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Article 1.

The Weekly Standard

Iran Clocks Ticking

Thomas Donnelly

December 19, 2011 -- In his history of the long-running conflict between Iran and America, Kenneth Pollack writes of the “two clocks” that measure time as it relates to what he calls (in the title of his book) the Persian Puzzle. One, of course, is the countdown to a nuclear Iran. No one knows for certain how much time is on this clock—it’s difficult to get good intelligence about a program the Iranians are doing all they can to protect—but if the November report by the International Atomic Energy Agency is to be believed, there isn’t that much. Iran has sufficient material to build a handful of weapons, has plenty of delivery systems, and may not tip its hand by testing a device.

Pollack also speaks of a “regime change” clock, arguing that “a different government in Tehran—one more reflective of the will of the Iranian people—would be willing to discontinue or reorient the [nuclear] program to make it much less threatening.” But he also acknowledged “there is little likelihood that such a new government will take power soon.” Pollack wrote this in 2004, and the regime’s behavior since, particularly its thuggish suppression of opposition in the wake of the 2009 election, seems to have borne out his prophecy. The rapid ticking of the Iran nuclear clock also marks an increasingly dark hour for the United States and its closest allies and partners, because it coincides with a third clock that Pollack did not imagine in 2004: the timetable of retreat set in motion by Barack Obama. The combination of the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq, the accelerating withdrawal from Afghanistan, serial reductions of U.S. military power, and the administration’s “pivot” away from the greater

Middle East to the “Indo-Pacific” portends a new era defined by a rising nuclear Iran and declining American influence in the region. This also marks a fundamental shift in U.S. grand strategy, one that has taken a favorable balance of power in the greater Middle East as key to a favorable international order. Thus, since 1979—the year of the Iranian revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein’s rise to power in Baghdad, and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Sunni extremists—the United States has become ever more engaged in the struggle to prevent any sort of “hostile hegemon” from dominating the region.

That strategy has achieved successes. Defeat in Afghanistan brought on the collapse of the Soviet empire and ended any outside threat to the region. One counterinsurgency and two conventional campaigns later, Saddam is dead and so is his Baathist tyranny. Al Qaeda and its associates are being suppressed, and they control no state (unless the Arab Spring becomes the Salafi Spring). By contrast, the Iranian problem remains unresolved. Tehran has continued an on-again, off-again, low-level war with “The Great Satan” from the original hostage-taking to the latest attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington. Our response has been a very mild form of containment, one that imposes few costs on the Islamic Republic. This means that the third clock, the one timing our regional retreat, is the one that measures the geopolitical competition with Iran. And because the United States has for so long focused on tactics rather than strategy—and for Iran, even nuclear weapons are a means rather than the end in itself—we’ve lost track of the time. The Obama White House has been especially wasteful, squandering years on a misguided policy of engagement with the Islamic Republic, and also putting Iraq back in play and preparing to abandon its own successes in Afghanistan. In place of serious “surges” of American power, the administration offers “silent war”—espionage, drones, computer

viruses. The RQ-170 Sentinel remotely piloted aircraft that the Iranians are now so proudly displaying provides an apt image of how covert pinpricks are replacing threats of “shock and awe.” In the after-midnight hour when the Obama retreat is complete, the United States would find itself with few options at the chiming of the nuclear clock. Containing and deterring a nuclear Iran would be a long, costly, and risky endeavor, and a task made immensely more difficult by the withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan and by the large cuts that will cripple the U.S. military. Time is short—but there is still time, and not simply to prepare for the extraordinary danger of a nuclear Iran, but to avert it.

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Article 2.

Al Jazeera

America, Israel and Iran - no way out

Robert Grenier

12 Dec 2011 -- US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta made some perhaps unintentionally interesting remarks regarding US policy toward Iran earlier this month, and it is fair to suppose that the venue in which he made them was not accidental.

Each year, the Brookings Institution, a prominent US think-tank, hosts the Saban Forum, a gathering of US and Israeli officials, along with the usual retinue of journalists, academics and observers, to discuss issues of common interest and concern. This year's theme was "Strategic Challenges in the New Middle East", and participants sought to focus thought and discussion, in the Saban Centre's words, "... on historic shifts... and their implication for US-Israeli security and interests in the Middle East region".

Of course, the tacit assumption that US and Israeli interests in the region are somehow mystically conjoined is an increasingly dangerous one, and a fallacy that the Saban Forum, like other such Washington confabs, does much to promote. Other "strategic challenges" in the Middle East notwithstanding, the threat posed by Iran's apparent pursuit of nuclear weapons hung like an incubus over this year's proceedings, and in addressing those concerns in his keynote speech, Secretary Panetta delivered the sort of mixed message which Israeli officials have come to expect from the Obama administration. Standing before huge Israeli and US flags, the secretary delivered prepared remarks in which he strongly asserted that "determination to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons" was one of three "pillars" of US policy in the region. And while he extolled the importance and encouraging efficacy of diplomatic and

economic sanctions, and carefully noted that resort to military force must be a last, and not a first option, Panetta also pointedly stressed that the administration had "not taken any options off the table". His department, he said, would be charged with preparation of a military option if so requested by the commander in chief, and would not shrink from doing so. All in all, it was a vigorous, straightforward restatement of administration policy, designed to reassure an Israeli audience. But in response to questions, the defence secretary said perhaps more than he intended, revealing more of the administration's true thinking than would have passed muster in his cleared remarks. A military strike on Iran, he said, would not destroy Iran's nuclear ambitions, but only delay them - perhaps a year or two at best. The relevant targets, he added "are very difficult to get at".

Obama wedded to containment? And against such limited and tenuous gains, one would have to weigh some daunting unintended consequences: a regional backlash which would end Iran's isolation and generate popular political support for its clerical regime both at home and abroad; attacks against US military assets and interests in the region; and "severe economic consequences" - read: sharply increased oil prices - which would undermine fragile economies in the US and Europe. Finally, he said, initiation of hostilities could produce "an escalation... that would not only involve many lives, but ... could consume the Middle East in a confrontation and a conflict that we would regret (emphasis added)".

Hardly a ringing call to arms, that.

William A Galston, a Senior Fellow at Brookings who attended this year's Forum, has written perceptively for *The New Republic* about Israeli reactions to it. Apparently, the studied ambiguity which the administration is attempting to maintain regarding its willingness to employ military force against Iran is not having the intended effect on its chosen audience - which is not the Iranians, but the Israelis.

According to Galston, among the many Israelis of differing political stripes with whom he spoke at the conference, no one - not one - believed that the Obama administration would ever exercise a military option to prevent Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon. Obama, they have concluded, is wedded to a containment policy; if Iran were nonetheless to acquire a nuclear capability, they are convinced, his administration would reconfigure its containment policy to suit. As Galston points out, this is completely unacceptable to the Israelis. For them, a nuclearised Iran poses an existential threat which they - unlike the Americans - literally will not tolerate. This fact is recognised within the administration, and particularly within the US Department of Defence, with which potential hostilities with Iran, however initiated, would be its responsibility to deal.

No one really paying attention should be surprised by this. Just days before the Panetta speech at Brookings, General Martin Dempsey, the US chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, gave a notable interview in which he made clear that, while the US sees sanctions and diplomatic pressure as the prudent course to pursue vis-a-vis Iran, "I'm not sure the Israelis share our assessment of that. And because they don't and because to them this is an existential threat, I think probably that it's fair to say that our expectations are different right now."

Asked whether he thought Israel would inform the US before striking Iran, Dempsey responded, "I don't know." That is political-military speak for "No". In short, current US policy, as the Israelis understand it - and as opposed to how it is being articulated by the administration - is unacceptable to Israel. This is no doubt troubling to them, but not a grave concern, for two reasons. First, the Israelis need not rely on the US to initiate hostilities with Iran, if it should come to that. They can do so themselves, confident that the US will then be forced to deal with the consequences, including the Iranian retaliation which Panetta described and all would expect.

Weakened by rhetoric

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the Israelis know that they can pursue such a course, in extremis, without serious fear of repercussions, including a cutoff of US support - diplomatic, military, or otherwise. They know that, where Israel is concerned, policy is not made in the White House, and still less at the Pentagon. It is made in Congress, which stands in thrall to Israel. Remember, this is an administration which thought it could pressure Israel into abandoning its illegal settlement programme and making a just peace with the Palestinians; it has since been taught a political lesson which it is unlikely to forget. And so, in this as in all other instances, the White House, bereft of effective sticks, is reduced to importuning the Israelis, trying to convince them of the seriousness of US purpose in confronting Iran and the effectiveness of its current sanctions policy, while hoping against hope that the Israelis would not take the sort of precipitate action which all would eventually come to regret. In making its case to the Israelis, moreover, the White House' domestic political position is being further weakened by its own rhetoric. The president and senior administration officials know that Iran does not pose an existential threat to Israel, and that the Iranians are anything but impervious to the overwhelming nuclear retaliatory threat which Israel poses. In fact, the Iranian drive for a nuclear weapons capability has relatively little to do with Israel, and much to do with the threat posed by Washington, whose ability to intervene at will in the region with overwhelming conventional force has been amply demonstrated three times in the past 20 years. The White House dares not say this, however, lest it convey weakness to Iran and a lack of resolve both to Israel and to its political critics in the US. Indeed, Secretary Panetta was back at it in his address to the Saban Forum when, after making reference to Iran's support for

terrorists, he asserted that "... a nuclear weapon would be devastating if they had that capability".

Having hyped the Iranian threat incessantly for the past three years, asserting that an Iranian nuclear weapon would have devastating and unacceptable consequences for US interests, the administration has put itself politically in a position from which it cannot escape on its own.

The president's Republican adversaries are parroting the same rhetoric, and fairly slaving at the chance to brand him as soft on the Iranian threat; even his Democratic colleagues would quickly abandon him if forced to make a choice, as the recent Senate vote on toughening Iran sanctions, which went considerably further than the administration wanted, has made clear.

Thus does Obama find himself effectively in a corner.

He has bet everything on the efficacy of a sanctions policy toward Iran, and while it may succeed, very few experts believe it can. The putatively most powerful man in the world is now hostage to the whims of Israel and Iran, foreign countries neither of which he can control. Unless one of them chooses to release him, there is no way out save moving forward, on a direct path to war.

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Article 3.

Bloomberg

Mideast Sectarian Strife Is Symptom of Weak States

Noah Feldman

Dec 11, 2011 -- For most of Islamic history, Sunnis and Shiites have managed to get along under the guidance of strong governments -- mostly run by Sunnis who kept the Shiites in their place. But when governments are on the edge of collapse, as in Iraq a few years ago and in Syria and Afghanistan today, the old sectarian tensions flare. The consequences matter not just for victims such as the 63 Shiites killed in Afghanistan on Dec. 6, the Shiite holiday of Ashura, or the more than 30 unidentified people whose bodies were dumped in an Alawite neighborhood in Homs, Syria, the same day. They matter for anyone who wants to see peaceful change in the Muslim world. Radical transition breeds instability; and instability has a nasty habit of generating sectarian violence. Understanding the structure of this violence is the only hope of preventing it.

The Sunni-Shiite divide started over constitutional politics and was annealed in violence. When the Prophet Muhammad died, in 632 ████, some followers believed his most qualified and virtuous companion should be chosen as commander of the faithful by the leaders of the community. Others opted for the principle of descent, preferring Muhammad's closest relative, his cousin and son-in-law Ali.

Discord within the close-knit community eventually led to civil war. In the resulting conflict, the anti-family faction defeated shi'at Ali, the party of Ali -- and killed Ali and his heir, Imam Hussein, the Prophet's grandson.

Ashura Celebrations

Ashura, the Shiite holiday commemorating the martyrdom of Hussein, recalls these events that happened more than 1,330 years ago. Where Shiites can worship freely, the holiday's dramatic ritual marches, in which young men mourn their slain imam, are symbolic markers of communal pride. A few years back, before the Sept. 11 attacks, I happened to witness a particularly moving Ashura march along Park Avenue in New York, which was at once somber and inwardly ecstatic.

In recent years, Afghanistan's long-oppressed Shiite minority, who overwhelmingly belong to the Hazara ethnic group, have been celebrating Ashura in the cities more openly than at any time in recent memory. Although the country doesn't have a particularly pronounced history of Sunni-Shiite violence, the Hazara have been an oppressed class since the consolidation of modern Afghanistan in the 19th century. Whatever the many inadequacies and failures of the U.S.-backed government of President Hamid Karzai, it has at least improved the quality of religious freedom relative to the period of rigidly Sunni Taliban rule.

Until this week, when a Pakistani terrorist group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, coordinated simultaneous attacks against Ashura celebrations in Kabul, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif. The attacks were taken directly from the playbook of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which perfected the technique of targeting public Shiite celebrations in the course of its attempts to provoke a civil war in Iraq between 2005 and 2008. By killing Shiites, radical Sunnis aren't just going after people they consider heretics. They also hope to radicalize other Sunnis, and to associate occupation forces with the unpopular empowerment of a previously oppressed minority.

Beyond these immediate tactical goals, the anti-Shiite attacks in Afghanistan, like those in Iraq, aim to tell the world that the official,

U.S.-backed government cannot protect its civilian population, and is therefore not legitimate.

The breakdown lines in Afghanistan are traditionally more ethnic than religious-sectarian, pitting the mostly Pashtun Taliban against the Tajik and Hazara communities. Yet the overall effect of delegitimation is the same as it was in Iraq.

Iraq Surge

The U.S. surge strategy in Iraq helped reduce such attacks. In Afghanistan, however, the surge is over, and U.S. troops are decreasing in number, not increasing. The attacks bring home the reality that Afghan security forces are still some distance from being able to protect either the Afghan borders or the country's populace, if they ever will be.

State weakness is also the immediate cause of sectarian violence in Syria. The growing effectiveness of the uprising against the government of President Bashar al-Assad means that almost everyone can now imagine the collapse of the last standing Baathist regime. Under these conditions, what began as a peaceful protest movement suppressed violently by the state runs the risk of devolving into civil war.

On one side are the Sunni Muslims who make up the majority of the Syrian population. On the other are the Assad family and its closest allies in the military and secret police. They, along with perhaps 3.5 million other Syrians, are Alawites. Although the point is rarely noted, the Alawites are a type of Shiite sect. (For example, they celebrate the holiday of Ashura.) Their name, derived from Ali, indicates that they venerate Muhammad's heir beyond the norms of orthodox Shiism -- even to the point of considering him divine. Indeed, the sectarian-Shiite aspect of the Alawite faith helped facilitate the Assad regime's contacts with Shiite Iran.

Caught in the middle are Syria's Christians, who like other such minorities in Iraq and Egypt long had little choice but to rely on dictators for protection. Now they find themselves associated with a regime for which they had no particular love. No doubt this is also true of many ordinary Alawites, who benefited from their position relative to the regime but may not have had any deep connection to it. The dumping of bodies in sectarian neighborhoods in mixed cities such as Homs is another legacy of the worst days of violence in Iraq. At the height of the troubles there, terrorists backed by al-Qaeda frequently kidnapped and killed innocent civilians, using their mutilated remains as messages to the other side.

In Syria, as in Iraq, one of the goals is to provoke the other side into all-out violence. It isn't entirely clear who would benefit by these particular killings -- whether they were carried out by extremist Sunnis or by Alawite supporters of the regime trying to convince the world that civil war is the only alternative to continued Assad rule. Either way, the killings are a grim reminder that a peaceful transition in Syria depends upon decapitating the regime while preserving the state -- as the U.S. signally failed to do in Iraq.

Failed states will mean more of the sectarian violence that claimed thousands of lives there. This time, there will be no David Petraeus *ex machina* to bring it under control.

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Article 4.

The Washington Post

Obama is lagging on Egypt

Jackson Diehl

December 12 -- Early on the morning of Nov. 25, the Obama administration significantly shifted its public position in the then-ongoing standoff between Egypt's ruling military and pro-democracy demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir square. Dropping its weak appeals for "restraint on all sides," the White House "condemned the excessive use of force" against the protesters and sided with their main demand by asserting that "the full transfer of power to a civilian government must take place . . . as soon as possible."

The generals got the message and reacted furiously. But most other Egyptians were oblivious — including the young revolutionaries and civilian political elite the administration was trying to support. When I spoke to a range of politicians and demonstrators in Cairo several days later, most were still fuming over the wishy-washy words of press secretary Jay Carney on Nov. 21. Maybe that's because Carney's comments were televised — while the subsequent statement was issued off camera, in the name of "the press secretary," at 3 ████. Washington time.

The story of that statement is a good example of how President Obama continues to lag on what his own top advisers have called the greatest foreign policy challenge of his administration. A president who began his presidency with a much-promoted public address to the Muslim world from Cairo has rarely found his voice since Egypt and other Arab states tumbled into a new era in which public opinion — the proverbial "Arab street" — matters more than ever.

In the past half-year Obama has given two big set-piece speeches about the events in the Middle East, at the State Department and the

United Nations. In both cases he made headlines for what he said about the frozen Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than the revolutionary change underway in Arab states. Outside those addresses the president has rarely spoken about the roller-coaster of change underway in Egypt, or the violent repression in Bahrain, or the pivotal civil conflict in Syria. Months of presidential silence go by, while the press shops at State and the White House issue perfunctory statements.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that Obama simply isn't much engaged by the fight for freedom in the Middle East or sees it as a distraction from his own priorities. After all, he continues to speak frequently and often provocatively about the causes of Palestinian statehood and nuclear nonproliferation, which he brought with him to office. He recently launched a much-promoted "pivot" of his foreign policy to Asia — a critically important area for the United States but one where no crisis, much less an epochal upheaval, is underway. Why does this matter? Because for the first time in a generation, the United States needs to reforge its strategic relations with countries such as Egypt — and it can no longer do it by writing checks or supplying tanks. Over the next couple of years the 80 million people of Egypt, and their elected representatives, will need to be convinced that an alliance with the United States is worth preserving.

So far the trend is not good. According to the 2011 Arab Opinion poll, conducted by Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland with Zogby International, the share of Arabs saying they have a positive view of Obama stands at 34 percent, compared with 39 percent in 2009. The president's ratings have increased since the Arab Spring began, but when people were asked which countries have "played the most constructive role," Turkey and France finished first; the United States barely edged out China for third.

Administration officials often argue that Washington is better off keeping a low public profile on Mideast events. Yet France has clearly benefited from Nicolas Sarkozy's aggressive public support for the revolutions. And the reality is that a large number of Arabs either don't know what U.S. policy is or misunderstand it. Most Egyptians I talked to during a recent visit to Cairo — including sophisticated political players — believed that Obama's priorities are to support the Egyptian military and Israel, regardless of what they do.

There are, of course, ways for the United States to demonstrate its continuing value to Egypt and its neighbors that may be more important than public statements. Help for economies devastated by revolution could be crucial in the next couple of years. Security cooperation in places such as the Sinai Peninsula, where al-Qaeda may be seeking a foothold, may also pay off.

But Arabs also need to hear and see that American leaders support their democratic aspirations. The administration is slowly moving in that direction: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, for example, has recently prodded both Egypt's Islamists and the military about sticking to democratic principles. The message, however, needs to be more consistent. And more often than it has, it needs to come from the president.

Article 5.

NYT

Depression and Democracy

Paul Krugman

December 11, 2011 -- It's time to start calling the current situation what it is: a depression. True, it's not a full replay of the Great Depression, but that's cold comfort. Unemployment in both America and Europe remains disastrously high. Leaders and institutions are increasingly discredited. And democratic values are under siege. On that last point, I am not being alarmist. On the political as on the economic front it's important not to fall into the "not as bad as" trap. High unemployment isn't O.K. just because it hasn't hit 1933 levels; ominous political trends shouldn't be dismissed just because there's no Hitler in sight.

Let's talk, in particular, about what's happening in Europe — not because all is well with America, but because the gravity of European political developments isn't widely understood.

First of all, the crisis of the euro is killing the European dream. The shared currency, which was supposed to bind nations together, has instead created an atmosphere of bitter acrimony.

Specifically, demands for ever-harsher austerity, with no offsetting effort to foster growth, have done double damage. They have failed as economic policy, worsening unemployment without restoring confidence; a Europe-wide recession now looks likely even if the immediate threat of financial crisis is contained. And they have created immense anger, with many Europeans furious at what is perceived, fairly or unfairly (or actually a bit of both), as a heavy-handed exercise of German power.

Nobody familiar with Europe's history can look at this resurgence of hostility without feeling a shiver. Yet there may be worse things happening.

Right-wing populists are on the rise from Austria, where the Freedom Party (whose leader used to have neo-Nazi connections) runs neck-and-neck in the polls with established parties, to Finland, where the anti-immigrant True Finns party had a strong electoral showing last April. And these are rich countries whose economies have held up fairly well. Matters look even more ominous in the poorer nations of Central and Eastern Europe.

Last month the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development documented a sharp drop in public support for democracy in the "new E.U." countries, the nations that joined the European Union after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Not surprisingly, the loss of faith in democracy has been greatest in the countries that suffered the deepest economic slumps.

And in at least one nation, Hungary, democratic institutions are being undermined as we speak.

One of Hungary's major parties, Jobbik, is a nightmare out of the 1930s: it's anti-Roma (Gypsy), it's anti-Semitic, and it even had a paramilitary arm. But the immediate threat comes from Fidesz, the governing center-right party.

Fidesz won an overwhelming Parliamentary majority last year, at least partly for economic reasons; Hungary isn't on the euro, but it suffered severely because of large-scale borrowing in foreign currencies and also, to be frank, thanks to mismanagement and corruption on the part of the then-governing left-liberal parties. Now Fidesz, which rammed through a new Constitution last spring on a party-line vote, seems bent on establishing a permanent hold on power.

The details are complex. Kim Lane Scheppele, who is the director of Princeton's Law and Public Affairs program — and has been following the Hungarian situation closely — tells me that Fidesz is relying on overlapping measures to suppress opposition. A proposed election law creates gerrymandered districts designed to make it almost impossible for other parties to form a government; judicial independence has been compromised, and the courts packed with party loyalists; state-run media have been converted into party organs, and there's a crackdown on independent media; and a proposed constitutional addendum would effectively criminalize the leading leftist party.

Taken together, all this amounts to the re-establishment of authoritarian rule, under a paper-thin veneer of democracy, in the heart of Europe. And it's a sample of what may happen much more widely if this depression continues.

It's not clear what can be done about Hungary's authoritarian slide. The U.S. State Department, to its credit, has been very much on the case, but this is essentially a European matter. The European Union missed the chance to head off the power grab at the start — in part because the new Constitution was rammed through while Hungary held the Union's rotating presidency. It will be much harder to reverse the slide now. Yet Europe's leaders had better try, or risk losing everything they stand for.

And they also need to rethink their failing economic policies. If they don't, there will be more backsliding on democracy — and the breakup of the euro may be the least of their worries.

Article 6.

The Daily Star

Obama redefines the economic role of government

Fareed Zakaria

December 12, 2011 -- With his speech in Kansas, President Barack Obama has begun a national conversation about the economy and the role of government. In presenting his view, Obama shifted the economic conversation from deficits to the crucial issue of growth. After all, deficits matter because they could have a harmful effect on growth. The question we should all ask is: What would make this economy grow?

One theory heard a lot these days is that the economy is burdened by excessive government regulation, interference and taxes. All these pressures on business, especially small business, are keeping the economy down. Cut them, the Republican candidates all say, and the economy will be unleashed. It's a compelling picture, but the data simply do not support it.

A World Economic Forum survey that ranks countries on their overall economic competitiveness puts the United States fifth; the countries ahead of it, including Singapore and Finland, are tiny, with populations around 5 percent of that of the U.S. The World Bank publishes a report that looks at "Doing Business" across the globe. The U.S. ranks No. 4, again behind a handful of tiny countries. As is the case with the World Economic Forum, that ranking has not changed much over the years.

The Kauffman Foundation, which looks at the level of U.S. entrepreneurship, found that in 2010, 340 out of every 100,000 Americans started a business each month. That rate hasn't changed

much in the past few years; it is only slightly higher than in 2007, before the recession. Regarding regulations, Bloomberg News has crunched the numbers and found that the Obama administration has not reviewed or issued significantly more rules than its predecessors. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released a study last week measuring tax revenue as a percentage of gross domestic product. The United States came in 27th out of 30 countries. Taxes are low in historical terms as well, the lowest since the early 1950s. But the complexity of the U.S. tax code clearly exacts a price in terms of economic growth and competitiveness. The World Bank study finds that the only category in which the United States is not in the top 20 is “paying taxes,” where it ranks a miserable 72. (The U.S. ranking has shifted from 76 in the 2008 report to 46 in 2009 to 61 in 2010.) Tax reform that gets rid of the loopholes, deductions and credits – and the inherent corruption related to them – would clearly help the economy. So, outside of the tax code, the United States does not seem to have slipped very much in terms of competitiveness and ease of doing business. What has changed? The answer is pretty clear. Only five years ago, American infrastructure used to be ranked in the top 10 by the World Economic Forum. Now we’re 24th. U.S. air infrastructure has gone from 12th to 31st, roads from eighth to 20th. The drop in human capital is greater. The U.S. used to have the world’s largest percentage of college graduates. We’re now No. 14, according to the most recent OECD data, and American students routinely rank toward the bottom of the developed world. The situation in science education is more drastic. The number of engineering degrees conferred annually decreased more than 11 percent between 1989 and 2000. Even with the increase in college attendance over the past two decades, there were fewer engineering and engineering technologies graduates in 2009 (84,636) than in 1989

(85,002). Research and development spending has risen under Obama, but the basic trend has been downward for two decades. In percentage terms, the federal share of research spending – which funds basic science – is half of what it was in the 1950s.

In other words, the big shift in the U.S. over the past two decades is not a rise in regulations and taxation but a decline in investment – in physical and human capital. And investment is the crucial locomotive of long-term growth.

Michael Spence, the Nobel Prize-winning economist, points out that the U.S. got out of the Great Depression because of the spending associated with World War II, but also because during the war it dramatically reduced its consumption and expanded investments. People spent less, saved more and bought war bonds. That surge in investment – by people and government – produced a generation of growth after the war. If we want the next generation of growth, we need a similarly serious strategy of investment.

Palestinian Refugee Research Net

The Arab Spring and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Rex Brynen

■ just headed home from a very enjoyable Chatham House conference on the “Arab Spring” and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The meeting was part of the continuing Minster Lovell process, although unlike most of these it had no particular focus on the Palestinian refugee issue. It also took place against the very nice backdrop of Ma’in hot springs in Jordan, thereby continuing the tradition (for good or ill) of having meetings in lovely places that look absolutely nothing at all like refugee camps.

Discussion was rich and views were varied, making it impossible to provide an overall summary of workshop conclusions. Instead, I’ll offer my own take-away on the issues raised, with the caveat that others who were there may have very different views on these topics.

- **The Arab Spring might be a transformative event for the region, but it isn’t a transformative watershed for Israeli-Palestinian relations or the peace process.** Instead, the apparent inability to move the peace process forward is largely due to Israeli and Palestinian reasons (compounded, as noted later, by dysfunctional diplomacy by the international community). Continued Palestinian political divisions are part of the reason for the stalemate. Far more fundamental are the problems on the Israeli side, and in particular the current Netanyahu government that has no interest in seeing the

establishment of a viable Palestinian state on reasonable terms. In the context of such rejectionism, getting the parties to the negotiating table serves little purpose, other than to delegitimize negotiations (especially if it takes place in the context of continuing illegal Israeli settlement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem).

- **The Arab Spring was one of the factors contributing to the Palestinian decision to pursue recognition at the United Nations**, as Mahmud Abbas responded to growing public expectations. The process also gives the Palestinians a new set of diplomatic options, and a potential source of pressure that can be intensified or relaxed with changing circumstances.
- **The Arab Spring was also a factor in the Fateh-Hamas reconciliation agreement**, due to increased Palestinian domestic expectations as well as changing regional circumstances (such the impact of events in Syria on Hamas, as well as renewed Egyptian mediation). However, there is still enormous distance to be travelled: a technocratic national unity government must be agreed, elections must be held, rival Fateh- and Hamas- controlled security services must be unified—all against a backdrop of continued political rivalry, hostility from Israel to any involvement of Hamas in the PA, and donor suspicion.
- The transition in Egypt remains uncertain, but **it is clear that a future, more representative Egyptian government will be much colder to Israel than was the Mubarak dictatorship**. Even if the Freedom and Justice Party (Muslim Brotherhood) and al-Nour Party (Salafists) carry their initial success in the current parliamentary elections into subsequent round (and sure they will), this does not necessarily mean an end to the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. A remilitarization of

relations with Israel would be enormously expensive for Egypt, both in terms of increased defence expenditures and the almost certain loss of US aid. This could compromise efforts at economic recovery—and the ever-pragmatic Muslim Brotherhood knows it.

- We didn't spend much time talking about **Egypt's partial loss of control over the Sinai**, evidenced in increased tensions with the Bedouins, increased arms smuggling, attacks on the gas pipeline to Israel, and the cross-border attack near Eilat in August (initially blamed by Israel on the Popular Resistance Committees, but possibly conducted by a much more ad hoc group of militants inside and outside Gaza). This will be a continuing source of tension with Israel, and a possible flashpoint if there is a future high-casualty terrorist attack.
- **Events in Syria have major geostrategic implications**, especially if the Asad regime falls in a way that severs Syria's longstanding alliance with Iran and results in a downgrading of relations with Hizbullah. Such an outcome would certainly be a major loss for Iran and Hizbullah, and a gain for Israel. Israel, on the other hand, has always had a "predictable enemy" in the Asad regimes, and is also nervous at the possible implications of continuing instability in Syria, or the rise of an unpredictable populist nationalist regime (especially given Syria's possession of a significant chemical weapon stockpile). Despite Hamas losing Damascus as a functional headquarters as the Syrian civil war intensifies, there is no reason to believe that it will suffer in the same way in the longer term. Hamas (unlike Hizbullah) has not been seen by Syrians as a supporter of the Ba'thist regime, and a great many Palestinian refugees in Syria have been sympathetic to the protesters. It doesn't hurt that they are Sunnis

either, given the sectarian undercurrents of some contemporary Syrian politics.

- We didn't much discuss the **prospects for Jordan** (perhaps because we were in Jordan, which generates particular sensitivities). I think the Hashemite regime will weather the storm, albeit with political damage. It will continue to emphasize the unity of Jordan AND play the East Bank vs. Palestinian card as serve its purposes. Any substantial reform in Jordan (and I am doubtful we will see that) would also shine an inevitable spotlight on the situation of Palestinians in the country.
- Overall, **we are likely to see greater support for the Palestinian cause in the wake of the Arab Spring among Arab regimes that are more sensitive to public opinion.** This will be partly limited for the next few years, however, by a preoccupation with domestic issues in transitional countries. Moreover, **I don't think that an increase in Arab support actually makes a huge difference to Israeli-Palestinian negotiating dynamics.** Instead, as suggested earlier, Israeli and Palestinian factors are more important.
- A critical issue, therefore, is **how the Arab Spring plays out within Israeli politics.** As one colleague noted, events of the past year are refracted by most Israelis through the prism of their preexisting political views. Those who support a two state solution see the Arab Spring as further highlighting the need for peace, lest Israel otherwise find itself isolated in an increasingly hostile and Islamist regional environment. Israeli hardliners, on the other hand, tend to view recent events as confirmation of their view that the Middle East is a dangerous and unpredictable place, with Islamic radicalism lurking around every corner. In such a context, they would argue, it would be foolish to make

risky territorial compromises with an unstable and potentially hostile Palestine. This view, of course, was articulated by Benjamin Netanyahu in his Knesset speech late last month, when he warned that “Israel is facing a period of instability and uncertainty in the region. This is certainly not the time to listen to those who say follow your heart,” and declared “I will not establish Israel’s policy on illusions. There’s a huge upheaval here...whoever doesn’t see it is burying his head in the sand.” I think that the alarmist view has a marginal advantage in this battle of interpretations—and in Israeli politics, even marginal shifts in public opinion can be important. On top of this, as Daniel Levy recently noted in *Foreign Affairs*, political and demographic trends in Israel tends favour the religious and nationalist camp. As a result, **not only will Israel be increasingly less inclined to reasonable compromise, but the Arab Spring will tend to reinforce this reluctance.**

- A wild card in all of this is the **Israeli economy and related social dynamics**. There was considerable discussion at the meeting of the (partly) Tahrir-square inspired Israeli social protests over the summer, and whether they would either shift the Israeli domestic balance or make conceptual connections between issues of Israeli social and economic development and Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. To date they haven’t. The Israeli participants also expressed considerable dismay at the state of Israeli democracy, given efforts to limit NGOs, criminalize commemoration of the Nakba, endorse boycotts, or otherwise freely express political views.
- On the Palestinian side, **the Arab Spring has created a sense that some historical momentum has been regained, and even that time might now be on their side**. This is particularly true of Hamas, which can look to the political success of Islamist

parties in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere as evidence that it can afford to take a long view. I am far from convinced that time is on the Palestinians side, given both continued Israeli settlement activity (especially around Jerusalem) as well as trends in Israeli domestic politics. Moreover, I think **the view that history favours Palestinian liberation tends to work against a frank and realistic assessment of Palestinian strategic options, especially within Hamas itself** (which has partly made a transition to acceptance of a two-state solution, but in a gradual and limited way).

- There was discussion among the group over **whether the two state model of resolving the conflict is itself dead**, and whether alternative models might become more attractive. I agree that a two state solution gets harder by the day, although ■■■ not prepared to pronounce it dead quite yet. I think a one state model is illusory and unobtainable within this century, given Israel's core, fundamental raison ■■■ of being a Jewish state. More likely, I fear, is a one-and-a-half state solution, in other words an evolving version of what we have now: an Israel state, and a Palestinian Bantustan.
- Concern was also raised by several Israeli and Palestinian participants that trends in the region (the electoral success of Islamist parties, the growing influence of the religious vote in Israel) **might gradually transform the conflict into a religious one that would be less amenable to resolution.**
- There was a broad consensus among participants that **US policy has been something of a disaster under Obama.** Too much emphasis had been placed on negotiations at the expense of clarifying core principles. Given the current election season in the US, no one expected that Washington would do much more in the next year. Moreover, if Obama were to be reelected, there

was little optimism that his Middle East policy would much different in a second term. While it is hard to predict what Romney might do in the White House (on any issue), the general view was that he would tilt even more to the Israeli right waing. A Gingrich White House, with John Bolton as Secretary of State? That, of course, would be an unmitigated disaster for the peace process.

- I strongly argued that **European policy has been a coequal disaster with US policy**. The EU had failed to generate the sorts of pressures it is capable of on the settlements issue. It had also failed to grasp the opportunities presented by the Palestinian UN bid. The British (who have some strikingly clever diplomats) has rather sadly lined up behind the American position in many regards. The French had handled it somewhat better in a public relations sense, but in substantive terms had done little better. Given the ongoing Eurozone crisis, no one is expecting European performance will improve any time soon.

Despite the meeting being part of the Minster Lovell series, there was virtually no direct discussion of the implication of this for refugees (some of which had been discussed at the last meeting. However, if my pessimistic view is accurate, it certainly suggests that there will be absolutely no progress to resolving the refugee issue any time soon.

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Article 8.

NYT

Physicists Anxiously Await New Data on 'God Particle'

Dennis Overbye

December 11, 2011 -- High noon is approaching for the biggest manhunt in the history of physics. At 8 ████. Eastern time on Tuesday morning, scientists from CERN, the European Center for Nuclear Research, are scheduled to give a progress report on the search for the Higgs boson — infamously known as the “God particle” — whose discovery would vindicate the modern theory of how elementary particles get mass.

The report comes amid rumors that the two competing armies of scientists sifting debris from hundreds of trillions of proton collisions in CERN’s Large Hadron Collider, or L.H.C., outside Geneva, have both finally seen hints of what might turn out be the elusive particle when more data is gathered next year.

Alternatively, the experimentalists say that a year from now they should have enough data to rule out the existence of the most popular version of the Higgs boson, sending theorists back to their blackboards in search of another explanation of why particles have mass.

So the whole world will be watching.

Among them will be Lisa Randall, a Harvard particle theorist and author of the new book “Knocking on Heaven’s Door: How Physics and Scientific Thinking Illuminate the Universe and the Modern World.” In an interview with Dennis Overbye of The Times, Dr. Randall provided this guide to the action for those of us in the bleachers.

Q. What is the Higgs and why is it important?

A. The name Higgs refers to at least four things. First of all, there is a Higgs mechanism, which is ultimately responsible for elementary particles' masses. This is certainly one of the trickier aspects of particle physics to explain, but essentially something like a charge — not an electric charge — permeates the vacuum, the state with no particles.

These “charges” are associated with a Higgs field. As particles pass through this field they interact with the “charges,” and this interaction makes them act as if they had mass. Heavier particles do so more, and lighter particles do so less. The Higgs mechanism is essential to the masses of elementary particles.

The Higgs particle, or Higgs boson, is the vestige of the simplest proposed model of what created the Higgs field in the first place. Contrary to popular understanding, the Higgs field gives mass — not the Higgs boson. But a discovery of the Higgs boson would tell us that the Higgs mechanism is right and help us pin down the theory that underlies both the Higgs mechanism and the Standard Model. In the simplest implementation of the Higgs mechanism, the experimental consequence is the Higgs boson. It is the particle that the experimentalists are now searching for.

Of course, Higgs is also the name of the person, Peter Higgs, who first developed the underlying theory (along with five others who will be in contention for the Nobel Prize if and when the Higgs particle is discovered.)

Q. How will we know it when we find it?

A. In the simplest implementation of the Higgs mechanism, we know precisely what the properties of the Higgs boson should be. That's

because of its connection to the Higgs mechanism, which tells us that its interactions with any particular particle are determined by that particular particle's mass.

Knowing the interactions, we can calculate how often the Higgs boson should be produced and the ways in which it should decay. It can decay only into those particles that are light enough for energy to be conserved. Roughly speaking, the Higgs boson decays into the heaviest such particles the most often, since it interacts with them the most strongly.

What we don't know, however, is the Higgs boson's mass. The Higgs boson decays differently, depending on its mass, since a heavier Higgs boson can decay in ways that a light Higgs boson can't. So when experimenters look for the Higgs boson, they look over a range of masses and employ a variety of search strategies.

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Q. What do we know about it so far?

A. Experimenters have already ruled out a large range of masses. The Higgs boson, if it exists, has to be heavier than 114.4 giga-electron volts (GeV), which are the units of mass that particle physicists use. By comparison, protons, the bedrock of ordinary matter, are about 1 giga-electron volt, and an electron is only half a million electron volts.

Based on recent searches by the L.H.C., the Higgs boson is also excluded between about 140 GeV and 500 GeV. This makes the most likely region for the Higgs mass to be between about 115 and 140 GeV, which is the range Tuesday's results should focus on, although in principle heavier Higgs boson masses are in contention too.

I don't want to shatter hopes, but don't count on Tuesday's results being definitive. This is the toughest range of masses for the L.H.C., and detection is tricky for this range. I suspect they will have enough evidence not to exclude the Higgs, but too little to fully pin it down without next year's data.

Q. What difference does its mass make?

A. Actually, as far as matter's properties go, it doesn't really make a great deal of difference. As long as the Higgs mechanism is in place, elementary particles that we know about will have the masses that they do.

But no one thinks the Higgs is the final word about what underlies the Standard Model of particle physics, the theory that describes the

most basic elements of matter and the forces through which they interact. Even if the Higgs boson is discovered, the question will still remain of why masses are what they are.

According to quantum field theory — the theory that combines quantum mechanics and special relativity — masses would be expected to be ten thousand trillion times bigger. Without some deeper ingredient, a fudge of that size would be required to make it all hang together. No particle physicist believes that.

We all expect a richer theory underlying the Standard Model. That's one reason the mass matters to us. Some theories only accommodate a particular range of masses. Knowing the mass will give us insight into what that deeper underlying theory is.

Q. Is the L.H.C. a flop if we don't find the Higgs boson?

A. The great irony is that not finding a Higgs boson would be spectacular from the point of view of particle physics, pointing to something more interesting than the simple Higgs model. Future investigations could reveal that the particle playing the role of the Higgs has interactions aside from the ones we know have to be there for particles to acquire mass.

The other possibility is that the answer is not the simple, fundamental particle that the Large Hadron Collider currently is looking for. It could be a more complicated object or part of a more complex sector that would take longer to find.

Q. Does this have anything to do with neutrinos — specifically, the ones that were recently reported as having traveled faster than light on a journey that originated at CERN?

A. Neutrinos have tiny masses. The Higgs mechanism is probably partially responsible for those, too. Just nothing that encourages them to go faster than light (which they most likely don't). In 1993, the U.S. Congress canceled a larger American collider, the superconducting super collider, which would have been bigger than the CERN machine.

Q. Would it have found the Higgs particle years ago?

A. Yes, if it had gone according to schedule. And it would have been able to find things that weren't a simple Higgs boson, too. The L.H.C. can do such searches as well, but with its lower energy the work is more challenging and will require more time.