goals and the strategy it plans to achieve them. It continues its effort to gain hegemony in the Middle East and beyond and export its messianic radical version of Islam, and it is committed to confronting the U.S. and annihilating Israel. In order to promote its strategy, Iran is arming itself to the teeth with advanced missiles of all ranges, drones, and naval capabilities. It is moving forward with its military nuclear project, ignoring all its commitments under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the JCPOA, or "Iran deal"), keeps trying to strengthen its ability to operate against Israel from Syria, and to provide Hezbollah in Lebanon with precise guided missiles. Iran is also trying to strengthen its ability to confront the U.S. by improving its relations with Venezuela and China.

■ *The End of the Embargo?*

As bad as relations have been between the U.S. and Iran, they may become even more strained in the coming months, especially if Washington manages to delay the expiration in October 2020 of the JCPOA clause preventing Iran from buying and exporting weapons. Such a step within a month of the U.S. elections, especially if it is performed by a snapback of the UN sanctions on Iran, may cause escalation. In this context Israel may be

faced with growing tensions with Iran and its proxies along its northern borders with Lebanon and Syria, either as a consequence of the growing need to act against Iran's efforts to strengthen its capabilities there or as a response to Iranian provocation. Such provocation may also take the form of cyber-attacks, like the attempt to harm several Israeli water supply systems in April 2020. This comes in addition to Hezbollah's arsenal of more than 100,000 rockets, drones, and other advanced weaponry, and its intention to carry out an offensive maneuver inside Israel. Hezbollah's intentions have become more concrete, despite Israel destroying its assault tunnels, based on the experience its activists gained from fighting in Syria and on a show of feasibility by cutting the security fence in three different locations simultaneously in April.

The possibility of entering negotiations with the U.S. on a new nuclear agreement from the point of weakness in which the regime currently finds itself is not on the agenda at this point. The regime will do its best to wait until after the American presidential elections, hoping for former Vice President Joe Biden to win and reenter the JCPOA. That way, Iran would again have a safe path toward a large arsenal of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles on which to mount them. Yet if it becomes clear to the regime that all other avenues of action have failed and public anger threatens to explode, it may have no choice but to consider even the negotiation option.

■ *Closer to Home*

The Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip have thus far handled the disease with great success and prevented its spread in the



Police check point at Passover evening due to Israeli government regulation in Haifa, Israel. (Photo: StockStudio Aerials)

territories they control. Both have enjoyed vast Israeli support in their struggle against Covid-19 and its economic repercussions. Some terror attacks were conducted but in general relative calm has prevailed. In spite of generous Israeli assistance (including a loan of \$230 million), the PA and Hamas have kept spreading libels against Israel and gone on with their legal and political activities against it, including their complaint at the International Criminal Court (ICC).

In the meantime, Israel has managed at long last to form a unity government that is determined to extend its sovereignty over parts of Judea and Samaria and the Jordan valley in accordance with the U.S. peace plan if the administration agrees to the details. The Palestinians are focusing their efforts on pressuring Israel and the U.S. to refrain from implementing this step and on preparation for an escalation including diplomatic, legal and economic measures, riots and terror attacks, including launching rockets if Israel goes ahead. Palestinian moves are supposed to be accompanied by Jordanian steps and a negative reaction from the European community.

Preparation for the extension of sovereignty has brought the Palestinian issue back to the Arab agenda, but throughout the coronavirus crisis, relations between Israel and the pragmatic Arab states have kept improving. The first direct flights from the UAE to Israel, the first Israeli flight to Argentina over Sudan, and the new attitude toward Israel expressed on social media and in a Saudi Arabian Ramadan television series attest to this reality.

■ Responding to the Crisis

The enormous economic damage and the blow to the idea of globalization as an organizing principle of the international system has deepened the responsibility of each country to deal with the virus and later with the need for economic revival by itself. It likely will take time, but in the meantime the situation proved again how deceptive the term “the Arab world” can be. The economic recession, the potential for growing tension between the U.S. and China and the impact of the results of the U.S. elections may affect the stability of some of the states of the region and affect Israel’s national security interests both

directly and indirectly.

The tension between the need to invest in the military or in health care to guarantee national security and the international economic crisis may put pressure on the military budget and affect Israel’s ability to implement long-term military buildup plans.

On the other hand, the Covid-19 crisis serves also as an opportunity for further improving the relations between Israel and its neighbors, based – among other components – on Israel’s ability to assist them in the medical domain. If Israel manages to contribute to the advancement of responses to the virus and to thereby expedite its contribution as a center of scientific research to the security of the entire world it may ease the normalization of its relations with its Arab neighbors.

BG YOSSI KUPERWASSER, IDF (Res.) is director of the Project on Regional Middle East Developments at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and the former head of the IDF Military Intelligence Research Division and director general of the Strategic Affairs Ministry.

Egypt's Struggle to Coexist with COVID-19

by OFIR WINTER and TZVI LEV

The crisis caused by the coronavirus presents Egypt with a slew of challenges: its large densely packed population; an economy exposed to global shockwaves; and a fragile health system. With the number of infections skyrocketing, the pandemic might exacerbate Egypt's financial struggles and endanger its political stability. Those most vulnerable to the virus' economic effects are the millions of day laborers who lack social benefits and are likely to slide rapidly into unemployment and poverty. As such, the benchmark for the Egyptian government in dealing with the crisis is its ability to formulate a plan that balances between the need for social distancing to curb infection and the economic constraints that demand a return to routine as quickly as possible. Despite three months of economic shutdown and social distancing restrictions, Egypt does not appear to be succeeding in its battle against the coronavirus. The number of patients is rising rapidly, surpassing 50,000 infected and 2,000 total fatalities by the end of June.

A major challenge facing Egyptian authorities is the relatively low rate of testing; by the beginning of May only about 105,000 had been tested, at a rate of about 2,000 per day. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Egypt had a stockpile of about 200,000 tests at the beginning of the crisis but has used half of its total capacity and is reportedly testing a maximum of only 30,000 people a week. Egypt's younger population works in its favor, with only 4.6 million of its approximately 100 million citizens over the age of 65.

It's important to highlight the questions regarding the veracity of Egypt's coronavirus data. The international media has cited estimates that the actual extent of COVID-19 is far higher than reported, while Egypt's Minister of Higher Education, Khaled Abdel Ghafar, estimated in early June that the true number may be as high as 117,000 COVID-19 cases. While the official message from Egypt is that the outbreak is still under control, other reports claim that the Egyptian health system is no longer able to cope with the large extra burden and may find itself in danger of total collapse.

Ahmed al-Sobky, who heads the Egyptian General Authority for Health Care, announced in the beginning of May that hospitals had reached maxi-

average of 1.8. The shortage of medical personnel compounds the difficulty of preventing contagion in a population of 100 million people living in overcrowded conditions.

As the battle against the worldwide pandemic continues doctors and medical staff are protesting the dangerous conditions they are forced to face as a result of an insufficient supply of protective gear. Hundreds of medical staff have already been infected, with dozens of deaths, while doctors have taken to social media to complain of Egypt's "inaction and negligence to protect them." Particularly enraging to doctors is the failure to provide treatment facilities to infected medical personnel, and the Health Ministry's refusal to test medical staff who had been in contact with

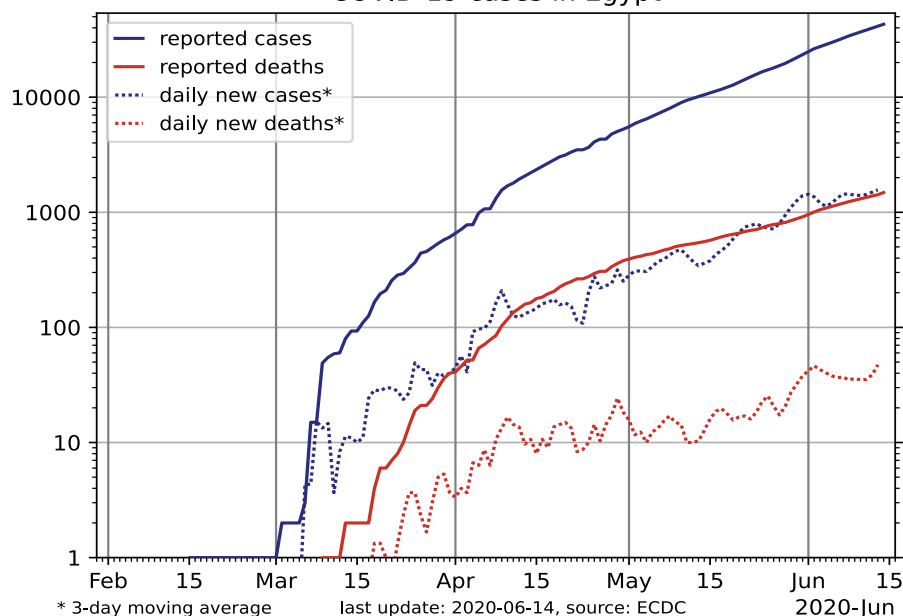
Even in normal times, hospitals suffer from a lack of intensive care beds and ventilators, and substandard sanitary conditions make it difficult to protect medical staff and patients from the spread of the virus.

mum capacity, with the Egyptian Medical Syndicate warning of "a catastrophe affecting the entire country" calling for a full lockdown. Even in normal times, hospitals suffer from a lack of intensive care beds and ventilators, and substandard sanitary conditions make it difficult to protect medical staff and patients from the spread of the virus. Currently, Egypt has only 1.2 doctors for every 1,000 people, significantly fewer than the OECD average of 3.4 and the global

confirmed cases. While promising to address the issue, Egypt's Health Ministry disputes the Syndicate's numbers regarding the medical staff who have been infected.

The Egyptian Ministry of Health has established a situation room to coordinate the response to the outbreak along with a call center to provide citizens with information. Three hundred seventy-six hospitals throughout the country, with over 90,000 beds, have been

COVID-19 cases in Egypt



designated for diagnosing and quarantining coronavirus patients. In addition, 1,000 ambulances have been allocated and medical centers were equipped to receive thousands of cases. Meanwhile, hospital physicians have been afforded better employment terms, with their numbers boosted by retired doctors and medical lecturers and students. In an attempt to keep hospitals from being overwhelmed, the Health Ministry Authorities launched an effort promoting local manufacture of ventilators to add to the existing 5,000. Meanwhile, patients in mild condition are being diverted from hospitals and sent to alternative facilities requisitioned for medical purposes or to their homes.

■ Partial Social Distancing

Starting in mid-March, Egypt's strategy to reduce contagion revolved around partial social distancing. Measures implemented included a nighttime curfew, shuttering entertainment centers and restaurants, a ban on smoking hookahs in public areas, the suspension of flights, quarantine of those returning from overseas, closure of schools and universities, a ban on prayers in mosques and churches, restrictions on governmental activity, promotion of

working from home, reduced crowding on public transportation, bans on gatherings, and closure of sports and youth clubs. The regulations initially led to a 35-50 percent decrease in traffic in public places, reflecting both the partial response by the public, and the government's decision to refrain from harsher steps that the Egyptian economy would be unable to withstand.

However, the public's commitment to the draconian measures appears to be rapidly fading. Reports speak of the public openly flouting the health guidelines, with hundreds of thousands of people remaining outside after curfew during the month of Ramadan. According to Egyptian officials, the disregard for social distancing lies behind the country's rapid infection rate, pointing to data showing just an 11 percent decrease in frequenting of markets.

Despite the consistent rise in infection rates and fatalities, the Egyptian government gradually began to roll back some of the lockdown restrictions following the Eid al-Fitr festival. In mid-May, the Health Ministry unveiled its plan to return the country to normal in three phases over 90 days. The new measures include permitting hotels to operate at 25% capacity (50% by

June) for domestic tourism, along with courts, real estate registries, shortening curfews, and the resumption of flights. The first phase includes heavy restrictions on hotels and other businesses and is slated to continue until the country's total number of coronavirus cases drops for two consecutive weeks. The second phase would last for 28 days before transitioning into the final stage that would remain in place until the WHO lowers the total risk level from COVID-19.

Observers explain the discrepancy between Egypt's push to remove restrictions and the negative public health situations as a desire to mitigate the economic fallout. The Health Ministry has spoken of Egypt's need to "coexist with the coronavirus" and refused to recommend extending the lockdown even as new cases passed its self-declared peak of 500. Yet, the increasing infection numbers have drawn harsh public and governmental criticism on the Health Ministry, with calls to review the original plan.

For the Egyptian government, the pandemic presents a challenge but also an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and control, and to prove the necessity of state authorities as the responsible address during a crisis. Leading the operation is the military, which has embarked on a campaign under the name: "The Egyptian Armed Forces – the Protection and Support," through which they perform a range of tasks, including: monitoring and maintaining border security, disinfecting roads and public buildings, operating military hospitals, assisting the police in maintaining public order and enforcing social distancing, preparing emergency stocks of food, and producing and supplying protective masks for free distribution to the population. While the Health Ministry and the military stand at the forefront of the battlefield against the pandemic, President Abd al-Fattah el-Sisi appears to be attempting to keep a safe distance from the daily management of the crisis.

■ **Economic Threat**

The pandemic has struck at the economic progress achieved by Egypt in recent years, reflected in encouraging growth rates and lower unemployment and inflation. Specifically, the coronavirus has now weakened major pillars of the economy. Millions of Egyptians who work abroad (mostly in the Gulf states) remitted some \$29 billion to Egypt in 2019, but many have been fired or had their wages cut and tens of thousands have already returned to their home country; the tourism industry has also been particularly hard hit, having only recently recovered from the turmoil of the last decade. The sector, which saw profits of \$12.4 billion, accounted for about 15 percent of GDP, while providing some four million jobs (12.6 percent of the workforce). The aviation industry lost 2.5 billion Egyptian pounds (EGP) in March alone; traffic along the Suez Canal plummeted due to the recession in global trade and the plunge in global oil prices, and forced Egypt to announce large discounts on transit fees. Another point of concern is Egypt's plummeting foreign currency reserves, which fell from \$45 billion in February to \$37 billion two months later, with some ratings agencies predicting that it may reach \$31 billion by the end of the year.

A major question is the potential impact the economic downturn will have on Egypt's political stability. On the one hand, recent economic reforms have increased Egypt's flexibility in responding to the health crisis and stabilized its macroeconomic position. On the other hand, the reforms included the elimination of subsidies and thus increased the poverty rate to 32.5 percent, and intensified the vulnerability of the middle to low socioeconomic class. According to International Food Policy Research Institute estimates, the crisis will cause a reduction in GDP of 0.7-0.8 percent each month, and cut average household income by about 10 percent. The Egyptian Center for Economic Studies estimates that the crisis will cause 12 percent of already-poor

people to sink deeper into extreme poverty and increase the overall poverty rate to 44.4 percent. In 2020, according to the International Monetary Fund, growth in Egypt will drop to 2 percent (down from the expected 5.7).

The most vulnerable sector is the 12-14 million irregular day laborers, who lack permanent employment and social benefits. Most of them belong to the middle to lower class, and as their distress mounts, there will be greater potential for social unrest and protests. In order to improve their situation, the government has authorized a special grant of 500 EGP per month for three months, but it will be difficult to bear such a burden beyond that.

will be funded by postponing the launch of national projects, including the move of government offices to the new administrative capital. In addition, government ministers and members of parliament are being asked to donate part of their salary to the national fund, "Tahya Misr."

Finally, Egypt appealed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which approved a \$2.8 billion loan in early May and a one-year \$5.2 billion financing package in early June to help the country alleviate the economic impact of the pandemic. The Bank of Egypt also continued its policy of quantitative easing, cutting interest rates by 3 percent and selling almost \$100 billion in debt.

A major question is the potential impact the economic downturn will have on Egypt's political stability.

Charity organizations are also gearing up to provide help for those struggling, while food chains are selling basic necessities at subsidized prices. In a sign of the heavy economic toll caused by the pandemic, the Egyptian Food Bank announced that 15 million families have requested assistance, a 300 percent increase from previous years. The cost of living is expected to rise even more, increasing the burden on working-class Egyptians. In April, the IMF predicted that consumer prices would rise 5.9 percent by next January and 8.2 percent in 2021.

The Egyptian government has allocated 100 billion EGP (about \$6.4 billion) to deal with the crisis, and has invested 20 billion EGP to stem the collapse of the stock exchange. Some of these moves are designed to assist businesspeople and companies in the private sector, and include reduction of interest rates and elimination of bank commissions, relief on taxation and debt repayments, a reduction in the price of electricity and gas for industry, and support for hotels. Part of the budget

■ **Conclusion**

In Egypt, even more so than in affluent Western nations, economic considerations play a vital role in any plans for a return to routine. The choice is between difficult alternatives: business people are calling for a renewal of economic activity even at the cost of higher morbidity rates in order to avert economic collapse in the form of bankruptcies, mass hunger, and anarchy; medical experts warn that containing the spread of the virus mandates additional economic victims, and perhaps even a complete lockdown for a limited period. At present, although there is no sign that the infection curve is flattening, the government is prioritizing resumption of economic activity under increased enforcement of the required health safety measures.

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China's Censorship, Propaganda & Disinformation

by **DANIEL BLUMENTHAL** and **LINDA ZHANG**

Disinformation, censorship, and propaganda are pillars of the Chinese Communist Party's grand strategy. CCP General-Secretary Xi Jinping has both added ballast to these capabilities as well as relied upon them even more to further his aims. Most recently, the Chinese Communist Party response to the COVID-19 pandemic shows us that disinformation, censorship, and propaganda are "features," not "bugs," of the CCP's system of government. A war on the truth is a central pillar of the CCP's strategy for survival.

■ *The Bureaucracy*

In February 2016 on a tour of Chinese media outlets, Xi announced "all the work by the party's media must reflect the party's will, safeguard the party's authority, and safeguard the party's unity." The job of Chinese media is not to inform the public and search for the truth. Rather, it is to "report" stories favorable to Xi and the party and censor those that are not.

The CCP has constructed a massive propaganda and censorship apparatus: it considers the truth to be dangerous. It does not want its citizens to know the extent of its corruption, its repression, its mismanagement of the economy, and of crises such as the current virus, the bird flu in 1997 and SARS in 2003. The below sample of a few organizations tasked with censorship and propaganda hints at how prominent a place these efforts hold in China's foreign and domestic policy:

1. **The General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP)** – GAPP drafts and enforces restraint regulations;
2. **State Administration of Radio,**

Film, and Television (SARFT) – SARFT controls the content on radio, film, and TV aired in China;

3. **Ministry for Information Industry (MII)** – MII regulates the Chinese telecommunication, software industries, and Internet related services;

4. **State Council Information Office (SCIO)** – SCIO promotes Chinese media to a global audience and is also responsible for restricting news that is posted on the Internet;

5. **Central Propaganda Department (CPD)** – CPD is the Party organ that works with GAPP and SARFT to monitor content;

6. **Ministry of Public Security (MPS)** – MPS monitors and filters the Internet and punishes and detains those who speak out;

7. **General Administration for Customs** – Customs collects books, videos, and other information that China does not want inside its borders; and

8. **State Secrecy Bureau (SSB)** – SSB enforces state secrecy laws, which are often used to punish individuals who write undesirable content.

■ *'Controlling' the Internet*

There are two major Internet censorship programs: The "Great Firewall" and the "Golden Shield" program. Both rapidly censor internet content produced within the People's Republic of China (PRC.) The PRC also seeks to assert new international legal prerogatives in the information domain, such as "internet sovereignty," a concept that would give countries the right to control their domestic internet space, and "data sovereignty,"

the idea that data is subject to the laws of the country where it was collected.

The PRC has proposed an International Code of Conduct on Information Security (with the support of the Russian Federation) to the United Nations that would put states in control of the Internet. These changes would not only significantly enhance the effectiveness of PRC control of the Internet, but also change the international rules governing it.

■ *CCP and the Media*

Chinese media portray specific criticisms the West has made against China, such as on human rights issues, as being "anti-China," as if a story about the party's human rights abuses is an affront to all Chinese people. Recently, the Chinese propaganda machine has started manipulating Western sensibilities by calling any criticism of Chinese government actions "racist" against all Chinese. The goal is clear: to shut down such criticism.

Chinese media have long deliberately misrepresented events to attack the country's perceived enemies. For example, during the 2008 Olympic Torch Relay, CCTV described all protestors in the West as "Tibetan separatists and members of other anti-China groups" who "repeatedly assaulted" torchbearers. This was simply not true. Almost all such protests were peaceful and joined by many different ethnic groups in the United States and other countries. The cause of religious and cultural freedom in Tibet has long been championed in the West.

More recently, China has accused the United States of "sinister intentions" after Congress passed the Hong Kong

Human Rights and Democracy Act of 2019. Xinhua state news agency published a statement from the Hong Kong Liaison Office accusing Washington of supporting violence and instability. The truth is that Congress cares about the basic rights of Hong Kongers and about the CCP upholding its obligations. The CCP wants its people and targeted groups around the world to think that Hong Kong (like Taiwan) is simply an internal Chinese issue and that America acts imperialistically and with an unrelenting anti-Chinese bias.

The Chinese government monitors, harasses, and bans Western journalists who publish content portraying China in a “negative” light. Examples include:

1. China kicked three *Wall Street Journal* reporters out of the country after *The Journal* published an Op-Ed about China that spoke the truth about the risks China’s system of government poses to the world;

2. China blocked access to *The New York Times* website after *The Times* published an article on party official Wen Jiabao’s family wealth in 2012;

3. Bloomberg News self-censored an investigative report on the wealth of “Princeling” families to protect their journalists (or their bottom line); and

4. The arrest of Jimmy Lai, the founder of *Apple Daily* and a Hong Kong media mogul, ostensibly for participating in an illegal assembly during the 2017 anti-government protests. This was meant to silence him (he too had just written a critical Op-Ed in *The Wall Street Journal*) and his own paper as well as punish him for supporting pro-democracy movements.

The CCP has always used access to China as a key point of leverage to shape perceptions. For years before these arrests, China would blacklist scholars and analysts from entering the country if they were deemed to be “anti-China.” The CCP also uses physical intimidation to enforce censorship. Fifty-seven percent of respondents of a Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China survey reported some form of

interference, harassment, or violence while attempting to report in China, and eight percent have reported manhandling or use of physical force. Twenty-six percent of respondents reported that Chinese government officials have harassed, detained, questioned, or punished their sources.

■ **Going After American Popular Culture**

Not only does China target journalists and media in its territory, but the regime also has started to influence pop cul-

ownership rights, merchandising, and individual player sponsorship. To be sure, the Chinese do not have absolute power in disputes like this. The Chinese people love the “product,” as they do so many American products, and the Chinese censorship apparatus backed off eventually. But still the episode shows the extent of China’s censorship efforts. Indeed, the lure of the China market is the most powerful weapon the Chinese have in their fight to stave off any criticism of the regime’s practices and abuses. The point was made; it is very

Fifty-seven percent of respondents of a Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China survey reported... interference, harassment, or violence... and eight percent reported manhandling or use of physical force..

ture abroad. Beijing knows that its people have great admiration for American sports and pop culture icons. It therefore believes it must control with an extreme intensity what such figures might say. Two examples highlight the level of Chinese interference: Basketball and Hollywood.

The case of the National Basketball Association (NBA) in China is one of China using its market power to make Americans curtail their free speech. It began when Houston Rockets General Manager Daryl Morey tweeted an image that read, “Fight for freedom, stand with Hong Kong.” This was during Hong Kong’s demonstrations over its basic human rights.

The Chinese response was fast and furious: Chinese tech giant Tencent and state broadcaster CCTV suspended broadcasts of Rockets games, while other sponsors suspended relations with the team. Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta publicly rebuked his general manager. All-Star James Harden apologized for Morey’s tweet. The NBA released a statement in Mandarin expressing disappointment in Morey.

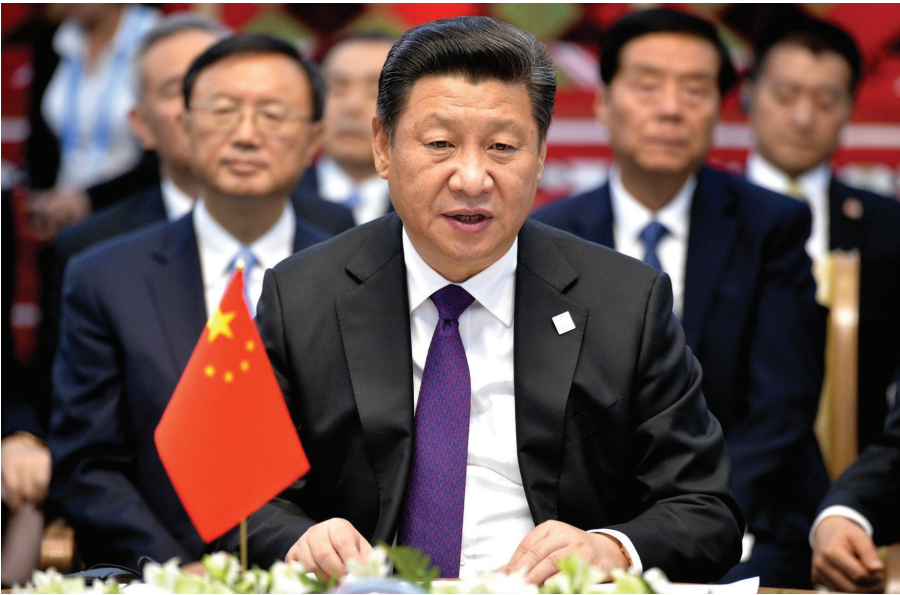
Like many American businesses, the NBA is making billions of dollars in the China market, on viewership, digital

unlikely that NBA stars or management will criticize China in the future.

Chinese censorship has also hit the heart of American entertainment in Hollywood. Americans have likely noticed the absence of Chinese villains or “bad guys” in American movies. No other country including our own is spared negative portrayals in film or television. Since China agreed to open its market to foreign films in 2012, Hollywood has had to make concessions to its Chinese censors. Producers and directors must coordinate with the Chinese government or lose access to the Chinese market. Films with Chinese characters portrayed poorly, such as Christopher Nolan’s “Dark Knight,” are not even submitted for approval in China.

As the writer Martha Bayles has chronicled, China believes that films are also a tool of the state and their content should align with the CCP’s ideology. The forthcoming *Top Gun: Maverick* – “a sequel financed in part by the Chinese firm Tencent—omitted the Japanese and Taiwanese flags from Tom Cruise’s jacket...”

According to Bayles, in addition to the many censorship and propaganda organizations mentioned above, films now



Chinese President Xi Jinping (Photo: kremlin.ru)

also have to pass muster with the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, the Ministry of Public Security, the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and numerous other bureaucratic entities.

China also has started to make blockbusters for its domestic market. Movies made for the China market are assertive in their portrayal of China as brave and righteous and America as weak and decadent.

America's pop culture is one of its competitive advantages, enjoyed by billions across the globe. When repressed populations really begin to ask why America is so dominant in entertainment, they find the answer to be its freedom – its free markets, its innovative and creative culture. If China can co-opt and silence cultural icons, people will lose faith in the power of these ideas.

■ Foreign Disinformation

A key effort of Chinese grand strategy is to break U.S. alliances. Chinese state media consistently attacks American allies as being economically dependent on the United States and highlights fragility in the relationships. Japan is a frequent target. *China Daily* has also described Britain as “currying favor” with the United States

because it has no choice after it leaves the European Union. Other themes include the loss of sovereignty to America and economic dependency on the United States. These themes come up in both Chinese and English-language articles and Op-Eds in media outlets such as China.com, Xinhua, *China Daily*, and *Global Times*, and are shared on social media.

■ COVID-19 pandemic

We know that COVID-19 is far more widespread than it otherwise would have been as a result of China's censorship. We know that Li Wenliang, Xu Zhangrun, Chen Qiushi, Fang Bin, and countless other doctors, journalists, and activists who spoke out and tried to tell the truth about the seriousness of the virus and inept response were silenced, arrested and intimidated.

The CCP also attempted to censor critical early research on the virus. On January 1, after labs returned the first batches of genome sequence results to health authorities, the Hubei Provincial Health Commission ordered at least one company to stop testing, stop releasing test results, and destroy existing samples of the coronavirus. Two days later, China's National Health Commission ordered all institutions to stop publishing on the new coronavirus and ordered

coronavirus samples to be either transferred to designated labs or destroyed. The laboratory that first sequenced the COVID-19 genome was closed for “rectification” on January 12, the day after the team published its genome sequence results on open platforms.

Finally, authorities are continuing their usual practice of shutting down any criticism or negative portrayals of the government. Censors closed down WeChat groups and social media discourse, punished individuals, and removed articles that portray the government response in a negative way. The Chinese government censored Fang Fang, an award-winning writer based in Wuhan, who blogged a diary account of her experience during the lockdown. Her writing described deserted landscapes, overcrowding of hospitals, mask shortages, and government incompetence. The state-run press criticized her diary as “biased and only exposes the dark side in Wuhan.”

Not only did the CCP silence the truth, it also pushed false narratives about an influenza epidemic in the United States, criticized the United States for “[creating] chaos and [spreading] fear with travel restrictions,” and lied about hospital construction. Zhao Lijian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, promoted a conspiracy theory that the U.S. Army brought the coronavirus to Wuhan. The United States wasn't the only country the CCP falsely accused of starting the virus. A *Weibo* post claiming that the coronavirus was in Italy in late November, before the outbreak in Wuhan, went viral and reached over 490 million views as of March 24. The intent of this disinformation was not necessarily to make people believe in a particular story, but to sow general discord around discussions about the origins of the virus. This indicates an increasing sophistication in the CCP's disinformation techniques.

■ What to Do?

Strategic approaches to China's mass use of censorship, propaganda, and disinformation can be broken up into two

categories: China's targeting of its own people and China's external efforts. There are offensive and defensive measures we can take. Remember, the CCP relies upon lies to stay in power.

First, the United States should substantially ramp up its own Chinese-language efforts (we have the broadcasting institutions already) to tell the truth to the Chinese people about how they are governed. The truth should be revealed about public health, the environment, corruption, and injustice. We should place ourselves on the side of the Chinese people and help them discover the truth that could better their lives. Obviously, Xi's regime will try to block all such efforts. But multimedia campaigns in Chinese make their way into China. Censorship is a cat and mouse game, and the regime needs to spend ever-greater resources to stop its people from learning the truth. When the United States Information Agency (USIA) operated, we had

countries we have deemed rivals or enemies in our national security documents.

Third, we should set up a center for excellence in combatting disinformation in Taiwan. Taipei faced down an onslaught during its past election. Many countries, including our own, can learn from it. And Taiwan is a Mandarin-speaking country that knows what messages work in Chinese and in Chinese culture.

Fourth, congressional and administration leaders can do a better job in our own country explaining the nature of Chinese human rights abuses and censorship. Pressure should be put on U.S. entertainment figures who bend to CCP dictates – they will likely face a backlash among American followers and customers if the public is more informed about China's abuses.

Fifth, Congress can continue to help set industry standards and best practices that guide social media com-

For the CCP, the truth is dangerous. The party cannot allow its citizens to know that it makes grievous mistakes.

career paths for those who wanted to be "information officers" or even "information warriors." We need that again.

The State Department's Global Engagement Center (GEC) can fill this gap if properly funded and staffed with Mandarin-speakers. Such efforts should tell America's story in Chinese. Public diplomacy together with multimedia campaigns should explain and persuade – we need to tell the story of why Americans support basic democratic values in Hong Kong and Taiwan and how we would do so in China as well. We need not be defensive about our foreign policy.

Second, we should pass proposed legislation enabling the United States to do a better job of highlighting the origin of political ads, particularly from foreign sources. We also should disclose the origin of content of social and other media from

panies in information sharing with each other and with the private and public sectors. This should include disclosing automated accounts, providing the locational origin of content, and providing users with more context when they see certain content.

Sixth, the administration should be encouraged to accelerate and broaden efforts to designate Chinese state controlled media companies as foreign agents who need to register as such, and to make sure that "journalists" working for such entities are not credentialed as journalists. Congress could help by publishing and disseminating easily digestible information on China's mass censorship and media control system. The American people should know exactly where their information on China is coming from and who is paying for it.

■ Conclusion

For the CCP, the truth is dangerous. The party cannot allow its citizens to know that it makes grievous mistakes that lead to sickness and death within China, that freedom and democracy work in Taiwan and in the West, that Hong Kongers are demanding their basic freedoms, that the United States is a force for good in the world.

Beijing cannot admit any failures of governance, from mismanagement of the viral outbreaks to a starkly slowing economy. The CCP has been struggling for legitimacy and a *raison d'être* since it began allowing markets to function (and thus undermined Maoism) and certainly since its violent crackdown on protestors in Tiananmen Square in 1989. It now coerces its people to accept its legitimacy and needs to protect itself in a web of lies. And, since President Xi has also set very ambitious geopolitical goals for his country to rejuvenate and return to its "rightful" place as the Middle Kingdom, CCP propaganda targets the United States. It does so by its influence over movies in which the United States is portrayed as declining and decadent and in its media portrayal of America as greedy and overbearing.

While the CCP has a vast apparatus to control information, arguably its most powerful tool is its market size. The economy may be slowing but the consumer market is still very large. The CCP will threaten U.S. media and entertainment companies with loss of market and financing if they deviate from the CCP party line. We need to break down and publicize as much as possible the specific entities that propagate the CCP's ideological line and stop treating Chinese "media" as anything but foreign agents.

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Lebanon: Hezbollah Takes Over Central Bank and Telecoms

by HANIN GHADDAR

[Ed Note: The coronavirus pandemic has provided an excuse for some governments to do what they had long wanted to do. In Lebanon, Beirut banned anti-corruption demonstrations by thousands of young Lebanese, including Shiites in the south. The country's leaders are looking for an excuse to seize control of additional sectors and replace the financial system with their own corrupt, cash-based economy.]

As Lebanese protestors return to the streets, another conflict is being waged in the background—a financial battle between Hezbollah and Banque du Liban, the country's central bank. On April 30, the pro-Hezbollah cabinet announced that it would be seeking billions of dollars in assistance from the IMF as part of a wider economic “rescue plan.” At the same time, however, the group has been attempting to establish full control over the country's remaining hard currency, using the financial crisis to strengthen its parallel economy at a time when Lebanese banks are suffering a serious currency shortage.

■ The Stakes

For years now, many ordinary economic transactions in Lebanon have been conducted in U.S. dollars. Recently, local banks stopped providing dollars to depositors after months of setting withdrawal limits; the central bank then ordered lenders to allow withdrawals from foreign currency accounts in Lebanese pounds only. But to stop the pound's slide on the parallel market, the central bank set a cap of 3,200 pounds to the dollar for money exchange firms,

according to Reuters and other media outlets. Despite these measures, the currency continued its freefall, selling as low as 4,000 pounds to the dollar—far less than the fixed peg of 1,500 pounds to the dollar that had been in place for decades. Apparently, money exchangers had been selling dollars at prices higher than the one specified by the central bank. Reuters reported that several of these dealers were arrested on April 27 for violating the cap; in response, exchange firms decided to shut down until the dealers were released.

The clash is part of a wider war between Hezbollah, which supports the parallel economy of exchangers, and Riad Salameh, the central bank governor who supports the banking sector. The winning camp will likely gain full control over Lebanon's hard currency and financial system.

■ Hezbollah's Plan Unfolds

The first signs of this struggle were seen in early April when Hezbollah tried to appoint some of its allies to key financial posts: namely, four open vice governor positions at the central bank, and top spots on the Banking Control Commission, which oversees the daily operations of private lenders. Hezbollah's camp already holds the Finance Ministry and Interior Ministry, so infiltrating these banking institutions would strengthen its financial position. Yet the plan was disrupted when former prime minister Saad Hariri—apparently under pressure from new U.S. ambassador Dorothy Shea—threatened to pull his allies from parliament if the cabinet approved the appointments.

Since then, Hezbollah has orchestrated a public campaign against Salameh, accusing him of stealing money and protecting corrupt political elites. Likewise, Prime Minister Hassan Diab publicly blamed Salameh for the deteriorating economic conditions. “There are gaps in the central bank's performance, strategies, clarity, and monetary policy, and [its] losses have reached USD 7 billion this year,” he stated in an April 24 speech, adding that the bank “is either incapable, absent, or directly inciting this dramatic depreciation.” Free Patriotic Movement leader Gebran Bassil reportedly joined the chorus, blaming Salameh for the loss of currency reserves and urging the state to “correct” these mistakes. And according to Reuters, deputy Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem “criticised the central bank over the pound's drop,” declaring that Salameh “was partly responsible” and that an “appropriate decision” must be made to put the “country's interest ahead of all else.”

Both the anti-Salameh campaign and the government's new request for an IMF bailout are richly ironic given that the pro-Hezbollah cabinet has done nothing to weed out corruption or implement urgently needed reforms itself. Even so, Hezbollah will likely double down on its rhetoric against the banks as the poverty-stricken populace commences another wave of mass protest.

■ What Does Hezbollah Need?

The group is well aware that Salameh has been implementing the financial policies of consecutive governments since he was first appointed to head the central bank in 1993. In that capacity,

he has facilitated the transfer of private bank funds to each of these governments and, by extension, to the corrupt political elite they represent—a tactic that went largely unchallenged for years until all of the depositors' money was squandered. Hezbollah and its allies are part of this elite and share much of the blame, despite their attempts to deflect it.

What the group wants now is to replace the teetering financial and banking system with its own parallel system based on a cash economy. That would enable Hezbollah to control all of the cash currently in the hands of the Lebanese people, estimated at 6 billion U.S. dollars plus 7 billion Lebanese pounds. It would also help the group become Lebanon's main importer of goods, mostly from Iran and Syria.

Moreover, Hezbollah is well aware that the central bank controls substantial assets besides currency. The bank still owns two potentially lucrative companies (Middle East Airlines and Casino Du Liban) and vast amounts of land. It also controls the country's foreign exchange reserves, including the \$13 billion in gold stored at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. The idea of selling this gold has been anathema in Lebanon for decades, but it has resurfaced amid the country's currency crisis and looming default on \$33 billion in foreign debt. If the central bank sells the gold, that would obviously create enormous opportunities to divert some of the money to Hezbollah and the wider elite.

The telecom sector has been another lucrative target for the group. Now that Hezbollah controls the Ministry of Telecommunications, it has placed management of the sector under direct ministry control, ousting the two private companies (Alpha and Touch) that once filled that role on the state's behalf. Annual profits from this sector could total around \$1 billion, making it a particularly valuable prize. Under the watchful eye of Hezbollah official Hussein Hajj Hassan, head of the Parliamentary Committee for Information and Communications, the group is reportedly

preparing a comprehensive state telecommunications strategy that aligns with its goals.

■ Policy Recommendations

Lebanon's entire system, including its banking sector, is in serious need of fundamental reforms, many of which would need to be implemented before—not after—the international community offers a proper bailout. Short of these reforms, true renovation will be impossible unless the system collapses.

Even so, some useful measures can be adopted in the interim to contain Hezbollah's financial takeover plans and inform the narrative surrounding the latest wave of protests. Hezbollah and its allies have been taking advantage of public anger to power their campaign against the banks, and this campaign needs to be exposed. While maintaining pressure on the central bank is important, Lebanon's corrupt

people's demands; reminding protestors that they should hold the entire political elite responsible for corruption, not just the banks; and reminding the banks that caving to Hezbollah's demands will force the international financial system to cut them off. Lebanese banks have generally done a good job of respecting U.S. restrictions on barring Hezbollah-linked individuals and institutions from accessing U.S. dollars. But they may be tempted to give in if the group continues its anti-bank rhetoric or resorts to violence as it has done in the past (e.g., detonating explosives in front of Blom Bank's Beirut headquarters in 2016.)

• **Build communication channels with the street.** U.S. and international officials need to start talking to protestors and political activists. When Lebanon's system eventually falls apart—as now seems inevitable—a new political class might take the fore. Hezbollah is

Lebanon's entire system, including its banking sector, is in serious need of fundamental reforms...

elite and Hezbollah's allies should not be allowed to avoid blame for the financial crash. To strike this balance, the United States and the wider international community should take three crucial steps:

• **Counter Hezbollah's rhetoric against the banks.** This means exposing its behind-the-scenes plans to replace the banking sector and explaining why its parallel economy cannot solve Lebanon's crisis. A strategic communication strategy would help in this regard, including outreach to certain independent Lebanese media outlets.

• **Issue new sanctions against a corrupt, high-profile Hezbollah political ally.** Targeting such a figure (e.g., an official or businessperson affiliated with the Free Patriotic Movement or Amal) would serve multiple purposes: sending a message of support for the

already assembling its own group of activists to fill this void, so Washington and its allies would be wise to establish ties with alternative leaders, and sooner rather than later.

The instinct among European governments will be to send financial assistance to Lebanon as soon as possible in order to maintain stability during the coronavirus pandemic. Without serious reforms, however, any such assistance would quickly be engorged by Hezbollah and the rest of the corruption machine. For the Lebanese people who have just gone back into the streets despite the risks of COVID-19, political reform is clearly more important than stability.

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“The President Needs Help”

review by SHOSHANA BRYEN

I admit it. I read Appendix II first, and I’m pretty sure you will too.

When the book is subtitled “Rivalries in the White House from Truman to Trump” and the Appendix is called “White House Nicknames,” you have to go there. You will be rewarded. Hamas, Yoda, Keyser Soze, Nurse Ratched, Fat Kraut, and GK (for Grassy Knoll) all make an appearance. Cousin Cheap, the Garbage Man, Huckleberry Capone, and Meatball Mind, too.

But so much for cheap laughs.

Fight House, by presidential historian, analyst and bestselling author Tevi Troy, is a serious – OK, mostly serious – consideration of how presidents have managed their staffs and staff rivalries since the Roosevelt administration.

Troy has extensive White House experience, having served in several high-level positions, culminating in a stint as Deputy Assistant and then Acting Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy. Experience is good, but what Troy really brings to the table is a readable perspective on the presidency. With a Ph.D. in American Civilization, his 2013 book *What Jefferson Read, Ike Watched and Obama Tweeted: 200 Years of Popular Culture in the White House* was a hit – but President Trump’s use of twitter may require a sequel. *Shall We Wake the President* was reviewed in *inFOCUS* in 2016, and received a new round of publicity in the current pandemic – what would Woodrow Wilson have done? Lincoln? George W? Wouldn’t you like to know? Troy is an author who gets inside his subjects and makes them accessible to those of us who don’t and won’t have access.

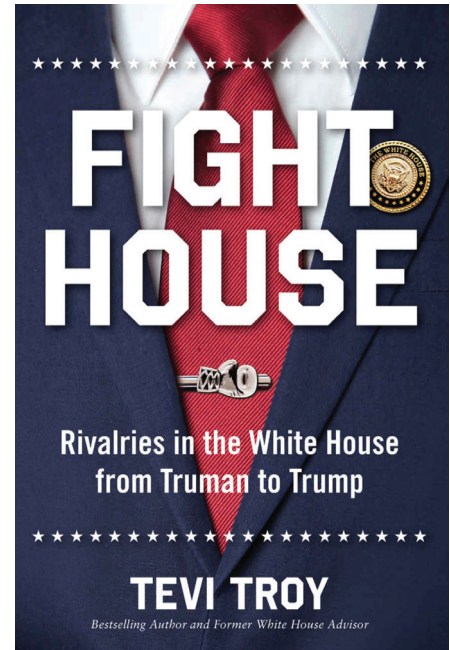
It is safe to say that no one today has an adult recollection of the period before World War II, the last time in which the federal government was small

and limited largely to its constitutional duties. FDR, helped along by the Great Depression, had visions of government as an enormous and powerful force. His vision has been realized in the growth of the Civil Service from 699,000 people in 1940 to 1.8 million in 1960 and the extraordinary growth in spending, aided by the 1913 income tax and augmented by payroll taxes beginning in 1935.

Growth in the White House staff, with its concomitant growth in the (self?) importance of that staff, began incrementally – as growth in Washington always does. In 1936, the Brownlow Committee on Administrative Management was established to help FDR deal with the growing administrative needs engendered by the New Deal. In 1937, the committee concluded, “the President needs help,” suggesting six – just six – executive assistants who would “remain in the background, issue no orders, make no decisions (and) emit no public statements.” They would be, according to the committee, “possessed of high competence” and a “passion for anonymity.”

Anyone who knows anything about government knows that when the idealistic picture met the reality of Washington egos, presidential and otherwise, it was doomed. The White House staff has grown exponentially since the 1930s and acquired more prestige, more responsibility, and ever more ego. This makes the nature of the President and his (so far, only his) willingness to tolerate or even foster dissent and argument within the White House staff and between the staff and the cabinet secretaries a determinant of the success of his policies.

Some Presidents, starting with FDR, encouraged a variety of voices. But Harry Truman, upon arriving in the Oval Office, was horrified by the lack of collegiality among staff members. He forbade



Fight House
by Tevi Troy

infighting. Troy cites historian Alonzo Hamby, “However forced the cordiality may have been between some persons, they all maintained it in their dealings with each other – or found themselves leaving.” At least if they did it in front of Truman.

■ *Clifford, Marshall, and Israel*

Truman did stoke one rivalry – that between Clark Clifford and Secretary of State George Marshall. In advance of the declaration of the independence of Israel in 1948, Truman faced pressure on both sides of the recognition issue. He called on

the feud between Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Special Assistant to the President for Disarmament Harold Stassen was a classic case of a cabinet secretary seeing a White House staff member as an impediment to his own rise.

■ *The Roaring Sixties*

What readers may remember as Camelot in 1960 was actually the beginning of serious change in Washington – the Civil Service had more than doubled since 1940. And Kennedy was a sweeping change from both the Truman and Eisenhower management

Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach wrote, “[Johnson] occasionally acted in an almost childish manner when news he had been planning to announce leaked out.”

Leaking is a subject unto itself and it leaks across the chapters. The point was always to enhance one’s own reputation and to make one’s nemesis look bad. But for decades it was, relatively, a gentleman’s game; now it is murder – Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, the most-read columnists in town, were part of Washington society, not assassins. The transformation in the book, as in Washington, is alarming; Troy makes it scary/fascinating.

■ *Reagan and Beyond*

There is a recurring issue with family as well. Nancy Reagan wasn’t staff, as Bobby Kennedy was, but her clear authority in the White House was another example of what happens when family has to be accounted for. Maneuvering around family, or with family around others, is a whole subset of politics. JFK not only couldn’t ignore Bobby – he made him a cabinet secretary. Reagan not only couldn’t ignore his wife – he didn’t want to. Jimmy Carter took Rose-lynn very seriously. Bill and Hillary.

Somewhere in the Reagan administration, and certainly in the succeeding administrations, the book becomes more personal. Readers will remember those better than FDR, HST, Ike, et. al. And when you remember them, you also remember the personalities. You remember who you liked and why or disliked and why.

James Baker was a master leaker. Novak, wrote, “Nobody in my long experience was more skillful in manipulating reporters than Baker, who devoted the equivalent of one full working day each week to massaging the important news media.” “Massaging” means leaking. Michael Deaver was trusted by both Ronald and Nancy Reagan, an unassailable position – even Baker worked to be on his buddy list – and they were both determined to get rid of Secretary of

... for decades [leaking] was, relatively, a gentleman’s game; now it is murder – Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, the most-read columnists in town, were part of Washington society, not assassins.

Clifford to present the arguments in favor of recognition, Marshall the arguments against. Israel won. Marshall was beyond a sore loser, saying “If the president were to follow Mr. Clifford’s advice and if in the elections I were to vote, I would vote against the president.’ As Clifford recalled, Marshall’s disloyalty to the president ‘was so shocking that it just kind of lay there for fifteen or twenty seconds and nobody moved.” Clifford later wrote about Marshall, “Not only did he never speak to me again after that meeting, but, according to his official biographer, he never again mentioned my name.”

But Truman revered Marshall and so he stayed.

It was during the Truman administration that the line between cabinet officials and White House staff began to blur – proximity to the President having a lot to do with that.

Eisenhower liked military structure and delegating authority to the cabinet. He was the first president with a Chief of Staff and the first with a National Security Advisor. While he prized amicability,

styles, encouraging differences in some areas, and deliberately bringing in staff that did NOT have that “passion for anonymity” that the Brownlow Committee recommended. Feuding was inevitable. Robert F. Kennedy vs. Lyndon Johnson is legendary. Personal – New England royalty vs. Texas cowboy – and political – New England liberal vs. Texas (relative) conservative – it lasted into the Johnson administration. On the other hand, Kennedy’s “Irish Mafia” and the “Intellectuals,” contrary to expectation, did not feud. Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. and Theodore Sorenson, however, did – and each wrote a book in 1965 about their experiences.

The descriptions of Lyndon Johnson could easily be mistaken for those of Donald Trump and Johnson’s use of the telephone foreshadows Trump’s twitter. Both are described as prodigious workers and hard drivers, and both exhibited a need to have others in company. According to historian Doris Kearns Godwin. “Johnson commanded, forbade, insisted, swaggered, and swore.” Johnson’s



President John F. Kennedy speaks in the House Chamber on Capitol Hill in Washington during his State of the Union report to a joint session of Congress with Vice President Lyndon Johnson sitting behind him in 1963.

State Al Haig, further cementing their relationship. Ed Meese and Donald Regan, David Gergen, Peggy Noonan, Larry Speakes, and David Stockman all edged around, looking for advantage.

Reagan himself is described as “amiable and agreeable... but he also had well-formed ideological principles and knew what he wanted.” Loath to involve himself in staff arguments, he

deflected them, often suggesting. “Okay, you fellas work it out.” Sometimes they did; sometimes they didn’t.

The George H.W. Bush administration was described as “the third Reagan term,” and Bill Clinton’s as “semi-controlled chaos.” The impeachment trial was a motivating factor in the second Clinton term, subsuming political disagreements in an effort to prevent the

unraveling of the administration. Troy notes, “Political crises can themselves serve as a potent way to resolve the nagging problem of internal White House dissension.” George W. Bush had an ideologically cohesive staff and, as time went on, the domestic side ran smoothly. While there was an unheard of level of acceptance by the American public of Bush’s response to the attacks of 9-11, the administration’s Iraq policy brought people with decades of experience in Washington nearly to blows: Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, and others leaked and fought, fought and leaked.

“No Drama Obama” had a rift over the lack of senior female staff in the White House, a Valerie Jarrett-vs-everyone rift, and a generational divide that pitted Ben Rhodes against more senior people, plus the profanity of Rahm Emanuel. The administration was, however, in comparison to others, largely quiet and ideologically cohesive. Revelations in 2020 over the misuse of intelligence, FISA warrants, surveillance, leaks, and other dodges to negatively affect the Trump administration might have, as happened in the Clinton administration, kept staffers pulling in the same direction – the final fallout remains to be seen.

President Trump appears only in the conclusion, the timing of publication making a more in-depth consideration impossible. However, it is a very good idea to read *Fight House* to remind yourself that every modern White House has seen backbiting, self-promoting, ego, leaking even some out and out fabrications. Until recently, however, outsiders looking in simply didn’t have social media and an ideological press to magnify the disagreements.

Fight House gives us an essential piece of Washington history and some pretty good laughs.

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■ *A Final Thought ...*

Federalism Emerges Just in Time

Federalism is how states and municipalities exercise their authority separate from the federal government. For decades, liberals have sought more federal power over states (abortion, marriage, health insurance, and bathrooms) while conservatives have argued for less (school choice, Medicaid).

In 2017, President Trump withdrew the United States from the UN-sponsored Paris Climate Accord. Irritated, a dozen American states and more than 200 cities committed to maintaining the principles and goals of the pact. Certain states made certain investments and worked with various companies; Washington didn't interfere. Presto – federalism.

Which brings us to 2020, COVID-19 and the Electoral College. States, jealous of their power and prerogatives when it suits, have been furious over what some governors call federal inaction on COVID-19. But each state also has a department of public health, a director of that department, and staff. Each is presumed to have a plan for emergencies, including pandemics. Schools, parks, and beauty salons are not handled in Washington. Activating the state National Guard is, as its name suggests, a state prerogative.

And the conversation isn't just between the states and Washington, it is among the 50 states.

In February, New York City and New Orleans encouraged their people to go out and mingle for Lunar New Year

and Mardi Gras. Ohio canceled a major festival before the first case appeared. Different strokes.

In the reopening phase, governors in a swath of states from the Dakotas to Texas view their needs as different from the governors in the hard-hit northeast who have banded together with their own plan. The governor of Nevada doesn't want to be ruled by the needs of the governor of New York.

And so, the Electoral College — the needs and votes of the people of New York and California can't swamp the votes of the people of Delaware and Oklahoma. Montana has a say and so does Maine. Every state — as a state — is equal, and it is 50 states that make up the republic we cherish.

Much will come from the pandemic. Most useful would be a better understanding of the role of Washington and of the states in managing the welfare of the American people in a crisis — whether that crisis is state-wide or national — and governors stepping up to follow through.

– Shoshana Bryen
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