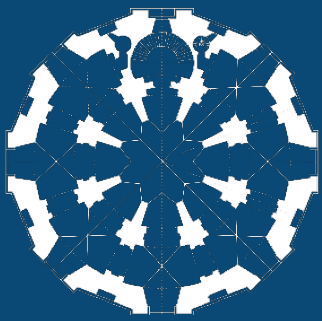

OXFORD MIDDLE EAST REVIEW

Vol. 6, No. 1 (Trinity 2022)

Oxford Middle East Review is a non-partisan project that seeks to bring together a wide range of individuals with different backgrounds, beliefs, ideas, aspirations, viewpoints, and methodologies, while sharing an adherence to principles of equality, social justice, freedom of speech, and tolerance.

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The editorial board would like to thank the St Antony's GCR and Antonian Fund, and the Middle East Centre at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, for their generous support. The editors are also most grateful to our peer reviewers for their time and feedback.

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From the Editor

Dear Reader,

The 2021-2022 editorial team of the *Oxford Middle East Review* (OMER) is proud to present the sixth edition of our journal. OMER was founded in 2016 by two students of Middle Eastern Studies at St Antony's College, Oxford, which we are proud to still call our institutional home. OMER is a space for students and scholars to thoughtfully engage with issues pertaining to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

2021-2022 has been a record-breaking year for OMER on all fronts. Our 20-person editorial team is the largest in OMER's history. This capable group of individuals has revived the OMER blog; team members and outside contributors alike have published over twenty articles on our site over the course of this year, including book reviews, interviews with academics and activists, political commentary, and poetry. OMER's social media following has more than doubled this year, allowing our content to reach even more readers and expanding the potential of future editions.

The theme of this year's issue is "Borders and Boundaries," which invited contributors to consider the functional as well as intangible aspects of borders. From a remarkable range of submissions, our team has chosen six articles that explore the theme from various original perspectives. First, Jan Stormann investigates the conceptual boundaries of status and identity in his study on *Dabiq*. Ian Parmeter then looks at how states wield influence beyond their borders, examining Russia's strategy in the Middle East. Elizabeth Monier's article kicks off a series of policy pieces, where she offers recommendations for reimagining minority/majority boundaries. Benedetta Galeazzi looks at the impact of coronavirus restrictions on refugee rights in the Levant; Erin Hayes' article then explores the conceptual border of neutrality in humanitarian aid. Finally, the issue concludes with Marjorie Kelly's examination of the ways a museum exhibition on contemporary Muslim fashion crossed cultural boundaries and expanded viewers' apertures.

We are proud to present such a diverse array of articles from contributors around the world. OMER's success is a testament to our hardworking team, our generous peer reviewers, and the importance of student-run initiatives for quality scholarship on the Middle East and North Africa region. It is also a testament to readers like you, who support our endeavours.

Juliet O'Brien, St Antony's College
Managing Editor

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He worked for 25 years in Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, where his diplomatic postings included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Russia (as Deputy Head of Mission) and Lebanon (as Ambassador). From 2004 to 2015 he was Assistant Director-General in Australia's Office of National Assessments, where he oversaw analyses of developments in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa.

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Erin Hayes *is pursuing an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy at the University of Oxford.*

Before coming to Oxford, Erin studied Political Science and Arabic at the University of Notre Dame, then moved to Egypt, where she worked at The American University in Cairo and then in refugee legal aid.

Marjorie Kelly *was Associate Professor of Anthropology at the American University of Kuwait, following her teaching career in California and Hawaii.*

She also consulted for the National Museum of Qatar. Dr. Kelly has published numerous articles on the presentation of culture and heritage for museum and tourist audiences, as well as editing a volume on Islamic civilization. Prior to obtaining her Ph.D. at the University of California, Los Angeles, she served as Director of Community Programs for the Foreign Policy Association in New York City.

The Boundaries of Status and Identity:
Hegel, Schmitt, and ISIS' Search for Recognition through *Dabiq*

Jan Stormann

> *"a state where the Arab and the non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and the westerner are all brothers,"*
> - Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi[1] in the first issue of *Dabiq* (July 2014), 7.

Introduction

Al-Hayat means "life" in Arabic. Yet the al-Hayat Media Centre is a propaganda agency of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).[2] Founded in May 2014, it is widely considered to specialise in targeting possible Western recruits through publications in English, German, French, and Russian.[3] It has been singled out in the history of jihadi media for its modern and innovative style and substance, its effective use of modern communication technology, and high production value.[4] *Al-Hayat*'s graphic videos have been particularly successful in "going viral" and spreading online, making them of significant academic interest.[5] While the cinematic and violent nature of these videos fascinates viewers, analysts, and even scholars, *al-Hayat* published a less viral English-language[6] product between July 2014 and July 2016 called *Dabiq*,[7] a fifteen-

[1] Emir and "Caliph" of ISIS from 2013 until his death in the 2019 Barisha raid.

[2] "ISIS" remains widely used in academia. The term displays some of the ambiguity this paper aims to address, and is recognizable to most readers, so we will be using this term. This is not an endorsement of ISIS' claims to statehood. We will complement this decision by calling ISIS an "organisation" or a "group," as this captures the ambivalent nature of the actor with a claim to statehood in the name but also a non-state descriptive term.

[3] See e.g. Gabriel Weimann, "The Emerging Role of Social Media in the Recruitment of Foreign Fighters," in *Foreign Fighters under International Law and Beyond*, ed. Andrea de Guttry, Francesca Capone, and Christophe Paulussen (The Hague: T.M.C. Asser Press, 2016), 80; Joshua Bleiberg and Darrell M. West, "The United States Must Respond to the Islamic State Threat (on Twitter)" (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2014); Logan Macnair and Richard Frank, "'To My Brothers in the West . . .': A Thematic Analysis of Videos Produced by the Islamic State's al-Hayat Media Center," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 33 (2017): 234–53.

[4] Amaury Bazalgette, Jean Langlois, and Jan Stormann, "Le Djihad Par l'image : D'As-Sahab à Al-Hayat," *Revue Défense Nationale*, 2021.

[5] See e.g. Macnair and Frank, "'To My Brothers in the West . . .'"; Roxanne L. Euben, "Spectacles of Sovereignty in Digital Time: ISIS Executions, Visual Rhetoric and Sovereign Power," *Perspectives on Politics* 15 (2017): 1007–33; Gabriella Calchi-Novati, "The Biopolitics of ISIS' Iconoclastic Propaganda," in *Palgrave Studies in Theatre and Performance History: War and Theatrical Innovation*, ed. Victor Emeljanow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 101–18.

[6] The magazine was translated into other languages. This paper will focus on the most prominent English-language version.

[7] Given the nature of this analysis, it is not necessary to be intimately familiar with all issues of the magazine. The following publications give a good overview of the content (though we often disagree with their analysis) without submitting the reader to the imagery of *Dabiq*:
Haroro J. Ingram, "Islamic State's English-Language Magazines, 2014-2017: Trends & Implications for CT-CVE Strategic Communications," (The Hague: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2018), 11–21; Halil Bisgin, Hasan Arslan, and Yusuf Korkmaz, "Analyzing the Dabiq Magazine: The Language and the Propaganda Structure of ISIS," ed. Robert Thomson et al. (Washington, DC: Springer, 2019), 1–11.

issue magazine named after a small town in northern Syria, which, according to the Hadith of Abu Hurayrah, is one of two possible locations for a final battle between "Romans" (often understood to mean Christians) and Muslims, marking the beginning of the end of times, or "*Malahim*."

Dabiq stands out among *al-Hayat*'s publications of the period: the average issue is over 60 pages long with a development towards increasingly more text and fewer pictures throughout time. It seems not to follow the otherwise "flashy" and "viral" media strategy of ISIS. While the production value remains high and the imagery is often graphic, the written content is often less accessible in content and style, and even "dull" to some readers.[8] Furthermore, while some of the content glamorises life in the Caliphate and justifies the actions of ISIS, other issues include clear indications of organisational fractures and, therefore, the publication's purpose is far more obscure.

In an attempt to understand *Dabiq* as a strategic tool, readers cannot even agree on the primary messages of the magazine. Some conclude that ISIS considers Shiites their main enemies,[9] while others claim that the "most negative role is always given to the United States."[10] Novenario, comparing the al-Qaeda and ISIS media strategy, suggests that ISIS initially sought to intimidate the people within its newly conquered territories through costly signalling in *Dabiq*.[11] However, it seems highly unlikely that ISIS primarily targeted an Iraqi or Syrian audience with an English-language publication, despite having multiple propaganda outlets in local languages.

The aptly named paper "What does Dabiq do?" by Major Brandon Colas at West Point perfectly sums up how both researchers and analysts struggle to make sense of ISIS' intentions with the magazine, calling it "a puzzle."[12] He points out that most attempts at understanding *Dabiq* fail at even identifying a target audience. If it were meant to radicalise or recruit Western Muslims, as most English-language jihadi propaganda is understood to, then why make it so inaccessible and include content that reveals organisational weaknesses? Colas proposes an understanding of the magazine that allows for three target audiences: 1) potential Western recruits, 2) Western policymakers, and 3) current ISIS members. He theorises that the passages showing organisational weaknesses[13] are meant to discipline English-speaking members of ISIS and are hinting at fractures within the organisation that the coalition could use to its advantage.

While most other readings of *Dabiq* are limited to understanding it as a tool with one single purpose – namely, recruitment – Colas reads the magazine through a strategic lens, allowing for multiple target audiences and thus strategic goals. While

[8] Brandon Colas, "What Does Dabiq Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within Dabiq Magazine," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40 (2016): 179.

[9] Bisgin, Arslan, and Korkmaz, "Analysing the Dabiq Magazine."

[10] Bernat Aragó, "Media Jihad," *Quaderns de La Mediterrània* 24 (2017): 109–22.

[11] "Differentiating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State Through Strategies Publicized in Jihadist Magazines," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39 (2016): 958.

[12] "What Does Dabiq Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organisational Fractures within Dabiq Magazine," 173.

[13] Ibid, 178.

this is the most differentiated and holistic analysis to date, it is still anchored in limiting assumptions of rational behaviour. Though he does not explore the idea further, Colas rightfully points out that the second target audience might be foreign policymakers. However, he does not explain in detail what the strategic value of addressing them in *Dabiq* would be.

This paper proposes to go beyond the purely rationalistic, strategic reading and approaches the "puzzle" from a different perspective: recognition theory. By analysing the magazine through the lens of recognition theory, this paper hopes to resolve much of the confusion surrounding *Dabiq* and its purpose. The hypothesis of this paper is that some of the messaging in *Dabiq* is a genuine expression of a desire to be recognised as a political entity which claims sovereignty, even statehood at times, but it also defies the international order with its definition of, and restricted access to, sovereignty. Defining ISIS would be outside of the scope of this paper, but it does propose a theory on what *Dabiq* might tell us about how ISIS wishes to be recognised by its enemies. According to this theory, ISIS portrays (and may well see) itself as transcending the three types of enmity of Carl Schmitt, blurring the lines between a state, a "true" partisan, and a global revolutionary, challenging the validity of the boundaries between these categories, and the international order which privileges recognised states over the others.

Recognition Theory

Oppenheim, at the beginning of the first chapter of his seminal work *International Law: A Treatise,* mentions "insurgents" as he defines the subjects of international law. He writes that insurgents "in some points are treated as though they were International Persons, without thereby becoming members of the Family of Nations" -- for instance, if they are "recognised as a belligerent Power in a civil war."[14] The liminal status of insurgents as non-state fighters hints at the broader importance of recognition in international law and politics. For example, there are obvious legal benefits for combatants who fall under the Geneva Convention IV and there is the privilege of sovereignty exclusive to states. However, there is also a sociological aspect to "being recognised" that goes beyond this legal rationale, though the liminal nature of insurgents and other non-state actors persists, as will be argued infra.

Recognition theory can be summed up as follows: "Sociological insights into how identities are formed, maintained, and dissolved" applied to International Relations.[15] Fundamentally, Hegelian ideas of the search for recognition and theories of identity creation are applied to communities, including states. This does not seek to anthropomorphise the state or other communities, rather it represents a theory asking to what degree states may "react to recognition and disrespect in ways [...] similar to

[14] *International Law: A Treatise* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), 108.
[15] Erik Ringmar, "The International Politics of Recognition," in *The International Politics of Recognition*, ed. Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 4.

individual responses."[16]

As the term "disrespect" in this context implies, recognition here means more than accurate ontological observations. It may have three distinct yet interrelated meanings, as has been observed by Bartelson,[17] building on Ricœur:[18] Firstly "to be recognised" may mean "to be distinguished and identified"[19] (*erkannt* in German), or "epistemic recognition."[20] Secondly, "to be recognised" may also refer to "acknowledgment" either by oneself and of oneself as an actor[21] (*Selbsterkenntnis*), or, thirdly, by others *(anerkannt*), leading ideally to mutual recognition between all actors.[22] These notions are interrelated, as one's perceived ontological nature obviously impacts one's self-acknowledgement and others', just as others' epistemic assessment of oneself (and its possible misalignment with one's self-image) conveys more or less acknowledgement and respect. For instance, according to Oppenheim, to be epistemically recognised as a "state" means to be acknowledged as a "member of the Family of Nations," which is a privileged status amongst international actors.[23]

Beyond academic interest, this has legal and political consequences. The way in which "recognition" blurs the line between international law and political sociology and the importance of considering recognition as a political practice have been explored in depth.[24] It has been argued, for instance, that practices of recognition are typically focused on state actors,[25] and that this may "reproduce and even reify the modern international system."[26] Indeed, as this paper will explore, the rigid and state-centric nature of recognition in the current international system can explain why a "desire" (*Verlangen*)[27] for recognition by organisations such as ISIS is unsatisfiable and may seem confusing to those whom the "desire" is expressed to.

Because the practice of recognition is often limited to states, literature on recognition theory in International Relations regarding non-state actors is rare. However, Behnke produced a remarkable case study in which he applied recognition theory to the 9/11 terror attacks and understood them as symbolic violence and an expression of a reclamation of non-state sovereignty by al-Qaeda.[28] Though ISIS and

[16] Reinhard Wolf, "Prickly States? Recognition and Disrespect between Persons and Peoples," in *The International Politics of Recognition*, ed. Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 39.

[17] "Three Concepts of Recognition," *International Theory* 5 (2013): 107–29.

[18] *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[19] Ricœur, 25.

[20] Bartelson, "Three Concepts of Recognition," 108.

[21] Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 96–149.

[22] Ibid, 150–218.

[23] *International Law: A Treatise*, 108.

[24] See e.g. Hans Agné et al., "Symposium 'The Politics of International Recognition,'" *International Theory* 5 (2013): 94–107.

[25] E.g. "recognizing" another state as sovereign as a typical speech act of applied recognition in foreign policy.

[26] Bartelson, "Three Concepts of Recognition," 110.

[27] "Desire" may not fully account for the multifaceted nature of desire, need, and demand for recognition, unlike the German term 'Verlangen' that captures this multifarity. Hegel used the term "*Begierde*" in German, closer to "desire" than "Verlangen."

[28] "Recognizing the Enemy: Terrorism as Symbolic Violence," in *The International Politics of Recognition*, ed. Thomas Lindemann and Erik Ringmar (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 189–206.

al-Qaeda are fundamentally different organisations with dissimilar political demands and aspirations, their (self-perceived) natures raise fundamental questions about the recognition and status of such organisations in the international system. Behnke's analysis thus served as an inspiration to this paper's analysis, though we examine dissimilar types of signals from very different actors.

This paper does not promote recognition theory but argues for a new application of it – one which may serve as a case study in its defence – especially when rationalistic approaches have fallen short of explaining the signals sent by actors. We will thus argue that applying recognition theory to Dabiq resolves, to some degree, the "puzzle" surrounding the magazine's purpose. Furthermore, we will argue that the application of recognition theory adds to the exploration of how recognition is limited by established categories, in which groups of liminal nature do not fit neatly. To demonstrate this, we will begin by establishing ISIS' need for recognition.

I. Denial of Recognition

> *"It is time to join our key ally France […] in using as frequently as possible the terminology Daesh rather than ISIL. Because frankly this evil death cult is neither a true representation of Islam nor is it a state."*
> - David Cameron's opening statement to the House of Commons' debate on military action in Syria, December 2, 2015.

The very politicisation of the terminology surrounding ISIS is a response to the organisation's perceived claims for sovereignty, statehood, and territory. When the British Prime Minister declared in 2015 that the term Daesh should be used when referring to the group, he explicitly stated that this is a denial of ISIS' claim to statehood and that the UK was adopting a nomenclature already common in other states.[29] Daesh has been chosen because it does not contain the term "state," such as ISIS, ISIL or IS. It is a transcribed version of the Arabic acronym of the organisation's previous name *"al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham,"* and its pronunciation "Daesh," sounds like "to trample down" in Arabic. It is known that the term "Daesh" has been considered offensive by ISIS, and there are reports that its use may have been a punishable offence within its territory.[30] Though a mere verbal offence might seem only mildly insulting compared to a bombing campaign, it is an important consideration to understand how ISIS' Verlangen for recognition was not fulfilled. As Bartelson writes: "*Practices* of recognition […] consist of *speech acts*, or otherwise symbolic acts that communicate the acknowledgement of the ontological, legal and moral status."[31] Put differently,

[29] See quote supra, David Cameron, "PM's Opening Statement to Commons Debate on Military Action in Syria," (London, 2 December 2015), https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pms-opening-statement-to-commons-debate-on-military-action-in-syria.

[30] Markus C. Schulte von Drach, "Warum Der Name "Daesch" Den Islamischen Staat Ärgert," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2015; Faisal Irshaid, "Isis, Isil, IS or Daesh? One Group, Many Names," *BBC*, December 2, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27994277.

[31] "Three Concepts of Recognition," 110. Italics by the original author, Bartelson.

while bombing combatants might be strategically important, denying them their status verbally and thus refusing to recognise them is highly significant too, even without delving into the legal consequences.

Though ISIS claims are not limited to statehood, as will be argued infra, this claim is most evident in ISIS' discourse, name and, arguably, its nature. ISIS might have never been a state without the aforementioned recognition in a "declarative" understanding of statehood, but it did fulfil all requirements for statehood according to a "constitutive" understanding. The theory of three elements (*Drei-Elemente-Lehre*) laid out by Jellinek, states that statehood requires the following components: State Territory (*Staatsgebiet*), State People (*Staatsvolk*) and State Power (*Staatsgewalt*).[32] ISIS undeniably held all three. Also, as Je-Yoon Shin, President of the Financial Action Task Force, explained in his address to the Security Council: "ISIL operates as a state and provides all the services a state is expected to provide."[33] This is not to argue that ISIS was in fact a state, but to show that in a traditional Western understanding of statehood, and by the admission of Western policymakers and institutions, ISIS was state-*like* (despite having been denied the recognition). Assessing the exact nature of ISIS would be too ambitious for this paper. However, the obvious rupture between seemingly observed features, which to some degree reflect ISIS' aspirations, and recognised status establishes the foundational argument to apply recognition theory to an official outlet of the organisation.

Theorists like Lindemann have argued that the denial of recognition has been a reason for conflict in the past.[34] Of course, it would be dangerous conjecture to claim that ISIS would have been more peaceful had it been recognised. However, the importance of this perceived deliberate denial of recognition of ISIS can be better understood when looking at it from the basic Hegelian lens on which recognition theory fundamentally builds. Hegel's "struggle for recognition" pits two hypothetical self-consciousnesses against each other in a conflict for life and death.[35] Each seeks to prove its own existence in a negation of the other. However, each needs the other as a distinct other to affirm itself through the recognition of the other. If either were to kill the other, it would no longer get the recognition it needed to constitute self-consciousness. Through the famous master-slave dialectic that follows, Hegel goes on to show that one self-consciousness dominates (*beherrscht*) the other to acquire the needed recognition by force while denying the recognition to the other. The "slave" (*Knecht*), who is left alive merely to provide this recognition cannot fully offer it without freedom.[36] Thus, this master-slave relation of uneven recognition is inherently

[32] Georg Jellinek, *Allgemeine Staatslehre*, ed. Walter Jellinek, 3rd ed. (Berlin Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 1929), 394–434. 1st. Edition: 1900.

[33] U.N. Security Council, "S/PV.7587: Threats to International Peace and Security Caused by Terrorist Acts." (2015), 3.

[34] Thomas Lindemann, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press Monographs, 2010).

[35] Hegel uses the term "*anerkennen*," therefore, he specifically does not merely refer to epistemic recognition, but to acknowledgment.

[36] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie Des Geistes* (Frankfurt am Main: Outlook Verlag, 2020), 89–95. originally published in 1807.

defective and unstable. When this is applied to ISIS from the organisation's point of view, ISIS was both denied recognition (demoting it to a *Knecht* in Hegelian terms) and its right to (physical) existence, as established states did not need ISIS to recognise them as there are more than two materialised self-consciousnesses in a world with hundreds of states that may recognise each other. The figurative slave that is ISIS then cannot be sure of its own continued existence materially or metaphysically, while obviously being there for itself (*für sich*). This created the friction and instability that recognition theory seeks to identify and understand.

If Hegelian concepts of recognition can enrich the analysis of other case studies, then a case such as this one, in which Hegel's thought experiment finds its most extreme iteration in the real world, is an obvious place for the application of recognition theory. We will first determine what claims to statehood and calls for recognition can be observed in Dabiq to construct this analysis.

II. Statehood and Sovereignty: A Seat at the Table in the "Family of Nations"

"This was a state-on-state thing... an Islamic State commando force that conducted a raid abroad."
- ISIS fighter who went by the nom de guerre "Abu Bakr" on the 2015 Paris attacks [37]

ISIS' claim to statehood and its peculiar call for the immediate establishment of a caliphate have been a defining feature of the organisation from 2014 onwards. As some have pointed out, this is particularly remarkable when comparing ISIS to other jihadi actors in the region. Al-Qaeda for instance, prioritised vanquishing the West over building a transnational Islamic "state", or Caliphate.[38] *Dabiq* reflects this fact from the very first pages of its first issue: E.g. al Baghdadi's quoted speeches within the first segment, "Khalifah Declared"[39] and the feature "From Hijrah to Khalifah."[40]

The Making of a 'State': Words and Institutions

This claim is repeated throughout the magazine's publication history explicitly as well as implicitly through the language used when referring to ISIS' institutions and actions. It mirrors the lingo used to refer to states, especially that used by the United States; for example, fighters of the Islamic State are often called "soldiers." Furthermore, a significant portion of issues are dedicated to the "liberated" territories[41] in ISIS "operations."[42]

[37] "Ça c'était un truc d'État contre État… un commando État islamique qui a fait une op extérieure," cited in Romain Caillet and Pierre Puchot, *Le Combat Vous a Été Prescrit': Une Histoire Du Jihad En France* (Paris: Stock, 2017), 277. N.B. "Abu Bakr" is obviously not Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

[38] Ibid, 241.

[39] Issue 1 (July 2014), 6-11.

[40] Ibid, 34-41.

[41] E.g. Issue 1, 45; Issue 2, 37; Issue 9, 70-71.

[42] E.g. Issue 4 (September 2014), 20; Issue 12 (November 2015), 25-28; Issue 13 (January 2016), 14-19; Issue 15 (July 2016), 40-45.

To name but a few, Issue 4 quotes the "Official Spokesman for the Islamic State,"[43] while another issue claims that a spy "cell was infiltrated by the Islamic State's security apparatus."[44] Lastly, the 10th issue refers to organisational sub-entities of the Islamic state as "departments."[45] This is merely a small selection of cases from a corpus of over 900 pages, but the lingo and continued and persistent use of vocabulary associated with states, especially as allusions to U.S. institutions carry meaning. As one analysis of ISIS's video propaganda suggests, the homage to the Guantanamo Bay Detention Camp and to Camp Bucca,[46] manifested through the depiction of orange jumpsuits and shorn heads in ISIS' execution videos, can be understood as "symbolic inversion in which the United States becomes a violent outlaw, Da'ish the injured sovereign."[47] Within Dabiq, the use of American vocabulary is more than a grotesque ridicule of the enemy or a denunciation of hypocrisy. In fact, it is an assertion of sovereignty, legitimacy, and status through the drawing of parallels between the global (and thus absolute) sovereign, the archetype of states, and ISIS' "government."

Another attempt to draw parallels and appear state-like can be found throughout roughly five percent of the magazine's content. *Dabiq* features accounts of the "state's' internal governance, typically depicting it in a very favourable light, with remarkable detail and banality."[48] Though five percent may not seem like much, it should be noted that pieces on *hijrah*, the emigration of Jihadi fighters to ISIS territory only represents roughly four percent of the content. Yet, as seen supra, some authors believe that recruitment in the West was a primary goal of the magazine.[49] Building on the legacy of previous publications, such as the *Islamic State Report*, which primarily focused on governance themes such as consumer protection within ISIS territory or successful agricultural policy,[50] *Dabiq* reports on similar developments in the "Islamic State Report" segment and throughout other articles. *Dabiq* features, for instance, a double page introduction to its new currency in one issue,[51] a double page article on the creation of a new administrative district, a new infrastructure plan in another,[52] a three-page highlight of ISIS healthcare in another showcases the statistics of two ISIS hospitals, which supposedly performed 18 urinary surgeries and 233 physiother-

[43] Issue 4, 6-9.

[44] Issue 6 (December 2014), 30-31.

[45] (July 2015), 72.

[46] A U.S. operated detention centre operated until 2009, in which Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was a prisoner until December 2004.

[47] Euben, "Spectacles of Sovereignty in Digital Time: ISIS Executions, Visual Rhetoric and Sovereign Power," 1016. See also Calchi-Novati, "The Biopolitics of ISIS' Iconoclastic Propaganda," 115.

[48] Colas, "What Does Dabiq Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within Dabiq Magazine," 188–90.

[49] Further, substantial governance is by itself not a given for any insurgency. Within the context of the civil war and 500.000 people killed or missing in Syria alone according to the BBC, "Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?" *BBC* March 12, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35806229. Developing institutions bearing any resemblance to an actual government is remarkable.

[50] Ingram, "Islamic State's English-Language Magazines, 2014-2017: Trends & Implications for CT-CVE Strategic Communications," 9–10.

[51] Issue 5 (October 2014), 18-19.

[52] Issue 10, 18-19.

apy sessions for instance.[53] If it were not for the "dull" and "banal" nature of these reports,[54] they might make sense as mere propaganda. However, within the broader context of *Dabiq*, to publish information on the internal workings and, most notably on 'organisational weaknesses' of ISIS,[55] simple propaganda would make little sense within the same medium that is at times so critical of the organisation. These reports seem more coherent from a different perspective.

Grounding the "State" in Reality: ISIS' "organisational weaknesses"

The "biting and sometimes harsh"[56] articles[57] about the internal situation of the Caliphate might be designed for a different audience than the flattering portrayals of governance, Colas theorises. For him, these parts of the magazine might be addressed to Western, emigrated ISIS members that need "correction," while the aforementioned features of governance and claims to statehood might be meant for Western policy-makers. However, ISIS has numerous propaganda outlets. Consequently, there is no reason to publish conflicting information to distinct and even opposed audiences in the same magazine, undermining both messages. Instead of reading the publication of these weaknesses together with the advertisement of state-like features as two distinct strategic plays, they may be understood as expressions of "realness," a grounded appeal to close the gap between analysis and expressed recognition, supposed proofs of sincerity, or, put differently, concessions of imperfection in exchange for acceptance as a real and graspable state.

Alternatively, revealing these mistakes may be understood as an abstract expression of a search for recognition, a self-affirmation of grounded realness, in a process of identity construction. This would be as much or little addressed to anyone as a diary, for instance. The self-told account of ISIS' story, a fundamental part to one's identity construction according to the theory of narrative identity[58] then becomes a tale of struggle for perfection by imperfect people in an unjust world of flawed states. In this self-narrative, ISIS becomes a "state whose inhabitants and soldiers are human beings […] not infallible angels," but which seeks to improve upon itself.[59] This can be understood as a bridging of the surreal religious claims that dominate the magazine[60] and the real-world implications of an at best misrecognized, at worst dismissed, self-understanding as a state. This felt dismissal of ISIS' status and self-prescribed identity by its Western counterparts can be observed throughout the magazine.

[53] Issue 9, 24-26.

[54] Colas, "What Does Dabiq Do?" 179, 188–90.

[55] Ibid, 178.

[56] Ibid, 184.

[57] E.g. *hijrah* articles do not always paint an image of a perfect Caliphate: As Colas points out, they sometimes warn emigrants of the imperfect state of affairs, e.g. Issue 3 (July/August 2014), 33. Other indicators of internal frictions may be the "To Our Sisters" segment from Issue 7 on, which sometimes clearly scolds those who are dissatisfied with life in support of ISIS (e.g. Issue 11 (September 2015), 41.), or the call to not believe in conspiracies in issue 9, 14-19., hinting at doubts within some of the emigrants.

[58] Dan P. McAdams, "Narrative Identity," in *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research*, ed. Seth J. Schwartz, Koen Luyckx, and Vivian L. Vignoles (New York, NY: Springer, 2011), 99–115.

[59] Issue 3, 33.

[60] Religious content represents over 30% of the magazine's content, see Colas, 190.

The Recognition of a "State": *Erkannt* but never *Anerkannt*

Admittedly, claiming statehood and hinting at parallels might, without context, be understood simply as a propagandistic overstatement of the organisation's significance or a commentary on Western "hypocrisy." However, there is a repeated segment that refers directly to recognition: "The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy" hints bluntly at the disparity between Western official acknowledgment and de facto strategic analysis, adding context. It presents selected quotes by (typically Western) policymakers or experts as they describe the organisation in a threatening manner. In early issues, these quotations were rather brief and cherry-picked to make ISIS appear powerful and state-like. In later issues, less concise accounts of ISIS' role in the near East and in the World become dominant.[61]

The first issue, for instance, features nit-picked quotations by two former U.S. officials, Douglas Ollivant and Brian Fishman,[62] insisting that "it is now a real, if nascent and unrecognised, state actor" and "a de facto state."[63] Similarly, Issue 6 quotes then Secretary of Defence Chuck Hagel: "I talked about asymmetric threats. I mean the sophistication of ISIL […] We've never seen an organisation like ISIL,"[64] creating the impression that he implied that ISIS was too strong to be considered a classic "asymmetric threat."[65] Issue 7 quotes the British-Irish journalist Patrick Cockburn who refers to the organisation as "the jihadi state."[66] These are but some examples from the "In the Words of the Enemy" segment, which are further supported inter alia by articles supposedly written by the kidnapped British journalist John Henry Cantlie.[67] One such article in Issue 8 claims after an enumeration of ISIS governance achievements and numerous dismissals of the term "organisation" that "these, surely, are all hallmarks of (whisper it if you dare) a country."[68] The last statement demonstrates clearly how ISIS demands recognition for what it deems to be its state(-like) nature.

When Hegel writes that in an equal relationship, two self-consciousnesses "recognise themselves as mutually recognising each other,"[69] the verbal imitation of statehood can be understood as a call of ISIS to be *erkannt* (epistemically recognised) as similar by "the" sovereign or community of sovereigns and thus to be *anerkannt* (acknowledged) as equal. Similarly, the insistence on being anerkannt of ISIS also becomes evident in the selected quotations of its "enemies" in *Dabiq*, which showcase the disparity between what the organisation has been seemingly erkannt

[61] N.B. This aligns with the overall trend of issues and articles becoming longer over time.

[62] "State of Jihad: The Reality of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," *War on the Rocks*, May 21, 2014, https://warontherocks.com/2014/05/state-of-jihad-the-reality-of-the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-syria/.

[63] Issue 1, 33.

[64] Issue 6, 57.

[65] N.B. The quote is taken out of context: Hagel was referring to an earlier mention of asymmetric threats, and was specifying ISIS as an example, rather than an exception. See Chuck Hagel, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel is Interviewed on PBS's "The Charlie Rose Show," interview by Charlie Rose, *PBS*, November 19, 2014.

[66] Issue 7, 52.

[67] Mr. Cantlie's fate and the true author of these articles are unknown as of November 2021. We will consider these articles to be as much a product of the al-Hayat Media Center as the rest of the magazine, because the decision to publish hinged on the organization, regardless of who wrote them.

[68] (March 2015), 65.

[69] "Sie anerkennen sich als gegenseitig sich anerkennend," *Phänomenologie Des Geistes*, 90.

as and how it has been anerkannt by some of those from which it seeks recognition. Therefore, had, in Hegelian terms, the self-consciousness that is ISIS been anerkannt, it may have recognised those that recognise it. Naturally, ISIS was never recognised as similar, and certainly not as equal. Thus, no stable relationship was possible, and the organisation was faced with a status similar to Hegel's *Knecht*.[70]

As will be seen in the next part, the recognition ISIS sought was, amongst other reasons, not granted because of ISIS' understanding of what a state may be: namely a non-national, pan-Islamic caliphate, which does not fit the common understanding of statehood under the dominant international order. As such, unrecognised as a "state," ISIS began to abandon claims to traditional legitimacy under the current order, transcending classical categories. This can be seen through a critical reading of *Dabiq*.

III. From Partisan to Global Revolutionary: Transcending Categories, Challenging the International Order

"ISIS is — all at the same time — a terrorist group, a state, and a revolutionary political movement."
Michael Joseph Morell in *Time* Magazine on November 16, 2015, quoted in the thirteenth issue of *Dabiq*, 46-47.

As Ingram observes, later issues of *Dabiq* focus less on "statehood, conventional politico-military activities, [etc.]," and more on "unconventional politico-military activities, [etc.]."[71] Ingram theorises that statehood is propagated when things are going well, and unconventional means are put forward when the war puts statehood in jeopardy. While this analysis is strategically sound, it must be noted that ISIS was not merely advocating for the use of local insurgency tactics in response to losing the ability to fight symmetrically. It was promoting an "international insurgency"[72] – a far more ambitious type of unconventional warfare to which al-Qaeda last laid claim at the height of its influence in 2001, right before its fall. ISIS's declared ambitions thus grew despite military setbacks. This is noteworthy because, as we have laid out supra, one of the fundamental differences between ISIS and al-Qaeda has always been that the latter "conceived of itself as the vanguard of a global insurgency" and "ISIS, in contrast, seeks to […] create a 'pure' Sunni Islamist state."[73] When considering that such a campaign had marked the beginning of the end for Osama bin Laden's organisation, and ISIS faced increasing military pressure at the time, signalling in *Dabiq* of the pursuit of an al-Qaeda-type "global insurgency," may seem strategically illogical. Nevertheless, it does make sense in the broader context of ISIS' search for recognition.

[70] "Stable" here denotes an abstract sphere of recognition, a metaphysical stability between enemies, not peace. We do not claim that peaceful coexistence with ISIS would have been possible, desirable or just.
[71] "Islamic State's English-Language Magazines, 2014-2017: Trends & Implications for CT-CVE Strategic Communications," 14.
[72] See e.g. the foreword of Issue 15, 4-7., though these exact words appear as early as Issue 5, 36-39. in a 'Cantlie'-article also claiming "[ISIS] has now become a global player."
[73] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs* 94 (2015): 90.

The Dilemma of the Partisan

Carl Schmitt's *Theory of the Partisan* can be understood, as suggested by its subtitle, as a complement to *The Concept of the Political*.[74] While the latter explores how enmity (*Feindschaft*), "the differentiation between friend and enemy,"[75] is the foundation of all things political, the former serves to define political actors by their "type" of enmity. Initially, in this image the state has a "monopoly" on the political,[76] as it alone can name the enemy.[77] As Behnke[78] suggests when quoting Nancy, war is "the sovereign event":[79] When Cardinal Richelieu had Louis XIII's canons cast with the inscription '*Ultima ratio regum*,' the artillery can be understood as the King's last argument, just as the King can be understood as the one who may argue with canons. War is thus a dispute between kings, or, in modern terms, sovereigns, so those who wage it must be sovereigns. Therefore, this type of enmity between sovereign nation-states gives status to the belligerents, as "the enemy is on my own level."[80] According to Schmitt's reading of the *jus publicum Europaeum*, it gives them legitimacy and legal protection as rightful "conventional enemy,"[81] or equal members of the 'Family of Nations,' as Oppenheim might have put it.

Regarding unconventional enemies, Schmitt distinguishes between the "true," telluric partisan and the global revolutionary. Building on Clausewitz, the former emerges from colonial or civil war,[82] and is defined by having a "true" enemy (*wirklicher Feind*), typically an oppressor, that ought to be destroyed.[83] The second is based on Leninist revolutionaries,[84] defined by having an "absolute" enemy (*absoluter Feind*) that is criminalised and dehumanised to such a degree that neither time nor space can delimit the war.[85] If every act of large-scale organised political violence falls within one of these three categories, then one can first distinguish between regular, state-to-state war and irregular warfare carried out by, first and foremost, non-state actors. The latter

[74] *Theorie Des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung Zum Begriff Des Politischen*, (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1963).

[75] "Unterscheidung von Freund und Feind" in *Der Begriff Des Politischen*, (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1932), 14.

[76] N.B. Much of Schmitt's writing is Euro-/Western-centric. However, so is, at the very least in ISIS' view, the current international system. As this paper seeks to understand if and how ISIS expressed its desire for recognition in this international system, the use of Western-centric authors remains valid: The same Western bias was "felt" by ISIS in its search for recognition, as we will argue.

[77] Gabriella Slomp, "The Theory of the Partisan: Carl Schmitt's Neglected Legacy," *History of Political Thought* 26 (2005): 505.

[78] "Recognizing the Enemy: Terrorism as Symbolic Violence."

[79] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 107.

[80] "Der Feind steht auf meiner eigenen Ebene" in Schmitt, *Theorie Des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung Zum Begriff Des Politischen*, 87.

[81] Ibid, 39.

[82] Ibid, 18.

[83] Ibid, 17.

[84] Schmitt notably omits the Nazi regime. Though disentangling Schmitt's academic thought from his Nazi past and political opinion falls outside the scope of this paper, these biases should be considered.

[85] Schmitt refers to the concept of "*Klassenkampf*" which is thought to be both global and timeless. Religious conflicts arguably function similarly: Just as the very existence of a bourgeoisie means that the *Klassenkampf* has not been won yet, the mere existence of an 'infidel' may be an insult to one's god.

are not only defined by their doctrine but are both legally and morally delegitimised by their state counterparts. Between each other, irregular parties can be distinguished by their "fundamentally defensive character which fundamentally limits enmity"[86] in the case of the partisan, and its "absoluteness" in the case of the global revolutionary. This defensive character of the partisan can be understood through "the telluric character," which gives him "legitimacy in his partisan irregularity" as he protects his home,[87] and makes "spatially evident the limitation of enmity." This saves the partisan from "the claim to absoluteness of abstract justice,"[88] which in contrast drives the global revolutionary towards absolute enmity and thus endless, total war. The latter would, of course, be incompatible with legitimate war or even a regular order in the image of the *jus publicum Europaeum*.

The defensive nature of the partisan thus delimits his aspirations to a given territory and well-defined enemy, and thereby also limits the threat posed to the international order. As Schmitt notes, "In the long run the irregular must be legitimised by the regular," either "through recognition by an established regular [authority]" or "through the establishment of a new regularity by its own means."[89] If the irregular actor fails to do either, he will inevitably lose his political character and become a mere criminal, deprived of all recognition. If the partisan, in desperate need for recognition, thus seeks to avoid the "hard alternative"[90] of establishing a new regularity, he will need to gain recognition by being recognised by those that already are. However, as Slomp remarks, "The partisan works toward his own demise: he wants the recognition of his own legitimacy, but when recognition is attained, a partisan ceases to be a partisan."[91] Thus, the partisan movement either receives the backing of a state, or wins and ultimately becomes a state itself. If the movement receives the backing of a state, it will benefit from the extended recognition the backer enjoys, but it will also lose the true nature of partisanship to become a prolonged arm of the state. Either way, the irregular then becomes regular again and finds its recognised place in the international order that previously considered it criminal. Here lies the dilemma of the partisan: to win, and be anerkannt, the partisan must return to the system that he challenged.

In this light, ISIS Verlangen to be recognised as legitimate state, especially in earlier issues of *Dabiq*, appears like a partisan seeking to become (recognised as) regular: initially it is an irregular actor that seeks to hold and control a specific territory and destroy the foe that "occupies" or "suppresses" it,[92] if necessary, by breaking

[86] "Mit einer solchen grundsätzlichen Defensive ist auch die grundsätzliche Beschränkung der Feindschaft gegeben" in *Theorie Des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung Zum Begriff Des Politischen*, 93–94.

[87] Ibid, 77. In contrast to the global revolutionary's illegitimate irregularity, as he does not seek to attain a legitimate/regular outcome, based on actual politics rather than absolute enmity.

[88] Ibid, 26.

[89] Ibid, 78.

[90] Ibid.

[91] "The Theory of the Partisan: Carl Schmitt's Neglected Legacy," 134.

[92] See the references to territorial expansion and control in *Dabiq* explored supra, including the repeated use of the term "liberate." Further, the term "ISIS" contains the territory the organisation claimed, putting forward the telluric character in the name itself until 2014. See also Rachid Kassim's accounts, cited in Caillet and Puchot, *'Le Combat Vous a Été Prescrit': Une Histoire Du Jihad En France*, 278–79.

the conventions and using terror and unconventional means.[93] What differentiates ISIS from a typical partisan, however, is that ISIS could never become regular beyond its technical resemblance to a state: the very idea of the caliphate is incompatible with the current international order. The caliphate is not just another state; it is a challenge to modern Western statehood as much as it is a project of belief. Its appeals to unite and represent the Ummah,[94] frequently repeated in *Dabiq*, challenge notions of the nation-state as we know it; its imagery does not only challenge the hegemony, but the very sovereignty of the United States., as seen supra; its communication promises "the advent of a psychotic utopia in which the state of exception will be an everlasting rule."[95] These are all clear challenges to a Western model of statehood, or, in the terms of al-Baghdadi, "boots that will trample the idol of nationalism" and "destroy the idol of democracy."[96] As Caillet and Puchot point out in their conclusion, one of the "essential questions" that will determine 'the future of the jihadists in France' is: "Will [policymakers] have succeeded in recasting a Republican pact worthy of its name?"[97] This aligns rather well with Schmitt's account of how the onset of the "liberal constitutional state […] brought about […] the birth of the state's greatest challenger: the partisan."[98] Caught in the aforementioned dilemma, Schmitt's partisan's highest aspiration is traditional statehood. While ISIS demanded the recognition and legitimacy reserved for states, it simultaneously claimed a model of sovereignty and normlessness that is incompatible with the liberal international order and unacceptable to the (nation-)states that enjoy the privilege of legitimacy and sovereignty through mutual recognition.[99]

It was therefore always impossible for ISIS to be recognised as regular and thus as a state – leaving it as an ostracised and criminalised outcast in a world of nation-states – with no way forward. As Schmitt insists, "The core of the political […] requires both friend *and* enemy."[100] ISIS did not know any legitimate, recognised "friend" that would treat it as equal. Moreover, it failed to get its enemies to recognise it as an enemy "on the same level." Therefore, it was doomed to become a non-political, criminal actor in Schmitt's framework, unless it could establish a system in which it redefined what regular and irregular meant, and who was worthy of recognition. In

[93] See e.g. Andrea Beccaro, "Modern Irregular Warfare: The ISIS Case Study," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 29 (2018): 207–28.

[94] The entirety of the global Muslim community, or all "true" believers.

[95] Calchi-Novati, "The Biopolitics of ISIS' Iconoclastic Propaganda," 115.

[96] Issue 1, 8.

[97] *'Le Combat Vous a Été Prescrit': Une Histoire Du Jihad En France*, 293. Though the authors here refer to the social contract seen as the basis for social peace in France, the overarching point stands: For a Western minority, the premise of liberal statehood has seemingly failed them so badly that those violently rising against it, regardless of political or religious taint, have become attractive alternatives – ISIS being but the most prominent in recent years.

[98] Slomp, "The Theory of the Partisan: Carl Schmitt's Neglected Legacy," 57.

[99] As Robert Kagan remarks on the sidelines of his report "The Twilight of the Liberal World Order," in *Brookings Big Ideas for America*, ed. Michael E. O'Hanlon (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2017), 267.: "the effort by ISIS" […] to establish a new Islamic caliphate […] If accomplished, that, too, would have effects on the global order."

[100] Italics by Schmitt show the clear emphasis on the requirement of both. See *Theorie Des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung Zum Begriff Des Politischen*, 93.

the next subpart, we will see how ISIS' increasing insistence on its global irregularity in *Dabiq* mirrors its abandonment of the partisan archetype, in favour of the image of a global revolutionary that sets out to destroy a system in which they cannot gain the recognition they need.

From Partisan to Revolutionary

Building on Hegel's struggle for recognition, Alexandre Kojève famously presented the "end of history" as the culmination of this struggle. In his view, much of the world's past can be reduced to the slave's attempt to gain recognition, which is doomed to fail, because "the world, as given, where he lives, belongs to the Master […] and in this world he is necessarily slave."[101] The master is incapable of abdicating and can only cease being master if he and the world that made him master cease to be. The slave's only hope, then, is a revolutionary changing of the world that made him a *Knecht,* as only the slave can "transcend the world as given (at the service of the Master) and not perish."[102] A state where this transformation has taken place and the slave has become an equal amongst equals is what Kojève calls the "end of history." As others have pointed out, such a dialectic of recognition "must be fought out in several spheres, including those of gender and ethnicity, class and power, race and empire,"[103] which arguably includes the unequal recognition of different violent political entities, be they states or insurgents.[104]

Schmitt, without explicitly quoting Hegel, explains the fight between equals (i.e. regular opponents): because the enemy stands on one's own level, one must confront them in a fight, as to gain one's own "size," "limit," and "*Gestalt*."[105] This parallels, of course, Hegel's foundational reasoning of the struggle for recognition. Just as two Hegelian self-consciousnesses fight for recognition to be truly self-conscious, so do the equal regular forces fighting to win their own *Gestalt* through the fight with an equal opponent. When Schmitt's irregular fighter, who is doomed to be unrecognised as long as they are truly irregular,[106] is introduced, it becomes evident that if a Schmittian confrontation between equals is at heart a struggle for recognition, then such an irregular must be a *Knecht*[107] of the international order. They are denied recognition by the masters of this system, the sovereign, recognised nation-states, but need that recognition in the end. When Kojève's work, which builds on that same struggle, is applied to this framework, it entails the following: in a fight for recognition, the party

[101] "Or, le Monde donné où il vit appartient au Maître […], et dans ce Monde il est nécessairement Esclave" in Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à La Lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 33.

[102] Ibid, 34. : "Seul l'Esclave peut transcender le Monde donné (asservi au Maître) et ne pas périr"

[103] M. A. Rafey Habib, *Hegel and the Foundations of Literary Theory*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[104] There are numerous interpretations of Kojève – we only utilise his theory to present the impossibility of recognition for the slave and the his consequential perceived need for revolutionary change.

[105] "um das eigene Maß, die eigene Grenze, die eigene Gestalt zu gewinnen," in *Theorie Des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung Zum Begriff Des Politischen*, 87–88.

[106] Because of the dilemma of the partisan.

[107] Kojève uses the imprecise translation "slave," but as we also refer to Hegel, we consider these terms interchangeable.

that finds itself as a *Knecht* (or the irregular in Schmitt's framework) cannot become an equal under the same system that made it a *Knecht* in the first place. Just as Kojève points out that the world is made for the master, the international order is made for and dominated by regular "master" nation-states that define the norms of the international system. Thus, the irregular's attempt to be recognised is doomed to fail unless they revolt, just as the slave needs a revolutionary changing of the world according to Kojève. The partisan is thus the irregular who still seeks the recognition of the established regular. But once they are aware of the impossibility to become recognised, normalised and thus legitimate, because they are too disruptive for the masters and their world, they are left with only one option: to redefine normality, Schmitt's "hard alternative" of an "establishment of a new regularity by its own means."[108]

Thus, in ISIS' terms, the partisan self-consciousness of ISIS sought recognition as a regular "master" state. This partisan however, is caught in a limbo of obvious and irreversible irregularity, with a claim to regularity that rests solely on imitation of state-like features. Once ISIS understood that it would be denied recognition and realised that its claim to its own type of statehood was incompatible with a world made for and by nation-states, it found itself in the same situation as Kojève's slave and Schmitt's irregular. It had to escape the dilemma of the partisan and was left only with the "hard alternative." In this light, ISIS needed "not the reform" but a "revolutionary transformation of the world,"[109] because in the international order as ISIS found it, it could not gain recognition, as that order "belonged to the Master" which are the sovereign states. Just as Kojève's master, these states could neither survive such a transformation nor could they be the driving force: Recognising a non-state as equal would be a fundamental disruption of the international system and would threaten the unique position of states, even their existence once sub-state groups make claims to sovereignty.[110] The irregular must redefine regularity if he wishes to gain the legitimacy that comes with the recognition of regularity by the regular. Similarly, the slave needs to transform the world if he desires the recognition as an equal by equals. ISIS is then the physical manifestation of this argument: the partisan that cannot be recognised as regular becomes a challenger to the established regularity as such and thus an opponent of the international order, an "international insurgent."[111] Such an irregular fighter no longer knows friend from foe, as the system itself has become the enemy. Therefore, in Schmitt's terms, they are no longer a political actor, but a global criminal without legitimacy who seeks to challenge the international order physically by destroying all those that defend it, morally by abusing its values, and epistemically, by transgressing not only moral boundaries, but ontological ones as well. The transgression of ontological boundaries is evident in the seemingly contradictory statuses of which ISIS sought recognition in *Dabiq*.

[108] *Theorie Des Partisanen: Zwischenbemerkung Zum Begriff Des Politischen*, 78.
[109] Kojève, *Introduction à La Lecture de Hegel*, 33.
[110] Further reading on how the international community reached a consensus on sovereignty and territorial integrity over self-determination see Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 86–87 & 102–3.
[111] Issue 5, 36-39.

ISIS goes from being a partisan to being a global revolutionary in its own image. In this view, one may make sense of ISIS' turn from claims to sovereignty towards claims of absolute authority, from statehood towards "international insurgent," from real enmity against the governments of Iraq and Syria that fought ISIS and those it claimed to represent towards absolute enmity against all governments, and finally the disintegration of the idea of statehood itself. This change in its self-understanding is gradual and entails a re-imagining of the world. The hard categories of Schmitt, which are products of a Eurocentric understanding of legitimacy and the international order, become less revealing about the increasingly liminal self-image of ISIS. In service of this liminal, even transgressional image, ISIS maintains the theme of statehood and sovereignty within later issues of *Dabiq*[112] and keeps the term "State" in its name post-2014, as it conversely slowly embraces the archetype of the global revolutionary. ISIS abandons the telluric character in its name post-2014 renaming itself Islamic State (IS). Mirroring this trend, the magazine also slowly shifts from a telluric focus on Iraq and Syria and an ontological focus on statehood – which defined *Dabiq* until Issue 4 – towards a transnational "project" and international terror starting in Issues 5 and 6. The transnational and irregular becomes the focus from Issue 7 on and remains central until the most explicit and pertinent final Issue 15.[113]

However, it is not merely the telluric character that makes the "true" partisan. It is also the defensive nature, of which the telluric character is only the geographic dimension, as noted earlier. Consequently, another clear indication that ISIS sees itself develop from a partisan to a global revolutionary is the increased focus on attacks in the West – these transnational irregular methods of warfare – which became increasingly important throughout *Dabiq*'s runtime.

In this process, ISIS first sought recognition as a legitimate sovereign in its claim to statehood. This is typical for a legitimate irregular partisan in his claim to telluric defence and faced with the partisan's dilemma. However, as this desire for recognition necessarily remained unfulfilled, ISIS sought to redefine which actors had the legitimacy of granting recognition. In this way, ISIS took on the image of a global revolutionary that sought to re-order the world in a strive towards Kojève's "end of history." The non-political, criminal nature that Schmitt ascribes to the global revolutionary then also dooms ISIS to a definite state of non-recognition in the current system,[114] making the revolution ever more important to the disenfranchised party of international politics. If ISIS would have succeeded with this revolution, and this state of the non-political had become the new norm, then, "Schmitt tells us, history as we know it would cease to exist, too."[115] Thus, ISIS simultaneously claimed for itself a

[112] See the examples taken from later issues supra.

[113] Ingram, "Islamic State's English-Language Magazines, 2014-2017: Trends & Implications for CT-CVE Strategic Communications," 12–16.

[114] As opposed to telluric partisans: E.g., the Taliban remain legitimate enough in their irregularity for great powers to convene with them. See Emma Graham-Harrison, "China's Talks with Taliban Could Be a Positive Thing, US Says," *The Guardian*, 2021; Ayesha Tanzeem, "UNAMA Chief: Without Meaningful Negotiations, Taliban Lose Legitimacy," *Voice of America*, 2021.

[115] Slomp, "The Theory of the Partisan: Carl Schmitt's Neglected Legacy," 136.

political nature while trying to do away with politics. It claimed sovereignty and even statehood, while it simultaneously denounced the illegitimacy of statehood as understood by the West. In transcending established categories in search of recognition without ever abandoning any status previously claimed, ISIS created "a puzzle" for those readers of *Dabiq* who are preoccupied with established norms and rational strategies. It also created uncertainty for the outside observer as to what new international order, what new regularity, it sought to establish.

Some derived from ISIS' communication the promise of a "psychotic utopia."[116] This may not be the most inaccurate description of a post-political world in the image of ISIS. Our reading of *Dabiq* through recognition theory does not show what ISIS promised or how it strategised, but rather illustrates how it coped with non-recognition and the consequences for one of its communication outlets that did not make holistic sense from any other angle. In the magazine, we see attempts at both ingratiation, or at least imitation of the masters of the current international order, and total rejection of any order at all. The shift in focus from the former to the latter mirrors, as we have argued, the development of Schmitt's irregular and Kojève's slave towards the respective "end of history" – though ISIS never succeeded in bringing about its own order, but rather left us a written testimony of its struggle for recognition as epitome of the failed, megalomanic revolutionary.

Conclusion

"The only thing senseless would be for there to be no violent, fierce retaliation in the first place!"
- ISIS addressing the West in the final, fifteenth issue of *Dabiq*, 15.

We cannot reasonably claim that any writer or editor responsible for *Dabiq* has read Hegel, Schmitt or Kojève, so we cannot postulate that the development presented to us in *Dabiq* was influenced by their writings. However, just as these influential thinkers (and the authors that reflected and analysed their writings) built their writings on the world they observed, ISIS as a social entity necessarily builds its own self-image and desire for status and recognition by observing a very similar, if not the same, world. ISIS faced a perceived Western-centric international order, and through the publication of a primarily English-language magazine, it addressed the Western world and its hegemon. Thus, our application of similarly Western-centric categories to ISIS' expressed desire for recognition reveals what ISIS conveyed about its Verlangen to the hegemonic power(s) that oppose it, in ISIS' own terms.

We built on the notion that the magazine may be understood as a genuine expression of ISIS, especially its desire for recognition, instead of building on the presumption that ISIS had a strategic goal with the publication of *Dabiq*. Thereby, we established that ISIS primarily longed for recognition as an *equal*. This was expressed in its emphasis on state-like features of its organisation, its success in governance and its

[116] Calchi-Novati, "The Biopolitics of ISIS' Iconoclastic Propaganda," 115.

admissions of organisational weaknesses which are similar to weaknesses known from other states. Similarly, ISIS' imitation of states in lingo and the reversal of sovereignty in its performance can be understood as calls towards the West to recognise itself in this new entity. The frustration of ISIS with being granted epistemic recognition yet being denied acknowledgment is most evident in this piece's 'The Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy' segment, leading to the incremental shift of its rhetoric. This shift is indicative of a changing self-image or at least of a change in sought-after status, namely one that does not depend on the recognition of states that deal in pre-established categories of Western thought and (Eurocentric) international law.

This new status, like ISIS' previous conflicting definition of statehood through the Caliphate and its theatrical atrocities and breaking of international norms, is a transgression against the international order. However, unlike previous transgressions, this new status requires an absolute enmity. It can ultimately only be achieved when the order that delegitimises it is toppled. Thus, ISIS shifted from being at war with its enemies to being at war with the international order as a whole. This attempt at a global 'revolution' mirrors the pre-final stages of other recognition dependent dynamics that Schmitt and Kojève presented. Thus, ISIS paints for us in *Dabiq* the history of an entity on the international stage that underwent the full Hegelian search for recognition and is increasingly desperate as it is doomed to the status of a *Knecht*. It is not only denied the legitimacy of statehood or of a regular partisan, but even the characteristic of the political as such: ISIS was reduced to an "evil death cult" devoid of recognition and legitimacy, a criminal entity at war with the world and every norm that it thought mattered to the order it opposed. ISIS thus lost the status of subject and was delegated to being an object for the international community *to be dealt with*, like hunger or illness. Its increasingly violent entropy became its sole claim to existence. *Dabiq* then became a misunderstood, unheard scream into the void of an unrecognised entity hoping to write itself into an actual, recognised being and, thus, into a *Gestalt*.

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Russia's Non-Traditional Statecraft in the Middle East and its Application to Ukraine

Ian Parmeter

In the past decade, the Middle East has again become a Russian foreign policy priority – reversing Moscow's reduced focus on the region from the 1970s, when the United States took on the dominant external role. This renewed interest was a result of growing tensions between Russia and the West from the mid-2000s and the Arab Uprisings of 2011, which led to the Syrian civil war. The Russian military intervened in Syria in 2015 to support Bashar al-Assad, Syria's dictator; this deployment of hard power has received comprehensive analysis, much of it critical, particularly from Western governments. However, Russia's use of non-traditional methods of statecraft -- aimed at supplementing its military strategy, countering international and potential domestic criticism of its intervention, and advancing its interests in other parts of the Middle East -- has been less closely examined. This non-traditional statecraft includes the use of mercenaries in Syria, Libya, Sudan, and elsewhere. It is also evident in sophisticated influence-building techniques, and use of cyber technology aimed at shaping the views of governments and the public in the Middle East. These methodologies have also been on display during Russia's war in Ukraine this year. This paper outlines the augmentation of Russia's traditional diplomatic and military capabilities through deployment of non-traditional statecraft to achieve its foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. It assesses Russia's foreign policy successes to date and Russia's likely use of this hybrid strategy in the future.

How Russia came back to the Middle East

During the first half of the Cold War (1950s-60s) the Middle East was a major theatre of Soviet-American rivalry. While the U.S. supported Israel and cultivated relationships with the conservative Gulf monarchies, the Soviet Union backed more radical Arab states, particularly Egypt. Though the Soviet Union sought to cultivate ties with Syria and Iraq, military coups in both hindered a consistent policy until the 1970s, when Syria's Hafez al-Assad and Iraq's Saddam Hussein, both ruthless autocrats, seized power and stabilised their regimes. The Soviet Union's doctrinal atheism further limited the establishment of ties with Gulf Arab states, and Moscow was shut out of Iran because of the Shah's partnership with the U.S.

The disastrous Arab defeat in the 1967 Six-Day Arab-Israeli War was also a defeat for Soviet arms, compounded by the death of pro-Soviet Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. The definitive break occurred in 1972, when Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet military advisers and turned to the U.S. for both material and diplomatic support.

U.S.-brokered negotiations between Egypt and Israel through the 1970s culminated in the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the subsequent peace treaty. This represented a major foreign policy win for Washington, and a zero-sum loss for Moscow, as the accords confirmed the U.S. as the primary external actor wielding

influence in the Middle East.

Moscow's attention to the region was further reduced as a consequence of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and Moscow's failure in the subsequent nine-year war. Moreover, throughout the 1980s, Moscow's focus on foreign policy was overshadowed by the growing internal strains of the weakening Soviet Union, which would lead to its collapse in 1991. Though the last Soviet President, Mikhail Gorbachev, sought a more accommodating relationship with the U.S., including by sending Soviet forces to join the international coalition to eject Iraq from Kuwait in 1990-'91, his main priorities were domestic: a last ditch effort to save the union through economic and social reforms represented by *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union caused political, economic and social upheaval in Russia for a decade. From Russia's perspective, Western leaders took advantage of the resulting power vacuum in Eastern Europe to expand NATO right to Russia's border - dashing prospects of a less adversarial post-Soviet relationship. Vladimir Putin, who had succeeded Russia's first post-Soviet president, Boris Yeltsin, in 2000, made clear his anger over Western policies in his landmark address to the NATO Security Conference in Munich in 2007. Putin accused the U.S. of an aggressive foreign policy aimed at establishing a U.S.-dominated unipolar world and neglecting the views and interests of other states. Putin's speech marked the beginning of a new Cold War style rivalry between the US and Russia.

In this environment, the Middle East again became of interest to Russia. President George W. Bush's poorly conceived and executed invasion of Iraq in 2003 highlighted American vulnerability in the region; this legacy overshadowed the foreign policies of his successors, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. Through deft diplomacy across the region, which took advantage of U.S. missteps, and calibrated military interventions (Syria, 2015 and Libya, 2019), Putin has been able to counter U.S. policies and develop productive relations with the most important regional actors – the major Arab states, Israel, Iran, and Turkey – despite their mutual antagonisms. Remarkably, he has for some years been the only world leader to be on personal good terms with the heads of all significant countries in the region.[1] How his aggression in Ukraine might affect this remains to be seen.

Russia's alliance structures in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

This personal diplomacy is a substantial feat. Essentially, Putin has achieved it by isolating Russia's bilateral relations with individual states in the MENA region from the region's broader antagonisms. A brief examination of Russia's dealings with individual Middle East states demonstrates this.

Syria is the only MENA state with which Russia has a formal alliance, and Russia's actions there have the potential to affect, for better or worse, its

[1] This remains the case at time of writing (May 2022), though if the war in Ukraine extends for some time, there may be an impact on relations with individual leaders. For example, Israel has reacted adversely to a suggestion by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov that Hitler had Jewish origins so Ukrainian leader Zelensky, despite being Jewish, could still be a Nazi. See: Tia Goldenberg, "Israel lashes out at Russia over Lavrov's Nazism remarks," *Associated Press*, 2 May 2022.

relations with all other states in the region.[2] Syria's progressive descent into widespread anarchy, as the civil war developed from 2011, rang alarm bells across the region. Many states feared that a spill-over of the violence there would affect their own security, especially after Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) emerged as a significant force in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Moreover, Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey had to cope with huge numbers of Syrians displaced by the conflict. Iran was alarmed for different reasons; it saw Syria as an essential bridge to Lebanon and its Shia client, Hizballah, which would be threatened if there was regime change in Damascus.

Moderate states in the region, particularly Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and Egypt, looked to the U.S. for a solution, given Washington's past interventions in the Middle East.[3] However, President Obama, who ran in the 2008 elections on a pledge to extract American ground forces from Iraq,[4] was reluctant to intervene in another war in the Middle East. In this context, Russia's resolute but carefully calibrated intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015 provided a significant contrast to Obama's inaction. All leaders in the region, including those with no brief for Assad, were impressed by Putin's determination to support his Arab ally. This was perceived as a stark contrast to the U.S.' apparent abandonment of former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in 2011.[5]

The Gulf Arab states were formally opposed to Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war.[6] However, this attitude was counterbalanced by their anger with the U.S. over what they saw as Washington's tilt to Iran through the 2015 nuclear deal.[7] Additionally, much like Israel, the Gulf states worried about the inconsistencies in Obama's approach to the Middle East; particularly following his refusal to stand by his declared "red line" concerning Assad's use of chemical weapons in 2013.[8]

With Saudi Arabia's and its Gulf Arab allies' confidence in the U.S. shaken under Obama, they welcomed Putin's outreach during Obama's second term – not least in order to display their displeasure with the American administration. They saw

[2] The Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, signed by the Soviet Union and Syria in October 1980. Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, has adopted the treaty. It provides for military cooperation and coordination in times of crisis. Hafez al-Assad's long-serving defence minister, Mustapha Tlas, claimed the treaty had a secret clause in which the Soviet Union promised to come to Syria's aid in the event of external aggression, but this was never confirmed by the Soviets.

[3] Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman.

[4] Lawrence K. Korb, "The promised withdrawal from Iraq," *American Progress*, 27 February 2009.

[5] Arab reaction to Russia's intervention in Syria is examined in detail in Eugene Rumer, "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* 31 October 2019. Rumer's summary is, "By reversing the course of the Syrian civil war and saving an old client, Moscow sent a message to other Middle Eastern regimes that it is a reliable partner."

[6] William Maclean, "Gulf Arabs oppose Russia role in Syria, still bent on Assad's ouster," *Reuters*, 22 September 2015.

[7] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed by Iran, the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and Germany, which lifted economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for Iran's curtailing its nuclear enrichment program.

[8] See Yoel Guzansky and Azriel Bermant, "The Best of the Worst: Why Iran's Enemies Support the Nuclear Deal," *Foreign Affairs*, 13 August 2015, which provides detailed analysis of the Gulf states' concerns over the Iran deal and what they saw as the Obama administration's inconsistency in its approach to the Middle East.

Trump's inauguration in 2017 as a positive development for their relationship with the U.S.; Trump made a major gesture by honouring Saudi Arabia with a trip to Riyadh as his first presidential overseas visit. However, Trump's visit did not deter Saudi King Salman from making a rare visit abroad to Moscow that October.[9] Putin subsequently reciprocated this gesture with a visit to Riyadh in October 2019.[10]

That said, Putin's motivations in his dealings with the Gulf Arab states lie more in bilateral than geostrategic interests. Russia is the world's second-largest oil exporter after Saudi Arabia - though Western sanctions imposed this year over Russia's invasion of Ukraine will probably affect this. Putin therefore seeks to work with the Gulf States in an Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+) arrangement to manage global oil production and prices. He also wants to encourage them to invest in massive natural gas projects in Russia's Arctic region. Moreover, he seeks to increase Russia's share of the lucrative Gulf market for arms sales, which the U.S. has long monopolized. He took advantage of strikes on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019 (which Washington and Riyadh blamed on Iran) in order to claim that Russia's S-400 air defence system would have prevented the attacks.[11] As well, Putin judiciously avoided taking sides in the dispute between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt on the one hand and Qatar on the other (2017-2021).

The reality is that, apart from cooperation on energy, the Gulf is a non-core area of foreign policy activity for Russia. Though it would like to loosen Washington's grip on the region, Moscow does not have the resources to take over the U.S. security role. Rather, Putin seeks to dilute the U.S. role through a multinational arrangement that would include a number of extra-regional powers, including Russia.[12]

Accordingly, Russia announced a Security Concept for the Gulf in July 2019.[13] The project envisages a regional security cooperation organisation whose members would comprise the Gulf states (including Iran) and external stakeholders involving Russia, the U.S., the European Union, India and China. Given the plan's impossibly broad nature and proposed involvement of antagonistic parties, Moscow could hardly have been surprised by the tepid initial reaction to the initiative. Nor was international reception of the plan helped by the fact that it was announced by Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, rather than Putin or Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov - suggesting it was a relatively low foreign policy priority. In calling for expansive dialogue between Iran and all Gulf states overseen by the UN, the GCC, the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Concept ambitiously sought to establish an Action Group to prepare an international conference on security and

[9] Leonid Issaev, "Decoding King Salman's Visit to Moscow," *Al Jazeera*, 4 October 2017.
[10] *Al Jazeera*, "Putin visits Saudi Arabia in sign of growing ties," 15 October 2019.
[11] Michelle Nichols, "Exclusive: UN investigators find Yemen's Houthis did not carry out Saudi oil attack," *Reuters*, 9 January 2020; Adam Taylor, "For Saudi Arabia, an oil field attack was a disaster. For Russia, it's a weapons sales pitch," *Washington Post*, 21 September 2019.
[12] Noted Russian scholar Bobo Lo sets out this aspect of Russian foreign policy in *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London, Chatham House, 2015).
[13] *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, "Presentation on Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region," 23 July 2019, https://www.mid.ru.

cooperation in the Gulf area.[14]

The Trump administration, despite its relatively benign approach to Russia, seemingly saw no value in the initiative and largely ignored the idea.[15] Biden has done the same. China politely praised it but showed no sign of taking it further.[16] The only Middle Eastern states to welcome the project were Russia's regional partners, Syria and Iran, which almost certainly rules out support from other Arab states.[17] Given these divisions, the timing for the Russian initiative was unpropitious.

Russia's relations with non-Arab regional states such as Iran, Israel and Turkey have been in line with its strategy with the GCC states: to undertake bilateral dealings and keep Moscow separate from broader regional frictions.

Russian-Iranian relations are rooted in a troubled past that continues to haunt their contemporary ties; as neither fully trusts the other, misunderstandings abound. They share a common interest in their mutual hostility towards the U.S. and their support for the Assad regime. However, their objectives are fundamentally different: Russia's focus is global, while Iran's is regional. Moscow has shown repeatedly that it is prepared to break its commitments to Iran when larger benefits are on offer elsewhere.[18] Russia has other Middle Eastern partners, some of whom are rivals to Tehran, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. And Russia can afford to be relatively complacent in its relations with Iran, as Tehran has no other major power toward which to turn.

Russian relations with Israel have shown the most dramatic improvement since Moscow's intervention in Syria. In the last century, Jews emigrating to Israel from the former Soviet Union and its successor states often harboured bitterness over the anti-Semitism they had experienced. Over time, that has been gradually replaced by growing interest and curiosity in the culture of their former homelands. Russian is now the fourth most-widely spoken language in Israel after Hebrew, Arabic, and English.[19] Moreover, Israeli politicians seek to cultivate the Russian-speaking vote, a factor that helped forge a strong relationship between long-time Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

[14] Detailed explanations of the concept were left to relatively minor officials: For example, *Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations*, "Press conference by Charge d'Affaires of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Polyanskiy, on Russia's Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region," August 8, 2019, http://www.russiaun.ru.

[15] Paul Saunders, "How does Washington see Russia's Gulf security concept?" *Al Monitor*, 11 October 2019.

[16] *Tass*, "China welcomes Russia's collective security concept for Persian Gulf," October 8, 2019.

[17] See, for example, Theodore Karasik, "Is Russia's 'old' Gulf security plan the best it can do?" *Arab News*, July 30, 2019.

[18] Several examples are set out in Witold Rodkiewicz, "Russia's Middle East Policy – Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives," *Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW),* Warsaw, 2017 https://www.osw.waw.pl. Among them is a secret Russian agreement with the US in 1995, when Moscow under President Yeltsin was seeking US financial aid: Russia agreed not to export arms or military technology to Iran after 1999. (This agreement was abrogated by Putin shortly after he came to power – when it was evident that the US had no intention of launching a Russian "Marshall Plan".) Another was Putin's quid pro quo with Obama in 2009 as part of the short-lived "reset" of bilateral relations: Russia backed a new UNSC resolution imposing further sanctions on Iran, and then-President Medvedev expanded the ban to include S-300 surface-to-air missiles that Russia had contracted to sell Iran in 2007.

[19] Alpha Omega Translations, "The Four Most Important Languages of Israel," March 4, 2019, info@alphaomegatranslations.com.

Netanyahu and Putin.

Israel under Netanyahu, and now Naftali Bennett, is amenable to many elements of Putin's policy in Syria. Israel hates uncertainty and does not favour changes to its regional security environment, particularly ones it does not initiate.[20] In the early stages of the Syrian civil war, Israel was conflicted. A relatively peaceful democratic transition in Syria offered prospects of a more benign and possibly pro-Western leadership in place of the Assads that could lead eventually to less hostile relations between Israel and Syria. It could also potentially produce a peace treaty, along the lines of those Israel has signed with Egypt and Jordan. At the same time, Israel doesn't believe in easy solutions in the Middle East. Even though Assad was an enemy to Israel, he was a known enemy. Since former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated the Israeli-Syrian disengagement in 1974, Israel's border with Syria in the Golan Heights has been its most secure. Meanwhile, Israel has handled other potential concerns, such as Syria's attempt to construct a nuclear reactor in the mid-2000s, through preemptive military action.

As civil war unfolded in Syria, Israel watched closely – prepared to take action if the conflict began to spill over its border. However, by 2015, the war was developing into something far more dangerous for Israel. In early 2015, hardline Islamists, such as ISIL and affiliates of Al Qaeda, were threatening to overthrow the Assad regime. If they succeeded, Israel would have had a truly hostile, aggressive, implacable, and unpredictable enemy on its northeastern border.

Accordingly, Israel's reaction to Russia's entry into the Syrian conflict in September 2015 should be of no surprise. Whilst Israel made no public comment, there was no doubt that Russia's intervention, which prevented the Assad regime from falling, was welcomed by the Netanyahu government. Bennett has also said little about the Russian presence in Syria publicly, but appears to share Netanyahu's views in that respect.

Russian-Turkish relations have fluctuated significantly in the past decade. Turkey was unhappy with Russia's support for the Assad regime because Turkish President Erdogan had staked much on funding and arming the rebel campaign against the regime. Relations between the two countries worsened after Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft that had strayed briefly into Turkish airspace in November 2015.

Following a period of frostiness, Erdogan uncharacteristically apologized, enabling normal ties to resume. Erdogan had been angered by the Obama administration's criticism of his 2016 crackdown following a coup attempt linked to U.S.-based opposition leader Fethullah Gulen. He consequently tilted strongly towards Russia, making Moscow his first external visit after the crackdown..

Turkish-American ties scarcely improved during Trump's presidency. Relations between the two countries were marred by America's continual refusal to accede to Turkish demands for Gulen's extradition, as well as by Trump's periodic

20 Daniel L. Byman, "Israel: A Frosty Response to the Arab Spring," in Kenneth M. Pollack et al (ed), *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington, Brookings Institution, 2011), 250-257.

insensitivities towards Ankara. Both leaders' egos made it difficult to ease friction between the two states. Trump's peremptory and undiplomatic letter to Erdogan in October 2019, in which he told Erdogan to not "be a fool" concerning a Turkish military incursion into the Kurdish enclave of northern Syria, unsurprisingly infuriated Erdogan.[21] The letter also undercut Vice President Mike Pence's efforts to mediate with Erdogan. Thereafter, the Turkish leader made clear that he preferred to work through Putin in order to reach an understanding with the Syrian regime on Turkey's Kurdish problem.

One of the consequences of the estrangement between the U.S. and Turkey is the ambiguous position in which it put Turkey within NATO. Erdogan's willingness to buy Russian military equipment, particularly the S-400 system, has precluded Turkish access to the US F-35 fighter, which is on order to most NATO countries.[22]

Though such tactical successes would please Putin, Russia needs to manage its relations with Turkey with utmost care. The two states' bilateral ties are underpinned by the Turkstream I and II natural gas pipelines, which cross the Black Sea. When completed, the project is planned to supply Russian natural gas not only to Turkey but also to several states in the west; including Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria. U.S. and EU sanctions on Russia since the start of the Ukraine crisis put the project in doubt, though Turkey has said so far that it will not implement the sanctions due to its energy needs. Turkey has good relations with Ukraine and voted in favour of the UN General Assembly resolution on 2 March demanding that Russia end its aggression. Turkey has also sought to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, so far un-successfully at the time of writing.[23]

Russia also needs to broker relations between Turkey and Syria over the remaining rebel enclave in Idlib. Turkey does not want Syria to invade the enclave, as it would lead to a further flow of refugees into Turkey. So far, Russian influence has held Assad back.

Russian-Egyptian ties: Due to Egypt's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, its foreign policy is largely consistent with theirs. Given Moscow's excellent relations with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, that has facilitated Russia's ties with Cairo. These were further boosted when Moscow embraced the Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi regime in 2013 - in marked contrast to the US, which was initially hesitant over whether to condone Sisi's violent seizure of power.[24] Putin backed Sisi's campaign for the presidency in 2014 and welcomed him to Moscow early that year, Sisi's first post-coup

[21] Roland Oliphant, "Don't be a fool!" Donald Trump's letter 'binned' by Turkish president as Mike Pence attempts to broker ceasefire," *Daily Telegraph*, October 17, 2019, https://www.telegraph.co.uk.

[22] *TRTWorld*, "US formally removes Turkey from F-35 programme," April 22, 2021.

[23] Dimitar Bechev, "Turkey between a rock and a hard place on Russia," *Politico*, March 2, 2022.

[24] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by President Barack Obama on Egypt: "We are deeply concerned by the decision of the Egyptian Armed Forces to remove President Morsy and suspend the Egyptian constitution," July 3, 2013. See also: Michael Crowley, "We Caved: What happened when Barack Obama's idealistic rhetoric collided with the cold realities of war and dictatorship in the Middle East and beyond," *Politico Magazine*, Washington, January/February 2016. He quotes Obama as saying, "We can't return to business as usual. We have to be very careful about being seen as aiding and abetting actions that we think run contrary to our values and ideals."

overseas visit.[25] Egypt and Russia have since enjoyed closer military ties, holding joint naval and airborne military exercises since 2015.[26]

Ukraine impact

A tactical success of Putin's outreach to Middle East states over much of his leadership has been the ambiguous approach of the region's most important states to the Russian war in Ukraine. The UAE disappointed the U.S. by abstaining from the UN Security Council vote on 25 February 2022 to condemn the invasion, which Russia vetoed. Though the UAE voted in favour of an identical resolution in the UN General Assembly, Dubai has allowed itself to become a haven for wealthy Russians escaping Western sanctions.[27] Saudi Arabia has been unwilling to increase oil production to compensate for the sanctioning of Russian oil exports – prioritising the OPEC+ arrangement over the U.S. relationship. De facto Saudi ruler Mohamad bin Salman is still bitter about the Biden administration's claim that he ordered the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.[28] Though Israel voted in favour of the General Assembly resolution, it has refused Ukraine's request to purchase Israel's Iron Dome air defence system.[29] Damascus has reportedly facilitated the Russian Central Bank's use of the Syrian financial system to evade sanctions.[30] Another important factor linking Russia, Ukraine and Syria is that the newly appointed Russian commander of Russian forces in Ukraine, Lt Gen Alexandr Dvornikov, previously oversaw Russia's military campaign in Syria from 2015, which included the brutal levelling of large parts of Aleppo.[31]

Limits of bilateralism

The problem for Putin's MENA policy is that, despite being on good terms with the leaders of all major Middle East states, he is not the primary external ally of any but the Syrian and Iranian leaders. Moscow's support for Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar (through mercenaries, discussed below) did not win plaudits with Turkey and Qatar. On the other hand, Russia's intervention in the Libyan conflict received praise from Haftar's other supporters such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. Meanwhile, Putin has managed to keep his relations with Israel and Iran separate, despite their mutual antipathies. He was also indifferent towards the U.S.-backed Abraham Accords in 2020, which normalised the UAE's and Bahrain's relations with Israel (with implied Saudi blessing), and ignored the setback to the Palestinian cause.

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[25] Jonathan Marcus, "Sisi in Russia: Moscow's Egyptian gambit," *BBC News*, February 13, 2014.

[26] Anton Mardasov, "Russia, Egypt look to boost military ties," *Al Monitor*, November 7, 2019. See also *BBC News*, "Putin backs Sisi 'bid for Egypt presidency,'" February 13, 2014.

[27] Martin Chulov and Joanna Partridge, "Dubai throws open the doors for the rich Russians escaping sanctions," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2022.

[28] Clifford Krauss, "Loss of Russian oil leaves a void not easily filled, straining market," *New York Times*, March 9, 2022.

[29] "Israel torpedoed sale of Iron Dome to Ukraine, fearing Russian reaction – report," *Times of Israe*l, February 15, 2022.

[30] Michael Weiss, "Exclusive: how Russia evades sanctions via Syrian loan schemes," *New Lines Magazine*, April 5, 2022.

[31] "Who is the general leading Russia's new war strategy in Ukraine," *Al Jazeera*, April 12, 2022.

Putin's diplomatic approach is thus to build regional relations where Russia and Middle Eastern states have mutual interests. It is essentially an opportunistic methodology, turning to his advantage developments as they arise, rather than a comprehensive strategy. Given Russia's limited economic heft, Putin has played a poor poker hand masterfully well. He is sufficiently canny to realise that a single approach cannot hope to straddle the region's divisions.

These limitations to traditional diplomacy have given Putin an incentive to bolster his approach with non-traditional statecraft.

Private Military Companies (PMCs) – Wagner Group

A major goal of the Putin administration is the re-establishment of international recognition of Russia as a great power. This would require peer acceptance of said status and a seat at the table in management of the global order. Putin follows the doctrine of long-serving Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, that no important international agreement should be reached without the Soviet Union's involvement.[32] Putin was clearly angry with President Obama in 2014 when Obama referred to Russia as a regional power.[33]

Indeed, Russia's economic weaknesses, compared with the economic prowess of the U.S., China, and Western Europe, makes it challenging to gain international recognition as a great power. According to IMF estimates, Russia's GDP is less than a tenth that of the U.S. and China – varying in size with fluctuations in energy export prices.[34] Nevertheless Russia's military power ranks second after the United States according to the independent 2022 Global Firepower Index, which is based on military resources, diversity of weapon systems and available trained manpower across land, sea and air theatres.[35] Russia has nuclear-weapon parity with the U.S., and conventional Russian forces have reportedly undergone significant performance-enhancing reforms and rearmament since their relatively poor showing in the brief war with Georgia in 2007 - though Russia's limited success in the Ukraine war to date casts doubt on the effectiveness of such reforms.[36] As well, a limiting factor for Russian power projection is its hostile neighbours, including NATO members and now obviously Ukraine, on its perimeter. Therefore, a significant proportion of Russia's military resources is focused on territorial defence.

Russia thus has incentives to look for smart and inexpensive ways to project power internationally. Private military companies (PMCs) provide a tool for Russia to

[32] Charles E. Zeigler, *The History of Russia*, (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 2009), 110;
Craig R. Whitney, "Andrei A. Gromyko: Flinty face of post-war Soviet diplomacy," *New York Times*, July 4, 1989.

[33] "Obama dismisses Russia as 'regional power' acting out of weakness," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014; "Obama calling Russia a regional power is 'disrespectful' – Putin," *Moscow Times*, January 12, 2016.

[34] U.S. GDP $22.7 trillion; China GDP $16.6 trillion; Russia GDP $1.7 trillion. Source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2021.

[35] *Global Firepower Annual Ranking*, "2022 Military Strength Ranking," www.globalfirepower.com

[36] Peter Apps, "Russia raises military clout with reforms after Georgian war," *Reuters,* February 28, 2014.

do great power politics on the cheap.[37]

This is not a new practice for Russia. The Russian state has a record of using non-state armed actors in regional conflicts since Ivan the Terrible's employment of the Danish mercenary Carsten Rohde against Sweden and Poland in the 16th Century.[38] Such non-state actors diversify the means available to achieve defined power projection goals, while providing plausible deniability to avoid accountability.

Wagner Group is the most well-known of the PMCs serving the Russian state. The Russian PMC industry comprises several companies of different sizes and specialisations. Not all are commercial in the sense of providing services on an open market. Wagner and a Ministry of Defence proxy, "Patriot," cater exclusively to Russian state agencies. Another company, 'RSB Group,' is more like a Western company (such as Academi, formerly Blackwater) and offers commercial services. Some are outcrops of military divisions, organised and run to "earn on the side" and perhaps allow their soldiers to operate with plausible deniability – for example, "Shield," which reportedly operates under the umbrella of Russia's 45th *Spetznaz* (Special Forces) Airborne Brigade.[39]

Wagner's origins, like much of its structure and financing, are shadowy. It is not a registered company in Russia, where mercenary groups are illegal. According to an analysis by the New America think tank and the Center on the Future of War, it was originally registered in Hong Kong in 2012 as Slavonic Corps Ltd by the Moran Group, a company formed by Russian military veterans to provide international security services.[40] Moran Group itself was registered in the Central American state Belize in the 1990s.

Wagner developed in stages in the first half of the 2010s as Moscow sought advantageous and politically palatable ways to fight wars in Donbas, a region of eastern Ukraine adjoining Russia, and then in Syria. The leader of Slavonic Corps was a former GRU *Spetznaz* officer, Lt Col Dmitry Utkin, whose call sign was Wagner – a name he chose apparently out of admiration for the German composer.

At some point between 2014 and 2015, Slavonic Corps took on the Wagner

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[37] This description is used in Ase Ostensen and Tor Bukkvoll, "Private Military Companies – Russian great power politics on the cheap?" *Journal of Small Wars and Insurgencies,* September 9, 2021.

Much of what is known about Wagner and other organisations associated with Prigozhin comes from cross-checking a range of reports in the Russian media and several detailed Western analyses. These include U.S. government reports, such as U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's 2018 assessment of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, and Treasury and Justice Department documents sanctioning Prigozhin.

As well, the Jamestown Foundation, Washington, has published a series of detailed reports on Wagner and other Russian PMCs by Sergey Sukhankin, a Russian-speaker who cites a large range of checkable Russian media sources, particularly from the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*, whose editor, Dmitri Muratov, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for 'safeguarding freedom of expression' in Russia.

[38] Sergey Sukhankin, "Continuing war by other means: The case of Wagner, Russia's premier private military company in the Middle East," *Jamestown Foundation*, July 13, 2018.

[39] Sergey Sukhankin, "New Russian PMC spotted in Syria: Potential military links and implications," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, August 7, 2019.

[40] Candace Rondeaux, Candace, "Decoding the Wagner Group, Analysing the role of private military security contractors in Russian proxy warfare," *New America*, Washington, November 7, 2019.

title. It was first deployed in Donbas in 2014 at a time when Russia needed to fight a covert war, hide casualties from the Russian public, and mitigate the international repercussions of a gross violation of a neighbour's sovereignty.

The Russian military intervention in the Syrian civil war from September 2015 was primarily through air power as Putin wanted to avoid Russian army presence on the ground and minimise official casualties. However, he secretly sent hundreds of Wagner fighters into Syria in the early days of the intervention.

Yevgeny Prigozhin

Wagner is a textbook example of how the Putin administration harnesses the self-interest of ambitious members of the Russian elite to create covert and flexible tools. Though he denies association, the reported primary financier and manager of Wagner is a Russian businessman, Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin.[41] Born in Leningrad in 1961, his background includes a nine-year prison term for money laundering and organising a prostitution ring in the late Soviet period. He has no military or security experience, and became rich as a successful restaurateur based in St Petersburg. Though not initially a member of Russia's security or commercial elite, he made it big by associating himself with Putin – eventually catering for Kremlin events and becoming known in the 2000s as "Putin's chef."

He made himself even more useful to Putin from 2013 through creating the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a vehicle for online Russian influence operations. The IRA will be examined later in this report.

Prigozhin appears now to be a de facto member of Putin's inner circle. However, he is not a member of the *siloviki,* theelite current and former senior intelligence and military officers, who control the instruments of the state's hard power or the oligarchs, the super-rich who garnered the spoils of the collapsing Soviet economic structure in the 1990s, and control much of the state's economy in their own and their families' interests. Prigozhin is a level below them. He has no separate power base and strives for influence and financial rewards by pleasing Putin. That connection facilitated his winning lucrative government civilian contracts with the Russian military, such as cleaning services – helping with his initial financing of Wagner Group. The obvious benefit he provides to Putin through Wagner is a mercenary force that operates with minimal state support. Moreover, his activities are deniable. Putin argued in a 2018 interview that Russia has no responsibility for Prigozhin because Prigozhin has no official position.[42]

However, it can be assumed that Wagner cannot exist without Putin's blessing, and Prigozhin needs Putin's approval for strategic-level decisions, such as where and when Wagner is deployed. If he falls out of favour with Putin, he will be back to running restaurants.

Wagner's early activities in eastern Ukraine and Syria were funded largely

[41] Much of the following is based on research by Sergey Sukhankin noted above, but also on the Mueller Report into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, detailed below.

[42] President Putin: Interview with Austrian ORF television channel, June 4, 2018. Text on President of Russia website at www.en.kremlin.ru.

from Prigozhin's commercial activities with a minor contribution from the Russian Ministry of Defense. The latter proved to be tricky because Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu apparently resented giving any of his budget to a PMC – a situation aggravated by personal animosity between the two.[43] Whatever the case, from 2017 Prigozhin started to run Wagner on a more overtly commercial basis via an agreement with the Assad regime to substantially fund the group's operations in Syria. The deal involved the regime allowing a company established by Prigozhin, EvroPolis, to take 25% of the revenue from Syrian oil and gas fields that the group won back from control of anti-Assad rebels. That commercial formula underlies Wagner's more recent expansion into Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), and other sub-Saharan African states. The CAR agreement reportedly involved EvroPolis's access to diamond and other mineral resources of the state.

From 2014 onwards, the group started to train at a military facility at Molkino near Krasnodar in southern Russia run by the GRU (in Russian, the Main Intelligence Directorate), Russia's foreign military intelligence agency. The GRU was renamed the GU in 2010 (removing "intelligence" from the title) but the original name stuck. The focus of this training has been on guerrilla skills, sabotage, directing land-air operations, battle space coordination, and other skills valuable for a relatively small militia whose task is to act as a force multiplier for larger military units. Estimates of the total number of Wagner recruits who have trained at Krasnodar since 2014 vary, but seem to be in the 8,000-10,000 range. The group apparently continues to train there despite the Prigozhin-Shoigu friction. Wagner's weapons are Russian and presumably supplied by the Defence Ministry.[44] In eastern Ukraine and probably in the initial deployment stage in Syria, Wagner was apparently subordinated to the GRU, a claim supported in the U.S. Treasury's statement sanctioning Wagner and Utkin in 2016.[45] However, Wagner seems to have become increasingly independent as the Syrian operation progressed.

Remuneration for Wagner members is superior to that of Russian regular forces. When Prigozhin set up the group, the Russian military's basic pay level was about 60% of the lowest ranking Wagner operative. Like the Russian military, the Wagner remuneration package included compensation for injury or compensation to nominated family members in the case of death. Payment levels increased during combat service. A 2017 estimate, based on Russian sources, put Syria-based Wagner operatives' average monthly salary at 240,000 roubles, compared to the much lower average Russian monthly wage of about 40,000 roubles.[46] This remuneration reportedly

[43] "'Putiin's chef' Prigozhin loses Defence Ministry's favor, report says," *The Moscow Times*, March 2, 2018.

[44] Much of this detail is taken from interviews (e.g. by Russian-speaking reporters) with former Wagner Group members. In addition, a tablet apparently left behind by a Wagner Group fighter while retreating from an engagement in Libya provided substantial details about the group's operations. See Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, "Wagner: Scale of Russian mercenary mission in Libya exposed," *BBC News*, August 11, 2021.

[45] *US Department of the Treasury Press Center*, "Treasury designates individuals and entities involved in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine," July 20, 2017; Colin Wilhelm, "Treasury sanctions more Russian individuals, companies in connection to Ukraine," *Politico*, December 20, 2016.

[46] Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's not so secret mercenaries: patronage, geopolitics and the Wagner Group," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, July 8, 2019.

deteriorated when the Assad regime became involved in funding the group, but by how much is not clear.

The group's recruitment base includes Russian war veteran societies; reservists with combat experience; Cossack organisations (historically a source of mercenaries since Tsarist times); ethnically non-Russian regions (such as south Caucasus); Serbs (a separate Serbian unit has been reported); and even French, Spaniards, and Italians.[47] The proportions and remuneration levels of each group are not publicly known – not least because payment is in cash. During the group's operations in eastern Ukraine, a Ukrainian security service officer estimated that about a third of the mercenaries did not speak Russian.[48] Whatever the proportion, it probably varied over time and with each recruitment intake. The obvious aim of this diverse recruitment strategy has been to ensure that as few as possible body bags are brought back to Russia, thereby avoiding public disquiet. Furthermore, these would not have been counted among official Russian military casualties. A 2017 estimate of Russia-related deaths since the 2015 intervention in Syria put Wagner's at 200 and the Russian military's at just nineteen.[49] Neither figure can be taken at face value, but they provide indications.

In terms of international norms and standards, Russia is neither a signatory to the Montreux Document, nor a member of the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers. The former outlines how international law applies to PMCs and is supported by fifty-five countries, including the US. The latter sets standards for PMCs to adhere to international law and human rights, as well as best practices in management. Evidence from several sources indicates members of the group have committed war crimes, such as killing prisoners, using torture and laying landmines in civilian areas.[50]

Syria

The number of Wagner personnel deployed in Syria since the start of the war does not seem to have exceeded 2,000.[51] That means they were too few to be a major on-the-ground force in their own right, but they could augment other ground troops and play a force multiplier role. There seems no doubt that the effectiveness of pro-Assad irregular forces, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hizballah, increased substantially when they were professionally coordinated from a single centre.

The tasks carried out by Wagner in Syria have included:

- Use as shockwave troops in conjunction with other pro-Assad forces
- Training pro-Assad armed groups and military formations

[47] Sergey Sukhankin, "Foreign mercenaries, irregulars and 'volunteers': non-Russians in Russia's wars," *War by Other Means, The Jamestown Foundation*, October 9, 2019.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Op Cit*.
[50] Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, *Op Cit.*
[51] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Op Cit.*

- Assistance with coordination of irregular pro-Assad paramilitary groups and working with Syrian army special forces units.
- Directing strikes of Russian air and naval assets deployed in Syria and off the Syrian coast.
- Taking back important Assad regime economic assets, such as oil and gas fields, and ensuring their security.

Though Wagner was too small to compete militarily with a technologically superior force in an open battle, the Syrian experience demonstrated that the 'cost-quality' balance favoured formations of this type: relatively little outlay for specific gain – especially in taking and maintaining control of economic resources, such as oil fields.

Wagner's role in Syria went through three stages:

- Ground reconnaissance (September 2015- early 2016) – in which the PMC helped lay the groundwork for Russia's intervention in the civil war.
- Independent military operations (2016) – its main success in this period was taking back Palmyra, a strategic town in central Syria, from ISIL on behalf of the Assad regime. Its activities in that battle included acting as shock wave troops through frontal military attacks. (ISIL recaptured Palmyra in December 2016.)
- Operations in combination with Assad regime forces (2017-2018): This phase involved closer coordination with Assad's military following the regime's agreement to assist with funding Wagner in return for specialist operations, particularly recapturing hydrocarbon resources. It included the group's assisting pro-Assad forces to retake Palmyra in March 2017.

Progozhin may have pushed his militia to take risks in order to demonstrate to Assad how its fighting skills could complement the larger Syrian army forces. The last phase led to a growing number of casualties. The worst occurred on 7th-8th February 2018 when Wagner, in combination with other pro-Assad groups, took on anti-Assad Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) supported by the US military near Deir al-Zor in Syria's east. The result was a heavy defeat for Wagner and serious losses: the number is disputed, but they may have been as high as 200 killed.[52] Though that would have been a calamitous loss for a small force, the event demonstrated key advantages of PMCs for Russia. There was no domestic damage to the Putin administration – which certainly would have been the case if similar losses had been sustained by the Russian military. Similarly, Putin was able to deflect criticism from Western countries as news of the debacle came out. Russian officials simply denied the reports.

Nevertheless, Putin was reportedly furious that Wagner's role in Syria had become so prominent and that the force had come into conflict with US forces. His aides upbraided Prigozhin, who promised to ensure that nothing similar would

[52] Nathaniel Reynolds, *Op cit.*

happen again.[53] From 2018, with Assad having effectively won the civil war, the group gradually downsized its role in Syria, with most being redeployed to other theatres, such as Sudan, Libya, and the Central African Republic (CAR).[54] They were reported to be returning to Ukraine in early 2022 as the crisis there ramped up.[55]

Despite the Deir al-Zor debacle, there can be little doubt that Wagner was partly the reason why Russia's intervention in Syria did not descend into a 'quagmire', as Obama had forecast in 2015. Wagner formed a largely invisible but generally effective force that delivered substantial results with minimal economic expenditure – and, after the deal with Assad in 2017, clear profits for Prigozhin.

As Wagner and Prigozhin have become more widely known, Putin has become less reticent about being associated with them. Utkin was photographed with Putin at a Kremlin reception in December 2016 in honour of recipients of the Russian Order of Courage. Utkin has apparently been decorated with four Orders of Courage – awarded for bold and decisive action in carrying out military or civil duties under conditions involving risk to life.[56]

In 2012, according to a Russian media report, Putin described PMCs as "a way of implementing national interests without the direct involvement of the state."[57] In December 2018, at his annual media conference, the Russian leader gave a public green light to Wagner's activities abroad: "If they comply with Russian laws, they have every right to work and promote their business interests anywhere in the world."[58]

Wagner and other PMCs are likely to remain part of Russia's hybrid warfare toolbox, as evidenced this year in Ukraine. Their activities now extend into Africa and Latin America (Venezuela). These mainly involve supplying authoritarian regimes with protective measures in exchange for mineral extraction rights and other economic deals. Their broader purpose, clearly with Putin's blessing, seems to be to restore respect for Russia as a great power by taking part in the geopolitical competition for influence in unstable regions. A benefit for Russia of this strategy was demonstrated by the divided African vote on the UNGA resolution on Ukraine on 2 March 2022: only 28 African states (51%) voted in favour; 17 of the 35 abstentions, more than half, were African, with Eritrea joining Russia, Belarus, North Korea, and Syria in voting against.[59]

[53] Ibid.

[54] "Political scientist: in Syria fights intensified after withdrawal of PMC 'Wagner,'" *URA News*, January 11, 2021.

[55] Guy Faulconbridge, "Exclusive: Russian mercenaries with spy links increasing presence in Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 14, 2022.

[56] Andrew Roth, "The Russian captives who may link Syria, Ukraine and the Kremlin's fight against the opposition," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2017.

[57] *RIA Novosti*, "Путин поддержал идею соедания в России частных военных компании" ('Putin backs the idea of creating private military companies in Russia'), April 11, 2012.

[58] Vladimir Putin's Annual News Conference, President of Russia website, December 20, 2018, www.en.kremlin.ru.

[59] Congressional Research Service, "Russian Private Military Companies (PMCs)" September 16, 2020.
See also Geraldine Cook, "Russia's Private Military Companies: A threat to Latin America," *Dialogo Americas*, November 18, 2020; Abraham White and Leo Holtz, "Figure of the week: African countries' votes on the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Brookings*, March 9, 2022.

Adversarial influence operations

Attempts to subvert opponents' perceptions and morale are as old as warfare. However, many of today's tools are new. Media operations, psychological operations and information action and outreach are weapons in a "battle-space in the mind." The contested domain is both virtual and cognitive. In this form of adversarial conduct, perception trumps reality.[60] Adversaries attempt to obfuscate their involvement, and there may be no physical movement of troops or kinetic effects – though the build-up of Russian troops on Ukraine's border in late 2021 and 2022, prior to Russia's actual invasion on 24 February 2022, could be described as a psychological operation as well as a military one. As implied in the U.S. Mueller Report examined below, influence operations tend to prey on segments of populations more easily drawn to conspiracies and outrage over developments they perceive as beyond their control.

All technologically advanced states play this game. Nevertheless, opponents of democratic countries have more angles to work: they seek to undermine trust in government by weaponising freedom of expression – in effect, turning Western countries' cultural strengths into weaknesses. That involves a combination of deception, disinformation and information laundering in order to control the narrative around current events and emerging developments.

Russia fears information operations from the West, and has developed its own measures to counter the effect of Western operations. This is evident in Russia's most recent Information Security Doctrine signed by Putin in December 2016.[61] The doctrine is defensive in nature. It claims that "special services of certain states" (an obvious reference to the U.S. and other Western states) are using information and psychological influences to threaten Russia's security. These malign actors, it argues, are targeting Russian citizens, especially the young – an apparent reference to the lures of Western lifestyles and entertainment. The doctrine notes that these dangers are exacerbated by Russia's high dependence on foreign technologies, including electronic components and software – the implication being that Russia must develop technological independence to reverse this. There is also an unexplained reference to the need for a "national system of internet management."

The doctrine, and especially the last reference, led to speculation that Russia was seeking to develop its own version of the Internet. Although this may become an objective in the longer term, Putin would probably be wary of cutting Russia off completely from the global Internet for now. Doing so would hamstring Russia's own technological progress and impede its online influence operations against Western targets. Even the Kremlin-imposed restrictions on Western media reporting on Ukraine have so far involved bans on specific websites, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and bandwidth limitations rather than a complete blockage.[62] Since the

[60] Robert Pratten, "The rise of information warfare: The need for training in a credible information environment," *Defence IQ,* March 30, 2021.

[61] *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, "Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation," December 5, 2016, www.en.mid.ru.

[62] "How Russia could cut itself off from the global Internet, and why it probably won't," *Euronews*, March 14, 2022.

limitations were imposed, Russian use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to sidestep these bans is reported to have risen substantially.[63] Moreover, the author has been able to communicate with Russian friends via gmail. That said, Russia is reported to be working on gradual indigenisation of domestic online hardware and software and an improved Internet filtration system along the lines of China's "Great Firewall."[64]

If the doctrine is solely explained as protecting Russians from the 'contamination' of foreign information, it would reflect only half the story. Putin is famously on record as telling the Valdai Discussion Club, a high-level Mosow-based think tank and discussion forum: "Fifty years ago, I learnt one rule on the streets of Leningrad: if the fight is inevitable, be the first to strike."[65] Though he was talking about security of the Russian state from military attack, his comments could be applied more broadly to the sophisticated information strategy his administration has developed over the past decade.

Prigozhin again

Here, too, Prigozhin came in handy. He allegedly established the innocuously-named Internet Research Agency (IRA) in 2013, which became known as the Olgino Troll Factory (after the suburb in St Petersburg in which it was housed).[66] Having cut its teeth on anti-Ukrainian internet posts during Ukraine's 2014 crisis, it helped develop and implement a strategy to interfere in the 2016 American presidential election from as early as 2014, according to several U.S. government reports.[67]

The totality of claims made, and evidence adduced, in these reports depict a brilliantly planned and executed information strike:

- The operation started as early as 2014 and involved Russians working for the IRA visiting the US to reconnoitre the pre-election landscape and tracking the U.S. social media sites dedicated to American politics.

[63] "VPN use in Russia is surging as citizens try to bypass government's tightening Internet control," *CNBC*, March 10, 2022.

[64] "Russia: growing internet isolation, control, censorship – authorities regulate infrastructure, block contact," *Human Rights Watch*, June 18, 2020; William Partlett, "Russia is building its own kind of sovereign internet – with help from Apple and Google," *The Conversation*, October 5, 2021; See also "Digital geopolitics: Russia is trying to build its own great firewall," *The Economist*, February 15, 2022.

[65] *Valdai Discussion Club*, "Vladimir Putin meets with members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Final Plenary Session of the 12th Annual Meeting," October 22, 2015.

[66] Jolie Myers and Monika Evstatieva, "Meet the activist who uncovered the Russian troll factory named in the Mueller probe," *National Public Radio*, March 15, 2018.

[67] The primary sources of publicly known information about the Internet Research Agency and Prigozhin's connections with it come from U.S. Government documents, in particular:

- Office of the Director of National Intelligence (January 6, 2017), "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections."
- Department of Justice, Grand Jury Indictment of 13 Russian individuals and three Russian companies for scheme to interfere in the United States political system, February 16, 2018.
- Robert S. Mueller, Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election, Vols 1 and 2, 2019, US Department of Justice, Washington DC.

The veracity of claims made in these reports have not, and almost certainly never will be, determined by a U.S. court, so they remain allegations.

- Posing as American citizens, IRA employees created false personas to operate social media pages and fictitious activist groups designed to attract American audiences – creating hundreds of social media and Twitter accounts used to spread disinformation about candidates.
- They bought space on computer servers based in the United States in order to set up virtual private networks. Through these, operatives based in Russia could conduct activity inside the U.S. while hiding the fact that they were in Russia, thus avoiding detection by American regulators and law enforcement.
- The aim of this activity was to support Trump's candidacy and disparage Hillary Clinton's. Before Trump won the Republican nomination, the IRA operation attacked his more moderate opponents. The operation also backed Bernie Sanders in his campaign for the Democratic nomination until he dropped out. The objective seemed to be to disrupt the political establishment on both sides of U.S. politics.
- This activity included operatives posing as Americans contacting individuals associated with the Trump campaign aiming to work with them in supporting Trump.
- Throughout the operation the IRA employed hundreds of individuals based in St Petersburg. The annual budget from 2014 was in the millions of US dollars. By September 2016, in the lead up to the election, the IRA's monthly budget for the project exceeded $1.25 million.
- Russia's external intelligence services were also involved. The GRU, in particular, oversaw the hacking of Democratic National Committee emails, which were subsequently made public by WikiLeaks.

It's important to note that the claims made by Mueller and American intelligence agencies have not been tested in court, so they remain unproven. The Russian government,[68] and Trump for that matter,[69] have dismissed them. However, these indictments and reports are relevant to Middle Eastern politics (and to U.S. intelligence agencies) as they outline in compelling detail how Russia has developed a sophisticated capacity to mount information campaigns to support its foreign policy aims.

Application to the Middle East

Russian policy in the Middle East, and hence its information strategy there, both have application beyond the region itself; they are also aimed at the West, especially the U.S. Particularly since Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2015, Rus-

[68] For example, "Kremlin says Mueller report shows no evidence of Russian meddling," *Reuters*, April 18, 2019; Marc Bennetts, "'No new information': Russia shrugs off Mueller report – Spokesman say report offers no "compelling evidence" of Russian interference in US vote," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2019.
Andrey Vadeev, "The mountain gave birth to a mouse: 'Russian business' fell apart before our eyes,'" *Gazeta*, March 23, 2019.

[69] See for example: "Trump dismisses 'ridiculous' claims of Russian interference in election result," *France24*, December 12, 2016.

sia's actions in the region have been part of a wider strategy that strives to create an international order guaranteeing Russia an equal footing with the U.S. in international decision-making.

Russia's information strategy in relation to Syria has been threefold:

- Domestic: Legitimising Putin's Syria policy, thereby preventing any potential Russian public backlash against the deployment of military assets to Syria.
- International: Imposing a narrative over the intervention in opposition to Western attempts to present a critical counter-narrative.
- Regional: Portraying the intervention as support for an embattled ally, thereby enhancing Russia's visibility in the region and encouraging hostility to Western military interventions aimed at promoting democracy or responsibility-to-protect obligations.[70]

Russian-controlled media, social media and websites, especially the Arabic language versions of RT and Sputnik News, expressed the Russian government's perspective on the war: the conflict was to be understood through the sole lens of the Assad regime's defence against a radical opposition comprising terrorists financed and equipped by the United States and like-minded regional states, aiming to force regime change.

The Syrian military was presented as a stabilising, patriotic, and disciplined force. Terrorists hid their true motivations in order to dupe credulous Western public opinion. Syria was a bulwark against Islamic extremism. There were regular references to the multi-religious character of Syrian society. The narrative also invoked the nineteenth century Tsarist Russian ambition to protect Eastern Orthodox Christians in the Levant.[71]

An example of the Russian information strategy at work followed a chemical attack in April 2018 in the Syrian city of Douma, on the periphery of Damascus, which reportedly killed 70 people. The attack was attributed to the Syrian army, causing international outrage and retaliatory U.S., French, and British air strikes on Syrian targets a week later.[72]

That produced a full-scale Russian counter-information campaign to sow doubt on what had actually happened on the ground and divide Western public

[70] Responsibility to Protect (R2P) is a doctrine agreed at the UN World Summit in 2005, and subsequently affirmed by the UN Security Council, that allows external nations to intervene in a national conflict to prevent crimes against humanity, particularly attacks on civilian populations. Russia, like China, opposes external intervention in states' internal affairs, and has been ambivalent about the doctrine. Under President Medvedev (2008-12) Russia abstained on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, thus allowing the resolution's adoption by the Security Council early in the Libyan civil war in 2011. That resolution permitted Britain, France and the US to establish a no-fly zone to prevent then-Libyan leader Gaddafi's forces attacking civilians in the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. Russia subsequently claimed that the NATO forces went beyond their R2P mandate to assist the rebels militarily and ensure Gaddafi's defeat. Since then Russia has refused to allow proposed R2P resolutions over Syria to be adopted by the Security Council.

[71] A detailed and well-sourced analysis of this strategy is set out in Donald N. Jensen, "Russia in the Middle East: A new front in the information war?" *Jamestown Foundation*, December 20, 2017.

[72] Julian Borger and Peter Beaumont, "Syria: US, UK and France launch strikes in response to chemical attack," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2018.

opinion and leaders. Reports on Russian TV and disseminated through social media included:

- Outright denial: claiming there were no chemical attacks, no patients in hospitals, and that photos and testimonies of the event were fake.
- Arguing that it was a plot by Westerners and the White Helmets (a Syrian humanitarian organisation that assists and reports on victims of regime attacks) to discredit Assad.
- Defending the regime by arguing that "everyone knows" that Syria does not have chemical weapons (Syria had accepted a Russian-U.S. proposal to surrender its stock of CW in 2013 – though implementation was patchy).[73]
- Comparing Western claims about the attacks to Nazi propaganda methods.

As such, Russia's information strategy was not so much about presenting Russia's own facts as about casting doubt on the Western version. They invoked conspiracy theories, such as the involvement of Israel's external intelligence agency Mossad and the CIA in the attacks. Such claims resonated across Arab society, given widespread distrust of their governments and Western accounts of events, and belief in Israeli meddling in Arab states.[74] The narrative aimed to undermine the legitimacy of opposition to Assad by suggesting that its support was based outside Syria, particularly in the US, France, and Turkey. There was no practical distinction between Islamic State and the opposition. The choice was binary: Assad or a terrorist takeover.[75]

The author of this report was in Moscow in September 2015 and observed these techniques in Russian media presentations. Television news reports claimed that the Russian intervention was in line with international law as the Assad government had requested the intervention (emphasising that had not been the case with the 2014 US-led bombing campaign in Syria against Islamic State). Moreover, the U.S. and other Western powers had botched the job of suppressing Islamic terrorism, so Russian professionals were now taking over the role.

This echoed a fundamental aspect of Russia's conception of international relations and international law: the only legitimate international actors are governments; any actions to interfere in, disrupt or change organised states are illegal unless specifically authorised by the UN Security Council (where Russia can exercise its veto).

An early success of Russia's pro-Syria information campaign appeared in fading support among Western publics for Assad's removal especially when Syrian refugees

[73] Putin had offered Syria's "removal" of chemical weapons to Obama as a face-saver given Obama's reluctance to take military action after Assad had crossed Obama's 'red line' by using chemicals in Ghouta near Damascus in 2013. Reporting at the time indicated that some CW was surrendered to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, but clearly stocks remained – as shown by subsequent regime chemical attacks.

[74] The role of conspiracy theories in the Middle East is well set out in Matthew Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World: Sources and Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

[75] For a fuller assessment, see reporting by French expert on global digital/cyber issues Julien Nocetti: for example, Julien Nocetti, "Dazed and confused: Russian 'information warfare' in the Middle East – the Syria lessons," *European Institute of the Mediterranean*, February 27, 2019.

were fleeing into Europe in massive numbers. That produced a related positive for Putin, with the refugee crisis playing into the Brexit referendum in Britain in 2016.[76] Putin views Western institutions such as the European Union as hostile and is happy to see them undermined, as the referendum result appeared initially to have done.

Information ecosystem

As noted above, all major states seek to spread information favourable to their interests. Russia is not a unique actor here. That said, a detailed report by the US State Department provides a compelling account of Russia's information ecosystem, which it describes as "the collection of official, proxy and unattributed communication channels and platforms that Russia uses to create and amplify false narratives."[77]

The ecosystem consists of five main pillars:

- Official government communications
- State-funded global messaging
- Cultivation of proxy sources
- Weaponisation of social media
- Cyber-enabled disinformation

According to the report, Russia invests heavily in its information channels, its intelligence services and its proxies to support its foreign policy aims. It leverages outlets that pose as news sites or research institutions to spread Russia's preferred narratives. Messages disseminated by different pillars of the information ecosystem provide a media multiplier effect that boosts the reach and resonance of the messages.

This strategy can cover a wide range of activities seeking to steal, plant, interdict, manipulate, distort, or destroy information. Channels and methods are equally diverse: computers, smartphones, real or invented new media, statements by leaders or celebrities, online troll campaigns, text messages, confected vox pops, YouTube videos, or direct approaches to individual human targets.

As evident this year in relation to Kremlin claims about the Ukraine invasion, information warfare or counter-narrative is now a powerful instrument for Russia to achieve its foreign policy objectives – a tool augmented by cyber technology.

Cyber

On a global scale, the sources of cyber threats are threefold:[78]

- *Nation-states and state-sponsored groups*. Their motivations are geopolitical

[76] See, for example, Amanda Garrett, "The refugee crisis, Brexit, and the reframing of immigration in Britain," *Europe Now*, Council for European Studies, August 1, 2019; Richard Hall, "How the Brexit campaign used refugees to scare voters," *The World*, June 24, 2016.

[77] *Global Engagement Center Special Report*, "Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda System," US Department of State, August 2020.

[78] This threat division reflects that set out in Tim Maurer and Arthur Nelson, "The Global Cyber Threat," *International Monetary Fund Research Paper*, Washington DC, 2021.

and ideological. Their goals are disruption, destruction, damage, theft, espionage and financial gain. Examples of such attacks are: permanent data corruption, targeted physical damage, power grid outages, payment system disruption, fraudulent transfers, and illicit access to covert or protected information. States with the most advanced cyber capabilities, and hence able to inflict serious damage on opponents, are the United States, China, Russia, Israel, Iran, and North Korea. All have practised cyber in pursuit of their national interests.[79]

- *Cybercriminals*. Their motive is enrichment. Their goal is theft and/or financial gain. Examples include ransomware attacks, cash theft, fraudulent transfers, credential theft.

- *Terrorist groups, hacktivists (political activists using cyber hacking as tools), insider threats*. Their motive is ideology and political/economic discontent with the status quo. Their goal is disruption. Examples are: leaks, defamation, denial-of-service attacks.

Cyber is a relatively cheap weapon, available to technically skilled groups and individuals in any country. At the state level, cyber resources can be marshalled to a significant scale. A state-sponsored cyber attack on an opposing state's key infrastructure can wreak the damage of a major conventional-weapon strike. Moreover, the cyber resources of individual states are inevitably estimates: they can't be calculated with the precision of weaponry.

The cyber threat to global security is exacerbated by the current fragmented geopolitical climate and high levels of mistrust between states – particularly the U.S. vis-a-vis China and Russia, as well as smaller countries aligned with each. This trust deficit hinders collaboration across the international community against actors in the second and third categories listed above.

Cyber insecurity blurs the boundaries between state and private actors and between geopolitics and crime. Perpetrators include states conducting espionage and testing their ability to inflict damage in war, but also criminal gangs operating with government tolerance, and thus augmenting the cyber resources of the state.

During the Cold War, the threat of mutually assured destruction contained the risk of an all-out nuclear confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The containment reality is now being applied to the risk of cyber attacks, as was shown during the first meeting between President Biden and President Putin in Geneva in June 2021.

At the meeting, Biden gave Putin a list of sixteen sectors that Biden said must not be attacked by the Russian state or any actors living in or under the control of Russia. The list was not published, but it is understood to have included water and

[79] This is set out in detail in *International Institute of Strategic Studies*, "Cyber Capabilities and National Power: A Net Assessment," June 28, 2021.

energy services as well as other critical infrastructure. After a follow-up telephone call with Putin in July, Biden announced: "I made it very clear to him that the United States expects when a ransomware operation is coming from his soil, even though it's not sponsored by the state, we expect them to act if we give them enough information." When a journalist asked whether the U.S. could attack the servers used by the hackers, Biden said yes.[80]

That warning followed attacks attributed to actors within Russia on several American infrastructure and corporate entities, most prominent among which were Solar Winds, which provides outsourced IT services to various government agencies, and Colonial Pipeline, which distributes energy across the eastern United States.[81]

Law of the jungle

A further problem is that international law and practice have yet to find methods to deter cyber criminals acting with the protection of their host governments. Non-state cyber actors based in Russia who attack targets within Russia can be prosecuted under Russian law. However, attacking Western targets is tolerated by the state – it is not even illegal in Russia.[82] According to a 1984 ruling by the International Court of Justice, state control over non-state actors is only recognized when those actors are dependent on the state – a burden of proof very difficult to meet in the case of cyber-criminals

The Putin administration argues that it is not in control of Russian 'patriots' – so not in breach of Russian or international law. That is a fiction: an authoritarian state like Russia could swiftly clamp down on domestic cyber actors of whom it disapproved. The US could counter such excuses through a campaign to persuade the international community to codify into international law the principle that a state is responsible for malicious cyber actors when it is unwilling or unable to stop its territory being used by them.[83] Russia and China would probably oppose such an action in the Security Council. That leaves states targeted by external cyber criminals with little option but to retaliate directly against the servers used by the relevant actors – as Biden implicitly threatened in July. That is provided for under the self-defence provision (Article 51, Chapter VII) of the UN Charter. However, such action could lead to state-sanctioned tit-for-tat attacks, which could easily get out of control.

Russia's cyber strategy involves domestic surveillance and control – primarily to safeguard the Putin regime from internal opposition, but also to protect its domestic environment against U.S. offensive cyber operations. Cyber governance is under the President's personal control, indicating the importance Putin places on it.[84]

Russian cyber capacity is currently held back by the fact that its digital economy is less advanced than that of major Western states like the United States, United King-

[80] "Biden vows action over Russian cyber attacks," *BBC News*, July 9, 2021.

[81] "Colonial Pipeline 'ransomware' attack shows vulnerabilities of US energy grid," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2021; "A 'worst nightmare' cyberattack: The untold story of the SolarWinds attack," *National Public Radio*, April 16, 2021.

[82] Michael John Williams, "Make Russia take responsibility for its cyber criminals," *Foreign Policy*, November 9, 2021.

[83] Ibid.

[84] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Op Cit*.

dom, France, and Germany. It is only a mid-level performer in digital competitiveness, as demonstrated by the absence of Russian tech and telecommunications firms from *Fortune* magazine's latest Global 500 ranking of the world's richest companies.[85]

Given its GDP limitations, Russia has fewer financial resources to invest in intelligence capabilities than the U.S. or China. Blurring the divide between state and non-state actors is a means to compensate for that, so use of Russia-based "patriotic hackers" and organised cybercrime expertise substantially enhances Russia's cyber capabilities. The skills honed by resident criminal cyber actors become potential assets that the Putin government can draw on when desired.[86] Such skills can of course be used against Russia in return – including by individual Ukrainians skilled in hacking -- though attacks at that level are more likely to be an irritant than a threat to Russian sites with strong cyber protection.[87]

Microsoft's Digital Defense Report attributes 58% of cyber attacks on Western or Western-aligned targets to actors in Russia in the year July 2020-June 2021.[88] By comparison the report attributes 23% of attacks to North Korea, 11% to Iran, and 8% to China. The report comments that over the past year, Russia-based activity groups have solidified their position as "acute threats to the global digital ecosystem by demonstrating adaptability, persistence, a willingness to exploit trusted technical relationships, and a facility with anonymisation and open-source tools that make them increasingly difficult to detect and attribute."[89]

State tolerance

Russia tolerates, and presumably encourages, these activities because cyber attacks against public and private entities in the West promote public discontent with governments which are seen as unable to prevent them. Such attacks also undermine global confidence in Western financial systems.

Russia has used its offensive cyber capabilities extensively as part of a broader strategy aimed at disrupting the policies and politics of Western adversaries and states in its neighbourhood that it views as hostile. Russia's successes include cyber attacks against Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014-15 and early 2022.[90]

Russian mercenaries are reported to have employed cyber at tactical level in campaigns against anti-Assad forces and the Government of National Accord in Libya.[91] But Russia is unlikely to direct disruptive cyber operations against Middle East states it wants to influence or cooperate with, particularly Israel, Turkey, Egypt

[85] Fortune Global 500 2021: Full List of Rankings, www.fortune.com.
[86] International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Op Cit*.
[87] "This Ukrainian hacker is spreading chaos in Russia," *The Economist 1843 Magazine*, March 11, 2022.
[88] Microsoft Digital Defense Report, October 2021, 55.
[89] Ibid, 57.
[90] See, for example, "Fake news and botnets: how Russia weaponised the web," *The Guardian*, December 2, 2017; and Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine accuses Russia of cyber-attack on two banks and its defence ministry," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2022.
[91] This is examined in detail in Marie Baezner and Patrice Robin, "The use of cyber tools in an internationalised civil war context: cyber activities in the Syrian context," *Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich*, October 2017. See also Ilya Barabanov and Nader Ibrahim, *Op cit*.

and GCC states. That said, it almost certainly uses cyber for economic and political espionage in all Middle East states. Given its close relationship with Iran, Russia could also help Iranian intelligence agencies enhance their cyber capabilities. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Intelligence Operations (IRGC-IO) and its Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) are reported to have liaison with Russia's domestic and external intelligence agencies, FSB and SVR.[92] A problem for Moscow is that sharing cyber capabilities with Iran risks loss of Russian control of the uses to which they are directed. Analysis of a string of cyber attacks on Saudi petrochemical plants in 2017 and 2018 found that, though responsibility was attributed to Iran, much of the effort was coordinated on Iran's behalf from inside a state-owned Russian scientific institute.[93] Following these attacks, the US placed sanctions on the Russian agency apparently involved, the Central Scientific Research Institute of Chemistry and Mechanics.[94]

That said, at this stage Russia is not believed capable of matching the sophistication of the American and Israeli Stuxnet operation (insertion of destructive malware into the Iranian nuclear centrifuge program).[95] A possible indication that the Russians themselves suspect they are outmatched is their repeated attempts in international forums to make the military use of offensive cyber tools illegal under international law. The United States opposes this, seeing it as an attempt to reign in its capabilities.

Conclusion

Russia's non-traditional statecraft, whether deployed in the Middle East or elsewhere, is an important adjunct to Putin's broader foreign policy methodology. As demonstrated, this methodology blends traditional diplomacy and military power with the non-traditional techniques described above. The U.S., the West, and China form Moscow's main geostrategic focus. Putin would ideally see Russia, the West (principally the United States), and China on equal footing on the global stage, counterbalancing each other.[96] Russia would accept legal justifications for international military action when enacted by the UN Security Council, which would restrict unilateral American intervention as seen in Iraq.[97] Though such a change to the international system would also restrict Russia's scope for external military action, that is a price Putin may be willing to pay. He presumably could justify action like the Ukraine invasion under the self-defence provision of the UN Charter, given the arguments he has made about the

[92] David J. Smith, "Dangerous Liaisons: Another Russia-Iran Intelligence Cooperation Agreement," *Cybergram*, March 16, 2021; Seth G. Jones and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria," *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington*, July 16, 2019.

[93] Nicole Perlroth and Clifford Kraus, "A cyber attack in Saudi Arabia had a deadly goal: experts fear another try," *New York Times*, March 15, 2018; David Sanger, "Hack of Saudi petrochemical plant was coordinated from Russian institute," *New York Times*, October 23, 2018.

[94] "The US sanctions Russians for potentially 'fatal' Triton malware," *Wired*, October 23, 2020.

[95] *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, *Op cit*.

[96] This argument is set out in detail by Russia analyst Bobo Lo. See Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, (Kindle, 2015); and Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*, (London, Penguin, 2017).

[97] See, in particular, *A Wary Embrace,* 50 ff and 76 ff.

threat to Russia from Ukraine's increasing drift to the West.

Economic uncertainties following the Covid pandemic and volatile energy prices make speculating on Russia's long term plan in the Middle East difficult. In this situation, Putin is likely to fall back on the opportunistic methodology described early in this report. He will probably bide his time and look for occasions to advance Russia's interests as they might arise. He will also seek to counter Western policies in the region in order to make gains for Russia within the broader geostrategic framework through which he sees the world. Russia's tools of non-traditional statecraft set out in this report are now well developed and will remain an important part of his playbook.

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Towards a New Basis for Societal Stability through Re-Imagining National Minority/Majority Boundaries

Elizabeth Monier

Introduction

The minority concept represents a numerical statistic as well as a social category that is characterised by disadvantage or disempowerment.[1] At the most basic level, it describes an unequal power relation between a reified minority and an equally reified majority.[2] This essay suggests that addressing this unequal power dynamic by tying the representation of a numerical minority or nondominant community in a nation-state to its size through political mechanisms, such as power sharing and electoral quotas, insufficiently challenges the privilege held by the majority/dominant identity-group. This privilege is often institutionalised by the state. [3] This privilege is subsequently normalised because the majority is imagined as representing the sole national identity, resulting in inequality and the exclusion of nondominant groups. [4] One solution to this problem would be to rethink approaches to the inclusion and visibility of minorities in constructions of nationhood.

A further challenge experienced by minoritised communities is that a national minority is often perceived as a threat to the nation, while simultaneously experiencing identity insecurity itself.[5] This hinders the de-construction of minoritisation; societal stability is conceived by political elites as dependent on maintaining the hegemonic meaning of what is "national." Fanar Haddad makes a similar argument in his analysis of sectarian conflict in post-2003 Iraq, in which he asserts that sectarian conflict is driven by "competing *national* truths and contested claims to the nation-state."[6] Nationhood is therefore a pivotal site for negotiating and contesting power relations, because its cultural underpinnings act as a basis for sovereignty and solidarity, as well as legitimation of the political regime.[7] To reduce these potential drivers of conflict or endemic insecurity, complementary measures are necessary to promote inclusion. This includes a reconsideration of the way in which the framing of society, as divided

[1] See for example, Philip Vuciri Ramaga, "Relativity of the Minority Concept," *Human Rights Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1992): 104–19; Smith, M. G. "Some problems with minority concepts and a solution," Ethnic and Racial Studies 10, no. 4 (1987): 341-362.

[2] Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 25.

[3] Will Kymlicka, "Ethnicity and Liberalism in the USA," in *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, edited by Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, (Malden, MA: Blackwells, 1999), 231.

[4] Howard Wolpe and Steve McDonald, "Democracy and Peace-building: Re-thinking the Conventional Wisdom," *The Round Table* 97, no. 394 (2008): 137-145.

[5] Serhun Al and Douglas Byrd, "When do states (de)securitise minority identities? Conflict and Change in Turkey and Northern Ireland," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21, (2018): 611.

[6] Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Identity and National Identity in the Middle East," *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2020): 123-137.

[7] Margaret Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory*, (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1996).

into majorities and minorities, operates to reinforce a notion of societal stability that sustains marginalisation as part of a national security discourse.

Non-Muslim communities in Egypt and Iraq form the focus of this discussion because national, inter-religious minority/majority relations are relatively under-studied compared with ethnic conflict. These cases also offer insights into forms of nested marginalisation and multi-layered minority status that impact the security of groups that might be termed "minorities within minorities."[8] This creates further invisible boundaries, lending credence to the notion that quotas or proportional representation can contribute to institutionalising marginalisation.[9] Not only is there a hierarchy of power and privilege between majority and minority, but among distinct minority groups as well. For these reasons, de-minoritisation requires lowering the boundary between who and what contributes to the meaning and experiences of everyday nationhood in order to erase boundaries constructed around certain identity communities without erasing difference.[10] This is crucial for securing both societal stability and identity sustainability, and for avoiding the normalisation of minoritisation.

The "Minority Question" in the Middle East

The impact of the minority question in the Middle East must first be examined within its historical context. This section will summarise the main factors contributing to, and the implications of, the formation of a national minority/majority boundary. Clearly, the "minority question" and issues pertaining to the status of national minorities in the nation-state are not confined to the Middle East. As Heiskanen has suggested, "Every self-styled nation-state is haunted by national minorities."[11] The new vocabulary of national minorities that expanded after World War I entrenched this understanding of the minority as "other."[12] Acknowledging the existence of minorities was viewed as a challenge to the sovereignty of freshly drawn borders and to the core political priority of most of the new Middle Eastern nation-states that had just gained their independence by proving their right to nationhood and ability to self-govern.[13] While these borders may be arbitrary lines in the sand formed under colonialism, scholars of political geography contend that borders can emerge from, or lead to, "deep symbolic,

[8] Sadiqa Sultan, Maryam Kanwer, and Jaffer Abbas Mirza, "The Multi-Layered Minority: Exploring the Intersection of Gender, Class and Religious-Ethnic Affiliation in the Marginalisation of Hazara Women in Pakistan," CREID Intersections Series, (Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2020).

[9] Meital Pinto, "The Absence of the Right to Culture of Minorities within Minorities in Israel: A Tale of a Cultural Dissent Case," *Laws* 4, no. 3 (2015): 611.

[10] Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, "Everyday Nationhood," *Ethnicities* 8, no. 4 (2008): 536–576.

[11] Jaako Heiskanen, "Spectra of Sovereignty: Nationalism and International Relations," *International Political Sociology* 13, no. 3, (2019): 315–332.

[12] Jennifer Jackson-Preece, *National Minorities and the European Nation-States System,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[13] RBJ Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

cultural, historical and religious, often contested, meanings for social communities."[14] As a result of these factors, minorities can be perceived as a threat to the physical security of borders and also to the symbolic configuration of the national community.[15]

These nation-states were established in an environment shaped by colonial rule and the application of the mandate system as part of the League of Nations' minority protection agenda.[16] Consequently, the notion of non-Muslims as a minority was, and still is, perceived as emblematic of imperialism and orientalism. This resulted in a refusal to officially accept the existence of minorities in Egypt and Iraq, a refusal that is evident in the minutes of both countries' constitutional drafting committees in 1922-'23 and 1924, respectively. During the Egyptian constitutional drafting committee meetings, Abdul Hamid Bedawi argued that dividing the nation into a minority and majority would lead to tension and enable foreign interference in Egyptian affairs.[17] In both Egypt and Iraq, the main position of committee members was that minorities did not exist within their states. Members also argued, explicitly in Iraq and more implicitly in Egypt, that the term minority could only refer to a non-Muslim; some also raised concerns about how to ensure the representation of non-Muslims in the state to prevent their exclusion.[18] This Muslim/ non-Muslim divide can also be seen in other parts of the Middle East. In Baskin Oran's Minorities and Minority Rights in Turkey, Oran argues that minority identity in Turkey also stems from religion.[19] In Iraq and Egypt, a "cultural compromise" was established that enabled non-Muslims of Iraq and Egypt to be incorporated within the borders of the states without challenging the continuation of socio-cultural boundaries within the national community. This compromise, which appeared explicitly in Iraq's 2005 constitution, explicitly acknowledged the dominance of the Muslim community.[20]

Nondominant groups or minorities in the Middle East, while generally accorded equal rights under the law, face *de facto* discrimination and vulnerabilities today that are enhanced in periods of insecurity such as after the Arab Spring.[21] This suggests that national minorities continue to be perceived as a threat to national

[14] Dylan MH Loh and Jaako Heiskanen, "Liminal sovereignty practices: Rethinking the inside/outside dichotomy," *Cooperation and Conflict* 55, no. 3 (2008): 284-5; David Newman and Anssi Paasi, "New Fences and neighbours in the postmodern world: boundary narratives in political geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 22 (1998): 187.

[15] A.D. Smith, "States and Homelands: The Social and Geopolitical Implications of National Territory," *Millennium* 10, (1981): 187–202.

[16] Carole Fink, "The League of Nations and the Minorities Question," *World Affairs* 157, no. 4 (1995): 195-205.

[17] M. Al-Sharif, *'Ala Hamish al-Dustor*. (Cairo, 1938), 20.

[18] Muthakirat al-Majlis al-Ta'sisi li Sannat 1924 al-Juz'- al-Owal, (Baghdad: al-Salam), 651.

[19] Baskin Oran, *Minorities and Minority Rights in Turkey*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2021).

[20] Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 28; Article 2 of Iraq's 2005 constitution not only designates Islam as the religion of the state but also guarantees the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people.

[21] Mariz Tadros, "Decrypting Copts' Perspectives on Communal Relations in Contemporary Egypt through Vernacular Politics (2013–2014)," *IDS working paper*, (2015), 27; Laith Nasrawin, "Protecting the constitutional rights of religious minorities in the wake of the Arab Spring," *European Human Rights Law Review* 1, no. 1 (2016): 48-60.

sovereignty and stability.[22] Treating minority affairs as a national security question limits the tools available to instigate change at the social and political levels in favour of maintaining the fragile stability of the status quo.[23] This has left some communities with a dilemma: whether to live within a state of persistent insecurity, or to leave. This dilemma undermines the very societal stability that is used as a legitimising discourse because, as Elizabeth Iskander argues, excluding a minority community from key decision-making procedures at the political core threatens social harmony because it greatly heightens the excluded group's sense of vulnerability to other powerful societal factions.[24]

The Dilemma of Representation/Visibility for Marginalised Groups

To address these dynamics of minoritisation and everyday insecurity, traditional communal leaders in Egypt and Iraq have sought alternative mechanisms for representation within the state, usually through a pact of support with the government.[25] This approach prioritises social harmony over contesting minoritisation. Many scholars have looked at frameworks for power sharing for addressing post-conflict scenarios and sustainable peace in divided societies.[26] While scholars acknowledge that some sort of power sharing regime is often crucial post-conflict, others point to the potential for such regimes to perpetuate societal divisions.[27] Salloukh illustrates this in the case of electoral engineering in post-civil war Lebanon, which led to increased sectarian tensions.[28] Devon Curtis' research on Burundi also points to the tension between societal stability and *de facto* marginalisation. She argues that power sharing prioritises social harmony as a measure of success, but that this harmony can sustain inequalities that particularly affect the nondominant parties. Addressing these inequalities thereby represents a threat to the sustainability of peace.[29]

The question of how to include and represent diversity in pluralistic societies is not only relevant in conflict resolution or post-conflict scenarios, but also to nation-state building projects. In the state-building process of modern Iraq in the 1920s, Christians and Jews were granted a guaranteed number of seats in parliament by law. While this provided token representation, the number of seats accorded to a

[22] For an instructive overview of identity/security dynamics see Pinar Bilgin, "Identity/Security," in J.P. Burgess, *The Routledge Handbook of New Security Studies*, (London: Routledge, 2010): 81-9.

[23] Elizabeth Iskander, *Sectarian Conflict in Egypt*. (London: Routledge, 2012): 82-3, 114.

[24] Ric Neo, "Religious securitisation and institutionalised sectarianism in Saudi Arabia," *Critical Studies on Security*, 8:3 (2002): 213.

[25] Iskander 2012; Mariz Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013).

[26] For example, Allison McCulloch, *Power-Sharing and Political Stability in Deeply Divided Societies*, (London: Routledge, 2014); Sid Noel, *From Power Sharing to Democracy: Post-Conflict Institutions in Ethnically Divided Societies*, (McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2005); Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*, (Yale University Press, 1977).

[27] Andrew Reynolds, "Building Democracy after Conflict: Constitutional Medicine," *Journal of Democracy* 16 (2005): 54–68.

[28] Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Limits of Electoral Engineering in Divided Societies: Elections in Postwar Lebanon," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 3 (2006): 637.

[29] Devon Curtis, "The International Peacebuilding Paradox: Power Sharing and Post-Conflict Governance in Burundi," *African Affairs* 112, no. 446 (2012): 87.

minority in a proportional system is unlikely to be large enough to secure real influence or representation of interests. [30] There has also been little to no participation of certain communities, such as the Mandeans or the Baha'is, in the public national life of Iraq because of their smaller size relative to larger minorities such as the Christians.[31] Such mechanisms not only fail to ensure smaller groups' representation, they also establish hierarchies– both between a "majority" and a "minority" and also among different minority groups, in a form of double-minoritisation. This seems to confirm the existence of an association with the size of a community and its visibility in the life and heritage of the nation. However, as Katharine Adeney notes, countries of South Asia which have not accommodated their non-dominant groups, such as non-Hindus in India, have witnessed high levels of conflict.[32] The link between the (non)representation of nondominant groups and socio-political tensions accounts for the apparently perennial discussions in both Iraq and Egypt about representation of non-Muslims in the form of quotas.

Iraq continues to operate a quota system for representation in parliament. In its present form, known as *al-Muhasassa*, the quota system is broadly criticised as ineffective in preventing conflict or improving the acceptance of diversity in national public life and Iraqi nationhood. Toby Dodge and Renand Mansour argue that this system was established ostensibly to ensure stability, but it has since been used to entrench elite power relations.[33] This supports the argument that current approaches to societal stability undermine identity security and inclusion, even when they appear to be working towards these goals. The sectarianisation of Iraqi politics after 2003, for example, has been linked to the principle of proportional representation in the transitional government established by the American Presidential Envoy to Iraq, Paul Bremer, after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. [34] This sectarianism has led to more than one million Iraqi Christians leaving the country. Yet the head of the largest Christian church, Cardinal Louis Sako, does not advocate the drawing of borders around an autonomous zone for Christians and other minoritised groups. He instead draws on a discourse of inclusive citizenship and repeatedly makes the point that Iraqi Christians are indigenous and have contributed strongly to the cultural and political life of Iraq, despite the small size of their community.[35]

In Egypt, the option of a quota for Christians has been debated on several occasions but always rejected.[36] It was posed in 1922 and '23 during the drafting

[30] Katharine Adeney, "How can we model ethnic democracy? An application to contemporary India," *Nations and Nationalism*, 27 (2021): 397.

[31] Z. Naji, *Aqaliyat al-Iraq fi al-'Ahd al-Maliki*, (Beirut: Dar al-Rafidain, 2015).

[32] Katharine Adeney, "A Move to Majoritarian Nationalism? Challenges of Representation in South Asia," *Representation*, 51:1, (2015): 7-21.

[33] Toby Dodge and Renad Mansour, *Politically sanctioned corruption and barriers to reform in Iraq.* Chatham House (2021).

[34] Abd al-Husayn Sha'ban, *Jadal al-Howiyat fi al Iraq: al-dawla wa al-mowatana. (*Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2010), 73-4.

[35] Elizabeth Monier, "The Chaldean patriarch and the discourse of 'inclusive citizenship': restructuring the political representation of Christians in Iraq since 2003," *Religion, State and Society* 48, (2020): 361-377.

[36] Elizabeth Monier, "Middle Eastern Minorities in Global Media and the Politics of National Belonging," *Arab Media and Society 24* (2017).

of the constitution following the declaration of independence issued by the British in February 1922. Opponents of the idea rejected it as divisive and counter-productive to establishing a democratic system and culture in Egypt. A similar line was taken when the issue was discussed in parliament after the Arab Spring, and this is reinforced by the community itself. The official Coptic Christian position is to reject the description of Copts as a minority because it undermines their indigeneity and integral place in national history and heritage.[37] This illustrates a core problem: even if the minority category is rejected, it is found in the experience and negotiation of everyday nationhood.[38] This dynamic is visible in the case of Egypt in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. Despite the historical rejection of labelling Christians in Egypt as a minority, concerns raised by Copts were quickly marginalised beyond the imagined boundaries of Egyptian nationhood by labelling them as 'factional' and secondary to *Egyptian* concerns.[39]

Re-Imagining the Nation and its Social Boundaries

The cases discussed here exemplify the ways in which minoritisation leads to tensions that undermine social harmony. Yet prioritising the maintenance of the status quo means that the root causes of marginalisation and inequality in society remain unaddressed, and can even be exacerbated. Wolpe and McDonald argue that sustainable peace is only achieved "when all key leaders of the society perceive themselves to be parts of the same national entity."[40] This reflects the argument that a more holistic approach to inclusion is needed. This holistic approach must focus on disconnecting the value and visibility of numerical minorities in the national imaginary from their size. Doing this requires the pursuit of a nationhood discourse that highlights all components as equally national–rather than labelling some identities as "other" or peripheral. The first step in this direction is the de-securitisation of minoritised communities, a process that is especially complex but crucial where the existence of minoritisation is denied for historical reasons. Secondly, it requires a conscious and visible process of engagement.

Research on Lebanon suggests that increased community engagement and long-term educational strategies such as citizenship education are necessary to prevent future reoccurrences of sectarian violence.[41] This promotion of engagement and awareness of the "other" must reach society as a whole. Research on encounter programmes in Israel also demonstrates the benefit of inter-group awareness and its

[37] Tadros, 105-9; "Coptic Pope Tawadros II Criticises Egypt's Islamist Leadership, New Constitution," *Al Ahram*, February 5, 2013, https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/64135/Egypt/Politics-/Coptic-Pope-Tawadros-II-criticises-Egypts-Islamist.aspx.

[38] Fox and Miller-Idriss.

[39] Elizabeth Monier, "Spatial Practices of Retreat Among Egyptian Christians: Isolating or Empowering?" *International Journal of Levant Studies* 2 (2020); Elizabeth Monier, "The Arab Spring and Coptic–Muslim Relations: From Mubarak to the Muslim Brotherhood," *European Yearbook of Minority Issues* 11 (2014): 169-186.

[40] Wolpe and McDonald, 144.

[41] Hoda Baytiyeh, "Has the Educational System in Lebanon Contributed to the Growing Sectarian Divisions?" *Journal for Education and Urban Society* 49 (2017): 546-559.

potential for social change. The main weakness is that the impact is limited to the small number of participants in encounter programmes; the sense of encounter and awareness of the other is central to the way national communities are formed.[42] There does not need to be an actual physical encounter between all citizens of a nation, according to Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities.[43] However, there must be a sense of shared nationhood that underpins solidarity. Stuart Hall argues that formulating national culture requires more than simply attaching "others" and their cultural heritage onto a fixed national story. It is necessary to reshape this story so that minorities or marginalised communities are not added on as extras at the borders, but so that they become an integral part of everyday nationhood.[44]

Conclusion

This article has discussed the ways in which minoritisation can be linked to marginalisation and securitisation. Contesting the resultant inequalities is complicated due to the framing of national minorities as potentially destabilising to the nation-state. The imperative of societal stability is therefore juxtaposed with addressing marginalisation. This is made more complex due to the historical context in which minority/majority politics became entangled with nationalism and with anti-colonialism, problematising and yet sustaining societal divisions. While the political mechanisms for power sharing and representation may redress some aspects of minoritisation, these strategies frequently fall short of inclusivity. Instead, they can potentially support the normalisation of hierarchies, including those built upon a minority/majority boundary in the national community. In this scenario, social harmony is perceived as dependent on maintaining the same power relations.

In addition to a better grasp of the complexities that minority/majority dynamics present to state-society relations, initiatives that expand programmes of encounter between groups in the national public space are necessary. Re-configuring the minority/majority boundary and re-imagining the nation are crucial for de-securitising national "others" and un-knotting perceived threats to sovereignty and border integrity. As Mariz Tadros found in her ethnographic work among Christians after the Arab Spring, amidst insecurity her interviewees called not for protection against the religious "other" but protection through embeddedness and the formation of harmonious relations among different religious groups.[45] Such a reframing of relations involves discursive work to re-imagine the socio-cultural boundaries within a national community and move away from notions of minority and majority in determining the extent to which communities are represented in nationhood and constructed vis-à-vis national identity.

[42] Karen Ross, "Peacebuilding through inter-group encounters: rethinking the contributions of 'mainstream' and 'politicised' approaches," *Peacebuilding* 4 (2017): 322.

[43] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism,* (London; New York: Verso, 1983).

[44] Stuart Hall, "Un-settling 'the heritage,' re-imagining the post-nation. Whose heritage?" *Third Text* 13 (1999): 3-13.

[45] Tadros, 2015.

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Refugee Rights in the Levant during the Pandemic: Hampered Mobility and Heightened Vulnerability

Benedetta Galeazzi

"Hard" borders and limited mobility during the Covid-19 pandemic have reshaped daily lives globally and exposed the universal precariousness of the human condition. However, mounting evidence demonstrates that the crisis has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable segments of society. This paper will explore how the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures devised to contain it have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and curtailed the rights of forcibly displaced people in the Levant region. The guiding question for this research is as follows: How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected refugee rights, access to health, and mobility in the Levant region? This analysis argues that Covid-19 should not be regarded as a unique point of critical juncture, but rather as an exemplary case for consistent state practices towards non-citizens that are not time-bound to the crisis itself. The paper argues that the pandemic is being instrumentalised—by various governments and to different extents—to justify and propel hard-line migration policy approaches, severely imperilling the livelihoods of emplaced refugee communities.

Introduction: The Interplay between Crisis, Citizenship, and Mobility

Borders are instruments of control. Understanding borders as tools that extend beyond lines on a map allows for the assessment of their intangible effects. Notably, the novel coronavirus knows no borders. Its mutability and unpredictability has brought even the most advanced countries to their knees, placing "unprecedented demands on the state."[1] This has triggered a long overdue global debate on the governance of bodies and lives, as argued by critical researchers and political theorists such as Charlotte Epstein. Almost two years after the outset of this global health crisis, mapping its multifaceted reverberations remains an arduous task. Numerous scholars have expressed concerns over the way in which "the economic impact of COVID-19 threatens to undermine the social contract and political stability."[2] In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), this is "testing the region's fragile resilience"[3] amidst a long-standing climate of pervasive "emergency, temporality and protracted displacement."[4] In fact, as UNHCR statistics reveal, while MENA countries cumulatively make up merely 5% of the world's population, they account for 40% of the global forcibly displaced. The refugee and state system are arguably two sides of the same coin. Hence, the Levant presents itself as a pertinent locale for investigating the relationship between sovereignty, immobility, and

[1] Christiane Froehlich et al, "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa and Its Impact on Migration," *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, July 2020.

[2] Eckart Woertz, "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa: Reactions, Vulnerabilities, Prospects," *German Institute for Global and Area Studies*, April 2020, 1.

[3] Carlos Conde and Arthur Pataud, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries," *OECD*, November 2020.

[4] Cathrine Brun, "There is no Future in Humanitarianism: Emergency, Temporality and Protracted Displacement," *History and Anthropology*, 27:4, July 2016.

degrees of citizenship in the pandemic period.

Many MENA countries entered 2020 with chronic low growth, persistent macroeconomic imbalances, and governance challenges, including deficits in transparency. By the end of February 2021, the MENA region collectively had recorded over five million cases of Covid-19. Despite varying levels of preparedness in public health systems across the region,[5] health infrastructures were unequipped to face the Covid-19 challenge especially in those countries that had been pre-eroded by long-standing conflicts.[6] It is even more difficult to gauge the impact of the pandemic on forcibly displaced populations who are safeguarded by international law in theory, but in practice suffer the frequent denial of their basic rights. The pandemic has intersected with and aggravated the vulnerabilities of forcibly displaced groups, who were already facing multiple crises before Covid-19.[7]

This paper will first explore how states in the Levant have responded to the pandemic and then evaluate the impacts of these responses on refugees. Given that by 2020 most refugee populations in the region were emplaced, the reduction in human mobility triggered by Covid-19 was not the main source of insecurity for these groups *per se*. This article argues that the securitisation of the Covid-19 pandemic has allowed governments to instrumentalise pandemic politics and bolster their grip on power to the detriment of refugees' freedom of movement, economic security, and access to healthcare. Given the volatility of the situations on the ground, this paper's scope is to present a preliminary qualitative study of existing literature on the matter. Further empirical research is required to investigate the long-term effects of current and upcoming state practices on refugees' precarious positions in the Levant region, from both comparative and individual case study lenses. Future research could continue from where this analysis ends, to investigate how a novel bottom-up approach with the aim of safeguarding refugee rights may be implemented.

Policy Assessment of State-Responses in the MENA Context: Restrictions, Repression, and Exclusion

As per German sociologist Max Weber's widely accepted definition, state authority has long been associated with the exercise of an effective monopoly of violence over a bounded territoriality.[8] Consequently, the legitimacy of the state is inherently linked with its ability to control mobility flows across and within its borders. Protracted displacement in the Levant can therefore constitute a threat to state sovereignty, not only in terms of undocumented and unregistered migrants, but also due to the extra burden placed on the state to provide adequate services that are inclusive of emplaced populations. Despite the many scholarly inquiries on the decline of the state in the 21st century, the Covid-19 pandemic has presented governments with opportunities to devise new strategies of control across their territory and sustain their neglect of

[5] Conde, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries."
[6] Estella Carpi, "The Covid-19 among MENA Refugees: A Great Humanitarian Concern," *ISPI*, April 2020.
[7] Daniel Gorevan, "Downward Spiral: the economic impact of Covid-19 on refugees and displaced people," *Norwegian Refugee Council*, 2020.
[8] Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, Hackett Publishing Company, 2004, 33.

displaced communities.

Notably, travel restrictions and border closures have significantly transformed regional displacement dynamics.[9] Those who would have ordinarily emigrated in search of safety were instead compelled to migrate internally.[10] Given that the designation of citizenship is the main prerogative of the state, denial of access to legal residency or status is a powerful tool at the disposal of host governments over non-nationals. Although most states in the Levant are not full signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention—with the exception of Iran, Israel, and Egypt—or the 1967 Optional Protocol, their legal obligations towards refugees are enshrined in the 1992 Declaration on the Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons in the Arab World. The hard-line migration policies that have been pushed through during Covid-19 could be deemed to breach the freedoms and responsibilities set out in Articles 1–3 of the Declaration. Asylum office closures led to stalled processing of existing asylum applications, and it became extremely difficult for refugees to lodge new claims.[11] Immobility left many refugees stranded in environments ripe with power asymmetries vis-à-vis host governments, which could take advantage of the political leverage granted by this state of emergency. Extra curfews imposed on Syrian refugees across some Lebanese municipalities were justified by "parading such measures as needed to limit the spread of COVID-19."[12]

Most problematically, displaced populations have experienced exclusion from national healthcare systems. Governments' unwillingness to extend COVID-19 relief programmes to refugees increases refugees' exposure to health risks, especially when most cannot afford the luxury of isolating, quarantining, or confining themselves.[13] For them, government campaigns urging them to stay home and practice social distancing are inapplicable and impracticable.[14] State-led measures demonstrate a lack of consideration of host governments vis-à-vis the harsh realities of those emplaced persons stuck in overcrowded camps. Non-inclusivity is a result of entrenched inequalities, which magnify the challenges for refugees "to accessing adequate healthcare services, as compared to national populations."[15] In Syria, the allocation of public goods is also intrinsically affected by politicisation. Electricity is selectively provided according to the population's allegiance to the regime.[16] This becomes a severe constraint on

[9] Joris Jourdain et al., "Assessing the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on migrants and displaced populations in the Middle East and North Africa," *IOM Middle East and North Africa Regional Office*, 2021, 37.

[10] Meghan Benton, "Future Scenarios for Global Mobility in the Shadow of Pandemic," *Migration Policy Institute*, July 2021, 9.

[11] Eric Reidy, "The COVID-19 excuse? How migration policies are hardening around the globe," *The New Humanitarian*, April 2020.

[12] Carpi, "The Covid-19 among MENA Refugees."

[13] Tamirace Fakhoury, "Lebanon excludes refugees from coronavirus response at its own peril," *The New Arab*, May 2020.

[14] Froehlich et al., "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa and Its Impact on Migration."

[15] Sigrid Lupieri, "Refugee Health during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Review of Global Policy Responses," *PubMed Central*, 2021.

[16] Woertz, "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa: Reactions, Vulnerabilities, Prospects," April 2020, 4.

livelihoods and a compelling reason for flight. In this context of political unrest, where hospitals are often targeted both by militia groups and government forces, those who remain internally displaced are the forgotten victims of governmental neglect[17] and selective vaccine distribution.[18]

Unequal vaccine distribution is possibly the most stark example of how governments have instrumentalised the Covid-19 pandemic in the pursuit of debilitating refugees.[19] Uneven vaccine availability has a global dimension; high and upper-middle-income countries received 86% of the vaccine doses delivered worldwide, whereas only 0.1% of doses had been delivered in low-income countries as of 30 March 2021.[20] Amongst those Levant states who fall in the latter category, emerging evidence demonstrates the practice of vaccine nationalism.[21] This implies excluding forcibly displaced migrants from vaccination coverage.[22] For example, Israel only vaccinated its own citizens and residents, plus "the 100,000 Palestinians who work in Israel or within West Bank settlements."[23] Discrimination in access to healthcare risks worsening the effects underway since the Gaza blockade of 2007. Checkpoints, draconian restrictions, and the permit regime have severely aggravated the vulnerability of the Palestinian population, including those who have been forcibly displaced. Currently, they remain immobilised, undersupplied, and "available for injury."[24]

When vaccines did reach refugee populations, they were sometimes met with reluctance. Displaced communities, already living under a climate of ubiquitous uncertainty, proved to be susceptible to misinformation regarding the virus. In both Egypt and Turkey, state-controlled media has been used to deny and downplay the threats posed by Covid-19.[25] Fake news spread through these platforms has contributed to an anti-vaccine sentiment based on the widespread belief that the pandemic was a plot. In a UN Women interview, staff member Hadeel Al-Zoubi who works in a refugee camp in Jordan, shared her own hesitancy about receiving the vaccine, as well as that of the refugee women with whom she works.[26]

Deliberate discrimination in refugees' access to healthcare is a direct result of institutionalised xenophobic narratives. In Lebanon, members of the president's party have expressed that they were "disturbed by the prospect of refugees accessing vaccines," despite government promises of "equitable vaccine access for all."[27] Globally, migrants and refugees have repeatedly been depicted as carriers of contagious

[17] Nick McAlpin, "Political systems are broken: A year of Covid-19 and repression in the Middle East," *The New Arab*, April 2021.
[18] Monette Zard et al., "Leave no one behind: ensuring access to COVID-19 vaccines for refugee and displaced populations," *Nature Medicine*, April 2021.
[19] Lupieri, "Refugee Health during the Covid-19 Pandemic."
[20] Zard et al., "Leave no one behind."
[21] Güven Sak, "Building a Post-Pandemic G20 Agenda for Migration," IAI, March 2021.
[22] Benton, "Future Scenarios for Global Mobility in the Shadow of Pandemic," 25.
[23] McAlpin, "Political systems are broken."
[24] Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim,* Duke University Press, 2017.
[25] Woertz, "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa," 7.
[26] RCO Jordan, "Protecting refugees from COVID-19 misinformation," *United Nations,* 2022.
[27] Zard et al., "Leave no one behind."

infectious diseases and held responsible for the spread of the virus.[28] The propagation of such stigmatised discourses allows for the continued securitisation of migration: it bolsters the false claims that migrants are threats to state sovereignty, national integrity, and identity and justifies the "long-standing push for closing borders."[29] Dehumanisation of refugees through a process of "othering" is not a new phenomenon and currently contributes to refugees being stripped of their fundamental human rights while advancing the arguments for closed border systems. Within national boundaries, these xenophobic attitudes translate to socio-cultural barriers in the realm of affordable insurance and services.[30] They simultaneously entrench inequalities in the way refugees are treated, even by healthcare professionals.

Impact on Refugees: Socio-Economic Challenges and Imperilled Rights

Borders, manifested in the form of access barriers to healthcare, have produced increasingly volatile situations for refugees' safety.[31] Inadequate living conditions in "densely populated camps or poorer urban areas" have facilitated the spread of the virus amongst refugees who are stuck in these landscapes.[32] Refugee camps in Northeast Syria are an example of this. In these camps, health, water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities were already scarce; strained; and ill-equipped because of pressures that predated the pandemic.[33] The absence of adequate Covid-19 detection mechanisms and medical care throughout the Levant region has intensified refugees' vulnerability.[34] Due to the challenges posed by weak infrastructure, it is imperative to rethink coping mechanisms devised to contain the virus.[35] Refugees themselves have voiced dissatisfaction with the approaches adopted by humanitarian organisations and NGOs operating in these contexts. Being taught basic hygiene rules is insufficient; the scope of programs must go beyond narrowly and exclusively treating the pandemic as a health matter that simply requires these external actors to impart technical advice.[36]

Reduced mobility since the Covid-19 outbreak has put refugees' economic security under dire strain.[37] Prolonged confinement measures have generated a regional reduction in labour supply. Loss of employment and limited access to work opportunities have had profound combined knock-on effects for refugees.[38] Chiefly, the widespread loss of income has placed them at heightened risk of falling into poverty and facing hunger.[39] According to the OECD and the World Bank,

[28] United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "A Pandemic of Exclusion: The impact of COVID-19 on the human rights of migrants in Libya," *United Nations OHCHR*, August 2021.
[29] Reidy, "The COVID-19 excuse? How migration policies are hardening around the globe."
[30] Lupieri, "Refugee Health during the Covid-19 Pandemic."
[31] Meghan Benton et al., "COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020," *MPI and IOM*, 2021, 25.
[32] Conde, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries."
[33] Mick Mulroy et al., "Covid-19 & Conflict in the Middle East," *MEI Policy Centre*, January 2021.
[34] Conde, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries."
[35] Carpi, "The Covid-19 among MENA Refugees."
[36] Ibid.
[37] Conde, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries."
[38] United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "A Pandemic of Exclusion: The impact of COVID-19 on the human rights of migrants in Libya."
[39] Gorevan, "Downward Spiral."

one-third of refugees in Lebanon were living in poverty prior to the pandemic.[40] This exposes overlapping forms of fragility that have come to constitute refugee experiences under Covid-19.

Moreover, throughout the pandemic, remittance flows have dropped drastically, as exemplified by the approximate 80% decrease in remittances arriving to Yemen (mainly originating from Saudi Arabia) between January and April 2020.[41] Likewise, Syria's population is highly reliant on remittances—the yearly influx typically amounts to 1.6 billion USD—which account for almost 15% of nominal GDP, according to the World Bank.[42] Losses of various sources of income coupled with the inability to afford food or access social safety nets has forced some refugees to break curfews to make a living, or worse, return to unsafe conflict regions in attempts to survive.[43] Embarking on secondary migration journeys is particularly problematic given limited resettlement options and underfunded regional responses.[44]

Arguably, the worst effect of mobility restrictions and border closures for refugees has been the delay and cessation of asylum claims processing. This has further imperilled the fundamental right to asylum and jeopardised the process of refugee relocation.[45] A comprehensive report by the UN OHCHR in 2021 demonstrated that the imposed travel regulations have triggered a surge in refugees relying upon the service of smugglers, undertaking more dangerous routes, and falling prey to traffickers.[46] In the Levant specifically, this aggravates the pre-existing problem of displaced populations' unwillingness to submit asylum claims. In fact, as a result of the aforementioned discriminatory host government policies that yield limited integration prospects, most forcibly displaced persons are averse to being classified as refugees. Rather than being entrapped in a context of prolonged impermanence and risk depending on the whims of hostile authorities for social protection, they prefer to remain unregistered and embark on perilous journeys towards Europe.

Conclusions and Future Avenues: Rethinking Refugee Governance in MENA

This analysis has called attention to the specific vulnerabilities faced by refugees across the Levant during the pandemic. Displaced persons have been confronted with new challenges in regard to employability, vaccination, and requirements for self-isolation. These must be accounted for in policymaking and the design of protection systems. A bottom-up approach should be adopted in order to operationalise more inclusive responses, as has been increasingly proposed by many critical refugee studies scholars.[47] Incorporating refugee voices or accounts "from below" can foster a multi-stakeholder approach aimed at debunking discriminatory stereotypes and portraying

[40] Conde, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries."

[41] Benton et al., "COVID-19 and the State of Global Mobility in 2020," 25.

[42] Froehlich et al., "COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa and Its Impact on Migration."

[43] Ibid.

[44] Fakhoury, "Lebanon excludes refugees from coronavirus response at its own peril."

[45] Conde, "Covid-19 Crisis Response in MENA Countries."

[46] United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "A Pandemic of Exclusion: The impact of COVID-19 on the human rights of migrants in Libya."

[47] Mulki Al-Sharmani, "Transnational Somali families in Cairo," *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 2007.

refugees as more than "passive recipients of aid."[48] Perspectives from refugees who have experienced different forms of displacement and survived war-torn environments can contribute to devising Covid-19 responses that account for the most fragile and disenfranchised segments of society.[49]

Notwithstanding government inaction and policies of exclusion, refugees "displayed a remarkable spirit of agency" as the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded.[50] Numerous self-started measures in camps are already underway with the collaboration and support of local associations. Lebanon is the epitomising example of this remarkable phenomenon, where Palestinian refugees began to fabricate masks "to protect personal and collective health before the enactment of formal responses."[51] Yasmin Kayali, co-founder and COO of the refugee-led organisation Basmeh & Zeitooneh, testified to the health awareness campaigns launched, intensified mask production, distribution of food baskets, and provision of tablets for children attending virtual schooling amongst Lebanese refugee communities.[52] With a perpetually weak government, real change and development is happening from the local level, led by civil society and NGOs that empower refugees (whether or not they are registered) to be active agents in the response to the spread of the virus.

Undoubtedly, 2020 has been a watershed moment for human mobility.[53] In this context, displaced persons who lack recognition or acceptance as official citizens—and consequently as legitimate rights-holders—have had to bear the brunt of host governments' restrictive policies. Future research in the field must take advantage of the pandemic-induced momentum that is redefining and transforming understandings of borders, to challenge existing approaches to migration management across Levant countries.

[48] Fakhoury, "Lebanon excludes refugees from coronavirus response at its own peril."
[49] Diane Duclos and Jennifer Palmer, "COVID-19 in the Context of Forced Displacement: Perspectives from the Middle East and East Africa," *Social Science in Humanitarian Action*, 2020.
[50] Fakhoury, "Lebanon excludes refugees from coronavirus response at its own peril."
[51] Carpi, "The Covid-19 among MENA Refugees."
[52] Yasmin Kayali, "It's time to fund organizations led by refugees," *Amnesty International*, August 2020.
[53] Benton, "Future Scenarios for Global Mobility in the Shadow of Pandemic," 4.

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Crossing the Neutrality Border: When Constraints of Principle Limit Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid

Erin Hayes

Humanitarian aid agencies have adopted the principle of neutrality in the provision of life-saving assistance, claiming it is necessary to maintain access and prevent outsiders from taking inappropriate positions in conflicts. In this article, however, I argue that it is not possible to achieve true neutrality, and aid agencies' attempts to stay within this normative border limit the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. The conflict in Syria is used as an example to show the dangers of aid agencies acquiescing to host government demands for the sake of neutrality. In this case, the intangible "border of neutrality" puts a tangible border around those whom the aid can reach, with catastrophic and non-neutral results.

Neutrality, defined by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) as not taking sides in hostilities or engaging in political, racial, religious, or ideological controversies, has long been a principle of classical humanitarianism.[1] However, maintaining truly apolitical neutrality has proved elusive in the complex and inherently political environment of humanitarian aid, where even inaction has consequences. The concept has lost its meaning in practice, and humanitarian agencies' refusals to cross the intangible, normative border of neutrality have tangible constraints on the effectiveness of international aid. This paper first outlines the risks of aid agencies claiming to be neutral and then discusses their options for crossing the border of neutrality. It next addresses the concerns that humanitarian actors raise around abandoning neutrality and responds to those concerns. Finally, the case of Syria is used to show how the focus on staying within the border of neutrality erects borders around aid effectiveness and fairness.

Dangers of the Neutrality Border

Although most humanitarian aid agencies intend for their work to be neutral, aid is inherently political. Literature on aid neutrality has cited a number of reasons why the provision of aid is not actually neutral in practice. First, the situations in which aid is administered are often ambiguous and can involve unsavoury actors. Some circumstances are so complex that "the purity of the principles of neutrality and impartiality, are so compromised by such situations as to become meaningless."[2] Providing aid has unavoidable political consequences, because agencies must determine with whom they will work, to whom they will distribute assistance, and which needs will be prioritized. Therefore, despite humanitarian agencies' intentions to

[1] "OCHA on message: humanitarian principles," UN OCHA, accessed November 22, 2021, https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/Documents/OOM-humanitarianprinciples_eng_June12.pdf.

[2] Mary Anderson, "To Work, or Not to Work, in 'Tainted' Circumstances: Difficult Choices for Humanitarians," *Social Research* 74.1 (2007): 212, https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2082/docview/209670967?rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo.

stay within the bounds of neutrality in theory, the complexity of war makes neutrality impossible in practice.

Humanitarian agencies that attempt to stay within the normatively constructed border of neutrality in ambiguous circumstances are in danger of doing more harm than good. One risk is that they will be perceived to be tacitly condoning the abuses that they witness. By complying with the demands of host governments or non-state actors that constrict aid provision or looking the other way when violations occur, aid agencies send the message that such behavior is acceptable. For example, in its quest to remain neutral, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) refused to provide evidence to war crimes tribunals on Rwanda and Bosnia.[3] This inaction, stemming from an aspiration for neutrality, ironically amounted to a political decision by the ICRC, an example of how the concept of neutrality has lost its meaning in practice.

Furthermore, humanitarian agencies claiming neutrality can lend legitimacy to unsavoury groups or governments committing abuses. Negotiating with such groups can confer a degree of legitimacy and power upon them. Incorrect perceptions that aid originates from these groups can also bolster their reputations, especially if parties to a conflict participate in, or control, aid distribution.[4] Thus, even if aid agencies acquiesce to the demands of warring parties in an effort to maintain neutrality, their acquiescence has political consequences that in effect make them non-neutral.

Another risk is that aid agencies working with unsavoury actors in the name of neutrality will become pawns, contributing to war economies and prolonging conflict. In an extreme example, 20 million US dollars in aid equipment was stolen during Liberia's civil war in the 1990s, generating resources for combatants.[5] This phenomenon is also observable in less striking examples, such as aid agencies feeding militants or their supporters, thus allowing such groups to spend money that would have been allocated to food and supplies on the war effort.

Alternatives to Neutrality

Conundrums surrounding the provision and distribution of humanitarian aid have caused some international agencies to refuse to be limited by the constraints of neutrality. Research into connections between aid and human rights, as well as conflicts such as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, in which aid agencies were accused of causing harm, have caused some agencies to adopt a "do no harm" approach to account for the unintended consequences of aid.[6]

One way in which agencies have responded to the negative consequences of

[3] Fionan Fox, "New Humanitarianism: Does It Provide a Moral Banner for the 21st Century?" *Disasters* 25, no. 4 (2001): 277, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00178.

[4] Sarah Kenyon Lischer, "Collateral Damage: Humanitarian Assistance as a Cause of Conflict," *International Security* 28(1) (2003): 85, https://doi.org/10.1162/016228803322427983.

[5] Ibid, 84.

[6] Michael N. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 2011: 213-216, https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/login?url=http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=31.38200.

humanitarian aid is by removing themselves from conflicts. Withdrawing or threatening to withdraw from circumstances in which aid is misused or reinforces unjust power dynamics allows agencies to use their leverage to highlight abuses and condemn them.[7] For example, Médecins Sans Frontières withdrew from Ethiopia in 1985 and Zaire in 1994 because it felt that its aid was doing more harm than good.[8]

Short of withdrawing, humanitarian agencies could take harder lines in negotiations and try to avoid legitimising unsavoury actors, even if this involves working around sovereign governments or using their platforms to condemn abuses at the risk of angering host governments. In contrast to aid organizations attempting to maintain neutrality, many international NGOs owe their effectiveness to taking principled stances. For example, "name and shame" campaigns by organizations such as Amnesty International have been effective in bringing international pressure to stop abuses. Aid agencies could commit to taking similar positions.[9] The norms of responsibility to protect (R2P) and sovereignty as responsibility, which hold that the burden of protecting populations has shifted to the international community, have gained traction since the Cold War. Thus, when states neglect their obligations, one could argue that it is not merely an option but rather a duty for members of the international community, including humanitarian agencies, to take a political stance.[10] However, as the following section examines, many in the field of humanitarian aid feel that such "new humanitarianism" approaches that stray beyond the border of neutrality are dangerous.

Arguments for Staying Within the Border

There are several reasons why humanitarian agencies have traditionally refused to cross the border of neutrality. First, there is the concern that politicising humanitarian aid risks jeopardising providers' access to the humanitarian space. Defending his agency's purported neutrality, former ICRC president Cornelio Sommarauga argued that he was able to meet with President Milošović to negotiate for humanitarian access due to the organisation's refusal to condemn atrocities in Kosovo.[11] However, one could argue that the ICRC's meeting with Milošović granted the leader undue legitimacy. Thus, the ICRC's aspirations of neutrality fall flat in the face of the risk that such neutrality does more harm than good.

Critics of new humanitarianism also warn that if humanitarian providers abandon neutrality, this could lead to a "hierarchy of victims" in which some aid recipients are regarded as undeserving. They argue that outside aid workers are not equipped to serve as "judge, juror and politician" in conflicts.[12] However, as the case of Syria illustrates, agencies' refusal to take a stand in the interest of maintaining

[7] Anderson, "To Work," 214.
[8] Barnett, *Empire*, 216.
[9] Anderson, "To Work," 214.
[10] Luke Glanville, "The Antecedents of 'Sovereignty as Responsibility,'" European Journal of International Relations 17, no. 2 (2011): 233-55.
[11] Fox, "New," 278.
[12] Ibid, 281-282.

neutrality can effectively amount to putting up borders around who receives aid.

Finally, there is the perspective that new humanitarianism is akin to colonialism, with Western countries imposing their views of human rights and ethics on conflict-ridden countries.[13] This should not justify maintaining neutrality, however, as even humanitarian aid that is supposedly neutral generally consists of Western countries intervening in non-Western countries, and, as noted above, often in harmful ways.

Doing Harm: The Case of Syria

The Syrian civil war illustrates how the intangible border of neutrality creates tangible boundaries to aid effectiveness. Aid providers in Syria refusing to cross the border of neutrality have shaped the roles and structure of humanitarian interventions in the country. Assumptions underpinned by the normative border, namely that aid is neutral and its distribution should be apolitical, have legitimised aid operations and allowed international agencies to claim they are unbiased. However, the Bashar al-Assad regime has exploited these assumptions, causing aid agencies to contribute to a biased reality.[14]

To appear neutral, many aid agencies have largely acquiesced to pressure from the Assad regime to partner with government institutions to deliver aid, which has limited access for some populations. By closely coordinating with government institutions, agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) have effectively strengthened the Assad regime. Since the Syrian Ba'ath party came to power, it has implemented food subsidies to ensure compliance and assuage popular discontent. By providing food aid that is primarily funneled to residents of government-controlled areas in Syria, humanitarian agencies perform this role for the regime, thus freeing funds for its military operations.[15] This case thus serves as an example of how attempts by humanitarian agencies to appear neutral can allow for greater political manipulation of aid.

Agencies' coordination with the Syrian regime has also had a legitimising effect. One Syrian activist attested, "Following the attacks of June 2013 when the Syrian army regained control of the city, I saw various soldiers distributing World Food Programme packages to local residents."[16] This association of Syrian forces with WFP-branded aid lends them legitimacy, further undercutting arguments that humanitarian aid is distributed in a neutral manner.

Allowing neutrality to underpin aid has also erected tangible borders around aid access. Partnering with Syrian institutions has severely limited the access of humanitarian agencies to non-regime controlled areas and played into the strategy of the Assad regime. Through bureaucratic delays and access denials, the Syrian government has ensured that the majority of assistance ended up in regime-controlled

[13] Ibid, 284.

[14] José Ciro Martínez and Brent Eng, "The Unintended Consequences of Emergency Food Aid: Neutrality, Sovereignty and Politics in the Syrian Civil War, 2012–15," [In eng] *International affairs (London)* 92, no. 1 (2016): 155-156, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12502.

[15] Ibid, 157-158.

[16] Ibid, 162.

areas.[17] Even with UN Security Council Resolution 2165, which authorized cross-border provision of aid without government consent, food aid had only reached 200,000 civilians by the end of 2014, compared to the 2 million the UN estimated it could reach following the resolution.[18] Evaluators attributed this to agencies such as the WFP wanting to maintain a close relationship with the Syrian government for the sake of future access. Agencies accepting this limited access have allowed the Assad regime to weaponise food and medical aid and use starvation as a tactic to induce civilians in opposition-controlled territory to surrender.[19]

As a 2019 Chatham House report noted, the abuses of the Assad regime prompted international condemnation, but the international community has continued to treat it as "a sovereign actor rather than as a warring party."[20] This overlooks the complex nature of sovereignty, which consists of both the responsibility to protect as well as states' rights to non-intervention in their affairs. The Syrian government relies on humanitarian assistance from the international community, which gives agencies leverage to fulfil the protection obligations of sovereignty as responsibility by pushing back against its aid manipulation. For example, agencies could insist on reduced bureaucratic approvals in order to broaden access to non-regime controlled areas and the ability to carry out direct needs assessments and monitoring and evaluation field visits.[21] The failure of agencies to do so out of fear of crossing the border of neutrality has exposed how neutrality has lost its meaning in practice, with dangerous humanitarian consequences.

In conclusion, norms in the provision of humanitarian aid have erected a perceived border of neutrality that agencies hesitate to cross. However, beliefs about the importance of maintaining neutrality belie the reality that in ambiguous conflict situations, true neutrality is not possible. Even inaction amounts to a political position, as it entails agencies refusing to take positions or stand up to abusive actors. Providers of humanitarian aid should thus not allow the normative border of neutrality to prevent them from taking stands. As the tragedy of the Syrian civil war illustrates, the refusal to cross this intangible border has tangible effects and constrains access to life-saving assistance.

[17] Ibid, 158.
[18] Martínez and Eng, "The Unintended," 160.
[19] Colum Lynch, "U.N.'s fear of angering Assad leaves gap in Syria aid effort," *Foreign Policy*, December 30, 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/30/u-n-s-fear-of-angering-assad-leaves-gap-in-syria-aid-effort/.
[20] Haid Haid, "Principled Aid in Syria: A Framework for International Agencies," *Chatham House* (July 2019): 20, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-07-04-PrincipledAidSyria.pdf.
[21] Ibid, 11-14.

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A Crack in the American Stereotype of Muslim Women: *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at San Francisco's de Young Museum

Marjorie Kelly

This article analyses how the exhibition of Contemporary Muslim Fashions, organized by San Francisco's de Young Museum, overcame the American stereotypes of Muslim women and particularly of Middle Eastern women. The exhibition's political turmoil was amplified due to the travel ban (issued by former President Trump) against seven Middle Eastern nations. The topic was harshly criticized by both Muslims and non-Muslims who had preconceived notions about the contents of the proposed exhibition. The article traces the research and development that went into the exhibition, including the choice and solicitation of foreign and local Muslim advisors and designers. It then describes the display and public events of the exhibition before turning to the reaction of the public; namely, participants such as designers, Muslim and non-Muslim museum-goers, as well as media reporters, reviewers, and broadcasters. The article concludes with a summation of lessons learned, successes achieved, and suggestions offered for future cross-cultural exhibitions.

Introduction

At a time when spectacular new museums are being constructed in the Arabian Gulf, the Arab region has also produced cultural exhibitions for use in foreign museums – in effect, for foreign consumption.[1] Curated, organized, and/or sponsored by Arab nations, the subject matter of these exhibitions is chosen to appeal to Western audiences. In the words of one Saudi presenter in a video accompanying an exhibition, the mission is to create "a bridge between cultures" and a "message of peace."[2] In short, the exhibitions not only provide aesthetic or educational windows into Middle East culture, but are a means of achieving soft power and deflecting negative images of Arabs who are often portrayed in Western media as radical, menacing, and violent. Examples of such international exhibitions are *A Gift from the Desert: The Art, History, and Culture of the Arabian Horse*[3] shown at the International Museum of the Horse (U.S.A.), *Horse and History: From Arabia to Ascot*[4] shown at the British Museum, and *Roads of Arabia: Archaeology and History of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*[5] shown at the Louvre and later in the United States.

However, an exhibition which opened in the fall of 2018 at San Francisco's de Young Museum was unusual in that it looked at global contemporary Muslim so-

[1] Among the new museums are: Qatar's Museum of Islamic Art (opened 2008) and the National Museum of Qatar (2019), Oman's National Museum (2016), and the Abu Dhabi Louvre (2017).

[2] Seacastle Film, *The Arabian Horse: A Gift from the Desert,* 2012.

[3] Sandra L. Olsen and Cynthia Culbertson, *A Gift from the Desert: The Art, History, and Culture of the Arabian Horse* (Lexington, KY: International Museum of the Horse, 2010).

[4] John Curtis and Nigel Tallis, *Horse and History: From Arabia to Ascot.* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

[5] Ute Franke and Joachim Gierlichs, eds., *Roads of Arabia: The Archaeological Treasures of Saudi Arabia* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2011).

ciety by presenting an entirely different view of Muslims and, specifically, Muslim women. In presenting worldwide contemporary fashions worn by Muslim women, the exhibition challenged what is arguably one of the most firmly-held stereotypes about Islamic societies: Muslim females' lack of agency and creativity. Contrary to stereotypic expectations, the existence of these qualities is visually and dramatically underscored by examining how they are expressed sartorially. In short, the garments themselves demonstrate very different qualities from the black abaya of the Arabian Gulf by displaying Muslim apparel from Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. In examining how the exhibition changed its audience's perception of Muslim women, this article begins with the research process used in the creation and development of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*, specifically, the role Muslims played in the exhibition, the countries and designers that were included and, consequently, which garments were displayed. The exhibition's ancillary activities are likewise included, as are the responses of media and museum-goers. The conclusion ends by asking why the exhibition was a success from the perspectives of the museum, the participants, the visitors, and the media; and offers suggestions for future programming.

While the scholarly literature on modest female dress in the Muslim world is growing,[6] publications useful for the exhibition were somewhat outdated (some recognized by the authors themselves). Namely, the intention of *contemporary* fashion in multiple settings, rather than as traditional or regional dress – or even the stylistic variations of dress worn by Muslim women in the West, makes publication dated. Given the exhibition's emphasis on contemporary fashion and widespread diversity that are virtually unknown to American viewers, the curators' choice focused on recent garments and on those currently worn by Muslim customers. In short, what the Americans see at the exhibition is not an unidentified female in a black abaya, but Muslim females that can be both fashionable and unique in their choice of fabric, style, etc. The theme and timing of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* took place at the Trump administration's unprecedented ban on Muslim travel to the U.S.[7] Thus, one might well ask not why such an exhibition took so long to happen, but rather how did it occur at all given the political atmosphere.

My own research methodology for this article included participant observation during visits to the exhibition and listening to visitor reactions in the galleries. It also involved attendance at a one-day symposium at which contributors to the museum catalogue talked about their research findings; interviews with curators, guides, and museum-goers; and an analysis of the transcript of the audio guide that accompanied the exhibition. Lastly, I consulted press clippings, articles, and videos on the exhibition

[6] For example, see Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), Elizabeth Bucar, *Pious Fashion: How Muslim Women Dress* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), and Reina Lewis, *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

[7] While the presidential Executive Orders banning travel to the U.S. were limited to seven Muslim-majority states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen), this numerical distinction was rarely made in media reports. Lawsuits were filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU); and on June 26, 2018, the Supreme Court upheld the third Trump travel ban by a vote of five to four. See ACLU, "Timeline of the Muslim ban," (no date). https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban.

and its ancillary activities. My long interest in the Middle East, museums, and clothing (see Kelly) led me to investigate how *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* was organized, given that the exhibition was the first of its kind in the world.[8] Additionally, I was eager to see how such a globally diverse subject would be dealt with by curators, consumed by museum-goers, and received by the general public.

Commitment and Controversy: The Genesis of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*

> Ten years from now, we may look at *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at the de Young Museum as a turning point in American history, where mainstream America, despite an angry minority, embraced its "others" at the highest institutions.[9]

Many Muslim states do not have national museums of fashion so it is not surprising that exhibitions on fashion have been organized by foreign museums. On the other hand, exhibitions organized by American museums – where collections are readily available – have also been a subject of controversy. Part of the issue has been from dismissive museum professionals who do not classify clothing as an art form or from reviewers who regard fashion exhibitions as blatant commercialism.[10] In addition, fashions are associated with change, obsolescence, and adornment; and are thereafter undervalued as a subject of exhibition -- "superficial, narcissistic, and wasteful."[11] Another reason for fashion's downgraded status was because, as an art form, it combines both high art and popular culture.[12]

In any event, the general American public is eager to see the actual objects. Indeed, fashion exhibitions have become one of the most popular (and lucrative) programs offered at museums. Some exhibitions have attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors and millions of dollars in sponsorships and special entrance fees. The most highly attended exhibition (in any category of art) at New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art was *Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination* (2018). Combining Papal robes from the Sistine Chapel sacristy with Catholic-inspired works by Chanel, McQueen, and Versace, it drew 1,659,647 visitors in its five-month run to break the forty-year record held

[8] Cynthia Durcanin, "Conversation Piece: San Francisco's de Young Museum Celebrates *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*," *Artnews*, January 4, 2019, http://www.artnews.com/2019/01/04/conversation-piece-de-young-san-francisco-celebrates-contemporary-muslim-fashions.

[9] Celine Semaan, "The de Young Museum Show Brings Together Different Religious Interpretations and Cultures of Islam," *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 25 2018, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/contemporary-muslim-fashions-exhibition-opens-san francisco-1146713.

[10] Valerie Steele, "Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition," *Fashion Theory* 12, no. 1 (March 2008): 7-30. https://doi.org/10.2752/175174108X268127.

[11] Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, "Introduction," In *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (New York: Routledge, 2001), 2.

[12] Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003), 246.

by *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* (which drew 1.3 million visitors in 1978).[13]

Four months after *Heavenly Bodies* opened in New York, *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* opened in San Francisco. While it did not draw Met-sized crowds, it was recognized as "a game changer" and "a turning point"[14] as well as "a bold statement of cultural appreciation during a time of heightened anti-Muslim rhetoric."[15] The new perception of Muslim women was due not just to the women's apparel, but because the designers were also female. The exhibition's eighty ensembles were created by 70% females under the age of forty.[16] Many of the photographers whose works were featured in the show were female. In addition, the galleries were designed by Hariri and Hariri Architecture, which was founded by two Iranian-born sisters. The show's curators, though not Muslims, were also females (Jill D'Alessandro and Laura L. Camerlengo), as was the Consulting Curator, Reina Lewis of the University of the Arts London.

In an interview, D'Alessandro discussed the genesis of the show. She said the seed of the exhibition was planted in 2016, when France was in an uproar over the ban on Muslim women wearing burkinis at the beach. At the same time, she noticed young Muslim women wearing chic modest fashion to express religious piety. It was the dichotomy, she said, that interested her.[17] As her colleague, Camerlengo, put it, "There has been an explosion of creativity from the Muslim modest fashion sector in the past decade…[we] thought it would be exciting to explore this development, as the different styles of dress are distinguished by enormous variety and creativity." Further, the de Young museum was an ideal venue for an exhibition on the topic since it has "a strong history of critically acclaimed fashion exhibitions, a costume and textiles collection that is rich in artworks from Muslim-majority countries, and we are situated in an [geographic] area with a sizable Muslim audience."[18] They found a receptive director in Max Hollein.

The Austrian-born Hollein became director of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (of which the de Young is a part) in June of 2016. Prior to that, he led three museums in Germany and, perhaps more to the point, was on the board of the Istanbul Museum (also known as the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art). He became intrigued with the idea of Muslim fashion as a means of communication.[19] While trav-

[13] Sarah Cascone, "The Met's *Heavenly Bodies* is the Most Popular Show in the Museum's History, Drawing 1.7 Million Visitors," *Artnet,* October 12, 2018, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/heavenly-bodies- most-visited-met-show-1370503.

[14] Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."

[15] Liz Bucar, "Three Things We Can Learn from Contemporary Muslim Women's Fashion," *The Conversation*, November 5, 2018, https://theconversation.com/three-things-we-can-learn-from-contemporary-muslim-womens-fashion-104889.

[16] Alaina Demopoulos, "Inside the Glamorously Modest World of Muslim Women's Fashion," *The Daily Beast*, March 3, 2020, https://www/thedailybeast.com/inside-the-glamorously-modest-world-of-muslim-womens-fashion.

[17] Janie Har, "San Francisco Museum Shows off Modern Muslim Women's Fashion," APNews, September 21, 2018, https://apnews.com/article/020165b76e324eea2a6bbf24e171f805f.

[18] Angela M. H. Schuster, "Spotlight on Fashion in the Islamic World," *Robb Report*, September 15, 2018, https://robbreport.com/muse/fashion-jewelry/rare-spotlight-on-fashion-in-islamic-world-2817544.

[19] Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."

eling in Tehran, he noticed the vibrancy of the city's fashion scene, where "women were using the mandated hijab to express their own individuality."[20] He later noted Nike's Pro Hijab line for athletes. Furthermore, like his curators, he believed that a museum exhibition on the topic was in order, as "museums are one of the few places where you can have a deep and non-polemic debate about the intersection of cultures. On other platforms, people either have superficial conversations – or just yell at each other."[21]

None of the exhibition's organizers was naïve about the tendency to trivialize fashion; nor were they blind to the fact that many people "don't even think there is fashion in Islam."[22] Hollein realized that the show might be a hard sell: "If you tell people you're doing a show on Claude Monet, everyone says: See you at the opening. But this show is clearly more challenging, more complex. As a director, sometimes your job is to create confidence in a show."[23] The team was sure of their topic and eager to share what they had seen and learned." Consulting Curator Reina Lewis also saw a positive side to fashion being trivialized. She regarded clothing as "a fabulous conduit for a whole series of conversations. Sometimes, precisely because fashion is trivialized as frivolous, talking about clothes is a good way to open conversation with people or groups you might not usually talk with, and about topics that might seem delicate."[24]

Associate Curator Camerlengo noted that many of the artists and designers who assisted in developing the exhibition saw fashion as being about more than pretty clothes. For them, it functioned as "an agent for positive change."[25] In the words of Los Angeles-based designer Carmen W. Muhammad,

> I have the belief that there are some industries that exist – sports, entertainment, music, and fashion – that are so powerful that they become ambassadors for peace. When you are operating within those industries, you have the potential to bring people together regardless of their race, social background, or economic status. This is my mission, to use my creative talents in fashion to promote peace and goodwill in the world.[26]

Despite their confidence in the show's worth, no one was prepared for the storm of controversy triggered by the public announcement of the exhibition. Donald Trump

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[20] Jori Finkel, "Mediating Faith and Style: Museums Awake to Muslim Fashions," *New York Times*, September 25, 2018, https://www.nytimes/com/2018/09/25/arts/design/de-young-museum-contemorary-muslim-fashions.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Jori Finkel, "The Fashion of Islam to Arrive at de Young in 2018," *New York Times*, December 26, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/26/arts/design/the-fashion-of-islam-to-arrive-at-de-young-in-2018.html.

[23] Finkel, "Mediating Faith and Style."

[24] Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."

[25] Hannah Davies, "Exhibition Showcasing Muslim Fashion to Open in San Francisco," *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2018/aug/31/exhibition-showcasing-muslim-fashion-to-open-in-san-francisco.

[26] Carmen W. Muhammad quoted in Jill D'Alessandro, "Global Style: Muslim Modest Fashion Today," in *Contemporary Muslim Fashions,* eds. Jill D'Alessandro and Reina Lewis (New York: Prestel, 2018), 57.

had just been elected President of the United States and the political turmoil regarding his U.S. immigration policy against Muslims (specifically, Middle Eastern nations) soon made headlines. While museum staff were later to say such policy only made the show more relevant,[27] in the short term the exhibition announcement evoked an unusually strong reaction, even though the topic had not been chosen in response to domestic U.S. politics or the presidential election.[28] Hollein characterized the public response as very intense. In an interview with the *New York Times,* Hollein recalled,

> I got a number of emails complaining – some in very harsh terms – that this is not the right time for America to celebrate Muslim culture. On the other hand, there were also people accusing us of celebrating the oppression of women [i.e., a stereotype of Muslim women]. The museum also heard from people of Islamic faith who found the notion of "fashion" antithetical to the religion's modest dress codes. For them, the very idea of the show seemed sacrilege.[29]

Hollein remained steadfast in his commitment to the exhibition; as D'Alessandro put it, "Fear is not a Max [Hollein] thing."[30] While stating the intent was not to provoke, he noted that "one quarter of the world's population is Muslim. So the idea that we shouldn't be exhibiting Muslim fashion is completely bizarre."[31] In August of 2018, Hollein left San Francisco to become director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The de Young exhibition opened as planned the next month for a four-month run.

Before turning to what was done and the response it evoked, brief mention should be made of the show's only other U.S. venue to date. The exhibition was scheduled to appear at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum in New York City from February 28 through August 23, 2020. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, public institutions including museums were closed; consequently, the exhibition was only open for about two weeks. Thus, one of the prime audiences in the U.S. for this show – those affiliated with New York's garment district – had little opportunity to see it. The venture was not a total loss, however, since the Cooper Hewitt had produced eight videos for the exhibition which were put online. They introduced the designers behind the fashions and expanded on the design process.[32]

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[27] Aysha Khanayshabkhan, "At Long Last, Muslim High Fashion Catapults into the Mainstream," *Religion News*, October 5, 2018, https://religionnews.com/2018/10/05/de-young-museum-high-muslim-fashion-catapults-mainstream.

[28] Alex Aubry, "Fashion's Muslim Voices: *Bazaar* Goes Behind the Scenes at San Francisco's de Young Museum," *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*, September 20, 2018, https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/fashion/the-news/contemporary-muslim-fashion-exhibition-de-young-museum.

[29] Finkel, "Mediating Faith and Style."

[30] Ibid.

[31] Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."

[32] See, for example, *Voices of the Exhibition* [the first of eight videos on YouTube produced by Cooper Hewitt], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbHkYJHyVs&list=PLqwPGOOIhKSB6P5OIpbzabcpxFz0O31Vi&index=1

Researching *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*

> I was very touched by how eager the Muslim community was to get behind this exhibition, and their feedback contributed to shaping its content.[33]

Typically, fashion exhibitions focus on a particular era or on an individual designer – usually deceased. Exhibitions on living designers were harshly criticized by reviewers who complained they were mere advertisements for a fashion house.[34] Sidestepping this controversy, Hollein announced his exhibition in 2016 when the financing was still not yet in place. In fact, he said, "I don't even want to have funding right away because that would skew us in a particular direction."[35] Since the exhibition was the first of its kind, no backlog of catalogues or museum-quality visuals – much less collections of clothing – were available for research or display. Nor, given the exhibition's emphasis on contemporary fashion, would most of the scholarly literature be current enough to suit the show's theme. Yet, Hollein insisted that the same scholarly rigour be applied to this show as would be applied to an old masters' show.[36] At the exhibition's opening, Hollein said his aim was "to start an examination and dialogue about Muslim fashion with a show that would inform, and be a discovery and perhaps even groundbreaking."[37]

Curators D'Alessandro and Camerlengo set about their research using Instagram as "one of the primary sources for finding designers and fashion influencers."[38] Indeed, as Hollein notes,[39] using social media as primary material for the catalogue and the exhibition was a necessity and also allowed a wider variety of Muslim voices to be heard. As an example, Camerlengo's catalogue article presents the views of several Middle Eastern-American bloggers of different backgrounds.[40] As local retailers did not carry clothing that met their needs, they turned to the internet to look for and exchange ideas about what to wear. As time went on, bloggers wrote about more than style; they also addressed social issues. Iranian-American Hoda Katebi's blog was a means to "investigate the artistic, the political, and the deeper significance of what

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[33] Associate Curator Laura Camerlengo quoted in Alex Aubry, "Fashion's Muslim Voices."

[34] For example, Michael Kimmelman, "Art, Money, and Power," *New York Times,* May 11, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05-11/arts/design/art-money-and-power.html.

[35] Finkel, "The Fashion of Islam."

[36] Ibid.

[37] Diane Dorrans Saeks, "*Contemporary Muslim Fashions* Debuts at de Young Museum in San Francisco," *Women's Wear Daily,* September 25, 2018, https://www.com/eye/lifestyle/contemporary-muslim-fashions-exhibit-de-young-museum-in-san- francisco-1202841704.

[38] Tony Bravo, "Seeing Muslim Fashion in a New Light: Modest, Modern, and Modish," *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 21, 2018, https://www.sfchronicle.com/style/article/Contemporary-Muslim-Fashions-explore-defnitions-13246051.php.

[39] Max Hollein, "Foreward," In *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*, eds. Jill D'Alessandro and Reina Lewis (New York: Prestel, 2018), 13.

[40] Laura Camerlengo, "'My Muslimness': Fashion, Faith, and Social Media," in *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*, eds. Jill D'Alessandro and Reina Lewis (New York: Prestel, 2018), 98-107.

we are wearing, and how we choose to present our bodies for public consumption."[41] Echoing Hollein's point about social media being a way to hear Muslim voices, Katebi wrote that:

> I didn't want to preach to the choir; I wanted to insert myself in spaces – whether people liked it or not – where people wouldn't be hearing or listening to people like me otherwise, and shape the way that they think about Muslims, women, femininity, foreign policy, and feminism but also fashion.[42]

A second avenue of research lay in seeking expert advice. Hollein was involved in forming an international advisory committee that included academics, curators, and journalists[43] and also helped acquire the loan of four haute couture ensembles from Sheikha Moza of Qatar.[44] The nearly 250,000 Muslims living in the six counties surrounding the city of San Francisco – forming one of the highest concentrations of Muslims in the U.S.[45] – was also a valuable resource for information. Associate Curator Camerlengo noted that contact with local Muslims was established via colleges and universities, mosques and Islamic associations; and resulted in an outreach group composed of seventy-five self-selecting individuals. Four large group meetings were held, starting eighteen months before the exhibition opened. While most participants were female, the women varied in age and ethnicity. Among them was Bay Area fashion stylist Saba Ali who was hired to wrap the hijabs on the exhibition's mannequins in the appropriate manner. She also loaned her (Pakistani) wedding dress to the museum for the exhibition and participated in print and television interviews.

As an indication of what motivated local Muslims to get involved and what they hoped the exhibition would accomplish, some of their views are quoted below, taken from the transcript of the show's audio guide.

> I think that by the exhibition we can see all that is happening from Muslims all over the world…and that we're not the stereotype dressing of black abaya and covered from head to toe and that we don't talk to people and that we are not fashionable (Norzaini Suhaimi).

> I hope from this exhibition Muslim women are not seen as "the other" anymore. I hope that they respect our choice to go through our own personal journey (Amanda Ramadhani).

[41] Hoda Katebi quoted in Camerlengo, "My Muslimness," 101.
[42] Ibid, 103.
[43] Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."
[44] Finkel, "Mediating Faith and Style."
[45] Farid Senzai and Hatem Bazian, *The Bay Area Muslim Study: Establishing Identity and Community* (Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 2013), https://www.ispu.org/bay-area-study-executive-summary.

In addition to the online and literature searches and the advice received from both international and local experts, the curators attended Fashion Weeks in Turin, Dubai, Malaysia, and London to identify the leading fashion designers of Muslim dress.[46] Further, they traveled to various sites to observe first hand what was being created. D'Alessandro traveled to Saudi Arabia (Riyadh and Jeddah) at the invitation of the King Abdul Aziz Center for World Culture in order to meet with fashion influencers on social media and designers, such as Alaa Balkhy and Mariam Bin Mahfouz. D'Alessandro was later to point out on the show's audio guide that Middle Eastern designers were particularly well-informed about Western design, having studied its tailoring techniques, for example. D'Alessandro also visited Indonesia, Malaysia, and London; and found that doing so broadened her perspective, making her "less western-centric in my approach to fashion because I met innovative designers who weren't necessarily looking to the West for inspiration."[47] Lastly, D'Alessandro and Camerlengo also traveled within the U.S. to visit studios, request portfolios, examine the construction of the clothing, and determine what was visually compelling.

The designers whose work eventually appeared in the exhibition were chosen for their prominence and for the actual production of their designs. In short, the museum would not use and could not display modest fashions that existed only as designs on paper: the clothing had to be produced, accepted, and worn by customers for the designers to be considered for inclusion. To be exhibited, specific garments had to demonstrate both high-quality craftsmanship and a striking design. A third consideration was the garment's historical significance; for example, Sarah Elnany's hoodie for the UK Scout Association. Having cast a wide net and received input from so many different sources, how did the curators go about narrowing their focus in order to create a coherent exhibition? The criteria for who and what to display as cited above were clear; but what were the parameters of the exhibition itself to be: what was considered to be contemporary, what counted as Muslim/modest fashion, and how did head coverings fit into the equation?

With regard to "contemporary," it was decided that only items that had been produced or appeared on social media within the past five years would be included (though exceptions were made for wedding gowns, for example). In fact, many items in the exhibition were no more than two years old. It was easier to establish a cut-off point in the past than in the present. Due to the exhibition's emphasis on being current, "one of the challenges we faced was the constantly shifting market."[48] "Modesty" was to be defined by the lender (the garment's designer or owner); the museum would not be an arbiter as to what was modest and what was not, what was regarded as acceptably Muslim and what was not.

Many non-Muslims regarded the hijab as the most identifiable sign of Muslim identity and would be confused if it were not part of the exhibition; thus,

[46] Saeks, "*Contemporary Muslim Fashions* Debuts."
[47] Aubry, "Fashion's Muslim Voices."
[48] Interview with Laura Camerlengo, 2018.

it was an aspect of dress that had to be addressed.[49] For obviously different reasons, Muslim designers were also concerned about stereotypes of head covering. Some designers from outside the Arabian Peninsula, as well as innovative designers from the Gulf, were frustrated at having the black abaya and niqab regarded as the norm, resulting in their work being either ignored or perceived as inauthentic or insufficiently modest.[50] In the event, museum-goers (and designers) got more than they bargained for, when the head coverings on display were diverse in color and style (hijabs, scarves, turbans, hoods, etc.) or absent altogether. Here too, the museum deferred judgment to the garments' lenders by asking them if they preferred to have their apparel shown with or without a heading covering.[51] Some did, others did not.

The issue was well-contextualized, however, with photographs of Muslim women going about their daily life or as the subject of the exhibition's art photography. Some women were shown protesting against having to cover (in Iran) while others wore their hijabs with pride, even defiantly, in the face of hostile others (e.g., Mona Haydar's music video "Wrap My Hijab"). In other words, what was worn matter-of-factly in some communities was mandated in others and, in still other contexts, was worn voluntarily or defiantly as a part of the wearer's right to freedom of religious expression. The point, of course, was that viewers could decide for themselves that more than one opinion existed in multiple situations within the Muslim community. Thus, listening to one voice or adhering to a simplistic stereotype did not tell the whole story, and the debate was far from over.

The Exhibition: Garments, Graphics, and Speakers

> In an increasingly unwelcome world, it felt amazing to see Muslim women being recognized for their courage in being themselves.[52]

The curators had researched sources and had consulted knowledgeable people abroad and at home to provide a Muslim voice. The next question was how did it come together. Was the exhibition coherent as well as diverse? Was it intelligible as well as groundbreaking? The main value of the exhibition lay in how well the visitor was drawn into seeing and assessing the various styles in contrast to previously held stereotypes. What might have been made clearer? What questions did visitors raise? To facilitate answer-

[49] Many publications on the hijab (and modest fashion) are available. Among them are the double issue of Muslim dress edited by Emma Tarlo and Annelies Moors, *Fashion Theory* 11, no. 2/3 (June and September 2007): 133-382. https://doi.org/10.2752/136270407X202718. Reina Lewis, "Veils and Sales: Muslims and the Spaces of Postcolonial Fashion Retail," *Fashion Theory* 11, no. 4 (December 2007): 423-41. https://doi.org/10.2752/175174107X250235. Arlene MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, The New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001).

[50] Anaka Kaundinya, "Seven Women on Muslim Representation in Fashion," *New York Magazine,* October 3, 2018, https://www.thecut.com/2018/10/contemporary-muslim-fashions-de-young-html.

[51] Aubry, "Fashion's Muslim Voices."

[52] Muslim visitor to *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* quoted in Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."

ing these questions, a summary of what was on display appears below.

The garments ranged from updated abayas to streetwear, hoodies, sportswear, and haute couture. They came from the Middle East as well as from Southeast Asia, the U.S., Canada, Australia, the U.K. and Europe. The eighty ensembles on display represented the work of over fifty designers, half of whom were women between the ages of twenty and thirty.[53] The apparel was shown on white plastic mannequins that often melted into a background of white walls. No attempt was made to portray facial features, make-up, hair styles, etc. so that nothing distracted the viewer from focusing on the clothing. The garments were grouped by geographic region or type, categorized as "Dress from the Middle East", "Dress from Southeast Asia", "Diaspora Dress", "Global Fashion" (haute couture), "Streetwear", and "Sportswear". Wall space was devoted to fashion magazine covers, photographs, and videos.

Among the Middle Eastern designers were Wadha Al Hajri from Qatar, whose ankle-length coat featured cutwork and embroidery; and Raşit Bağzibağli, a designer for Istanbul-based Modanista whose work was represented by a chiffon and crepe gown that included feathers and sequins. Among the designers from Southeast Asia were Dian Pelangi of Indonesia, whose ensembles featured Thai silk; and Bernard Chandran of Malaysia, whose garment featured Swarovski crystals. Naima Muhammad of the U.S. used African-print clothes for the basis of her designs. Londoner Sarah Elenany, of Egyptian and Palestinian heritage, designed a hoodie dress for The Scout Association in the United Kingdom with long sleeves and a long torso that could be worn over jeans or leggings. Aheda Zanetti, a Lebanese-born Australian, originally designed the burkini (a hooded swim top and pants) for her nieces in 2004. It was exhibited next to a swim ensemble designed by Egyptian-American Shereen Sabet, a longtime scuba diver.

The exhibition concluded with haute couture. Among the exhibits were a caftan by Marchesa, a second caftan by Oscar de la Renta, an elaborate wedding gown and abaya by John Galliano, and four ensembles from Dior, Gaultier, Chanel, and Valentino worn by Sheikha Moza of Qatar. Sheikha Moza's Valentino ensemble included trousers (worn at an event in the New York Public Library). As a result, visitors learned that (some) Arab women wear trousers in public – even the wives and mothers of emirs – when circumstances permit. The Sheikha personally selected the ensembles for the exhibition and may have deliberately chosen the Valentino outfit to illustrate her range of choice. As Camerlengo pointed out on the audio guide, Middle Eastern women have purchased couture for decades, modified to suit their needs. Visitors might have benefited from seeing the photographs of original haute couture versions so they could see exactly what cultural changes were made.

Some visitors did evoke uncertainty or raised questions from the displays. One question dealt with skirt length and modesty. While one could readily tell that the entire leg was meant to be covered by floor-length dresses or long pants, how should one interpret other skirts ending at mid-calf? Were the mannequins relatively tall so that

[53] Jeffrey Brown, "How Muslim Women's Fashion is Shaping Conversation Around Creativity and Power," *PBS News Hour*, January 3, 2019, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-muslim-womens-fashion-is-shaping-conversation-around-creativity-and-power.

Figure 1 L: Top, pants, and turban (2018) by Pierpaolo Piccioli for Valentino; M: Gown and turban (2012) by Bill Gaytten for Christian Dior; R: Gown, obi, and turban (2016) by Jean Paul Gaultier. Loaned by Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser (Qatar). *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at the de Young Museum, (photograph courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco).

the skirt looked shorter than in tended or was the skirt supposed to be mid-calf in length? The question went unanswered. Another question that one frequently heard in the galleries concerned the heat and/or humidity of various Muslim regions. How did women "breathe" while wearing high necks and long-sleeved clothing in such climates? On reflection, one might realize that air conditioning was the obvious answer but, unfortunately, the labels never addressed the issue.

The last two questions concerned the textiles and decoration used for the garments. How did women conduct their daily lives in such rich textiles and sometimes cumbersome clothing? One needed to remember the title of the exhibition: what was shown was *fashion* and, as such, would not be worn doing laundry, for example, any more than one would find in San Francisco. Labels focusing on what was worn privately and what was worn publicly might have helped visitors realize how their own wardrobes varied by function and audience. Lastly, a good number of the non-couture ensembles were made of expensive materials. How did the average woman

afford them? In asking the question to Laura Camerlengo, I received several answers: a) some of the exhibited garments were not that expensive and were sold in American department stores, b) others were inexpensive when the price was converted into dollars, and c) the designers were cognizant of cost and they therefore sold less expensive versions of their high-end offerings. While Camerlengo's response answered the question, the issues were raised so often by museum-goers that it was a shame labels or the audio guide did not address them. However, the questions were evidence that viewers internalized what they saw, applied it to themselves, and imagined how they would feel wearing such clothing.

Figure 2 Ensemble shown at Torino Fashion Week (2017) by Dian Pelangi (Indonesia). *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at the de Young Museum, (photo by Marjorie Kelly).

The mannequins are, of course, static and most garments could only be seen from a limited perspective. The photographs and videos were thus a welcome addition in the exhibition, as they showed how and where the clothes were worn, how they fit,

how they moved and/or how the wearer moved in them. The photos also added to the variety of what was displayed: the diversity of Muslim women's overall appearance was viewed, not just their clothing. That is, one could see the differences in how modesty was defined (for example, jeans worn with loose tops and a hijab), differences in makeup and hairstyles, and differences in body size and age. In sum, if the ensembles demonstrated variety and color, the photographs and videos added context via the wearer.

Figure 3 Screen shot of *Hijabi (Wrap My Hijab)* (2017) by Mona Haydar (Syrian American). *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* at the de Young Museum, (photo by Marjorie Kelly).

Additionally, the videos were useful in conveying the complexities of political and religious debates without the museum becoming embroiled in the minutiae of the arguments. However, the video that got the most attention – especially from younger museum-goers – was a large-screen projection of Mona Haydar's music video, "Hijab (Wrap My Hijab)." The video showed young, hijab-wearing women singing, dancing, and posing while Haydar raps. Illustrative of her confrontational style were lyrics such as "Even if you hate it, I still wrap my hijab." The young Syrian-American woman was eight-and-a-half months pregnant when the video was shot so that her appearance was not that of the usual music video star. Widely seen online before the exhibition opened, the video was already controversial. Some members of the Muslim community found it inappropriate[54] while others found it empowering.[55] In contrast, a video depicting

[54] Jennifer Chowdhury, "A New Museum Exhibit Spotlights the Politics of Fashion in the Muslim World," *Elle*, October 1. 2018, https://www.elle.com/culture/a23546483/contemporary-muslim-fashions-exhibit-review/.
[55] Hana Siddiqi, "Why I Took My 11-Year-Old to the Muslim Fashion Exhibition at the de Young," *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 31, 2018, https://www.sfchronicle.com/style/article/Why-I-took-my-11-year-old-to-the-Muslim-fashion-13495869.php.

Iranian women ripping off their headscarves at a public protest was shown nearby.

The exhibition also featured the works of well-known female art photographers, among them Boushara Almutawakel of Yemen. Finding that Arab/Muslim women were either demonized or romanticized after the demolition of the World Trade Center, she posed before her camera wearing different styles of clothing. In "True Self 2, hijab, niqab, without hijab," she appears in six different guises to make the point that people's reactions are triggered by the clothing rather than the (same) woman wearing them. In his photographs, Iraqi-born Wesaam Al Badry portrayed "Western consumerism and its influence on traditional Muslim culture" by refashioning silk scarves by Chanel, Gucci, and Valentino as niqabs[56] (D'Alessandro and Lewis 2018, 273). As a result, the model's eyes are barely visible behind the luxury-brand scarves. Three photographs by Hassan Hajjaj show Moroccan women in modest apparel (designed by Hajjaj himself) and niqabs, straddling the motorbikes they use to commute to work. The effect caused one museum-goer to describe them as "niqabi biker chicks."[57]

The final aspect of the show to be discussed is one that is rarely mentioned in discussions of museum exhibitions, but is nevertheless important in deepening public understanding of the issues involved as well as personalizing the topic: the receptions, seminars, lectures, podcasts, panels, etc, known as ancillary activities. These activities provide an opportunity for members of the public to interact with curators, catalogue contributors, designers, photographers, etc., in a variety of formats and hear what they have to say in detail – and often in more dramatic, less neutral terms than the terminology used on labels and in catalogue articles. *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* opened with a preview event for over 500 museum patrons, providing them with an opportunity to meet with fashion designers, lenders, and artists, as well as museum personnel such as the director and curators. The evening began with guests watching a fashion show featuring the work of five of the designers, then entering the galleries. Speaking to reporters, Her Highness Deena Aljuhani Abdulaziz, the founding editor of *Vogue Arabia,* addressed a point not covered in the exhibition by noting that Saudi males, as well as females, are to dress modestly "out of respect for our religion and society."[58]

Some exhibition participants welcomed the sense of community afforded by such events. For example, though she is a New York-based Lebanese Christian, designer Céline Semaan Vernon is consistently misidentified as a Muslim in the U.S. She had this to say about attending the opening:

> …I have always been struggling with the notion of home or feeling at home…and this rare moment I felt like: "Wow, I am with my people…" The fact that this exhibition has included people like me is important because we are not separating one another

[56] Jill D'Alessandro and Reina Lewis, *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* (New York: Prestel, 2018), 273.
[57] Siddiqi, "Why I Took my 11-Year-Old."
[58] Quoted in Saeks, "*Contemporary Muslim Fashions* Debuts."

> anymore. In any case, I'm going through the same prejudice as my Muslim peers...I felt the curators were purposefully including voices from the regions that they wanted to shine a light on, and including us not simply because of our religious background but for our message. It's a rare feeling, to feel included.[59]

Taking advantage of the presence of designers and artists in town for the opening, other events were scheduled for them, including a book signing, a presentation, and a discussion on the evolution of the modest fashion sector with Ghizlan Guenez and Her Highness Deena Aljuhani Abdulaziz. In addition, high school and college students created a podcast to explore the theme of the exhibition for teenagers and young adults.[60] About halfway through the exhibition's run, a one-day symposium was held at which many who contributed to the catalogue gave talks and afterwards conversed with some of the 150-200 attendees who came from a variety of backgrounds.

A less academic, more politically-charged talk was given by Iranian-American Hoda Katebi (whose blog is mentioned above). She told a standing-room-only crowd that, while growing up in Oklahoma a few years after the attack on New York's World Trade Center, "I was punched in the face, had my hijab pulled off, [and] I got called a terrorist almost daily."[61] She believes that rather than being restrictive, modest fashion offers the wearer freedom from social pressures that encourage women to put their bodies on display. She also felt that the exhibition was "an important first step in teaching Westerners about the richness and diversity of the world's Muslim cultures."[62] At another event, New York rapper Mona Haydar spoke of receiving death threats to herself and those of her children. She believes that:

> [t]he whole *world* suffers from toxic patriarchy and masculinity…And what that often looks like is a conversation about women's bodies and their clothing – and what women should and shouldn't wear; and what they can and can't do with their bodies. And a hijab fits perfectly inside that whole conversation.[63]

Clearly, people who attended these talks heard stories representative of those who, in Max Hollein's words, "are scrutinized and spoken for, but are rarely given the chance to speak for themselves."[64] In sum, these types of events and occasions broadened the exhibition's outreach and allowed visitors to hear Muslim women firsthand as they

[59] Quoted in Kaundinya, "Seven Women."
[60] Aubry, "Fashion's Muslim Voices."
[61] Jonathan Bloom, "Exhibition at San Francisco's de Young Museum Explores Contemporary Muslim Fashion," NBC Bay Area, November 20, 2018, https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/Exhibition-at-San-Francisco-De-Young-Museum-Explores-Contemporary-Muslim-Fashion-500444481.html.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Jonathan Curiel, "Niqabs, Abayas, Burkinis, and How California Got its Name," *San Francisco Weekly*, October 4, 2018, http://www. sfweekly.com/culture/niqabs-abayas-burkinis-and-how-california-got-its-name.
[64] Hollein, "Foreward," 13.

expressed their opinions and related their experiences. Judging by crowd size and the level of enthusiasm, the speakers were well-received and added a dynamic dimension to the exhibition.

The Response: Designers, Museum-goers, and Media

> It just made me so happy that the rest of the world might see Muslim women as we really are, not as they paint us to be.[65]

For designers familiar with the concept of museum fashion exhibitions, the advantages of participating in the show were obvious: the heightened exposure of one's work, the potential for increased sales, and the prestige of being judged worthy of inclusion in a groundbreaking show. For example, Faiza Bouguessa – of Algerian heritage, born in France, and based in Dubai – was explicitly aware of the value of the de Young exhibition: it was "a great milestone for me…To get global exposure at such a beautiful museum is a great honor."[66] However, not every designer was as savvy as Bouguessa. According to curators, designers from regions without a tradition of museum fashion exhibitions struggled to understand the concept as something other than a commercial fashion show held in a retail environment. For yet others, prestige and material benefits were not the sole or even the major reasons to participate; they were aware of the bigger issues and the attendant religious, cultural, and political ramifications. For example, the first question one non-Western designer asked after the exhibition opened was, "Do Americans understand that Muslims are not scary now?"[67]

Several months after the exhibition opened, I asked Laura Camerlengo what the response had been. She replied that non-Muslim Americans felt comfortable learning about Muslims in the museum environment and that the show was an eye-opener for them. The exhibition's theme of diversity was central to redressing one-dimensional stereotypes of Muslim clothing – hardly a minor theme. However, some viewers with a greater knowledge of Islamic society expressed a desire for more incisive themes. While recognizing that *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* was necessarily introductory, they hoped it would generate other conversations and perhaps future exhibitions. We next consider the reactions of Muslim museum-goers.

Some Muslim Americans derived an affirmation of their Muslim identity from the show, as reflected in the quote below, written by a Muslim resident of the Bay Area who visited *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* with her eleven-year-old daughter.

> [T]he exhibition captured the full range of how Muslim women present themselves, to themselves, each other and the world. It was basically a Muslim Girl Fest. My daughter called it "empowering…especially for young Muslim girls like me. Plus, it was so

[65] Muslim visitor to *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* quoted in Durcanin, "Conversation Piece."
[66] Saeks, "*Contemporary Muslim Fashions* Debuts."
[67] Personal communication, Carla Jones, January 2, 2019.

> beautiful and diverse." The clothing styles that may seem repressive to a Western audience – or, on the other hand, improper to more conservative Muslims – were for her an affirmation… What struck her was that her own experience was gathered right here, at a public art space in the heart of the Bay Area…Seeing an exhibit in which Muslim girls and women are representing themselves through blogs, through music and through design, was uplifting….
>
> "It's kind of unexpected for people to create a place only focusing on Muslim women's fashion," my daughter observed, "because a lot of that kind of stuff is looked down upon just because some believe Muslims are terrorists. They don't really have an interest in this aspect…so it's like an empowering statement to show the beauty of Muslim women through fashion."
>
> [My daughter] was articulating what many of us feel: That so often, anything of beauty connected to Islam can be diminished or overpowered by rampant negative stereotypes. This exhibition was the opposite of that, and the time we spent together absorbing the beautiful collection connected us to our Muslim heritage in a way that is irreplaceable.[68]

In contrast, a Saudi designer reflects her perspective as a citizen of a Muslim-majority country, where societal inclusion and a sense of identity are taken for granted. The designer was therefore more concerned with global than with national (U.S.) recognition.

> My work has always been in boutiques and commercial spaces… but seeing it with other amazing designers, it's surreal. I'm from Saudi Arabia and it's a small circle of artists and designers. But people take you more seriously when you've done something in the States, just because it's the center of the world…[M]y being Muslim makes absolutely no difference. It feels normal. Part of it is I grew up around people who are exactly like me, so I never faced the feeling that I was different in terms of religion…I don't think I felt the same way they [Muslim Americans] felt. For me, it's just like: This should happen. This should be normal.[69]

To summarize, the exhibition received both local and national coverage and was largely

[68] Siddiqi, "Why I took My 11-Year-Old."
[69] Quoted in Kaundinya, "Seven Women."

well received[70] in terms of its diversity, its visual appeal, and its willingness to take on a difficult and largely untouched subject in a less than welcoming political environment. A journalist who viewed the exhibition and attended Mona Haydar's talk reported that "for anyone who's never been in a Muslim-majority country, or never been in a milieu where a majority of people are Muslim, *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* will be a revelation. And an intense experience."[71] His article said more about the hijab than the fashion, but it made the point that Muslim women have a choice in how they dress, even as the complexity of their situation means that "the truth is often dismissed by outsiders in favor of simpler (stereotypic) answers." An online article from the Religion News described the exhibition as helping to "correct a long history of misinformed, even racist, attitudes towards the hijab, the burqa, and Muslim women as a whole."[72]

The almost seven minute length of television coverage given to the exhibition by the PBS (Public Broadcasting System) *News Hour* perhaps gave the show its largest national audience. Broadcast on January 3, 2019 (a week before the show closed in San Francisco), the segment was part of a recurring cultural series hosted by Jeffrey Brown. While curator Jill D'Alessandro appeared briefly with Brown speaking about Muslim women's creativity, most of his interaction was with Muslims who had participated in the exhibition: stylist Saba Ali and designer Lisa Vogl, creator of the Verona line of modest fashion. Mona Haydar's "Wrap My Hijab" also appeared in the piece, as a counterpoint to Iran's compulsory dress code and the 2016 burkini controversy in France. Thus, the hijab was a central motif of the segment; but whether the emphasis was due to politics, the desire to show diversity, or the visual appeal of the video footage was not possible to say. The report concluded with an interview of *Washington Post*'s Pulitzer-prize-winning former fashion editor, Robin Givhan. She discussed fashion, power, and divisive politics. The segment was obviously tailored to its national audience of educated viewers whose primary concern is in-depth coverage of the news. While fashion – much less Muslim fashion – was an unusual subject for the program and thus speaks well for the museum's effort and execution of the topic, by airing the segment so near the exhibition's closing date, the broadcast was unlikely to significantly increase the number of visitors. However, it did give Muslim women a voice; and some members of the television audience might have been sufficiently intrigued to learn more.

Conclusion: Why the Exhibition Worked and Suggestions for What Might Come Next

> When I started on this two-year journey…none of us could have anticipated how much we would grow and expand our world-view from this project. Simply taking the time to listen to Muslim women, who are often spoken for or misrepresented in the media, is a step in the right direction; and we hope this exhibition

[70] Durcanin, "Conversation Piece" and Finkel, "Mediating Faith and Style."
[71] Curiel, "Niqabs, Abayas, Burkinis."
[72] Khanayshabkhan, "At Long Last."

> will open the door to more fruitful conversations at a time when they are very much needed.[73]

In evaluating *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* – with its goals of a) redressing the stereotypes held by non-Muslim Americans, b) collaborating with local Muslims, and c) portraying the creativity and agency of Muslim women globally – one finds that the de Young's curatorial staff organized the exhibition in a diligent and professional manner. They conducted online and literature searches, consulted local and international experts, attended fashion weeks in four countries, visited design studios at home and abroad, and set standards both for including designers and for exhibiting their garments. The result was an exhibition that was diverse, colorful, and broad-based, with high-quality apparel ranging from sportswear to streetwear to haute couture, as well as thought-provoking photographs and videos that showed Muslim women in a variety of contexts.

However, one concern that was expressed publicly by a few writers dealt with the exhibition's leadership: why was the exhibition not led by a Muslim? The underlying assumption with this concern was that only a Muslim could or should deal with the topic. The response is a pragmatic and practical one because the goals of the exhibition focused on cultural stereotyping and inclusionary politics, not religious or ideological messages. Hence, there is little reason to think that a Muslim would have been more professional or more concerned about diversity than the museum's staff, who already had a successful track record of organizing exhibitions and who were eager to undertake the show. The exhibition included Sunnis and Shi'ites (and even a Middle Eastern Christian or two), male and female designers and photographers, easterners and westerners, the famous and the less well-known, mainstream designers and specialists, as well as Middle Eastern, Asian, European, and American Muslims, including African American Muslims. Certainly, the staff could not be accused of playing favourites or presenting a biased or self-interested narrative. This was most obviously seen in the prominent role local Muslims played in addressing the media, whether in print or on television, and at public events. True, religious tenets *per se* played little part in the exhibition but, had it been otherwise, would it have alienated the non-Muslim segment of the audience and undermined the goal of confronting stereotypes?

The success of an exhibition cannot be judged solely on the basis of the knowledge and professionalism of its curators; i.e., the labels and items on display (portrayed by contributors) are most relevant to the visitors. The way museum-goers perceive and the way the general public react are also critical. Numerous quotations have been cited to indicate how Muslim and non-Muslim participants and museum-goers reacted to the exhibition or felt about their experience with the museum, and they need not be repeated here. What will be touched upon is the effort made by the museum to ensure that potential museum-goers and the greater public understood what the exhibition was actually about rather than having it characterized by those who

[73] Curator Jill D'Alessandro quoted in Aubry, "Fashion's Muslim Voices."

projected stereotypes or personal experiences onto what they thought the exhibition was about – especially without ever having seen the display itself (an experience that was duplicated at the exhibition's second venue, Frankfurt's Museum Angewandte Kunst[74]). We thus turn next to the media coverage of the exhibition.

Given that the exhibition was the first of its kind on the subject, it is perhaps not surprising that some journalists and critics did not know quite how to handle it. One male critic saw it as

> …a massive, necessary exercise in identity politics…[that] provides a welcome opportunity for Muslim visitors to absorb and articulate expressions of their own culture, while offering the larger public an important chance to become informed about traditions that are all too often misunderstood and vilified. The exhibition is thus an effective major political statement….[75]

The quote is virtually the author's complete analysis of the political aspect of the exhibition; its aesthetic qualities were ignored and its content was covered in three sentences. The bulk of the article was devoted to considering whether fashion is an art and, hence, whether it deserves to be displayed in museums. In counterpoint, a female interviewer, familiar with exhibitions that are retrospectives of a single designer, admitted to D'Alessandro and Camerlengo that she could hardly "wrap her head" around the subject of *Contemporary Muslim Fashions*. She characterized its political aspect, not as inclusionary or as confronting stereotypes, but as "spanning ancient cultures and current mash-ups, fueled by the heat of religion and politics."[76] The interviewer later noted that she had equated being covered with being suppressed, but she had now given consideration to "how comfortable the clothing would be."[77]

To handle the limited experience of journalists with the subject and the false charges of those who regarded the exhibition as an expression of female oppression, racism, or sacrilege, the de Young's public relations department put together a campaign that was so thorough and effective that it won the Grand Prize for Nonprofit PR (public relations) Campaign of the Year, awarded by *PR Daily*. As examples of what was done, the museum used social media to give "visitors an in-depth look at the show through behind-the-scenes footage and preview pieces via the museum's network and the followings of the eighty [sic] designers participating in the exhibition."[78] Staff

[74] Quynh Tran, "Right-Wing Groups have Made an Uneasy Alliance with Feminists to Blast this Show of Muslim Fashions," *Artnet*, April 9, 2019, https://news.artnew.com/opinion/contemporary-museum-fashion-1510108.

[75] David Carrier, "The Challenges of Fashion in a Museum," *Hyperallergic*, November 17, 2018, https://hyperallergic.com/471639/contemporary-muslim-fahions-de-young-museum.

[76] Gwynned Vitello, "In the Driver's Seat: *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* @ de Young Museum, San Francisco," *Juxtapoz,* October 3, 2018, https://www.juxtapoz.com/news/fashion/in-the-driver-s-seat-contemporary-muslim-fashion-de-young-museum-san-francisco.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Anonymous, "Nonprofit PR Campaign of the Year," *PR Daily*, 2019, https://www.prdaily.com/awards/nonprofit-pr-awards/2019/winners/nonprofit-pr-campaign-of-the-year.

were trained to ensure understanding of Muslim audiences and cultural sensitivities. D'Alessandro noted that one of the first things that was discussed with the Bay Area outreach group was correct terminology.[79] The effort proved so successful that ninety-eight percent of the 2,500 media pieces about the exhibition were positive.[80] Another award the museum received was more meaningful in representing a Muslim response to the exhibition: the Council on American-Islamic Relations' Enhanced Understanding Award (2018) for increasing understanding of Islam and Muslims. A third award, presented to the museum's curators by the Costume Society of America, was the 2020 Richard Martin Exhibition Award given to outstanding exhibitions that "demonstrate excellence and innovation in the interpretation and presentation of costume [apparel], providing a transforming experience to the public."[81]

While the bestowing of awards varies in significance to the museum's staff, the awards are even more indicative of the exhibition having obtained success in the public eye. It is this success that is perhaps the strongest reason for having a curatorial staff that is local, works in partnership with the community, knows what is expected of it, and delivers what is promised – and then some. *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* was successful because 1) its focus was on something that everyone could relate to: clothing, 2) its goals of demonstrating diversity and inclusion, creativity and agency, were clear and made manifest in what was on display, 3) the never-before-seen clothing was a revelation and highly appealing visually, 4) conflicting issues (e.g., attitudes toward the hijab) were presented in a way that enabled visitors to see literally that Muslim opinion on dress is far from uniform, 5) the local Muslim community was sizeable, diverse, and involved in terms of collaboration (advice) and participation (loans, public events, media coverage), hence making them more accessible, 6) staff spoke openly of their learning about Muslims and were given a voice in the exhibition and its coverage, 7) the interests of younger visitors were catered for by including blogs, podcasts, and music videos – again increasing accessibility, and 8) the museum was pro-active in addressing unwarranted perceptions, while the director was steadfast in supporting the exhibition.

The curators described the exhibition as being only a snapshot of fashion. Stylist Saba Ali recognized that the exhibition was just "one page in the story of Muslim women's empowerment."[82] While the wide range of the exhibition was evident, the lack of depth was mentioned by some, more knowledgeable, museum-goers. The exhibition was, indeed, an introduction and not intended as a penetrating analysis – that is the job of future exhibitions now that *Contemporary Muslim Fashions* has "broken ground." One looks forward to seeing the traveling exhibitions that foreign curators might organize, for it is they who are in a position to do the in-depth research that

[79] Vitello, "In the Driver's Seat."

[80] Anonymous, "Nonprofit PR Campaign."

[81] Anonymous, "*Contemporary Museum Fashions* Receives Prestigious Award from the Costume Society of America," De Young Museum, 2020, https://deyoung/famsf.org/press-room/contemporary-muslim-fashions-receives-pretigious-award-costume-society-america.

[82] Quoted in Hannah Maureen Holden, "How Contemporary Muslim Fashions are Having their Day in the Sun," *American Muslim Today,* July 24, 2020, https://americanmuslimtoday.com/details/bec9b950-4b11-4ca8-ab9f-7639cec55560.

more focused, future shows will require. Among the topics for possible consideration are: Context - the public and private selections of individual women; Personal Preferences - variations in dress within a singular group (e.g., family, college students, associations, etc.) whose members include both conservative dressers and fashionistas; Professional Women - the wardrobes of businesswomen who travel within and across borders; and Haute Couture - the relationship between the haute couture industry and the Muslim customers who patronize it and have kept it afloat. For those interested in redressing stereotypes and correcting one-dimensional media images, exhibitions can provide a greater impact and reach a larger audience than can lecture tours or books with a limited shelf life. However, as this analysis has shown, in order to curate and stage a successful exhibition, one must begin with clear objectives and an awareness of the knowledge base of the intended audience.

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