Siasat Al-Insaf
The Middle Eastern Review

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE
Re-envisioning the Regional Order

FROM TRIBALISM TO STATEHOOD
The Oedipal Trilogy as a Celebration of Athenian Democracy

A RAY OF HOPE, COLOUR AND VIGOUR
Protest Art and Freedom of Expression in Iraq and Lebanon

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CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

An Introduction to the Second Issue

This issue of Siasat al-Insaf is an analytical reflection of the region and its nuances amidst a global pandemic and offers new critical insights to delve upon. It sheds light on some positive and negative developments too, in exploring the effects of the new developments and dissent on street art, as supposedly an integral form of freedom of speech and expression triggered by external powers to serve their strategic objectives of controlling the region . It is safe to say that the so called social unrest against incumbent governments has been the rise of the hegemonic state and clash between its global strategy objectives and goals, and those of the nationalist states in the region. Indeed , this strategy has been translated in the region, using ethnic, religious, interfaith , and sectarian intrastate disputes and conflicts, to reframe the politics of the Middle East.

The pandemic has redefined regional politics in multiple ways: Destruction of Iraq, the wars against Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia, and recently Lebanon. However, there is also an evident silver lining present in this pandemic under the ambit of increasing conditioned terms of humanitarian co-operation   and aid diplomacy aids. After the devastating blast of Beirut port, Lebanon saw potential verbal and humanitarian assistance from a wide number of countries, friends and foe alike. Iran, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, France, Italy, Turkey, and even Israel, a country with which Lebanon is still at war, offered medical assistance after

the devastating blasts, reinstating belief that the countries of the region can come beyond parochial tendencies to co-operate against battles of transnational nature, but each of those countries has its own terms and conditions to change the status quo of the Lebanese political system. Therefore, the most important aspect to be yielded from here is the whether or not COVID exacerbates the crisis the Middle East, which needed   the countries to herald an era of mutual co-operation and regional prosperity or is it just a temporary break in the practise of ethnic, ideological and unending proxy wars for domination, continuing the unsolicited military, economic and humanitarian crisis in the region, just because of the discovery of huge reserves of oil and gas in the Mediterranean, as could be demonstrated by the potential escalating confrontations in the Mediterranean between major regional and world powers to control this important commodity to the world industrial economies. China, an integral and emerging player in the region has too used the pandemic as a critical juncture to expand its goodwill and soft power by extending humanitarian aid to the region. At a juncture when Western notion of statism in its traditional sense is facing a crisis form within in the Middle East, this issue revisits the literary theory of state vis-a-vis tribalism and identity through the critical evaluation of the Oedipus Trilogy. Shedding an interesting and critical light on the concept of family lineages, traditional state authority and role of tribal loyalties in the making and unmaking of states.

Yet, there is an undesired continuation of certain conflictual disagreements and wars which could render any positive regional co-operative model useless and insufficient. The Israeli peace plan lies in shambles, Palestinians farthest away from their dream of realising a homeland, newly emerging assertive players like Turkey, Iran and Russia are stepping up their influence in the region and non-state actor, triggered and supported by external powers, have mobilised their effort aimed at securing the very legacy that is being drained out of the governments reputation due to faltering state incapacity in terms of a pandemic and the humanitarian efforts lies in shambles with the future of post-war reconstruction seeming the bleakest venture amidst drying state treasuries. The fall in oil prices, the illegal and illegitimate unilateral sanctions, and the economic glut combined with the policy of emptying the Middle East countries from huge human capital, will have long-lasting impacts on the capabilities of states to fund and finance expensive foreign policies and proxy wars. The economic crisis might open the region's vulnerabilities to the Chinese model of development, focusing on infrastructural and corporate responsibilities, replacing the US model which come attached with political conditionalities for liberal regime changes. Therefore, with the increased number of stakeholders, an ailing economy and a western- led revolting population, the Middle East is on a crossroads wherein it will define its outlook for the upcoming post-COVID regional interactions, whether it crosses into a newly heralded era of co-operation and mutual adaptation or it increases the risks of conflicts by exasperating ideological differences and instigating national priorities for regional hegemony.

This issue also launches the 3-part series on "India in the Eyes of Arab Travellers" which is an anthropological literary assessment shedding light on the ancient cultural and trade nexus which existed between Arab citizens and Indian kingdoms. The first part of this series is an introduction to the India-Arab relations which draws examples of prominent travellers who have described, mapped and discovered the multiple nuances of India-Arab relations.

In Conversation With...

This section is an exclusive interview with Dr. Mohsin Bilal.
The team of Centre for Middle East Studies attended Dr. Bilal's talk on "Strengthening India-Syria relations and Future of the Syrian Crisis", after which we had a one-on-one interview session regarding the future role of India in the reconstruction of Syria.

The talk given my Dr. Bilal focused on trying to decipher the expected role India can play in the state rebuilding and reconstruction of post-conflict Syria. A lot of international efforts have taken place in terms of Styrian state rebuilding and a measures. The Astana Process and others have mostly been a big player game which has not featured in India's diplomatic or economic support in any way. The following interview highlights the importance of India in supporting Syrian sovereignty and maintain India's policy of respect for territorial integrity and on-interference in internal affairs of other countries.

Dr. Bilal was born into a prominent Alawite family in Burghalieh, Tartus Governorate, in 1944.

He studied medicine at the University of Padua, graduating in 1970. In 1976, he specialized in surgery in Italy. Then he received his PhD in medicine and surgery from the University of Pennsylvania with the specialization in liver transplantation.

His political career started in 1977 when he was elected to the People's Assembly. In 1981, he was named the chairman of the Arab and foreign affairs committee, and served in this position until 1985. He led the Syrian delegation at the 1982 World Peace Conference in Prague. In 2001, he became Syria's ambassador to Spain, and he held this post until he was appointed minister of information to the cabinet headed by then prime minister Mohammad Naji Otari in February 2006. He replaced Mahdi Dakhlallah as Information Minister. When Dr. Bilal was in office, he acted as chief spokesperson for the Syrian government during the Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006. Dr. Bilal's term ended in April 2011 when he was succeeded by Adnan Mahmoud.

From left to right: Dr Riad Abbas Ambassador of Syria to India, Student Representative of O.P. Jindal Global University Tamanna Dahiya, Dr Mohsen Bilal Chief Speaker and Member of the Central Leadership of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party and Head of the Bureau of Higher Education, Dr (Prof) Abdul Fatah Ammourah Director of Centre for Middle East Studies and Vice Dean at O.P. Jindal Global University, Dr Waiel Awwad, Writer & Senior International Journalist

Continued...

Question: *Sir what do you think will be India's role in the future rebuilding and reconstruction of Syria? In what capacity India contribute to the same?*

Dr Bilal: *We are looking for diplomatic support from India. Syria appreciates Indian policy of respect for Syrian sovereignty and non-interference in matter of internal affairs. Therefore, from hereon we expect nothing less than the reiteration of the same narrative.*

Since India plays a role of peace and development in the international level, we ardently look for its diplomatic assistance in pushing for peace and reconstruction in Syria. The energy and the power of the state of India at the international front has always been expressed for maintain non-intervention in internal matters of other states. We respect this approach which is in stark contradiction with many other international players whose military intervention has enraged the war in Syria.

The Indian government and MEA has always shown solidarity and respect for the Syrian government. Even during the time of the Arab Spring, the bi-lateral relations between the two states did not take a dip and continued with mutual respect for non-interference in matters of internal security.

Comments by Dr. Abdul Fatah Ammourah, Centre Director.

India, has been defined by multiple dynamics of development, democracy and unity in diversity, Syria respects this approach and looks up to a similar state approach towards its people and its citizens. India has already played an important role in safeguarding Syrian sovereignty, bilaterally as well as on the international front through UN. Furthermore, India and Syria have had fruitful bi-lateral co-operation in terms of soft power approach related to promotion of education. Indian government has provided 1000 scholarships to Syrian students, which has been on the rise ever since.

Question: *Having established that, are you looking for a "boots-on-the-ground" approach from India in any way or step of the reconstruction process either militarily or as a part of a UN Peacekeeping mission?*

Response: *We do not expect foreign troops in any capacity as you know we have liberated more than 85% of the Syrian territories and only the North Eastern parts are under terrorist and US invasion and Turkey interference. Military intervention by any other nation would undermine the internal sovereignty of Syria. India as a country has always been highly respectful of the sovereignty of other nations, while expecting the same level of non-interference in its own internal affairs.*

We only look for reconstruction efforts from other countries. No boots on the ground.

REMEMBERING MAHATAMA GANDHI

Dr. Mohsin Bilal
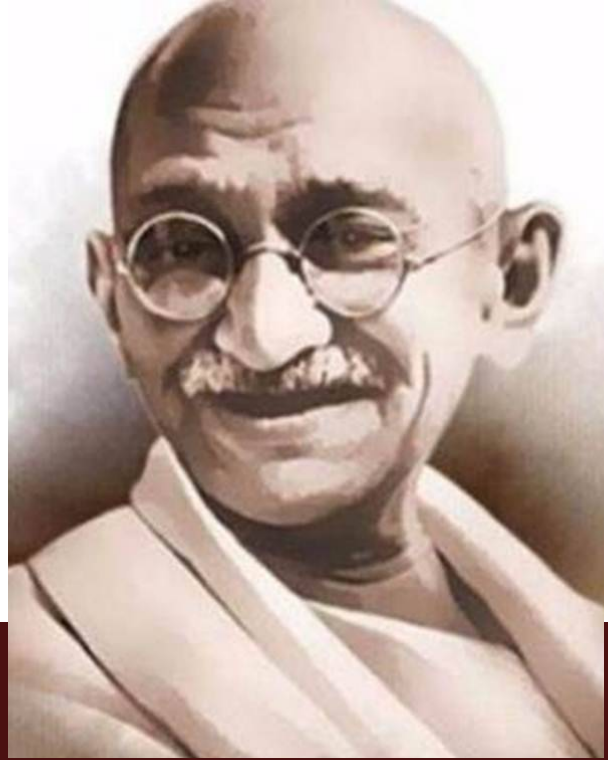
Mahatma Gandhi

This piece on Mahatma Gandhi's legacy has been written by Dr. Mohsin Bilal who is currently a Member of the Central Leadership of the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party, Head of the Bureau of Higher Education in Damascus, Syria.

It reflects Mahatma Gandhi's wide-reaching ideological struggle for equality of humanity.

It has been 73 years since India became independent, but Gandhi's ideals and struggle are even more important in today's world when identity, religion, caste, gender still divides millions through artificial differences failing to embrace humanity as a whole.

The perspective explored in this article are Dr. Bilal's personal views. However, it does give all of us a minute to contemplate on the relevance of Gandhi's teachings, views and lifestyle embracing simplicity, love for humanity and peaceful co-existence of all at a time when parochial identities and materialism has redefined concepts like citizenship, development and peace.

Like Shakespeare, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, Gandhi, the Great Spirit, is a key source of inspiration and an icon for millions upon millions of people, the world over.

This extraordinary figure is so hard to approach from a unidirectional viewpoint. His encyclopedic personality should be approached through a panoramic perspective. This explains how he transcended the status of a fighter struggling to accomplish freedom for his people: he is universally viewed as a new cultural, spiritual, philosophical and sentimental phenomenon that has given politics, in its comprehensive concept, both in theory and practice, an unprecedented moral dimension.

The arena for his struggle was so spacious. It stretched between his home country, India, and South Africa where he launched his endeavour against Apartheid. He devoted himself to uproot this inhuman and dehumanising disease represented by ethnic segregation and racial discrimination between a 'minority' claiming that life for it is both a right an a prerogative, while for the 'others' i.e. 'the majority', it is merely a duty. In his approach to non-violent resistance against British colonialists, Gandhi consolidated the concept of building a modern state inspired by 'tolerance' in the face of zealotry and bigotry.

Gandhi transcended religion and national identity, embracing humanity at large through adopting a novel culture based on tolerance and acceptance of the 'Other'.

Inspired by the notion of tolerance, he built a virtual empire for humanity whose space is the world over. For him, this empire is not a mere utopian dream. It is rather, a reality which can be visualised and therefore, materialised when 'politics' hovers over peoples' heads; using two wings: spiritualism and morality.

The Mahatma was one of a few leading avant-garde figures who called for the need to implement the doctrine of 'citizenship' in the modern period away from religious, sectarian and ethnic biases and prejudices in a world characterised by fanaticism and bigotry.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

He was assassinated by a fanatical compatriot. However, that assassin had morally killed himself before killing Gandhi. Gandhi's blood shed by that murderer remains the life cord, granting light to the torch of freedom which the Mahatma himself had lit on the moral, spiritual and human levels. It is the light which the Mahatma has always yearned to embrace.

-Dr. Mohsin Bilal

Head of the Bureau of Higher Education
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INDIA IN THE LITERATURE OF ARAB TRAVELERS

3 part series

By Professor Abdalla Mjeidel

The three part series by Professor Abdalla Mjeidel, on "India in the Eyes of Arab Travellers" is a anthropological literary assessment which sheds light on the ancient cultural, and trade nexus which existed between Arab citizens and Indian kingdoms. Not only does this series provide a contextualisation of historical linkages based on trade and culture but also ties into understanding perceptions and ideologies that have served as arenas of convergence or divergence in the past. The first part of this series is an introduction to the India-Arab relations which draws examples of prominent travellers who have described, mapped and discovered the multiple nuances of India-Arab relations.

Introduction

True is what the speaker said, *"the news is not the same as the witness"*. It is the first sentence in which al-Biruni began his famous book Achieving What is Acceptable to the Mind of India or Scorn. Travelling across lands and acquainting with new countries and its peoples is considered one of the oldest human activities since the advent of humanity. Humans haven't stopped moving between countries and destinies, passionate for everything new they faced. Scientists say that human beings are still in perpetual travel since they were found on the land. These trips have played a major role in geographical exploration, and have achieved communication among peoples, acquiring knowledge and learning about customs and traditions. Many historians refer to that knowledge which was the first sign of the emergence of ethnography, which formed the main basis for the comparison of lifestyles and their manifestations, such as environment, clothing, food, medicine and other aspects of comparison related to the social and cultural systems of peoples.

Based on this, it is no wonder that this type of literature is the most reliable means of documenting travellers' observations of various aspects of life and nature, by word and description through the inspection of travellers. This vision is supposed to be neutral towards the phenomena when described, but it often came full of the feelings of travellers, which made them influential in style and enjoyable in detail. And in addition to that, it monitors the scenes that may seem normal to the local population, while very important, in studying the evolution of patterns cultural and comparative studies of the customs of peoples and their values and traditions, and as such, it provides travellers with valuable scientific material for social studies and anthropology to those who would come after them from the field of scholarly research.

There is no doubt that a considerable part of our knowledge and perceptions of the history of some countries are due to the travellers' blogs, the succession of sultans and wars, or the great events took place those days. Arabs have known the literature of travel since ancient times and they took a great care of that kind of literature throughout various periods. Many Arab travellers such as Al-Biruni, Ibn Hawkal, Masoudi and Ibn Battuta, who described their observations in the areas they visited, were also interested in India. Some also contributed to the mapping they describe, the geography of the countries they saw, the routes they went through, as well as the accounts of some traders who had come to India to trade like Sulaiman the Merchant. Their accounts documented many aspects of the life of the people of India, and confirms the fact that trips to foreign lands and ethnographic research are the most holistic form of education for man.

History of Arab-Indian Relations

If contemporary Arab history has witnessed an intense situation of expatriate labour from India, especially from the Arabian Gulf countries, previous times witnessed the Arabs going to the Indian subcontinent, which some travelers described at that time as "Bahr Dar, its ruby mountain and fragrant tree" (Abdel Rahman, 2014, 5). The relation between Arabs and Indians goes back to very old times and although the natural conditions were not conducive to communication between the two parties because the road to India was long and arduous, the sea route did not withstand long before the early attempts of both sides to get to know each other. We cannot say exactly how long the Arab relations in India deepened before the beginning of the Islamic conquests. But we can say that at the beginning of the conquest, India was not unknown to the Arabs. They had a clear idea of this world, and in particular the inhabitants of the southern Arabian Peninsula (Nadvi.SP172).

The sources point out that the history of the Arab-Indian relations dates back to pre-Islamic times, as it was associated with the Arab countries by sea routes and merchant trips which formed a solid foundation in the development of Arab-Indian relations and the promotion of cultural and civilizational interaction between them. Based on discovered ruins found in Honjdar region, it appeared that this region was chronologically-parallel to the Sumerian civilization in terms of emergence and upgrade, and proved the establishment of a civilization which gave great attention to various aspects of civilized life, as some excavations in archaeological sites of Iraq and India reveal. The connection of these civilizations is evident in the great similarity between excavations in the Sumerians and those found in Muhangdaro, such as carts, seals, pots and jewellery (Baqir, 2011, 376). Among the archaeological finds in the Diyala region, an Indian Sumerian shaped carving was found, representing a bull with a hump (Lamerg.C.P.302).

"Yunnan Kabir" argues that it is not possible to categorically determine the reality of the population who settled in Muhingodar, or to confirm the places from which they fled to India, where their ruins indicate an amazing resemblance between them and the inhabitants of Sumer. Historians have different opinions in explaining these similarities, some see that this civilization extended from the valley of Glendos to the west until it reached the shores of the Tigris and the Euphrates, and others believe that it arrived in India from "Sumer" (Big, 2010, 8). The ruins from excavations indicate the depth of the relations between the Arab and Indian cultures, especially the single-ribbon pottery urns found in Ur, Tel Barrak, Tal Beri and Tal Hamdi, on the Syrian island in the Hasakah region, and the first layers at Hongrad site at Wadi al-Sind (Ahmad, 1985,196). In the old Babylonian era (2004-1595) BC, commercial and cultural relations between

the two civilizations strengthened. The Babylonian ships were destined for the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to bring perfume and precious stones imported from India (Nadawi, 8). "The Babylonians were one of the greatest nations of their time in navigation, because both the Tigris and the Euphrates ended up in the Arabian Gulf,"(Gustav Le Bon). "The way to the distant shores of the country, like India, is rich in its treasures." References indicate that Arabs came as merchants and settled establishing for themselves a number of houses on the coast of "Malabar", and that the immediate purpose behind the Arabs' arrival of the Sind was to protect their commercial routes with southern India and Ceylon, but they have become a significant force in these areas over time (Large, 2010, 20). Kratchkowski believes that the Arabs have traded with India and China. Al-Dinuri reported that when the port of Al-Ablah near Basra fell in the hands of Arabs in the reign of Umar ibn al-Khattab, Muslims found Chinese ships (Kratchkowsky, 1957, 138).

The trade relations between the two civilizations were initially concentrated in trade exchange. Sumerian exports were barley and oils leather, wool, tigers and textiles, while imports from India were majorly ivory, oyster shell, some precious stones, soapstone, wood and peacocks (Nadawi). [7] These relations were greatly strengthened after the emergence of Islam in India, the subsequent Islamic conquest of India and the relative 'Islamization' of India. The Indian scholar, Humayun Kabir, noted that the nature of India has greatly helped to spread the spirit of tolerance that exists in it, and that the vastness and diversity of its landscapes, climate and ways of life have prepared minds to accept existing differences and created a new population who came from abroad (Big, 2010, 54). Often Muslims who came to India were warriors and did not take their wives, so got

married to Indian wives (ibid., 25). Kabir believes that the influence of Islam in India was very deep. The connection between the old and the new ideas led the wise people to contemplate and rethink the mysteries of this universe and its eternal problems, especially after the minds were separated from the restrictions of old traditions. The emergence of new philosophies which showed the closeness between Hindu and Islamic ideas was important in promoting a feeling of peaceful co-existence. However, the processes of assimilation and reconciliation between the two systems have not been fully completed. Keeping in mind that the cities have witnessed a process of integration between the two cultures, and the political importance of Muslims has been substituted due to their small number (ibid., 82).

The most important Arab travelers who traveled to India

Sulaiman Al-Tajer is considered to be one of the most prominent travellers of the third century AH. He recorded the travels in a diary written in 237 AH, which matches 851 AD. He was neither a traveler nor a geographer or a historian but a merchant of Seraf. He would travel to India and China to purchase goods and sell them in Arab countries. Not much is known about his life except for a manuscript of a book "Dates Series" which was written by an Iraqi citizen of Sulaiman, called, Zeid Hasan al-Serafi, who lived in Seraf in

the fourth century AH, some 60 years after Suleiman wrote his memoirs. The French orientalist Rynodo found them in 1718 in a private library in Paris and later handed them over to a local library. Renodo translated the manuscript into French and published it, "Ancient News from India and China by Two Muslim Travelers who Traveled there in the Ninth Century." Then came his fellow citizen, the Orientalist Renault who re-printed the text in 1845, explaining that Father Renudo wrongly attributed the manuscript to two of the Arab travelers, in case of the merchant Solomon, while Abu Zeid Hassan Serafi who was attributed the second part was only a geographical amateur who collected news about India and China from the tongues of traders and sailors in Siraf.

Abu Zaid did not mention that he met Sulaiman the merchant, although they are from one city, but wrote down what he heard from the sailors, and added to the diary of Solomon the merchant sixty years after Solomon the merchant's recordings, a period likely to the possibility of Abizaid Hassan Sirifi's manuscript writing after the death of Solomon the merchant.He also does not claim travelling to those countries, but explicitly admits that he collected some information, and brought it into entries to the diary of the merchant Sulaiman. The Dutch orientalist "Frand'' published a new translation of the book in 1921, adding paragraphs from the "gold promoter" to the Masoudi to complete the deficiency (Majidl, 2008, 143-144). It is worth mentioning that the French library of Colbert bought the original manuscript of Sulaiman's merchant book from Aleppo in 1673 (Al-Sharouni, 2000, 9). Suvagé questioned the proportion of the first part of Solomon the merchant's book, citing that the name of Solomon the merchant comes in the context of the text by reference to the third person, and in fact it was a method of writing at that time found in many of the books.

Abu Rayhan al-Bayrouni;
Picture Via: thefamouspeople.com

Ibn Battuta
Picture Via: Imre Solt, CC BY-SA

One of the things that Suvagha points to is his discovery that Masoudi was taken literally from Abizaid al-Hasan al-Serafi's book on the things related to the news of India and China. He repeated the mistake that the copyist had made in the book of Seraphi, in which Masoudi himself also fell into unconsciously. When the copyist wrote in the first part of the news of China and India when he was talking about one of the islands there, stating: "In which many naked men and women created, but on the nakedness of women there are leaves, if they the boats came to them, they went to them by small and large boats. They traded with the people with amber, iron and what they needed for clothing because their climate was neither cold or hot. " The scribe added a word to Serafi's book, and thus (ma) became a connected name after it was a negation tool, until the consistency of meaning; otherwise, how to be naked and buy clothes? It is noted that Masoudi quoted several parts from the book of the merchant. Most of the country's news was historians and travelers, drawn from travelers and

local people who met them or what they wrote about the countries they visited (ibid., P. 12). Though I found the expression (la) in Qandil's book (...They traded with the people with amber, iron and what they needed for clothing because their climate was neither cold or hot...) (Qandil, 2002, 101).

It should be noted that the journey of Sulaiman the merchant has attracted the attention of the leading orientalists since the early 18th century, such as Renodo, orientalist Reno, Savage and Verne, who are-obtained and translated them with sophisticated methodology. In recent years, the Turkish scholar Fouad Szkin found a complete copy of this manuscript and printed it within the rare Arabic texts.The Cultural Complex in Abu Dhabi printed the manuscripts on the basis of the Paris version in 1999. Krychkowski tells that the story of Solomon the merchant dates back to about Year (237 AH, 851 AD). It is the best example of Arab traders going to India and China, where he described the way to India and China with a high degree of accuracy, which enabled Veran to follow him on modern maps. He has left a description of the coasts, islands, various ports, countries and their populations, crops, products and trade goods. Although some scholars of China's science, such as Yul and Blyu, have questioned the proportion of stories allotted to his name, Ibn al-Faqih explicitly attributes the stories to Solomon the merchant, so the question of his authorship does not hover around it without any doubt (Kratchkowski, 1957, 142). Sulaiman Al-Tajer was the first to present a valuable description of the maritime trade route that links the Arabian Gulf region to India and China in the eyes of many researchers, and with his involvement and understanding in geography the description was credible and highly detailed from distances between commercial centres to the mention of ports, stations and cities. He also explained the sites where drinkable water is available. Furthermore, he mentions the commer

-cial links between the Gulf region, the Indian Ocean and the Pacific countries. This trip and its tail features a true description of the commercial routes, some customs and social systems, and a few myths and superstitions that were the general character of the entire journey of that era.

One of the most important travellers of the fourth century AH, from the Arabs who came to India, Abu Al-Rayhan Mohammed bin Ahmed Al-Biruni (362-440 AH), did not stop providing the branches of science and knowledge for the many books that can be said to have culminated in the words of Kratchkowsky in his book about India, the book, which he called "Rosen" as "the impact of more in his door is peerless in ancient scientific literature or mediator, whether in the West or the East" (ibid., 244). Al-Bayrouni kept writing in Arabic, despite his knowledge of other languages. He believes that Arabic is the only language worthy of being the language of science. In his last book, "The Pharmacy", he says: "To the people and the virtues of the language, and the Arabic dialect I like to praise the Persian" (ibid., 256-257). He was able to provide us with accurate documentation of the culture of the people of India and their customs and the nature of their country, where he lived for a long period of time, and enabled him to know their language to document the various aspects of their lives in his book, "Takqik ma lilhind min makule fi alaql aw marthule" (to achieve what is acceptable to India in mind or what is not) which is considered the major source in Arabic on the conditions of the people of India in that period, and thus created an important reference material for those scholars who came after him over the centuries'. Ibn Battuta, who started his travels late to the country of India; that is, between 712 and 735 AH. His work on the city of Al-Matalan in 733 AH, located on the west side of the river Sind, described the political and administrative conditions in the Sultanate since the sixth century AH, which is an important contribution of Ibn Battuta to know the

past of India, and one of the most important political events in it. His source in the narration of this information is Sheikh Kamal al-Din Muhammad ibn al-Burhan al-Ghaznawi, who describes him as "imam alama al-faqih", showed him a lot of news about the history of Islam in India since the sixth century of migration. Ibn Battuta's journey is an important source to reveal ancient India's cultural and social history. Ibn Battuta and other Arab travelers, with the exception of the Peronite, have long lived in the community with close relation to the sultans. This gave them the opportunity to experience first-hand and observe closely, the traditions, cities, culture, lives and aspects of Indian society which other travelers probably didn't, thereby legitimizing the authenticity of their ethnographic accounts.

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The Book by French Orientalist Renodo
Picture Via: bonham.com
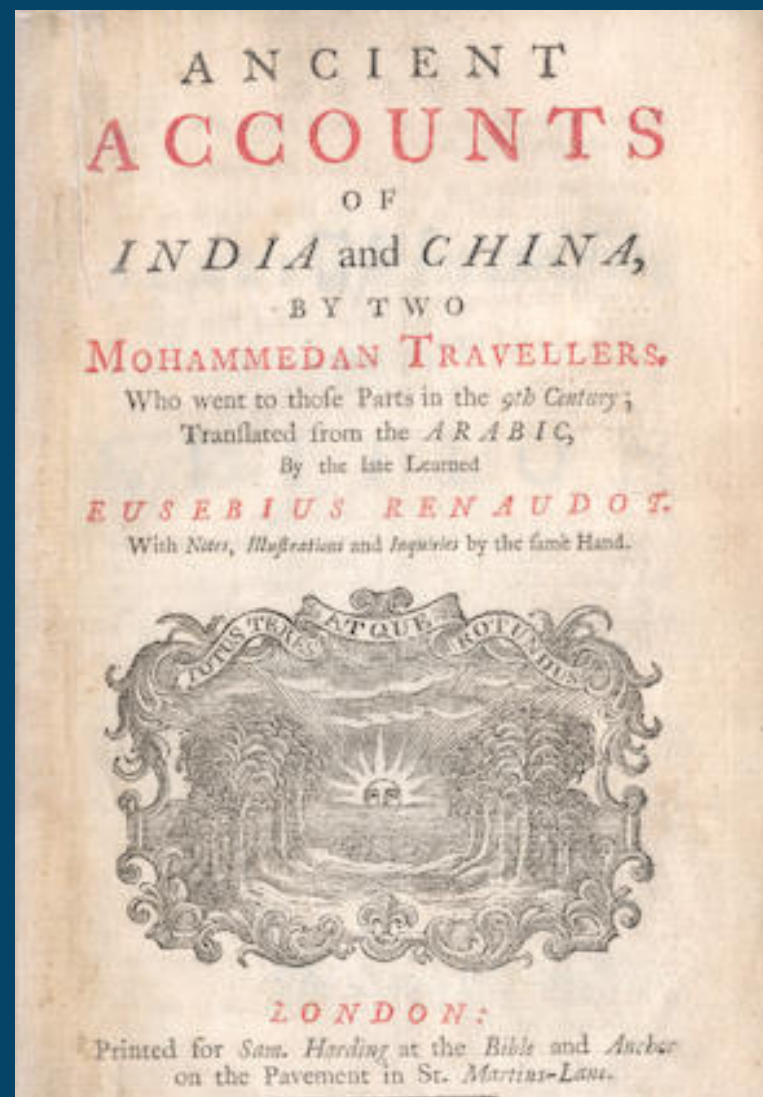
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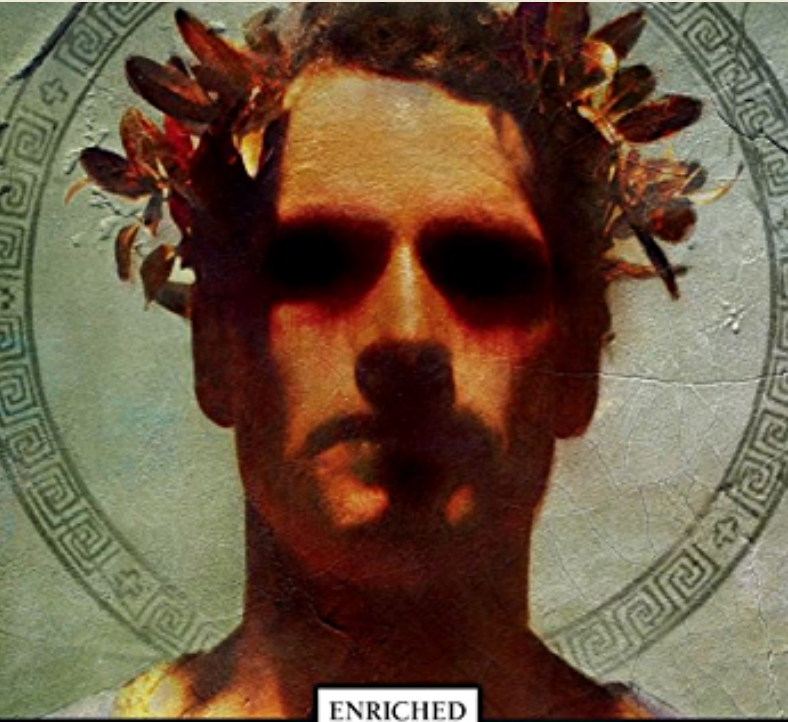
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The Oedipal Trilogy as a Celebration of Athenian Democracy

OEDIPUS THE KING

ENRICHED CLASSIC

In the conversations of Goethe with Eckermann, the former is quoted as asking:

"...and were not the productions of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides of that kind and of that depth that they might be heard again and again without being esteemed trite or put aside? "(114)

Goethe's marked interest in ancient Greek myth involves among other things, an unmistakable nostalgic touch instigated by a romantic driving force, which characterises his attitude towards classical antiquity. However, this celebratory fascination with ancient Greek heritage goes beyond this passionate nostalgia, and embraces a more serious and more rigorous reasoning that delves into the very core of the myth itself. In what amounts to a dispassionate answer to Goethe's question, Gilbert Highet in his book The Classical

Tradition authenticates, rationalizes and justifies Goethe's romantic vision of the ancient myth: "the central answer is that myths are permanent. They deal with the greatest of all problems which do not change, because men and women do not change." (450)

Highet here is quite clearly touching upon the epitome of the myth, which demonstrably centers around human nature whose typicality is changelessness. The relevance of the myth continues unabated in modern thought, causing a leading critic like George Steiner to undertake a novel twist to an earlier view he adopted in **the Death of Tragedy** where he stated that "the classic leads to a dead past". (325) However, two and a half decades later, he came up with a new outlook, exhibiting a progressive critical judgement. In Antigones, he spoke of a "hunger for beginnings" (285) and a "homecoming" because,

Far from sounding archaic and unrecapturable, the Homeric, Aeschylean or Sophoclean words, images and gestures strike us as overwhelmingly pertinent. They foreshadow, they symbolize, they speak nakedly to our present condition. Under the pressure of relevance, the intricate mappings of distance between reader and classical text on which responsible interpretation depends, are annulled. (Antigones, 284)

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The inexhaustibility of any creative text manifests itself through providing the reader with the freedom to approach it independently even from the original intention of the author. In his book Tragedy and Philosophy, Walter Kaufmann expressly refers to this notion:

A tragedy can have a meaning apart from what the poet meant. Yes ... there is also what it meant to his contemporaries. But we must also entertain the possibility that it might have a meaning that it had

occurred neither to him nor to them. There is no insuperable difficulty here if we are willing to allow that there are as many meanings as there are readers or spectators. (112)

However, in his book, Myth on the Modern Stage, Hugh Dickinson emphasizes the vital role that the poet plays in the process of making the myth enjoy multidimensional meanings: "it was not that the myth contained endless meanings; rather, the poet could, through his interpretations, attribute endless meanings to it." (332) As a middle-ground view between the last two statements, I suggest that there are two authors who actually parent the product: the poet who authors the text, and the reader who authors its meaning.

Within the framework of this vision, this paper constitutes a departure from the mainstream critical approaches to one of the most popular myths in Greek cultural canon. It argues that Sophocles' Oedipal trilogy manifests among other things, the historiography of ancient Greek political system. It is a dramatisation not only of the myth, but also of the political history of ancient Greece. From this perspective, the Oedipal trilogy is approached as a celebration of the progressive transformation of ancient Greece from the rule of the Oikos to the rule of the Polis. The trilogy narrates a qualitative shift from a tribal system

to state system which found its true expression in the Golden era of 5th century Athens B.C. The trilogy in my view, highlights five stages of socio-political transformative shift culminating in 5th century Athens B.C, which painfully but triumphantly ended by establishing Athenian democracy. The first stage demonstrates a tribal system where religious and political authorities act in concert even though the former seems to have the upper hand; and where the priest acts as a human shadow of divine authority. The narrative framework of the trilogy clearly demonstrates a primordial fusion between two related types of piety: tribal piety represented by Laius, king of Thebes, or perhaps more truly, head of the then, Theban tribe, or Theban Oikos, and religious piety represented by Tiresias, the prophet of the god Apollo. Tiresias' sphere of influence on public conscience was unmistakable, and was an integral part of popular faith.

The space of Tiresias' hegemony and domination of the socio-political scene was overwhelming and therefore, unquestionable. His prophecies amounted to undisputed verdicts and even fate. Jocasta's account of Tiresias' undisputed hegemony and sphere of influence is indicated in her reference to his warning to Laius and the latter's reaction. (O.K. 784-800)

The leader of the Chorus who represents this collective popular conscience unequivocally states this fact:

To the Lord Phoebus, the lord Tiresias
Stands nearest, I would say, in divination.
He is the one who could help us most in our
search. (O.K. 316-318)

Even Oedipus was ironically compelled to succumb to this popular faith after failing to find a solution to the catastrophe befalling Thebes when he spoke to the prophet earlier in the play (O.K.340-59). One major feature of theological piety is that it neutralizes and, at times, even alienates human reason and rational prudence. Therefore, 'Father' Tiresias or perhaps 'Pope' Tiresias holds all keys to people's lives: their past, present and future. Archaic ontology prevails through the blending and merging between theology and politics; making the latter a poor subordinate to the former. Accordingly, the thin line demarcating religious piety and tribal piety is annulled.

The second stage exhibits early signs of state system where Oedipus poses as a human counterweight to divine hegemony represented by Tiresias, marking strong signs of conflict between religious authority and political authority. This stage began with the appearance of Oedipus at the outskirts of Thebes. Oedipus, the alien fugitive running away from archaic domain to historical ontology in the attempt to make himself rather than remake the past, is the man of the hour. The Theban crown is in search for a new head since the chief of the tribe is no more, and since religious piety, by rejecting reason, has remarkably failed to provide a solution for a calamity that is slowly but systematically squeezing life out of Thebes and its people, the power vacuum filled by an 'alien' is an extraordinary event that reversed tribal typicality. Obviously, that move was the only choice since there was no biological heir

apparent to replace the dead head of the Oikos. Thus, understandably enough, this stage is initially characterized by an uneasy coexistence between the new political tyranny introduced by Oedipus 'the alien' on the one hand, and the traditional religious tyrannical authority of Tiresias, on the other.

Oedipus immediately strikes everyone as a shrewd political rationalist with a sophisticated potential that is going to change wholly, the tribal system of the time. The riddle of the Sphinx symbolizes political stagnation that is suffocating the established political system. Solving that riddle is a metaphor for a civilized solution championed by human rationalism rather than speculative faith represented by traditional religious power, which quite palpably failed to reassert its credibility in the eyes of the people due to the passive attitude it adopted during the crisis. 'Power sharing' which was long enjoyed by the two wings of power:Laius and Tiresias, and which characterized the first stage, has gradually developed into bitter power struggle between divinely inspired despotic dominance and a new human counterweight attempting to establish itself through forcing a new vision on the Oikos. The incumbent religious establishment will not yield or relinquish power although it unwillingly succumbs to this new reality after the Oedipal 'tsunami', so to speak. The enthronement of Oedipus marks an expansive new political vision coupled with a concomitant contractive withdrawal of religious piety from the public scene. Reason replaces faith, and symptoms of the skeleton of state system begin to nudge out of the rubbles of the aging tribal system, waiting to be fleshed out. Oedipus is conscious of a parallel between himself as an individual, and the state that he is building. "*Here I am myself – you all know me, the world knows my fame: I am Oedipus.*"(O.K.7-9) It is a personal achievement based on what he has done for Thebes over the years, carrying

it to the zenith of a glory, which matches his; a fact acknowledged by his people in a lengthy and detailed account of the progressive evolutionary change that Thebes has enjoyed for long under the new regime. (O.K. 39-69) However, this stage is also marked by a bitter conflict between traditional political Theban power base, and the exponent of the new system instigated by a political and conceptual setback caused by the blight on the city. Severe and uncompromising recriminations between Oedipus on the one hand and Tiresias and Creon, on the other, plagued the political scene and threatened to wreck the place down. This setback provided traditional religious and political Theban forces, long alienated by the new regime, to try to rehabilitate themselves and assume their former political presence, and retrieve their lost traditional authority. The second stage ends with the ousting of Oedipus, leaving Thebes demoralized, and in a state of socio-political disarray, paralleled by a confusion that put into jeopardy all the achievements that have been scored thus far.

A blind Oedipus commending his children to the Gods
Source: Bénigne Gagneraux, National Museum Stockholm

The third stage is perhaps the most dangerous, the most intriguing and the most daring of all the five stages that the trilogy exhibits. In the aftermath of Oedipus' downfall and subsequent exile, Thebes suffered political turmoil because of the political vacuum resulting from the absence of a legitimate heir apparent ready to take over. A hasty solution had to be enforced through Creon's takeover as a regent to the throne until Polynices, the elder son of Oedipus came of age. What characterizes this stage is Creon's daring reversal of tribal tradition or typicality when he decided to hand over the throne not to Polynices, the elder son, as the political tradition of the time dictated, but to his younger brother, Eteocles in clear violation of the tribal norm. Nowhere in the second or third play of the trilogy can we find any credible or clear-cut reason why Creon made that unusual and explosive move. Polynices' complaint adds to the mystery:

Polynices: My father
…Listen to the reason why I am here.
I am an exile, driven from the fatherland.
Because I claimed my birthright, the right to sitIn
the seat of your former sovereignty, my brother,
My younger brother, Eteocles, expelled me.
The case was never argued; there was no fight;
But somehow, he got the city on his side.
(Colonus, 1328-1335)

However, one of the following reasons may lie behind Creon's move. First, it is possible that Polynices is not qualified to meet the requirements of the job; therefore, the country, which is already in a state of disarray, will most probably plunge further into deeper troubles. Secondly, it is possible that Creon's move is motivated by his desire to see the two brothers finish each other off, leaving the door wide open for himself to assume power

officially. Third, it is likely that Creon wanted to put an end to traditional hereditary laws and force a new law where only 'the qualified' should be allowed to rule. Through this action, he is most probably demonstrating the emergence of a new political vision and foreshadowing the forthcoming Roman style of governance where Caesar is chosen according to his merits; rather than hereditary tradition. Nevertheless, Creon's decision had extremely dangerous repercussions represented by a bloody civil war that threatened to cause Thebes to be out of joint. In his quest to retrieve his hereditary rights, or perhaps, satisfy his lust for power, Polynices, frenzied by power mania, was ready to destroy what his father had built over the years: i.e. destroy his father's legacy represented by moving Thebes from tribe to state. Seven foreign armies were recruited by Polynices to invade and reclaim Thebes. At this stage, it is quite clear that personal, familial, hereditary interests, together with lust for power are far more important than the welfare or even, the very existence of the state. Throughout the violent exchange: first between Oedipus and Creon; and later, between Oedipus and Polynices: both attempting to drag Oedipus to their side, it is clear that both Creon and Polynices are trying to use Oedipus as their winning card which carries a huge moral and political weight to the side that wins him. Antigone's attempts to knock some sense into her brother's head came to nothing.

Antigone: order your army back to Argos; now,
Before it is too late, to save yourself
And our city from destruction.
Polynices: that is impossible...
Antigone: ...but why?
Why need you fight again? What use is it?
To make your home a ruin?
Polynices: am I to endure, the insult of exile, and the mockery of a younger brother?

Antigone: Then you're determined to do this?
Polynices: I am. (Colonus, 1416-1436)

The civil war that ensued, demonstrated an archaic political setback, threatening to blow Thebes into oblivion. The result was typical of civil wars where all conflicting parties lose. In the aftermath of this bloody domestic feud, Thebes was now in ruins. Therefore, the need to start a long, slow and painful process of reconstruction of the state and the rehabilitation of the Oedipal legacy was overwhelming.

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The fourth stage illustrates the resurrection of Thebes from the rubbles of its former self. From under the wreckage of universal destruction, we witness the birth of a new city state where almost all the traditional values of the past are reconsidered, and priorities are re-defined. Therefore, a new socio-political approach that sets the foundation for the new state has to be implemented. Antigone, the third play of the Oedipal trilogy, which hosts the fourth and fifth stages, opens with a bitter and uncompromising conflict between traditional familial values remnant of the tribal system, championed by Antigone, and the newly established state values represented by Creon, the new tyrant. It is quite palpable from the opening lines that these two laws are uncompromisingly incompatible. According to the new law, family considerations have to give way to state ones. Since familial feud led to the destruction of Thebes, familial ties are seen as a hindrance to the emergence of the state. This stage may well mark the institutionalization of dictatorship, because it demonstrates not only the birth of the state as a dictatorship, but also the birth of the politician as dictator; and the dictator as fate. It is a manifestation of the establishment of the one-man rule system where the dictator is self-apotheosized. Creon's proclamation in in the aftermath of the civil war, which occupy the

the bulk of Oedipus At Colonus, amounts to a political manifesto that serves as a draft constitution for the newly born state. It manifests an irrevocable and total divorce from old values represented by religious piety or tribal, particularly, familial considerations. It is also meant to enthrone him as the undisputed dictator par excellence. Creon, the new tyrant, is stating his vision of the state; a vision which will immediately be translated into an unquestionable law that will ring in people's ears as fate. It is useful to quote Creon at length:

Creon:
I, … inheritedThe throne and kingdom which I now possess.
For my part, I have always held the view,
And hold it still, that a king whose lips are sealed
By fear, unwilling to seek advice, is damned.
And no less damned is he who puts a friend
Above his country; I have no good word for him.
When I see any danger threatening my people,
Whatever it may be, I shall declare it.
No man who is his country's enemyShall call himself my friend....
Our country is our life; only when she Rides safely, have we any friends at all.Such is my policy for our common wheel. (Antigone, 211-228)

Like all tyrants, Creon establishes a kind of oneness with the state. So, from a man in a state, he transcends to the status of a state in a man. This is a typicality which characterizes all dictators. As a dictator, he views himself to be superior to the state which exists only to serve his own purposes. People are not treated as citizens but as subjects whose duty is to obey. The measure for their loyalty to the state is determined by the obedience they show to the dictator himself whose "frown is a sufficient silencer / of any word that is not for [his] ears". (Antigone, 727-728) This act of self-apotheosis turns the dictator into an allegorical

figure rather than flesh and blood:

Creon:
He whom the State appoints must be obeyed
To the smallest matter, be it right – or wrong.
And he that rules his household, without a doubt,
Will make the wisest king, or, for that matter,
The staunchest subject.
He will be the man
You can depend on in the storm of war,
The faithfullest comrade in the day of battle,
There is no more deadly peril than disobedience;
States are devoured by it, homes laid in ruins,
Armies defeated, victory turned to rout.
While simple obedience saves the lives of hundreds
Of honest folk.
Therefore, I hold to the law,
And will never betray it – (Antigone, 668-680)

This self-appointed human dictator who transforms himself into self-apotheosized deity is typical of all human dictators who are aloof and lonely, and who ironically go to sleep with one eye closed and another eye open so to speak because they are shrouded by a sense of suspicion of their subordinates. Mistrust breeds a sense of fear that transforms 'the other' into a potential enemy; therefore, into a constant threat. This largely explains dictators' belligerence against their people. Creon whom everyone loves to hate is no exception. He is contemptuously dismissive of any role that the people can play in matters related to the state; denying them the right to act or even think independently from the dictates of the tyrant.

The authority of the dictator is meant to transform the tyrant's law within the collective conscience of the people into a new religion that can well be described as the religion of fear. The inflated 'I' of the dictator, deflates 'the other' i.e. the people into almost a non-entity. Haemon who later calls his father "mad", (Antigone, 783) tries to draw his father's attention that the latter's verdict against Antigone has not met popular approval:

Creon: and was not this woman's action dishonorable?
Haemon: the people of Thebes think not.
Creon: The people of Thebes!
Since when do I take my orders from the people of Thebes? (Antigone, 733-735)

The despotic nature of Creon's rule is manifested in his firm belief that as a king, "I am...responsible only to myself" (Antigone, 737) because according to him "the state belongs to its ruler." (Antigone, 739) "If people disagree with their dictator, the people should resign." This Brechtian sarcastic recipe for the kind of relationship that binds people to their tyrant seems to have originated here. Haemon warns his father that if he proceeds with that despotic attitude he "would be an excellent king – on a desert island." (Antigone, 740) This sense of sarcasm is reflective of mute popular anger which is going to develop into political dissent in the form of "whispers spoken in the dark" (Antigone, 728) as Haemon puts it, in his bid to sway Creon away from the edge of the cliff. However, blinded by hubristic power, the dictator is both unwilling and unable to activate any form of political insight. The inflated larger-than-life status which he assumes, distances him not only away from his people, but also from reality. What Sophocles tries to deliver in this particular stage in my view, is that no matter how far dictatorships are constitutionalized, institutionalized or even apotheosized, they are doomed. Creon, the dictator, who presents himself throughout the fourth stage as doom, is himself doomed. Creon embraces the conclusion that dictatorship is "the Curse of my stubborn will", as he puts it. None could describe him more eloquently than he himself had done: in his own words, he is now "a breathing corpse", "a smoke's shadow" and "nothing more than nothing." (Antigone, 1238)

The fifth stage begins with a bloody dismemberment of constitutional dictatorship where the dictator's voice is replaced by people's voice, and the one-man rule by people's rule. The fall of the dictator foreshadows the end of an era and the birth of another. Haemon, the archetypal paradigm for this new spirit is most probably Sophocles' mouthpiece. His violent verbal exchange with his tyrannical parent is illustrative of the dictator's desperate attempt to cling to a power he knows is slipping away from his control. It is also reflective of the new generation's resolve to force progressive transformation where people are promoted from subjects to citizens, and where they will no longer nourish on the grace of the shepherd ruler. It marks the birth of the individual historicistic man. Along with the inevitability of change, comes the heavy price that has to be paid in order to hasten the dismemberment of the current regime. Therefore, the violent deaths that took place in the process are metaphorical of the inevitability of the ultimate triumph of rational prudence.

In this last stage, Sophocles seems to celebrate the triumphant emergence of Athenian democracy. Nowhere else in the trilogy, can we feel the celebratory presence of Sophocles more than we feel it here. The exchange between the two characters is worth pondering at. Haemon gives his tyrannical father an illuminating lecture which amounts to a democratic political manifesto that can be applicable anywhere, any time. It marks a progressive vision, which is translated into a democracy that his compatriot Athenians in 5thcentury B.C. nourished on.

Haemon:............ I say,
Let not your first thought be your only thought.
Think if there cannot be some other way.
Surely, to think your own the only wisdom,

And yours the only word, the only will,
Betrays a shallow spirit, an empty heart.
It is no weakness to the wisest man
To learn when he is wrong, know how to yield.
So, on the margin of a flooded river
Trees bending to the torrent live unbroken,
While those that strain against it are snapped off.
A sailor has to tack and slacken sheets
Before the gale, or find himself capsized.
I think, for what my young opinion's worth,
That, good as it is to have infallible wisdom,
Since this is rarely found, the next best thing
Is to be willing to listen to wise advice. (Antigone,
683-721)

This is the epitome of Athenian democracy, which was inspirational to later generations. This spirit persisted throughout successive centuries, and led Goethe, the father of German Romanticism among many others, to consider it almost as a new faith. In what sounds as an emphatic answer to the tentative question he threw at Eckermann, Goethe says:

Indeed, a man of really superior endowments will feel the necessity of this; need for an   intercourse with great predecessors is a sure sign of higher talent. Study Moliere, study Shakespeare; but above all things, the Greeks, and always the Greeks. (185)

Afterword

The relevance of the Oedipal saga as an ancient Greek myth to our modern socio-political setting speaks itself out, particularly in a volatile region such as the Middle East. This region, which fluctuates between the deeply rooted tribal system fighting to cling to power on the one hand and the tentative yet, unsuccessful attempts to nudge out of this tribal shell and embrace the world of democracy, is plunged into the quagmire of violence and political and societal uncertainty. For decades, this region has been suffering from a sense of political identity crisis and a struggle to put itself on the right track of political direction.

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The nucleus of this paper was originally a lecture I gave to my Ph.D. female students via satellite, in the English Department at King Saud University, KSA. Soon after I finished the section on the cohabitation between religious authority and political authority (Tiresias and Laius) and later, the struggle between these two authorities (Tiresias and Oedipus), one of my students threw a daring but an extremely illuminating question. She said: "Sir, are you sure you are talking about ancient Greece or modern Saudi Arabia?" I thought then that this rhetorical question said it all.

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Embracing democracy through the struggle for liberation from the rule of the Oikos, in order to celebrate the rule of the Polis is a dream shared by the majority of the people in the Middle East. This dream must one day, come true. I hope that this paper can inspire further research in this field especially by young scholars whose progressive vision can make a difference.

Nineteenth-century painting by Philipp Foltz depicting the Athenian politician Pericles. Source: Pittsburgh Quaterly

My consolation for any shortcomings in this paper is drawn from George Steiner's apology in the closing words in his Antigones: "All I can be certain of is this: what I have tried to say is already in need of addition". (304)

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REVISIONISM AS NORMATIVE

A New Regional Order

Across the world, the pandemic has revealed certain trends of authoritarianism, populism, absolutism, racism, cultural intolerance and a steep decline in civil liberties. These trends are not COVID-induced, the pandemic has only served to remove the blindfold from our eyes and confirmed the earlier notion of a steep decline in liberal values of globalism, collective security, human rights and cosmopolitanism. The world stands at a watershed moment, wherein unprecedented changes are taking place within the realms of politics, economics, society and healthcare. Economies are dwindling, healthcare resources are insufficient and political movements are as motivated and resilient as ever. The Middle East is no exception.

The region has come under severe attack of a protracted and multi-layered security threats, some imminent and tangible like rising unemployment, lack of health resources, continuing ethnic, sectarian interfaith, and terrorist proxy wars, oil shocks and some more pronounced but intangible and less evident, like the gendered violence amidst the pandemic, the decline of human capital and the rise of intolerant, unsecular and militaristic regimes. The region is slowly experiencing a decline in the value, trust and legitimacy of state governments. The definition and scope of statism as we knew it is dynamically being replaced from within by quasi and non-state actors.

While social movements of dissent take over an anti-corruption narrative against the cronyism, instability and economic incapacity of governments in Lebanon, Libya, Algeria and Iraq, the economic hardships brought on by the pandemic will only resuscitate the public anger reorienting either the governments approach towards the economic policies or the entire makeup and nature of the very government. Economically, debts, failed healthcare facilities, a burgeoning gap in GDP-Debt ratios and an unmanageable refugee crisis will force the regional powers to rethink their aggressive and expensive foreign policy proxy wars and concentrate more on domestic policies for strengthening the economy, employment, infrastructure and state capacity.

Lastly, politically, a region mired under
Saudi-Iran cold war shadows has evolved with new players taking the front with Tehran against the gulf monarchy. Simultaneously, reduced US presence leaving a substantial vacuum opens up place for great powers like China and Russia to meddle in the regional geo-politics. Considering the goals, orientation and methods of these two great powers varies greatly as compared to the United States, the region might experience an altered power balance in political, economic and social theatres.

THE NEW PLAYERS

The Middle Eastern political order stands at an important juncture today wherein the erstwhile anti-western axis led by regional nationalist players is witnessing an unprecedented expansion. Turkey, a state that served as a loyal "eastern bulwark of containment" for the Western powers[i] during the Cold War and initiated a westernized society under Ataturk Kemal Pasha is now in undertaking a reverse U-Turn to re-define its identity on the lines of the Ottoman civilization and modelling its foreign policy on Pan-Islamic and Jihadist lines. After the Cold War, the Kemalist approach towards secularism and westernization did not materialize mainly due to western rejection after Turkey's app-lication to EU. Therefore, like many other countries

Turkey too stood at important crossroads deliberating on the nature of its ethno-nationalistic identity. Samuel Huntington in his widely read book "The Clash of Civilizations" expounded the inevitable rise of civilisations

Rouhani, Erdogan & Putin at a joint conference in Ankara, Turkey (2018) Image Credits - Al Monitor

as prospective fault lines of cooperation and conflict between states. This has never been truer than in the case of Turkish revisionism under Erdogan.

Constructivist theorists hold a strong belief that states do not only act for material self-interests but also for a perceive identity and ideas. The Turkish example can be explained with a similar constructivist lens. While westerners and western media defines Erdogan's actions as increasingly anti-West and a drive for power and regional hegemonic status, the ground reality has something to do with Turkish romance with the Islamic ideology and its quest to shape its identity on cultural affiliation with Pan-Islamism. Huntington strongly believed that in the 21st Century alliances and friendships between nation

-states will be forged through cultural and civilizational ties and Turkish policy of Pan-Islamism and Neo-Ottomanism has turned this speculation into a concrete social fact. Erstwhile

Rouhani, Erdogan & Putin at a joint conference in Ankara, Turkey (2018)
Image Credits - Al Monitor

western stronghold and a member of the Anti-Iran club, Turkey has undergone a substantial evolution in terms of its outlook, goals, policies and allies in the region. Erdogan's accession to power as Turkey's new PM, has led to a drastic reorientation of Turkey's identity from a Kemalist Western ally to a revisionist, hegemonic and ostensibly anti-West populist power. Turkish revisionism and Erdogan's newly found assertiveness in the region are doubling the impact and capability of the new axis with Moscow and Tehran. Erdogan is engaging in military power projection and adventures coupled with an ideological drive to rearrange itself as a prospective leader of the Islamic world.

Militarily, the Turkish government has secured the importance of national security and

territorial integrity of Turkey as one of its foremost goals. This is in opposition to the revisionism followed under Davutoglu which focused more on economic advancement and Turkish development. However, Erdogan is reconfiguring the Turkish foreign policy approach on militaristic and territorially ambitious lines and the domestic policy has been heavily re-oriented from westernised and democratic to a more Islamic, populist and authoritarian one.

Therefore, Erdogan's brand of foreign policy seems to be wedded to the nuances of offensive realism wherein an increased military prowess is not limited to a defensive outlook for preserving national security, rather it is an offensive capability aimed at re-balancing the status-quo to achieve the historical glory and the territorial capacity Turkish predecessor, the Ottoman Empire once commanded. It reflects tendencies of a regional hegemon. According to a report by SIPRI, in 2019, Turkey spent 20.4 billion dollars on its military expenditure, which has increased by 86% over the last decade (2010-2019) and now Turkey ranks 16th in the military expenditure rankings.

Furthermore, under Erdogan domestic and regional military interventions and deployments have increased drastically. Firstly, on 3rd January, the Turkish Parliament passed a law giving the Turkish head of state ultimate power to decide the level of deployment and the rules of engagement of its military in Libya. This has heralded an era of militarily assertive and pro-active Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan's authoritarian rule. Turkish revisionism and militaristic power projection have also translated in militaristic assertiveness on the contested maritime boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea where Turkey opposes the East Med Pipeline agreement on offshore hydrocarbon exploration concluded between

Israel, Egypt, Greece backed by the EU. This pipeline venture is another aspect which challenges Russian dominance in the region by reducing EU's dependence on Russian energy trade and therefore, convergences Moscow's and Ankara's interests, giving them another reason to oppose the western ventures in the region.

Turkey's regional ambitions of subduing the Kurds, sending the refuges back to their homeland and establishing considerable influence in a post-conflict in Syria are all aligned with the Tehran and Moscow's efforts, allying with NATO and the western powers cannot help Turkey realise the dream of a regional hegemon. Furthermore Iran-Turkey-Russia axis will be an effective counter-balance to the Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis in the region. Moreover, the Tehran-Moscow-Ankara camaraderie goes beyond the ultra-nationalist, anti-West and anti-democratic ideological convergences, it translates into hard power credentials too. Transfer through military trade. Turkey's purchase of the S-400 Missile system and subsequent threats to expel US forces from its Incirlik and/or Kureçik air bases is highly representational of the recent shift in Turkish geopolitics from the West to the East. [i] This approach of military purchasing diversification stresses on the strategic autonomy envisioned and adopted by the Turkish policy makers under Erdogan.

TEHRAN

Iran fits like a perfect missing piece in the puzzle of Russian-Turkey axis for mutual realisation of goals and needs, especially since it is a vociferous anti-West power who is in critical need of allies to sustain its economy and regional reputation. The anti-west power of Iran theocracy has been fighting a regional cold war against the Saudi and its allies for

a long time and since the imposition of US sanctions, Iran is desperate for allies and economic partners. Turkey and Russia's revisionist aspirations fulfil the role. Furthermore, for Russia endorsing Tehran seems like an ideal move to counter-balance western influence in the region. The friendship under this context is straight up the disciple of the ancient aphorism of statecraft, 'My enemy's enemy is my friend.' Lastly, and more importantly Iran is also a very important weapons market for Russia. In 2019, after explicitly refusing to extend the arms embargo to Iran, Russian defence exports to Iran makes up for 96% of its total imports, which displays the criticality and the importance of Russia to Iran.

In return, Russia has access to cheap oil and energy security which is a win-win situation for both powers and there seems little reason for them to not follow a close-knit model of mutual co-operation and benefit. While the above-mentioned revisionist, anti-West reasons are integral to justify a developing Tehran-Ankara-Moscow axis, the feasibility and depth of the same is highly questionable. Moscow and Anakra have some deeply unresolved clashes which would not allow for their mutual anti-West camaraderie to evolve as a sustainable alliance. Their opposing positions in the Libyan civil war and Ankara's attitude of coddling with the West to serve its "strategic autonomy" steals any trust which is required to construct a long-standing partnership or alliance. Additionally, both countries have stakes in the Central Asian region which is considered a sphere of influence by Turkey under its ambitious Neo-Ottomanism policy of revisionism and Russia at the same time claims the region as its "Near Abroad" having substantial energy, economic and diplomatic interests at stake.
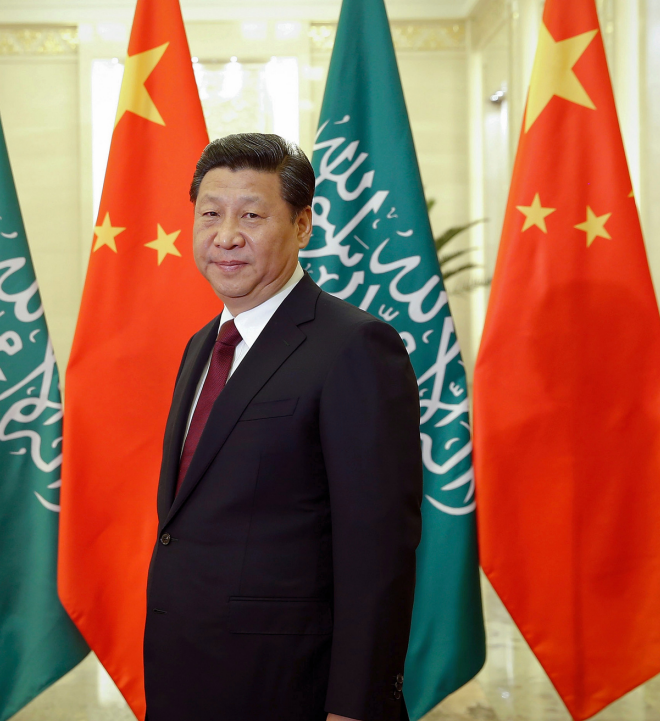
Xi Jinping before meeting with Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz (2015)
Image Credits - Foreign Policy

Therefore, the regional politics in the Middle East has become more complicated. Multilateralism is declining and multipolarity is on the rise, creating diverse power centres and counter-balancers against erstwhile hegemons. Similarly, the Middle East is no exception but a rule to the larger geo-political forces. The rise of multipolarity in the region has played out not only with respect to increasing state assertiveness like Turkey and Iran but also with the rise of non-state actors and religious, socio-cultural forces.

These developments have taken place in the backdrop of Western retrenchment in the region weakening the position of the erstwhile hegemonic groups like the Saudi-UAE axis and simultaneously raising the comparative value, strength and assertiveness of the Iran-Turkey-Russian axis. A bipolar space of opposing and competitive axis' can be more confrontational than the past order lead by the Western allies and economically unchallenged gulf monarchies. Having established the political possibilities, one cannot ignore the silver lining in the regional engagements brought upon by the continued

crisis like the pandemic, oil shocks, economic gluts and social protests.

CHINA

Added to the complexity of emerging Turkish, Iranian and Russian roles is the Chinese angle of economic engagement and assertion of its energy security needs with the region. Unlike the other foreign powers engaged in the region, the Chinese model can be summarised as maximising benefits and minimising commitments. China's increasing influence in the region has many strategic and logical geo-political underpinnings. Firstly, since US's retrenchment from the region left a considerable vacuum for other major players. Simultaneously, Chinese economic expansionism under BRI and its increasing need for energy security made the Middle East region a lucrative and ideal location. Since 2011, China has consistently increased its economic investments, geo-political infrastructural loans for strategic ports and export of energy requirements.

The Chinese model of development and their conceptualization of security and stability in the Middle East is more lucrative for the authoritarian and undemocratic Middle Eastern leaders since it comes with no political strings attached. Unlike, the US model of development for the Middle East, which attempts to meddle in domestic institutions to promote democracy, liberties and individual freedom, China focuses on economic, infrastructural development rather than getting involved in political systems.

For power-hungry nationalist or monarchical regimes external democratization is a dangerous consideration to attach on proposed developmental plans and agendas. Therefore, the Chinese model of development through economic growth is more promising. Furthermore, China itself offers an epitome of development and growth by exploiting trade and

free market capitalism without having to dilute free market capitalism without having to dilute its nature of governance, thereby denouncing the US conditionality of democratization for development, security and stability. While China is not an antagonistic power, entering the region with pre-defined ideological underpinnings, it is still substantial in altering the power-politics of the region as it challenges US national interests primarily those of energy security.

Politically, China will resist interference but as it secures its energy supplies and expands its economic aspirations of BRI through the region, it is obvious and undebated that military expansionism will accompany the geo-strategically important trade routes and BRI projects. Djibouti, Syria, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Sudan already have the presence of China's soft military bases. China currently has 30,000 military personnel stationed in the Middle East, which makes it the second largest presence after that of United States. [i] Therefore, with potential hard power investment in the region, and a clearly anti-Western outlook China will inevitably occupy a major player status in the region.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, a new order does consider a more active and evolving role for revisionist anti-West powers like Turkey, Iran, Russia and China. At the same time failures to deliver medical and healthcare facilities as well as cushions against economic shocks the Middle Eastern governments could be facing a substantial legitimacy crisis.

Simultaneously, the pandemic and state incapacity has provided a fresh opportunity for non-state actors to fill in the legitimacy vacuum by extending healthcare facilities to the people.

Therefore, the region is undergoing a multiplicity of political changes which will redefine the regional outlook, goals, policies and orientation in the coming years.The economic impact of the pandemic could either open way for new players to infuse militaristic and economic aid to regional powers and continue the proxy wars or the middle eastern players could abandon conflict to concentrate on domestic economic crisis and bring about the age of co-operation and mutually beneficial regional economic order, the Middle East has been waiting for.

As the readers could see, the EU has been absented from the region. EU is facing an internal problem, weak diplomacy and limited role to play. Reasons for this could be attributed to the EU- US differences over several issues related to the discontentment of the US towards the EU policy in the region and the world at large, which can implicate the end of Europe role.

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Putin, Jinping & Rouhani attend a meeting of the
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)
Image Credits - CNN

LEVERAGING LEGITIMACY
Non-state actors in the complexity of the Middle East

Scarred by great power competition, the imbalance of the world power system, nationalist authoritarianism, political violence and all-out war, the Middle East has evolved into the complex entity that it is today. Where history has chalked a path for the rise of revisionism on the one hand, it has also transformed the structural frameworks of many states on the other; altering the social contract in places, creating state vacuums in others, and producing a variety of highly consequential actors. This process of incessant change has also given birth to dynamics that are very unlike any other in the world. A definitive product of these dynamics is the rise of "hybrid" actors, which cannot be considered fully or formally sovereign but have nonetheless created networks and organizations of their own and control both power and territory. Today, the relationship between these entities and the states in the Middle East have not only come to challenge concepts of legitimacy and security, but also the very foundations of the modern nation state; a process that may soon be hastened by the pandemic.

Perhaps beginning in the 1970's with the resurrection and rise of the Muslim Brotherhood Movement (Originally founded in 1928 in Egypt), the shift of allegiance away from governments in the Middle East is undoubtedly a product of bad socio-economic conditions and a deep seated discontent that was never addressed. The failure of ideologies like socialism, Arab nationalism and Baathism in the 70's; the humiliating defeat of the Arabs in 1967; and increasing economic disparity, are but a few in a number of other key motivating factors behind this discontent. However, governments across the region failed to address it and, in many instances, chose to withdraw from certain sectors of society altogether. This left a vacuum that was to be filled by western-created-and-backed local, powerful and non-state groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Besides, the western-led ideology to contain anti- west nationalist movements, led to rise of resistance of powers like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, and various other ethnic and sectarian groups in Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia Today, a few of these groups have disappeared under the repressiveness of the governments in their countries, however, many others have flourished. Their flourishment though, has marked the fragmentation of Arab sovereignty and state legitimacy across the board; a fact that was witnessed in the Arab spring of 2011.

It has been said that "Nowhere is a rethinking of 'the state' more important than in the Middle East." This is a statement that finds its justification

in both the events leading up to the Arab Spring as well as the rise of non-state actors across the region, who have at times taken on roles of governance and at others, declared state borders null and void. These actors have now come to define a variety of dynamics across the region, enmeshing themselves in societies and state structures. In a seemingly complementary fashion, the legitimacy that was once wholly accorded to states and formal governments are now increasingly being enjoyed by entities that are apart from this formal structure. However, this does not mean that the governments of the middle east have or will completely forego their sovereign powers. It is perhaps more indicative of a shift towards hybrid partnerships, rather than conflictual existence. Yet, it is to be understood that norms cannot be applied universally across a region that has been so complicated by actors, ideas, culture and deep-rooted diversity.

Today, as the COVID-19 pandemic spreads globally, there has been a surge in unprecedented challenges faced by states across the world. In a few countries in the Middle East, where years of conflict have weakened national health systems, these challenges have become almost unmanageable. A fragmentation of legitimacy, low state capacities, endemic corruption and a certain sense of mistrust of the local elite has left authorities without the proper means to detect, manage or monitor the spread of the pandemic. Herein, the activities and the roles of "hybrid" non-state actors must be re-envisioned. While many have been used as proxies for larger geo-political goals, others have also sought to carve for themselves a new dynamic out of this situation. Hezbollah for instance has deployed thousands of medical professionals across Lebanon in an effort to soften the divisive image the party has among its rivals and many within Lebanese society. Taking upon itself a transformation from being seen as mere proponents of political violence and proxy agents of regional powers, this group is but one among many others who have seen the need to project a new perception to the societies they operate within.
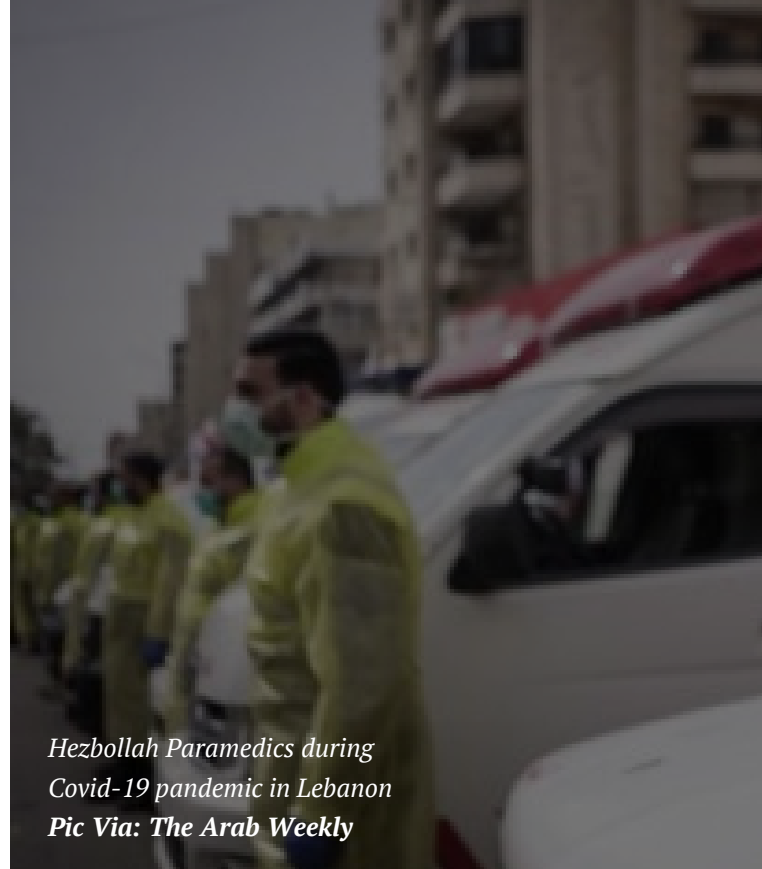
Hezbollah Paramedics during
Covid-19 pandemic in Lebanon
Pic Via: The Arab Weekly

In war-torn Libya as well, with hybrid actors aligned to the Government of National Accord (GNA) being granted a portion of the $300 million budget allocated to fighting the disease, it is more likely that not that questions of legitimacy will soon become prominent. Being placed at the center of the response to COVID-19, will create a relationship of dependency between national authorities and non-actors who have been operationalized in enforcing social distancing measures and lockdowns across the state. Under General Haftar as well, many factions have now focused their efforts on leveraging the pandemic. Cultivating positive relationships with their respective constituencies in an effort to bolster the image of being a legitimate security provider, will allow such actors to not only garner popular support but also challenge the legitimacy of authority. While uncertainty thrives in the case of Libya, these dynamics are nonetheless symbolic of the opportunities now offered to non-state actors in undertaking a number of public functions that were previously performed exclusively by states.

A similar dynamic can now be witnessed in Iraq as well, where months of protests and the lack of a government has once again allowed for Iraq's Shiite militia to leverage support by posing as health care beneficiaries. Underpinned by an array of informal

socio-political, cultural and security structures, the networks operated by these non-state actors have only expanded over the years. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella organization composed of some 40 militias is currently one of the most prominent hybrid groups in Iraq, and at the forefront of the fight against the government's legitimacy. Most past governments have fallen prey to the pressures exerted by this group, who have sought for years to project themselves as an alternative to the formal state institutions.

With the state institutions currently failing to adequately respond to the pandemic, the PMF has initiated a number of campaigns aimed at countering the effects of the same. Providing medial support, burial services and distributing food across Iraq may perhaps present another opportunity to Iraqi's Shiite militia in enhancing their reputational standing. While the pandemic continues to play out across the region, non-state actors will thus also continue to seek opportunities in enhancing their own legitimacy. Where leadership is contested and the pandemic has hit particularly hard, forces currently embroiled in conflict may also chose to consolidate their command and extend power through these alternative mechanisms. The possibilities of this could be seen in Yemen, Libya or

the Gaza strip, regions currently akin to failed states in the Middle East. Nonetheless, this analogy is to be presented selectively. Opportunities through which hybrid actors will be able to challenge state capacities and legitimacy in the coming months will be premised on the state they operate within. State failure is not universal to the countries of the Middle East and perhaps, never will be. Countries who have either had overtly repressive governments or enjoyed the benefits of being rich economies, like Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, have shown to have escaped these dynamics.

With that being said, it is not evident as of this moment as to whether the opportunities presented to these non-state actors will indeed be wholly fruitful. While on the one hand, the pandemic may prepare the way for increased stake in state functionality, on the other, many struggling states in the past have continued to embody elements of statehood even at their worst. The Libyan government for example, has continued to export oil, provide for state employees, and also facilitate electricity across much of Libya, while being in constant conflict with the forces of General Haftar. Leveraging the possibilities accorded by either the pandemic or the weakening of state legitimacy will thus lie solely on the initiatives of either state or non-state actors in the coming years. While the rise to prominence of actors such as the PMF, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood are resultant out of the absence of the state, their existence per se does not signal an absolute state vacuum. States will recuperate and re-exert their power over these actors at the earliest possible opportunity. If this is not to be the ensuing dynamic in the region, the possibility for the co-optation of non-state actors by states is higher; whether for reasons of structural weakness, strategic motives or political advantage.

The Middle East is characterized by complexity, shaped by historic faults, transformed by an over-imposition of external influence and thus a failure in many regards. Ideas that were not of the region

have been imposed upon it by external factors, creating a region that is both undefinable and unpredictable. With questions of state legitimacy, hybrid partnerships and conflicting goals now plaguing the horizon, one must perhaps turn back to 'civilization' rather than 'the state', in understanding "What went wrong?". Much of the region has emerged out of competition on the one hand and repression on the other, however, at the root of modern Middle Eastern society, lies a sense of community. While non-state actors have thus chosen to turn inwards and cater to this society that governments and formal state structures have failed, it is imperative that an understanding of the civilizational aspects of the region are brought

to the forefront. Perhaps, "after decades of intense debate on colonialism and post-colonialism, nationalism and post-nationalism surrounding the Middle East, it is time for balance and understanding."

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PMF militants in Iraq
Pic via : Middle East Monitor

A RAY OF HOPE, COLOUR AND VIGOUR

Protest Art and Freedom of Expression in Iraq and Lebanon

Protest art weaves powerful stories; stories brimming with courage and dissent; stories devoid of meaningless borders and barriers; stories so universal that they resonate with one and all. It is strenuous to attribute a particular definition to the term 'protest art'. By and large, it encapsulates any visual or aural artistic expression in the form of a graffiti, poster, poem, satire, song or sculpture. It can be a piece solely created for the political purpose of a protest or it can be any artwork of cultural or historical relevance used as a revolutionary medium of dissensus.

With the onset of the digital age, protest art has gained renewed pertinence owing to its ease of access through social media and other online platforms. This is seen in protests around the world which have heralded a new epoch in 2019-2020. Various groups have been raising their voice on issues concerning racism, religion, corruption, environment etc. In these protests, it is noteworthy that art has played an impactful role in conveying the magnanimity of the situation globally.[1] One such prominent example of intersection of art and dissent is the October Revolution (Thawrat Tishreen) of 2019-2020 in Iraq and Lebanon. The protests were triggered by the worsening economic conditions, heightened corruption in the administration and widespread anger towards government mismanagement. In these grim times, art has inspired a pulsating solidarity
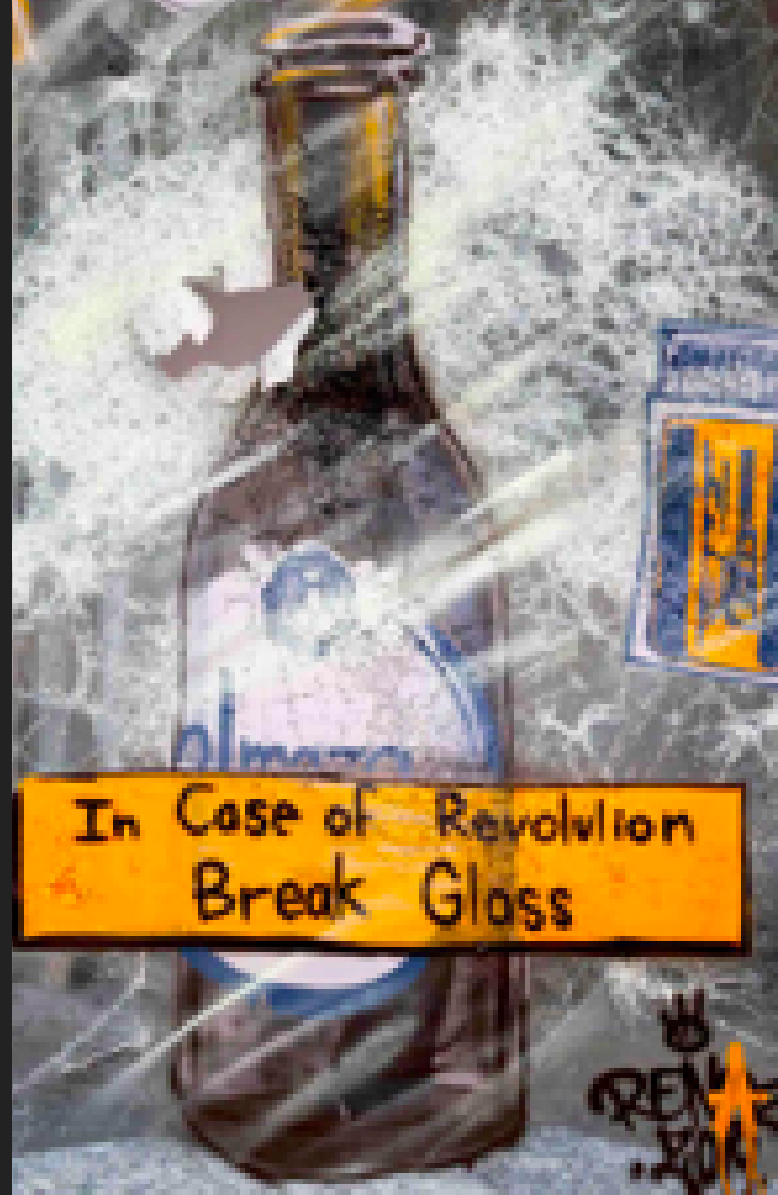

Figure 1: A graffiti on a smashed glass facade in Beirut (Source: The Arab Weekly)

among the protesters in their endeavour to resist the despotic authorities. With this backdrop, it is important to understand whether protest art is sufficiently protected by the laws pertaining to freedom of expression in Iraq and Lebanon. It is apposite to state that a prudential balance between legal restrictions and artistic freedom is essential to use protest art as a medium for democratic dissent, both locally and globally.

Protest Art in the October Revolution

The Arab Spring in 2011-2012 may be seen as the genesis of modern Arab art which established a strong cultural identity that glued the rebellions together.[2] Unlike the Arab Spring, the 2019 protests are

Figure 2: An illustration of a protester in Lebanon by the female artist Aya Maria (Source: art_of_thawra, Instagram)

loose-knit, leaderless movements with an unprecedented use of technology to mobilise and caution the protesters.

In Lebanon, apart from public art in the form of graffiti and murals (Figure 1)[3], social media has spearheaded the circulation of slogans, artworks, and other memorable moments from the demonstrations. A parallel digital uprising has gained momentum in which protesters dissent by expressing themselves from other parts of the country and the world.[4] Instagram accounts such as 'Art of Thawra' (Art of Revolution) started by Paola Mounla after the inception of protests in October, are a repository of impactful images created by Lebanese artists (Figure 2).[5] 'Art of Boo' is another account created by cartoonist Bernard Hage where he resorts to political satire as a means of disseminating information. (Figure 5)[6]

In Iraq, the walls of Al-Saadoun Tunnel in Baghdad have become a hub for protest art (Figure 3 &4). Iraqi artists have meticulously reflected their national identity and culture in their work. For example, they revived Mesopotamian figures in murals, blended images of Assyrian winged bulls from the seventh

century B.C. with contemporary tuk-tuks, and reimagined the Sumerian princess Puabi wearing a gasmask like the protesters withstanding the fumes of tear gas.[7] Osama Art, a Baghdadi graffiti artist, created a gigantic work in the roof of a garage by using cuneiform which is an ancient writing system invented by Sumerians.[8] 'Calligraffiti' - a fusion of graffiti with Arabic and Sunbuli calligraphy, has also embellished the streets of Iraq.[9]

Also, the October Revolution has witnessed an increase in women protesters like never before despite the disturbing instances of kidnapping and torture against them.[10] A photograph of Rua Khalaf (a 31 year-old female protester) wrapped in Iraqi flag with her face turned against the drifting tear gas became a symbol of courage on social media as well as the protest site in Tahrir Square, Baghdad.[11] Women in Lebanon used belly dance, music and singing as artistic mediums for social engagement during the protests.[12] It is noteworthy that people have risen above sectarian divisions and more women artists like Zafiri Haidar Marin and Yasmine Darwich have become proactive during these pressing times.[13]

Figure 3: A clligraphiti by an artist in Baghdad (Source: Al Fanar media

It is undeniably overwhelming and motivating to see the use of art as a non-violent and effective medium of dissidence. However, while the global media addresses the issues in the West (Black Lives Matter, Brexit etc.) with great urgency and importance, similar attention is not accorded to the events in the Middle East. As a result, there is a lack of sustained international pressure on political leaders in these countries to accommodate the protesters' demands.[14]

Protest art plays a pivotal role in not only garnering attention but also in educating the public, increasing access to public art among marginalised groups and creating a public memory of the events. By breaking political and language barriers, it also helps in deconstructing the cultural hegemony by reflecting the Middle Eastern culture, politics and success stories. Therefore, protest art must be created and disseminated fearlessly. But the larger question is, can protest art thrive valiantly in Iraq and Lebanon?

Figure 4: A woman poses for a photo in front of a graffiti at the Saadoun Tunnel in Baghdad (Source: Independent)

Freedom of Speech and Expression in Iraq and Lebanon

Article 38 of the Constitution of Iraq guarantees freedom of expression provided that it does not

Figure 5: A cartoon on free speech intolerance in Lebanon by the political cartoonist Bernard Hage (Source: The Art of Boo, Instagram)

violate 'public order and morality'. Similarly, Article 13 of the Constitution of Lebanon states that freedom of expression is subject to 'limits established by law'. Unfortunately, authorities have invoked these vaguely worded restrictions to stifle what may be constitutionally protected speech.

Lebanon has traditionally been hailed as the most liberal of all Arab countries in terms of free speech.[15] But ever since the protests broke out on 17 October 2019, interrogations, detentions and prosecutions increased tremendously on the charges of defamation, publication of fake news, inciting sectarian strife, insulting the President on Facebook posts, etc. Journalists and protesters are also being coerced into signing a pledge promising to refrain from making defamatory statements. [16]

The atrocities in Iraq are worse. Security forces have used excessive force, including firing live ammunition at protesters, to suppress the protests, killing at least 544 people and wounding at least an additional 24,000 between October 2019 and March 2020. Authorities have also ordered the closure of a dozen television and radio stations.[17] in both the countries, defamation is criminalised and digital laws are underdeveloped. The effect of these laws on protest art is two-fold: first, honest and

truthful methods of dissent are over-criminalised; second, such laws create a 'chilling effect' on the public leading to self-censorship. In these circumstances, protest art is subjected to extreme scrutiny and suppression from the government. If protest art must survive and thrive, it is imperative to safeguard and strengthen the free speech protections to ensure that protest art is a peaceful tool of dissent and cultural expression and an effective channel to instil unity among protesters divided by political borders.

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CONTRIBUTING TO THE CRISIS
Authoritarian Incapacity during COVID

W hen contextualized within a world of rising right-wing nationalism, the COVID-19 pandemic is painted as the final straw that would bring the liberal international regime tumbling. Such a juxtaposition assumes that authoritarian states display relatively consistent performance in their handling of COVID-19. At first sight, it would seem that authoritarian regimes, with their strong state structures and centralized power, would be better equipped to handle a national health crisis. Yet, this couldn't be farther from the truth. A look at the Middle East reveals that authoritarian states have had varying levels of success in reining in the pandemic regardless of a collective reliance on high handed policies. As Sally Sharif points out, a fragile social contract exists between authoritarian leaders and their citizens which is based on guarantees of provisions of security and prosperity (Sharif, 2020). However, authoritarian response to COVID-19 shows that the use of authoritarian mechanisms without the prerequisite state capacity for handling a health crisis has only brought about backlash over a broken contract and insufficient control over the virus.

Authoritarian regimes have several tools that can be assets in pandemic response. One tool that has been a constant is the securitization[1] of the pandemic for political purposes. In Egypt, the state has

adopted militaristic language when referring to the pandemic and state response to it. Images of the Egyptian Armed Forces in chemical warfare suits and disinfection gear can be found and were referred to in President El-Sisi's video message to the people as well (Egypt Independent, 2020). Similar rhetoric was used by the Iranian government who clubbed health together with security as the state's key principles amidst the pandemic (AP, 2020). By portraying the pandemic as a war-like fight, governments also indicate the strong state led response required to fight it.

Yet it would be naive to think that the act of securitization is naturally accompanied by strong state response in practice. In reality, the healthcare infrastructure in the above-mentioned states was limited and ineffective even at pre-pandemic levels (Bayoumi, 2016). As the pandemic has taken a greater toll such states suffer from inadequate quantities of protective gear, lack of hospital beds, high infection rates within hospitals and in medical staff, etc. In Egypt this has created considerable backlash against the government as doctors accuse the government of negligence and patients turn to plead on social media as they look for hospital beds.

Authoritarian states have particularly suffered from issues of misinformation and states of have

actively contributed to it rather than working to curb it. As is characteristic of authoritarian regimes, the governments in these countries have devolved to falsifying official statistics and suppressing dissenting doctors who are working in insecure spaces. In Iran, Reporters Without Borders reports that the Revolutionary Guard is identifying and bringing into custody individuals that have questioned government provided information by cordoning their phones and social media accounts (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). Satellite images show mass graves in the Iranian city of Qom for victims of the virus, signalling that the death toll is likely much higher than the estimates of the Iranian government (Kottasová & Murphy, 2020). On the Egyptian end, Reuters reported that medics have been silenced from reporting a lack of protective equipment or demanding more infection control measures from the government (Reuters, 2020). Doctors in several provinces have received notices warning of legal consequences if any information is leaked to the media (Reuters, 2020). Instead of preventing misinformation and distributing accurate and helpful information, authoritarian regimes are using state tools to propagate misinformation by silencing doctors and journalists.

Communications during the pandemic must productively address the concerns of the public. In contrast to the examples above, some Middle Eastern administrations have been commended for explaining seemingly strict but necessary policies and maintaining overall transparency. The United Arab Emirates is one such example. In the UAE's case, the collectivist nature of society increases the likelihood of people cooperating with government decrees. Much like the examples above the UAE's COVID plans harken back to the point on securitization. This "civil-defense plan" however has been effective and its use is directed towards efficient healthcare response. Laws regarding valid issues such as panic shopping are being effectively enforced along with measures to facilitate mass disinfection of public spaces (Karassik, 2020).

Remarkably, the country has been able to carry this out during the month of Ramadan successfully which would usually see people flocking for prayers. A report by the Atlantic Council even states that the lockdown and border control measures to buff up response to the pandemic in neighbouring states, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, etc. were inspired by the UAE's measures (Karassik, 2020). Disparity in the quality of response seen between the UAE and other countries is due to the strength of the Emirati state. In a region that is otherwise politically unstable and violent, the UAE is a relative oasis characterized by extensive economic development, military strength, and a period of consistent peace. This has lent the government the strength to quickly and efficiently mobilize resources.

The Middle East is a mixed bag in terms of the quality of response to the ongoing pandemic. While this article has exemplified insufficient state response through Iran and Egypt, a similar case can be made about many other Middle Eastern powers. Examples like the UAE show that successful response is possible when all the right factors align. While there are many factors that can jeopardize response, misinformation or lack of information is perhaps the most crucial. The virus is novel in nature, meaning much was and is still unknown about the virus and the necessary means to keep it at bay. With little information and unable to rely on government provided information, it is only natural that widespread anxiety emerges. This is perhaps the greatest flaw in an authoritarian government's measures to maintain order and reason for mass dissatisfaction. However, one important question arises as to why the liberal, most advanced , and richest countries of the world have registered the most highly infected numbers of individuals, upon which the world attaches great hopes to find the solution.

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Notes

[1] Securitization refers to the process by which certain social or political issues get designated as national security risks. Securitization theory believes, as its initial assumption, that there is no issue that "naturally" poses itself as a security risk. Instead, security risks emerge when they are referred to as so by securitizing actors like activists, politicians, etc. Securitization theory refers to five major sectors in which these "speech acts" can create new security risks, namely the Economic, Social, Military, Environmental, and Political Sectors. In this way Securitization theory has also served to significantly broaden the scope of what might be considered as a security risk in the first place.

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CORONA AND THE
Perils of Digitization

The world faces a deadly crisis; the Middle East faces more than one. The Coronavirus pandemic is only the latest tragedy to befall a region that has been plagued by social, political, humanitarian, and economic crises for decades. These pre-existing conditions only worsen the effects of the pandemic.

Taking cues from China's draconian response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Middle East has resorted to its personal authoritarian playbook to combat the virus in the region. Countries like Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Lebanon are no strangers to the practice of curtailing civil liberties for their political interests, and hence it is no surprise that they would use these methods in order to fight a public health crisis.

The cost of using such techniques, however, will be far higher in the Middle East than they were in China, due to the region's aforementioned conditions. The last few decades in the Arab world have been defined by waves of political uprisings, and a struggle for freedom, and all the progress that has been made is now forfeited to the pandemic. Fear and panic-stricken citizens are willing to give up, in the short term, what few hard-earned liberties they had in exchange for the perceived security that their States offer. These

countries, in turn, have been quick to enact authoritarian measures, the most controversial (and arguably the most effective) of which has been the use of digital platforms and surveillance software to track and trace individuals.

Digitization is a double-edged sword, particularly in the context of the Middle East during a global pandemic. On the one hand, it is an important tool to curb the spread of the virus, and such measures have been adopted by countries all over the world in varying degrees. Digitization and setting up of the digital economy could also be essential to help pull the region out of the largest economic slump it has seen in four decades [Middle East Eye, 2020]. Skyrocketing unemployment figures, low GDP growth, and now the falling oil prices are all factors that lend favour to the push towards digital transformation. The virus has also forced consumers online, many for the first time, which helps boost the economy in a time when physical retail cannot function efficiently.

On the other hand, these measures have long term implications, particularly on political movements, and the peoples' struggle for freedom from totalitarian governments. Surveillance and digital tracking can be used to

monitor the movements of citizens, especially of political dissidents and those who may be considered to be acting against the State, and crack down on legitimate political protests under the guise of security and public health. This is not just a likely future scenario, but one that is already taking place. Officials in Lebanon have started using social media to track down protestors and critics of the government and arrest them [Amos, 2020]. Governments in the region as well as in Egypt [Al-Monitor, 2020] have started censoring journalists and other legitimate sources of information on social media while spreading disinformation about the pandemic that casts a favourable light on the regime [Hickman, 2020].

The emergence of mobile coronavirus apps is another cause for concern as they have become an essential tool to collect biometric data from citizens and limit their freedoms. Downloading these apps is not optional for most people, as they are required to have them if they want to continue to work, or obtain certain benefits from the government, or even move around. Palestinians are required to download an app if they want to retain their permit to stay and work in Israel, and this app tracks their phones at all times and allows the military to access all the data on the phone, as well as notifications and any other files/images they receive or send [Hasson, 2020]. Countries in the Gulf such as Dubai have been using artificial intelligence technology to track citizens' movements using their cellphones as well as the number plates on their cars, which are linked to a centralized biometric identification database [Movement Permit Registration in Dubai, 2020].

While it is possible that digitization can be used to improve the economy, further political participation among citizens, and enable the free-flow of information and digital communication, there is a very real threat of digital authoritarianism, given the Arab world's view of the

internet as a tool of surveillance rather than development. Further, unlike any other security or counter-terrorism justification, the medical knowledge and scientific facts of this particular situation support and legitimize the use of such mechanisms of control and surveillance. Hence, the coronavirus pandemic has become the perfect biopolitical narrative for authoritarian regimes to deepen their control over citizens and enforce discipline without much resistance from citizens who currently prioritise safety from the contagion over political and other freedoms. This is precisely the reason why all measures taken by these countries must be viewed with scrutiny and efforts must be made to ensure that they are not used to perpetuate political ends in the future.

Undoubtedly, a day will come when the biological threat of the pandemic has passed, but the mechanisms of control are still in force. These measures will be difficult to reverse and in the Middle East, they will only add additional challenges to the peoples' struggle for freedom and civil liberties. They also have the potential to create hostile digital environments and hamper economic growth. History shows us that pandemics and other such disasters have future consequences in the power structure and functioning of states. Models such as the ones that have been adopted have the potential of worsening the region's existing architecture of repression, and hence any benefits of the use of such technology must be considered in light of the risks they pose in being used to monitor and crack down on political protests and anti-establishment movements.

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THE TRUMP PEACE PLAN 2020

A lost opportunity for resolution and peace-making

The 181-page Peace Plan was released by the Trump Administration on 28th January 2020, in a manner that sought to gain publicity for its daring stance on the Israel-Palestinian issue. Trump's vision of the two-state solution does nothing new to facilitate self-determination or statehood for the Palestinians apart from laying down more conditions and providing financial funding (Shidler, 2017). It is more of an arbitrary appeasement to Israel's expansionist mission and furthering of territorial sovereignty rather than facilitating the right to self-determination and Statehood processes of the Palestine State (Beaumont, 2020). What remains glaringly apparent is the support extended to the annexation tendencies of Israel, in the pretence of peace-making in the State of Israel.

The plan legitimizes the annexation of the Jordan valley and the city of Jerusalem, which have been under Israeli occupation since 1967. The plan sees this as integral for Israel's national security, despite it being opposed by the State of Jordan. In spite of there being a UN Security Council Resolution (specifically, Resolution 478) condemning Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem as a violation of international law, the United States has openly absolved Israel of its aggressive tactics (Ward, 2020). The plan also denies any portion of Jerusalem being considered as part of a possible Palestinian State (Beaumont, 2020).

Even the redrawing of borders assures more land on the West Bank being given to Israel in return for two lands being swapped in the desert of Negev (Ward, 2020). This would deceptively legalize the portion of the West Bank already under Israeli occupation, and permit the existence of Israeli settlements once the plan gets global recognition and support (BBC, 2020). This would help Israel in circumventing International condemnation for breach of International Law. The plan thus seems to encourage the land-grabbing propensities of the Israeli State (Beauchamp, 2020).

Further, the plan continues to make the to-be State of Palestine dependent on Israel's military strength for their protection, by denying the maintenance of any military force in the Palestinian region. It also refuses the Palestinian refugees in occupied territories to return to their homes in Israel which would aggravate the refugee crisis seen since the 1948 war (Ward, 2020).

To term this proposal as a 'peace' plan would be to mask the real objectives stipulated, objectives which only secure the right-wing interests of the Israeli State under the garb of security issues, and forgo those of the Palestinian community in the name of 'peace'(Ward, 2020). The idea of the U.S playing a peacemaker needs to be questioned

considering the quid pro quo relationship it has with Israel (Zunes, 2002). This was one of the reasons that the Palestinian representatives refused to participate in the unveiling of the so-called Peace Plan as they anticipated the possibility of a bias in the resolution process mediated by the US government (Ward, 2020). The complicity of going ahead without one of the key stakeholders in the peace process itself defies the values of inclusiveness and fairness. The non-inclusion and non-representation of important parties to a two-nation solution is absurd. Even the three-point solution regarding the future refugees have not been drawn in consultation with the representatives of the Palestinian community (Ward, 2020).

The Trump Administration thrives on its hyper-nationalistic views on governance in United States and this is reflected in its backing of Israel. The plan, at best, only provides legitimacy to the illegal annexation of territories by the hyper-nationalistic Israeli State, which is in line with their granting of limited territorial sovereignty to the Palestinians. This continued line supported by the US is reflective of its unaltered foreign policy towards Israel, one that overlooks the values of justice, freedom, equality, and human dignity of the Palestinian community and reflects its own strategic interest (Zunes, 2020). It does not achieve the demands of the role of a peacemaker in the disputed territory.

Instead, there could be a real threat to peace if, and when this plan is put into implementation (Ward, 2020). This is bound to continue as long as the Republicans stay in power due to the large support the conservative party extends to its right-wing counterpart in Israel. The onus of bringing in a change in the role of the U.S in this issue would be upon the incoming President. This would require an altering of foreign policy towards Israel, accommodation, and promotion of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian community (Salam, 2020). This would be in line with the value of liberty that the U.S embodies internationally and can be done by pressurizing the Israeli government to pull back from its illegal occupation of the West Bank and its illegal blockade of the Gaza strip (Zunes, 2020). The U.S can pressurize the Israeli government by restricting the military funding being made to Israel (Salam, 2020). It must act collectively with other States and use persuasive means to prevent the rampant and unprecedented violation of rights of the Palestinians and especially those living on Israeli occupied territory (Zunes, 2020).

As a peacemaker, the U.S must take real leadership in the opportunity offered by the Israeli-Palestine conundrum. It must establish that Israeli security and Palestinian rights is not a zero-sum game. It must extend unconditional support to the security and sovereignty of Israel and Palestine as well as condemn illegal acts committed against Palestine.

These must not be treated as mutually exclusive but as mutually dependent goals (Zunes, 2020). Though this suggested approach may seem idealistic, it cannot be ignored for its appropriateness. The present plan is unlikely to be accepted by the Palestinian community and is likely to only exacerbate the xenophobic outlooks of each community towards the other and lead to conflict. "Without concrete and substantially implementable measures, the idea of peace-making and forming a Palestinian State will continue to remain an empty promise, considering the devious impetus it gives to the annexationist agenda of the Israeli right-wing party. And while the new Israel-UAE peace "proposal" may result in the plan not being wholly implemented, it may not be long before a another such Trump Peace Plan is once more initiated.

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CHINA'S NEW PLAYGROUND?
Mapping Chinese influence in the Middle East

The past decade has seen a major shift in the geo-economics of Middle East with key developments vis-à-vis regional and international players and a power tussle as a result. Among the key stakeholders with vested interests in the Middle East is China, with its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) which was launched in 2013. In 2017, it surpassed the United States to become the world's largest crude oil importer and by 2019 was importing 10 million barrels of crude oil per day (US Energy Information Administration, 2018). Of these oil imports, 40% are from the Middle East (ibid). However, the Chinese influence in the Middle East is starkly different to the kind of influence which the US or Russia had. The Chinese 'Partnership Diplomacy' has seen numerous strategic partnerships with states in the Middle East. It has comprehensive strategic partnerships with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE whereas an innovative comprehensive partnership with Israel (The Asia Dialogue, 2020). The dragon, therefore, has made a unique place for itself in the world's most volatile region.

The Chinese ambitions in the Middle East among other parts of the world are largely driven by its thirst for economic growth and energy resources. This has led China to further deepen its ties with the Middle East. China is Saudi Arabia's biggest trading partner in the world with the former's crude oil imports from the latter rising to 43% in 2019 (Arab News, 2019) whereas it is UAE's second largest trading partner. China's revisionist tendencies have also culminated into its policies and models concerning Middle East. The dependence on economic ties and developmental stability arise out of China's modus operandi of challenging the status quo as already set by the West in this region. With its heavy reliance on trade, it eyes strategically important ports and maritime routes falling under the domain of the countries of West Asia. An estimated 3.8 million barrels of oil pass Bab-el-Mandeb every day whereas the Strait of Hormuz accounts for 17 million barrels per day (Gresh, 2017). Needless to say, such choke-points run high in importance for Beijing as any blockage in these points will prove to be costly. As the BRI expands in the region, China's ties with the Middle East will only grow.

The realist aspirations which China holds deter it from engaging in political or security dimensions in the volatile Middle East. Unlike

Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Xi Jinping & PM of UAE
Image via Emirates New Agency

the West, it is not interested in any sort of regime change in the region. Most importantly, the economic underpinnings behind China's Middle East policy convey that it doesn't seek to export political ideologies. As mentioned in China's 2016 Arab Policy Paper, it seeks to jointly pursue the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative and chart development strategies in areas like infrastructure construction, trade and investment facilitation, nuclear power, space satellite, new energy, agriculture and finance (China's Arab Policy Paper, 2016). Evidently, the foundation of these bilateral and/or multilateral ties are based on mutual cooperation in terms of development and trade. Even for the Middle East, this presents as an opportunity for them to diversify their developmental goals and opens a gateway to better infrastructure and construction projects. Moreover, the fact that China does not have much appetite towards political reformation in the region provides solace to the Middle East as scars from the Arab Spring still remain, with many countries still under deep socio-political crises.

Furthermore, the departure of the United States as a major stakeholder in the Middle East has also left a burgeoning gap vis-à-vis the power struggles currently taking place in the region. While the Chinese intend on keeping the scales of power balanced with its strong strategic ties with adversaries like Iran and Saudi Arabia, they are steering clear of taking any centre-stage in the domain of security. Zarif's recent announcement of Tehran getting close to entering a long-term strategic partnership with Beijing (Al Jazeera, 2020) as well China's help in constructing a nuclear facility in Saudi Arabia (The Wall Street Journal, 2020) are mere enhancements towards China's long term economic policies in the Middle East. However, political backdrops run deep in this explosive region and it is impossible to separate powerplay from trade, even for the People's Republic

Al-Sisi and Xi approve framework deal (2019)
Picture Via: egypttoday.com
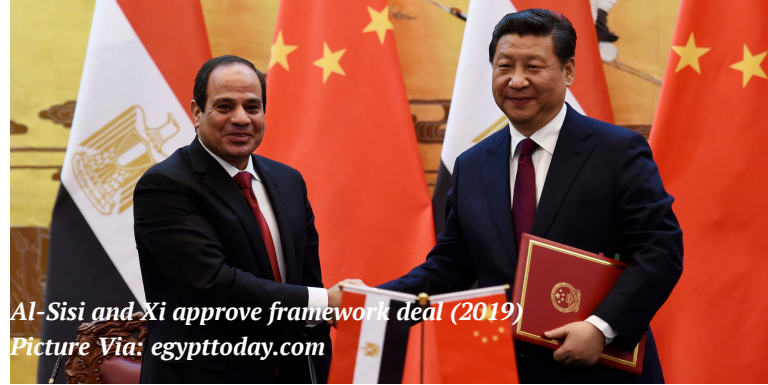
of China. The reliance on major ports and chokepoints in the MENA region has prompted it to construct a $590 million military base in Djibouti (South China Morning Post, 2017). The Strait of Hormuz being a constant area of US-Iran friction also added to the insecurities of BRI's future. Therefore, the $10.7 billion Sino-Oman industrial city and the Duqm Special Economic Zone (SEZAD) have become a cornerstone in securing China's ambitions in the Middle East (Siddiqi, 2019).

To conclude, China with its carefully carved out policy on the Middle East is walking on eggshells in terms of its engagements apart from development and commerce. To suit its national interests, it has been wary of indulging in any power dispute owing to the explosive climate of the region. With a receding US dependence and influence in the region, the Arab states also seek to welcome the new investment opportunities instituting from China. With US-Iran frictions and the reverberations from the ongoing pandemic, securing its interests in the region will prove to be onerous. As the world battles the pandemic, the Middle Eastern states will look towards increasing support from China and may even compete for the limited resources resulting from the deep economic crisis of 2020. Ultimately, much is to be seen in terms of the future of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East and whether China can skilfully manoeuvre through the cataclysmic events of this year.

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Constrain the pandemic or constrain the People?
Lebanon's anti-establishment protests

"Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and truth and compassion against injustice and lying and greed. If people all over the world...would do this, it would change the earth."- William Faulkner.

Protesting and expressing dissent, are often seen as cornerstones of legitimate democracy. It is a way of conveying dissatisfaction when 'normal channels' of political action are exclusive and inaccessible. But where do citizens go when even the act of protest becomes inaccessible due to the onset of a pandemic? In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, protesting does not only put you at risk of bodily harm by instruments of state power but also at a health risk given the nature of the virus.

All around the world, the virus acted as a deterrent for protestors due to the nature of its infection. However, in places like Iraq, Israel, Lebanon and other Middle Eastern Countries, the virus highlighted further shortcomings in government functioning and fuelled a second wave of anti-establishment protest. The public dissatisfaction in 2019 in many such countries was born out of a frustration of the way government dealt with the economy and other crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic added to this sentiment by pushing the common people into further desperation.

A Timeline of Protests in Lebanon

In 2019, Lebanon found itself in the midst of stagnant economic growth and slowing capital inflows. Alongside this, there was increasing pressure to curb the massive budget deficit. On October 17th, the government announced a fee for internet calls on platforms that included Facebook and WhatsApp. In addition to this, there was also a proposal to raise the VAT gradually by 2022 (Reuters, 2019). Although this is what sparked the large scale protest in the country, deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the government had been brewing for a while. A garbage crisis, mismanaged wildfires, growing public debt, and a collapsing infrastructure are just the tip of the iceberg (Cairo, 2019). On October 19th, the Government withdrew their proposals, however, the protests continued on a large scale. On October 29th, Prime Minister Saad Hariri submitted his resignation (Reuter, 2019). Following this, the former education minister Hassan Diab was nominated to be the next Prime Minister by the Shia Hezbollah movement ("Lebanon Protests", 2019). On 21st January a new cabinet was formed. Further financial rescue plans were drawn up, however, protestors continued to be dissatisfied with the political elitism and instability in the country.

Demonstrators run away from tear gas fired by riot police during a protest, Beirut, Lebanon. Source: Fox News

The Root Cause of Dissatisfaction

While casual factors such as the announcements regarding new taxes contributed to the protests, its root causes have been present for far too long. Lebanon's government is based on a sectarian system. Under Lebanon's current system, leadership posts are apportioned based on confession. The president must be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of Parliament a Shiite Muslim. In May 2018, parliamentary elections were held for the first time, but the composition of the parliament remained elite without the addition of new faces. The reason why these protests did not happen on the same -scale during the Arab Spring, is that unlike in Syria, Egypt, or Libya, where there were clear strongmen to topple, Lebanon's government is a coalition of sect-based political parties (Chehayab, 2019).

In addition to these political dissatisfactions, the central bank has been accused of constantly putting the profits of the banking sector over the well-being of the people. Temporary measures put in place to deal with hyperinflation in the 1990s, continue to be in place and have led to growing debt and stagnant growth (Chehayab, 2019). Thus the protestor's dissatisfaction with the political elite combined with poor economic and living conditions fuelled the current protests.

The impact of the COVID-19 Virus

The onset of the virus in February curbed protests to a huge extent. The streets of Lebanon, just recently filled with protestors and plans of roadblocks, were now quiet. The masks on the protestors served a dual purpose of protecting them but also silencing them. Amid the lockdown, the government took the opportunity to dismantle protestors' tents (Sunniya, 2020). There was a strategic use of the global pandemic to slow the efforts of people who had worked tirelessly to bring about political change. However, even as the virus served as an initial silencer, it also highlighted the fatal flaws of the Lebanese economy. The lira went into free fall, many citizens lost their source of income, and prices of goods increased exponentially (Mouzner, 2020). On April 25th, the lira hit an all-time low and devaluated by almost 60 percent. In response to this protests broke out in the middle of the night - roads were blocked and banks were sent onto fire (Mouzner, 2020). There was a sense of desperation and angst. The elite few managed to smuggle billions out of the country, whereas the lower sections of society could not afford to buy basic food grains.

Gino Raidy an activist proclaimed "we fear hunger, not coronavirus" ("We fear hunger", 2020). When the chances of dying of hunger are higher than that of contracting the virus, protestors had no choice but to return to the streets. The raw fight for survival and anger at corruption combined to create a second wave of protests, which could not be curbed by something as distant as a virus. The lived reality of people in Lebanon, was that of looming hunger and a broken political structure. Linda Borghol, a protestor said, "you think we care about (masks) when people can't feed themselves?" (Chulov, 2020). These statements bring forth the dirty truth of privilege, the privilege to be afraid of something as global as a pandemic.

The Shutdown of Dissent

Peaceful protests all around the world are met routinely with disproportionate uses of force and violence. Human Rights Watch reported that protestors in Lebanon were subject to teargas, rubber bullets and water cannons("Lebanon: Excessive Force", 2019). The United Nations Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms provide that all use of force by law enforcement must be proportionate and should only be escalated if other measures to address a genuine threat have proved ineffective or have no likelihood of achieving the intended result. There is a need to keep in mind the legitimate objectives of protestors in mind while resorting to any form of violence against them. However, instances of violent suppression and shutdown of dissent prove the blatant neglect of international standards while dealing with acts of political dissatisfaction. Amnesty International reported that officers armed with riot shields forcibly removed protesters who sat on the ground with their arms raised as a peaceful sign, carrying them away and handcuffing them. They also kicked and beat protesters with iron batons as well as verbally assaulting them. The most violent incident was when the army opened fire on a group of protestors at a peaceful sit-in the Beddawi area of Tripoli. Several cases of enforced disappearance were also reported ("Lebanon Protests Explained", 2020).

Conclusion

Protests in the time of corona, are not very different from protests in the so-called "normal" times. The threat of corona is but an addition to the threats that protestors face in their fight against injustice. While the pandemic has added to the risk of protestors, it has also played a key role in laying baring economic and social inequalities within various forms of governance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has left people more vividly poor and hungry than ever before, and anger motivated towards political change supersedes the fear of infection. The initial lockdown period was used strategically by the government to reverse the progress made by protestors. However, protestors have quickly adjusted to this new 'normal,'- flyers calling for protests now often have the requirement of face masks and social distancing. In a world where racism, corruption, suppression of dissent, economic exploitation, and poverty exist, protests are no longer a choice. The need to speak up against injustice and blatant misuse of political power is a constant in an everchanging world. The power of people who chose to step out and speak up for what they believe in is truly inspiring and capable of effecting real change. The resilience of these people, in times of despair, is what allows for revolutions.

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A PSYCHOANALYSIS OF WAR-TORN TEHRAN

Examining the film 'Under the Shadow'

In 1988, the Iraq-Iran War, entered its eight year that resulted in a series of irrational yet tragic attacks on Tehran. 'The war, which was the largest drawn-out on frontiers, started with the question of Shat-al-Arab River, following the unilateral abrogation of Algiers Agreement of 1975 by Iraq on September 22, 1980, had obviously acquired other objectives.'[i] Amidst the missiles and the frequent hide-outs in the basement, oppression, and displacement, Babak Anvari sculptures the myths of the Eastern-Asia and closely ties them to the war-related difficulties. The genre of the film is well tied to answer larger socio-political questions without dismantling the central theme of the movie. The film revolves around a nuclear, modern-family, residing in Tehran. Anvari puts together a short, thriller-horror movie which encompasses the gendering of war, the fate of those affected and more importantly, the Islamic and regional understanding of religious myths. The horrific encounters with djinn exemplify the paranormal-mythology of West Asia which finds the mention in the holy Quran.

The civil-wars and frequent invasions historically dominated the region either from the West or neighbouring regions. The Iran-Iraq war which lasted eight years provided prevalent themes to the developing-cinema 'such as politics; imagining the nation; religious extremism; war; exile and loss of 'belonging.'[ii] Anvari makes use of such sub-themes and conveys the plight of New Iranian Cinema united by the psychological effects of the Iraq-Iran War. 'Previously, women generally
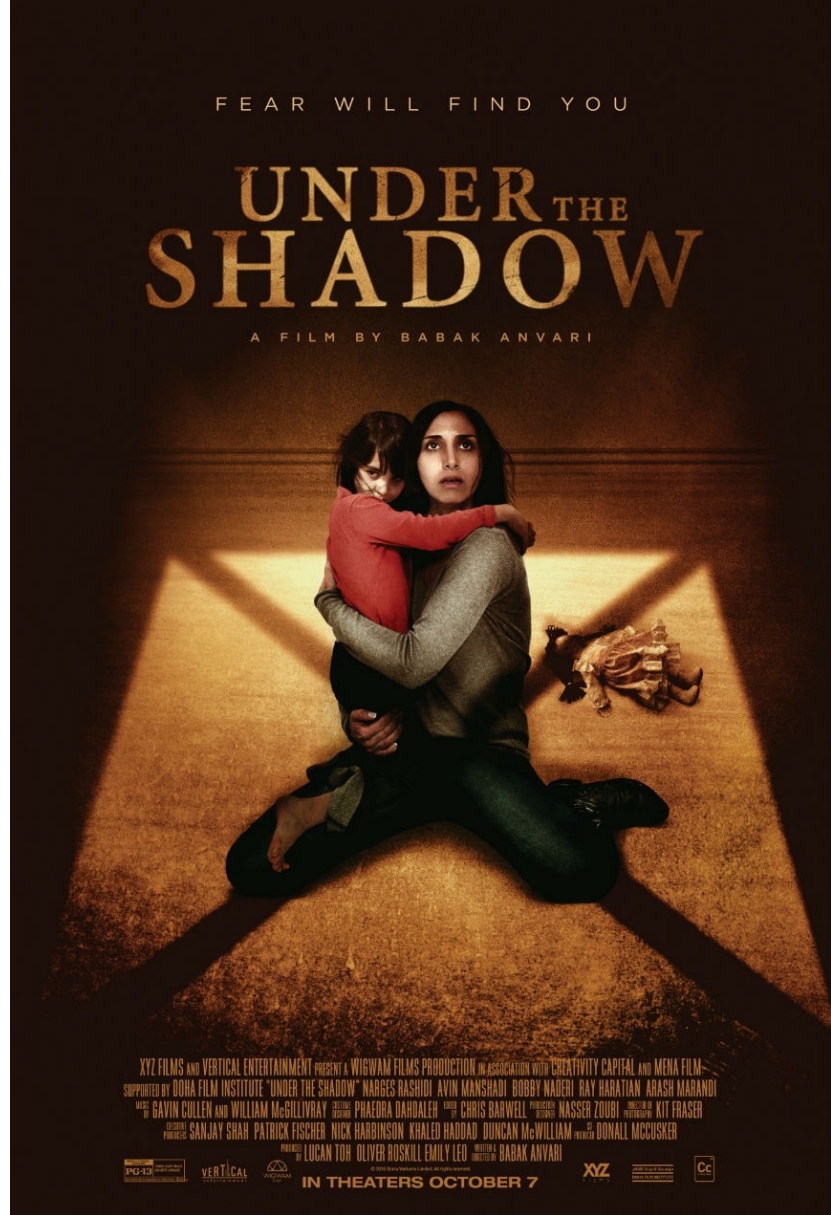
occupied background roles, partly due to filmmakers wanting to avoid complicated censorship rules, which forbid cross-gender contact between actors who are unrelated, but as of current decade, many such difficulties are done away with in response to the Western representation of Eastern women.'[iii].

For instance, the film features Narges Rashidi as the protagonist that draws attention to nuances of femininity of Muslim women, who were indirectly affected by the rampant-war. The approach to the issue is indeed unique. For instance, unlike the movies such as 'Wadjda'[iv], Anvari directly dwells into the issue through his female protagonist. Wadjda featured a Muslim-girl and her brave attitude towards the gender-roles and male-supremacy prevailing in West Asia, but the movie only hinted at the challenges faced by the Muslim women and lacked a subsequent solution. Rather than establishing the fight against

gender-bias or cultural belief, Anvari allocated the struggle around its persistence through various characters such as that of Shideh, Pargol and Mrs. Ebrahimi.

Shideh was represented to be an extraordinary woman for she was brave, rebellious and modernised. She possessed an illegal VCR and often danced to the Jane Fonda video. She wanted to resume her study of medicine but was shunned down by the administrator, who asked her to "find a new goal in life." Owing to the disappointment, she removes all her course-books except for the one gifted by her dead mother. Furthermore, she was the only woman who could drive amongst the other women living in the same residential building. Brought into juxtaposition, however, she was stopped by the police because of her outfit, while she meant to escape from the djinn holding Dorsa. The policemen even remarked if she thought she was in Europe. She surrendered herself silently and was released only after another Muslim woman vouched for her "good-behaviour" to the police. It can be argued that the terror caused by the spirits became metaphorical as they symbolically represented contradictory ideological dialects. For instance, Shideh began reflecting upon her actions as a mother, student of medicine, and an Iranian Muslim woman. Dorsa constantly reminded Shideh if she was an "acceptable woman" to raise Dorsa all by herself. Shideh's encounter with the djinn, who appeared on her bed conveying how incapable a mother she was, left her terrified and doubtful.

Anvari adopts a rather original path for explaining the conjuring situations of haunting spirits. Unlike the global folklore set in the "exotic East", he represented the central theme as more regional by projecting that the spirits landed with the missile. Even presently, it is believed that, 'there exists an affinity between the djinn and an imaginal realm which is inherently ambiguous, containing elements of both the spiritual and corporeal worlds.'[v]

The empty hallways, cluttered-rooms, cracked ceilings and fallen window-tapes are lucidly conveyed as nightmares, which makes the movie more convincing. The divide between the seen and the unseen world is genuinely captivating, and nurtures the cultural belief that, 'for each person in the human realm there exists a qareen in the parallel djinn realm, which can be assumed to have an affinity to Satan.'[vi] Unlike the western consumer culture represented by hegemonic Disney (through Aladdin) that fuels the imagination of Genie as a wish-granting agent, what Anvari portrays remains localised. For instance, Dorsa often talks to a lady who poisoned her emotions against Shideh and displaced her doll, Kimia to a locked-drawer where Shideh usually hid her valuables. Eventually, Dorsa started believing that her mother was ignorant and annoyed by her naïve remarks. This perhaps can be conceived as the presence of a respective quareen of Shideh as the lady who wanted to take Dorsa away to possess her.

Ultimately, Shideh understands about the existence of djinn from a book written by an Iranian author Gholam-Saiedi[i], unlike the Western cinema that would depend upon a series of spirit-catching techniques. The prolific acting of Narges towards the climax further strengthens the belief advocated by Gholam through his books, which were then banned. In 1978, Edward Said[ii] pointed out that the 'Middle East [West Asia] is more susceptible to being grasped under the imaginative demonology of the "mysterious Orient"' than any other region in the World.'[iii] Anvari knits the narrative well with a differentiated reality of West Asia and persisting myths. 'The urgency of regional or national self-representation is therefore heavily inscribed in West Asian cinematic production, which has often evolved in order to challenge European or Hollywood images.'[iv] The movie appears to be convincing despite the rationalised understanding of paranormal activities due to its historical and twisted yet psychedelic plot.

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[vii] Gholām-Hossein Sāʾedi was an Iranian writer. He explicitly wrote about cultural criticism in addition to fiction genres of drama, novel and screenplay.

[viii] Edward Said, was a prominent literary critic and a professor at Columbia University also known as the founder of academic field of post-colonial studies.

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OUR
TEAM

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