

COMMENTARY

Editorial of
The Guardian

By Emil Avdaliani

Trump and arms

Can the
doomsday clock
be stopped?

How late is it now? On Thursday (24), the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* will announce the time on its Doomsday Clock. Last year, the bulletin moved the hands forwards 30 seconds, to reach two minutes to midnight: the closest to catastrophe in six and a half decades. Since then, the immediate peril encapsulated in Donald Trump's threats of "fire and fury" to North Korea has receded. But Trump should take no credit for pressing pause on a crisis largely of his own making. His actions have exacerbated existing problems on the Korean peninsula, and elsewhere.

As a candidate, Trump is said to have asked why the US could not use nuclear weapons. So it should be no surprise he has proved reckless in office. Last week, his administration announced it would begin its pull-out from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty next month, and Trump called for billions of dollars of new spending on missile defences. Arms control experts have warned that the missile defence review, and Trump's rhetoric in particular, risk provoking an arms race, encouraging Russia and China, both of which are potential and actual destabilizers already, to increase their own capabilities.

Meanwhile, Trump has announced he will meet Kim Jong-un for a second summit by the end of next month. Following the Singapore meeting, where he gave away much and received almost nothing, Trump declared there was "no longer a nuclear threat" from North Korea. Yet this week's missile defence review warned of the "extraordinary threat" it poses. The contrast between the casual jettisoning of the INF treaty, which has kept nuclear weapons out of Europe for 30 years, and Trump's dangerous grandstanding over the review and summit, is hugely telling.

Making and maintaining such treaties is painstaking and detailed work, and relies on deeply unTrumpian attributes. It requires sustained, strategic, informed diplomacy which appreciates incremental achievements, rather than showpiece events and bombastic announcements driven by whim, vanity, hawkish advisers and, at times, surely, the desire to distract from Robert Mueller's investigation. It seeks to reach out to adversaries and act consistently towards them; while falling "in love" with Kim, Trump has withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal. It depends on close cooperation and coordination with allies; Trump reportedly discussed pulling the US out of Nato last year.

Faced with Russian non-compliance with the INF treaty, the US has made no serious efforts to find a solution but has chosen to tool up and announce a free-for-all. Now attention is turning to the New Start treaty, which caps the number of nuclear warheads held by Russia and the US, but runs out in 2021. Its demise would leave no legally binding limits on the world's largest nuclear arsenals for the first time since 1972. Moscow has said that it would extend it for five years; Trump has called it a "bad deal".

Allies and parts of the US government have sometimes worked around Trump, notably in taking diplomatic action against Russia. Some hope he could be flattered into promoting a "new" treaty if it was portrayed as a triumph for the great dealmaker. But even if such an approach was possible given the complexity of arms agreements, look at the hawks now surrounding him. James Mattis has quit. The national security adviser is John Bolton, known for his visceral opposition to any kind of constraint on US capabilities. Bolton's deputy, Charles Kupperman, once suggested it was possible to win a nuclear war.

Last year's nuclear posture review was summed up as "nuclear weapons are back in a big way". The new missile defence review proposes investing heavily in questionable technology. One hope is that Congress balks at the huge sums indicated by the two plans. The second is that Europe's desperate shoring-up of the Iran deal in the face of growing pressure, and its lobbying for an extension or renegotiation of New Start, will pay off. But it will take every ounce of ingenuity and effort that US allies can muster to hold back the hands of the clock.

Editorial of the Gulf News

World must do more for Syrian refugees

The tragic deaths of at least 15 children due to severe winter chill in Syrian refugee camps under United States military control has refocused attention on the estimated six million Syrians who have been displaced internally by the brutal war that has wracked the country for the past eight years. Four million more are eking out a living in grim refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Babies are dying from preventable or curable health issues. In this day and age, this is unacceptable. There are no excuses. This man-made loss of life must end.

This winter has been brutal, especially in Lebanon; snowstorms have made con-

ditions in the Bekaa Valley unliveable. Thousands have had their tents and other belongings destroyed by heavy snowfall. Those who live in some of these camps have described them as "hell on earth".

But they have no choice but to accept their fate — they can't leave for the lack of other options.

It exposes the abject failure of the international community. Countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, who have their own delicate economic and social conditions to contend with, need more help from the rest of the world. An entire generation of Syrians has grown up in the midst of unspeakable carnage of war,

and grave trepidations that have resulted from it. Many have spent almost eight years in these tents, dependent on wholly insufficient handouts from humanitarian agencies. All this is because of no fault of their own. Many residents of these camps were part of the middle and upper-middle classes of Syrian society; they are skilled and educated but now find themselves in the frustrating position of not being able to provide basic necessities for their families.

Every winter has proved to be brutal for the refugees. So there is no excuse for not planning well ahead. This year in refugee camps in Lebanon, for instance, families

spent all day emptying their tents of ice cold water only to see another crushing night of snow, wind and flooding. Their flimsy tents provide no real protection from the elements, especially in winter. The need of the hour is to provide better housing, through prefabricated homes, for example.

Syria's war has been a tragedy of our times. Half a million people have been killed by the actions of the Syrian regime and its extremist foes. The least the world can do is to help ensure a life of basic dignity for the survivors. That would include providing adequate shelter.

the
Globalist

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks during a handover ceremony for the new Israeli chief of staff on January 15, 2019 at the Defence Ministry in Tel Aviv

- JACK GUEZ / AFP

By Alon Ben-Meir

Time to dump Netanyahu

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to call for an early election, scheduled to take place on April 9, was really nothing short of another political stunt that Netanyahu has masterfully learned to employ when the time is right and he is reasonably assured of another victory.

One would think, however, that after 10 continuous years in power he would relinquish his role as the leader of the Likud party and leave the political scene with some dignity, especially now that he may well be indicted on at least three counts.

What has allowed Netanyahu to navigate through the Israeli political morass is the very political system that encourages division, intense personal rivalry and self-interest, which often is placed above the party or national interests. Although Israel is a democracy, its democratic political system has been steadily eroding.

At any point in time, there are at least 10 political parties in the Knesset. Currently the Netanyahu coalition is composed of five parties, there are six in the opposition and five more parties have just been formed in advance of the April elections.

Every leader of these parties believes that he or she is the most qualified to become the prime minister and can lead the country to peace and prosperity. The fact, however, is that no current nor newly-established party has yet to produce a framework for a peace agreement with the Palestinians in the context of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace, which is fundamental to Israel's future prosperity and security.

Obviously, diverse political and ideological views are and should be welcomed under any circumstances. Despite the similarities in the political/ideological views of the Israeli political parties from the left, and similarly among the parties from the centre, right, and the religious parties, each party within these political groupings insists on maintaining their "unique social and political agendas" and thereby their independence.

Thus, the plethora of parties made it impossible for any single party to garner an outright majority, ending with the establishment of a coalition government led by the leader of the largest party. As a result, all coalition governments over the years have had to compromise on many critical issues. Following intense negotiations about the terms of the coalition, they eventually and frequently settle on the lowest common denominator.

This has ill-served even the most critical issues facing the nation, espe-

cially the conflict with the Palestinians.

In a similar vein, the number of civil society organizations dedicated to promoting Israel's well-being and peace has mushroomed to over 120. Each of these organizations adopted a worthy cause, largely related to ending the Arab-Israeli conflict along with socio-political issues of concerns.

They have never, however, appreciated the importance of uniting and creating a powerful movement that could impact the national political discourse.

I had an opportunity to meet with several heads of these groups, and without fail, even though they share very similar goals, every single representative strongly suggested that their own specific angle and emphasis on what ought to be done is the only way.

I emerged from these meetings convinced that these organizations differ only in nuance and, just like the political parties, each founder of these organizations wants to be the leader and is unwilling to share his/her leadership role with others.

The failure of these civil organizations to coalesce around one political movement deprived them of the power that a united front can project as a national movement to be reckoned with.

Regardless of what party wins the relative majority in the upcoming elections, little is likely to change in the dynamic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Over the years, successive Israeli governments were engaged in a deliberate public narrative that denounced the Palestinians and proclaimed that they cannot be trusted because they are committed to Israel's destruction.

The Palestinians themselves have also been engaged in an adversarial narrative against Israel and justify it because of the occupation. And while there is a strong element within the Palestinian community that seeks the destruction of Israel, there is no doubt that the vast majority want to end the conflict and live in a state of their own, side-by-side Israel in peace and security. Nevertheless, a growing number of Israelis who have been persuaded by this constant adversarial narrative championed by Netanyahu, who stated that there will be no Palestinian state under his watch, believe there is little or no prospect for real peace with the Palestinians.

Moreover, Netanyahu's fear mongering and skilful amplification of the Iranian threat pushed the Palestinian conflict to the back burner.

Thus, the lack of urgency by the government to make peace produced public complacency and disillusionment with the political parties.

What made matters worse is that a steadily growing number of Israelis are moving to the right-of-centre. Even the opposition parties, who have been advocating Israeli-Palestinian peace, are now reluctant to speak vociferously about the need to end the occupation, fearful of being branded as traitors.

Recent polls taken in Israel suggest that Netanyahu may still win a relative majority and form the next Israeli government. Such an outcome will be disastrous for Israel because it would simply mean that there will not be peace with the Palestinians.

Israel will face a growing danger because the *status quo* is unsustainable and potentially explosive, and the continuing conflict only encourages Iran to continue to instigate extremist Palestinians, including some elements of Hamas, to harass Israel and deprive it from living in peace and stability.

Although it is unlikely that the old and new parties from the left and left-of-centre will coalesce around one leader who can seriously challenge Netanyahu and his party, at a minimum they should agree on a joint platform that offers a road map for peace with the Palestinians.

Indeed, Israel is in desperate need of a new, visionary, courageous, articulate and honest leader who would commit to and remain relentless in the search for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

The former chief of the Israel Defence Forces, Benny Gantz, who has just formed his own party—Resilience for Israel—may well succeed in giving Netanyahu a run for his money, provided that other left and centrist parties support him.

The question is, will the leaders of these parties for once put the national interest above their party and their lust for power?

Perhaps they should remember that despite Israel's miraculous achievements in science, technology, medicine, economic development, agronomy, military prowess and even space exploration, its destiny rests on peace.

The upcoming parliamentary election offers Israelis a historic opportunity to rid themselves of the revisionist, nationalist and blindly zealous leaders like Netanyahu who have steered Israel astray and subjected it to the ominous danger of losing its democratic principles and its Jewish national identity.

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NYT Editorial Observer

By Carol Giacomo

Iran and the US
doomed to be
enemies?

John Limbert belongs to an exclusive club — the 52 American diplomats held hostage by Iran for 444 days during the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Since that crisis, which began 40 years ago next month, the two countries shared an enmity that has only grown worse under President Donald Trump.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo raised the rhetorical stakes earlier this month when he urged the world to isolate Iran and promised to "expel every last Iranian boot" from Syria. The United States and Iran are so hostile one wonders whether they will be enemies forever.

"I've thought about that a lot," Limbert said in an interview. At 75, he remains fond of Iran and committed to helping Americans understand the country, but he finds the bilateral dynamic more dangerous than ever. "I think the best we can hope for is not to get into a war," he said, setting a low if tragically realistic bar.

In theory, no Islamic country is better positioned than Iran to play a leading role in the Middle East, because of its location, its wealth and the sophistication of its people. But that potential has been stunted because of Iran's continued meddling in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon, and an antipathy for the United States that is mutual and obsessive.

Both sides are to blame, with hard-line leaders demonizing each other in a struggle to satisfy their constituents and maintain power. Excoriating the "Great Satan" is central to Iran's defence of its revolution and its religious underpinnings; the administration has made intensifying pressure on Iran a central tenet of its foreign policy.

Pompeo and John Bolton, the national security adviser who before joining the administration called for regime change and military strikes on Iran, are driving the hard-charging approach.

In September, Bolton requested military options after Iranian-backed militants fired three mortars or rockets into an empty lot on the grounds of the US Embassy in Baghdad. No action has been taken.

After his much-criticized speech in Cairo, which denigrated President Barack Obama's overtures to Iran and the Muslim world, Pompeo is doubling down by hosting a meeting in Poland next month that aims to unite countries in an anti-Iran coalition to "confront the ayatollahs, not coddle them."

The United States and Iran have been adversaries for so long it's hard to remember that they were close partners after Mohammed Reza Pahlavi came to power in 1941. During World War II, Iran was a supply route for Lend-Lease aid to the Soviet Union. In 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower gave Iran technology for a peaceful nuclear energy program. Under President Richard Nixon, Iran became the guardian of American interests in the Persian Gulf.

But Iranian resentment had been simmering since 1953, when the United States and Britain overthrew a democratically elected Iranian prime minister, allowing the shah to return to power. With the 1979 revolution, Iranians ousted the shah for good and established a rigidly conservative, Shiite theocratic state.

The hostage crisis poisoned American views of Iran, but so did Iran's hostile statements and its sponsorship of militant groups and terrorist attacks, including the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US airmen.

More recently, Iran's hostility toward Israel; its attacks on US troops in Iraq; its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad government in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen; its growing missile program; and suspicions that it might use its nuclear program to produce weapons added to the concerns.

Iran has grievances, too: President Ronald Reagan's support of Iraq over Iran in their 1980-1988 war; the accidental downing of an Iranian civilian airliner over the Persian Gulf by an American naval cruiser in 1988 that killed 290 people; and decades of sanctions intended to change Iran's behaviour.

In America, where few people have visited or studied Iran, polls show there is little to gain politically from pursuing a more cooperative approach. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Iranian opposition group Mujahadeen Khalq and Saudi Arabia, all with long-standing anti-Iran agendas, have intensified their lobbying for punishment over engagement.

Such pressure, coupled with Trump's enmity for his predecessor, led him last year to tear up the 2015 Iran deal, squandering a unique opportunity. The agreement not only curbed Iran's nuclear program, it created potential space for Iran and the West to gradually lessen their hostility and expand cooperation.

Iran is still abiding by the 3-year-old deal. But Iran has not halted its regional aggression, giving Trump a rationale for portraying it as an implacable foe that should be bullied and punished with sanctions. There is no doubt that a more democratic Iranian government is to be desired. But any changes should begin with Iranians, not an outside power like the United States.

Meanwhile, Iran's anti-US policies shouldn't preclude bilateral engagement. Despite America's waging more than a decade of war in Vietnam, relations with Hanoi today are flourishing. Even at the depths of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union found ways to cooperate, including on arms control and human rights.

If Trump cares about stabilizing the Middle East, he has to engage Iran, as he offered to do as recently as last summer. But the atmosphere between the two countries remains sulphurous, and even Limbert, who would like to visit Iran with his children and grandchildren, doubts he will ever be allowed to return. "I remind them of something in their past that they would rather not think about," he says.