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<a href="#">Article 1.</a>	Al Jazeera <b><u>Why Iran's presence in Geneva II is critical for any progress</u></b> Rami G. Khouri
<a href="#">Article 2.</a>	The National Interest <b><u>Obama's Foreign Policy to Nowhere</u></b> <a href="#">James Jay Carafano</a>
<a href="#">Article 3.</a>	Financial Times <b><u>Get ready, the indispensable Americans are pulling back</u></b> Gideon Rachman
<a href="#">Article 4.</a>	Bloomberg <b><u>Israel-Turkey Pipeline Can Fix Eastern Mediterranean</u></b> Matthew Bryza
<a href="#">Article 5.</a>	New York Post <b><u>Egypt's next battle: Freedom is the biggest loser</u></b> Amir Taheri

<a href="#">Article 6.</a>	<p>Al Monitor</p> <p><b><u>The meanings of Egypt's referendum</u></b></p> <p>Author <a href="#">Bassem Sabry</a></p>
<a href="#">Article 7.</a>	<p>The National Interest</p> <p><b><u>Russia's Homegrown Terror Threat</u></b></p> <p><a href="#">Andrew Foxall</a></p>

[Article 1.](#)

Al Jazeera

## **Why Iran's presence in Geneva II is critical for any progress**

Rami G. Khouri

21 Jan 2014 -- The fierce diplomatic controversy that erupted Monday over UN Secretary-General Ban-ki Moon's announcement that he had invited - and subsequently disinvited - Iran to attend this week's Geneva II talks on exploring ways to end the Syrian conflict, highlights the contradictory regional and international complexities that define this situation: Foreign interventions in Syria have helped bring this war to its terrible current situation, and yet only robust international engagement can offer any hope of winding it down.

The easy answer to the question of whether Iran should attend the Geneva meetings is a straightforward and emphatic "yes", because Iran's assistance to the Syrian government headed by President Bashar al-Assad is crucial for keeping the Damascus government in place. Yet nothing is easy when it comes to finding a diplomatic solution to the war in Syria, because the matter of Iranian involvement raises more vexing issues related to regional and international confrontations that bind the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Hizbullah and others in an intense ideological struggle to define the character and condition of the region.

A sub-plot of the debate about whether Iran should be invited to Geneva without preconditions, or only after it accepts the conditions laid down by the US and its allies, revives long-standing Iranian determination to be treated with respect and not to have its sovereign rights mangled by foreign powers.

The Iranian government logically must participate in the Geneva talks because its role in Syria is central to developments in that war; and what happens in Syria is deeply linked to, and will influence, future developments across much of the Middle East, which in turn will shape the influence of the US, Russia and Saudi Arabia across the region. Iran's central role in Syria mirrors, and is part of, its wider positioning and influence across the Middle East, so it is deeply invested in the current and future condition of the Assad government.

Iran has shown beyond doubt that it is prepared to go to great lengths and expend much money, arms, troops, and political support to maintain Assad's incumbency, even if only over half a country that will emerge from the war deeply wounded and

polarised. Iran's relations with Syria and Hizbullah in Lebanon are the most tangible and lasting regional successes of the Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979. A strong political relationship with Damascus is critical for Iran's continued tight alliance with Hizbullah.

These three actors form the "Deterrence and Resistance Front" that seeks to check or roll back the influence of the US and Israel in the region, while also assisting local actors in other countries that join it in confronting the policies of Saudi Arabia across the region. The overthrow of the Assad government would be a major blow to Iran's regional network of allies and would seriously weaken its stature and influence across the Middle East. It would probably also embolden Saudi Arabia and others, who fear Tehran's links with Shiite Arab populations, to step up their political confrontations with Iran in countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain.

It seems naïve to think that a political agreement can be reached to establish a post-Assad transitional process in Syria without Iran's active involvement or assent, which is not likely to happen now. Iran's continued robust support to fortify the Assad government - directly and via its close ally Hizbullah - indicates that it is not willing today to sacrifice Assad's rule as part of a peace agreement in Syria.

Iranian policy, like Syria's and Hizbullah's, is based on the principle of active resistance and sacrifice in the face of what it sees as American-Israeli-Saudi desires to smash the Syrian-Iranian-Hizbullah alliance and re-order the region according to the interests of the US and its allies.

So Tehran seems willing to continue supporting Assad at almost any cost, which is why a Geneva process that excludes it is bound to fail. Like Russia, Iran says that the future of the governance system in Syria must be decided by the Syrian people, not by American or Arab convictions that the Assad government has lost its legitimacy and must be brought down. Should American and other support for anti-Assad rebels succeed in further weakening and toppling the government in Damascus, Iran would join Russia and others in fearing that this would open the path to Washington unilaterally deciding the fate of other Arab or Iranian governments or non-governmental groups such as Hizbullah and Hamas.

It is not clear what positions Iran would take at the Geneva talks, but it is fair to assume that its acceptance of any transitional governing arrangements in Syria would expect that Assad and his co-rulers in the country would be part of that process, and not its first discarded political relics. This is based on the assumption in Tehran that Assad will not be overthrown by force. The wider question that remains actively discussed around the region is how Iran would react should Assad start to lose ground militarily to strengthened opposition forces, and reach a point in the year ahead where his demise appeared imminent. Would Iran cut its losses, drop Assad as a lost cause and focus instead on maintaining Hizbullah's strength and influence in Lebanon? Would Iran eventually sacrifice Assad gracefully for the bigger prize of the US and Saudi Arabia accepting it as an equal strategic player and even a partner in the Gulf region, especially in the wake of a successful Iranian nuclear power/sanctions lifting process?

We will have to wait for answers to these hypothetical questions,

but there is no doubt that Iran's substantial influence in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq is vital for any successful outcomes in Geneva - and, more importantly, that its influence across much of the region could sabotage any moves on Syria that it does not explicitly approve and help define.

*Rami G. Khouri is director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, and an internationally syndicated columnist.*

Article 2.

The National Interest

## **Obama's Foreign Policy to Nowhere**

James Jay Carafano

January 21, 2014 -- Sir Hew Strachan, an advisor to the Chief of the British Defense Staff, made some ripples across the pond with his judgment [3] on the U.S. president's foreign policy. "Obama has no sense of what he wants to do in the world," Strachan said.

Coming from a world-class military historian, it was a stunning rebuke.

Strachan gives Mr. Obama's Middle East policy, specifically his

muddled approach to Syria, two thumbs down. Obama's initiative there, he says, has taken the situation on the ground "backwards instead of forwards." That's just one conclusion he delivers in his forthcoming book, *The Direction of War*, which evaluates how modern political leaders utilize strategy.

Portraying Obama as the Inspector Clouseau of foreign policy may pump Strachan's book sales. (After all, it worked for Gates.) But his assessment seems a bit off the mark.

Since the start of his second term, Mr. Obama has exhibited a pretty clear idea of what he wants to do in the world—and that is to have as little as possible to do with it until he gets out of office. The President's primary objective appears to be "no more Benthazis"—just ride out the second term, go build a library, and then mimic the line of his first former defense secretary: "Hey, everything was fine when I left!"

A penchant for risk-aversion seems to be the chief hallmark of U.S. foreign policy today. The "red line" over Syria's use of chemical weapons, a particular target of Strachan's academic scorn, is a case in point. It was a way of doing nothing [4] about that nation's spiraling civil war. No one appeared more unprepared than the president when it turned out that the red line would actually require the U.S. to get engaged. Likewise, leaping at the chemical weapons deal was all too predictable. It offered the White House a quick exit from getting drawn more deeply into the conflict.

But Obama faces an enduring dilemma. As Syria showed, while he might want to leave the world alone, the world doesn't seem to feel the same way about the United States. There is just too

much time left in office to coast till the end, pack up the Nobel Prize, and move back to Hawaii. The Oval Office has found it has to do something to fill the vacuum, opening space for other influences to drive foreign affairs—as long as they don't push the president too far from his chosen path.

So a second vector has sprouted up to drive the direction of U.S. foreign policy, one not too far from the president's heart: an infatuation with multilateral process. This scratches Mr. Obama's progressive itch. It is an item of progressive faith that, as long as we're "engaged in a process" and mean well, we must be making progress. Thus, multilateral process became the fallback solution for Syria, once the red line gave way. The U.S. is currently engaged in multiparty talks about Syria in Geneva. Likewise, the administration is upbeat about "progress" between the Israelis and the Palestinians, because Secretary of State John Kerry has worked hard to get peace "talks" going again. And then, there is the ultimate bright, shiny object: nuclear talks with Iran.

A third vector is emerging as well: a kind of magical thinking among administration officials which holds that vectors one and two are actually working so well that, by the end of the president's term, the entire Middle East will have been transformed. So, for example, there is happy talk that engagement with Iran will lead to working with Tehran on helping the US disengage from Afghanistan, settle things down in Iraq, and end the war in Syria.

For now the president seems happy to bundle these three vectors to guide what he sees as his coherent vision of a low-risk, run-out-the-clock strategy.

Contrary to what Strachan asserts, the president does have a sense of what he is doing. The president's only problem is there are no signs that the three vectors are converging on anything that makes the region look like the land of milk and honey.

The odds of the Geneva talks playing a decisive role in resolving the Syrian civil war grow longer by the day. Vicious infighting among the insurgent groups and ramped-up support for the Assad regime by Moscow and Tehran are far more likely to drive the outcome. The "best case" scenario thus is a Balkanized Syria, with an Al Qaeda safe haven, huge displaced populations, and an occasional stream of car bombings from Damascus to Beirut.

As for Iran, while the administration thinks it has bought six months of "wait and see," the reality is that, when the clock stops ticking, the West will be no more confident it can shut down an Iranian nuclear program than it is now. Meanwhile, the once-effective sanctions regime will have fallen apart, and the long sought U.S.-Iranian rapprochement will remain but the stuff of dreams.

Meanwhile, the president's policy of disengagement from Iraq is shaping up like a disaster. It is reaffirming Henry Kissinger's truism, "Unilateral withdrawal is not victory." And the Israeli-Palestinian peace process remains moribund. There are no talks, just U.S. officials talking about talks.

If Egypt successfully implements its new constitution, elects a government, and puts the Arab Spring back on course, it will be no thanks to a White House that has vacillated between displaying complete indifference and casting annoying catcalls from the sidelines.

Strachan's explanation may be off, but the result is the same. It's hard to see the vectors of Obama's foreign policy leading anywhere but nowhere.

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Article 3.

Financial Times

## **Get ready, the indispensable Americans are pulling back**

Gideon Rachman

January 20, 2014 -- The official theme for this year's World Economic Forum is predictably bland – “Reshaping the World”. But the unofficial slogan will be “America is back”. Predictions that the US economy will grow by 3 per cent this year – added to worries about emerging markets – mean that Davos is likely to be bullish on America for the first time in years.

But a revival of the US economy should not be confused with a resurgence of America's role as the “sole superpower”. On the contrary, the most important emerging theme in world politics is America's slow retreat from its role as global policeman.

Some of America's closest partners now talk openly of a diminished US global presence. Laurent Fabius, the French foreign minister, recently gave a speech in which he said: "The United States gives the impression of no longer wanting to get drawn into crises." As a result, he said, America's allies are "increasingly factoring in their calculations . . . the possibility that they will be left to their own devices in managing crises". Even Israel is adjusting. Its foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, recently remarked: "Ties between Israel and the US are weakening . . . The Americans today are dealing with too many challenges." The Israeli analysis is shared by America's other key ally in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, which is furious at what it regards as US disengagement.

The deep reluctance of Barack Obama's administration to get involved militarily in the Syrian conflict has fuelled accusations that America is pulling back from the Middle East. But European policy makers are also worried. They are concerned that America's famous "pivot" to Asia will mean less attention to Nato and its European partners.

Meanwhile, America's Asian allies seem no more satisfied. Japan thinks that the US was not firm enough in responding to China's declaration of an "air defence identification zone" in the East China Sea, while the Philippines feels it was left in the lurch when China established effective control of the disputed Scarborough shoal.

Scepticism about getting entangled abroad now reaches into the US policy making elite

Obama administration officials complain that all this talk of

disengagement is wildly overdone. They point out that America is taking the lead in the Syrian peace negotiations, as well as in the Iran nuclear talks and the Israeli-Palestinian saga. The US also remains the main guarantor of the security arrangements of Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East.

And yet, America under President Obama is clearly more reluctant actually to use its military muscle. When Congress debated missile strikes on Syria, Washington quickly became aware that opinion back home was strongly against. The spread of a new semi-isolationist mood was confirmed last week in a poll for the Pew Research Center. Some 52 per cent of Americans agreed that “the US should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best way they can, on their own”; only 38 per cent disagreed. As Bruce Stokes of Pew points out, this is “the most lopsided balance in favour of the US minding its own business” in the nearly 50 years that pollsters have asked this question.

Mr Stokes calls this “an unprecedented lack of support for American engagement with the rest of the world”. What is more, this scepticism about foreign entanglements now reaches into the US policy making elite. When Pew polled members of the Council on Foreign Relations, an elite think-tank, they found their views roughly in line with those of the general public.

It is not hard to identify the reasons for America’s inward turn. The economic crisis persuaded Mr Obama to concentrate on “nation-building at home”. Meanwhile, the trauma of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars has led to an understandable disinclination to put America’s hand back into the Middle Eastern mangle. And there are also more positive reasons for

America's neo-isolationism. The shale-gas revolution has raised the prospect of American "energy independence". By 2015 the US will once again be the world's largest oil producer.

Gyrations in the world energy market could still profoundly affect the US economy. But energy security is no longer such a compelling argument for global engagement.

It is possible that America's isolationist mood will simply be a phase. The US went through similar, inward-looking periods after the first world war and after Vietnam. In both cases, international events compelled America to plunge back into global affairs. An economic resurgence in the US may create a more outward-looking mood. But it is also possible that, this time, the shift towards non-intervention is structural rather than cyclical – reflecting a US that is quietly adjusting to the rise of other major powers, in particular China.

For the moment, however, it is the rest of the world that is adjusting to an emerging political and security vacuum. The Clintonite slogan that America is the "indispensable nation" may have been vainglorious, but it also turns out to have been true. As Mr Fabius, the French foreign minister, acknowledges: "Nobody can take over from the Americans from a military point of view." And, if the Americans cannot or will not act, he says, there is a "risk of letting major crises fester on their own".

The truth of that proposition is currently on display from Syria to the Senkaku Islands to the Central African Republic. Who knows – it is a thought that might even disturb a few dinners at Davos.

*Gideon Rachman has been the Financial Times chief foreign affairs commentator since July 2006.*

Article 4.

Bloomberg

## **Israel-Turkey Pipeline Can Fix Eastern Mediterranean**

Matthew Bryza

Jan 20, 2014 -- For Israel, the discovery in 2010 of a vast natural gas field off its coast was like hitting the jackpot. The future energy development offered the country unprecedented economic security.

Now, the business plans for the Leviathan site are advanced enough that Israel and its neighbors must address the toughest question about the project: how to export the gas.

The Leviathan field's estimated 510 billion cubic meters of gas, coupled with continuing production at the nearby Tamar site, are expected to fuel Israel's electricity generation, water desalinization and a new generation of energy-intensive industries. Exporting the gas beyond Israel would offer still greater economic benefits.

The finds also have the potential to lead to breakthroughs in

disputes that have long poisoned relationships between Turkey on one side, and Israel and Cyprus, which also has potential gas reserves in its waters, on the other. Getting to a resolution won't be easy, but with the right approach and support from the U.S. and the European Union, it is possible.

Exports in the form of liquefied natural gas would maximize Israel's options, providing access to the world's highest gas prices, currently in East Asia. Unfortunately, building a liquefaction plant on Israeli territory appears politically impossible, given concerns about environmental and physical security.

The obvious alternative would be to build an LNG terminal off Israel's coast, avoiding such domestic hurdles. But this would limit the geopolitical advantages to Israel of collaborating with other countries on gas exports. It may become a flashpoint if the neighbors of Israel and Cyprus have no stake in the new energy resources, further entrenching regional disputes.

Aware of the costs and benefits, Israel's government is planning to build a short pipeline to Jordan, a project that could help to stabilize the Jewish state's lone Arab partner and supply Palestinians in the West Bank. The Leviathan field's developers said Jan. 5 that they had signed a deal to sell 4.5 billion cubic meters of gas to Palestine Power Generation Co. over 20 years.

Full development of the field, however, will require larger exports than Jordan or the Palestinian territories can absorb (the combined annual gas consumption of Israel and Jordan is only about 6 billion cubic meters). One possibility would be to pipe the gas from Leviathan to a proposed LNG terminal on Jordan's

Red Sea coast. Similarly, Israeli gas could be piped to Egypt's underused LNG terminals on the Mediterranean.

But locating such a critical Israeli asset in Jordan or Egypt is politically infeasible for all three countries. So the Israeli government is looking at two other export options: an LNG terminal in Cyprus or an underwater pipeline to Turkey.

The first option looks politically easier. With the deterioration and rupture of its partnership with Turkey, Israel has improved relations with Cyprus in the last three years. Cyprus has had no diplomatic relations with Turkey since 1974, when Turkish troops seized the northern third of the island after a military coup.

For the Cypriot government, an LNG terminal at Vasilikos on the island's southern shore is an urgent priority, providing revenue and jobs to mitigate the country's financial crisis and creating the eastern Mediterranean's natural gas hub.

The project, however, requires large amounts of Israeli gas, because the biggest Cypriot field discovered so far, Aphrodite, is too small to justify commercial development of a \$4.5 billion to \$6 billion terminal. In the time it takes to find enough gas and finance construction, new volumes of liquefied natural gas from Australia, East Africa and the U.S. may have flooded global markets, depressing prices.

Israel might agree to use a Cypriot terminal, yet no country has ever exported its natural gas from an LNG terminal on another country's territory, making this prospect unlikely.

Another option may involve two stages: First, private companies

construct a 292-mile pipeline to Turkey, which would be much cheaper and give Israel more control (disclosure: I am on the board of Turcas Energy Group AS, which is proposing such a pipeline); second, some of the pipeline's early revenue, coupled with excess gas from Leviathan, would be used to enable financing of the Cypriot terminal.

Commercially, this dual-export option appears feasible; it enjoys support from the lead companies developing both the Leviathan and Aphrodite fields, the U.S. company Noble Energy Inc. and Israel's Delek Group Ltd.

Again, however, the hurdles are formidable. A subsea pipeline from Leviathan to Turkey must cross the Cypriot continental shelf, which, for practical purposes, requires permission from the Cypriot government. Such permission is inconceivable today. Meanwhile, normalization of Israel-Turkey relations also remains stalled.

These obstacles could fade in coming months as the prize of a deal on energy helps speed that process. Both Cyprus and Turkey are working to restart talks on a Cyprus settlement under the auspices of the United Nations. Although this has been tried before, Cypriot leaders increasingly (if privately) recognize the economic imperative of a pipeline to Turkey. At the same time, Turkish officials have quietly suggested that restoration of full relations with Israel could occur in tandem with an agreement to build an Israel-Turkey natural gas pipeline.

Achieving these breakthroughs and integrating them into an agreement among Israel, Cyprus and Turkey to develop these two projects in tandem will require intricate diplomatic

choreography. The U.S. can play a role, as it did in the late 1990s, when it helped Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey open a new corridor for oil and gas pipelines. This time, however, the U.S. is sitting back, waiting for Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to soften his hostility toward Israel.

Building an Israel-Turkey pipeline connected to a Cyprus LNG terminal offers strategic opportunities that transcend economics, including a chance for Israel and Turkey to restore their strategic partnership. It would also push Turkey to reach an agreement on the Cyprus question, removing a 40-year irritant in relations with Europe and re-energizing Turkey's flagging efforts to join the EU. The U.S., working with the EU, should help to shape this future.

*Matthew Bryza is a former U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan. He is on the board of Turcas Energy Group AS, which is backing an Israel-Turkey gas pipeline.*

[Article 5.](#)

New York Post

## **Egypt's next battle: Freedom is the biggest loser**

Amir Taheri

January 19, 2014 -- ‘We can go back to normal now,’ says Amr Moussa, the elder statesman of the Egyptian establishment who supervised the drafting of a new constitution. “What we now need is a good president.”

The draft was put to the vote at a referendum spread over two days last week, with the subtext that approval would amount to a popular endorsement of the military coup that removed Egypt’s first freely elected president from power last summer.

Interior Ministry spokesmen say turnout was high, but refuse to provide precise figures. Unofficial estimates put the ballots cast at just over 27 million, out of 55 million eligible voters. But those who did vote apparently revived the old tradition of elections during Egypt’s 60 years of military rule by massively voting “yes.” The elections commission announced Saturday that the “yes” vote was 98.1 percent.

One might question key aspects of the exercise, notably the fact that the “no” campaign was shut out of state-controlled media. Yet there’s little doubt that a majority of those who voted did wish to approve the coup that kicked the Muslim Brotherhood out of power.

Put simply, the new constitution is a slightly modified version of the one in force under President Hosni Mubarak. It allows the military to retain its central position in the government with a veto on key aspects of foreign and security policies. It also restricts some freedoms of expression and association Egyptians thought they’d won in the Arab Spring, and allows civilian dissidents to be tried in military courts.

So strong was the desire of a substantial segment of Egyptian

society to get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood that they opted to rush back to the disgraced generals as saviors.

It's too soon to say if they jumped from the frying pan into the fire. What is certain is that the military is determined to roll back the Arab Spring and restore its hold on power. This will be the main theme of Egyptian politics for the rest of the year.

In one scenario, army chief Gen. Abdul-Fattah al-Sissi would become president with the traditional 90 percent vote claimed by dictators from Gamal Abdul-Nasser to Mubarak. Moussa, a former apparatchik of the Nasserist regime, is already peddling that scenario. "Gen. al-Sissi is the best man for Egypt right now," he said last week.

In another scenario, the military would field an old technocrat (e.g., the octogenarian Moussa) as president, keeping the reins of power in its own hands behind the scenes. The new constitution stipulates that for the next eight years the Defense Minister will be appointed by the military, not whoever is elected president. Thus, Sissi could remain minister and exercise real power as he does now.

As usual, the Obama administration has tried to hedge its bets by supporting the coup behind the scenes while subjecting it to some criticism in public, backed by a cut in military aid. It has thus squandered much of the influence that America had with virtually all players in Egyptian politics.

The Brotherhood, which had forged close ties with Washington thanks to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's efforts, is reverting to its traditional anti-American posture. The military now regard the United States as a fickle friend who can stab you in the back

in your hour of need. And pro-democracy groups are unhappy about Obama's failure, or unwillingness, to adopt a clear stance in support of genuine social and political reforms.

Contrary to Moussa's hope that Egypt will now return to normal (whatever normal means in a society gripped by revolutionary tensions), the new constitution could well mark the start of a new chapter in instability and violence. Shut out of the political game, the Brotherhood could well fall under the control of more radical Jihadist elements that have never believed in constitutions and elections.

Meanwhile, the military may be forced into offering more concessions to radical Islamists (notably the Salafi groups) in order to isolate the Brotherhood. Pro-democracy groups could end up as all-round losers, their dream of a pluralist system fading further.

The military had best not to think that the Arab Spring genie can easily be pushed back into the bottle. Al-Sissi might not want to admit it, but something has changed in Egypt. Many Egyptians (certainly not a majority) now regard him as the hero who slew the Islamist dragon. But things could quickly change when, as looks certain, Egyptians witness the return of the equally vicious dragon of military despotism.

[Article 6.](#)

Al Monitor

## **The meanings of Egypt's referendum**

Author Bassem Sabry

January 20, 2014 -- As the dust begins to settle after Egypt's third constitutional referendum in three years, this time passing what are officially constitutional amendments but in reality is a brand new constitution, two broad narratives are emerging. The first narrative, predominantly local, positively presents the totality of everything that is taking place in regard to the vote and the country, a triumph for the goal of real democracy and the values of modernism. The second narrative proclaims the death of democracy and the end of everything that has to do with the January 25 Revolution and its lofty goals. The reality, one leans to believe, is more complex and multilayered. It is also still developing, most obviously.

Let's start with some basic facts and figures. Official overall voter turnout in the 2012 parliamentary elections stood at 54%, while voter turnout for the 2012 presidential elections was 46.4% in the first round and 52% in the second. The 2011 constitutional referendum, which came at the height of post-revolution national enthusiasm, witnessed a turnout of just over 41%. Most importantly and tellingly, at the time of the 2012 constitutional referendum — which saw a large-scale mobilization on both sides of the political fray and heated campaigns in favor of and against the charter — the total turnout only reached just over 32%, with 36% of voters casting a "no" vote. In the 2014 referendum, official voter turnout figures stood at 38.6% (thus somewhat higher than the 2012 referendum turnout), which culminated into what was simultaneously an odd sounding and resounding support percentage of 98.1%.

Two things come to mind. First, while some make the argument that voter turnout was low compared to other referendum results, the turnout was actually substantial and sufficiently reassuring for the authorities in particular. Second, while some automatically assumed rigging and fraud given the ostensibly high-approval percentage, there has not been any real evidence of something earth-shattering thus far. Instead, this figure of unanimity was also the result of the boycott of the naysayers, predominantly by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters as well as some degree of boycott by non-Brotherhood sympathizers who object Egypt's current state of affairs. There was also a tremendously omnipresent “vote yes” campaign, while no clear “vote no” campaign saw the light of day, whether out of lack of initiative or lack of allowed space, if not potentially a bit a both.

Four particular phenomena have been discussed in the media regarding the referendum. The first is what is regarded as a high turnout by women, while the second are the seemingly honest manifestations — at least if in part — of jubilation and festivities in the voting lines, often with nationalist and pro-army music playing in the background. The third phenomenon, and a particularly comforting sign, was the absence of process-derailing violence. The fourth, and a point of much contention, is an allegedly low turnout by youths. While to my knowledge there are no exact statistics or exit polls on the turnout breakdown, the prominent media discussion of the alleged low youth turnout as some incontestable fact — especially given how the media has strongly been in support of the current transition and process — suggests that there is at least some smoke, even if not necessarily an outright fire.

But nonetheless, the final tally and result remains predominantly encouraging for the authorities in Cairo and strongly discouraging for the Muslim Brotherhood — who have already claimed the vote was rigged — especially as turnout and percentages were key in the rhetorical battle surrounding legitimacy and popular support, both locally and internationally. The current authorities in Cairo will definitely feel further emboldened in their current course, politically and in terms of security. After all, the vote was not only seen as a vote on the draft constitution but it was also significantly viewed as a vote on the current political order, as well as a test of the current administration's capabilities of securing the country during such a challenging and key national event. Conversely, many make the argument that the vote was a test of Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's popularity, but I do not entirely buy into that argument just yet.

There is much to be concerned about in the coming period. Would the extremes of nationalism ebb or flow, would dissent be further tolerated or not on popular and official levels and would Egypt's security apparatuses decidedly return to their Hosni Mubarak-era ways? Would the upcoming electoral processes and political environment be substantially competitive, inclusive and representative? What will be the fate of the January 25 Revolution and its narrative and perception as well as the fate of its activists, some of whom have been or are still involved in controversial legal proceedings? What about Mubarak's fate and the trials of Mohammed Morsi and Muslim Brotherhood figures? Would the media relax a bit? Would there be any degree of transparent and just investigation into all the events and violence since July 2013? Would violence continue

and grow worse, and would the economy improve or slide down further? Would the national rifts heal in one way or another? These are some of the questions that are out there. While it would be impossible to be decidedly certain about almost anything right now and in the near future, the image is not as bleak as some paint it to be.

For example, some are trying to make the argument that the voters in the 2014 referendum were nothing more than media-brainwashed masses, but that would be a disastrous assumption and mistake. Discussions with supporters of the constitution generally show a breadth of opinion and reason for endorsing the document, ranging from the impassioned and nationalist, the argumentative and detailed, to the seemingly more often pragmatic and practical, with many simply hoping to move forward with the country, for a chance at stability after three tumultuous years. What is most important is they all know that their vote matters and is crucial.

One can make arguments about the death of the January 25 Revolution, but the fact that large numbers of Egyptians know that their vote and opinion is crucial is one paradigm-shifting gain of the uprising that remains strongly alive despite all the imperfections of the current reality. Any political power hoping to rise and remain in power can no longer afford to resort to the Mubarak-era mass rigging ritual of the “stuffing of the ballot” boxes. Instead, they need voters, and they need to deliver to these voters. The public at large — beyond those who voted — remains increasingly more knowledgeable and more intensely engaged than ever, in one form or another. And the remarkable reality of the past three years in Egypt is that the successive landmark moments and votes have shown a highly dynamic

public, substantially unpoliticized and willing to experiment across the spectrum, willing to change opinion, and one that is also growing increasingly impatient with good reason.

This new constitution is not perfect — its evolutionary process was controversial — and at least a few amendments would be welcome. But it is also arguably substantially more progressive than its predecessors and provides a good base to move forward upon in the coming period, especially if its articles of rights and freedoms are taken seriously and hopefully become manifest and entrenched. I don't think this will be the way it was in 2010 or 2005, or even in the 1950s or 1960s, as some might argue. I believe this will be — for better or worse — the new experiment of 2014, whose outcome is yet to unfold and become clear.

*Bassem Sabry is an Egyptian political writer and commentator.*

[Article 7.](#)

The National Interest

## **Russia's Homegrown Terror Threat**

Andrew Foxall

January 21, 2014 -- Since at least the autumn of 1999, when the second Chechen war began, Russia has been mired in terrorist-related violence linked to the North Caucasus. What makes the recent suicide bombings in Volgograd, in October and

December 2013, stand out—and what has been overlooked in much of the reporting of the events—is the prominence of ethnic Russian converts to Islam amongst the individuals who planned and carried out the attacks. For a long time the sole preserve of Chechens and other individuals from the North Caucasus, increasing numbers of ethnic Russians are joining the insurgency. Converted and radicalised by the situation in the North Caucasus, these ethnic Russian jihadists are looking beyond the region for their next cause célèbre.

While it is true that a Dagestani, Naida Asiyalova, was responsible for the suicide bombing in Volgograd on 21 October 2013, she was helped in preparing the attack by her husband, Dmitry Sokolov, an ethnic Russian who had converted to Islam and fought in the North Caucasus insurgency (under the name ‘Abdul Jabbar’). The bombing in Volgograd on 29 December was carried out by an ethnic Russian, Pavel Pechyonkin, who had converted to Islam in January 2012. It remains unclear who carried out the attack on 30 December, but it would not be surprising if ethnic Russians were involved.

The involvement of ethnic Russian converts to Islam in the North Caucasian insurgency is a recent development. The first known examples are Vitaly Zagorudko and David Fotov, who were killed, in 2004, in Stavropol Krai after planning a terrorist attack in the region. The following year, in 2005, Viktor Semchenko and Yuri Menovshchikov were killed after carrying out four bombings in Voronezh, in which one person was killed. These cases, however, were the exception rather than the rule.

The situation changed after Alexander Tikhomirov (better known as ‘Said Buryatsky’), an ethnic Russian, went to the

North Caucasus, in late 2007 or early 2008. Buryatsky quickly began to recruit ethnic Russians into the insurgency, chiefly through his online presence. His message was convincing, if simple: Russia is dying, and only through Islam is your future assured. These recruits carried out a number of high-profile attacks, including that on the Nevsky Express train in 2009, which killed 25 people, and were suspected of being involved in others, including the suicide bombing at Moscow's Domodedovo International Airport, in 2011, in which 37 people were killed.

So successful was Buryatsky that he became one of the insurgents' main ideologues. His experience set an example to which other ethnic Russian jihadists would aspire. In 2012, it was reported that Alexei Pashintsev ('Emir Abdul-Malik'), an ethnic Russian, had assumed the leadership of the 'Riyad-us Saliheen Suicide Bomber Battalion' in Dagestan. The Battalion is part of the broader 'Dagestan Vilaiyat' group, which Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the Boston marathon bombers, had sought to join when he travelled to the republic in 2012.

The emergence of ethnic Russian jihadists poses a threat to not only the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, but also to Russia as a whole. The jihadist movement spread from the borders of the North Caucasus republics and expanded into Russia proper long ago. Unlike the North Caucasian insurgents, who, by and large, see their struggle in regional terms and have concentrated their attacks in their own region, ethnic Russian jihadists have a far wider outlook.

For Russia, the emergence of ethnic Russian jihadists might provide an opportunity to engage with the West. After all,

Western countries have much experience of dealing with so-called 'homegrown' terrorists.

Also, the West has a vested interest in how Russia deals with this issue. For these jihadists are seeking theatres of war not only in the North Caucasus, but also across the Middle East and Central Asia. Today, they can be found in Afghanistan and Syria. Tomorrow, they could be anywhere.

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