

THE FUTURE

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The Future is a newsletter periodically published by The Future Institute. This journal aims to chronicle the major events and developments in the societies of the emerging nations with the potential of impacting their future. The newsletter offers snippets of news analysis that might be advantageous to the academics, policy-makers, social and political workers, students and various organisations.



Sisi's bloodthirsty vengeance against the democratic opposition goes on

The authoritarian regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has continued its vicious onslaught against the democratic opposition in Egypt. In contravention to all manner of judicial norms, the Court of Cassation, Egypt's highest appellate court, upheld the death sentences for 12 major opposition figures as well as long prison sentences for hundreds of other defendants on June 14, 2021, for their role in the largely peaceful 2013 Rab'a sit in protests. Human Rights Watch released a statement calling for the commuting of the death sentences which had been earlier handed down by a Cairo terrorism court in September 2018 following a mass trial of 739 defendants that began in December 2015, and marks the final stage for a questionable trial linked to a 2013 mass killing by government security forces at Rab'a square.

Technically speaking, the ruling cannot be further appealed, which means the 12 opposition leaders could face imminent execution pending approval by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Among the 12 are Abdul Rahman Al-Bar, the top Muslim Brotherhood religious scholar, Mohamed El-Beltagi, a former member of parliament, and Osama Yassin, a former minister. On the other hand, no Egyptian official has been tried for the Rab'a massacre which had resulted in the largest number of protesters killed in one day according to reports by human rights groups. Despite shameful silence from the international community, the absurdity of the trials have not been lost on rights groups and political analysts. Rights groups have condemned the trials as a mockery of justice and have decried the numerous violations of international law and human rights throughout the trial process. Analysts have denounced the death sentences as a burning-of-bridges moment, both as a move that will clearly undermine prospects for any future transitional justice efforts, and as a lost opportunity for Egypt's Sisi to benefit from changing regional dynamics in the wake of the arrival of the Biden administration in the US and reconcile with the Brotherhood.

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Is the western mind changing regarding the issue of occupied Palestine?

For long, uncritical support for Israel had been the normative position for many in the West. But as the most recent escalation in the Palestinian heartlands has shown, winds of change are on the horizon, and views favourable towards the Palestinians are at an unprecedented high in the West. So much so that one could label Israeli gains and achievements in the latest escalation in Jerusalem and Gaza as a pyrrhic victory- while words such as ‘apartheid’ and ‘war crimes’ have entered the mainstream discourse describing Israeli actions in the occupied Palestinian territories, it has also become clear to the world that the Israeli army is neither ‘invincible’ nor ‘moral’. In fact, it was just last month that Ireland became the first EU country to label Israel’s actions in Palestinian territories as “de facto annexation.” This indication of an upcoming transformative wave is perhaps why we get to hear more from voices such as Stephen Walt, an influential Harvard based political scientist, who recently called on the US to end its ‘special relationship’ with Israel. Walt is no stranger to the Israel-Palestine question, he co-authored a ground-breaking book in 2006 with John Mearsheimer, another influential US political scientist, exploring the role of the Israeli lobby in perpetuating a Israel-US ‘special relationship’ he believes is detrimental to the US and its global image, since it does not make any moral or strategic sense whatsoever in the current political climate. Moreover, according to a TRT report, as part of a pro-Palestinian global sentiment, Western public opinion has largely transformed with respect to Israel, despite Western governments continuing to pander to Israeli interests. A recent poll in March 2020 showed that two thirds of Americans, including 81% of the Democrats said that it was “acceptable” or even the “duty” of U.S. Congress members to question the Israel-US relationship, a far cry from a not so distant past, where it was almost a political taboo to criticise Israel; one should read Congressman Paul Findley’s *They Dare to Speak Out: People and Institutions Confront Israel's Lobby* (1985) to get a sense of the nightmarish experiences facing those who broke the taboo back then.

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Cryptocurrency:

is it yet an irresponsible gambling or a limitless potential?

Cryptocurrency has recently become a favourite for investors looking to make quick profits. The most well-known cryptocurrency is Bitcoin, which was the first cryptocurrency and currently makes up the bulk of the cryptocurrency market. Beginning in 2009, the total aggregate market value of Bitcoin is currently just outside the world's top ten currencies, an indication of an almost limitless potential of the cryptocurrency market. In light of this supposedly limitless potential, two aspects of bitcoin are important for analysis - firstly its volatility, and the second its significant carbon footprint. The year 2021 was a rollercoaster for the value of Bitcoin, from a value less than \$15,000 in November 2020, it was at \$39,000 when Tesla announced in February 2021 that it would start accepting payments in Bitcoin. This was followed by a surge in price that seemed fantastic, by April the cryptocurrency was already trading at \$65,000. However, in light of Tesla's sudden u-turn regarding accepting Bitcoin payments in May, the value of the cryptocurrency suddenly fell in light of a frantic sell off by customers; the current value hovering at around \$30,000. Other cryptocurrencies were also severely affected by the Tesla announcement, but the extreme volatility continues to be associated with high risk investment. A reason given by Elon Musk, the CEO of Tesla, for withdrawal from the Bitcoin market was that bitcoin had a significant carbon footprint - bitcoin 'mining' requires large amounts of electricity, currently reported to be the equivalent usage of a medium-sized country such as Egypt. Moreover, much of this mining relies on environmentally hazardous coal-fired power in China, which houses about 70% of worldwide mining operations. Worldwide, sparsely regulated bitcoin mining causes nearly 60 million tonnes of CO₂ annually. These realities alongside others debunk the myth of the 'green bitcoin'. Moreover, it has not yet been able to replace gold as a stable currency, and institutional investors have often invested in cryptocurrency to make a quick profit rather than invest in renewable resources; with all the widely available information, it is hard to believe that Elon Musk 'did not know' about the environmental hazards of bitcoin before investing in it to make a quick buck.

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Turkey is finding its own place in the world: where the future will lead to?

Turkey, important both to the NATO bloc and the Russo-Iranian bloc, is finding its place in an increasingly polarizing world. Although Middle East analysts often have had a lot to say regarding Turkey and its foreign policy, their opinions were often stated in terms of how Ankara's actions aided or detracted from Western interests in the region. However, long gone are the days when Ankara was just another loyal, card carrying member of the transatlantic community. A recent Foreign Affairs article notes that Turkey's growing military-industrial strength and America's retrenchment from the Middle East have paved the way for Ankara to become a major player in regional conflicts, as seen recently in the drone flexing in Azerbaijan and Libya, and Turkey's crucial role in the Syria crisis. In a very short time, Turkey has become the world's fourth-largest drone producer since President Tayyip Erdogan increased domestic production to reduce reliance on Western arms, and has even begun selling the technology abroad, such as to various countries in South Asia, and most recently to NATO member country Poland. Under the leadership of Erdogan, whose government envisions modern-day Turkey as a heir to a glorious Ottoman empire, it is more accurate to see this transformation as a deeper change in Turkey's foreign policy orientation rather than just a temporary pivot. This new foreign policy is best understood not as a drift toward Russia or China but as expressive of a desire rooted in Ottoman realpolitik to manage great-power rivalries. Engineered by the Erdogan regime, one can confidently state that an independent Turkish foreign policy is both irreversible, and here to stay.

However, the newly elected US Biden administration, known for its anti-Erdogan bias, has acted to alienate Turkey rather than acknowledge it. Recent remarks by Biden regarding the Armenian genocide on April 24 have echoed the extent of this bias, and has served to alienate a beleaguered US from an important regional NATO ally such as Turkey. Analysts have contended that the genocide remarks by Biden are rooted in scoring political points with the Armenian lobby at home, and have little legal or historical basis - Turkey's calls for an international inquiry commission led by historians to look into the archives have largely been ignored in this regard. Recent developments however point to the fact that the US has begun to see the writing on the wall. Despite a lack of breakthrough in recent talks between Biden and Erdogan, the US has been keen to promote the idea of Turkey playing a key role in Afghanistan in the aftermath of a complete US withdrawal, including ensuring the safety and security of key US assets and institutions in that country.

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Future of Energy and climate change

The environmental impact of patterns of energy usage by humans in the twentieth century has necessitated a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. The nature of ameliorative response to environmentally damaging anthropogenic activity over the past century has also spawned some complex problems - conservation efforts to minimise environmental impact have often been carried out at the expense of the livelihoods of the most vulnerable communities, while a transition to green renewable energy is not as hassle-free or romantic as many like to believe. An example of the former is the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forests, which are crucial ecosystems regulating biodiversity and well-being of the planet. Recent studies have shown that despite conservation efforts by governments in the region, the high density of population in the deltaic region means that such aquatic ecosystems contribute to half of total global methane emissions from anthropogenic and natural sources, making the planet hotter by the day. However, conservation efforts in the Sundarbans are being carried out at the expense of highly vulnerable human communities, whose livelihoods have become endangered through legal restrictions on one hand, and periodic climate disasters such as cyclones on the other hand.

Central to our times is the issue of power, or how we meet our energy demands amidst changing perceptions of our relationship with the environment. Despite global commitments towards ending dependence over fossil fuels, global strife over vital resources may not, in fact, disappear in any coming Age of Renewables. The global transition towards clean energy necessitates reduced dependence on oil and natural gas, and an increased dependence on carbon-pollution-free electricity generating renewable energy such as wind and solar power. This transition, however, entails increased usage of minerals like cobalt, copper, lithium, nickel, and rare earth elements (REE) for electricity producing equipment. At present, wind and solar power constitute 7% of global power generation, and electric vehicles form less than 1% of the total number of vehicles, and the global supply of the above minerals roughly caters with the demand. However, if major economies such as the US and Europe were to transition to a green economy, the demand for these materials would increase as much as 50 fold in some aspects, which would be difficult to meet since the supply of these minerals is finite, often far less than remaining petroleum supplies, and at the same time is concentrated to very specific areas of the globe such as China, Congo, Myanmar, Argentina, etc. To illustrate the problems associated with the supply of these raw materials, it is enough to know that China, while itself not possessing vast reserves of minerals, plays a major role in supplying the processed materials - it accounts for approximately 65% of the world's processed cobalt, 35% of its processed nickel, nearly 60% of processed lithium, and nearly 90% of processed REEs. Thus, should a major transformation to green renewable energy take place soon, the geopolitical implications in light of scarcity of resources, and who controls them, should not be taken lightly - one could expect either far-reaching economic collaborative efforts, or major conflicts, over the supply and procurement of such minerals in the very near future.



Assad getting 95% votes in Syrian election:

indication to a grim future of more human rights violation

Syrian Presidential elections were held in parts of Syria controlled by Bashar al-Assad on May 26 in the face of international pushback. Unsurprisingly, Assad claimed to have won the elections through attaining 95% of the vote with a 79% election turnout. The elections are largely symbolic - a demonstration of power and claim towards legitimacy in what is essentially a fragmented nation; one third of the country in the north and north-east lies in the hands of the Syrian opposition and Kurdish forces respectively. The US, alongside Britain, France, Germany and Italy, released a statement decrying the lack of free and fair elections and voicing support for the concerns of the Syrian opposition. In its scope and conduct, the Syrian elections are similar to recent electoral processes in Myanmar and Bangladesh, where military juntas and ruling political factions were accused of resorting to widespread election fraud and engineering to maintain their hold on power.

The 10 year old Syrian conflict, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians, and seen the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government, has largely settled into a protracted stalemate and an uncertain future. The regime, backed by Russian and Iranian support, has exacerbated an already burgeoning humanitarian crisis by refusing to cooperate with international agencies. Furthermore, the elections undermine the Geneva process led by the international community aiming for a new Syrian constitution upheld by free and fair elections under UN supervision. Analysts believe that the upcoming conflict resolution efforts likely will need to pivot away from Damascus-based diplomacy such as the Geneva process to a new negotiation architecture that convenes key external powers wielding influence on the ground in Syria, an example being the Astana talks led by Turkey, Russia, and other key stakeholders in Syria.

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Bangladesh government's initiatives in Bhasan Char and the reality of Rohingya refugees

At least 49 Rohingyas have detained in the last few weeks for fleeing Bhasan Char Island from unchitprang Rohingya camps and Sandwip Island. It has become usual amid the ongoing discussion between the UN bodies with the Bangladesh government on operationally engaging in the newly built facility in Bhasan Char. On 31 May, a group of Rohingya participated in a demonstration on the island with demands of employment and getting medical assistance. The discontent has depicted in a recent investigative report by Al Jazeera.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch's newly published 58-page report on Bhasan Char Island in the first week of June accused the Bangladesh government for transferring refugees to that remote island without fully informed consent and preventing them from coming back to the mainland.



During the visit of two top UNHCR officials to the island on 31 May marooned Rohingyas staged a protest demonstration. Citing an international activist as a witness, Al Jazeera reports that police used batons to control the protesters just the kind of behavior they used to receive from the Myanmar security forces. Police denied the allegation and claimed that they were only preventing the protesters from entering the building where UNHCR officials were present as the crowd became unruly and threw stones, which needed to be controlled.

Days after the visit, UNHCR outlined Bhasan Char as a potential alternative location for the Rohingyas while conveying their satisfaction over the big picture of the island. They also called on the international community to come forward in -

ensuring the Rohingyas have a life of dignity on the island.

Rohingyas in Bhasan char are still remonstrating their situation as worse than their previous life at the camps in Cox's Bazar. A recent BBC report backs the complaints, as some Rohingyas reside in Bhasan char were describing their ordeals. Talking to BBC, a young resident said, "I do not know how long I will be here. I have no way out. "Another woman who arrived in December when she was pregnant described the horror she underwent during childbirth as the worst and painful experience she ever had.

Allegations apart, what is undeniable is that people on the low-lying slit island of Bhasan Char are living in hidden fear and trauma multiplied by the disruption to their mental health care. Moreover, the recent unrest proves that they fear a life of castaways with no hope, no future, there are fewer options on offer other than basic food.

Moreover, experts warn that as monsoon and cyclone season is on the door the concern for their safety is also urgent and real. The island lies just 2-3 meters above sea level, which is at a high risk of washing away under high tides during this notoriously volatile season.

The following days will be vital for the stakeholders in terms of what steps would be taken. Locally, relocating 80,000 Rohingyas to the island by the latest initiative will become a big challenge for the Bangladesh government. On other hand, how humanitarian actors advocate with the government to curb the continued chaos will be closely observed by the international community. On top of everything, what remains crucial is and other stakeholders including the government and international actors share and voluntarily accept the same vision of the future.

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Contributing Editors

Mohammad Hossain

Nazmus Sakib

Dr. Faroque Amin



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