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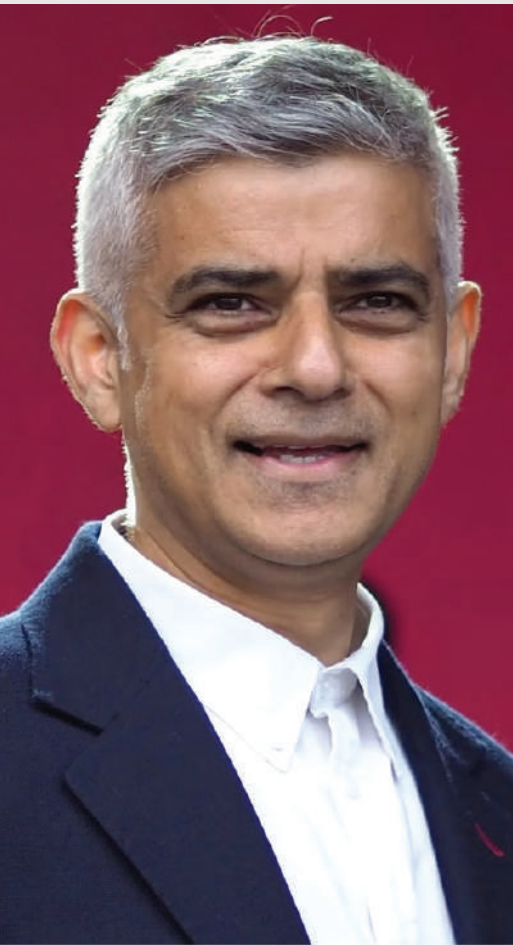
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A Magazine for Scholarly, Literary, Political, Economic and Religious Activities



Page # 14

**Supporters hail Trump nomination
as 'definitive' after latest win**



Page # 13

**UK signs new deal with EU to
tackle small boat crossings**



Page # 30



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Page#

3. Editorial
4. A short lesson on the facts of life
5. A Brief Window for Israel to Integrate Its Arab and Jewish Communities
7. Nowhere Is Safe in Gaza. We Need a Ceasefire | Opinion
9. In the Year of the Dragon, China prospers via hard work: Global Times
11. America must learn to keep its cool
13. Supporters hail Trump nomination as 'definitive' after latest win
14. Lee Anderson is 'pouring fuel on fire of anti-Muslim hatred', says Sadiq Khan
16. Government delays plans to double number of medical students in England
18. Canada seems to have forgotten its peace building legacy in the Middle East
19. The trials of Julian Assange: A death sentence for democracy
21. Opinion: The crux of Israel's challenge
23. US and UK carry out fresh strikes on Houthi targets in YemenDavos Duplicity:
24. Britain's King Charles seen back at work for first time since cancer diagnosis
25. Senior Pakistan official admits election rigging as protests grip country
29. Vile Attempt of Muslim Clerics to Prevent the Ahmadiyya Peace Symposium in Visakhapatnam
30. UK signs new deal with EU to tackle small boat crossings
31. Japan naked festival: Women join Hadaka Matsuri for first time
34. India's 'Whitey on the moon' moment
36. West African Heads Meet to Keep Junta-Led Nations in Blocgan approved
37. Japan's early bloom of cherry blossoms sparks concerns amid record heat
38. Pakistan woman in Arabic script dress saved from mob claiming blasphemy
40. 'People want our government to do something': Commons Gaza chaos was the day British democracy failed
43. How to know if the olive oil you're buying is actually good for you

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Editorial



Dr. Busharat Elahi Jamil - Assistant Editor

The recent general elections were historically a continuation of a saga of electoral fraud, wherein the Pakistani people's mandate was stolen and the nation was used from 1947 to form 47.

Elections were held on February 8, 2024; they were not rigged, but it was the first time that the Pakistani people had seen electoral engineering in action. The sole distinction is that it was made visible by the actions of a specific political party and an unanticipated large-scale public outcry.

For the first time in its history, the country is on one page, but its political grasp is split into two distinct forms, 45 and 47. These are now not just forms, but also the beginning of a political consciousness and the end of a particular type of authoritarianism.

The election results also show who is fighting for national interests and who is standing up for the constitution, but Pakistan has shown itself to be the nation's ally.

Additionally, the results of the February election demonstrated that the Pakistani establishment is a subset of the global establishment and that the political mafia used their services to gain influence in Pakistani politics. It has also been demonstrated that the local establishment is more powerful than the democratic desire of 250 million Pakistanis.

Only the so-called establishment has the power to decide a country's destiny; the nation itself, the judiciary, and democratic institutions cannot. This is known as controlled democracy, which primarily benefited a few elite classes to administer the Pakistani state's system in accordance with their own goals.

Institutions such as the judiciary, election commission, police, and the so-called media, among others, have equal responsibility and made every effort to subvert democratic and electoral conventions. This further demonstrates that the PDM-2 is not the genuine voice of the Pakistani people.

Furthermore, the travesty of an election that delivered only a tyrannical government—rather than a representative government—left the country in the hands of the mafia, who bears the real responsibility for getting it to this point.

The real election results coincided with Imran Khan's return home, proving that elections are really a numbers game. Even if it was a political activity, its application for individualized or unique goals set off the country's democratic forces, especially the masses.

Prior to and during the election results of 2024, Pakistanis have demonstrated that they will no longer support anti-democratic elements and will instead use their legitimate politicians to embellish their country.

A short lesson on the facts of life

The howls of contempt when Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre stated the obvious this week are as predictable as they are incomprehensible. In response to a media question, Poilievre waded into the trans rights controversy, stating what polls show a majority of Canadians believe: that female bathrooms, female change rooms, and female sports are for females. You could almost hear the gasp of horror from activists and some media types who would have you believe these are the death throes of a dinosaur in the tar pit.



Echoing the beliefs of most rational people, Poilievre said, “female spaces should be exclusively for females, not for biological males.” With just a hint of disapproval, many news outlets reported that Conservative Party members voted for a similar motion at their convention last year, no doubt hoping to portray them as knuckle-dragging transphobes.

Instead, most Canadians, especially women or those who have daughters, wives, sisters or mothers, quietly nodded their heads. Adults are free to live their lives as they see fit. It only becomes a problem when they invade the private places of other people. The more the left huffs its disapproval and attempts to liken Poilievre’s views with extreme rightwing lawmakers in the U.S., the more they insult mainstream Canadians, who don’t need to have the facts of life redefined for them.

Poilievre pointed out that the federal government has no role in these decisions. They’re matters for school boards, provinces and municipalities. “But obviously, female sports, female change rooms, female bathrooms, should be for females – not for biological males,” he opined. Women, particularly, are concerned about the growing trend for people who were born biological males and who have gone through puberty as a man to invade spaces set aside for women and girls. There is a disturbing trend among school boards nationwide to install all gender-neutral washrooms in schools. This is a detrimental move that removes the right to privacy that young people need when they’re going through puberty.

Quite apart from how unfair it is for larger, stronger biological males to compete in female sports, it’s also dangerous. Young women risk getting hurt and will cease to compete if the playing field is uneven.

That’s not a radical ideology. That, too, is simply another fact of life.

<https://torontosun.com/opinion/editorials/editorial-a-short-lesson-on-the-facts-of-life>

A Brief Window for Israel to Integrate Its Arab and Jewish Communities | Opinion



In May 2021, Israel's mixed Jewish-Arab cities exploded in violence. Streets in Lod, Haifa, Acre, Ramla, and Jerusalem became battlegrounds for clashes between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs. At the time, the Israel Defense Forces were fighting Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Israeli Arabs were upset.

By the time the operation in Gaza was over, four Israeli citizens—three Jews and one Arab—were dead, some of them lynched by mobs. Hundreds of people—Jews and Arabs—were injured and synagogues and storefronts were smashed or burned. The riots left the country fractured. Arabs make up about 2 million of Israel's citizens and constitute 20 percent of the population. Most live in northern and southern Israel, many in mixed cities where you can find apartment buildings shared by Jews and Arabs.

The IDF was particularly disturbed by what had happened and decided to set up a new unit of reservists whose job would be to protect highways to ensure they remain open in future wars so troops, tanks, and ammunition can deploy to the front as needed. One IDF general went so far as to declare in a newspaper interview that, in a future war, the military would not cross through a well-known area of the country with an Arab majority. Keeping roads in that area open, he said, would not be worth the effort or resources if there were riots.

It is with this backdrop that a profound change is taking place in Israel: Since the Oct. 7 massacre of Israelis by Hamas, Israeli Arabs have not only not rioted, but a majority—according to several polls—support Israel's right to defend itself with a ground offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. One poll, in late December, asked Israeli Arabs if they feel "part of the State of Israel and its problems." Sixty-five percent answered that they did, while, before the war, only 48 percent had. This is a dramatic change and one that needs to be investigated, firstly to understand why it is happening, but also so that the country can further integrate its Arab minority. Israeli Arabs were horrified by the Hamas massacre on Oct. 7 and many have

joined volunteer efforts to assist the country since. At least 24 Israeli Arabs were murdered on Oct. 7, illustrating the shared destiny and fate of Arabs and Jews in Israel. One casualty was Awad Dawarshe, a paramedic in his 20s who was on shift that morning at the Nova music festival. He refused to evacuate, telling people that he needed to care for the wounded and that his Arabic would save him. It didn't.

For many Israelis, witnessing Arab citizens embrace a deeper connection with the state fulfills a long-held aspiration for inclusivity and unity. However, the government's response under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu falls short, lacking proactive engagement. Instead of embracing this dramatic change, the government is doing almost no outreach and making no effort to increase cooperation. Instead, it appears to be actively disenfranchising Arabs with decisions like the one Netanyahu took on Monday to limit Arab access to the Temple Mount during the holy month of Ramadan, which starts March 10.

Instead, the government should be actively supporting integration, highlighting activists who are working toward it. There should be more done to encourage Israeli-Arab youth to commit to national service. This does not have to be in the IDF, but there are myriad opportunities within civil society, in NGOs, that can really make a difference.

Failure to capitalize on this transformative moment would have far-reaching consequences. A responsible government would seize the chance to bridge divides and work to advance the integration of Israeli Arabs into the wider society, safeguarding Israel's future for all its citizens. Israel risks squandering this chance, a mistake with potentially grave consequences for us all. Yaakov Katz is a senior fellow at JPPI, a global think tank for the Jewish people, and the author of *Shadow Strike: Inside Israel's Secret Mission to Eliminate Syrian Nuclear Power* and *Weapon Wizards: How Israel Became a High-Tech Military Superpower*.

<https://www.newsweek.com/brief-window-israel-integrate-its-arab-jewish-communities-opinion-1872574>

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May Allah be with you - Amen

Nowhere Is Safe in Gaza. We Need a Ceasefire | Opinion



What would you do if your house, full of your sleeping family, was bombed in the middle of the night? That's exactly what happened on the night of December 19 to Omar Zu'rub. An Israeli military strike hit his two-story house in Rafah, Gaza, killing 22 civilians, including 11 children.

All those sleeping on the first floor of the completely destroyed house were killed: Omar himself, age 75, his wife Rowaida, 70, and their son Mahmoud, 36. Mahmoud's wife, Mervat, 35, was also killed along with the couple's four children: Farah, 16; Omar, 14; Mohammed, 13; and Dima, 1. Omar's other son Mamdouh, a 39-year-old civil servant, was staying with his family on the top floor. He was killed alongside his daughter Roua, who had just turned 16.

In an adjacent house owned by journalist Adel Zu'rub, more than 70 people who had fled from other parts of Gaza were sheltering. The strike killed Adel and nine members of another family.

Mohamed Zu'rub, who survived, said, "sometimes I still cannot figure out if this was real or a nightmare. My nephew has a daughter, who is not yet three weeks, his other son is not yet two years old.... Can you imagine these children's bodies being crushed under the rubble?"

Amnesty International did not find any indication that the residential buildings hit could be considered legitimate military objectives or that people in the buildings were military targets. Even if Israeli forces had intended to target legitimate military objectives in the vicinity, these attacks evidently failed to distinguish between military objectives and civilian objects. Direct or indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian objects are war crimes.

This strike is just a snapshot of the mass civilian suffering that has been inflicted across the

occupied Gaza Strip by the Israeli military since the attacks by Hamas and other armed groups, which included war crimes, on October 7. Rafah, a city in the southernmost part of Gaza, is supposedly the "safest" area, yet many civilians there are still being killed in unlawful attacks.

Worse yet, Israeli forces are gearing up for a ground operation in the area, which will have devastating consequences for the million-plus people crammed into just 24 square miles following successive waves of mass displacement from other parts of Gaza.

In their stated intent to use all means to destroy Hamas, Israeli forces have shown a consistent disregard for civilian lives. They have pulverized street after street of residential buildings, killing civilians on a mass scale and destroying essential infrastructure. We have witnessed and documented serious violations of international humanitarian law, including war crimes, by all parties—and they are continuing unabated. Palestinians remain at risk of genocide in Gaza.

Despite claims to the contrary, Israeli forces have not shifted their conduct in the phase of the conflict following the November pause in hostilities. On January 9, just before 11:00pm, an Israeli strike hit the two top floors of the Nofal family's five-story building located in Tal Al-Sultan, a neighborhood to which the Israeli military had repeatedly ordered displaced residents to flee. The attack killed 18 civilians, including 10 children, and wounded at least eight others.

Nidal Nofal, a nurse who lives on the ground floor of the building, told Amnesty International that relatives from Khan Younis had been staying with them since the Israeli military issued instructions to leave for Rafah:

Amnesty International's weapons experts examined photos of fragments recovered from the rubble. They identified the weapon that struck the house as a GBU-39 Small Diameter Bomb, which explains the specific damage to the top floors. A GBU-39 is a precision-guided weapon with a smaller warhead made in the U.S. by Boeing. Not only are war crimes happening on our watch—they are happening with weapons made in the U.S. and provided by the U.S. government.

Both President Joe Biden and Secretary Antony Blinken have said they care about protecting civilians, but after more than 29,000 people killed—including 12,000 children—and some 60,000 injured, it is clear that the Israeli government isn't listening. It is past time for Washington to back up its words with action and take the necessary steps to ensure U.S. military funding is not being used to commit violations of international law.

At this very moment, President Biden and some members of Congress are ready to green-light billions of dollars in military and security funding to the government of Israel. This is unthinkable, immoral, and unlawful at a moment when there's serious and credible concern about atrocities, including further war crimes and the risk of genocide. Worse yet, it sends a chilling message of impunity to Israeli authorities.

Enough is enough. The U.S. government must immediately stop sending weapons to Israel or risk complicity. President Biden must demand a ceasefire urgently to protect civilians, ensure sufficient humanitarian assistance, and secure the safe release of remaining hostages.

<https://www.newsweek.com/nowhere-safe-gaza-we-need-ceasefire-opinion-1872592>

In the Year of the Dragon, China prospers via hard work: Global Times editorial

The Chinese Lunar New Year is coming. Recently, there has been heavy snowfall in the south, but the bad weather won't stop people from rushing home. According to estimates from the Ministry of Transport, the number of cross-regional trips around the country during this year's Spring Festival will reach a record high of about 9 billion. The desire for reunion and the nostalgia for the hometown are concepts engraved in the bones of the Chinese people. Reunion with relatives and the steaming New Year's Eve dinner are rewards and comforts for a year of hard work and hardship. New hope is born on the New Year's Eve.



This year's Spring Festival has two special features compared to the past, which add more joy to the festival. First, the UN recognized the Lunar New Year as one of its optional holidays. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently thanked China and the Chinese people on behalf of the UN for their unwavering support to the UN, multilateralism and global progress. Second, this year will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. This is dual happiness. The Chinese people's expectations for family happiness and their confidence in the country's prosperity are deeply integrated.

From a global perspective, the Spring Festival's influence is growing. Nearly 20 countries have designated the Spring Festival as a legal holiday. About one-fifth of the world's population celebrate the Spring Festival in different forms. The "Chinese New Year" has truly transformed into the "Global New Year." This is not only driven by the increasing global influence of Chinese culture, but also the result of the charm of the Spring Festival itself being recognized and shared by more and more people. The meaning of the Spring Festival is very good. "The new year begins again and everything is renewed."

The expectation for the warmth of spring and the recovery of all things is shared by all mankind. The forms of celebrating the Spring Festival - writing Spring Festival couplets, decorating windows with paper cuts, lion and dragon dances - have a vitality that invigorates people. The connotation of the Spring Festival - joy, harmony and reunion - contains profound humanistic care. The Spring Festival is closely connected with Chinese culture, and it is the most condensed expression of Chinese culture. The charm and spirit of the Spring Festival are the charm and spirit of Chinese culture.

2024 is the Year of the Dragon in the Chinese lunar calendar. The dragon embodies the aspiration for soaring ambition, strength without dominance, and benevolence toward all beings. It serves as the totem and distinctive cultural symbol of the Chinese nation. UN Secretary-General Guterres remarked that "we need these qualities [of the dragon] to rise to today's global challenges." This is a statement of truth. As the world once again stands at

the crossroads of history, enlightened individuals consciously seek courage, wisdom, and strength from the Chinese nation, an ancient nation that has gone through many storms and tribulations.

Over the past year, facing various risks and challenges at home and abroad, China has endured significant pressure and experienced numerous trials. However, amid the storms, we have strengthened our physique and fortified our resilience. It is undeniable that present-day China plays a pivotal role globally. Yet, with the Chinese people's vision of a world where self-improvement benefits all, they consistently contribute certainty and positive energy to the complex and changing world.

Just as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee Xi Jinping pointed out in his Spring Festival greetings to all Chinese, looking back at all the hard work over the past year, we have more deeply realized that building a strong country and realizing national rejuvenation on all fronts through the Chinese path to modernization is not only a bright road for the Chinese people to pursue a better and happy life, but also a just way to promote world peace and development.

Chinese people do not expect free lunch; they believe that happiness is achieved through hard work. Whether weak or strong, poor or prosperous, the Chinese adhere to benevolence, mutual prosperity, and view plunder and aggression as great evils. The Spring Festival, the oldest, grandest, and most significant traditional festival in China, embodies the most authentic spiritual and cultural essence of the Chinese nation. It represents a spirit that is peaceful, harmonious, positive, and resilient.

A dragon soars in the sky, but China's development must remain grounded, a truth deeply understood by all Chinese people. 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and is a crucial year for achieving the goals and tasks of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-25). The challenges and difficulties facing China in the Year of the Dragon may not be fewer than in previous years, but we also believe in the auspiciousness of the "Dragon Year." The Chinese economy has stabilized and rebounded, with signs of a rising trend in the new qualitative productive forces during the Year of the Dragon. Our confidence is not mere rhetoric but stems from the fundamental lessons learned over the 75-year development journey of the People's Republic of China. It also draws from the immense strength embodied in the Chinese nation during the Spring Festival and the spirit of continuous self-improvement.

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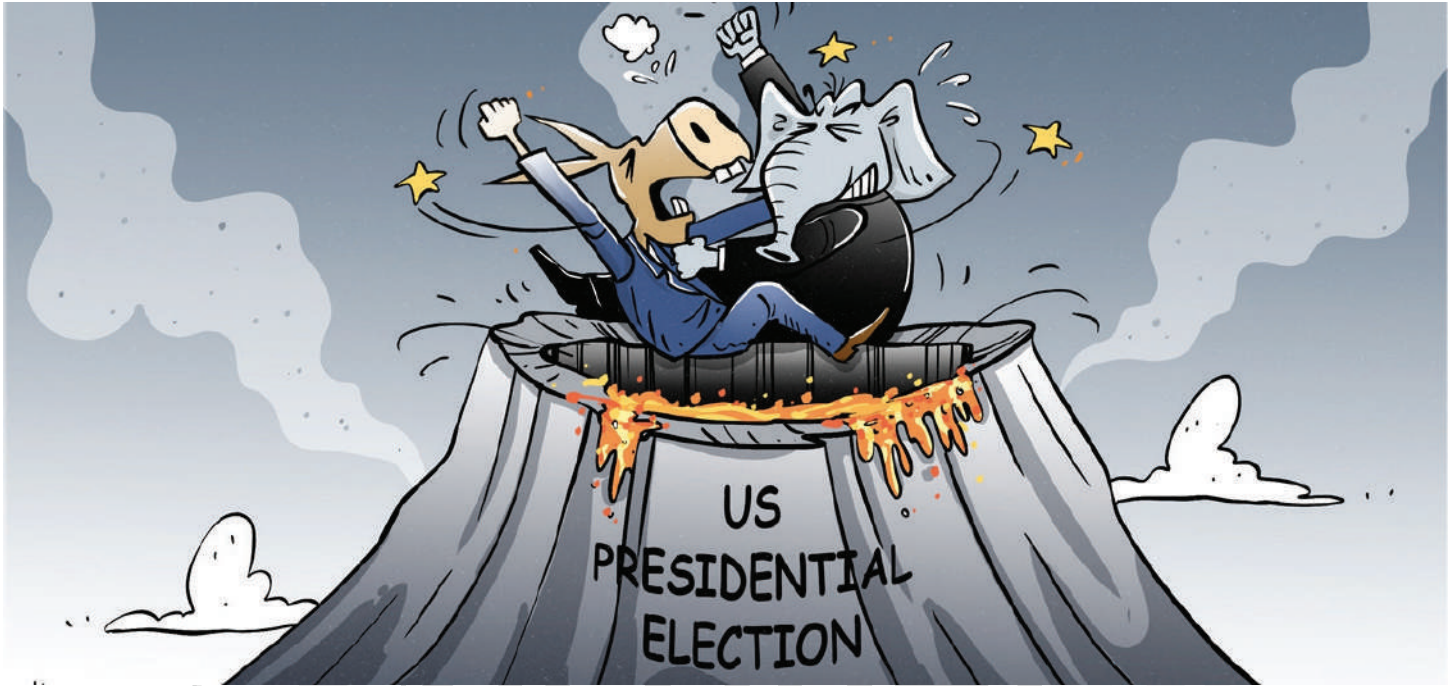
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America must learn to keep its cool

By: Anthony Moretti



In an election year, the world is witnessing a "tale of two Americas," with a growing number of controversies within the US escalating. What has caused the deep divisions in the country? Where are they headed? The Global Times has invited scholars from both China and the US to explore the issue. This is the third article of the series.

A little more than three years ago, America stared into the abyss. On January 6, 2021, a group of rioters could have started a civil war. Rioters - acting on the illogical belief that unknown and unseen forces had stolen the presidential election from Donald Trump - stormed the Capitol. What they accomplished is well documented. What they could have accomplished is chilling.

America backed away from the abyss immediately following that cold January day. However, the country still remains dangerously close to it. The potential for another spark to be lit is real, yet no one can predict who might light the match.

Before we consider a few possibilities, let's state loudly and clearly that America cannot - must not - come anywhere close to a civil war. The consequences for the country now would be immense and the global ramifications also would be horrible.

Common sense says that the US cannot afford another civil war. However, in the current dangerously polarized political climate that exists right now, common sense has little chance to prevail.

With the political parties being pulled ever further apart, we must admit that the executive and legislative branch of government may inadvertently take actions which could spark a dangerous internal conflict. As liberals and Democrats remain locked within an echo chamber, they hear that Republicans want to undermine decades of advances for women and

minorities. The simplified message: The Republicans want only White people to again be the rulers of the land. As conservatives and Republicans listen to their echo chamber, they hear that Democrats want to flood the country with illegal immigrants and force diversity down everyone's throat. The simplified message:

The left is desperate to destroy the values that made America great. To seek compromise on legislation, a hallmark of Western democracy, is interpreted as a sign of weakness and of trampling on the "values" of that politician's party. It is not ridiculous to suggest that a politician, perhaps in a moment of madness, commits an act so egregious that it leads to widespread violence.

Then again, the caustic relationship between Washington and many of the 50 states might cause the rupture that triggers a war. As just one example, remember that the convoy of people, dubbed "Take Our Border Back," is streaming into Texas, where they appear ready to defend the state from "Brown" people who are seeking entry into the US. A recent Supreme Court decision that required Texas remove barbed wire set up at the US-Mexico border to prevent illegal immigrants from entering the country was interpreted by these people as proof that elites were destroying the country.

With the governor of Texas not urging them to back down, one can see how a conflict relating to states' rights could launch chaos. What would happen if one of those well-armed militia fatally shoots a Border Patrol agent? Could the ensuing firefight spread? Do not shake your head and suggest something like that cannot happen. It could happen in America and it could happen this year.

Or might media celebrities be responsible for taking the country over the edge? No credible journalist would seek to inflame tensions, but current and former talk show hosts - consumed by radio or television ratings and online clicks - might. One such person recently posted on X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, the following after the aforementioned Supreme Court ruling:

"So it's unanimous: everyone in power, from the White House, to the hedge fund managers, to the Supreme Court of the United States has decided to destroy the country by allowing it to be invaded. That leaves the population to defend itself. Where are the men of Texas? Why aren't they protecting their state and the nation?"

A few years ago, such a message might have been met with this response: "Son, those are fighting words. Cool off, apologize and do not say anything like that again." But right now, for roughly half the population, such screeds on social media are deemed to be speaking the "truth."

There is no other way to say this: The dangerous rhetoric being heard around the US these days must stop. And the political class ought to be the ones setting the example. But until those two things happen, the country remains on a knife's edge.

America is still healing from the scars from January 2021. People remember that January day as one that could have started a civil war. To borrow a cliché, cooler heads prevailed then. Will they the next time?

The author is an associate professor at the Department of Communication and Organizational Leadership at Robert Morris University.

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202402/1306979.shtml>

Supporters hail Trump nomination as 'definitive' after latest win

WASHINGTON: When Donald Trump's picture appeared on screen Saturday, his supporters at an election-night watch party in South Carolina burst into cheers -- convinced that his victory in yet another state primary had cemented his status as the "definitive" Republican presidential nominee.



Holding slices of pizza and glasses of wine, those gathered at an upscale apartment complex outside Charleston hugged and congratulated each other, with the 77-year-old former president projected to win just moments after polls closed.

"I'm thrilled!" Amber Sparks told AFP. "Because it's definitive, and at this point we can move on... we can move forward. We don't have to sit on the fence and wonder 'what if' and ride between two candidates -- now it's definitive," the 55-year-old legal assistant said.

The party had yet to hear from Nikki Haley, South Carolina's former governor and Trump's last remaining opponent, who would later confirm that she would not drop out of the race despite losing her home state.

"It was already over for her," Tom Robertson, 61, told AFP. "Trump will rule the world if he gets back in there and he'll help us out." Another attendee, Jordan Bryngelson, said Haley "did a good job with the UN" -- when she was an ambassador under Trump -- but that "it's just not her time."

Sparks had reservations about the controversy Trump perennially courts with his remarks, but "I do love his policies," she said. "You know, you're gonna be policy-driven or you're gonna be personality-driven. But for me, it's really going to come down to policy."

For another Republican, who wished to remain anonymous, voting for Trump also meant voting for their Christian values. The former president, when in office, notably appointed conservative justices to the Supreme Court, paving the way for the overturning of the federal right to abortion in 2022.

"I feel God allowed Biden in to wake people up," she said, clutching the cross she wears around her neck. Trump "needs to have a chance to finish what he was accomplishing," she said.

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/supporters-hail-trump-nomination-as-definitive-after-latest-win/articleshow/107984671.cms>

Lee Anderson is ‘pouring fuel on fire of anti-Muslim hatred’, says Sadiq Khan

Sadiq Khan has accused Lee Anderson of “pouring fuel on the fire of anti-Muslim hatred” after the former Tory deputy chair said Islamists had “got control” of London and its mayor. The mayor of London said Anderson’s comments were Islamophobic and put across the notion that Muslims were “fair game” when it came to racism. He also lambasted the prime minister for failing to condemn his own MP’s remarks, saying Rishi Sunak and his the cabinet were now complicit.



Khan’s comments come after Anderson, the MP for Ashfield, said in a Friday night appearance on GB News that the mayor Khan had “given our capital away” to Islamists, referring to the latter as Khan’s “mates”.

Khan responded on Saturday morning, telling Sky News: “These comments from a senior Conservative are Islamophobic, are anti-Muslim and are racist.” He pointed to a recent surge in hate crimes, adding: “These comments pour fuel on the fire of anti-Muslim hatred. “I am afraid the deafening silence from Rishi Sunak and from the cabinet is them condoning this racism.

“I am afraid it confirms to many people across the country that there’s a hierarchy when it comes to racism. “I am unclear why Rishi Sunak, why members of his cabinet aren’t calling this out and aren’t condemning this. “It’s like they are complicit in this sort of racism. The message it sends is Muslims are fair game when it comes to racism and anti-Muslim hatred. “It’s not good enough in 2024 in the United Kingdom.”

Tory and Labour MPs have expressed their disgust at Anderson’s remarks, with the former chancellor Sajid Javid calling them “ridiculous”. The shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy, said they were “a total disgrace”. The Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) had earlier called for Anderson to be kicked out of the parliamentary party.

The MCB said the comment was “disgusting” and criticised the “silence of the party in the face of such extremism”. A spokesperson added: “In a week where we learn of an explosion in Islamophobic hate crimes, influential MPs and a donor to the Conservative party are endorsing common talking points that peddle conspiracy theories and Islamophobic tropes of alleged Muslim takeovers of our country.”

Labour’s chair, Anneliese Dodds, later wrote to her Conservative counterpart, Ric Holden, calling on him to take “serious, concrete action” on Islamophobia in the Tory party. She said Anderson’s comments were “the tip of iceberg”, and a continuation of a “deeply concerning pattern of Islamophobic comments tolerated and Islamophobia not dealt with”.

She added: “Lee Anderson’s comments were unambiguously Islamophobic and Rishi Sunak’s failure to suspend the whip or take any other action speaks volumes ... “Sunak has a clear choice: show some backbone and withdraw the whip or be forever known as the Tory leader who was too weak to stop the far-right rhetoric in his own party.”

The letter states that, despite a review into Islamophobia in the Tory party in 2021, the party has failed to meaningfully tackle it. The chorus of condemnation over Anderson continued on Saturday, with the business minister Nus Ghani describing her fellow Tory MP’s comments as “foolish and dangerous”.

In a post on X, she said: “I have spoken to Lee Anderson. I’ve called out Islamic extremism (& been attacked by hard left, far right & Islamists). “I don’t for one moment believe that Sadiq Khan is controlled by Islamists. To say so, is both foolish and dangerous. Frankly this is all so tiring” The Conservative peer Gavin Barwell, who was Theresa May’s chief of staff in No 10, described the comment as a “despicable slur”.

Neil Garratt, leader of the Conservatives at City Hall, said he had “no shortage of criticisms of Mayor Khan” but added “he is not an Islamist, he is not in the pockets of Islamists, and I completely disagree with anyone who says otherwise”. The shadow foreign secretary, David Lammy, called the comments “a total disgrace” and said they “whipped up hate at a time our country needs to come together”. He asked Sunak: “When will you act to remove the Conservative party whip?”

The former Conservative chancellor Sajid Javid was among those who criticised Anderson’s comments, calling it a “ridiculous thing to say”. Asked on Saturday morning whether Anderson should lose the Tory whip, the defence secretary, Grant Shapps, said the matter was “one for the party itself”. He declined to say whether the MP for Ashfield was a good representative voice for the Tories, saying only that “we live in a democracy where people are allowed to speak their mind and Lee Anderson, I think, is famed for speaking his mind”.

It comes in a week in which former prime minister Liz Truss had used a talk at the Conservative Political Action Conference (Cpac) in the US to claim her efforts to cut taxes were “sabotaged” by the “administrative state and the deep state”. The former prime minister later took part in an interview with the former Trump chief strategist Steve Bannon and remained silent as he hailed the far-right figure Tommy Robinson a “hero”. Javid criticised her for not challenging the comment, saying: “I’d hope every MP would confront such a statement head on. Liz should really know better.”

In a letter to Sunak on Friday, the shadow paymaster general, Jonathan Ashworth, said “egregious” remarks made by Truss and Anderson “cannot go unchecked or unchallenged”. The Muslim Council of Britain welcomed Anderson’s suspension but said the Conservative party has “an Islamophobia problem” and his remarks are “only the tip of an iceberg”.

A Conservative spokesperson said: “An investigation and subsequent independent review, both conducted over several years by Prof Swaran Singh, found no evidence of institutional racism in the Conservative party.”

Speaking before Khan’s comments, a Conservative party source said: “Lee was simply making the point that the mayor, in his capacity as PCC (police and crime commissioner) for London, has abjectly failed to get a grip on the appalling Islamist marches we have seen in London recently.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/24/lee-anderson-is-pouring-fuel-on-fire-of-anti-muslim-hatred-says-sadiq-khan>

Government delays plans to double number of medical students in England

By: Toby Helm



Ministers have dramatically stalled plans to double the number of doctors being trained in England by 2031 in a move that has caused dismay across the NHS, as well in medical schools and universities, the Observer can reveal.

In June last year, ministers backed a long-term plan to expand the NHS workforce and pledged, amid great fanfare, to “double medical school places by 2031 from 7,500 today to 15,000, with more medical school places in areas with the greatest shortages to level up training and help address geographic inequity”. Labour is also committed to raising the number of doctors to 15,000 by 2031.

But a leaked letter written jointly by health minister Andrew Stephenson and the minister for skills, apprenticeships and higher education, Robert Halfon, to the independent regulator the Office for Students, says they will fund only 350 additional places for trainee doctors in 2025-26. This is less than a quarter of the annual number widely anticipated and there is no guarantee that even that level of resource will be repeated.

The heads of universities and medical schools last night expressed extreme disappointment and said the numbers fell far short of what they had been led to expect, and were now able to accommodate. In Yorkshire and the north-east of England, where shortages are among the most serious, there will be just 52 extra places for medical schools to bid for across the entire region.

David Bell, vice-chancellor of Sunderland University, said there had been “real excitement” last autumn about more students passing through its new school of medicine, leading to an expansion of the medical workforce locally. “Now we are extremely disappointed. We were led to believe only a few months ago that there would be genuine expansion.

“This would have played an important part in addressing wider inequalities in the north-east as well as the shortages of doctors. We want to triple our numbers from 500 to 1,500 by 2030 and had serious plans to do that by the end of the decade. But this pushes us back. It is now a very tall order.”

The leaked letter says that money for the 350 extra places will be followed by “larger scale expansion” from 2026-27 onwards – but it also makes clear that the government cannot guarantee funding on this scale for new trainee doctors will be repeated for intakes in future years, saying this will be subject to review.

Professor David Green, vice-chancellor and chief executive of the University of Worcester, whose Three Counties medical school opened last September, said at the current rate the 15,000 total would not be reached for more than two decades.

“We were delighted to receive an allocation of 50 places for medical students for September 2024 entry,” he said. “We were hoping to bid for 54 more home places for September 2025 and were therefore very disappointed to learn that just 350 additional places for the whole of England are being made available. At this rate of progress it will take over 21 years to meet the NHS long-term workforce plan’s aim to double the number of medical students in training.”

According to NHS figures, there are now 8,858 vacancies for doctors in the NHS in England. The news comes after junior doctors began the latest round of strikes as part of their battle for higher pay and better working conditions, following a six-day strike last month.

In comparison to other nations, England has a very low proportion of doctors relative to the population. The average number of doctors per 1,000 people is just 2.9, compared to 4.3 in Germany and an average of 3.7 in the 38 countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Shadow health secretary Wes Streeting said Labour would stand by the commitment to double places by 2031 to 15,000: “The Conservatives have slammed the brakes on expanding medical schools, despite the NHS going through the worst crisis in its history. The Tories are moving at a snail’s pace to put out the fire.”

Not only does the failure to train enough staff mean patients waiting longer for care, it is also costing the NHS an arm and a leg in agency fees. A Labour government will deliver our commitment to double medical school places, but it is infuriating that the Conservatives are dragging their heels and making our job harder.”

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: “We are fully committed and remain on track to deliver our pledges set out in the long-term workforce plan, including the doubling of medical school places in England to 15,000 by 2031.

“We have already expanded the number of medical school places in England to 7,500 per year – a 25% increase – since 2018 that has delivered five new medical schools. We have accelerated this expansion by allocating 205 additional places for 2024/25, a year ahead of target. We are increasing capacity exponentially until 2031 rather than dividing the additional 7,500 evenly over the years.”

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2024/feb/25/government-u-turn-on-plans-to-double-number-of-medical-students-in-england>

Canada seems to have forgotten its peace building legacy in the Middle East

By: Thomas Walkom

For the Canadian government, it was as if the last few months in Gaza had never happened. No Hamas attacks on Israelis, no hostages taken prisoner, no drama. And in particular, no wanton bombings of Palestinian civilians whose only crime was their desire to stay alive in Gaza. The International Court of Justice, a United Nations tribunal, had offered Canada and others a chance to give their views on one of the most contentious issues of the day — Israel's occupation of Palestine. Algeria took up the ICJ's offer to make oral submissions. So did 50 other nations,



including China, the U.S. and Algeria. But Canada didn't. Instead, it re-released some old boilerplate on the Palestinian question that had been written last summer. Instead of speaking directly to the issue before the court, Canada politely chided the 15-member international tribunal for tackling it at all, saying it was none of its business. Otherwise, the Liberal government kept its head down and its mouth shut. It said the UN general assembly, which solicited the court's opinion in the first case, was asking the wrong body the wrong question. Questions on Israel and Palestine, Canada said, should be dealt with by the much smaller security council. This solution has been tried before but has never worked. That's because the United States routinely uses its veto on the security council to deep-six anything that criticizes Israel. As it did again this week. In the past, the UN has successfully bypassed stalemates on the security council by what it calls "uniting for peace." The most notable example of this was the creation of peacemaking forces to deal with the 1956 Suez crisis — an initiative that won a Nobel Peace Prize for Canada's then secretary of state for external affairs and later prime minister, Lester Pearson. It's odd that Canada seems to forgotten this legacy. But it has. In its written submission to the court this week, it urged the justices to not get involved in this difficult dispute lest it make matters worse. But how can matters get worse? Hamas has been true to form, using its arsenal of terror tactics to attack its old enemy. Israel has never been squeamish about using force to achieve its ends. But in this war against Hamas-run Gaza, it has become a parody of itself. It attacks hospitals, blows up ambulances and threatens to drive Palestinians out of Gaza altogether. Its kill numbers are in the thousands. Israel vehemently denies that it is committing war crimes. And then it turns around and engages in tactics like collective punishment that are patently illegal under the laws of war. Even U.S. president Joe Biden has called Israel's tactics "over the top." In this context, the International Court of Justice case is timely. The international community allows Israel to occupy lands in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem that do not belong to it. It is time to re-examine this arrangement. This is the question that is of interest. It is the question that Canada should have directly addressed this week. The answer may have changed since Ottawa last wrote about these matters last summer.

https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/canada-seems-to-have-forgotten-its-peace-building-legacy-in-the-middle-east/article_210ddd6a-d19f-11ee-93a5-4fce67087a5c.html

The trials of Julian Assange:

A death sentence for democracy

By: Belén Fernández



In June 2022, when Russia's foreign ministry announced that it was considering "stringent measures" against United States media outlets in response to US restrictions on Russian media, the US Department of State huffily complained that the Kremlin was "engaged in a full assault on media freedom, access to information, and the truth".

This sort of hypocrisy was nothing new; after all, the world's self-appointed greatest democracy has long made it clear that basic rights and freedoms are things that only its enemies must abide by. The shameless double standard enables the US to do stuff like make a ruckus over Cuba's political prisoners while simultaneously operating an illegal US prison on occupied Cuban territory – or call out China for an alleged "spy balloon" while simultaneously spying on China and everyone else on the planet.

And on Wednesday, February 21, as WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange completed one last legal attempt to avoid extradition to the US, the country's own "full assault on media freedom, access to information, and the truth" was once again on full display.

If extradited, the Australian-born Assange faces up to 175 years in prison on spying charges – which again is pretty rich coming from a nation with an extensive history of illegally spying on its own citizens. In reality, Assange's only "crime" was to utilise WikiLeaks to expose the truth of US military crimes, as in the notorious "Collateral Murder" video that was released in 2010.

The video footage, which dates from 2007, shows a massacre of a dozen people in Baghdad by upbeat helicopter-borne US military personnel, who did not find it necessary to conceal the extent to which they were getting off on the slaughter.

Among the murdered Iraqis were two staffers for the Reuters news agency. Talk about assaults on media freedom. The US insists that, by publishing such content, Assange actively endangered the lives of innocent people in Iraq, Afghanistan, and beyond. But as I have

pointed out before, it would seem that one surefire way to not endanger innocent lives in such places would be to refrain from blowing them up in the first place.

To be sure, it is common knowledge that the US has killed a whole lot of civilians in a whole lot of countries, although the official narrative still maintains that all killing is ultimately done in the name of freedom, democracy, and other noble goals – rather than for sport or fun, as might be suggested by the “Collateral Murder” production.

So why, then, the need for such over-the-top pretences to secrecy and the super-vilification of the person of Julian Assange?

In the end, the US can’t afford to have its global do-gooder disguise too relentlessly or thoroughly challenged – since too much “access to information and the truth” would relieve the nation of its alibi for wreaking havoc across the world. Regardless of the final outcome, the protracted US war on Assange has already set a chilling precedent in terms of press freedom and other essential liberties.

Indeed, the calculated physical and mental destruction of Assange is meant to deter other publishers and journalists from the crime of pursuing the truth, as the US has effectively undertaken to classify reality itself. To that end, pending his extradition to the US, Assange has been held for the past five years in Belmarsh prison in southeast London, where the British government has proved faithfully complicit in the protracted efforts to bring about his demise.

Shortly after Assange’s arrest and incarceration in 2019, the United Nations special rapporteur on torture Nils Melzer warned that the man’s life was at risk, and that he exhibited “all the symptoms typical for prolonged exposure to psychological torture”.

Melzer, who is now a professor of international law at the University of Glasgow, also remarked at the time that, “while the US Government prosecutes Mr. Assange for publishing information about serious human rights violations, including torture and murder, the officials responsible for these crimes continue to enjoy impunity.”

Maybe Melzer should have been jailed, too?

And as Assange’s extradition battle now comes to a close, it seems the US may at long last get to definitively kill the messenger – and not just metaphorically. As his wife Stella Assange recently told reporters, “If he’s extradited, he will die.”

But Julian Assange’s persecution and torment also constitute a death sentence for any approximation of democracy and justice in the United States of America, a country whose constitution supposedly enshrines freedom of speech and the press.

At any rate, injustice has already scored a major victory with the chronic underreporting in US corporate media of Assange’s trials, which National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden has described as “the most important press freedom case in the world”.

In other words, this should be major news for the news industry itself. But disappearing the truth is another way to kill it – and in that respect, Julian Assange is already dead.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/2/22/the-trials-of-julian-assange-a-death-sentence-for-democracy>

Opinion: The crux of Israel's challenge



By: Frida Ghitis

(CNN) — More than four months after Hamas, the Iran-backed Islamist group that rules Gaza, launched a brutal attack on Israel, triggering a ferocious response, diplomats met in Cairo this week aiming to reach a temporary ceasefire. Despite the participation of CIA Director William Burns, Mossad chief David Barnea, and other heavyweights, the talks did not succeed and there's some question about whether they will continue. In the meantime, prominent



figures across the globe are urging Israel not to launch an offensive in Rafah, the Gaza city on the border with Egypt which remains a stronghold of Hamas brigades, and where more than a million civilians, most of them displaced by the fighting, have taken shelter amid widespread devastation across the strip. Rafah encapsulates the perverse genius of the Hamas strategy, and the unwinnable moral dilemmas it created with the war it deliberately provoked. By launching a brutal attack on Israel, committing large scale sexual violence, and taking hundreds of hostages, it ensured that Israel would counteract with overwhelming force.

By embedding itself in the population, it guaranteed that Israel's response would bring enormous suffering to Palestinians, knowing that Israel would take the blame and Hamas's support would surge, particularly in the West Bank, where Fatah, its Palestinian rival, dominates. The crux of the matter remains how to make Hamas relinquish power in Gaza. If Hamas leaders leave, surrender, or lay down their arms, the war could end. Israel's critics demanding an immediate ceasefire may believe Israel should accept Hamas's continuing control of Gaza, but Israelis, divided on political and social issues, are convinced of the justness of their cause. Hamas leaders vow that massacres like they committed on October 7 will happen "again and again," that Israel cannot be allowed to exist. Its political leaders, in comfortable exile, acknowledge the tactics will prove costly, but dismiss the casualties among their own people saying "We are proud to sacrifice martyrs."

With every passing day, however, with every Israeli bomb, with every death and injury among the besieged Palestinians, the pressure on Israel grows, even as Hamas remains defiant, hoping to survive the war as a power in Gaza. Hamas, classified as a terrorist group by many countries, not only rejects the existence of Israel. It is a repressive, fundamentalist, homophobic, dictatorial power in the Gaza strip. It was elected in 2006, but then brutalized its foes and became a dictatorship, funneling foreign aid to boost its financial empire and build tunnels and rockets. This conflict may be creating more terrorists than it is eliminating, but it is clear that it cannot end with Hamas still in control of Gaza. That would ensure that there's no peace for Israel or Palestinians on either side of the border, a perpetual war. The diplomats' immediate goal is to craft a formula for a temporary ceasefire and a release of some of the more than 130 Israeli hostages — an unknown number of them already dead — that Hamas is still holding after its October 7 rampage, when they brutalized families,

women and children, children killing some 1,200 and kidnapping some 240 people in Israel, most of them civilians. The hostages would be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. But the larger goal, beyond this short-term objective, is to leverage the deal to build a permanent ceasefire; to end the war so that the region, and the world, can move to the even more complicated matter, the most crucial of all, of what happens the “day after,” when the war ends. Among those raising alarms about a Rafah operation is President Joe Biden, who has become increasingly critical of Israel’s conduct of the war, calling it “over the top” and is demanding that Israel provide a credible plan for protecting the civilian population before it goes into Rafah. Israel is putting together controversial plans to temporarily relocate civilians to 15 tent cities along the coast, according to the Wall Street Journal. However, no official evacuation plan has been announced. Israelis see the situation in stark terms. Traveling to The Hague to file war crimes complaints against Hamas, Ofri Bibas, whose brother, his wife and two children — one of them a nine-month-old baby — were kidnapped and have not been released, called Hamas “the successors of Hitler, Eichmann and Goebbels...” Seeking a solution,

Biden is exasperated with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is also profoundly unpopular in Israel and remains in power only because of support from extreme right-wingers in his coalition. Biden is publicly demanding that Israel take more care to protect civilians. Standing with Jordan’s King Abdullah, Biden correctly described October 7 as “the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust.” He added, also correctly, that “the Palestinian people have also suffered unimaginable pain and loss.” The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry in Gaza says 27,000 have died in the war. It doesn’t distinguish combatants from non-combatants, but it’s beyond doubt that thousands of civilians have been killed, including large numbers of children. And the living are enduring excruciating conditions. It may seem that the administration is sending mixed signals, but a closer look shows a nuanced position that not only maintains strong support for Israel, but also continues to endorse the uprooting of Hamas, including in Rafah.

National Security spokesman John Kirby said this week, “We never said that they can’t go into Rafah and remove Hamas,” arguing that Hamas remains a threat and Israel will continue to go after its leadership and infrastructure, “as they should.” In the meantime, talks about what should happen in Gaza the “day after” are moving forward quietly, out of the spotlight. The New York Times reported that officials from six Arab countries recently met in Saudi Arabia to discuss the prospects. Even though Arab leaders are publicly critical of Israel, there’s little doubt that many of them wish fervently to see Hamas, which is backed by their regional foe Iran, removed from power. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and others, would like to see Hamas soundly defeated. One post-war scenario said to be gaining support among Sunni leaders is the formation of a new Palestinian administration, replacing the unpopular Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to run Gaza backed by Arab troops from countries like the United Arab Emirates and perhaps Saudi Arabia, which is reportedly willing to establish diplomatic relations with Israel if it agrees to a path toward the creation of a Palestinian state.

For now, Israelis — still smarting from the trauma of October 7, with hostages still in Hamas’s hands, and with surveys showing most Palestinians approved of Hamas’s decision to launch its onslaught — are in no mood to endorse a Palestinian state. Netanyahu has called the idea “delusional.” But if Hamas is uprooted — a prerequisite for genuine progress — the government of Israel could change. Polls predict Netanyahu would be crushed in another election. The sentiment in Israel could also change if the hostages return and if Arab countries offer steady reassurance. But before the war can end, before the wounds can begin to heal on both sides, Hamas has to be removed from power.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/15/opinions/israel-offensive-rafah-gaza-ghitis/index.html>

US and UK carry out fresh strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen

By: Jaroslav Lukiv

The Pentagon says US and UK fighter planes have carried out strikes on 18 Houthi sites in Yemen - the fourth such joint operation by the allies. The US says Saturday's strikes were directed against storage facilities, drones, air defence systems, radars and a helicopter of the militant movement. The UK says the allies acted to "further degrade" Houthi capabilities.

There have been sustained attacks by the Iran-backed Houthis on shipping in the important Red Sea trade route. The Houthis - who control large swathes of Yemen including the capital Sanaa - have been targeting vessels they say are linked to Israel and the West in response to the continuing Israel-Gaza war. Global supply chains are now facing severe disruption and rising costs as a result of some of the biggest shipping companies diverting journeys away from the Red Sea - one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.



In a joint statement, the Pentagon said that Saturday's "necessary and proportionate strikes specifically targeted 18 Houthi targets across eight locations in Yemen associated with Houthi underground weapons storage facilities, missile storage facilities, one-way attack unmanned aerial systems, air defence systems, radars, and a helicopter. "These precision strikes are intended to disrupt and degrade the capabilities that the Houthis use to threaten global trade, naval vessels, and the lives of innocent mariners in one of the world's most critical waterways." The statement said "the Houthis' now more than 45 attacks on commercial and naval vessels since mid-November constitute a threat to the global economy, as well as regional security and stability, and demand an international response".

The strikes were carried out "with support from Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and New Zealand", the statement added. Shortly afterwards, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin stressed that America "will not hesitate to take action, as needed, to defend lives and the free flow of commerce in one of the world's most critical waterways". Separately, UK Defence Secretary Grant Shapps said "it is our duty to protect lives at sea and preserve freedom of navigation". "That is why the Royal Air Force engaged in a fourth wave of precision strikes against Houthi military targets in Yemen". The US military said earlier in the day that it had destroyed seven Houthi mobile anti-ship missiles that were being prepared for strikes. Earlier this week, the crew of a Belize-flagged, British-registered cargo vessel abandoned ship off Yemen after it was hit by missiles fired by the Houthis.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-68395173.amp>

Britain's King Charles seen back at work for first time since cancer diagnosis

By: Sophie Tanno

(CNN) - King Charles III has been seen back at work for the first time since revealing his cancer diagnosis. The monarch was filmed shaking hands with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak as he arrived at Buckingham Palace on Wednesday afternoon. Their meeting marked the resumption of their weekly encounters to discuss government matters. Though the King has stopped carrying out public engagements while he undergoes his cancer treatment, he is continuing with his duties as head of state. Images from the British news agency PA Media show Charles, dressed in a suit and tie, greeting Sunak with a broad smile and the pair exchanging pleasantries.



“We’re all behind you. The country is all behind you,” Sunak said, according to PA Media. Charles replied: “I’ve had so many wonderful messages and cards. It’s reduced me to tears most of the time.” They went on to discuss how the King’s illness had shone a spotlight on cancer charities, with the King describing such organizations as “wonderful.” Prior to his meeting with the prime minister, Charles held an in-person Privy Council at the royal residence, which was attended by ministers including Lord President of the Council Penny Mordaunt.

On February 6, Buckingham Palace announced Charles, 75, had been diagnosed with an undisclosed form of cancer and would be stepping back from public-facing duties while he undergoes treatment. It was identified after he was admitted to a London hospital for a corrective procedure for an enlarged prostate last month, the palace said. Prostate cancer has been ruled out to CNN by a royal source, who did not provide any further detail.

Charles is expected to carry on getting his daily red boxes with government papers so he can continue working through state documents at home. CNN understands it is anticipated the King will continue his weekly audience with the prime minister and alternative arrangements will be made if his doctors advise him to minimize in-person contact.

Prince William, Charles’ son and the heir to the throne, and Queen Camilla are expected to take on more public engagements to account for Charles’ absence. Charles’ first public outing since the diagnosis was to attend a church service alongside Queen Camilla at St Mary Magdalene’s church on the monarch’s Sandringham estate in eastern England on February 11. He has previously expressed gratitude to the public for their support, saying it brought him “the greatest comfort and encouragement.”

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/21/europe/britain-king-charles-back-at-work-cancer-intl/index.html>

Senior Pakistan official admits election rigging as protests grip country

By: Shah Meer Baloch

A senior official in Pakistan has admitted to election rigging amid protests breaking out across the country over claims that its general election results were unfair. The confessional statement throws further questions over the legitimacy of the 8 February elections, which were marred by controversies and allegations of rigging in Pakistan. Commissioner Rawalpindi Liaqat Ali Chatta told reporters that authorities in Rawalpindi, Punjab province, changed the results of independent candidates – referring to candidates backed by the former prime minister Imran Khan’s party – who were leading with a margin of more than 70,000 votes. Chatta said there was so much “pressure” on him that he contemplated suicide, but that he then decided to make a public confession. “I take responsibility for the wrong in Rawalpindi. I should be punished for my crimes and other people involved in this crime should be punished.”



He also accused the chief election commissioner and the chief justice of Pakistan for their roles in the rigging. Chatta was arrested by police after the statement. The chief justice of the supreme court of Pakistan, Qazi Faez Isa, has denied the allegations. The claims have put pressure on the election commission and Pakistan’s powerful military, which has been accused by many political parties of rigging the election to favour the former prime minister Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari’s Pakistan People’s party (PPP).

However, the election commission has denied the allegations of rigging levelled by Chatta. The interim chief minister, Punjab Mohsin Naqvi, has taken notice of the commissioner’s allegations and ordered an “impartial probe” into allegations of manipulation of the election results. Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party (PTI) has demanded the resignation of the chief election commissioner and announced anti-rigging rallies across the country on Saturday to change the results. Khan, who has been in prison since last August, said the public mandate was stolen. As protests erupted across Pakistan, Punjab police on Saturday arrested the PTI-backed candidate, Salman Akram Raja, in Lahore for taking part in a protest. Raja is one of more than 100 candidates who say the results were changed with fake votes.

Fazlur Rehman, the head of a religious political party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, and the former head of a democratic alliance that ousted Khan in a vote of no confidence in 2022, also alleged that the elections were rigged and has rejected the results. Rehman alleged that the elections were sold and said “some were given entire assemblies in exchange for money”. In Pakistan’s restive province Balochistan, ethnic nationalist parties accused the military of

rigging the election for PPP and PML-N and closed major highways for days. The military that has ruled Pakistan for decades has been facing criticism for its alleged role in the manipulation of election results. Zahid Hussain, an author and political analyst, said the commissioner's confession confirmed that there had been large-scale rigging in general elections. He said the massive riggings and the senior bureaucrat coming out in public had pushed the country into a deeper crisis.

Though commissioner Chatta did not name Pakistan's powerful military as being responsible for the rigging, Hussain said that this was to be expected. "Everyone knows that the military and election commission were behind this large scale of rigging in Pakistan. The confessional statement is proof of the election rigging which many of us already knew," said Hussain.

<https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/17/senior-pakistan-official-admits-election-rigging-as-protests-grip-country>

Five Women Among Eight Injured As Armed Mob Targets Ahmadi Worship Place In AJK

At least five women among eight people belonging to the Ahmadiyya Community sustained serious injuries when miscreants attacked a worship place of the community in Kotli district of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) on Monday. Community members said that more than 50 unidentified assailants, armed with hammers, shovels, and sticks and other weapons stormed their worship place (Baitul Zikr) in Bhabra area of Kotli.



The mob demolished four minarets erected atop the worship place and its arch (mehr-ab). Two of the attackers also fired into the air to allegedly spread fear among the resident Ahmadiyya community. An Ahmadi woman identified as Zahida Parveen was also injured during the daylight attack on their worship place. Community members said that a total of eight people were injured, including five women and the rest men, including Wajid Husain. The injured were rushed to the Kotli District Hospital for treatment. The community has submitted a written complaint about the incident to the Kotli police demanding action against the culprits. It is pertinent to mention here that opponents of Jamaat-e-Ahmadiyya were demanding the demolition of minarets erected atop the worship place (Ahmadiyya Bait Ul Zikr). They had allegedly given the local administration an ultimatum to demolish the minarets by December 16, 2023; otherwise, they would attack the worship place and demolish the minarets themselves. It is pertinent to mention here that on November 24, 2023, miscreants demolished the minarets at an Ahmadi worship place in Kotli.

<https://thefridaytimes.com/12-Feb-2024/five-women-among-eight-injured-as-armed-mob-targets-ahmadi-worship-place-in-ajk>

Courts must exercise caution in matters of faith: CJP

By: Nasir Iqbal

ISLAMABAD: Chief Justice of Pakistan Qazi Faez Isa has observed that courts must exercise extreme caution in matters of faith, saying facts always give way to emotions in dealing with offences against religion and individual complainants supplant the state. He also cited Surah Al-Baqarah from the Holy Quran to emphasise that the Islamic faith expounds that there must not be any compulsion in religion. Religious compulsion also violates the divine scheme of accountability in the hereafter, CJP Isa observed in a judgement he wrote. He said that even Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was told by Almighty Allah that he was required to only convey the message and should not compel people to believe, as stipulated in verses from Surah Ar-Ra'd and Surah Yunus.



“Freedom of faith is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam. But sadly, in matters of religion tempers flare up and the Quranic mandate is forsaken,” he regretted. CJP Isa issued the judgement while heading a two-judge SC bench which had taken up a set of appeals moved by one Mubarak Ahmed Sami against a Lahore High Court order. Petitioner Sami had sought deletion of certain charges in an FIR registered against him on Dec 6, 2022 at the Chenab Nagar police station in Chiniot district.

The petitioner was accused of distributing/disseminating a proscribed book, Tafseer-i-Sagheer, which, according to the prosecution, was an offence under the Punjab Holy Quran (Printing and Recording) (Amendment) Act enforced in 2021, whereas the FIR alleged that the petitioner had done this in 2019 when the distribution/dissemination of the proscribed book was not an offence.

“The petitioner could not have been charged for it,” the judgement explained, adding that the petitioner was not being treated in accordance with the law because, while waiting for the conclusion of his trial, he remained imprisoned for a period much longer than what he could have been punished for if he was found guilty.

The petitioner was arrested on Jan 7, 2023 and remained incarcerated for 13 months — more than double the permissible punishment under Section 5 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1932. The Supreme Court set aside the impugned orders and ordered immediate release of the petitioner upon provision of a personal bond in the sum of Rs5,000.

Moreover, the charge was framed on June 24, 2023 by an additional sessions judge to the extent of charging the petitioner for the offences under Sections 298-C and 295-B of the Pakistan Penal Code. “The Holy Quran requires that all matters of significance should be pondered over and reflected upon Surah An-Nahl (chapter 16), verse 44 and Surah Yunus

(chapter 10), verse 24,” the judgement observed, adding that all those concerned with this case should have done so; instead they were eager to demonstrate that the Holy Quran was desecrated and that Prophet Muhammad was denigrated.

They should also have considered verse 9 of Surah al-Hijr (chapter 15) where Allah says, “We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and we will assuredly guard it.” The verdict observed that the principle of there being no compulsion in religion mentioned in the Holy Quran is enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental right.

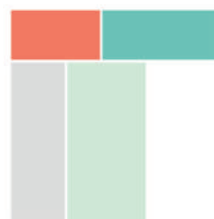
Clause (a) of Article 20 of the Constitution stipulates that “every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion”, while clause (b) of Article 20 states that “every religious denomination and every sect thereof shall have the right to establish, maintain and manage its religious institutions”.

Article 22 of the Constitution requires and prescribes that “no religious community or denomination shall be prevented from providing religious instruction for pupils of that community or denomination in any educational institution maintained wholly by that community or denomination”.

“These fundamental rights cannot be derogated from, circumvented or diluted. If only the functionaries of the state had heeded the Holy Quran, considered the Constitution and examined the law then the FIR would not have been registered,” the judgement observed.

The court regretted that bail was declined to the petitioner by the additional sessions judge on June 10 last year, without considering that the petitioner had already served out the maximum prescribed imprisonment for these offence. The high court also dismissed the petitioner’s bail application by overlooking this crucially important aspect of the case, it added.

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1812607>



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Vile Attempt of Muslim Clerics to Prevent the **Ahmadiyya Peace Symposium** in Visakhapatnam



LOVE FOR ALL HATRED FOR NONE

Stopping the Peace Symposium of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is not only condemnable but also an act that fosters unrest in society. Declaring the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community as non-Muslim goes against the principles of religious freedom enshrined in the constitution of India. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Visakhapatnam had planned to organise a Peace Symposium, inviting representatives from various faiths and ideologies to share their perspectives on global peace. However, certain Muslim organisations in the city issued an appeal to prevent this event. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community strongly condemns this reprehensible attempt and urges the government to ensure justice. Hindering the Community's peace efforts is tantamount to spreading disorder in society. Similarly, the Andhra Pradesh State Waqf Board in Visakhapatnam has endorsed the malicious attempt to label the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community as non-Muslim. This action contradicts the principles of tolerance and inter-religious harmony, constituting a clear violation of the Indian Constitution. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community has continuously announced its unwavering adherence to the Islamic creed, 'La ilaha illallah, Muhammadur Rasulullah'. It firmly believes that Allah is One without any partner and recognises Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) as the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets. The community sincerely upholds the conviction that the Holy Quran is the ultimate law (Shariah) revealed by God for humanity. Ahmadi Muslims wholeheartedly follow the fundamental tenets of Islam, including the Pillars of Islam and the Articles of Faith. No individual or organisation, hence, has the right to declare its members, who adhere to the Islamic creed (Kalima), as non-Muslims. Furthermore, several high courts in India have ruled that the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is an Islamic organisation. Likewise, the People Census Report of 2011 officially recognises the Community as a sect within Islam. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community is dedicated to promoting unity, brotherhood and mutual harmony among various religions, races, and communities in India. In the face of the deteriorating global situation, where the looming threat of a third world war appears inevitable, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, led by its Worldwide Head Hazrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, organises Peace Symposiums across the nation. These programs serve as a platform for individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their thoughts on achieving the crucial goal of establishing peace in today's world. It is disheartening that certain Muslim organisations aim to obstruct such sincere endeavours for peace. Their actions contribute to the spread of disharmony among people, disrupting the peaceful atmosphere of society. In a secular country like India, it is crucial to note that religious edicts (Fatwas) do not constitute laws, particularly when these edicts are based on the unfounded opinions of clerics rather than the true teachings of Islam. Peace Symposiums play a crucial role in fostering unity among different communities, strengthening bonds of love, and establishing peace in society. These events should be encouraged and supported as they are organised for the benefit of society. Islam, literally meaning 'peace', inherently rejects any action aimed at disrupting peace. Such actions stand in stark contradiction to Islamic teachings and principles. We urge all Muslim organisations to act responsibly and refrain from issuing statements that can harm societal peace and religious harmony. We invite them to strive to promote respect and interfaith harmony, which align with the true principles of Islam.

<https://lightofislam.in/vile-attempt-of-muslim-clerics-to-prevent-the-ahmadiyya-peace-symposium-in-visakhapatnam/>

UK signs new deal with EU to tackle small boat crossings

The UK has signed a new deal with the EU's border agency to work more closely together to stop small boats crossing the English Channel. The agreement with Frontex is intended to lead to more sharing of information and expertise. It is the latest in a series of measures aimed at improving cooperation in tackling illegal migration. Last year, nearly 30,000 migrants crossed the Channel to the UK from France - down a third on 2022. However, the total was still the



second highest figure on record. The deal includes training for both the UK and EU's border agencies to learn from successful tactics overseas, collaboration on the development of new technologies, and the deployment of staff on both sides to help coordinate efforts to stop crossings. Home Secretary James Cleverly said: "Organised immigration crime and people smuggling are global challenges that require shared solutions and ambitions. "Our landmark working arrangement between the UK and Frontex is another crucial step in tackling illegal migration, securing our borders and stopping the boats." The home secretary told BBC Radio 4's Today programme the deal focused on making it easier to share information and work together on operations, rather than being about returning migrants to the countries they came from.

However, he said the government was looking at signing returns agreements with more countries, following a deal with Albania which was reached in December 2022. Lucy Moreton, from the ISU, a union representing border force staff, said that, by not including a returns agreement, the deal "was not looking at the larger part of the migration issue". She told Today it also did not confirm the UK would regain access to the Eurodac database, which was lost after Brexit. The database stores the fingerprints of asylum seekers and migrants who have entered a European country, which Ms Moreton said would help returns by proving individuals had rightful residence in other countries. The agreement states that generally both the UK and the EU will cover their own costs for activities carried out under it. However, it says the UK will pay Frontex for certain activities, with the details to be decided in a separate agreement. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak made "stopping the boats" one of his five key priorities last year. So far, 1,716 people have made the dangerous crossing this year, down from 2,720 in the same period in 2023. The deal follows an agreement in May between Mr Sunak and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to strengthen cooperation between UK and EU border agencies in tackling small boat crossings. In March, the UK also signed an agreement with France, which included paying almost £500m over three years to fund extra law enforcement officers and a new detention centre in the country.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-68379392.amp>

Japan naked festival: Women join Hadaka Matsuri for first time

By: Shaimaa Khalil

The sea of chanting, nearly-naked men tussle, push and shove towards the shrine. "Washoi! Washoi!" they yell - let's go, let's go. It is scene that has barely changed in the 1,250 years the Hadaka Matsuri, or the Naked Festival, has been taking place at the Konomiya Shrine, in central Japan.

But this year there is a change - a big one.

Away from the men's huddle, a group are about to become the first women to ever take part.

The women gathered here know they are making history. Finding room in traditionally male-dominated spaces is difficult anywhere, but in Japan - which last year ranked 125 out of 146 on the World Economic Forum's gender gap index - it is particularly hard.

Not that they weren't always there.

"In the background, women have always worked very hard to support the men in the festival," explains Atsuko Tamakoshi, whose family has been working at the Konomiya festival for generations. But the idea of actually taking part in the festival - which sees the men attempt to drive away evil spirits, before praying for happiness at the shrine - seems to have never come up before. According to Naruhito Tsunoda, there has never been an actual ban. It's just that no one had ever asked.

And when they did, the answer was easy.

"I believe the most important thing is for there to be a fun festival for everyone. I think God would be happiest about that too," he told news agency Reuters.

Not everyone in the community was as accommodating though.



"There were many voices that were concerned (about us taking part) - saying, 'What are women doing in a men's festival?', 'This is a men's festival, it's serious'," Tamakoshi, a 56-year-old grandmother, explains. "But we were all united in what we wanted to do. We believed that God would watch over us if we were sincere."

The women waiting for their turn are indeed sincere. What they are not is naked.

Instead many are wearing "happi coats" - long, purple robes - and white shorts, as opposed to the men's loincloths, while carrying their own bamboo offerings. They won't be part of the big scramble which accompanied the men's rush to the shrine, or the clambering over one another to touch the Shin Otoko, or the 'male deity' - a man chosen by the shrine. Touching him, as the tradition goes, is meant to drive evil spirits away.

It doesn't take away the significance of this moment.

"I feel that times have finally changed," Yumiko Fujie tells the BBC. "But I also feel a sense of responsibility." These women, however, are not just breaking gender barriers with their participation. They are also keeping the tradition alive. This week, another naked festival - held at Kokuseki Temple in Japan's north - said this would be the last one they would hold. There simply were not enough young people to keep the festival going.

Japan has one of the fastest ageing populations on earth. Last year, for the first time, more than one in 10 people were aged 80 or older. Meanwhile, its birth rate stands at just 1.3 per woman, with only 800,000 babies born last year.

The moment has come for the women to make their way to the shrine.

They stand in two parallel lines and carry the long bamboo sticks wrapped in intertwined red and white ribbons. Atsuko Tamakoshi is leading the way - blowing her whistle to prompt the rhythmic chant they've heard the men say for decades.

'Washoi Washoi,' the women shout.

The women focus on the movements and speed which they've practiced for weeks. They know they have to get this right. Aware that the eyes of the media and the spectators are on them they're also smiling a mix of nerves and excitement. There are supportive cries from the watching crowd, some shouting "Gambatte" or 'keep going!', as they push through the freezing temperatures. They enter the Konomiya Shinto shrine's courtyard and, like the men, they're sprayed with cold water. It seems to energise them even more. After their offering is accepted, the women end the ceremony with the traditional salutation of two bows, two claps and one final bow.



And then, the enormity of the moment sets in. The women erupt into cheers, they jump around and hug each other crying. "Arigatogozaimasu! Arigato!" Thank you! Thank you! They say to each other and the crowd now applauding them. "I got so teary," Michiko Ikai says. "I wasn't sure I could join, but now I feel a sense of achievement." As they make their way out of the shrine, the women are stopped by members of the public who want to

take pictures with them and media outlets who want to interview them. They happily oblige. "I've done it. I'm so happy," Mineko Akahori tells the BBC. "I'm really grateful that as a woman, I could participate for the first time." Her friend and teammate Minako Ando adds that simply "becoming the first to do something like this is just great". "Times are changing," says Hiromo Maeda. Her family has been running a local inn which has hosted some of the male festival-goers for the last 30 years. "I think our prayers and wishes are the same. It doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman. Our passion is the same." For Atsuko Tamakoshi, who has played such a key role in the day, there is a moment to reflect on what they have all achieved together. She's both emotional and relieved. "My husband has always taken part in this festival," she tells the BBC. "And I was always the spectator. I'm now filled with gratitude and happiness."

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68378651>

Pakistan Supreme Court Defends Ruling On Minorities After Backlash

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Supreme Court has defended its top judge after a ruling he issued related to blasphemy that sparked an online backlash and led to thinly veiled death threats. The campaign targeting Supreme Court Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa began after he ordered the release of a man from the Ahmadi religious sect, considered heretical by hardline Muslim scholars. The man had been accused of disseminating a forbidden Ahmadi text, which firebrand clerics consider tantamount to blasphemy -- a hot-button issue in Muslim-majority Pakistan where even unproven allegations of offending Islam have sparked violence. The Supreme Court issued a statement on Thursday evening defending the ruling, denying that it went against the Islamic constitution. "This impression is absolutely wrong," it said. "The organised campaign against judiciary and judges is unfortunate." Isa's ruling first went unnoticed two weeks ago, before it was highlighted by social media accounts linked to the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan party behind violent anti-blasphemy protests. The Pakistani chapter of the Taliban militant group -- known as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) -- called Isa "an enemy of Islam" and "a damned man". Ahmadis have been discriminated against and persecuted for decades in Pakistan, because of their belief in a 19th century prophet after Muhammad. The second amendment of Pakistan's constitution, made in 1974, declares Ahmadis non-Muslims. The law also prohibits them from professing to be Muslims or spreading their faith, and allows the death penalty for those found guilty of insulting Islam. In his judgement, Isa ruled that according to the constitution, "every citizen shall have the right to profess, practice and propagate his religion". "Freedom of faith is one of the fundamental tenets of Islam. But sadly, in matters of religion, tempers flare up and the Qur'anic mandate is forsaken," he added. He also said the book allegedly disseminated by the accused had not been outlawed at the time of the alleged crime in 2019. Cleric Fazlur Rehman, the influential leader of the conservative religious party Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, said Isa's reasoning was "false and based on bad intentions". In 2011, the governor of eastern Punjab province was killed by his own bodyguard after calling for reforms to the stringent blasphemy laws which Ahmadis frequently fall foul of.



of.

https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-supreme-court-defends-ruling-on-minorities-after-backlash/amp_articleshow/107940868.cms

India's 'Whitey on the moon' moment

By: Vidya Krishnan

On August 23, 2023, India's Chandrayaan-3 spacecraft successfully landed on the moon, making India the fourth country in the world, after the United States, the USSR and China, to achieve such a feat. It was a proud moment for a young, post-colonial nation just 75 years into her freedom. Tragically, it was also India's very own "Whitey on the moon" moment. In 1970, soon after the US became the first country in history to land on the moon, African-American jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron released his famous spoken word poem "Whitey on the moon", criticising the Apollo space programme as a white man's vanity project completed at great expense and with complete disregard for the deep poverty and exploitation being experienced by Black Americans at the time.

*"The man jus' upped my rent las' night.
'cause Whitey's on the moon
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
but Whitey's on the moon
I wonder why he's uppi' me?
'cause Whitey's on the moon?
I was already payin' 'im fifty a week.
with Whitey on the moon", sang Scott-Heron, accompanied by conga drums.*

The poem quickly became a hit among Black Americans, who were angry that their country had invested in – and was shamelessly celebrating the completion of – an expensive space programme that did not involve or benefit their communities, while they were struggling with medical debt, high taxes, underemployment, urban decay, high rates of incarceration, and racial discrimination among other fundamental problems. The parallels between the US society at the time of the Apollo mission described in this poem and modern-day India in the aftermath of its own landmark moon mission are difficult to ignore. As Indian scientists – mostly upper caste, prosperous and secure in their place in the country – were celebrating the moon landing, millions of marginalised, disfranchised, impoverished Indians were suffering immensely. Throughout the month-long journey of the Chandrayaan-3 spacecraft towards the moon, in the southeastern Indian state of Manipur, an ethnic cleansing effort was under way. Entire villages were burned to the ground, dozens were killed, and tens of thousands were left without homes. Just before the beginning of the spacecraft's journey, the government had gifted itself a brand new parliament building, which cost \$120m to construct – a high price, especially at a time when, across the country, countless underprivileged Indians are struggling with hunger and unemployment. The controversial building was also inaugurated on a controversial date – the 140th birth anniversary of the father of Hindu nationalist ideology, VD Savarkar, who is a divisive figure due to his connection to the 1948 assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. A six-time parliamentarian from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the outgoing Wrestling Federation of India chief, Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh, who is accused of sexually abusing female wrestlers, was also present at the inauguration ceremony. Delhi police manhandled Indian wrestlers, many of them Olympians, who wanted to march to the parliament building to protest his actions. Within six months of the eventful inauguration, the new parliament building was attacked, with two men entering the inner chambers, shouting slogans and setting off canisters of coloured gas. This was followed by an even more historic low, as 141 parliamentarians – all from opposition parties –

were suspended for demanding a statement from the prime minister on the security breach. Without opposition, the Modi administration bulldozed three new pieces of legislation to India's criminal justice system that allow the government to censor news content, imperil encrypted communication, shut down the internet, and intercept communications with minimal accountability. Sadly, none of this is extraordinary in India today. The same nation that successfully sent a craft all the way to the moon has



turned abuse and oppression of its most marginalised and underprivileged members into a casual pastime. Every day, Indian newspapers lay bare the bones of some broken minority. Headlines are depressing, scary. “Man rapes eight-year-old”; “Muslim lynched over beef”; “Dalit man urinated upon, beaten”...

Minorities, sitting ducks with no power to protect themselves, endure abuse, humiliation and violence with no expectation of justice. They are left to stew in their own grief, the way raw mangoes are fermented in their own brine. Meanwhile, the rich and the privileged, the “whitneys” of India, celebrate the growing economy, the new temples, the impressive new parliament, and landmark journeys to the moon. There is such little fraternity – genuine solidarity among citizens – in India. It is baffling to me that we continue to call ourselves one nation, the world's largest democracy. The US-based non-profit Freedom House already downgraded India's democracy from “free” to “partially free,” while the Sweden-based V-Dem Institute has deemed it an “electoral autocracy.” Democracy, from its long misuse, now exists only in our past. This is the only reasonable conclusion as every social contract underpinning law and order breaks down. Truth is, India is now a state of regulatory capture, and, as we enter another election year, the minorities of India have developed a collective wisdom unique to the oppressed: they know they are on their own.

So here we are. India made it to the moon, but Indian people are still poor, still hungry. Indian women are still unsafe. No scientific triumph can obscure the degradation of human life in our country. A journey to the moon cannot hide the ever-deepening inequality and seemingly endless injustices devastating minorities. India's always camera-friendly, attention-loving Prime Minister Narendra Modi who wasted no time basking in the glory of Indian scientists who took India to the moon, has yet to say a word on the violence in Manipur. Modi's Home Minister Amit Shah immediately hailed the successful landing of Chandrayaan-3 – emphasising that it made India the first nation to “touch the South Pole of the moon”. However, he has yet to explain to the citizens why a BJP member had invited the two miscreants who attacked the parliament building. He has also not explained why sexual predators are welcomed to the Parliament and why he has not done a single press conference in the ten years he has been in office. Just as the Apollo mission was a project for white America, Chandrayaan-3 was a project for educated, prosperous, upper-caste Indians. With our many brilliant scientists and increasingly powerful technologies, I have no doubt India will soon put a man on the moon, and from there go on to Mars, Jupiter and the heavens beyond. None of it changes that we remain a country that has no money to feed the hungry, house the homeless, and tend to the sick – a country where, as “Whitey's on the moon”, others have, as Scott-Heron said, “No hot water, no toilets, no lights.”

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/2/22/indias-whitey-on-the-moon-moment>

West African Heads Meet to Keep Junta-Led Nations in Bloc

ABUJA, NIGERIA — Heads of state across West Africa are meeting Saturday to call again on three junta-led nations to rescind their decision to quit the regional bloc and to review sanctions imposed on Niger following a coup there. The summit of the 15-nation regional economic bloc known as ECOWAS in Nigeria's capital, Abuja, comes at a critical time when the 49-year-old bloc's future is threatened as it struggles with possible disintegration and a recent surge in coups fueled



by discontent over the performance of elected governments whose citizens barely benefit from mineral resources. Decisions to be made at the summit “must be guided by our commitment to safeguarding the constitutional order, upholding democratic principles and promoting the social and economic well-being of the citizens,” Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, current chairman of ECOWAS, said at the start of the summit. Top of the agenda is the recent decision by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to leave ECOWAS, or the Economic Community of West African States, over “inhumane sanctions.” That move is unprecedented since the bloc was established in 1975 and grew to become the region's top political and economic authority.

“We must re-examine our current approach to the quest for constitutional order in our member states,” Tinubu said. “I therefore urge them to reconsider the decision ... and not to perceive our organization as the enemy.” The summit is also expected to review the harsh sanctions imposed on Niger. This week, one of the bloc's founding leaders and Nigeria's former military ruler, Yakubu Gowon, urged regional leaders to lift the sanctions, noting that the bloc is “more than a coalition of states [but] is a community established for the good of our people.” In the past year, however, the bloc has struggled to resolve the region's most pressing challenge: The Sahel, the vast, arid expanse south of the Sahara Desert that stretches across several West African countries, faces growing violence from Islamic extremists and rebels, which in turn has caused soldiers to depose elected governments.

The nine coups in West and Central Africa since 2020 followed a similar pattern, with coup leaders accusing governments of failing to provide security and good governance. Most of the coup-hit countries are also among the poorest and least-developed in the world. The sanctions against Niger and the threat of military intervention to reverse the coup were “the likely triggers to an inevitable outcome” of the three countries' withdrawal from the bloc, said Karim Manuel, an analyst for the Middle East and Africa with the Economist Intelligence Unit. With their withdrawal, “the West African region will be increasingly fragmented and divided (while) the new alliance between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger fragments the West African bloc and reflects an axis of opposition to the traditional structures that have underpinned the region for decades,” Manuel added.

<https://www.voanews.com/a/west-african-heads-meet-to-keep-junta-led-nations-in-bloc/7501129.html>

Japan's early bloom of cherry blossoms sparks concerns amid record heat

By: Stuti Mishra



Cherry blossoms, Japan's symbol of spring, have started blooming earlier this year amid hotter winter temperatures in February. Japan usually sees the peak cherry blossom season in March and April when the streets of its major cities are adorned by beautiful pink and white flowers, attracting millions of visitors. Some flowers, like Kawazu blossoms, bloom earlier in the season, usually by late February. But videos from Kawazu, a small town on the east coast of the Izu Peninsula after which the species is named, show the flowers were in full bloom by mid-February, according to Weather.com. Streets in Kawazu are seen covered with pink flowers that appear to be in the peak of their season, with fears that the flowers will begin to deflower sooner, before the Cherry blossom festivals end. The flowers in Tokyo are also expected to bloom early this year again after a mild winter and warm spring this year in Japan amid record-breaking temperatures around the world. Climate crisis and urban warming have been impacting the flowering dates of cherry blossoms in Japan. In 2023, the iconic blossoms appeared ten days earlier than usual and tied with an early record set in 2020 and 2021 for the earliest bloom date since the records began in 1950s. The climate crisis and urban warming have pushed forward the "peak bloom" flowering period by 11 days, researchers from the Met Office in the United Kingdom and Osaka Metropolitan University in Japan said in a study in 2022. In Japan, forecasts for cherry blossom bloom are an integral part of the country's spring celebrations. The government has set a standard for observing cherry blossom trees and has been forecasting the annual bloom since 1955. According to the rules, once five or six flowers have opened on the branches of the tree, it's considered to be blossoming. Once 80 per cent of the tree has flowered, it's deemed to be in full bloom. In 2023, the Tokyo tree that's used for forecasting had 11 flowers by 14 March. The season does not just hold cultural significance, but it's also a major tourist attraction. An estimated 63 million people travel to Japan to see the cherry blossoms, spending around \$2.7bn in the process, according to a 2019 estimate from Kansai University. Average winter temperatures in Japan have increased by several degrees since pre-industrial times, under the influence of both climate crisis and urban warming, scientists have observed. Hundreds of monthly high-temperature records for February have been broken in Japan this year following several months of mild temperatures.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/climate-change/news/cherry-blossoms-tokyo-japan-climate-crisis-b2501148.html>

Pakistan woman in Arabic script dress saved from mob claiming blasphemy

By: Caroline Davies



An angry mob in Pakistan accused a woman who wore a dress adorned with Arabic calligraphy of blasphemy, after mistaking them for Quran verses. She was saved by police who escorted her to safety after hundreds gathered. She later gave a public apology. The dress has the word "Halwa" printed in Arabic letters on it, meaning beautiful in Arabic. Blasphemy is punishable by death in Pakistan. Some people have been lynched even before their cases go on trial. Police told the BBC they first received a call at about 13:10 local (08:10 GMT) on Sunday that a crowd had gathered around a woman at a restaurant in Lahore, the capital of the Pakistani province of Punjab. Around 300 people had crowded outside the restaurant by the time they arrived, said Assistant Superintendent Syeda Shehribano. Videos of the scene circulated on social media, with one showing a woman, visibly scared, sitting in the far corner of the restaurant, shielding her face with her hand. In another, she is surrounded by officers, who had formed the only barrier between her and a growing crowd who were shouting for her to remove the shirt. In some videos, people can be heard chanting that those who blaspheme must be beheaded. Footage shared on social media shows Ms Shehribano standing at the restaurant's entrance, trying to restore order to an increasingly charged crowd. "Nobody actually knew what was written on the shirt," she said. "The major feat was to try to get that woman out of the area in order to ensure that she is safe." Ms Shehribano adds that she had to "negotiate" with the crowd. "We told them we would take the woman with us, her actions are going to be taken into account and we're going to hold her responsible for whatever crime committed as per the law of the land." The footage later showed Ms Shehribano putting her arm around the woman, now covered by a black robe and a headscarf, and pushing through the crowd. Other police officers formed a chain with their arms to clear their path as people in the crowd pushed against them. Ms Shehribano said supporters of the hardline Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) party were among those in the crowd. The woman was brought into a police station, where several religious scholars confirmed that the text on her dress was Arabic calligraphy, not verses from the Quran. The police then asked the scholars to record a video stating their findings and that the woman was innocent. "I didn't have any such intention, it happened by mistake. Still I apologise for all that happened, and I'll make sure it never happens again," she said, adding that she is a

devout Muslim and would never commit blasphemy. Authorities said she was in Lahore to do some shopping, and has since left the city. Tahir Mahmood Ashrafi, a former adviser to the prime minister on religious affairs said on X, formerly known as Twitter, that the men in the crowd, rather than the woman, should have been the ones to apologise. Ms Shehribano said authorities have seen a "mushrooming of incidents" similar to that on Sunday. "Had I not screamed and had I not convinced the crowd that we will do something about it, It would have turned nastier... Thank God," she said. She has been widely praised, with the Chief of Punjab police calling for her to receive an award for her bravery. Laws against blasphemy were first codified by India's British rulers and expanded in the 1980s under the military government. In August last year, scores of churches and homes were burnt in Jaranwala, a city east of Pakistan, after two men from the city were accused of damaging the Quran.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68399822>

Austria: Four women and a girl killed in Vienna in 24 hours

Police in Vienna are investigating the deaths of four women and a teenage girl in a 24-hour period. Three women were stabbed to death by a man in a brothel in Austria's capital on Friday. A suspect was arrested. Another woman and her daughter were killed in an unrelated incident. Investigators believe the girl's father was responsible. Campaigners described the day as "Black Friday" and called for urgent action to stop violence against women. The bodies of three women, believed to be Chinese nationals, were found in a building in the central Brigittenau district at around 21:00 local time (20:00 GMT) after a witness called the emergency services. The suspect, whom police have described as a 27-year-old Afghan national, was found hiding near the brothel with a knife in his hand. On Sunday, police said the man had "basically confessed" to the killings during his first interrogation. The motive is currently unclear but further questioning and investigations are to follow. Autopsies will be carried out on the bodies of the three victims later on Sunday. Earlier on Friday, a 51-year-old woman and her 13-year-old daughter were found dead in an apartment in the Erdberg area - about 12km (seven miles) from where the other incident happened. There is no suggestion they are connected. Police are still searching for the woman's husband, who is also the girl's father, as investigators suspect he may have strangled or choked them to death. "The initial investigations, which are currently under way, indicate that blunt force was involved," said police spokesman Philip Hasslinger. Eva-Maria Holzleitner, the leader of the women's policy department of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SPO), has urged the federal government to call a crisis meeting to discuss the issue of femicide in the country. "We mourn the murdered women, are thinking about the survivors and call for a national action plan to protect against violence to finally be implemented in order to protect women's lives in Austria," said Ms Holzleitner. Klaudia Friebe, leader of umbrella organisation the Austrian Women's Ring (OFR), wrote on X (formerly Twitter) that "this day will go down in history as Black Friday with five dead women". According to the latest data on femicide rates in Austria, published by the Institute of Conflict Research, some 319 women were killed in the country between 2010 and 2020 - mostly by male partners or ex-partners. The coalition government has vowed to crack down on the issue - pledging almost €25m (£21m) in 2021 to initiatives aimed at protecting women against violence.



<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-68392233.amp>

‘People want our government to do something’: Commons Gaza chaos was the day British democracy failed

By: Toby Helm & James Tapper



The week had started well for the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC). Keir Starmer had finally backed calls for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and the Prince of Wales had raised his concerns about the appalling loss of life in Gaza. But on Saturday, as more than 200 people gathered at Conway Hall in London for the campaign’s annual general meeting, optimism that the debate over the Middle East might be turning the PSC’s way had been superseded by puzzlement – and some anger. “It’s not extremist to be against the war,” said Fiona Goldie, an activist from Carlisle in Cumbria. “It’s the norm to want peace.”

She was referring to suggestions that pro-Palestinian activists like her had been in some way responsible for the chaotic scenes that had unfolded inside the House of Commons on Wednesday and Thursday, during a debate on the Middle East conflict. For months MPs have reported feeling intimidated by pro-Palestinian activists in their constituencies and online. The murder in October 2021 in Essex of the Tory MP David Amess by an Islamist extremist remains fresh in their minds. But last week the accusations against pro-Palestinian campaigners widened. The front page of Saturday’s Times reported that the PSC had been trying to sabotage British democracy, no less, and force parliament into lockdown to advance its cause.

Goldie, and others with her, seemed anything but extreme in their methods or views as they went about their business yesterday. She told how she and friends had handed out leaflets for months in Carlisle town centre most Saturday lunchtimes. The public, she insisted, was “overwhelmingly sympathetic”. “The feedback we get from somewhere as non-political as Carlisle is that people are outraged. They want our government to do something.” But with feelings over events in Gaza running high, and as the UK heads towards a general election that has increased the heat of the conflict between parties in the House of Commons, arguments over Israel and Gaza have become entangled with domestic Westminster politics and the entire debate has turned toxic.

On Friday, the twice-sacked Tory home secretary, Suella Braverman, claimed that “Islamist cranks and leftwing extremists” had taken control of the UK’s streets. It was all part of a left-wing agenda, she said. The Conservative MP Lee Anderson said Islamists had “got control of London” and that its Labour mayor, Sadiq Khan had “given our capital city away to his mates”. Many of those heading through the winter sunshine towards Conway Hall wore the keffiyeh, the black and white scarf that has come to symbolise the Palestinian cause. But Roshan Pedder, from Surrey, proudly showed off her African National Congress scarf, as a symbol of hope, and to demonstrate that those who had come to the meeting were from a long and wide tradition of peace campaigning. “We faced down Reagan and Thatcher [who were] holding out to the bitter end against sanctions,” she said. “And we pressed and pressed and pressed and eventually it burst.” Pedder rejected the idea that demonstrating outside an MP’s office was wrong. “I don’t see how it can be intimidating as long as it’s peaceful,” she said. “Isn’t talking to our MPs what we’re supposed to do in a democracy?” On Thursday morning, British democracy was very much in the frame. After 24 hours of furious and unseemly argument over the handling of a debate in the House of Commons on a Gaza ceasefire by the speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, the veteran Labour MP Barry Sheerman rose to declare the behaviour of his colleagues a disgrace. Vicious political point-scoring had drowned out serious debate on events in Gaza, and whether calling for a ceasefire was now the best way forward. “It was shameful that the BBC had to blank off the proceedings at one stage because of the crude and vile language that was coming from one end of the chamber,” said Sheerman.

A senior Tory MP roamed the Commons corridors in a state of fury at the way the house had failed to conduct a civilised, serious and dignified discussions on the Israel-Gaza question, of all issues. “It is a fucking disgrace. We are now in a row with ourselves, among ourselves, debating whether to kick out the speaker of the House of Commons, rather than the issue at hand, which could not be more serious. It is the most depressing day of my life as an MP.” Hoyle’s troubles had begun the previous morning, when he decided to go against the advice of his own officials and select a Labour amendment, as well as a government one, to an SNP opposition day motion calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Normally only the government can put down an amendment to an opposition day motion but Hoyle had gone out on a limb. The SNP’s motion was for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire, with the onus on Israel, and it mentioned what it called the Netanyahu government’s “collective punishment” of Palestinians. Labour’s amendment, meanwhile, was for an “immediate, humanitarian ceasefire” observed by all. It condemned the terrorism of Hamas, while also demanding the release of hostages, and calling on Israel to stop its bombardment. The government amendment did not call for an immediate ceasefire but put the emphasis on a humanitarian pause to the conflict, working towards a ceasefire. Hoyle, who used to sit on the Labour benches before becoming speaker, had, as a result, left himself wide open to accusations of pro-Labour bias, and of helping Starmer avoid the damaging prospect of seeing many of his pro-ceasefire MPs rebel by voting for the SNP motion calling for an unconditional and immediate ceasefire.

Many Labour MPs felt under pressure from constituents to show they backed a ceasefire. If Labour’s own amendment wasn’t selected, backing the SNP motion would have been the only way to answer those voters. One senior Labour MP said: “Everyone knew that the SNP had chosen the issue of a Gaza ceasefire for their opposition day solely to expose splits on our side. It was entirely cynical on their part. I think Hoyle was right to do what he did. Opposition days are supposed to be occasions when the opposition parties criticise the government. This SNP opposition day was different. It was designed to attack Labour.” If no Labour amendment had been allowed, and Starmer had been left to whip his MPs to abstain, this could have seen mass resignations, as happened with the likes of Jess Phillips when a similar situation occurred last November.

"The situation was really tense at the top," said one Labour source. "There were fears that at least two shadow cabinet members would have resigned. There would have been a big rebellion that would have seriously damaged Keir." There were reports, denied by Labour and Hoyle, that with this in mind team Starmer had made clear to the speaker that the party would not back his re-election at the start of the next parliament unless he called the Labour amendment. What ensued was undignified chaos as Hoyle felt the full force of Tory and SNP fury. Both parties had in interest in exposing Labour splits. When the clerk of the house, Tom Goldsmith, wrote an official note for publication to record that the speaker had gone against convention and his advice, the Tories withdrew from the process and the votes. Labour's amendment passed and the SNP motion was never voted on, though it had been its opposition day in the first place. Immediately SNP MPs suggested that Hoyle's position was untenable. On Wednesday night there were rowdy scenes, worse than any many could recall. Penny Mordaunt, leader of the House of Commons, desperate to score political points, accused the speaker of having "hijacked" the debate and "undermined the confidence of the Commons." The SNP milked the occasion for all it was worth, saying the whole episode had shown the contempt with which Westminster regarded Scotland's ruling party and the third biggest party in the Commons. "We have seen the SNP opposition day turn into a Labour opposition day and I'm afraid that that is treating myself and my colleagues in the Scottish National party with complete and utter contempt," said Stephen Flynn, the SNP's leader at Westminster.

On Thursday, a tearful and clearly sleep-deprived Hoyle made his second apology to the house in 12 hours for what he admitted had been a serious error of judgment. "I apologise to the House. I made a mistake: we do make mistakes and I own up to mine." But he made clear that in doing what he did he had had in mind the interests of all MPs, and that he had felt that those would be best served by allowing two amendments, Tory and Labour, as well the SNP motion, so all the main party positions could be laid out, Labour's included. It had been for the very best of reasons, he said, to help not fan the flames. "I will defend every member in this House."

Every member matters to me in this House. As has been said, I never, ever want to go through a situation where I pick up a phone to find a friend, on whatever side, has been murdered by a terrorist. I also do not want another [terrorist] attack on this House – I was in the chair on that day. I have seen, I have witnessed. I will not share the details, but the details of the things that have been brought to me are absolutely frightening for all members of the House, on all sides. I have a duty of care and I say that. If my mistake is looking after members, I am guilty."

This weekend, although more than 70 MPs have signed a motion expressing no confidence in the speaker, their efforts to oust him seem to have stalled, at least for now. Plenty of right-wing Tories have swung behind him, including the veteran Sir Edward Leigh, who said it was time to move on and have another debate as soon as possible on a government motion, with all amendments considered "to restore our reputation as soon as possible".

Back at Conway Hall on Saturday, Pedder wondered how ordinary people could get their voices through. Referring to the behaviour of the main parties and their MPs, she said: "These were people applying archaic rules that nobody understood. We have a system that does not allow the public voice to enter parliament. MPs were looking after their vote banks instead of looking at the genocide – there's no other word for it – in Gaza, and the injustices over the last 75 years that the Palestinian people have suffered."

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/feb/25/commons-gaza-chaos-mps-israel-hamas-war-british-democracy-uk>

How to know if the **olive oil** you're buying is actually good for you

By: Kristen Rogers



Olive oil has many health benefits, including lowering the risk for dementia, poor heart health, cognitive decline or early death. How beneficial the Mediterranean diet staple actually is depends on how the product is harvested, processed, stored and used — in farms or mills, grocery stores and your own home. “The health benefits come from a variety of factors or components within olive oil,” said Dr. Tassos Kyriakides, assistant professor of biostatistics at the Yale School of Public Health in New Haven, Connecticut. “The main one is oleic acid, and that has been shown to have very healthful benefits.” Also important is the rich amount of polyphenols in olive oil, which are a type of antioxidant that helps protect against cell damage and inflammation in the body, said Dr. Mercedes Fernández, head of the standardization and research unit of the International Olive Council, an intergovernmental organization based in Spain. Here’s what you need to know to select the best possible olive oil for your diet.

Harvest and processing

Historically, brands that maintain a high quality of olive oil are those that put care into the process from the moment of harvest, Kyriakides said. Oil made from gently harvested, very green olives that haven’t fully ripened are best since those have a higher concentration of the healthful components, he added. How quickly the olives go from harvest to being processed into oil is the next critical step. “Some companies have their own mills and processing where within two hours, they could take the fruit from the trees, put it in the mill and get the product,” Kyriakides said. This minimizes the risk of the fruit oxidizing or fermenting from sitting out for too long post-harvest. There shouldn’t be more than a few days between harvest and processing dates, he added. How the oil is processed is one of the biggest factors in whether that product is healthy, experts say. Extra virgin olive oil is the healthiest version because it’s cold-pressed only once without high heat or chemical solvents. The special processing helps extra virgin oil retain its nutrients.

Freshness and storage methods

You may be wondering how you're supposed to know when brands pick their olives or how soon they process them. With the growing popularity of consuming olive oil for health benefits, some companies have placed these details directly on product labels. Alternatively, some labels have a QR code you can scan to read that information on your smartphone. Either way, be sure to look for the harvest, processing and bottling dates and the "best by" date to get the freshest oil, experts recommend.

Bottles that take no more than three months to get from the harvest to the shelf are your best choice, and the farther away the best-by date is from when you buy the oil, the fresher the product will be, Kyriakides said. The International Olive Council has recommended brands limit the best-by date to no longer than two years after bottling. If a brand's bottle says the harvest season was "23/24," for example, "that means their harvest lasted the latter part of 2023 into early 2024," Kyriakides said. "Others will be very strict — they will say October, September 2023." For fans in the United States, getting fresh olive oil doesn't mean it needs to be imported anymore. It's been made possible by the growth in US-based producers — especially in California, where there's a climate conducive to growing native varieties of olive trees and locals can get high quality oil within a much shorter time frame. Georgia, Oregon, Texas and Arizona also produce olive oil, but on a smaller scale. Just like the compounds in tea or chocolate, those in olive oil degrade with time, especially if it's stored in a hot environment or exposed to light or air, said Dr. Selina Wang, an associate professor of cooperative extension in small-scale fruit and vegetable processing at the University of California, Davis.

This is why storing the oil in a cool environment and a dark-colored glass bottle throughout the olive oil's life is crucial. The importance of a cool environment is also why consuming the oil raw, say as a salad dressing, is better than using it to cook. But regardless of how it is consumed, olive oil is much healthier than heavily refined oils purchased at the grocery store, experts said. If at the grocery store you see extra virgin olive oil stored on a top shelf near bright, big lights and the bottle is warm, that's a red flag, Kyriakides said. "I'm not going to buy that oil, because I know it's been sitting there, it's been exposed to that heat already," he added.

Preserving your oil at home

Besides information on harvest and processing dates, another way to gauge the freshness of your oil is by taste. "The more taste an olive oil has, the more health benefits," as the compounds responsible for them also contribute to the oil's taste, said Joseph R. Profaci, executive director of the North American Olive Oil Association, an industry trade association, via email. "If health is the primary driver, the consumers should look for those that are robust rather than mild." For that reason, Profaci urged that people "get accustomed to cracking open their olive oil bottle as soon as they get it home and tasting it," he added. "That will help them develop a more discerning palate for olive oil. If they take that taste and are disappointed, and especially if it has the rancid taste of wax crayons or stale nuts, take it back to the store and ask for a refund or replacement." And once you taste it, if the oil's fresh enough, don't put it on the back burner for special occasions, Wang said.

"You should consume your olive oil as soon as possible," she added, "because the reasons that you purchase it — which is for the health and then the flavor — those both decline as the oil ages." Consistently keeping the oil in the fridge can extend the protection of the phenolics for another year or two — just be sure to set it on the counter a little in advance of putting it on your salad so it can warm up to its normal consistency, Kyriakides said.

<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/19/health/olive-oil-healthiest-quality-wellness/index.html>