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THE FUTURE

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The Future is a newsletter periodically published by The Future Institute. This newsletter aims to chronicle the significant events and developments in the societies of the emerging nations with the potential of impacting their future.

This publication offers snippets of news analysis that might be advantageous to academics, policymakers, social and political workers, students and various organisations.

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Powerful earthquake in Afghanistan, thousands killed

On 22 June 2022, Afghanistan was shaken by its deadliest earthquake in decades; a magnitude 5.9 earthquake devastated eastern regions in the country, killing over 1,000 people and injuring many more, according to a regional official. The humanitarian calamity has hit at a difficult time for the country, which is currently suffering from starvation and an economic crisis in the aftermath of the freezing and then diversion of seven billion dollars of Afghan Central Bank funds by the US government in February 2022.

Geological experts pinpointed the earthquake's epicentre at around 46 kilometres southwest of the city of Khost, which lies close to the country's border with Pakistan. According to the Afghan State Ministry of Disaster Management, most of the deaths occurred in Paktika province, specifically in the districts of Giyan, Nika, Barmal, and Zirok. More than 1,000 people died, 2,000 were injured, and 10,000 homes were destroyed in the earthquake.

According to an Afghan health ministry official, thousands of people at risk of sickness need clean water and food, just days after the UN humanitarian agency (OCHA) warned that cholera breakouts in the aftermath of the earthquake would be a significant issue. Assisting thousands of Afghans is also a challenge for countries, including the US and its European allies that imposed sanctions on Afghan government entities and banks, shutting off direct aid and causing a humanitarian crisis even before the earthquake.

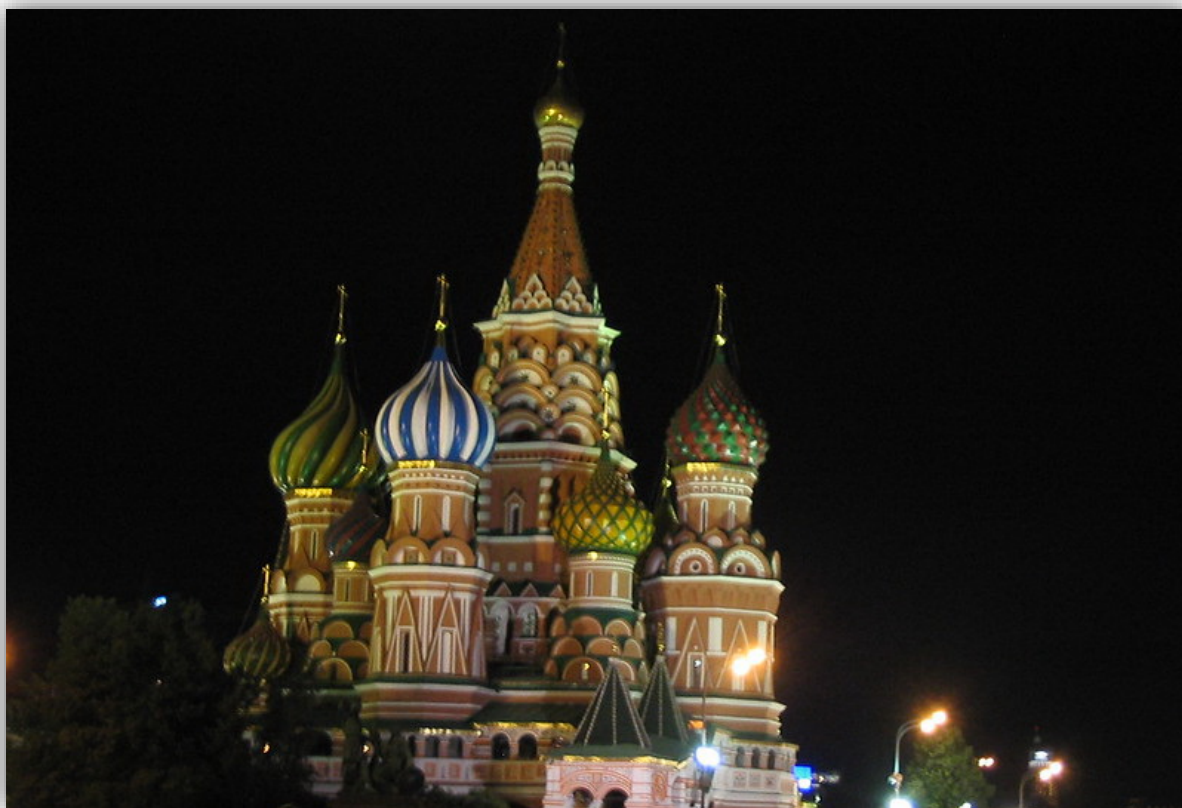
The UN and several other governments have delivered help to the devastated areas, with more expected to come in the coming days. The Taliban administration has called for sanctions to be lifted and a block on billions of dollars in central bank assets stored in Western financial institutions to be lifted.

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Western Move to Choke Russia's Oil Exports Boomerangs as China and India import cheap Russian oil

China and India, the world's two most populous countries, have been buying more oil from Russia since the Russian-Ukraine conflict erupted, allowing Moscow to avoid US and EU-led sanctions and dampening market expectations for increased oil prices. Moreover, higher current oil prices also mean that Russia is making a higher profit from sales than before the war began, as a result of which the value of its once-failing currency has risen versus the dollar.

According to figures issued by Beijing in mid-June 2022, China purchased \$7.47 billion in Russian oil products in May, nearly \$1 billion more than in April. Russia is now China's major oil supplier, surpassing Saudi Arabia.

As compared to the same period last year, India's imports of Russian oil have increased sixfold, while China's has increased threefold. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has brought Russia closer to India and China, both of which have refused to join the United States and the European Union in sanctioning Russia, with Beijing going even farther.

The spike in Russian oil imports, which come at steep discounts, might be viewed as a large pay-off in exchange for China and India's "soft" support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a way to avoid the EU oil embargo. Experts have warned that, in light of the foregoing, the Western embargo against Russia could backfire, as soaring oil prices pose a significant threat to Western economies in terms of rising inflation and slower growth.

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BJP leaders in India give Islamophobic statements - causing an international uproar

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) recently found itself amid political and diplomatic controversies when two of its high-ranking officials, National Spokeswoman Nupur Sharma and Delhi Media Operation Head Naveen Kumar Jindal, made insulting statements about Prophet Muhammad. Despite initial attempts to silence and intimidate Indian Muslim protesters, the BJP government only began to pay attention when news of the offensive remarks - and the government's response to them - spread beyond the country's borders, prompting at least five Arab GCC nations, including Qatar, to lodge official protests against India. Calls for a boycott of Indian goods have also been made on social media in various Arab nations, and several shops in Kuwait have removed Indian products from their shelves.

Soon after the diplomatic protests, the BJP made moves to "suspend" and "expel" the staffers who insulted the Prophet and gave generic statements to distance the government from their comments. Experts, however, had warned that the moves meant very little when neither were the offending BJP members' fringe' elements, nor was there any reason to believe that these did not represent views of the BJP itself - after all, no BJP leader issued any apologies for the remarks, and sustained communal hatred and documented state-sanctioned violence against Muslims under the BJP rule has been attaining alarming levels. In fact, Arundhati Roy opined that the multiplicity of the BJP's crimes against Muslims proves that India has already transitioned from a deeply flawed, fragile democracy - openly and brazenly - into a criminal, Hindu-fascist enterprise with tremendous popular support.

Moreover, in light of ground realities such as continued popular local political-cum-financial support, growing Islamophobically grounded Israel-India ties, and an ever more complex global situation surrounding

the Russia-Ukraine conflict, many warned that it was not an easy task just yet to force to BJP to change its attitude towards its Muslim citizens.

According to experts, economics should be at the centre of any plan for dealing with Hindu nationalism in India and the state's soft power in the Gulf. According to reports, Indians living overseas are the BJP's largest donor group. Though a boycott of Indian goods is currently in effect in several Gulf nations, a more sophisticated and coordinated plan for exacting economic costs is required to ensure that the most disadvantaged are not hurt. Gulf residents must be more attentive in spotting the various types of cultural diplomacy flowing from Modi's India, as well as the large corporations of Indian origin that are helping to legitimise his Hindu majoritarian agenda at home and abroad.

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What is the way forward - Biodegradable plastics or a ban on plastic use?

Over the previous 70 years, the world has generated around 8.3 billion tonnes of plastic, 60% of which has been dumped in landfills, oceans, and rivers or incinerated. According to a recent UN assessment, worldwide plastic use is anticipated to triple by 2060, with the annual production of fossil fuel-based plastics reaching more than 1.2 billion tonnes by the same year. Such output levels would generate more than 1 billion tonnes of garbage annually.

In light of the tremendous environmental crisis unfolding in this area, governments and scientists have been working for many years to address the issue of plastic pollution, either through recycling initiatives or by exploring ways for plastic to bio-degrade at a faster rate.

Because of the magnitude of the problem and the overall ineffectiveness of recycling, several governments have taken drastic measures. In a historic step, the Canadian government announced in June that it would prohibit the manufacture and importation of a variety of "dangerous" single-use plastics, with numerous new restrictions taking effect in December. With certain exceptions, the new laws will apply to checkout bags, cutlery, food-service products made of difficult-to-recycle plastic, ring carriers, stir sticks, and straws. By the end of 2025, it will also prohibit the export of six plastics. Earlier this year, the federal government declared plastics to be harmful under the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, paving the path for rules to prohibit some of them. On the other hand, a group of plastics manufacturers is suing the government over the harmful designation in a case that will be heard later this year.

Scientists have also worked tirelessly to develop novel solutions to the problem of plastic longevity in the natural environment. In a recent discovery, German researchers discovered the PHL7 enzyme, which rapidly degrades PET, the world's most frequently produced and used plastic. PHL7 appears to 'digest' PET plastic faster than LCC, a commonly utilised enzyme in PET plastic-eating tests nowadays. For decades, scientists have been searching for enzymes that can cause plastic to break down, and in 2012, they discovered LCC, or "leaf-branch compost cutinase." However, unlike the more promising PHL7 method, which is believed to 'eat' PET plastic in as little as 24 hours, the LCC process takes several days.

The BBC also reported earlier this month that Australian scientists discovered that the *Zophobas morio*, sometimes known as a superworm, can thrive on a diet of polystyrene. The researchers discovered that many enzymes in the superworm's intestines could break down polystyrene and styrene. Concerning commercial practicality, the experts stated that it was a matter of both further researches and if it would be economically viable to cope with the massive scale of the current plastic pollution problem.

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Biggest interest rate hike in 30 years in US history – the consequences

The Federal Reserve of the United States has announced the biggest interest rate increase in nearly 30 years as it intensifies its efforts to contain rising consumer prices. The Federal Reserve announced that its main interest rate would be raised by three-quarters of a percentage point to a range of 1.5 per cent to 1.75 per cent.

The increase, the third since March, came amid unexpectedly high inflation in the United States last month. More hikes are predicted, adding to the economy's uncertainties. Officials predict the rate the Federal Reserve charges banks to borrow to reach 3.4 per cent by the end of the year, with the effects reverberating to the public in the form of higher borrowing rates for mortgages, credit cards, and other loans.

As central banks around the world adopt similar actions, the global economy, where businesses and individuals have enjoyed years of low borrowing costs, will undergo a tremendous shift. Many observers believe the Federal Reserve is still playing catch-up after dismissing price increases last year as a temporary problem caused by supply chain concerns. Since then, inflation has accelerated due to reasons such as the Ukraine conflict and China's continued Covid-19 shutdowns.

The crisis is expected to grow, and reverberations are already being seen in various countries of the world, with vulnerable economies such as the Turkish economy being especially hit hard.

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Millions affected by devastating floods in Bangladesh and India

Floodwaters have overwhelmed parts of Bangladesh and northeast India as authorities seek to rescue more than 9.5 million people left with scant food and drinking water supplies following days of heavy rain. Heavy monsoon rains have caused the worst floods in decades in some sections of low-lying northeastern Bangladesh and India's Assam state, killing more than 100 people in the last two weeks. Monsoon rains in South Asia often begin in June. However, in a sign of changing climatic patterns, severe rains lashed northeastern India and Bangladesh as early as March this year, causing floods as early as April in Bangladesh.

The district of Sylhet, to the northeast of Bangladesh and close to the Indian border, has been one of the hardest hit areas by the recent flooding. So far, 32 people have been reported killed, and more than 100,000 people have been evacuated, but authorities say that many more are still in need of rescue. According to UNICEF, around four million people have been cut off by floods in the country's northeast and desperately need assistance. The UN agency also stated that 90 per cent of its health facilities had been inundated, and incidences of waterborne infections are on the rise, as it urgently needed \$2.5 million in funds to supply water purification tablets, emergency medical supplies, and water containers to flood victims.



In neighbouring India, officials and residents said that flooding has blocked off three districts in the Barak valley, and water is waist-deep in portions of the region's main city of Silchar. Authorities in Assam have reported more than 80 deaths to date, including over a dozen who died in landslides. The Indian army and paramilitary forces have been called in to assist with rescue operations.

According to figures from the state-run India Meteorological Department, Assam and neighbouring Meghalaya had received 134 per cent more rainfall than the average for this time of year. In the previous week, thousands of residents have been evacuated from their homes by India's National Disaster Response Force and the Indian army. It is believed that many are still missing. According to the Indian government, around 4.7 million people have been displaced from their homes in Assam, with approximately 330,000 residing in shelters.

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'Paid but failed': Hajj lottery for western pilgrims descends into farce

On 6 June, a month before the official start date for the annual Hajj of 2022, Saudi Arabia's Hajj Ministry abruptly announced that travel for Western pilgrims coming from places such as the United States, United Kingdom, and the European Union, which Saudi government-authorized travel agents had previously carried out, would now be carried out through the Saudi government-approved portal Motawif. Those who booked packages using the previous approach – authorized travel companies – were encouraged to seek refunds. Saudi officials stated that the new 'Hajj lottery' measure was made to reduce Hajj fraud.



The online platform was designed to be a one-stop shop for all Hajj-related travel data, including a repository for documents, a payment processor, and a progress tracker. Service packages were priced on the ascending levels of silver, gold, and platinum. Western pilgrims who wanted to go were required to upload their passports and coronavirus documents between 10 June and 13 June. They were enrolled in a lottery,

which ran from 15 June to 18, to determine who could purchase a Hajj package, even if they'd purchased one month before from a travel agent. Winners may pay for their package through the portal, which would then generate a special electronic visa for the trip.

Despite the centralised approach, however, many pilgrims who attempted to book through the portal reported that things were a shambles. Motawif's hasty implementation has left thousands of Muslims in the dark, with technical difficulties preventing many from booking travel. Pricing packages and details have seemingly changed, for the worse, differing from initial advertisements, and in many cases, pilgrims have been asked to arrange their own flights.

Some claim they are rushing for refunds after the service collected their money but did not arrange their travel, in fact showing that their booking had failed. Others have reported arriving at the airport only to be thrown off overbooked flights. Many pilgrims feel the timing is especially tragic, coming on the eve of a long-awaited once-in-a-lifetime journey. Furthermore, according to the Middle East Eye, Motawif website is owned by a corporation with ties to India's Bharatiya Janata Party and its leader Modi, raising concerns about security breaches and outrage over the persecution of Indian Muslims and the disrespect to Prophet Muhammad.

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Biden Middle East visit: Why an Israel-led security pact is a paper tiger

US President Joe Biden is slated to visit Saudi Arabia this July and meet with Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman as part of his first presidential Middle East tour. His expected visit comes at a time when anti-Iran hawks in the Gulf and Israel are urging Washington to abandon nuclear talks and face Iran head-on. The reality, however, is that a military solution to the Iran problem is unfeasible at the moment in light of a decreasing US military footprint in the region and a lack of common ground or trust for a Middle East security pact.

Calls for a more prominent US military presence in the Middle East are out of step with reality in Washington. Since Barack Obama, successive American presidents, including Biden, have attempted to lessen their obligations in the region, instead empowering local actors to shoulder the burden of security. In an ideal world, Washington would like to see the creation of a regional security framework that includes Iran and replaces Arab Gulf antagonism with Iran with direct dialogue.

In light of this, the United States is unlikely to increase its current military footprint of roughly 50,000 troops in the US Central Command (Centcom) area. However, despite its efforts to lessen its heavy involvement in the region, the US continues to foot the price for regional security, and disproportionate portions of the US military budget continue to be sent toward the Middle East, with Israel topping the list of recipients, having received more than \$146 billion in US military aid since 1946. Despite these efforts, the US has not been able to establish a self-sustaining security infrastructure in the region that can, at least in the military arena, pull its own weight without US leadership - and much of this may be attributed to US local partners.

Moreover, from a strategic standpoint, there is no common foundation or trust for a Middle Eastern security accord. More broadly, danger perceptions and security criteria vary greatly between Arab governments and Israel, and even between themselves, since Israel is not trusted by most Arab countries as well. On the

question of Iran, while it may be an important element of the regional security infrastructure for Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman, another set of states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Israel, may concur that Iran is the greatest threat to regional security and stability.



However, even among the latter set of states, the methods and tactics by which they intend to address this issue vary greatly. None of the Gulf governments, and least of all Israel, would want to risk escalation of military tensions with Iran because they would be on the front lines, facing the brunt of any Iranian reprisal. It is not surprising, then, that even Israel, despite its very hard-line anti-Iran position, has attempted to keep the current conflict with Iran in the grey zone between war and peace, including cyber methods and surrogate operations to achieve its goals.

Finally, greater military cooperation would imply a semblance of a common military infrastructure across the board. Still, the Middle East's militaries are a mishmash of different platforms and technologies that are difficult to integrate - for example, the six GCC air forces currently operate seven different fighter jet platforms. As a result, any "alliance" in the region lacking trust and a shared security strategy, as well as a US leadership willing to devote resources and long-term commitment, will be a paper tiger, hopelessly out of depth in dealing with Iran's network-centric surrogate operations across the region.

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