

The Colloquium

International Affairs. Trinity perspectives.



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Dear Reader,

In this issue, we are delighted to present the work of some of Trinity's talented writers.

This semester's edition is the largest in The Colloquium's history, and it speaks to the curiosity that has long animated the magazine. The articles here chart the landscape of modern international affairs, exploring power as it is exercised and contested across states, societies, technologies, infrastructures, and ideas. From Lebanon to South Africa, from Iran to Slovakia, and from the politics of semiconductors to the weaponisation of water, our contributors offer a rich and engaging set of perspectives on the events which shape our world.

This issue is especially meaningful as we look ahead to next year, when The Colloquium will turn ten. Reaching that milestone will be a fantastic opportunity to reflect on the magazine's growth over the past decade, and also to celebrate the writers, editors, and readers whose commitment has made it possible.

Once again, we would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to the Trinity Alumni Trust and Trinity Publications for their continued support. Our deepest gratitude also goes to our editors and the wider Colloquium team, and above all to you, our readers, whose support and curiosity have allowed this magazine to flourish, almost ten years on.

Yours truly,

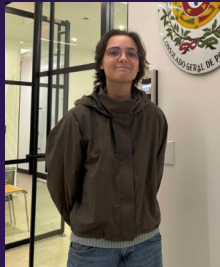
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Living Through Lebanon's Great Famine: In Conversation with Dr Tylor Brand

Priya Caswell interviews Dr Tylor Brand, a specialist in Middle Eastern studies and author of 'Famine Worlds: Life at the Edge of Suffering in Lebanon's Great War'.

By: Priya Caswell

In this interview, Dr Tylor Brand reflects on how he came to specialise in Middle Eastern studies, the challenges of writing famine history, and why past pandemics still matter for understanding crises today. He also touches on the enduring value of language learning for historical research and cultural understanding.

His recent book, *Famine Worlds: Life at the Edge of Suffering in Lebanon's Great War* (2023), shifts the focus away from politics and toward everyday life during Lebanon's Great Famine. Drawing on oral history and lived experience, it rehumanises the crisis in Mount Lebanon through personal accounts of hunger, disease, and survival.

'What initially drew you to focus on the history of the Middle East, and how did that evolve into specialising in disaster and famine studies?'

I began my studies at the University of Arizona in 2001, and just a few weeks into the term, the events of 9/11 erupted. It was a traumatic event for everyone in the United States, and the political and social climate shifted dramatically. The country became increasingly militarised, with surges in xenophobia and attacks on people of colour. Politics increasingly pushed violence as a way to reclaim American security, safety and honour.

I realised very quickly that I didn't actually know much about the region that was becoming the central target of this discourse, so in 2003 I took a course on the history of the Middle East. Just before the Iraq War began, my professor, a brilliant, old-school scholar, sat us down and laid out what he thought would happen. Almost everything he predicted came true. I remember sitting there as a 19-year-old and thinking: That's what I want to do. I wanted to help people understand the region and reshape their opinions of the Middle East and the Arab World.

My interest in Lebanon developed later, while studying Lebanese history with another professor, and eventually, I went on to do my PhD at the American University in Beirut. Being physically present in Beirut shifted much of what I cared about, or thought was important. I initially thought I would focus on political negotiations and power blocs, but over time, I became more interested in histories of disease and disaster, or events that affected ordinary people in very immediate ways.

'This brings us to your book *Famine Worlds*, which was published in 2023. How does it challenge or expand existing narratives around famine and crisis?'

The idea of studying the Great Famine of Mount Lebanon was first proposed to me in 2011, but as we approached the famine's centenary, the field became much more populated, with some great scholarship emerging. At the same time, I was in Lebanon as the Syrian refugee crisis unfolded, and that experience shifted my focus. Instead of environmental history, I found myself drawn to experiential history. What was it actually like to live through famine? How did people keep themselves going in the face of a prolonged crisis?

I found earlier scholarship often revolved around political narratives, with local accounts framing the famine as a genocidal Ottoman attack, particularly within the Maronite Catholic communities. Others downplayed the famine as a way of resisting its politicisation. For me, these aspects were less important, as I was more interested in how the famine intersected with disease and everyday life.

Typhus, for example, was particularly problematic during the famine. The inability to wash yourself or your clothes made poorer communities more vulnerable, and as a result, class divides were sharpened, with the poor seen as dangerous sources of

contagion. This is just one example of the famine's wider social consequences. The book explores how people experienced the famine in their daily lives—how they survived, what they ate, and how the crisis reshaped perceptions of both others and themselves.

'Do you think the themes you were writing about felt especially poignant in light of contemporary crises such as COVID-19?'

I think that many of us who lived through the COVID pandemic can empathise with the book's themes – it also helped me to conceptualise my own questions more clearly.

However, there is always a danger of presentism. We don't want to impose our assumptions about the present onto the past, but understanding historical mechanisms can help us understand ourselves better.

When COVID hit, I was teaching a course on the history of disease and disaster, and the parallels in the texts we were reading were striking. While history can't predict the future, it helps us understand which responses to crises tend to work, and which ones fail. This is particularly relevant with today's threats, from the rise of antibiotic-resistant superbugs or anti-vax movements in America, which have encouraged the spread of measles.

Social judgements are also deeply rooted in history – with diseases like Syphilis and Gonorrhoea, moralisation and stigma had a profound impact on our ability to respond to them. History functions as a cautionary tale – although we might not always learn from it!

'In your research, were there any surprising stories or sources you uncovered in your research that particularly stayed with you?'

I did a lot of work with oral histories because I wanted to capture the stories themselves and the memories that stayed with people. These stories provided the lived experience and unfiltered accounts of hunger and survival in Mount Lebanon.

I found that some oral histories were often retold with a moral dimension. One I remember well involved two brothers from Mount Lebanon, Druze by background, who worked as smugglers. They would sneak into Syria through back roads, buy cheap wheat, bring it back to feed their families, and sell it for income. At one point, all they had to eat was an onion and a piece of bread. One brother thanked God for this blessing, while the other refused, believing that the suffering around him didn't warrant praising God.

In the retelling, the faithful brother went on to live a

long life, whereas the other later developed cancer. The story, therefore, took on a moral and self-critical dimension when retold. I find accounts like this deeply humanising, particularly when set against a historical context in which those who suffered were so often dehumanised.

'And looking forward, are there new research projects or questions you're currently pursuing?'

I'm now interested in what happens after a world-changing crisis. We talk a lot about the event of famine itself, but much less about its aftermath, such as changes in customs, attitudes, and social life.

In Lebanon, the famine coincided with a political transition: the collapse of Ottoman authority and the arrival of French military occupation. While the political history of this period is well documented, the social aftermath is much harder to trace. I'm trying to read between the lines to ascertain how economic consequences like inflation affected daily life and rental prices, and how certain diseases were experienced and perceived by the population after the famine. The sources are difficult to find, as there's very little written about the lived experiences in the years immediately after the famine.

I'd like to return to Lebanon to do more oral history, work with local archives, family papers, and newspapers, particularly in mountain communities, although funding is tough, especially with the current political situation.

'Finally, what value do you see in language learning and immersion for understanding the region's history?'

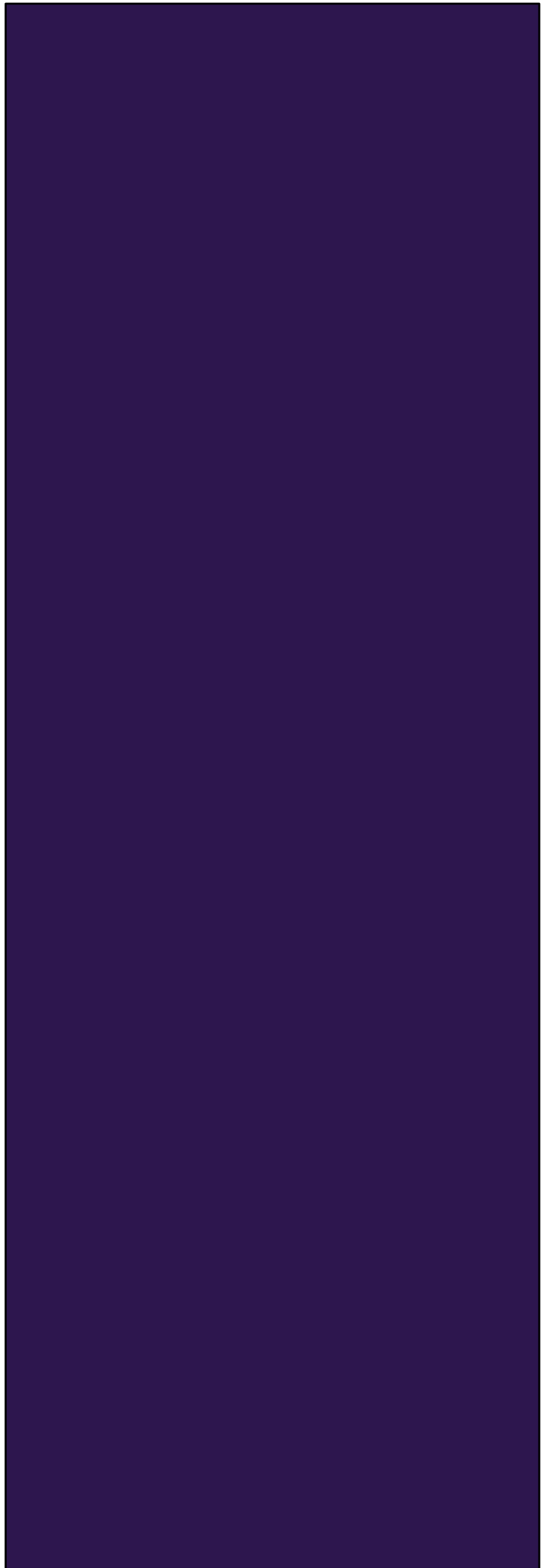
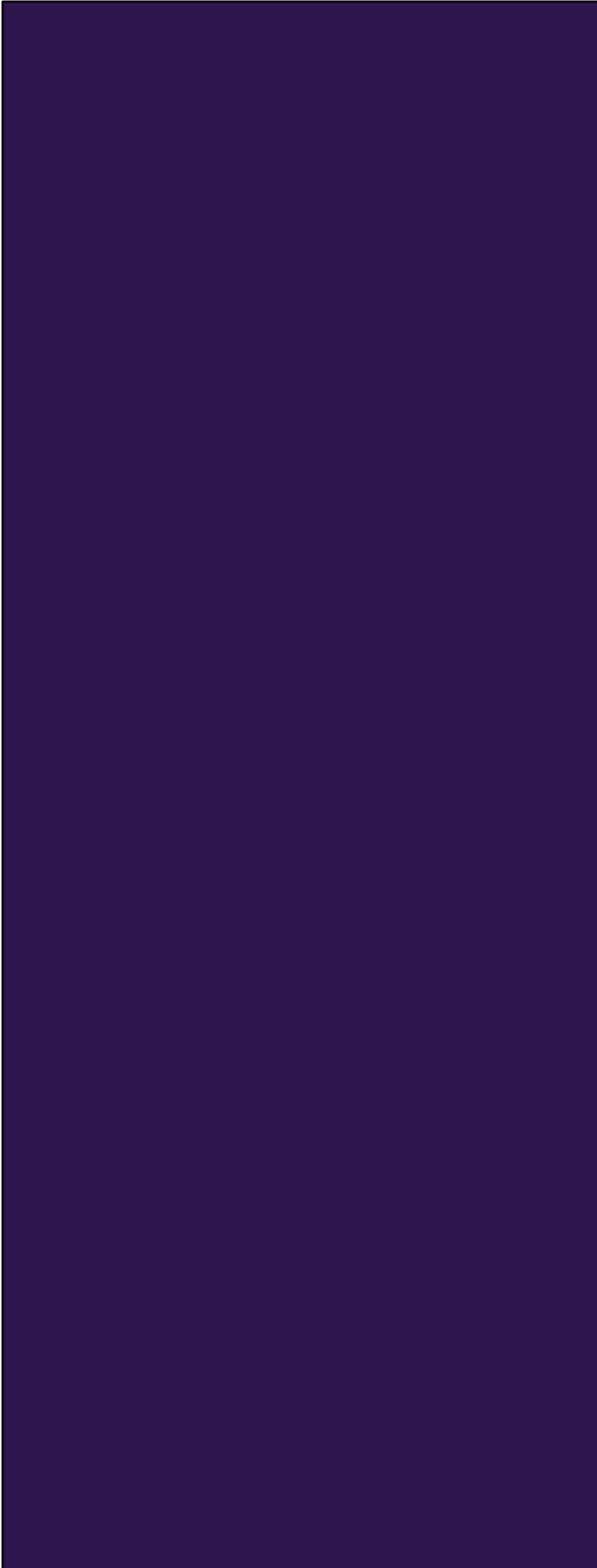
Many institutions are cutting language and anthropology programmes, partly because of the assumption that AI will replace language learning. I think that's a mistake. We live in an increasingly interconnected world – from Dublin, you can reach Morocco for 30 euros in a matter of hours! And while a lot of people do speak English, that is not necessarily a universal reality, and it might not be the case forever.

I think having an understanding of languages and cultures is also a show of respect. I would never want to show up in a place, wanting to learn about its people and history, but not have the respect to learn it on their own terms or through their own language.

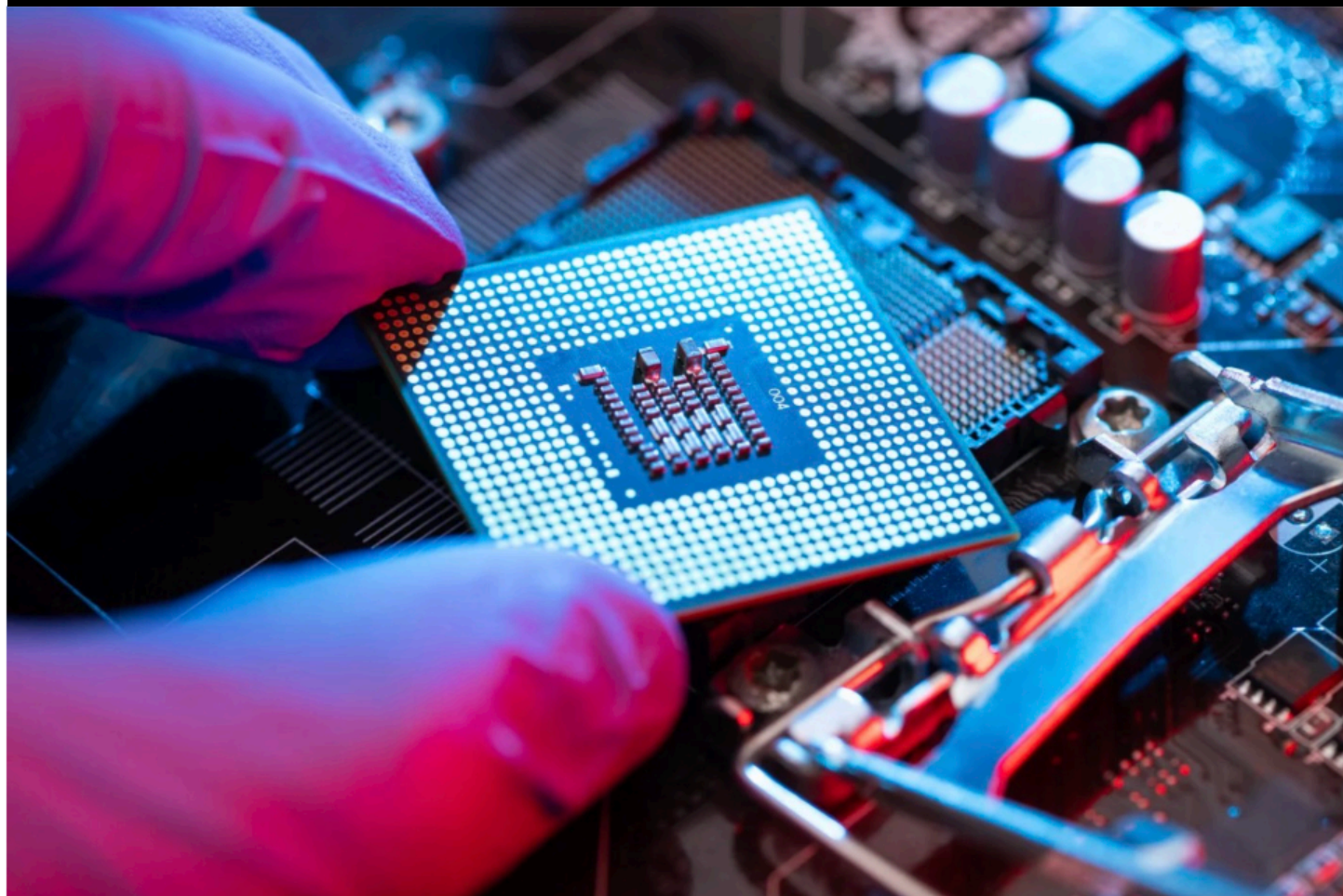
I think there's clear value to history and to language, and tying people together is even more important now.

There's also a practical dimension. Those who come out of languages and history programmes like the

Middle Eastern programmes at Trinity, gain tangible skills which help them stand out in a competitive job market. As the limitations of generative AI become more apparent, I think these unique skills will stand you in good stead.



Analysis



Narumon Bowonkitwanchai via Getty Images

The New Tech Race: Semiconductors, Security and Sino-American Tension

Marta Rehnman examines the significance of semiconductors and the major players vying to control their production.

By: Marta Rehnman

Semiconductors power contemporary society – constituting essential components of advanced microchips found in everything from cars and smartphones, to military technology, 5G and artificial intelligence (AI). Indeed, the importance of semiconductors in the 21st century has been likened to that of oil in the 20th century. In the context of the ongoing ‘tech race,’ with countries competing for global leadership in AI and other emerging technologies, countries understandably vie to control the supply of these crucial components.

The United States (US) has long played a leading role in global semiconductor production, with companies like Nvidia and Intel. Even so, American companies of

rely on imports of advanced chips from Taiwan, which produces half of the world’s semiconductors and 90% of the world’s advanced chips. However, this has been challenged in recent years by China. In 2015, China launched the Made in China Plan, aiming to achieve self-sufficiency in semiconductors by 2025. However, US export restrictions on semiconductor manufacturing equipment have thwarted this goal, with Chinese output remaining two generations behind US-produced chips. The Chinese state has invested heavily – some \$900 billion – in semiconductor and AI development over the last decade, and Chinese semiconductor imports have dropped significantly between 2017 and 2023.

'The Chinese state has invested heavily – some \$900 billion – in semiconductor and AI development in the last decade, with Chinese imports of semiconductors dropping significantly between 2017 and 2023.'

These developments have given rise to fears of Chinese dominance in strategic technology in the West. A 2025 report by the independent think tank Council on Foreign Relations warned that if China were to achieve dominance in the global semiconductor industry, US security would be in peril. Such a development would force the US to use Chinese-produced chips in critical infrastructure – like 5G networks – exposing Western democracies to authoritarian threats like surveillance and cyberattacks. Indeed, the US already relies on Chinese imports of critical minerals such as arsenic, which is necessary for semiconductor manufacturing. This dependence poses a security vulnerability, as illustrated by China's suspension of exports of critical minerals to Japan during a diplomatic dispute in 2010. Moreover, American semiconductor production depends heavily on imports of other microchip components from countries such as the Netherlands, South Korea, and Japan. Thus, the 2025 report calls for increased investment by Western governments in semiconductor innovation, talent and manufacturing, and the domestic expansion of critical minerals.

Consequently, the geographic concentration of semiconductor manufacturing, together with growing rivalries as countries like China and the US compete for global leadership in emerging technologies, has created an impetus for states to increase domestic manufacturing through massive investment, talent development, and new partnerships to bolster national security amid reliance on fragile global supply chains. This trend intensified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where shortages in medical equipment, cars and other appliances exposed the vulnerability of global supply chains. In addition, the restructuring of global trade under US President Donald Trump has exacerbated these risks, with China restricting exports of critical minerals in retaliation for US tariffs.

Global politics increasingly reflect these developments. For example, the US Chips and Science Act, introduced in 2022, provided a \$500 million investment in domestic semiconductor research and manufacturing. Moreover, an executive order in 2023 imposed restrictions on the export of US semiconductor manufacturing equipment to China, with American allies such as Japan, Taiwan, and the Netherlands following suit. In a similar vein, a new US-Taiwan trade agreement in February 2026 saw

Taiwanese pledges to invest \$250 billion in American semiconductor manufacturing, as part of President Trump's aim to reshore 40% of Taiwan's semiconductor production to the US. Still, problems remain, as Taiwan is reluctant to offshore its production – a move that would compromise not only its economic importance, but also its geopolitical security, as Chinese dependence on Taiwanese semiconductors has provided a 'silicon shield' against Chinese aggression, while providing a powerful strategic and economic incentive for the US to defend the island.

'A new US-Taiwan trade agreement in February 2026 saw Taiwanese pledges to invest \$250 billion in American semiconductor manufacturing.'

These policy developments are not limited to America. For example, the European Union introduced the European Chips Act in 2023, pledging over \$30 billion to increase joint European research, development, and manufacturing of semiconductors to reduce Europe's susceptibility to global supply chains. As part of this EU framework, the Irish Department of Enterprise, Tourism, and Employment announced in February 2026 the creation of the National Competence Center in Semiconductors (IC3) – one of 30 across the EU – to power Irish semiconductor startups through funding, training and facilities, as part of larger efforts to establish Ireland as the 'Silicon island' of Europe. This initiative includes Irish universities like the University of Cork and University College Dublin, as well as over 130 Irish and foreign companies. Moreover, the initiative aims to encourage foreign investment from companies like Apple and Nvidia as part of its objectives to double the number of Irish people employed in semiconductor startups by 2030.

'The Irish Department of Enterprise, Tourism, and Employment announced in February 2026 the creation of the National Competence Center in Semiconductors (IC3) – one of 30 across the EU – to power Irish semiconductor startups through funding, training and facilities, as part of larger efforts to establish Ireland as the 'Silicon island' of Europe.'

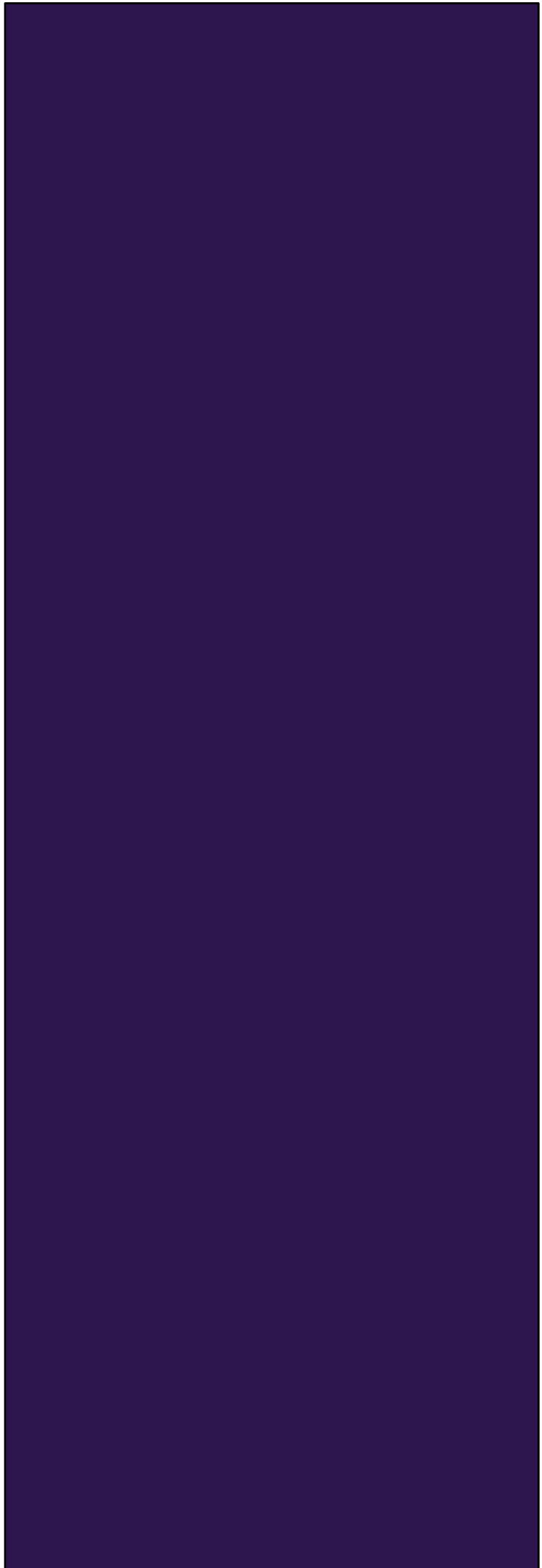
Such trends toward technology decoupling also open the door to geopolitical and economic realignment, with countries like India and Vietnam seeking to position themselves as alternative suppliers of chip technology. For example, in 2024, the US and India announced a new partnership in semiconductor manufacturing, establishing the prospect of joint projects to diversify and solidify semiconductor supply

chains.

Yet, clouds remain on the horizon. Experts have warned that the US trade war may aggravate semiconductor supply chains and increase the cost of production inputs and facilities in the United States. Moreover, tensions over Taiwanese statehood remain, intensifying with the deterioration of Sino-Japanese relations following Japanese pledges in November 2025 to defend Taiwan in the case of a Chinese attack. Japan and Taiwan's status as American allies further complicates the situation, risking that any potential dispute could turn into a wider conflict.

Climate change poses a further threat to semiconductor security, as the vast water consumption involved in semiconductor manufacturing may become harder to meet in the future, with changing precipitation patterns expected to exacerbate water scarcity. For example, Taiwan has experienced significant water shortages since 2021, with the government paying farmers not to irrigate their crops to supply water to semiconductor facilities. Indeed, approximately 40% of the world's semiconductor plants are located in areas likely to face high to extremely high water-stress risk by 2030. Despite this, both the EU and the US plan to increase semiconductor production in water-stressed areas, including the construction of facilities by Samsung, TSMC, and Intel in the Colorado River Basin, which has experienced drought since 1994. This issue is only expected to grow as countries scramble to enhance their AI capabilities.

Suffice it to say, the scramble for semiconductors is likely to become more salient and potent in the future, encapsulating key issues – trade, climate change, technological development, and geopolitical realignment – that shape the politics of today's world.





<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/jan/12/iran-protests-crackdown-toll-foreign-minister>

Between Reform and Rupture: Iran's Uncertain Political Horizon

Ethan Bouchard investigates Iran's volatile political crossroads, where unrest, fractured leadership, and rival power centres are complicating an uncertain future

By: Ethan Bouchard

Just before the start of the new year, mass civic unrest erupted across Iran and has continued to escalate throughout the country. What began as protests triggered by severe economic decline and the collapse of Iran's currency quickly evolved into a broader challenge to the Islamic Republic itself, fueled by deep distrust in the regime's leadership and direction. The government's violent crackdown has left thousands feared dead and tens of thousands arrested, while widespread internet blackouts and power outages have attempted to stifle communication among dissident cities. Recent developments have further intensified uncertainty: escalating confrontation with the United States and Israel, including military strikes inside Iran and the reported death of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, have created an unprecedented moment of instability for the regime. As unrest persists amid both domestic upheaval and regional conflict, many observers are questioning whether Iran may be approaching a historic regime change, and what the implications of such a change might be.

Before these protests, Iran had experienced civil unrest, beginning with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Before 1979, downtown Tehran echoed Western counterparts like California with its vast western urbanisation and cultural influence. Denim and short sleeves were perennial, and religious garments were optional. In fact, throughout the 1970s, Iran remained the number one importer of American films in the Middle East. Hollywood features outnumbered local FilmFarsi productions, and John Wayne became one of the most idolised actors in the nation. Alongside its love for Western culture, pre-revolution Iran also held much more lenient views concerning men and women mixing publicly freely, without persecution.

Change began to spark in early 1978 when a government-run newspaper published a story on Ayatollah Khomeini, accusing him of being a British puppet. His supporters widely perceived the piece as a direct insult and an attempt by the Shah's regime to discredit a respected religious figure, prompting

students and followers to take to the streets in the city of Qom in protest. Their dissent was met with mass murder, with the Shah ordering the military to open fire on those protesting in favour of the Ayatollah. Notably, in Shia Islam, funerals are held 40 days following the death of the deceased, and each new funeral of the martyrs sparked further protests and murders, creating a vicious cycle of clashes between grieving protestors and the state. These cycles spread across the country, with a significant clash in Abadan, where the Cinema Rex Fire, an intentional fire where somebody locked patrons inside the cinema, killed over 400 people. At the time, the public blamed the Shah's secret police, although today's evidence suggests otherwise. Roughly three weeks later, the Shah declared martial law, leading to the infamous 'Black Friday' demonstrations, where protestors were once again met with lethal force in Tehran's Jaleh Square. Alongside the violence, Iran faced economic collapse, with the oil industry strike heavily undermining the Shah's authority. In the wake of mounting pressure, the Shah was forced to leave on what became a permanent 'vacation.' The previously exiled religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to take charge in his absence and, shortly thereafter, instituted clerical rule and supremacy. Khomeini established the Islamic Republic, and its grip has remained over Iran for the past forty-seven years.

'These cycles spread across the country, with a significant clash in Abadan, where the Cinema Rex Fire, an intentional fire where patrons were locked inside the cinema, killed over 400 people.'

Four decades later, the political system of 1979 continues to define Iran's domestic politics. However, the recent protests demonstrate the population's discontent with the system. Multiple options are vying to replace the current regime. Reza Phalavi, the deposed Shah's son, has been leading the current call for revolt. He possesses the reverence for leading Iran out of its theocratic state; however, this is offset by his profound support for Israel. This support represents one of the Iranian people's greatest qualms regarding Reza, so much so that it is one of the first three questions addressed on his personal website. With countless Israeli bombs having destroyed many buildings and families across the country, and the war in Gaza a seemingly cautionary tale, many Iranians struggle to support this option. While Reza proclaims himself as a transitional figurehead toward democracy and regime change, it remains unclear if his controversial stance hinders him from becoming a viable option for the Iranian people.

'While Reza proclaims himself as a transitional figurehead toward democracy and regime change, it remains to be seen if his controversial stance hinders him from becoming a viable option for the Iranian people.'

Another notable figure is Maryam Rajavi, a dissident Iranian politician and President-elect of the National Council of Resistance, as well as the leader of the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK), an organisation advocating the overthrow of the Islamic Regime. Rajavi has proposed a six-month transitional period following the potential collapse of the Islamic Republic, during which she would serve as interim leader until voters can freely elect a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution. She advocates the separation of religion and state, gender equality, the abolition of the death penalty, and a non-nuclear Iran. Rajavi does not encourage foreign military intervention but instead advocates organised resistance, stating that the regime is at a 'point of no return' and that her movement is ready to take on the transition of power.

Rajavi's support amongst Iranians remains unclear, given that her party, the MEK, was aligned at times with Saddam Hussein and labelled a terrorist organisation by the United States and European Union from 1997 to 2013. There are many concerns that the MEK could further instability and institute another form of authoritative power. Furthermore, critics argue that the MEK's hierarchical structure is incompatible with democracy; former members have reported having no access to outside media and being frequently monitored by superiors. The organisation has also been accused of lobbying Western politicians for support and to speak at their events to create a facade of international legitimacy. They proclaim themselves a scaled-down opposition to Western institutions, yet have lingering effects and a history of regime-adjacent behaviour. Ultimately, the party's credibility will depend on how it addresses its past and how transparent it is regarding its future.

Another plausible form of regime transformation would involve further consolidation of power within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Established after the 1979 Revolution under Ayatollah Khomeini, the IRGC was designed to safeguard the Islamic Republic and its ideological foundations. It is composed of over 100,000 members whose orders supersede those of the President, taking command only from the Ayatollah. In addition to its primary forces, the IRGC also includes roughly one million active and

reserve army personnel. It further splinters down into the Basij branch, a neighborhood-watch-esque volunteer paramilitary group, embedded in local communities, who reinforce the regime's principles from the ground up. While the proportion of committed regime loyalists, in comparison to the average citizen, is relatively small, with a ratio of 1:10, the IRGC's overwhelming control over 90% of the nation's military equipment significantly amplifies its influence. Its institutional survival and concentrated power are both closely linked to the endurance of the current regime. If significant distrust in the current Ayatollah Khamenei continues, the IRGC might intervene directly to form a junta government in an effort to preserve the regime's stability.

'If significant distrust in the current Ayatollah Khamenei continues, the IRGC might intervene directly to form a junta government in an effort to preserve the regime's stability.'

With no clear leader on the ground to rally the crowds amongst the chaos, the opportunity for an unknown figure to emerge remains. What Iran now faces is not simply the question of whether the Islamic Republic will endure, but what could replace it if it does not. History offers no comfort in linear progress. The 1979 Revolution itself was born from legitimate grievances, only to harden into a system more repressive than the one it displaced. Today's unrest echoes that paradox. Economic despair, generational anger, and moral exhaustion have converged, yet leadership remains fragmented, trust scarce, and alternatives deeply contested. Whether power consolidates under a familiar figure, fractures into competing movements, militarises under the IRGC, or gives rise to an unexpected leader amid the chaos, any transition will be fragile and volatile. Iran stands once again at a crossroads where revolution and reform blur, and where the desire for freedom competes with the fear of repeating history. Ideology alone won't decide the outcome; It will depend on who can command legitimacy when the moment arrives, and whether the Iranian people are willing to risk another transformation without knowing its ramifications.



https://www.ena.eu/web/eng/w/eng_8427569

Is International Law Becoming Irrelevant?

Sumsoar Khan considers whether international law is losing its force as institutions weaken and major powers apply legal rules selectively.

By: Sumsoar Khan

International law has long depended more on shared expectations than on coercion. Its authority has rested on the belief that rules, once agreed, carry political weight even without a global enforcer. Yet recent developments suggest that this balance is shifting. Mounting financial pressures within the United Nations, alongside discussions of alternative initiatives, such as US President Donald Trump's proposal for a 'Board of Peace,' reflect uncertainty about the capacity of existing institutions to sustain their traditional roles. These developments raise a broader question: Is international law losing its practical influence amid intensifying geopolitical competition?

'International law has long depended more on shared expectations than on coercion.'

Following the Second World War, the assumption that collective institutions could help stabilise relations

between states was the foundation of the new legal order. Formal rules governing the use of force, sanctions, and dispute resolution were intended to provide predictability and legitimacy. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks has always depended on political backing. When consensus weakens, legal processes can become slow, contested, or symbolic. Recent episodes illustrate the fragility of this arrangement. For example, within the European Union, Hungary's periodic blocking of sanctions against Russia has underscored how legal and policy tools requiring unanimity can be vulnerable to political divergence. While such mechanisms reflect respect for sovereignty, they also highlight the difficulty of sustaining coordinated action when member states hold conflicting priorities (as in Hungary's case, access to Russian energy). Legal frameworks that depend on consensus may struggle to respond swiftly to crises, and, from the EU's perspective, sanctions on Russia require swift action.

At the global level, enforcement challenges have become increasingly visible. International arrest warrants issued by bodies such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) carry significant symbolic value, yet their implementation relies entirely on state co-operation. The difficulties surrounding efforts to enforce warrants issued for figures such as Russian leader Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu demonstrate the limits of legal authority when political considerations intervene. Law can articulate norms, but it cannot compel compliance where governments are unwilling. Unwillingness to comply can arise for various reasons – including conflicts with national interests, or fear of retaliation.

'Law can articulate norms, but it cannot compel compliance where governments are unwilling.'

Maritime governance presents another area of concern. Reports of Russia's so-called 'shadow fleet,' used to circumvent restrictions on energy exports, highlight the complexities of enforcing sanctions in international waters – one of many ambiguous 'grey areas' in international law. Monitoring and regulating such activities requires extensive coordination, but enforcement remains uneven. These gaps do not indicate the absence of rules, but rather the difficulty of translating them into effective oversight and enforcement.

Conflicts such as Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas further reveal tensions between legal principles and strategic realities. Competing interpretations of international humanitarian law, alongside disagreements over accountability, demonstrate how legal frameworks can become arenas of political contestation. While law continues to provide a vocabulary for debate, its capacity to shape outcomes appears increasingly limited. Institutional pressures compound these challenges. Financial difficulties within the United Nations have prompted concerns about operational capacity, even as expectations placed upon the organisation continue to grow. The US Ambassador to the UN stated that the UN needed to be "put on a diet", reflecting dismissive attitudes towards international institutions among major powers. Multilateral bodies remain central forums for diplomacy, yet questions about funding and political support cast doubt on their ability to enforce or even coordinate responses effectively. The proliferation of proposals for alternative structures reflects a search for mechanisms that might circumvent perceived limitations.

None of this suggests that international law has ceased to matter entirely, across all domains. States still

invoke legal arguments, participate in treaty regimes, and rely on institutional processes. However, the pattern that emerges is one of selective engagement. Legal norms are upheld where they align with national interests and contested where they do not, giving rise to what many observers see as endless hypocrisy among the world's great powers. This selective approach risks eroding the perception that rules apply universally.

'Legal norms are upheld where they align with national interests and contested where they do not.'

The distinction between formal authority and practical influence is crucial. Legal frameworks may remain intact on paper, yet their capacity to shape behaviour depends on political will. When enforcement becomes inconsistent, the credibility of institutions can diminish, creating incentives for further non-compliance. Over time, this dynamic may weaken legal expectations and reduce institutional buy-in among nations.

At the same time, the international system has not reverted to a purely lawless environment. Cooperation persists in many technical domains, such as aviation and climate policy, and multilateral processes continue to facilitate dialogue. Nevertheless, the current trajectory suggests that the restraining power of international law is under strain, particularly in areas where strategic interests are most pronounced. Understanding these developments requires recognising the inherent tension between law and power. International law was never designed to eliminate political conflict, but rather to manage it. However, its effectiveness depends on a minimum level of shared commitment to rules. When that commitment becomes uncertain, legal mechanisms face increasing difficulty in fulfilling their intended functions. Transparency, cooperation, and consistent support are essential for ensuring that legal obligations translate into meaningful action. In the absence of these elements, the gap between formal rules and practical outcomes may widen.

The present moment may therefore represent less a sudden collapse than a gradual weakening or loss of relevance – a widening gap between legal aspiration and political reality. Whether this trend continues will depend on states' willingness to reaffirm the value of collective rules or to pursue alternative approaches that place greater emphasis on unilateral action. In a world characterised by strategic rivalry and competing visions of order, the role of international law is likely to remain contested. The question is not simply whether rules exist, but whether they retain sufficient

authority to shape behaviour. Recent developments suggest that maintaining that authority may prove increasingly challenging.



Source: The Slovak Spectator/Jose Luis Magana

From Communist cadre to CPAC: The curious case of Slovakia's Social Democracy

Natalia Kamendy traces how Direction – Social Democracy (Smer-SD) and its frontman, Robert Fico, have transitioned over four terms from standard-bearers of social democracy into its antithesis

By: Natalia Kamendy

The Slovakia of today emerged in 1993, following its split from Czechoslovakia. With its newfound independence came the power to make its own political and ideological decisions, and, as an emerging post-communist democracy, it was left to create new political parties that spanned the political spectrum.

This split saw the emergence of Smer-Sociálna Demokracia (Smer) in 1999, and, after solidifying its position with a parliamentary majority only 13 years later, Smer has maintained a prominent role in Slovak politics. Recently, however, it has strayed further from its original principles of solidarity, social equality, and justice, defying the 'social democratic' aspect of its title.

Founded by Robert Fico after his split from the SDL (Party of the Democratic Left), Smer adopted a 'non-ideological' approach at its inception, subscribing instead to the Third Way philosophy propagated by politicians like Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. Although the Third Way is rooted in social-democratic concepts, Smer outright refused to identify with them, choosing a policy of pragmatism, rationality, and order. With Fico as its frontman, the party focused on positioning itself as a solution to the country's political chaos. Although Fico first came into the public eye as a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) and gained notoriety in its aforementioned Slovak successor, SDL, the course he set for his own party was a harsh split from his roots.

Even after the party's more left-wing pivot and subsequent name change in 2002, from Smer - The Third Way to Smer - Social Democracy, Smer drew criticism from both domestic left-wing parties and the Party of European Socialists, an organisation to which it fought tooth and nail to become a member.

Although Smer could identify with the label of social democracy in an economic sense, the notable absence of policies surrounding social equality, integration, and even the classic element of the welfare state undermined the party's legitimacy. As such, Smer was characterised by a strange mix of left- and right-wing elements, exemplified by its simultaneous anti-establishment leanings and exclusionary outlook toward minorities. Specifically, statements made by multiple party members revealed the party's negative position on the Magyar and Romani minorities, publicly ostracising them and creating a clear 'us versus them' divide. Despite this, it won 13.5% of the vote in its first election and came back even stronger in 2006, winning 29% of the vote. Four years later, in 2010, Smer had a short stint in opposition despite winning 34% of the vote, largely because of its limited coalition potential.

'Smer was characterised by a strange mix of both left and right-wing elements, exemplified by its simultaneous anti-establishment lean and exclusionary outlook on minorities.'

However, the party finally came out on top in the 2012 snap elections, securing 44% of the vote. This victory propelled Robert Fico, the party's unchanging frontman, into the seat of the Prime Minister and gave Smer a majority of parliamentary seats, thereby forgoing the need for a coalition. During its four-year primacy, Smer pushed for populist reforms, including offering free train travel for students and seniors and introducing a thirteenth annuity payout for socially disadvantaged citizens. Yet, these measures were still insufficient to rectify the financial inequality they faced. Furthermore, instead of investment in the country's faltering health and education sectors, Smer focused on buying off its large senior-voter demographic.

The breaking point of both Fico's career and his party's reputation came in 2018 after the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, who were investigating possible corruption charges tied to people close to Fico and other Smer party members, were both murdered. Following multiple large-scale demonstrations, Fico was forced to resign as Prime Minister. Other Smer corruption scandals emerged alongside Fico's resignation, contributing to a sharp

decline in the party's popularity. Although Peter Pellegrini, Fico's second-in-command, replaced him for the two remaining years of the party's parliamentary term, Fico notably maintained his position as Smer's party leader and continued to prepare to run for Prime Minister again in the 2020 elections.

Unsurprisingly, after the controversial events of 2018, Smer was relegated to the opposition and was replaced by a coalition of mainly centre-right liberal parties. During this time, Fico's rhetoric took an even sharper turn towards embracing populist, far-right rhetoric, especially concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Fico used his platform to make increasingly more pro-Russia and anti-vax statements, standing in sharp contrast to the leaders of other social democratic parties in Europe. He spent his time in the opposition antagonising prominent Slovak leaders, like the liberal president Zuzana Čaputová, and further developing his anti-progressive rhetoric.

'Fico's rhetoric took an even sharper turn towards embracing populist, far-right rhetoric, especially in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.'

However, Smer did not make a victorious return to power in the 2020 elections; in its place, a self-proclaimed anti-corruption party, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), took victory. OĽaNO ran on a platform of fixing the country after its depletion by Fico and Smer, and it promised to punish the corrupt officials and politicians. However, major disagreements stemming from the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the government's collapse and subsequent snap elections in 2023, in which Smer emerged victorious.

Now on his fourth premiership, Fico has significantly increased his collaboration with nationalist and right-wing parties, prompting Smer's removal from the Party of European Socialists. The fact that a supposed social democrat has entered into a coalition with the Slovak National Party (SNS), whose Minister of Culture frequently speaks of "preserving the white race" and other neo-Nazi reminiscent talking points, remains a political anomaly. Fico has now fully aligned his rhetoric to that of SNS, becoming the main proponent of pro-Russian sentiment in the country. Basing his campaign on stopping military aid to Ukraine as well as peddling various conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic, the "dictatorship of Brussels," and immigrants, his far-right assertions are no longer compatible with principles of social democracy.

'The fact that a supposed social democrat has entered into a coalition with the Slovak National Party (SNS), whose Minister of Culture frequently speaks of "preserving the white race" and other neo-Nazi reminiscent talking points, remains a political anomaly.'

Rather, Fico's new reforms, introduced straight after his election, border on autocracy. He began with the removal and subsequent investigation of the Special Prosecutor and the Chief of Police, both of whom were involved in investigating previous instances of corruption and clientelism within the party. Later, after introducing an almost unconstitutional reform to the penal code, Fico and his new government once again behaved in a way completely foreign to the tenets of social democracy.

Two instances best showcase Fico's complete right-wing shift – his non-state visit to Russia and his recent attendance at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in the United States.

Regarding his visit to the Russian president in late December of 2024, neither Fico nor his representatives divulged any details to the public, and they dodged media questions about the two politicians' conversation. The public and the media could only learn about this visit through the premier's Facebook page or Russian state media, thereby forgoing the possibility of acquiring any semblance of objectivity. While other European social democrats continue to impose sanctions and restrictions on Russia, the Slovak government seeks to standardise "the relations between Slovakia and the Russian Federation." This meeting, as well as his later attendance at CPAC, is part of Fico's new foreign policy, the so-called "politics on all four cardinal directions". It involves thinly veiled attempts at legitimising his meetings with top-ranking Russian officials and its attacks on Ukraine and its President, both of which have solidified Fico as a member of the new right.

Having reached the height of his career by attending the CPAC conference, one wonders how Fico's past self, a once-devoted Communist Party member, would react to his increasingly right-wing positions. For many, his presence at this event and earlier meeting with Elon Musk has signified Fico's definite departure from pretending to be left-wing, instead highlighting the beginning of his new political era. In his fourth term as Prime Minister, Fico has become highly unpredictable, hostile, and authoritarian, but most importantly, he has become the antithesis of a social democrat.



<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/thousands-march-in-greenland-against-trumps-threats-to-take-over-the-arctic-island>.

How Trump's Attempt to Overtake Greenland affected the US. Stock Market

Elena Nikovski unpacks how Trump's threats to seize Greenland shook investor confidence and sent tremors through the US. Stock market.

By: Elena Nikovski

Speeches delivered at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, are often quickly forgotten by investors. On January 21st 2026, however, President Donald Trump's speech commanded the full attention of international markets with his renewed threat to seize control of Greenland.

Greenland has continuously held strategic and economic significance, particularly for the United States. Its Arctic location is key to military operations and desirable for those seeking control over transatlantic and Arctic trade routes. In addition to its geopolitical importance, the island contains abundant natural resources, including rare-earth minerals, oil, gas, and other materials. These resources are becoming increasingly important to high-tech industries, green energy production, and advanced manufacturing. However, Greenland has quietly remained a point of interest to the US for several decades. Trump's

renewed attention, marked by overt threats and aggressive negotiations, has captured the attention of global markets. His desire for Greenland signals a broader global concern that the US. might be willing to prioritise strategic resources over diplomatic convention.

Before the Davos conference, Trump announced that he planned to seize the sovereign Danish territory either through purchase or, if necessary, by military force. He further warned NATO members that he would 'remember' their stance if they opposed the US's efforts, threatening that eight affiliated European countries, including Denmark, would face 10 per cent import tariffs if they failed to support his motives. The threat's new economic dimension immediately drew scrutiny from both policymakers and investors, who began to warn of the destabilisation of transatlantic trade relations and the overall credibility of the US.

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'He further warned NATO members that he would 'remember' their stance if they opposed US. efforts, threatening that eight affiliated European countries, including Denmark, would face 10 per cent import tariffs should they fail to support his motives.'

The statements had a staggering, immediate impact on global investor confidence in US financial assets. Wall Street's benchmark S&P 500 index, which tracks the share price performance of the largest 500 publicly traded US companies, fell nearly 2.1 per cent. The sale of investors' shares across several major sectors of the US economy triggered the decline, reflecting a sudden drop in confidence in economic and political stability. Similarly, the Nasdaq Composite, a technology-focused index often more sensitive to risk and uncertainty, plunged nearly 2.4 per cent. This drop suggests that investors were particularly concerned about the long-term implications of the geopolitical tension, given that technology stocks traditionally underperform amid uncertainty about future earnings. Together, these plunges marked Wall Street's worst trading day since October, exemplifying the significant shift in market sentiment. The clear reactions of investors and the wider market demonstrate how Trump's threats to international trade and alliances quickly eroded market confidence and triggered widespread sell-offs.

Furthermore, the US. The dollar, which is typically seen as a safe-haven asset during periods of global market volatility, weakened by approximately 0.8 per cent against other major currencies, signalling reduced confidence in the stability of US leadership. Meanwhile, gold prices have risen to record highs of nearly 2 per cent. This rise is unsurprising, as gold is traditionally associated with safety during periods of market uncertainty; central banks and private investors turn to assets that insulate them from dependency on the dollar. Alongside these market changes, the US's major trading partners are actively diversifying their export markets away from the US toward Asia and Latin America. These partners include Japan, Germany, and South Korea, which are re-evaluating trade priorities in the wake of US tariff pressures. Similarly, EU policymakers have highlighted the need to reduce reliance on the US. and expand ties with other regions. Several industries, including automotive, electronics, and semiconductors, could face major disruptions as companies seek to shift supply chains away from the US. These projections reflect a broad realignment in the global economy, catalysed by tariff threats on European imports.

'Furthermore, the US. dollar, which is usually marked as a safe-haven asset during periods of global market volatility, weakened approximately 0.8 per cent against other major currencies, signalling reduced confidence in the stability of US. leadership.'

These changes are unsurprising as threats of conflict or trade disputes often influence investor behaviour and overall economic health by introducing uncertainty about future corporate profits and market conditions. A political development, such as an unprecedented, sought-after acquisition of large territory, makes investors risk-averse, leading them to sell equities and seek safe assets or less volatile currencies. This behaviour is motivated by concerns about disrupted global supply chains, increased business costs, and doubts about future earnings, all of which are key drivers of stock valuations. Thus, the trends observed in the US. market following the threats reflects standard investor behaviour during periods of political uncertainty.

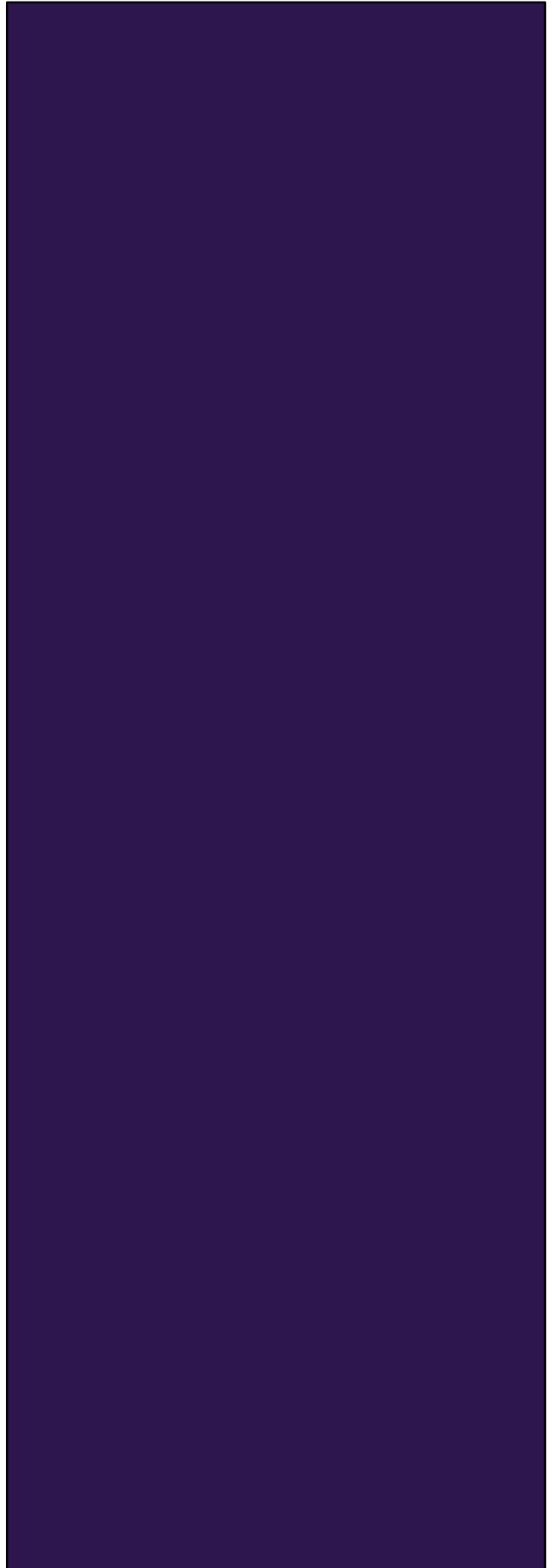
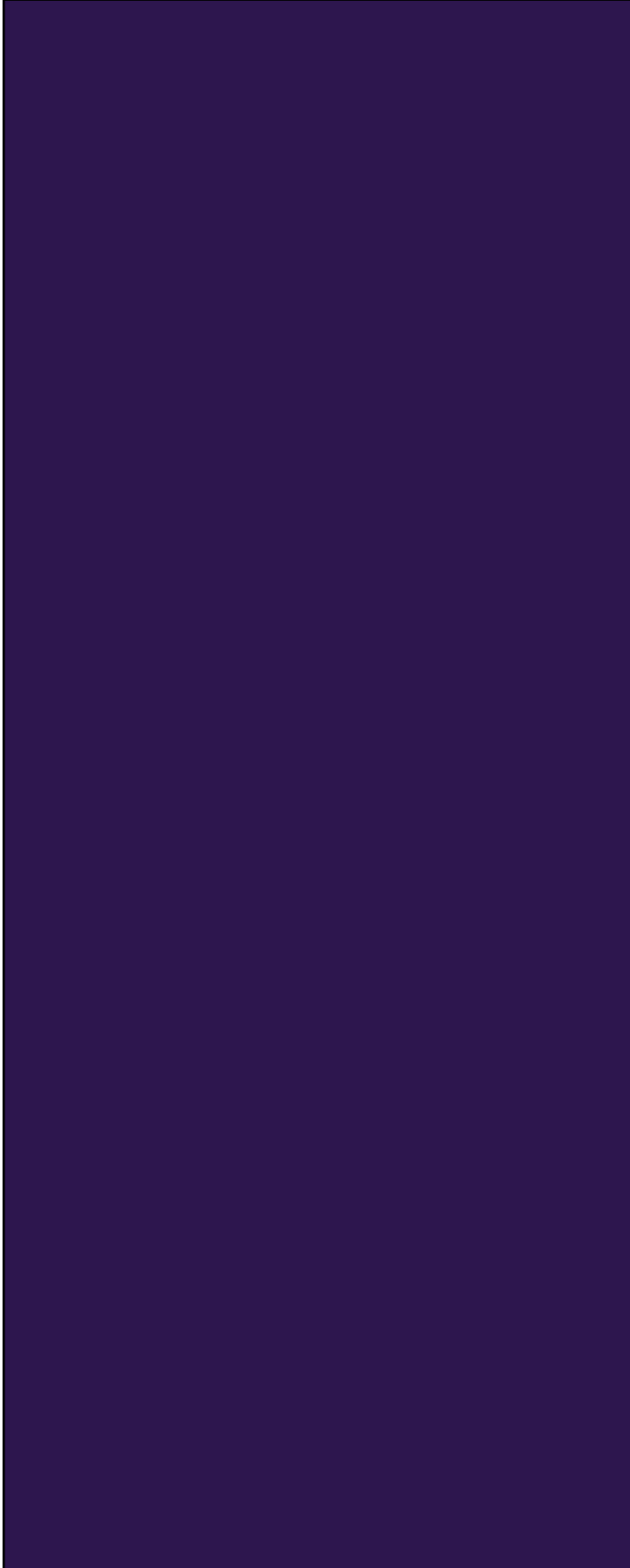
Beyond economic shifts, Trump's rhetoric has strained US-European relations to their lowest point in decades, threatening the survival of NATO and transatlantic trade. Denmark has repeatedly stated that Greenland is not for sale, warning that any attempt to seize the territory would undermine the alliance's foundational principle: an attack on one member constitutes an attack on all members. More worryingly, when asked how far he would go to achieve his intentions during a briefing at the White House, Trump ambiguously responded, "You'll find out."

'Denmark has repeatedly stated that Greenland is not for sale, warning that any attempt to seize the territory would undermine the alliance's foundational principle: an attack on one member constitutes an attack on all members.'

While Trump has since softened his stance and financial markets have partially recovered, the issue remains unresolved. Trump continues to frame the acquisition of Greenland as a national security priority, while Denmark and Greenland continue to reject US control and maintain firm opposition. Though the conflict remains undetermined, several scenarios could follow. While negotiations could stabilise and rehabilitate investor confidence in markets, intensified threats could lead to a diplomatic standoff. Despite all transcontinental negotiations, polls indicate that approximately 85% of Greenlanders oppose joining the US., further complicating matters.

In summary, Trump's threats to seize the sovereign

territory of Greenland while compromising stable trade for eight European countries have not only destabilised domestic financial confidence but also undermined trade relations with those countries. The outcome of the issue remains to be determined and may trigger broader consequences for global economic stability.





<https://www.thetimes.com/world/africa/article/south-african-power-giant-investigates-sabotage-at-plants-twcq6ktp3>

The Politics of Critical Infrastructure in South Africa

Luca Genovese traces the roots of South Africa's power crisis and whether reform can deliver a stable, cleaner grid.

By: Luca Genovese

Growing up in South Africa provided a unique insight into the politics of critical infrastructure. Long before energy security became a dominant concern for the West, South Africans were living with loadshedding – scheduled blackouts implemented to protect the national grid from collapse. While this term became the source of much parody and humorous relief for many within the country, especially those wealthy enough to afford a diesel or gas generator, there is no denying the crippling socio-economic effects which continually disrupted the country's industrial production, infrastructure and daily life.

'Long before energy security became a dominant concern for the West, South Africans were living with loadshedding – scheduled blackouts implemented to protect the national grid from collapse.'

Eskom, the state-owned generation and transmission utility, implemented loadshedding, which would 'shed the load' from the grid during periods of high energy demand to keep the South African grid stable. The current instability stems directly from the lack of foresight under former President Thabo Mbeki, who led the country from 1999 to 2008. The 1998 Energy White Paper, written by the Minister of Minerals and Energy, warned that without investment into new generation capacity, South Africa would face binding energy constraints by 2007. However, Mbeki's administration largely ignored these warnings.

Investment eventually took the form of two large power stations, Medupi and Kusile. Yet both projects were plagued by cost overruns and delays, with estimates suggesting they exceeded their original budgets by roughly ZAR 200 billion (€10.5 Bn). Furthermore, the projects were shrouded in allegations

of corruption; for example, the alleged misuse of the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) quota system enabled unfair tender awards. Similarly, the use of an African National Congress (ANC) owned organisation, Chancellor House, which maintained direct ties with the ANC as a funding arm, cast a shadow over the projects, as Chancellor House benefited from government tenders despite the government holding a direct stake in it, illustrating a 'player and referee' mentality. These ties resulted in severe economic damage over the following decade. A study commissioned by Eskom estimated the total cost of load shedding at ZAR 43.5 billion (€2.3 Bn) from 2007 to 2019, an amount comparable to the impact of the 2008/09 financial crisis on GDP growth.

Eskom has been at the centre of corruption scandals in South Africa over the past two decades, and its inability to provide stable electricity has been a cornerstone in the broader decline of the South African economy. No country can expect meaningful progress when its core infrastructure fails to support learning, development or upward mobility.

In 2018, former president Jacob Zuma resigned from office due to in-party pressure from reformers closely aligned with his replacement, vice-president Cyril Ramaphosa. Zuma was a key player in the 'state capture' scandal of the last decade, where systemic corruption and collusion of politicians and state enterprises gutted the country of billions. Zuma's departure left a fragmented ANC still in power, dominated by his allies and own faction.

Following the ANC's re-election in 2019, Cyril Ramaphosa entered the presidency with a constrained reform mandate. Both his narrow victory at the party's elective conference in Nasrec the year prior and the need to manage complex internal party factions limited his ability to appoint a strongly reformist cabinet or pursue rapid structural economic change. Consequently, the early efforts of his administration focused on political consolidation and institutional repair in the wake of the damaging 'state capture' scandal, rather than decisive economic restructuring. The COVID-19 pandemic, which severely reduced fiscal space and shifted policy toward short-term economic relief, compounded these constraints. Simultaneously, the deepening electricity crisis and escalating loadshedding between 2020 and 2023 further undermined growth and absorbed state capacity, making ambitious reform both politically and economically difficult. Over the period, the cost-to-growth ratio surged fivefold between 2020 and Q1 2023, reaching ZAR 224 billion (€11.8 Bn). This ratio represented a 1.2% loss of cumulative GDP in level

terms over this period. Without extensive reform, there was little hope of overcoming the serious, rooted structural damage of the previous decades.

The 2024 General Elections brought major changes to the political landscape of South Africa. From the dawn of democracy in 1994, the ANC won every election with a majority. While this majority was consistently declining, especially during the Zuma presidency, the ANC still seemed to maintain its grip. Additionally, according to voter polls, ANC never faced meaningful opposition, as votes remained split between the further radical-left-leaning party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), and the more centre-right-leaning party, the Democratic Alliance (DA). Neither of these parties had succeeded in challenging the ANC's popularity, with the DA's share of the votes hovering around 20%, and EFF's making up 12% continuously in recent general electoral cycles.

Yet during the 2024 elections, the ANC lost its majority, securing only 40% of the vote. This loss led to the formation of a Government of National Unity (GNU), a broad coalition of the ANC and the DA, along with several smaller parties. Through this coalition, there has been a major push to lift the South African state out of the economic difficulties caused by Zuma and COVID-19.

Broadly speaking, this new coalition has been successful in improving the country's overall state, with South Africa at a key tipping point. The last few years have been essential in stabilising the economy and working toward a more positive future for all. With the stabilisation of Eskom's energy production, loadshedding has generally become a thing of the past. However, without active efforts toward broad-scale diversification and a transition away from ageing coal-fired power plants, South Africa could once again find itself hurtling toward an energy crisis. The question remains, in a country still fraught with corruption, inequality and dysfunction, how can South Africa transition to more renewable energy solutions, and maintain a stable grid?

The Electricity Regulation Amendment Act, signed into law in 2024, represents one of the most consequential reforms in the sector and a significant shift towards a stable, diverse grid. This act established an open-market platform and shifted energy production and transmission away from Eskom and into a partnership between private producers and public transmission. In principle, this reform opens the door to competitive energy production, as private energy producers can now, for the first time, procure, develop, trade and sell electricity on the grid.

'The Electricity Regulation Amendment Act, signed into law in 2024, represents one of the most consequential reforms in the sector and a significant shift towards a stable, diverse grid.'

This change significantly encourages the adoption of industrial-scale renewable energy and more sustainable, modern alternatives to fossil fuel combustion. While renewable, zero-carbon production is the end goal, it is unachievable without the assistance of diverse energy sources to mitigate downtime and reduce energy production during periods of low irradiance or wind.

Yet, where there is potential for renewal, there are also those who stand to lose. For Eskom, this change could bring an end to corrupt practices that have long permeated the organisation and undermined its integrity. Corruption occurs through several mediums throughout the organisation. These range from the employment of unqualified employees in positions of power, the unjust procurement of tenders not through competitive bids but through nepotistic relationships with Eskom executives, and, most worryingly, the blatant robbery of funds intended for development and maintenance. With the opening of the market to competitive energy production, Eskom must adapt to a more equal playing field, or it will succumb to the corruption which has long weakened the utility.

'Yet, where there is potential for renewal, there are also those who stand to lose.'

However, Eskom currently controls the electricity transmission company. This control is the crux of the issue, which is why the stakes are so high. Eskom cannot maintain control over the transmission company, given the clear conflict of interest, which will be a decisive factor in the amendment's success. The 1998 Energy White Paper also warned of this eventuality, asserting "In the long term Eskom will have to be restructured into separate generation and transmission companies."

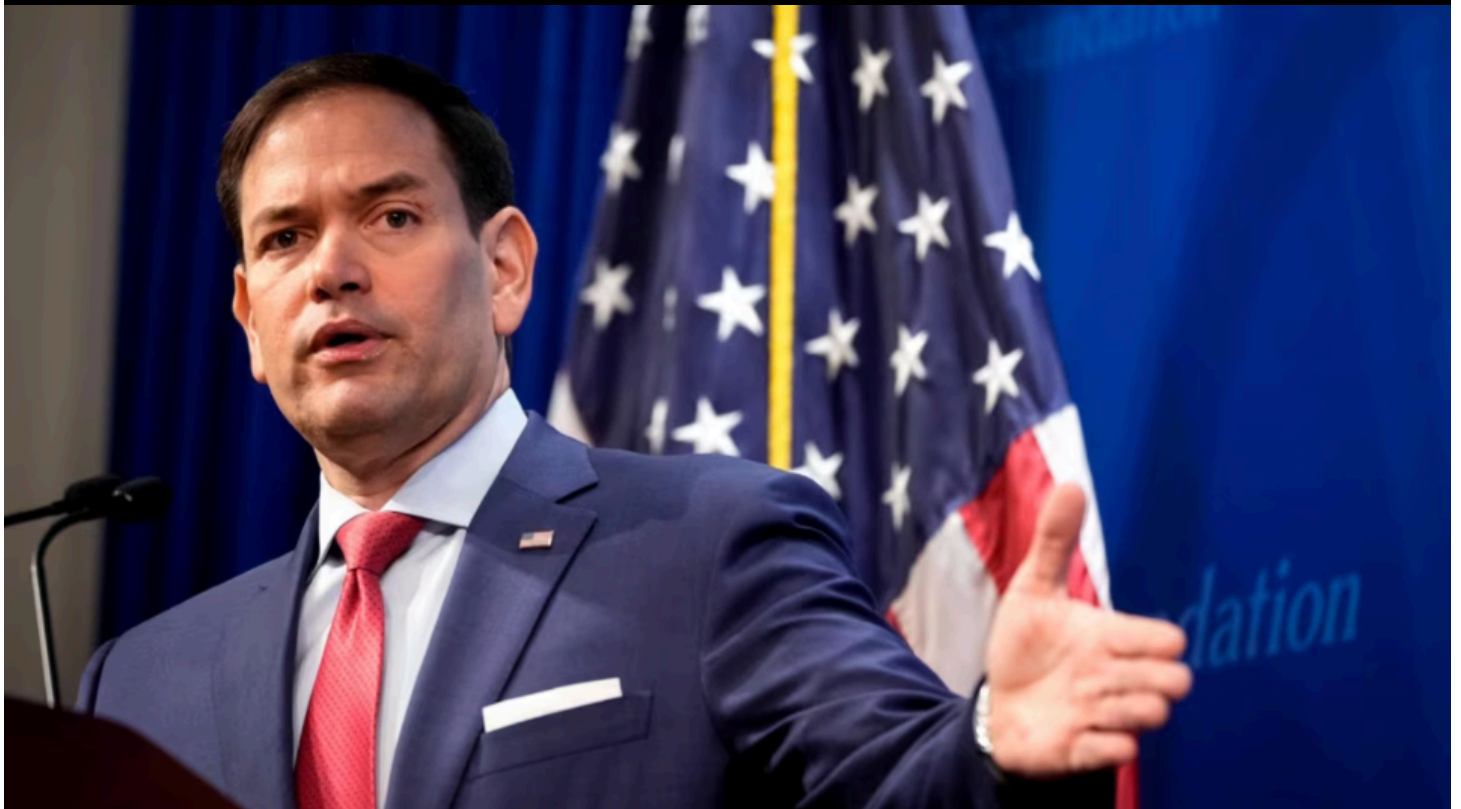
However, this uncoupling of electricity generation and transmission between the two companies revokes most of the power and resources that have enabled the deep-rooted corruption at Eskom and among its officials for so long. Despite the clear benefits for South Africans, pro-Eskom individuals remain concerned about the financial viability of an uncoupling, arguing that many of the loans Eskom has taken out would be defaulted on. Such arguments, however, appear overstated. Companies restructure regularly, and lenders and financial institutions are accustomed to navigating these transitions. Ultimately, the country cannot afford

another prolonged energy crisis to preserve a monopoly's interests.

Thankfully, despite misinformation and a desperate battle by certain individuals within Eskom, progress is apparent. In the State of the Nation Address by President Ramaphosa in February, he once again affirmed that his administration will split Eskom and establish a new Transmission System Operator (TSO) to fulfil the Electricity Regulation Amendment Act of 2024.

These promises are by no means a guaranteed solution, but they do begin to pave the way for a brighter future. In principle, an uncoupling will encourage the development of new electricity generation. In reality, there are several other bottlenecks to overcome. For example, South Africa must undertake significant grid development, including the construction of an estimated 14,000 km of new transmission lines for ZAR 440 billion (€23.4 billion). Yet if the legislature and the political landscape are supportive, development becomes a viable possibility. The next decade will determine whether reforms can translate into a more stable, competitive energy grid or whether the country risks repeating its cycle of energy crises.





<https://edition.cnn.com/2015/02/20/politics/marco-rubio-fast-facts>

The Effective Equilibrium of Trump 2.0's Foreign Policy

Daniel McGee examines the competing forces shaping the direction of foreign policy in Trump's second term.

By: Daniel McGee

In an administration staffed in no small part by iconoclasts and outsiders, Marco Rubio's presence in Trump's White House almost seems like an anomaly. After earning both his BA and JD, spending time in local and then state politics and holding a professorship for several years, Rubio was elected to the United States Senate in 2010. Having served for 15 years, Rubio was nominated as Secretary of State by the incoming president – a nomination unanimously approved by the Senate, unlike many of his colleagues.

Despite running against Trump in the 2016 presidential election, Rubio consistently supported him throughout his first term and in his subsequent reelection campaigns. Rubio tended to share the GOP's (The Republican Party) general policy agenda while in Congress and had a particular interest in advancing the US stance against China's rise as a global power. This hawkish view of his appeared early in his public service when Jeb Bush, at the time Governor of

Florida, gave the then state representative a sword belonging to Chiang Kai-shek (the Republic of China's leader for much of the 20th century), a sort of auspicious token for Rubio's nascent foreign policy positions.

'Despite running against Trump in the 2016 presidential election, Rubio consistently supported him throughout his first term and in his subsequent reelection campaigns.'

More influential than any concern about China, however, is the Secretary's Cuban-American heritage. Descended mostly from those who fled Castro's takeover of the island in the 1950s, Cuban-Americans, a community located primarily in southern Florida, tend to be considerably more conservative than other Hispanic groups throughout the US. Largely supporting a stricter approach to immigration and harsher attitudes towards left-wing regimes on a global

scale, this culture is the one in which Rubio came of age. It is in this context that Rubio's hawkish tendencies emerged, fostering a strong resentment toward the spread of leftism abroad.

The polished and conventional persona of the Secretary of State is a far cry from that of many members of the administration, perhaps most visibly Vice President JD Vance and Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Stephen Miller, men who define their personal political persuasions by a simple two-word cry: America First. The former's rise is a well (and self) documented one. Born into a broken family from Appalachia and growing up in the Rust Belt, Trump's number two has seen firsthand the desperate plight of many Americans. After graduating from Yale Law School and serving in the Marine Corps, Vance worked for years in the private sector – notably under Peter Thiel (infamous for founding Palantir and related ethical stances) – before entering politics and representing Ohio in the US Senate. While his support for Trump lacks the longevity that many in the White House boast, his stance on foreign policy tends clearly and consistently towards the dovish.

'The polished and conventional persona of the Secretary of State is a far cry from many members of the administration, perhaps most visibly from Vice President JD Vance and Deputy Chief of Staff for Policy Stephen Miller, men whose personal political persuasions are defined by a single two word cry: America First.'

Stephen Miller's career has mostly focused on communications, a medium in which his aggressive diction dominates the dialogue. At the same time, he remains under the aegis of whichever politician or media outlet he serves, that being Trump since 2016. His choice of rhetoric has always been intentionally intense and bombastic, pushing the limits of the Overton window as if doing so is a mark of his dedication to disrupting the system. An official whose nebulous role attracts less attention than other members of the Cabinet, Miller is almost wholly devoted to the cause of immigration, to the point that international affairs are only a sideshow for him. The result is an isolationism that only ventures beyond the United States' borders to slow migration.

These figures, competing with the other forces and faces in his orbit for Trump's attention, have managed to forge a competent and coherent approach to foreign policy. In conjunction with military leadership that has a far more amicable relationship with the President than during his previous term, senior MAGA(Make America Great Again) advisors have begun

pushing for the targeted and discriminatory use of force on the global stage. As long as the operations do not lead to sustained involvement by the United States, the White House shows apathy and often animosity towards established norms and international law. Constrained by cries of 'no new wars,' the administration has demonstrated a certain deftness in orchestrating strikes that, so far, have not resulted in the additional, long-term deployment of US troops. From Iran to the Caribbean to Nigeria to Venezuela to Yemen, the 'America First' wing of the President's coalition has shown itself to be unrestrained by borders, and even in favour of international intervention, if a situation meets two criteria: They must deem that it is both explicitly in the best interests of the US and cannot lead to continued conflict.

'The administration has demonstrated a certain deftness in orchestrating strikes that, so far, have not resulted in the additional, long-term deployment of US troops.'

While many will disagree with the wisdom of the specific operations executed so far, or the degree to which the reward outweighs the risk, there is a clearly articulated rationale behind them. It is a vision of foreign policy that accepts less input from the public (how can voters oppose the kidnapping of a foreign adversary's president if it happens before they wake up?) and flouts the notion of international law. As ugly as it might be, operating in this fashion avoids embarrassing bumbles like the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan several years ago, a disaster preceded by a controversial 20-odd years of occupation. As naive as it is to assume that the US can avoid maintaining a global presence, the last year has proved that America can act without becoming bogged down.

If the Administration is staffed with too many of those who share Rubio's line of thinking it would be near impossible for the White House to act with the swiftness with which it has; at the same time, if there were too many from the camp of Vance and Miller, the opposite would be true – interest in international affairs would fall by the wayside and domestic policy would become the sole focus of the President's attention. Though the implications of this style of foreign policy have yet to become clear, it is undeniably Trumpian and unmistakably the result of his tent's breadth.





<https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2025/12/28/ireland-hosting-eu-council-presidency-set-to-cost-state-more-than-203m/>

Ireland's EU Presidency: A Study in Contradictions

Indira Kelly explores the tensions and trade-offs at the heart of Ireland's EU presidency.

By: Indira Kelly

Ireland's upcoming turn at the helm of the Council of the European Union has been framed, predictably, as a moment of prestige. The State will chair meetings, broker compromises, and shepherd the Union through six months of geopolitical turbulence. But beneath the ceremonial choreography lies a more revealing question: what does Ireland actually want from this presidency, and at what cost?

The rotating presidency of the Council of the EU allows each EU member state to chair the Council's meetings for 6 months. The member state hosting the presidency is therefore able to set priorities but not put forward motions, and its interests can easily be interrupted. For example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine took over France's presidency in 2022, and COVID interrupted much of Germany's presidency in 2020. Considering this, the presidency has only limited capacity to dictate the EU's stance on issues salient to Ireland, such as defence, tech regulation, and international trade.

The government's confidential draft, leaked to the Irish Times, offers telling insight. Ireland, it seems, hopes to use its presidency to repair a fraying transatlantic relationship. Of late, the once treasured partnership has been battered by tariffs, tech tensions, and the spectacle of Washington's erratic foreign policy under Trump. In light of this shift in the relationship, the Irish government's document calls for building a "more ambitious and mutually beneficial" partnership with the United States. It is a diplomatic aspiration wrapped in the language of economic prudence. But the subtext is harder to ignore: Ireland, due to our reliance on the tech and pharma industry, is the EU's most exposed economy if relations with Washington deteriorate further. And the presidency, for all its limits, offers a stage on which to signal loyalty.

'Ireland, due to our reliance on the tech and pharma industry, is the EU's most exposed economy if relations with Washington deteriorate further.'

The leaked paper portrays Ireland's presidency within what it calls a "deteriorating international security situation." That is an understatement. Russia's war in Ukraine has transformed the EU's internal politics, pushing defence from the periphery to the centre. In tandem, Trump's taunts about annexing Greenland earlier this year have led Brussels to now speak fluently of strategic autonomy, defence industrial capacity, and EU-NATO cooperation. These are all terms that would have been politically radioactive in Dublin not long ago, and go against Ireland's favoured neutrality. Yet the government's draft priorities embrace this shift with striking enthusiasm. Ireland pledges to support: the expansion of Europe's defence industry, new 'flagship' common defence projects, efforts to counter hybrid threats and smoother cross-border movement of military personnel and equipment. For a militarily neutral state, this is a remarkable evolution. In combination with efforts to reimagine the Irish triple lock, it signals to the rest of the EU that Ireland is focusing on unity with other member states at all costs. Although the presidency will not allow Ireland to set the EU's defence agenda, it will require Irish ministers to advance it. And as long as national support for neutrality endures, the State will spend six months defending policies that remain politically fraught domestically.

'For a militarily neutral state, this is a remarkable evolution.'

Many recognise the influence of American tech firms on Ireland's attempt to cosy up to the US. And while three US firms contributed to 46% of Ireland's corporate tax receipts, attitudes toward Big Tech have hardened across Europe. Member state governments want stricter enforcement, tougher competition rules, and greater digital sovereignty. The EU has echoed this sentiment. At the same time, Ireland hosts the European headquarters of many of the very firms Brussels seeks to discipline. Tech executives, ever optimistic, reportedly see Ireland's presidency as a chance for their "friend inside the tent" to soften the regulatory blow. They may be disappointed. The leaked documents make clear that the presidency is expected to advance reforms to data protection rules, new AI legislation, and a broader digital simplification agenda. The Commission intends to pursue "better regulation, not deregulation," which Ireland will also have to sell with a straight face, if unity is the foremost concern.

The presidency is often described as a chance to 'show leadership.' Ireland will be expected to represent the collective will of 27 governments – even when that will contradict its own interests. This position does not align with Ireland's current behaviour, as it is one of the

5 states that have rejected the MERCOSUR agreement. This move angered many other member states and estranged Ireland from a Europe which is trying to diversify and modernise. Now, with growing protectionist instincts led by France, Ireland will have to delicately manoeuvre to shield key industries, preventing the cutting of US firms out of the market and leaving Ireland economically exposed. All of these future hiccups await the Irish tenure, but there is not much the state can do to prepare. The presidency will not allow Ireland to slow that momentum, only to manage it.

'The presidency is often described as a chance to 'show leadership.' Ireland will be expected to represent the collective will of 27 governments – even when that will contradict its own interests.'

Ireland has historically held the presidency at crucial times such as the first formal European Council meeting in 1975, the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification in 1990 and the eastern enlargement of the EU in 2004. These can all be moments of unity for Europe, and it is a legacy the current national government would like to continue. Considering the varied interests at stake, it remains the wisest course to prioritise unity, as the costs of disunity fall disproportionately on Ireland. Yet unity within the EU is not neutral and will require Ireland to take a clear stance on whom it is loyal to. It means defending EU defence integration while insisting neutrality remains intact, championing digital regulation that may harm its own economic model, and mediating between Washington and Brussels without alienating either.

From July, the six months of Ireland's presidency will show whether Ireland has the capacity to serve as an arbitrator in EU-US relations, or whether it will get lost in the power plays at stake. As debates intensify about Ireland's close relationships with US corporations ahead of the presidency, it is worth remembering that, at its core, this relationship is a tax arrangement, not a geopolitical one. Meanwhile, the EU has invested far more in Ireland's development than the US ever has: it bailed the state out and helped build the infrastructure that made its low-tax model possible in the first place. Strengthening transatlantic relations is a reasonable goal, but not if it comes at the expense of Ireland's place in the Union. Big Tech firms might one day leave, and the US administration will hopefully change, but the EU is a system Ireland is deeply integrated into – and cannot afford to jeopardise. The presidency will not allow Ireland to reshape the EU, but it will force Ireland to reveal what kind of European state it wants to be. And perhaps that is the real story: Ireland's presidency is less about

leading Europe and more about confronting its own strategic contradictions.



<https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-858618>

The False Binary of Solidarity: Separating the Iranian Regime from Palestine

Rogeh Nassar argues that solidarity with Palestine and opposition to the Iranian regime are not contradictory, but obscured by geopolitical instrumentalisation.

By: Rogeh Nassar

With the ongoing uprisings in Iran demanding an end to the clerical rule of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, I originally found myself in an uncomfortable position on where to stand, and it has been painfully clear that others find themselves in similar positions. It feels almost contradictory to be openly Pro-Palestine but against the current Iranian regime. Iran's government has repeatedly presented itself as one of Palestine's strongest defenders, while Israel also positions itself rhetorically to be in alliance with Iranian protestors. This complexity makes supporting Iranian protestors feel like indirectly aligning with Israeli strategic interests, and Palestinian liberation feels politically entangled with supporting the Iranian Regime. However, in reality, these positions are not contradictory. States produce this surface-level contradiction by instrumentalising other people's struggles.

'In reality, these are not contradictory positions. This surface-level contradiction is simply produced by states instrumentalising other people's struggles.'

Iran's current regime is authoritarian and oppressive. Although initially sparked by an economic crisis and mass unemployment, the current uprising, which began around the new year, quickly evolved into large-scale anti-government protests and demonstrations throughout the country, stemming from Iranian's longstanding resentment of the regime's inhumane crackdowns on current and preceding protests, restrictions on free speech, freedom of expression, women's rights, and other considerable concerns.

The Islamic Republic has externally presented itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause since 1979. This support has largely manifested itself through its position as the leader of the 'Axis of Resistance,' a loose anti-Western, anti-Israeli coalition across the Middle East. Multiple channels reinforce their support, from the substantial financial backing of Palestinian armed resistance groups to embedding anti-Zionism into its identity and state ideology. For Iran, being anti-Israel functions as a tool to exercise legitimacy domestically and regionally, and a moral framing device internationally. The government's repression of

its own people is a reflection of the fact that its support of the Palestinian cause is ultimately a geopolitical tool, rather than solely an ethical commitment to justice and liberation. Nevertheless, acknowledging this is not a dismissal of the material impact of Iran's backing for the Palestinian cause and its resistance to Western/Israeli hegemony, but rather an acknowledgement of the dual interest of the situation.

'To Iran, being anti-Israel functions as a tool to exercise legitimacy domestically and regionally, and a moral framing device internationally.'

Likewise, Israel has long labelled Iran as its key adversary. When the Iranian uprisings began, Israeli officials were quick to express support for the protesters and a revolution publicly, but not out of genuine solidarity or for human rights, as they claim, but rather a geopolitical advantage.

Within this context, figures such as Reza Pahlavi, the son of the deposed Shah, have gained international visibility. Despite the decentralisation of the Iranian protest movement, which is diverse and not defined by monarchism, Pahlavi has positioned himself as an alternative to the current regime. He has openly advocated for the normalisation of ties between Iran and Israel, regularly visiting Israel and making public statements endorsing their political stances. This amplification of Pahlavi in Western and Israeli media narratives can create the impression that he represents the face of a future Iran and the uprisings, contributing to a false binary that pressures people to align with one side through and through, as it becomes more difficult to detach oneself from the other side. Nevertheless, this does not and should not define ethical solidarity or alter the legitimacy of the Iranian protesters' demands, and should be seen for what it is: instrumentalisation.

Even though these two regimes are fundamentally opposed, their existence seems to serve a paradoxical purpose. They are utilising each other as a safety net and a political shield against any criticism or scrutiny. You criticise the Iranian regime and support the uprisings, and you are dismissed as capitulating to 'Zionist agendas' or foreign interference. The Iranian Regime itself categorised those in the protests as "rioters who were deceived" and "terrorists working for Israel and the US." Conversely, if you criticise Israel and its war crimes, you can be under scrutiny for giving in to Iranian propaganda, framing the opposition through the lens of Iranian hostility.

This dynamic forces people to frame it as a choice between the two rather than to question the power itself. This may seem a little confusing, but Iran and Israel intentionally engineer this confusion to

essentially feed off of each other's oppression and sectarianism. When people feel that every critique automatically strengthens "the enemy," they become hesitant to criticise at all. The result is not a genuine debate or analysis, but paralysis, hence the lack of public opinion on this matter.

Breaking out of this dynamic requires rejecting the binary entirely. It means refusing the idea that opposing one form of oppression requires excusing another. It means listening to the people, not the powers. Pro-Palestine means supporting Palestinian civilians and their rights and dignity, not necessarily supporting any government that claims allegiance to their cause. Anti-regime means supporting the Iranian people seeking freedom from authoritarianism and repression, not supporting the Western/Zionist regime that desperately attempts to cling to its cause. Supporting people's struggles should not depend on whether geopolitical rivals benefit rhetorically.

'Breaking out of this dynamic requires rejecting the binary entirely.'

There is a quote I came across that encapsulates the essence of my argument: "[True] Freedom, liberation, justice... can never be achieved by the oppression of other people." This principle applies both ways. Supporting Iranian protesters should not require endorsing policies of the Israeli state, just as supporting Palestinian liberation should not require overlooking the repression of the Iranian regime. When the liberation of one people depends on the subjugation or silencing of another, it ceases to be liberation at all. Selective justice is not justice.





<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/venezuela-diaspora-reacts-maduro-capture-world-reaction-9.7032756>

A Matter of Freedom: Is the US Justified In Its Intervention In Venezuela?

Ashleigh Szafran contends that the scale of the Venezuelan regime's repression, corruption, and humanitarian devastation justifies US intervention.

By: Ashleigh Szafran

During the early hours of Saturday, January 3rd, the US military carried out a brazen operation in Caracas and captured Venezuela's infamous dictator, Nicolas Maduro, and his wife, Cilia Flores. Venezuelans across the country and those displaced celebrated in the streets. Meanwhile, US politicians on the left scorned Trump's decisive move to remove Maduro from power. Outrage erupted worldwide. But the question remains: Was this justified – and what does it mean for Venezuela, economically and humanitarily? To truly understand the Venezuelan dilemma and why the US chooses to involve itself in its affairs, one has to go back to the early stages of Venezuela's current regime and examine how relations between the two countries fractured. In 1998, Venezuela elected former military officer Hugo Chávez with 80% of the popular vote. He entered office as a strongman, promising a socialist haven. In 2007, crying the infamous phrase "Expropiese!", Chávez seized the assets of two major US oil companies: ExxonMobil and ConocoPhillips. These assets cost these companies billions, and thus harmed the wider American economy and its access to affordable gas. Chávez set an unsustainable economic

model for Maduro not only to inherit but also to exploit to his own benefit.

The expropriation of both US and Venezuelan private companies into the Venezuelan government's hands only brought about more corruption once Maduro came into power in 2013. As he settled into office, Venezuela descended into a recession in 2014, resulting in hyperinflation that reached 63.6%. This crisis increased tenfold by 2016, when inflation reached a whopping 800%. Children on their way to school would carry thick wads of Bolivars to buy a bottle of water, while others simply started throwing their cash away; at 800% inflation, the Bolivar had become worthless. The result was starvation and health crises, pushing more than 8 million Venezuelans to flee their country. Those who stayed face increasing scrutiny from the regime, and any dissidents were strictly punished. In April of 2019, fierce protests contesting the presidential results erupted in both Maracaibo and Caracas. These protests led to week-long blackouts, and thousands reported having no access to electricity or running water. Moreover,

Maduro's regime sent soldiers into the streets, murdered protesters, and sent those they arrested to the infamous political 'torture' prison, El Helicoide. This uprising ultimately led the US to recognise it as a humanitarian crisis, and it withdrew its embassy and all diplomatic personnel from the country. This further fractured relations between the two countries and set the stage for intervention.

'They took my friend to jail. He was 14 at the time, just walking on the street near the protests. They only let him go because of his age, and an officer promised him they'd come for him once he turned 18.' – Daniel C., *A man from Maracaibo discussing what happened during the 2019 protests.'*

In 2024, elections in both Venezuela and the US brought about big changes. In July, Maduro rigged the Venezuelan elections in his favour. By all accounts, he lost to his opposition's centre-right candidate, Edmundo Gonzalez, but Maduro, like most autocrats, had no intention of relinquishing power. He remained in office, as did the rest of his administration. The US and most European countries rejected these election results, claiming that this election was neither free nor fair. Between this seizure of power and Trump's election in November 2024, things catalysed from that moment on. 2025 saw increased sanctions on the regime and targeted strikes on drug boats linked to Maduro's criminal drug trafficking enterprise, Cartel de Los Soles.

'We need to treat Maduro like we treat El Chapo, as an international criminal. That's what he is.' – Daniel Di Martino, *Venezuelan Economist on Nicolas Maduro.'*

Given the sheer volume of exploitation and societal ruin that Chávez began and Maduro continued, the case for American intervention in 2026 is clear; not only did Venezuela seize vital American assets when Chávez spread his socialist ideals, but Maduro sent Venezuela spiralling into the largest 'peacetime' humanitarian crisis and exodus the world has ever seen. In fact, I argue that the US did not do enough to stem the wrongdoings of Maduro's regime. Trump may have cut off the proverbial 'head of the snake,' but the Chavistas still hold power. Maduro's Vice President, Delcy Rodriguez, now reigns supreme, and not much has changed. Political prisoners remain locked within El Helicoide with little to no hope of exoneration. The American left is inclined to negate intervention completely, but to purge Venezuela of corruption fully, there needs to be more involvement in clearing it. Whether that comes from the US or a humanitarian agency remains to be seen. In the same

vein, outspoken Venezuelan opposition leader and Nobel Prize winner Maria Corina Machado has recently returned from political exile and made her case for a complete overhaul of the regime in Caracas. Known as Latin America's 'Iron Lady', Machado has repeatedly advocated for Venezuela's liberation through intervention. She is a lifelong champion of freedom in Venezuela and has admirably fought for liberty since Chávez's days. Since she emerged from exile, her overarching message points to the desire for American aid to help Venezuela climb out of the trench its leaders have dug for it.

'You cannot have peace without freedom, and you cannot have freedom without strength.' – Maria Corina Machado, *in an interview with NPR after her Nobel Prize win.'*

While recognising that American foreign intervention can lead to an overreach in power, it is necessary and justified in Venezuela's case. Not only did the Chavista regime murder, imprison, or exile countless innocents, but it also sent roughly 23% of their population fleeing, many with just the clothes on their backs. Maduro's capture has been a solid first step, but the entire regime has to go for Venezuela to prosper again.





<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/sep/20/jewish-british-mp-israel>

Israel's Attitude to a Palestinian State is an Existential Risk

Ben Raher warns that rejecting a Palestinian state threatens not only Palestinian freedom, but Israel's own future as a Jewish and democratic state.

By: Ben Raher

Ever since the watershed moment that was October 7th, 2023, when Hamas terrorists launched their brutal assault on southern Israel and sparked a major regional conflict, much has been said about the nature of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories, which began after the country's military victory in the so-called Six-Day War of 1967. The largest such territory is the West Bank, or as the Israeli government tends to refer to it, Judea and Samaria. 58 years on and despite efforts to promote a two-state solution to the conflict, a one-state reality is emerging, which is not only injurious to the interests of Palestinians, but also to the very state which is arguably most responsible for letting it die, the State of Israel itself.

Hawkish Israeli figures, particularly those who are members of the country's right-wing government, insist that a Palestinian state is an existential threat to Israel's security and prosperity. However, what they fail to realise is not only that the settlement project fuels Palestinian extremism, rather than countering it,

but the annexation of even just the West Bank would pose a serious threat to the character of the State of Israel. The country's basic law defined the nation of Israel as a "Jewish and Democratic state". Given demographic predictions, it is likely that a 'Greater Israel' would have a significant Arab population, which could potentially even become a majority. Therefore, it would cease to be a Jewish state. However, if the country insisted on retaining its Jewish identity despite this (especially if it simply refused to grant equal rights to Arab inhabitants), it would hardly be a democracy either. It should also be obvious that absorbing a population against their will would likely spark bitter conflict. If the Israeli public does not wake up to the folly of annexation and reject extremist charlatanry, they will be undermining their own national vision, prosperity, and security.

'What they fail to realise is not only that the settlement project fuels Palestinian extremism, rather than countering it, but the annexation of even just the West Bank would pose a serious threat to the character of the State of Israel.'

After the unilateral decisions taken by several European governments to recognise Palestine, the Israeli government has announced that it intends to commence work on the construction of the E-1 settlement bloc, which, in the words of Israel's far-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, is intended to 'bury' the concept of an independent Palestinian state primarily located in the West Bank. This particular project will bisect the territory, making a contiguous area under Palestinian sovereignty impossible. Furthermore, the recent approval of a bill in the Israeli Knesset granting the State of Israel powers within Areas A and B (Respectively under full and partial Palestinian Authority control), which critics have labelled as a 'de facto annexation' of the West Bank. If fully implemented, the legislation would allow Israel to expand its ability to confiscate Palestinian land in these parts of the West Bank, eroding what remains of Palestinian sovereignty in complete defiance of international law.

Life is already increasingly difficult for West Bank Palestinians. Ultra-nationalist Israeli settlers have been waging a campaign of terror against the area's native inhabitants, one which, in the eyes of many observers, is tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Palestinians feel suffocated by the growth of Israeli settlements, many of which surround key urban centres and inhibit expansion, despite their burgeoning populations. These towns and cities are often cut off from each other by a series of arbitrability-operated checkpoints, rendering them impoverished ghettos, which, while (mostly) under de jure Palestinian control, are arguably more reminiscent of South African Bantustans than 'islands of sovereignty.'

'Life is already increasingly difficult for West Bank Palestinians.'

Since the beginning of the settlement project, Israeli governments have branded the expansion of these illegal communities as being necessary for Israel's security. However, if anything, it has done the opposite. It has fueled the growth of Palestinian radicalism, as further generations grow up under an increasingly repressive occupation that not only humiliates them daily, but actively squanders any chance of their national ambitions being realised peacefully and pragmatically, in the form of a Palestinian state existing alongside Israel. For Israelis,

the effects of such policies will be just as damaging, if not more so, in the long run. In the absence of a two-state solution, Israel/Palestine may well be considered (as some already do) a single political entity. Indeed, major Israeli figures have even called for the incorporation of the West Bank into the State of Israel. Such a move would do great harm to Israel's self-defined character of a Jewish and Democratic State.

'Since the beginning of the settlement project, Israeli governments have branded the expansion of these illegal communities as being necessary for Israel's security. However, if anything, it has done the opposite.'

If implemented, this proposal would entail absorbing the predominantly Arab population of the West Bank (some 3.3 million people), which, combined with roughly 2.1 million Arab Israelis, would constitute a substantial non-Jewish population. Currently, Israeli Arabs are around 21 per cent of the country's population. If the annexation were to occur, given that there are currently approximately 7.2 million Jewish Israelis, the potential Arab population (which could stand at around 5.6 million) would, percentage-wise, account for just less than half of Israel's population. According to some demographers, it may eventually surpass the Jewish population in the state, rendering its Jewish character anachronistic. If, as the overwhelmingly right-wing and nationalist annexationists would likely insist, Israel strives to remain a 'Jewish' state where much, if not most, of the population is not Jewish (and potentially disenfranchised), its democratic character would also be in doubt.

It also goes without saying that forcing a population with its own very strong national identity into a state which it regards as its occupier, one currently run by the most right-wing government in its history and marked by a barely disguised contempt for its national desires and for Arabs more generally, will likely be rather unstable. Ultimately, Israelis have a choice, one to keep in mind when they cast their ballots this year. Their country can continue to exist as the only Jewish state in the world and the only democracy in the Middle East, while accepting its Palestinian neighbour as an independent state, or as the American economist and Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman put it, as long as fourteen years ago, they can choose a "gradual, long-run form of national suicide."

Special Section: *The Politics of Water*



<https://www.dw.com/en/syria-are-water-supplies-being-weaponized-by-turkey/a-5634995>

Weaponisation of Water

Lara Su Dumanli examines the severity of ecological terrorism in the Middle East.

By: Lara Su Dumanli

Earth's most abundant resource covers 71% of its surface: water.

Of that 71%, 39 million water wells span across 40 countries globally. Currently, after the turn of the century, the weaponisation of those wells has increased by 500%. With over 1,000 global incidents originating from the Middle East, the deliberate terrorism of natural resources continues to create a parasitic ideology that propagates a deteriorating environment, physically and mentally, in the Middle East and North Africa.

'Currently, after the turn of the century, the weaponization of those wells has increased by 500%.'

However, ecological terrorism is not limited only to water. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's Domestic Terrorism Chief James Jarboe invoked the term "ecoterrorism" twelve times in his speech addressing the

environmental impacts of September 11, 2001, in New York City. Describing the devastating impacts on infrastructure, wildlife, and ecosystems, the fall of the Twin Towers imposed, terrorism has remained an effective tactic in our world's history of destruction. Since then, though, its aftermath has largely been represented globally with the manipulation of water, more specifically.

While its history has spanned decades, the most notable example of water terrorism is the series of incidents during the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991), which fundamentally redefined how countries engaged with the environment in wartime. While retreating out of Kuwait in mid-February 1991, Iraqi forces intentionally released around 6 million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf. Known as a critical resource, the Persian Gulf covers up to 251,000 km² and spans eight countries: Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. Under the orders of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi military set fire to

over 600 Kuwaiti oil wells, releasing around 6 million barrels of oil per day.

As a result, the environmental impacts were devastating on a scale not yet measurable. The released oils themselves created over 250 million oil lakes across the country's landscape and continued to trigger a domino effect throughout the region. With debilitating air pollution, wrecked marine ecosystems, and persistent wildlife impacts across 1.3 million square miles, this ecological war encapsulated the beginnings of a long-term legacy that the water war would thereafter take root in.

After the Arab Spring, the Middle East entered a new period of regional instability marked by constant warfare, escalating imperialist meddling, and deep psychological division. Water warfare has only further exacerbated these tensions. In a society so fundamentally impacted by pervading social issues, the deliberate targeting of water points has transformed from environmental destruction to political propaganda used to push an overpowering agenda in the region.

According to the Centre for Climate & Security, water warfare has developed into six-category subdisciplines: strategic, tactical, coercive, unintentional, instrument of psychological terror & instrument of extortion. These groups encompass three main uses of water exploitation: flooding, restriction, and contamination. The widespread weaponisation of this resource demonstrates the extent to which actors have exploited it.

In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, documents from the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights most recently report the destruction of one-third of the water infrastructure. Through the bombing and bulldozing of water supplies, the concentration on water during an active-conflict zone forms it into a tool of war. It may have started with water as a resource, but it has since become political when manipulated during genocide. Water becomes a way of life, as a healing would for all, and the subsequent deprivation triggers a record-high form of inhumane torture. The contamination of the water from the chemicals used in the bombings has now been linked to a public health crisis, including diarrhoea, hepatitis, and widespread malnutrition among the most vulnerable.

'In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, documents from the Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights most recently report the destruction of one third of the water infrastructure.'

In the West Bank, authorities use more formal legal measures to ensure that water continues to be diverted from clean water supplies into the camps. Specifically regarding bureaucratic obstacles, Israel's control over the Joint Water Committee has created a process that systematically delays any improvement in water access, whether fresh for drinking or unfiltered for broader environmental uses.

Just as potent as the physical impact of water warfare, the manipulation of water exerts a dominating influence on the population's psyche. Since the 2022 invasion, both Ukraine and Russia have engaged in water restrictions, but more recently, they have manipulated water as a war tactic. With the siege of Mariupol, Russian soldiers shut off the local water supply, thus forcing the trapped population to go without safe drinking water. As a result, when Russia shut off and destroyed the city of Mykolaiv's water pipelines, the locals grew restless. After Ukrainian forces regained control of the city, they implemented a queue to collect clean water. The instability of the queue, coupled with testimony about the dangerous conditions near the front line, took a psychological toll on the citizens.

As it increasingly became a gamble over access to proper water, the psychological effects of the weaponisation of water had seeped into the minds of the locals, creating a decaying relationship between water and corruption. By understanding the sheer weight of the weaponisation, water has since become a shield of political accountability, used to craft the perfect social climate for their needs.

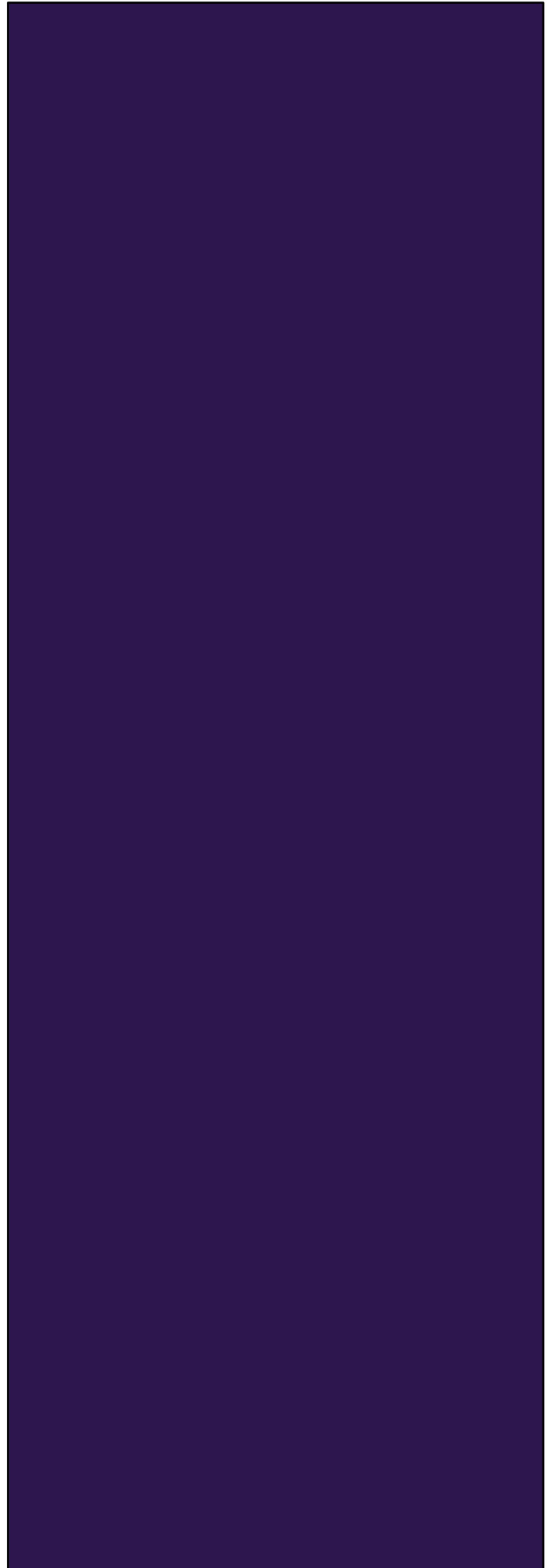
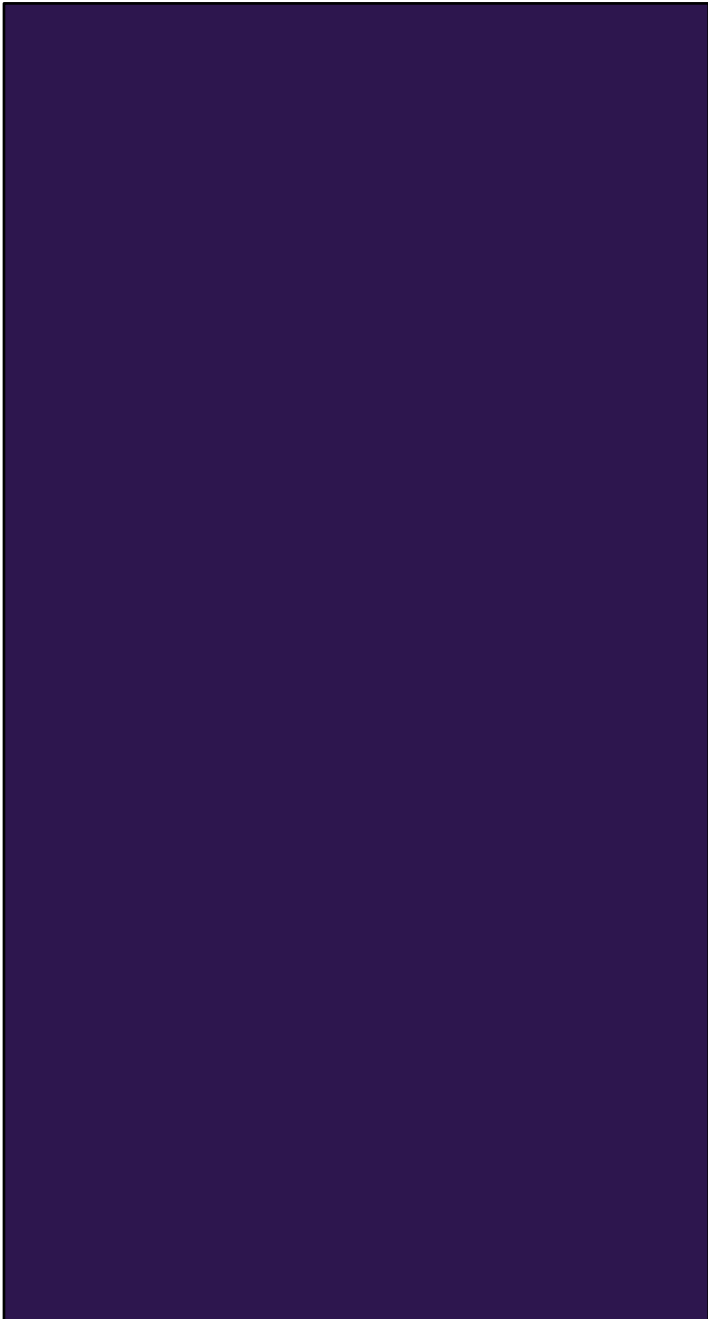
This level of coercion takes a whole other step in Iraq and Syria, however. In most large-scale attacks, ISIS deploys a primary 'carrot and stick' type of obedient system to lure in soldiers based on the availability of water. Due to the increasing levels of water scarcity, there has been a proven positive correlation between ISIS recruitment levels and communities in areas experiencing severe water insecurity. With water deprivation routinely attacked, hydro-terrorism has created such a violent environment that local fighters wouldn't dare to oppose a party that holds the power of death.

'Due to the increasing levels of water scarcity, there has been a proven positive correlation between ISIS recruitment levels and communities in areas experiencing severe water insecurity.'

But how has this continued? Article 54(2) of the 1977 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 states that it is strictly "prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless objects

indispensable to the survival of the civilian population,” but ecological terrorism remains a prevalent issue, underreported and underprosecuted. Due to the widespread underreporting, the weaponisation of water plays into an already socially vulnerable and politically unstable region, further shaking the ground on which the Middle East stands.

Weaponising water sources, especially during periods of conflict, goes beyond mere torture; it hinges on the overarching corruption plaguing our political system. By manipulating water, a resource whose potency knows no limits, it separates human-made destruction from environmental ruination, a distinction that creates a barrier in our morality. Once we step over that line, once we allow for animalistic tendencies to propagate a torture ideology, then we have lost our humanity in the wake of a terrifying world. If we continue to propagandise water, then the extent of this militarisation knows no bounds.





<https://fairseas.ie/2023/03/30/irelands-new-marine-protected-area-legislation-the-journey-so-far/>

Ireland, the EU, and the Politics of Marine Protection.

Ava Urquidez explains why Ireland's marine protection goals risk falling short without stronger funding, enforcement, and coordination.

By: Ava Urquidez

Across the EU, the credibility of global climate promises is increasingly judged by what countries can implement, rather than what they sign. The significance of the Atlantic Ocean to Ireland's economy and communities offers a clear test of whether EU climate policies can move beyond diplomatic ambition to legitimate protection, and whether climate leadership can survive the practical politics of coordination and compliance.

Ireland's coastal and marine ecosystems are central to its economic, ecological, social, and cultural well-being. In 2023, the ocean economy contributed €2.7 billion in gross value and supported 39,000 jobs, while sustaining coastal communities and vital marine biodiversity. Despite ambitious Irish and EU climate policies, the expansion of marine protected areas (MPAs) remains undermined by underfunding and weak implementation, threatening the long-term sustainability of these resources.

Ireland's commitment to the EU's 30x30 climate goal risks becoming a symbolic achievement rather than a substantive one if enforcement and financing gaps persist. Without reform, Ireland will face higher future

costs from environmental degradation, climate adaptation, and economic losses in coastal industries. As an island economy and EU member state, Ireland must pursue economic and governance reforms that enable effective policy implementation, improve coordination across governance levels, and ensure marine protection delivers tangible ecological and social benefits for future generations, while aligning with international climate obligations.

'Ireland's commitment to the EU's 30x30 climate goal risks becoming a symbolic achievement rather than a substantive one if enforcement and financing gaps persist.'

The European Union has positioned itself as a global leader in climate and biodiversity policy, committing to ecosystem protection, renewable energy expansion, and sustainable food systems. The European Environmental Agency identifies key coastal threats, including water pollution, biodiversity loss, urban development pressures, and coastal erosion. At COP15, the EU committed to the 30x30 target, which requires at least 30 per cent of global land and marine areas to be effectively protected by 2030, a goal Ireland

has formally adopted.

Ireland's island geography places coastal protection at the centre of its climate responsibilities. While the EU holds formal authority over many MPAs in Irish waters, this governance structure has generated inefficiencies, including bureaucratic delays, fragmented oversight, and limited local accountability. Coastal protection outcomes vary significantly across regions such as Wexford, Galway, and Cork, largely reflecting disparities in local funding capacity rather than differences in political commitment. This uneven implementation highlights the gap between national policy ambition and local delivery.

'This uneven implementation highlights the gap between national policy ambition and local delivery.'

At the municipal level, Dublin City Council has incorporated the 30x30 objective into its Climate Action Plan (2024–2029), identifying significant variation in coastal vulnerability across the city. Rapid population growth and climate pressures require immediate investment in adaptive infrastructure to prevent future flood damage. However, the council has acknowledged persistent obstacles stemming from underfunding, refinancing constraints, and supply chain instability. These challenges reinforce concerns raised by Fair Seas that, under current conditions, Ireland may technically meet its 30x30 target while failing to ensure MPAs function effectively in practice.

Ireland's struggle to turn ambitious marine targets into enforceable protection is not unique. Internationally, across coastal economies, marine ecosystems sit at the crossroads of climate risk, food security, trade, and local livelihoods, meaning policy failures have more widespread implications.

Hawai'i has similar usefulness in its coastlines, transcending economic, ecological, social, and cultural values. Its coral reefs are internationally known for their beauty and thus generate significant revenue, with an estimated asset value of nearly \$10 billion across the main Hawaiian Islands. However, climate change and a lack of protection in the past have led to widespread coral bleaching, threatening marine ecosystems. As the decline of coral reefs led to a loss of tourism revenue and spilt over into the fishing industry, Hawai'i quickly mandated protected areas for coral reefs and developed a strong regulatory framework to manage them appropriately. Tourist companies, fishermen, and people must respect and follow this framework to enjoy its benefits. While short-term profits may be lower, this approach ensures sustainable revenue and recognises the ocean economy as a public good. Effective implementation results

from prioritising reef protection, strong community collaboration, and appropriate funding.

In Morocco, coastal areas stretch 3,500 km and provide almost half of the country's gross domestic product, making the area's health a priority for the future of the Moroccan economy. A 'blue economic approach' to Morocco's ocean economy aims to maximise its diverse avenues for profit while promoting sustained growth. The EU and private companies support sustainable trade relations to develop a blue economic approach in Morocco and promote long-term trade relations that rely on the health of the coastal area.

However, effective implementation and management remain uncertain. These coastal regions in Hawai'i and Morocco face similar environmental challenges, with their economic success depending on policy prioritisation, funding, and management. Taken together, these cases point to a wider lesson for international policy: targets such as 30x30 are only as credible as the institutions that enforce them. For Ireland, the question is therefore not simply whether to adopt global commitments, but whether governance and financing arrangements can ensure that protected areas function in practice.

'Targets such as 30x30 are only as credible as the institutions that enforce them.'

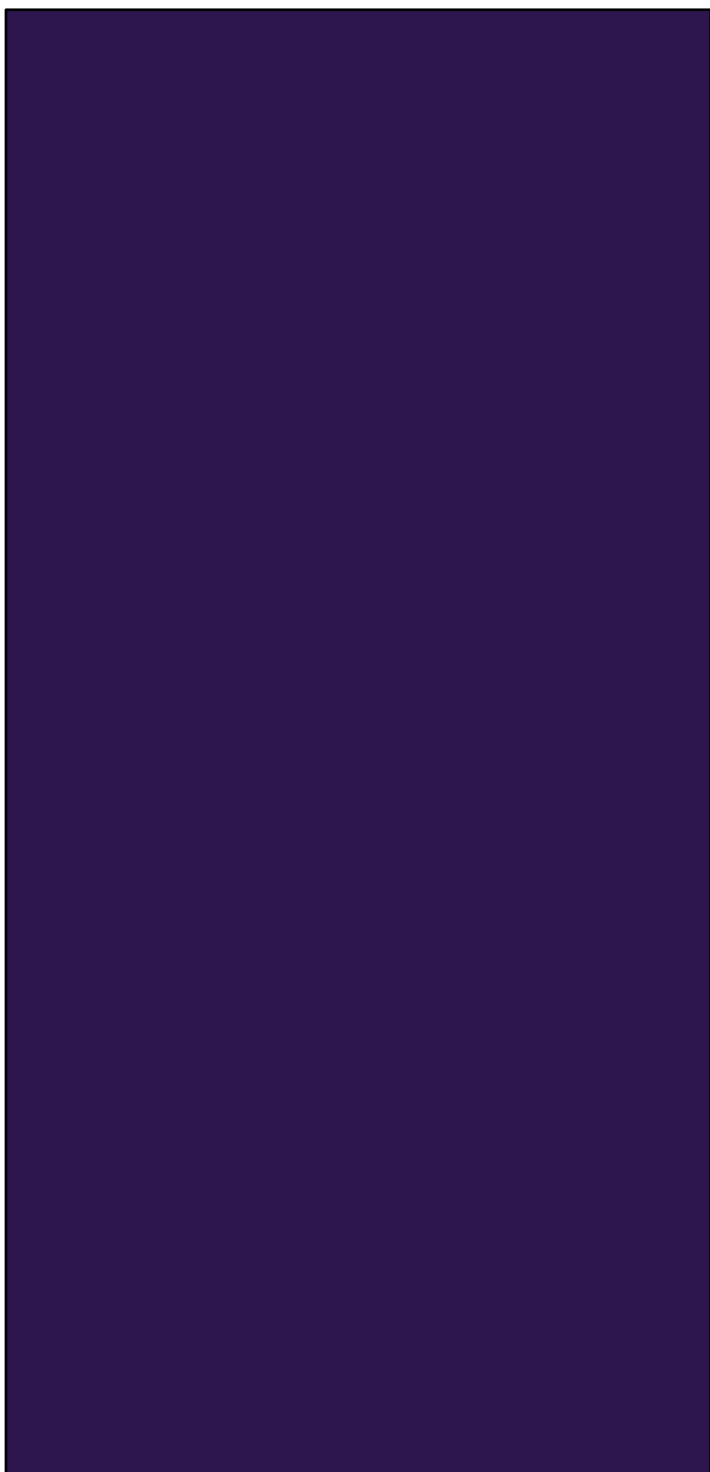
Both the EU and Ireland have attempted to incorporate social and cultural values into marine governance through initiatives such as Integrated Coastal Zone Management, which aims to coordinate environmental protection with community interests. However, these initiatives have consistently stalled due to insufficient funding. Proposed protection expansions in areas including Dublin Bay, Bantry Bay, and Cork Harbour have failed to progress beyond the planning stage, reflecting structural financing gaps rather than policy opposition.

Ireland's climate framework, therefore, reflects a broader pattern: strong normative commitments coupled with weak delivery mechanisms. Persistent challenges include underfunding, fragmented governance across the EU, national, and local levels, and limited coordination with coastal communities and economic stakeholders. Pursuing ambitious policy targets without ensuring their implementation risks eroding public trust while failing to deliver environmental protection.

Coastal zones account for just 6.3 per cent of the Earth's surface, yet generate an estimated 43 per cent of global ecosystem services. These benefits underpin international fishing industries, the eco-tourism sector,

coastal communities, and overall quality of life. While Ireland and the EU have demonstrated international leadership in climate ambition, significant inefficiencies remain in the implementation and financing of marine protection.

Under the current trajectory, Ireland may meet its 30x30 target in formal terms but fall short in delivering meaningful ecological outcomes. Addressing underfunding, strengthening policy implementation, and improving coordination across governance levels are essential to prevent higher long-term economic and environmental costs. Reforming marine governance now offers countries an opportunity to protect their coastal ecosystems while sustaining the economic and social foundations that depend upon them.





<https://www.globalconstructionreview.com/ethiopia-inaugurates-grand-renaissance-dam-after-14-years-of-construction/>

Damned if they do and damned if they don't: Hydropower in the Horn of Africa

Josh Craughwell explores how hydropower in the Horn of Africa promises development and energy security, while deepening environmental, social, and geopolitical tensions.

By: Josh Craughwell

The Horn of Africa is home to around 294 million people, many of whom live in poverty and lack access to basic services, such as electricity. In a region that is home to many rivers, including the world's longest river, the Nile, there is significant potential for hydropower to meet the growing needs of millions of people. Many hydropower projects have already been completed or are currently underway in numerous countries, including Ethiopia and Sudan. While electricity is a crucial component of these nations' plans for economic prosperity, the means of achieving them are not without fault. Dams constructed for hydropower can have widespread implications for both the environment and the people who live in these areas, while also potentially fracturing relationships between countries that share one of the region's most important resources – water.

Hydropower is considered a renewable, non-polluting energy source with low operating costs and reliable output. The Horn of Africa is one of the world's fastest-

growing regions, with a projected 25 per cent population increase by 2030. Combined with a 3 per cent annual increase in energy consumption this past decade, the need for energy development is paramount. Hydropower is therefore a viable solution to the region's growing demand. The cheap, renewable energy source could contribute to rapid economic expansion, lifting millions of people out of poverty and changing the social fabric of this historically deprived region. Moreover, renewable energy helps the region achieve its climate targets. Ultimately, hydropower has the potential to solve many of the region's problems, but not without creating new ones.

'Ultimately, hydropower holds the potential to solve many of the region's problems, but not without creating more problems of its own.'

This debate becomes most politically charged when hydropower shifts from a domestic development plan to a cross-border question of who controls the flow of

shared water. The pinnacle of Ethiopian infrastructure development, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), is Africa's largest hydropower project. With a reservoir the size of London and a total storage capacity equivalent to Egypt and Sudan's annual share of the Nile, the GERD has the potential to radically improve Ethiopia's energy output. The project is of national importance to Ethiopia's development, a country where 65 per cent of people lack access to the power grid.

The dam's construction was not without controversy, however. Ethiopia failed to publish an Environmental Impact Assessment for the GERD before its construction, thereby violating international law. The dam will also have significant repercussions for shared resources throughout the region. Although nations such as Sudan stand to benefit from the dam's increased irrigation, countries such as Egypt will face water scarcity and adverse effects on their agricultural sectors. 90% of its fresh water comes from the Nile, of which the GERD directly threatens 57%. Egypt views this issue as a matter of life or death for its population. A reduction of only 1 billion cubic metres of water flowing to Egypt would have detrimental effects, including a loss of 290,000 jobs, a loss of \$430 million in agricultural produce, and an increase in food imports of \$150 million. For Ethiopia, the dam is not only a driver of a necessary economic boom but also a source of national pride. Millions of Ethiopians have donated funds to the dam, viewing it as a means to secure Ethiopia's national dream. Egypt fears the GERD will grant Ethiopia greater regional power, enabling it to regulate resources and weaken Egypt's sphere of influence. Ethiopia, on the other hand, sees this more as an issue of sovereignty. Egypt has therefore insisted that external forces be present during negotiations on this issue, and has garnered support from both the Arab League and the United States. China, however, could play an important role as an ally to Ethiopia in negotiations. Such an advancement sets the stage for proxy regional relationships, in which a global superpower represents each side.

'Egypt views this issue as a matter of life or death for its population.'

Hydropower politics is not confined to flagship projects or to the Nile's diplomatic theatre. Sudan's biggest hydropower project concluded with the completion of the Merowe Dam in 2009. Located about 330 km north of the capital Khartoum, in the historic region of Nubia, the dam yielded the potential to double Sudan's previous power generation capacity. The dam was earmarked for construction before approval by the Sudanese environmental ministry, violating domestic laws and setting a precedent for the

damage to come. Some 50,000 people were displaced by the dam's construction, forced to move from fertile river banks to arid desert conditions. The disregard for Sudan's environmental, social, and historical dimensions highlights its government's reckless pursuit of economic development. Sudanese government consultation with locals was effectively non-existent, and any attempts to challenge the government on the proposed project were met with brutal oppression, resulting in the deaths of at least 3 protestors and the injury of 40 others, highlighting further issues surrounding the politics of such projects.

'Some 50,000 people were displaced by the dam's construction, forced to move from fertile river banks to arid desert conditions.'

If water is the resource, finance is the lever. The lack of viable financial resources, combined with the need for economic development, means that much of the funding for energy mega-projects comes from abroad. China partially financed 34 mega-dam projects across sub-Saharan Africa between 2000 and 2015. The Chinese National Water Resources and Hydropower Engineering Corporation, internationally known as Sinohydro, is a state-owned enterprise with over 50 per cent ownership of the global hydroelectric market. Responsible for the construction of both the Merowe and Gibe III Dams, Sinohydro has consistently advanced Chinese political interests in the region. By establishing long-term economic influence, China expands its strategic presence on the world stage. At the same time, developing nations remain locked into financial arrangements that require them to prioritise debt repayments over domestic priorities. Although foreign capital can address and alleviate growth constraints, it does not inherently contribute towards economic self-sufficiency. The need for more diversified financing mechanisms and improved domestic capacity is crucial to preventing large-scale energy projects from becoming vehicles for long-term economic dependency.

The problem at hand is a zero-sum game, in which one party can only benefit at the expense of another. Developing countries, such as Ethiopia, must improve their infrastructure to alleviate poverty and achieve economic sustainability. However, this is often at the expense of certain groups within society. Ultimately, developing countries are damned if they do and damned if they don't: with hydropower, long-held livelihoods are disrupted and regional relations fracture, but without it, development is only pushed further downstream.



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