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The Need for a Grand Bargain and Regional Integration in the Middle East



The process of normalisation that brought Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain together may also indicate that the wider Western Asia region is passing through a period defined by shifting dynamics. Over the past few years, the United States' (US) retrenchment opened space for new alliances while, at the same time, the enduring regional competition continues to erode the few regional institutions that tried to stymy stabilisation, notably the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Local competition (re: between Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, Iran etc) continues to mar cooperation and a number of hybrid and proxy wars continue unabated. But is it possible to think about a future

Grand Bargain to establish a West Asia Union? Can the European Union — also a product of enduring rivalries and war — act as a beacon for such a union or does this all remain a utopian dream? This work unpacks regional dynamics and seeks to determine whether the forces of competition will trump; bringing the various actors into an escalation spiral or whether the interests embedded in regional cooperation will generate new accords and greater unity among the main protagonists. Geographically, West Asia extends from Turkey to Yemen and includes Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Arab Gulf monarchies and the Sinai Peninsula (some scholars also include Iran) and is the bridge between

A Reignited Crisis: Devaluation and Capital Flight

Once a shining beacon for emerging markets, the Turkish economy has continued its stumble, hitting record lows on currency valuation in late October 2020. Turkey's economic footing prior to the beginning of the year was already on shaky ground, but with the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the economy has slid into a gradual free fall. The country's inflation was at a chronically high 11.9% in October, it lost nearly 30% of its currency's value against the U.S. dollar this year alone, and unemployment was estimated to be at 14.3% during the second quarter. This is hardly an isolated event. In fact, the Turkish lira has been gradually losing value against the dollar since 2005, culminating in the Turkish currency devaluation and debt crisis of 2018. With a combination of austerity measures and a short-term hike in interest rates, a newfound, albeit fragile, stability was created based on high inflation rates. This fragility was unable to withstand the brunt force of the coronavirus pandemic, which led to a 10% contraction in the second quarter. The 15.4 billion dollar stimulus plan introduced by the government (valued at around 2% of GDP) provided limited support to the country's most vulnerable. Although the government's stimulus and policies have allowed

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An Overview of the GCC Countries' Parliaments

On 5 December 2020, Kuwait will hold parliamentary elections where voters are set to elect 50 members of the National Assembly. Its parliament is considered to be one of the most independent among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, having powers to pass legislation and dismiss Ministers. With this in mind, it is, therefore, interesting to understand how parliaments in the GCC countries operate, exploring the similarities and differences that exist among them.

Kingdom of Bahrain

Bahrain has a bicameral parliament, the National Assembly, which consists of two 40-member chambers: the Council of Representatives (COR, *Majlis al-Nawab*) and the Consultative (Shura) Council (*Majlis al-Shura*). While the former is directly elected, the latter is appointed by the King. The National Assembly was first formed in 1973, but two years later it was disbanded until its reactivation in 2002 under King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa as part of the new Constitution, which enabled both men and women to vote and run in the parliamentary election. Since then, elections take place every four years. Women first entered the parliament in 2006 as one woman was elected to the COR and nine were appointed to the Shura Council. Like in the rest of the GCC countries, political parties are prohibited, however, in contrast to its Gulf counterparts (except Kuwait), candidates can align with political associations and run under their banner in elections, or run as independents. Once seated, their roles include proposing laws, and, unlike the other GCC parliaments, they may amend the Constitution. Moreover, the COR can call a vote of no-confidence of Ministers and dismiss them, while the Shura Council oversees the state budget and can accept, amend or reject draft laws. In the most recent

2018 election, independents won 35 seats, al-Asalah, a Sunni Salafi society, won three, Progressive Democratic Tribune (*al-Minbar*), a left-wing society, won two and the National Unity Assembly, a Sunni party, won its first seat. About half of the elected independents then formed parliamentary groups: Bahrain, Taqadom, a left-leaning group, and Al Methaq (National Action Charter), a politically liberal alliance, leaving the number of unaffiliated at seventeen. Within this composition, women secured six seats in the COR and nine seats in the Shura Council, including Fawzia Zainal, who became Bahrain's first female Speaker and second among the GCC countries, after the UAE.

State of Kuwait

Kuwait's unicameral parliament, the National Assembly (*Majlis al-Umma*), consists of 50 members directly elected every four years, along with 15 appointed Ministers, so-called *ex-officio* members, of which one has to be also an MP.[9] Thus, in contrast to its GCC counterparts, Kuwait's parliament seats more elected than appointed members. Those elected are considered independents since political parties are outlawed, but, as in Bahrain, members can form informal societies.[10] Following Bahrain again, these members can interpellate, dismiss and call a vote of no-confidence in Ministers, as well as initiate and pass laws and approve the budget. The first National Assembly was elected in 1962, making it the longest-serving majority-elected parliament in the GCC. While elections take place every four years, Kuwait's parliament stands out in the region as it is often dissolved by the Emir, most recently in 2016 due to disagreements over oil prices. New elections, however, must always be called within two months following the dissolu-

tion. In the last election of 2016, the opposition, which included the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Salafis, Shia Muslims, tribal factions and liberals, won 24 seats, and the remaining 26 went to pro-government coalitions. This includes only one female parliamentarian, a decrease from when four women first took office in 2009. In fact, despite being the second GCC country to grant women the right to vote in parliamentary elections and hold office in 2005, Kuwait has the lowest proportion of female parliamentarians in the region. This mirrors the trend in the GCC countries with parliamentary elections that fewer women get elected than appointed.

Sultanate of Oman

After Bahrain, Oman is the second GCC country with a bicameral parliament. The Council of Oman consists of the State Council (*Majlis al-Dawla*), appointed by the Sultan, and the directly elected Shura Council (*Majlis al-Shura*), with both houses enjoying 86 seats designated to independents. This makes it the largest GCC parliament, who, like the aforementioned parliaments, propose and review laws and examine the annual budget. Yet, in contrast, Oman's Shura Council can merely interpellate, but not dismiss, Ministers. In terms of passing laws, Oman's parliament is one of the least active in the GCC, having passed only 30 laws in the previous legislature. Oman established its first parliament, the State Consultative Council, which was fully appointed, in 1981. A decade later, it was transformed into *Majlis al-Shura* and a selected group of voters was allowed to choose its members. It was only in 1996 that the upper house, *Majlis al-Dawla*, was founded, forming the current bicameral parliament. Since 2003, universal suffrage was adopted, significantly expanding

AN OVERVIEW OF THE GCC COUNTRIES' PARLIAMENTS

Although the GCC countries remain hereditary monarchies, it is interesting to look at how their parliaments operate, examining some key similarities and differences that exist among them, as well as highlighting important milestones.



COMPOSITION

Oman and Bahrain are the only two **bicameral** GCC parliaments, the rest is unicameral.

50% of UAE's FNC members are elected by the **electoral college**. FNC is the only GCC parliament that **cannot propose new laws**.

	National Assembly	National Assembly	Council of Oman	Federal National Council	Consultative Council	Consultative Council
elections						
elected members	40	50	85	20	0	0
appointed members	40	15	86	20	35	150

Those are Cabinet Ministers (ex-officio members).

Kuwait's National Assembly seats **more elected than appointed members** and has **more powers** than its GCC counterparts.

Qatar and Saudi Arabia are the only two countries with **all-appointed parliaments**.

POLITICAL PARTIES



Political parties are in general **prohibited** across the GCC and candidates thus run in the elections as independents. However, in **Bahrain** and **Kuwait** they can form **political societies** and run under their banner.



WOMEN IN THE PARLIAMENT

FIRST AND LAST



Oman was the **first country to allow women run and vote** in parliamentary elections.



Qatar was the **last GCC country to appoint women** in its parliament in 2017.

1ST FEMALE SPEAKER



The UAE elected the **first woman Speaker of the House** in the GCC in 2015, the second one was elected in Bahrain in 2018.

1ST WOMEN QUOTA



Saudi Arabia was the **first to introduce women quota** in the parliament. It was set at **min. 20%** and KSA thus has the **largest number of women members (30)** among the GCC parliaments.

PROPORTION



The UAE was the **2nd to introduce quota for women** and the first to set it at **50%**, becoming the first GCC parliament with **equal gender representation** and simultaneously also the **largest proportion of women**.



Kuwait currently has the **lowest proportion of women** in the Parliament.

the pool of eligible voters. This included women who were the first in the GCC to gain the right to run in the Shura Council election in 1997 with two females elected to parliament accordingly. In the latest 2019 election, 2 women were elected to the Shura Council, while fifteen were appointed to the State Council.

State of Qatar

Qatar's unicameral parliament is known as the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura, Consultative Assembly). It is the smallest parliament in the Gulf region, currently holding 35 seats, which are all appointed by the Emir. This comes despite the 2004 Constitution, which stipulates that the Council should comprise of 45 members, 30 of whom are directly elected, and 15 of whom are royally appointed. Elections have been postponed several times; although, in the Council's 49th session, the Emir proclaimed that the first parliament elections will be held in October 2021. Despite this anomaly to the aforementioned parliaments, their duties remain similar to them as members propose and consider laws, as well as approve the national budget. Moreover, they can interpellate and call a vote of confidence of Ministers like in Bahrain and Kuwait. The Shura Council was first formed in 1972 with 20 appointees, expanding its membership in the subsequent years. Females, however, only entered this equation in 2017 when four women, who are currently still in office, were first appointed to the parliament, making Qatar the last GCC country to do so.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's parliament, the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura), is unicameral, consisting of 150 members plus the speaker. It is the oldest parliament in the GCC, formed in 1927. However, unlike its GCC counterparts (except Qatar), members are not elected but appointed by the King for a four-year





renewable term. In terms of their duties, it can discuss government reports as well as social and economic plans and it is the only GCC country where parliament has no oversight of the budget. Further, the Council cannot pass laws, but it may propose new laws or amendments to the existing ones. It can also seek accountability of Ministers through a request to the Prime Minister. In 2013, Saudi Arabia was the first GCC country to institute a quota reserving at least 20 percent of seats in the Shura Council for women. Accordingly, 30 women were appointed to the Council that year for the first time in the Kingdom's history, and continue to hold the same number of seats.

The United Arab Emirates

The UAE's unicameral parliament, the Federal National Council (FNC), is a manifestation of the country's federal system — it is comprised of 40 independent members, half of which are indirectly elected, while the remaining

20 are appointed by the rulers of each of the seven emirates, serving four-year terms. Each emirate can elect a fixed number of members based on the size of its population, with the largest amount assigned to Dubai and Abu Dhabi (8 each). Unlike its GCC counterparts, the Council does not propose laws; however, it can pass, amend or reject laws and review the general budget. Further, it also debates international treaties and agreements along with other issues relevant to the Federation, and questions the Ministers' performance, although, similar to Oman and Saudi Arabia, it cannot dismiss them. The FNC was formed under the Provisional Constitution in 1971, and, in 2006, the electoral college members voted in the first parliamentary election. In the same year, females were also given the right to vote and run for office and, consequently, one woman was elected, while eight women were appointed. Nine years later, the FNC appointed the first female Speaker, Amal Al-Qubaisi.

A further progression occurred in 2019 as the UAE President ordered to raise female representation in the parliament to 50 percent, becoming the second Gulf country to implement a quota and taking the lead in the proportion of females in the GCC parliaments.[41] Consequently, the latest 2019 FNC election saw for the first time equal gender representation, with seven women elected and thirteen appointed.

The GCC countries' parliaments, while sharing several similarities, vary both in terms of their structure, legislative competencies and extent of power they are granted over the executive. With the upcoming elections in Kuwait, it remains to be seen whether the parliament's composition will significantly change and what implications on society this could have.

by Sophie Smith

DYNAMICS

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A Reignited Crisis

Devaluation and Capital Flight

FROM PAGE 1

key exporting sectors to function normally amidst the pandemic, ultimately, the stimulus was not enough to help the ailing economy stabilize. The situation was made worse by the fact that the government has consistently maintained sizeable current account deficits since 2000 with exceptions in 2001 and 2019. This alarming trend has continued into 2020, with the deficit increasing over 190% in September compared to the same month last year. These deficits have burdened state finances, heavily pressuring the lira, and leading to Moody's warning earlier this year, that the country has "almost depleted the buffers that would allow it to stave off a potential balance-of-payments crisis." Turkey's hard currency reserves dropped to an estimated \$36.3 billion in September 2020 compared to \$143 billion in September of last year. The country has spent over \$134 billion dollars within the last 18 months, and around \$65 billion this year alone to support its currency. A currency swap with Qatar in May provided only temporary relief from devaluation, which in March and April alone was 10%. This coupled with a non-effective monetary policy has led to one of the biggest capital flights of an emerging market since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that about \$7.6 billion of foreign capital left the local currency bond market, and another \$5.7 billion left Turkish stocks. This has compounded the negative effects of the crisis. That is to say, the losses in purchasing power, devaluation of assets, and reduc-

tion of government revenues and economic output are more severe. As it stands, the Turkish economy is crippled, and policymaking has become a minefield. The pandemic has only worsened the country's stagflation. Globally, central banks are pumping large sums of money into the economy and lowering key interest rates, in some cases into negative territory. The Turkish central bank cannot afford to drop its rates for fear of increasing inflation, and it cannot increase rates for fear of crippling an already bleeding economy. In the short term, policymakers should aim to stabilize the effects of the pandemic, and stem losses, particularly of small and medium enterprises, which make up over 90% of all enterprises, employ 78% of the workforce and contribute over half of Turkey's GDP. In the medium term, once global economic activity resumes pre-pandemic levels, the central bank should adopt drastic measures and maintain high interest rates until inflation is corrected. The economy will invariably enter a deep recession and unemployment will spike, but it will recover and those jobs will return once the market has readjusted. The Turkish Central Bank, however, has so far been relatively unresponsive to traditional indicators used to influence monetary policy, which has led to spikes in inflation and unemployment. In Turkey's situation, it is more pertinent to understand the geopolitical landscape as it has had a considerable impact on this lapse in economic decision-making. Locally, the country has been mired in political instability,

with elections being held annually since 2014 with an exception for 2016 where a coup attempt led to a two-year state of emergency and gradual political consolidation. Regionally, Turkey has been both directly and indirectly involved in regional armed conflicts. In addition, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has employed a strong-arm foreign policy that has alienated Turkey's traditional allies in the European Union and the United States that have gone so far as to suggest economic sanctions over its destabilizing effects in the region. Somewhere, mired into all of this, is the waning independence and influence of the central bank on economic policymaking. Erdogan has long held the unconventional belief that higher interest rates lead to higher inflation, as such, the bank, under this direction, has maintained this unconventional policy and it has so far been ineffective. It also stands to reason that implementing drastic measures to readjust the economy will likely come at a cost that Turkey's Justice and Development Party – which has maintained control since 2002 – is unwilling to take. There is no easy way out for Turkey. Short-term band-aid fixes only add to socioeconomic and geopolitical instability, but might be necessary given the present extenuating circumstances. However, it is imperative that policymakers look at long-term stability and sustainable growth as a goal in implementing policies, even if that means short-term hardship.

by Rashed Albinali



GULF MONITOR

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The Need for a Grand Bargain and Regional Integration in the Middle East

FROM PAGE 1

three continents—Africa, Asia and Europe. It is also one of the crucial regions Nicholas Spykman termed the ‘*Rimland*,’ the lands peripheral to the Eurasian continent and the real strategic centre of the world. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, West Asia’s stability folded into a series of nationalist movements which, given the climate of the Cold War, gravitated into either Western (re: the US and its NATO allies) or Eastern (re: the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies) camps. With few exceptions (notably the string of Arab-Israeli wars) the process of state building and power consolidation dominated the regional agenda and prevented, largely, sustained adventurism. This has drastically changed since 1979 which marked the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the consolidation of power by Ba’athist Saddam Hussein in Iraq and, importantly, the formal disengagement of Egypt from the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Camp David Accords. As such, the subsequent decades saw the dissipation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the rise in Arab-Arab and Arab-Iranian tensions. At present, the region is in turmoil. The end of the Cold War further reduced international polarisation and this reduced state-centred economic stability (the USSR’s demise stripped many of the Arab states of their cash-flows) and led to crises of legitimacy. This, in turn, has bred sectarianism, nationalism and Islamism resulting in a surge of religious terrorism (re: Al Qaeda, Daesh, Hezbollah). Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, Washington began a string of military interventions which caused further tensions in the region and, to an extent, contributed to the so-called Arab Spring movements. Indeed, the Arab Spring has been likened to the beginning of a West Asia ‘*Thirty Years’ War*,’ which gave birth to the modern nation state



in Europe. Or, as others argue, the post-Cold War architecture in West Asia resembles 19th century Europe: sprinkled with middle powers vying for spheres of influence. In terms of security dynamics, a Cold War between Iran and Saudi Arabia (and their allies) fuels the region with instability. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, coupled with the subsequent seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by a millenarian group of al-Ikhwan (led by Juhayman al-Otaybi), is indicative of this trend. Indeed, while the region continues to grapple with a resurgent Iran, it has also had to contend with a spate of Sunni revisionism as reflected in Ikhwani groups. This already volatile situation has been rendered more fragile with the recent re-arrival of Turkey into the geopolitical mix. Ankara is now directly competing for influence in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. For West Asian integration to work a complex security system must be implemented that includes: Israel, Turkey, Iran and all the Arab states from Morocco to Iraq. No state can be excluded. At the same time, a general reconciliation within the Muslim majority states of West Asia needs to take place as the main fault line runs through two diametrically opposed visions. The first bloc regards political Islam (Sunni and Shia) as the kernel of legitimacy. This bloc

tends to seek to revise the regional status quo to carve out new spheres of influence. Turkey, Iran and Qatar belong in this first bloc. The second bloc works at maintaining the status quo and views political Islam and, in particular, the Muslim Brotherhood as a challenge both domestically and regionally. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and most other Sunni states in the Arab world belong to this bloc. The Israel factor is also important to consider when discussing the potential for a Grand Bargain in West Asia—it is the only non-Muslim majority country in the region and it lacks the cultural overlaps that may be needed to assuage tensions. However, even in this case, the strategic benefits of including Israel outweighs the cultural costs of integration. Whether reflecting on the 1979 peace with Egypt, with Jordan in 1994, the sputtering (nearly failed) Oslo I and II peace process with the Palestinians or the recent peace with the UAE, Bahrain and now Sudan it is clear that Israel is key for long-term stabilisation in the region. Palestine must not be forgotten in this process or stabilisation will likely be short-lived. A quadruple Grand Bargain is needed to spearhead regional integration and to incentivise others to seek economic development and social stability rather than perpetual



competition for elusive goals. Israel-Turkey-Iran-Saudi Arabia need to mend their fences. Please note some points to consider:

1. Turkey is, and will remain, a key connector between the Europe and West Asia and it retains the potential to emerge a pillar of regional integration with its history of multiculturalism and cohabitation in Ottoman times and its core democratic, secular values during its Republican history. A sticking point is over leadership of the Muslim—which it competes for with Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is certainly not new. Questions of temporal legitimacy have preoccupied Islamic governance since the 8th century. However, this needs to be reconciled for integration to work. Turkey does have a stake and an interest in a Grand Bargain.

2. Likewise the Arabian Peninsula — on which Saudi Arabia is, by far, the most robust power — is historically, geographically and ontologically a bridge between Africa and Asia. Despite tensions and an ongoing civil war (Yemen) the states all share the idea of regional stability. With resources unfairly distributed, arable land sparse, domestic populations rapidly growing and the centrepiece of global Islam Riyadh and its Peninsular allies must continue the Islamic renaissance and redefine their relationship to religion and politics. The rest of the Muslim Middle East will likely fol-

low suit.

3. Israel is, again, an exception and is only now emerging as a partner for regional integration. In part this is due to its unique model of democratic stability and ethnic diversity coupled with a back-to-the-wall ideology that forced it to put security first. It now enjoys significant military primacy. For Israel, striking a Grand Bargain and building on the recent normalisation wave is key to its long-term survival as the Arab states demographically dwarf it.

4. The wildcard in this equation is Iran. It remains guesswork to understand the direction the Islamic Republic will take but it is clear that it cannot be neglected. If it continues to spread its revolutionary ideas, the Grand Bargain may just have to wait.

What steps could be undertaken to jumpstart security and economic integration in West Asia? First, just like the Treaty of Rome followed the Ventotene Manifesto on Europe, West Asian integration requires a social consensus, vocal intellectual leaders and a set of regional conferences on economic and security cooperation. These meetings could address the steps needed for a common market and common resources similar to the European Coal and Steel Community in post-WWII Europe. Security conferences would follow on, for instance, the model of the

Helsinki Conference, which created the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Second could be the launch of a comprehensive economic and security platform (formalising the relationships) between all the regional powers — big and small — on the Israel-UAE model. The two areas should be soldered together. As Kupchan argued, diplomatic engagement with rivals, far from being appeasement, is critical to rapprochement between adversaries. Diplomacy, besides economic interdependence, is the currency of peace: strategic concessions promote mutual trust, necessary to build a prosperous society. But such a process will not be possible without external support, facilitating the diplomatic efforts. Third, should be the inclusion of key external powers. The UN, the OIC, EU, ASEAN could join the US and NATO and act as guarantors of the process. The EU is crucial here since it is a model worth replicating.

Diplomacy demands time and patience. At present, it may seem utopian to truly consider West Asian integration, but the European Economic Community also seemed impossible until it was no longer. It was borne of war and the Treaty of Rome — more than 60 years ago — was signed ‘to make war [in Europe] not only unthinkable but materially impossible.’ The same could happen in West Asia. But for that to happen, the regional powers will have to lead—intellectually. As the spate of proxy wars end or freeze into stalemates, regional leaders will face a fundamental decision of choosing between the old-style balance of power with all the risks of instability and escalation or a gradual regional integration. The second choice is the only viable option.

by Maurizio Geri

*Notes to this article are available on its online version at www.egic.info

Rebuilding Lebanon: Tensions Between Bkerké and Hezbollah Amplify

FROM PAGE 1

The Maronites, an ethno-religious Christian group in Lebanon, have long enjoyed a unique position in the Middle East as the only Christian group with widespread autonomy throughout centuries of Islamic rule. They have been given Bkerké, the See of the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate and a unique spiritual center in the region. Charles Malik, the Greek orthodox Lebanese philosopher and diplomat, wrote in his (1980) letter to the Maronites about the importance of the Maronite patriarchate in Lebanon noting that: 'Bkerké is extremely vital. In fact, if Lebanon happens to fall into ruins while Bkerké remains safe, sound, and strong, embracing the mission to which it has long been entrusted with an ironclad fist, it can rebuild Lebanon. But, if God forbid, Bkerké happens to be devastated, weakened, or languished, Lebanon alone cannot rescue Bkerké and help it regain its strength and rebuild itself. If Lebanon lies in ruins, it might not be able to rebuild itself if Bkerké is also in ruins.' Today, Lebanon is in ruins. The small country is facing its worst economic crisis; it has entered hyperinflation with a currency that lost 80% of its value. And, with the Central Bank Reserves



depleting, by the end of 2020 it may fail to finance the country's basic needs such as fuel, medications and wheat. The Matryoshka doll of misery does not end there; the Beirut explosion on 4 August killed hundreds, injured thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands, causing damage and losses worth some \$10 billion (USD). At the root of Lebanon's collapse lies a Ponzi scheme, corrupt politicians, and militia rule. The Lebanese ruling class are doing nothing to save the country from drowning other than kicking the can. But Lebanon no longer has the luxury of time. As French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, said: 'Lebanon is at risk of disappearing.'

In these circumstances, Bkerké is stepping in and fulfilling its role which, according to Malik, depends on living at the decisive moments of history.

The Maronite Patriarch Attacks the Lebanese Ruling Class

In his sermons, the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, Bechara Boutros Al-Rai, has vocally criticised the Lebanese political elite by arguing that: 'It appears politicians want to hide their responsibility in emptying the treasury and not enact any reforms...[They] do not have the courage nor the freedom to meet and find ways out of the suffering.' He has also expressed support to the Lebanese revolution — which recently celebrated its first anniversary — seeing it as 'a glimmer of hope' and highlighting the importance of cooperation with the protesters 'so that it becomes a civilized revolution not a chaotic one.' Most importantly, the patriarch is also now well aware of the dangers Hezbollah poses to Lebanon, and its Christian community, in particular. The Iranian-funded militia has its own economic networks, regional goals and maintains control over the failed state of Lebanon. For more than a decade, it has hijacked the Lebanese political process on



multiple occasions— blocking the latest French reconstruction initiative is only the most recent example. The country's main Shiite groups' (re: Hezbollah and Amal) insistence on securing the key Finance Ministry blocked the formation of a new government that would supposedly unlock foreign aid for Lebanon. This infuriated Al Rai, who said: 'Which constitutional act permits the monopoly of a particular ministry portfolio? We reject this monopoly because it aims to establish the hegemony of a group over the state,' hinting on Hezbollah. The militia is also known for its total control over the Beirut port, airport, avoiding taxes and smuggling subsidised resources like fuel to Syria. It also often intimidates and assassinates its domestic rivals. Many also believe that Hezbollah hides weapons and dangerous materials like ammonium nitrate around residential areas. In a veiled attack, the Maronite patriarch addressed this issue: 'Authorities must carry out raids on all weapons and explosives caches and warehouses spread illegally between residential neighborhoods in cities, towns and villages...Some Lebanese areas have been transformed into fields of explosives [and] we do not know when they will explode or who will detonate them.' The deterioration of the relationship between Hezbollah and Bkerké hurts Hezbollah because the militia likes to present itself as the protector of all minorities, in-

cluding Christians, for propaganda purposes. However, this is just the latest episode as the relationship between the two was significantly tarnished already a few years ago. Hezbollah's electronic army attacked Al Rai, when he visited Jerusalem in 2014, accusing him of treason and considering his visit a 'historic sin.'

A Return to the Lebanese Identity

The patriarch was also attacked for his proposal and promotion of "active neutrality," which he considers essential for the country's survival and historical vocation. He believes there is no salvation for Lebanon without neutrality: 'Lebanon has always been open to all countries, east and west, except for Israel, which occupied our land; therefore, Lebanon was called the Switzerland of the east. Today, Lebanon has become isolated from the whole world, yet this contradicts with our identity which is positive and constructive neutrality, not wars.' The concept of active neutrality rests on three key premises, the first would be that Lebanon not enter alliances, axes, political conflicts, regional or international wars. Active neutrality is a major concern for Hezbollah, which is aligned to Iran in the so called Axis of Resistance and has its fighters engaged in conflicts across the region. Despite that, the patriarch's appeal for neutrality has been met with wide approval from the other po-

litical groups and sects in Lebanon. Yet, neutrality alone cannot be the panacea to the crises the small country is facing. Lebanon needs to break Hezbollah's chains, which block the path to progress. This requires international and regional engagement, including with Iran. Lebanon also needs to rethink its system to solve its political and institutional sclerosis and move towards a more decentralised system. And, most importantly, to fix the severe economic crisis, it needs to unlock a deal with the International Monetary Fund and reorganise its banking sector. The Gulf countries can help Lebanon get back on its feet by securing new deposits that could ease the pressure on the Lebanese Lira, as they did before, in 2006. However, today, Hezbollah's large influence over the country poses a serious obstacle to obtaining such assistance from the Gulf. All six GCC members designated Hezbollah a terrorist organisation and they will not come to Lebanon's financial rescue unless a new government that can act independently of Hezbollah is formed.

by Romy Haber



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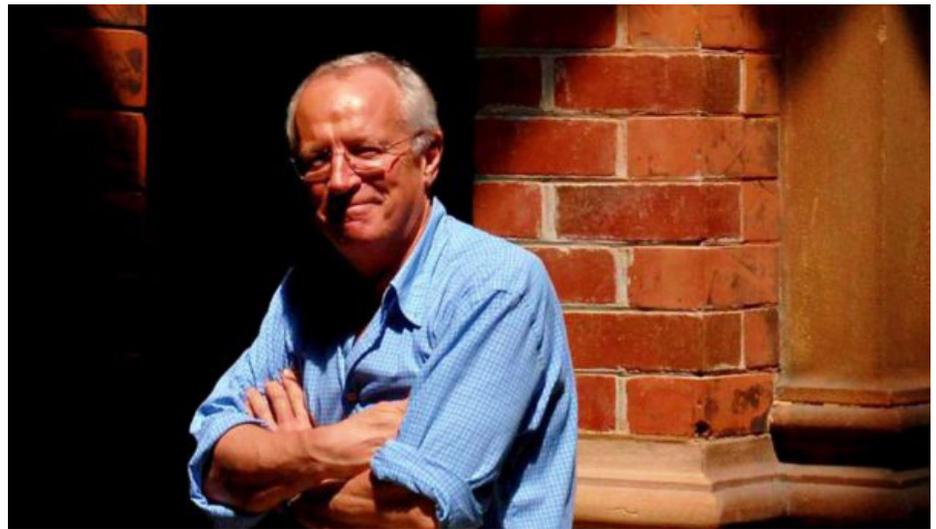
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Robert Fisk: From Beirut to Damascus

Robert Fisk (71), a veteran Middle East reporter and author, died on 30 October 2020 in Dublin after a suspected stroke. Fisk was considered an expert on the troubled and dangerous region of the Middle East. He was famous, notably, for his work on Lebanon's wars encapsulated in his famous book *Pity the Nation* (1990) and interviews with Al Qaeda's Osama bin Laden. His works served the anti-war movements and he won accolades for his fierce critic of US foreign affairs in the Middle East. For many in the media sector a journalist-hero has been lost. However, many in the Middle East remember him differently. Fisk, having been brought in by Edward Said's *Orientalism* had, similarly, the tendency to elevate pan-Arabist and pan-Islamist concerns above those of the Middle East's many minority communities. His book, *Pity the Nation* — much praised by Western journalists — especially in the pre-internet era, does not impress Lebanese readers. It stands accused of whitewashing the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), while taking a tougher stand on Lebanese Maronites: 'The Maronites brought the war down on their own heads. The first event of the civil war was a massacre of Palestinians by a group of phalangists trying to win power.' This statement shifts the blame to Maronites, who did not want their country to turn into a playground for foreign militias and guerrilla warfare and who were tired of being harassed at checkpoints by Palestinian militiamen in their own country. A few hours before the massacre Fisk was referring to, the PLO tried to kill Christian leader, Pierre Gemayel, but failed and instead they killed two civilians and two Kataeb members. Fisk's historical accounting was often accompanied by derogatory remarks and he had no problem calling an ethno-religious group



'stupid' or even justify their killing. In one remark, Fisk said 'Is it any wonder that the Hezbollah headbangers now want to kill them all?' In reference to the Maronite Christian minority in Lebanon. Defending and downplaying the killing of a minority (Maronite in this case) by a terrorist organisation is never ethical, even if it was meant to be sarcastic. After 2011, Fisk stood accused of concealing the Assad regime's war crimes in Syria and downplayed his close ties to the Assad family. Reporting on the Lebanese Civil War in the 1980s, Fisk called Hafez Al-Assad — the Syrian dictator who nurtured a cult of personality and mercilessly repressed dissent — as a 'taciturn, mild man.' Despite his bias, Fisk's writings have been influential and helped shape perception of the region within the Western media and diplomatic communities. According to Roger Scruton, who also wrote a book on Lebanon, Fisk's reporting at that time did much to 'persuade the Western powers that Lebanon had to be relinquished to the "taciturn, mild man" who had ordered the death of its leading politicians and the massacre of its more inconvenient minorities.' And, while many praised Fisk for his courage to work in dangerous zones, Scruton raises different questions: '...suppose Robert Fisk had written

the truth about the Islamic militancy? which is now at work in Lebanon: would he have been able to reside comfortably in the Iranian capital? Suppose he had, over the years, writing the truth about the Syrian occupation: would he have been able to claim that special expertise which attaches — he hastens to inform us — to those who can travel freely 'North of Baalbek' (i.e. into the zone occupied for the past ten years by Syria)? Or suppose he had written the truth about the Palestinians, whose lawless cohorts roamed the countryside of Lebanon, tormenting Shi'ite and Christian alike, and driving thousands from their homes, long before the Israeli invasion: would he have been able to enjoy the comfort, along with so many other Western correspondents, of a West Beirut hotel owned by Palestinians? What Fisk called 'getting close to the truth' usually meant getting close to authoritarian regimes and their intelligence services. However, whitewashing the Syrian government's massacres in Darayya, Eastern Ghouta, Douma and Khan Sheikhoun was the match to the powder keg and he denied some of the most heinous war crimes of the 21st century. Of course, speaking ill of the dead is not the right path. Fisk made some very important contributions to unpacking some of the more

pressing issues that grip the Middle East. He worked hard and acted as a source of inspiration for many people in the region—not least the Palestinians. So, despite the controversies, Fisk was an influential cor-

respondent and it is a shame that his track-record is speckled and his legacy is tainted. While it is better to remember people for their positive achievements, since journalists write the first draft of history, it is

history itself that judges them and on this Fisk's work needs to be understood.

by Romy Haber



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