

Opinion2025



TOMORROW
Osama Al-Sharif on the fact
that the war crimes stigma
has now stuck on Israel
like an indelible stain.

How to bring the region closer to peace

Even by the turbulent standards of the Middle East, 2024 was earth-shattering in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon and the West Bank. In Gaza, tens of thousands were killed and millions made homeless. Impunity for war crimes and crimes against humanity emboldened perpetrators to commit ever more gruesome atrocities. In Syria, Bashar Assad was forced to flee after a disastrous 24-year rule capped by a bloody 13-year civil war. In Lebanon, Israel decimated Hezbollah's leadership and weakened its grip on power. Consistent with Israel's indiscriminate battle doctrine, there was a huge civilian toll.

The most catastrophic event in 2024 was the killing fields of Gaza and this looks set to continue into 2025. More than 45,000 Palestinians have been killed there since October 2023, mostly women and children. About 100,000 more have been injured, some maimed. Many others are missing or buried under the rubble of their destroyed homes.

Having taken control of all entry points into the Gaza Strip, Israel has severely impeded the flow of aid. The conditions for survival are diminishing for the 65,000 to 75,000 people estimated to remain in the north. Starvation has already taken a toll in many parts of Gaza and famine is looming.

In addition to deliberately starving the Palestinians of Gaza and forcibly displacing them en masse, which are war crimes under the Geneva Conventions, Israel has engaged in other grave breaches of international humanitarian law, including indiscriminate bombing and the targeting of unarmed civilians, hospitals, schools, refugee camps and shelters. It is for these and other war crimes and crimes against humanity that the International Criminal Court in November issued warrants to arrest Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant.

The Israeli government, led by Netanyahu and populated by some of the basest ministers Israel and the region have ever had, engaged in this genocidal campaign because it was assured by the full support of the US. Although the Biden administration frequently voiced disagreement with some of Netanyahu's extreme tactics, it continued to support him materially and shield him from UN censure.

President Joe Biden, the consummate politician who has spent more than 50 years in politics, failed to use his tremendous leverage to temper Israel's unhinged behavior in Gaza, let alone bring a halt to the war. His administration also failed to persuade Israel to allow aid to flow to starving Palestinians.

Many have argued that Biden still has enough time and power to do the right thing before he leaves office on Jan. 20. Jonah Blank, now with the RAND Corporation, served for 10 years as a Biden adviser. He wrote that there are three steps Biden could take during his final weeks in office that would "mitigate Palestinian suffering and preserve the possibility of a two-state solution — which would also be the best way to solidify Israel's security in the long run."

First, he should recognize Palestinian statehood. Second, he should sponsor a resolution on a two-state solution at the UN Security Council. Third, he should enforce existing US legislation on arms transfers. These three actions are within Biden's executive authority and could change the course of the crisis in the Middle East, "which is hurtling toward catastrophe," as Blank made clear.

Such actions could salvage Biden's legacy, which is now marred not only by the failure of his Middle East policy but



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also his contribution to the Democratic Party losing the presidential and congressional elections. This loss was one of the most pivotal moments in 2024.

The Republicans, led by Donald Trump, convincingly flipped the White House and the Senate and retained their majority in the House of Representatives. They already had a solid majority in the Supreme Court, thus rounding out the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government. From Jan. 20, they will be in a position to change the face of the federal government for a long time.

In addition to the Gaza war, there are other crises that the White House needs to address during the weeks leading up to Trump's inauguration. They include the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Fortunately, in each of these four crises, there is consensus on what needs to be done and UNSC resolutions to go by.

First and most urgent is the crisis in the West Bank, where the Israeli government and settlers have increased their attacks on Palestinians with the clear aim of driving them off their land. Hundreds of Palestinians have been killed

and their homes and farms destroyed or burned down.

Clearly, the only way to defuse the West Bank crisis is through ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state. Already, about 150 countries have recognized Palestine as a state and there is a clear consensus on the parameters of this solution in UN resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative.

Second, in Lebanon, the agreement of a 60-day temporary ceasefire was a good start, but it needs to be solidified by the implementation of UNSC Resolution 1701 of 2006, which called for the withdrawal of all forces, save for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon and the Lebanese security forces, from Lebanese territory south of the Litani River.

Third, the surprise attack in late November by Turkiye-backed Syrian groups on Aleppo and the surrounding areas ended in Assad's ouster and the installation of a new Islamist government in Damascus.

In December 2015, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 2254, which set forth a roadmap to

resolve the crisis in Syria. Talks over its implementation stalled because the Assad regime stopped cooperating with UN Special Envoy Gere Pederson. Instead, the civil war raged, claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands and leaving half of Syria's population homeless.

Things in Syria are now in flux, but the new rulers appear to be eager to reassure Syrians and the outside world that they intend to have an inclusive government focused on rebuilding Syria's devastated economy.

Fourth, in Yemen, the UN-led peace process has also stalled, as the Houthis have chosen to improve their political standing by disrupting international maritime trade and attacking ships. Here too, there is a clear UNSC resolution (No. 2216 of 2015, which was adopted under Chapter VII of the UN Charter) that sets out the main parameters for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

To its credit, the Biden administration has been working on all these issues. But time is of the essence. It needs to take advantage of its remaining days in office so as to hand over to the new administration a coherent response.

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Expect nothing from a brother or a friend; have you ever seen your shadow walk with you in darkness?
Mohammed Rabah
(Contemporary Syrian poet)

Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Vera Songwe and Guido Schmidt-Traub on how rich countries must do more than just talk about the climate.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS THE SPORTING PRESS

Trump's key foreign policy tests

As ever, a new year comes with new challenges and opportunities. For US foreign policy, the new Trump administration, which will take office on Jan. 20, will shape the country's approach to the world. As with all presidents, Donald Trump will have significant power to determine foreign policy but will also have to determine how to respond to events that are unexpected or outside of US control.

When Trump once again becomes president, he and his senior advisers will face two major wars — in Ukraine and Gaza — that have bedeviled the outgoing administration. Trump has repeatedly said that he could very quickly end the war between Russia and Ukraine and now he will have an opportunity to attempt to do so. Trump and some of his top advisers have expressed skepticism about or opposition to America's provision of weapons and aid to Ukraine. It is very likely that Ukraine will face a major reduction in US assistance once Trump returns to the White House.

Trump recently appointed Keith Kellogg as his special envoy to address the war. Kellogg has proposed using the threat of cutting off future aid as leverage to force Ukraine to negotiate, while offering incentives such as putting off NATO membership for Ukraine and alleviating sanctions to persuade Moscow to negotiate. Regardless of the policy specifics, Ukraine will find itself in a weaker position vis-a-vis Russia, which indeed might lead to negotiations to end the war, but probably on terms that are more disappointing to Kyiv than to Moscow.

A related challenge will be managing relations with European allies. Trump's lack of commitment to NATO, as he expressed during his first term in office, will pose a challenge for the organization, which gained strength from new members during Biden's

term but also faces multiple threats from internal tensions and Russia. Advocates for greater European cooperation on security and autonomy from the US on defense matters are hoping that their efforts will gain momentum during the second Trump presidency.

The war in Gaza is likely to still be ongoing when Trump is inaugurated. The Trump administration's approach will feature enthusiastic support for Israel. Trump's picks for foreign policy advisers are all extremely pro-Israel. For example, his nominee for secretary of state, Marco Rubio, recently wrote that "Israelis rightfully living in their historic homeland are not the impediment to peace; the Palestinians are."

Trump's choice for ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, has said that "there is no such thing as the West Bank — it's Judea and Samaria," and that "there is no such thing as an (Israeli) occupation." Other senior foreign policy officials chosen by Trump express similar sentiments. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have even greater US support under Trump and will face no serious pressure from the new administration to change his approach toward Gaza or the West Bank.

The Trump administration will face the continuing risk that the war in Gaza helps to drive other regional conflicts. Even if the ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel holds through Trump's inauguration, the risk of renewed fighting is high. The outgoing administration has also struggled to respond to evolving risks posed by the Houthis in Yemen and Trump will inherit that challenge.

The new administration's pro-Israel lens will be applied to the challenge of dealing with Iran, including less pressure on Israel to restrain its potential actions. Many of Trump's top foreign policy advisers take a hawkish approach toward Iran; however, Trump does not seek another protracted war in the



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Middle East that might involve US troops. His desire to avoid direct involvement in a war that could be costly in terms of American lives and funds might constrain some of his advisers' more hawkish tendencies.

One of the few areas of bipartisan agreement in Washington is that China poses the greatest long-term threat to the US. Over the years, Trump has spoken both negatively and positively about China and Chinese President Xi Jinping, but his advisers are mostly hawkish toward Beijing. Furthermore, the US defense establishment sees China as its "pacing threat" and the top potential challenger to American power and interests. Trump's administration is very likely to view China as a key competitor and threat and to seek to shift resources away from the Middle East toward East Asia — though the same was true for the last several presidents, with limited success.

It will be important to watch how the Trump administration shapes the details of its approach toward China. Trump has promised very high tariffs against Beijing, but he has both official and unofficial advisers who oppose that. Some of his advisers want to back Taiwan, but Trump appears less likely to be willing to risk significant military losses to protect the island. He may prefer to engage in economic rather than military conflict with Beijing. China will loom large in US foreign policy, but the details on how the Trump administration will manage the challenge are not yet fully clear.

Increasing US-China competition, combined with uncertainty regarding Washington's future policy, creates a challenge for US allies in the Pacific, including South Korea and Japan. South Korea has particular reason to worry about the depth of US commitment to its alliance, given statements from Trump that suggest he wants a more transactional relationship. Recent media reports suggest that Trump would like

to renew talks with North Korea. Security in East Asia will depend significantly on how Trump approaches China and North Korea, as well as how Beijing and Pyongyang respond.

The Biden administration placed significant emphasis on cooperation to address global concerns, such as climate change, but Trump and many of his advisers express disdain for international institutions. For example, his nominee for ambassador to the UN, Elise Stefanik, is very critical of the institution. Trump has called climate change "a hoax" and will likely withdraw from the Paris Agreement, as he did during his first term.

As the Trump administration determines how to respond to new challenges that might arise in 2025, it will do so on a unilateral basis or by working with specific countries, rather than through multilateral institutions.

Elsewhere, Trump's strong opposition to illegal immigration will define Washington's relations with Central and South America. Trump's "America First" approach opposes sending US taxpayers' dollars abroad without clear, concrete returns, so US aid to developing countries is likely to drop, especially where previous aid was based on concepts of soft power and promoting American values. Relations with India will likely see continuity, as Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi get along well and Trump's advisers do not see India as a major concern.

The world is more prepared for a second Trump term than it was for the first, which came as something of a surprise to many global actors. However, Trump's second presidency will be different from his first in many ways, as already evidenced by his selection of advisers based more on their strong alignment with him and less on their experience within the political or national security establishments. Washington's approach to foreign policy challenges in 2025 will diverge significantly from its approach in 2024 — and possibly from Trump's first term.

تقي التي حين يخلّك الناس لن أنخلّي!
وحيث يغادرُك الأصدقاء الغدائي
سأبقى لأصيخ بيتاً وحفلاً وظلاً
(روضة الحاج)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

Trust that when others fail you, I will not abandon you. And when old friends depart, I shall remain — becoming your home, your field and your shelter.

Rawdha Al-Hajj

(Contemporary Sudanese poet and woman of letters)

Opinion2025

The year Israel became a pariah state

There is a famous quote that states: “There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen.” This, I believe, best describes 2024 — a year of tumult, political upheavals, unyielding atrocities, apocalyptic devastation and historical legal precedence.

For the Middle East, this was a year where nations were caught in a vicious loop: the images of bloody rampages, imploding buildings, broken families, shell-shocked children, gutted hospitals and grieving parents. There has been no reprieve. Gaza has become one ever-expanding killing field, a gushing wound in the belly of humanity.

In the beginning, numbers meant something. So many children killed, so many women, so many journalists, so many doctors, so many buried under the rubble; numbers that were meant to deliver shock and awe — and shame.

But then, Israel managed to do something no country has been able to pull off before: it normalized genocide.

Politicians and pundits argued among themselves: Is what is happening in Gaza genocide? They squabbled as the world saw the images of emaciated babies, the headless bodies of children, the mass exodus of civilians, the faces of bereaved parents, wailing mothers and stricken fathers holding little white shrouds containing what was left of their sons and daughters.

As it turned out, it all came down to semantics. Killing thousands in Gaza was justified as Israeli “self-defense.” Politicians defended the massacres because “ Hamas was using civilians as human shields.” Collateral damage, they said, which is another arbitrary and callous term.

Yes, semantics matter. If it was genocide that Israel was carrying out in Gaza, then the US and the West would have acted differently, right? While nations joined South Africa at the International Court of Justice in arguing that, yes, it is genocide, a US State Department spokesperson disagreed and insisted that “we are not seeing any acts that constitute genocide,” adding that South Africa’s case was “unproductive.”

While the debate over what constitutes genocide went on, Israel was quick to describe a clash between Israeli football hooligans and pro-Palestine groups in Amsterdam as a “pogrom.” The mainstream media and Zionist influencers were quick to adopt the term. No one died in Amsterdam and social media activists soon exposed the truth about the events there: Israeli hooligans provoked the clashes by chanting “death to Palestinians.” The term pogrom refers to the organized massacre of Jewish people in Russia and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. So, no genocide in Gaza, but a pogrom in Amsterdam.

The mainstream Western media continued to manipulate the coverage of the war in Gaza, particularly the indiscriminate killing of civilians by Israel. “Dozens killed in a strike at a UN school in Gaza,” read one headline in an influential daily newspaper in America, blaming an unnamed third party.

In Gaza, according to the Western press, people “die,” which is a euphemism for “Palestinians killed by Israel.” The dehumanization of Palestinians has not subsided. The disinformation, the bias, the hatred and the allegations that are never fact-checked or corrected have become the poisoned legacy of the Western press.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: ALBERTO ARAGON

On the other side of the world, the elections in the US took an unexpected turn. President Joe Biden, a self-described Zionist and Israel’s best friend, was forced out of the race due to fears over his health. Vice President Kamala Harris was pushed into the fray as the presumptive Democratic nominee. She was to challenge Donald Trump, who led the polls against Biden.

Late in 2023 and in the spring and summer of 2024, students at Ivy League universities became the center of media coverage and political jockeying by US lawmakers. The students held sit-ins, vigils and marches calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the severing of ties between universities and Israel.

In the ensuing maelstrom, Gaza, Israel and the Palestinian cause became a consequential election issue. University presidents were summoned to Congress to receive a lashing for allowing antisemitism to spread in American universities.

Pro-Palestine protests had already



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spread across the world in an unprecedented manner. There was what one could call a global awakening. People were protesting their own governments’ pro-Israel policies, citing the contrasts between their policies toward Ukraine and Gaza.

Palestine had become a matter of moral standing. The narrative that Israel had built with precision and deceit over decades began to crumble. Its hasbara lost ground to social media. The deep state and the corporate media were on the defensive.

The culmination of this gaping gulf between the state and the people occurred when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was invited by defiant US House Speaker Mike Johnson to address a joint session of Congress for the fourth time — a record.

The invite was issued following a bold announcement by the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Karim Khan, that he had asked the court to issue warrants for the arrest of Netanyahu and his then-Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, in addition to

Hamas’ military leader Yahya Sinwar, his second-in-command Mohammed Deif and the movement’s political leader, Ismail Haniyeh. Netanyahu and Gallant were accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Khan’s announcement sent shock waves across the world. For the US, which is not a member of the court, it was a time to demonstrate fealty to Israel and present yet another example of Western double standards. Khan and the court were attacked by US lawmakers, who made direct and explicit threats of sanctions against the judges and their families.

Netanyahu’s arrival in Washington to deliver his speech prompted mass protests that engulfed the Capitol. Many Democratic lawmakers boycotted the event. An animated Netanyahu did what he does best: he lied all the way, even claiming that there were no civilian casualties in Gaza. He received more than 50 standing ovations. That scene epitomized decades of the complex US-Israeli alliance. It underlined a bitter and dark reality: the Palestinians were not only facing Israel, but also Washington’s Zionist cult.

Arab and Muslim voters in America were making their position on the elections known. Earlier, during the primaries, they had shunned Biden in Michigan by voting “uncommitted.” Harris had tried to woo them by showing empathy with the Palestinians in Gaza. But she would not allow any representatives of these Arab and Muslim voters to take the stand at the Democratic National Convention to plead their case.

Trump saw an opportunity to address their grievances. He promised to end the wars in Gaza and Lebanon once he took office. Some believed in him and voted for him, only to be disappointed by his nominations for UN envoy, ambassador to Israel and defense chief — all fanatic Zionists.

Meanwhile, a rare bright spot in a bleak regional canvas was the International Criminal Court’s decision last month to issue warrants for the arrest of Netanyahu and Gallant. This historic move rattled Israel and its allies in Washington.

While the two wanted Israeli officials will not surrender themselves voluntarily to The Hague, the fact is that the war crimes stigma has now stuck like an indelible stain on Israel. Israel and the US will fight the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. When the new administration takes over, it may even pull the US out of the UN altogether, triggering global chaos. That could mean the end of the unipolar world as we know it, sowing the seeds of a new multipolar world; and that could be a good thing in the end.

This is no longer about Gaza and the Palestinians. However, they have become the unsuspecting instigators of what could be the ultimate reset of the world order. Where the world will head in 2025 is a matter of speculation, since there are already many parts simultaneously moving in many directions. But what is a fact is that there is no going back to the world of before Oct. 7, 2023.

We are a long way from seeing justice delivered to the victims of Israel’s horrific war. But we are seeing a world where Israel is turning into a pariah state, with its leaders accused of genocide and war crimes. In that, there may be some solace and fractured justice for its victims.

أَفْضَلُ الْعِبَادَةِ الْإِمْسَاكُ عَنْ
الْمَعْصِيَةِ، وَالْوَقُوفُ عِنْدَ الشُّبْهَةِ
(ابن السَّمَاك)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
*The best worship is refraining from committing
sin, and stopping before suspicion.*
Ibn Al-Sammak
(Medieval rhetorician, linguist and man of letters)

Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Yossi Mekelberg on the
Israeli authorities' belief that
almost everything in their
war on Gaza is permissible.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS DOM MCENZIE

World's stark displacement crisis

Can one imagine a year passing nowadays when the number of refugees and internally displaced people declines? Sadly, these circumstances are hard to imagine. The trends are stark and terrifying.

According to the UN, there are a jaw-dropping 120 million-plus in this category, 1.5 percent of the global population. If they formed a country, it would rank as the 13th most populous in the world. This is almost double the figure of a decade ago. Back in 2014, the figure was 60 million, an alarming figure in itself. If this pace continues, it will be 240 million by 2036.

What are the drivers of this massive displacement? Conflict remains key. In 2024, two stand out: Sudan and Gaza.

The horrendous fighting in Sudan, which kicked off in April 2023, has led to 1.2 million refugees and 6 million internally displaced. Chad has taken in by far the most, about 700,000. This replicates the feature of most conflicts, with refugees staying within the same region, largely in neighboring countries and largely never making it to a richer state. It is the poorer ones that still carry the burden. This might confuse a huge percentage of those on the far right in Europe, who think somehow that their countries have a refugee crisis.

The other conflict generating an ever-larger number of refugees is the Middle East war, principally in Gaza and Lebanon. About 90 percent of Palestinians in Gaza have been displaced, some as many as 10 times. One has to remind politicians in Europe and even those in the media that 70 percent of the population in the enclave were already refugees prior to last October. This displacement is forced and, in the case of northern Gaza, Israeli officials have made clear that it is permanent. This is why human rights groups openly refer to it as

ethnic cleansing. In the West Bank, Palestinians are also being displaced and, with formal de jure Israeli annexation planned for 2025, many more Palestinians will be ethnically cleansed there too.

As for Lebanon, the Israeli bombing and invasion of the country led to the internal displacement of about 900,000 before last month's ceasefire deal was reached. More than 550,000 crossed into Syria and thousands more made it to Iraq. This is a country where a quarter of the population were already refugees prior to the latest war.

Meanwhile, the Ukraine war has now lasted for more than 1,000 days. This also continues to drive displacement.

Therefore, much of the global displacement comes down to a failure to resolve or even de-escalate conflicts. If the global community remains divided and inward-looking, where will the necessary resolve and patience to handle such wars be found? The UN appears impotent.

Climate change both drives refugee flows and affects refugee communities. Research published in November showed that, of the 120 million displaced, three-quarters — some 90 million people — live in countries with high to extreme exposure to the effects of climate change. For example, Bangladesh, a state prone to flooding, has had to host refugees from Myanmar. What then happens is that the displaced feel forced to move again as a result of flooding, droughts or other climate-related issues. It also makes it less likely that they can return if their areas of origin are so gravely impacted.

This trend is only going to get worse if massive action is not taken.

The dangers of displacement continue, not least during the perilous journeys many take by sea and land. The International Organization for Migration has calculated that, since 2014, more than 70,000 have



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gone missing while trying to reach safer areas. The Mediterranean alone accounts for more than 30,000 of these.

The Central Mediterranean route remains the most lethal. As a result of 212,100 attempts to cross this route in 2023, about 3,100 are known to have lost their lives. If the Middle Eastern regional war continues, then many more refugees will once again seek to cross the Aegean Sea to Greece. What is clear is that the dangers are far from putting these migrants off, such is their desperation.

Many of the refugees who have succeeded in reaching the richer states of the world have found these countries to be less than hospitable. Prejudice and racism are more openly expressed and it has proved harder to settle in such environments.

Political trends do not help. In the US, President-elect Donald Trump has promised to crack down on what he terms illegal migration and even deploy the military to carry out mass deportations of undocumented migrants. His relevant appointments all appear onboard with this agenda. This time around, the Republicans also control Congress, making it easier for Trump to deliver on his promises.

European attitudes are similar. Far-right parties continue to prosper in elections across the continent. Even if they do not win, they have succeeded in changing the nature of the debate, forcing the traditional right-of-center parties to adopt much of their anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies. In the UK, the Reform Party plays this role, as the Conservatives try to push back against their far-right rival by mimicking their language. This was a party prepared to dispatch asylum seekers all the way to Rwanda at huge cost to show how anti-immigrant they were. Even the Labour Party, which came to power at the Conservatives' expense in July, has few solutions.

The ugly riots of the summer show how incendiary the whole issue is.

Elections across Europe showed how immigration is now perhaps the top issue, as well as arguably the most divisive. Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Slovakia all have far-right elements in their governments. The far-right Alternative for Germany was victorious in a state election this year. In France, Marine Le Pen's National Rally thrives. The extremes have become dangerously normalized.

Even in Ireland, a country rarely associated with far-right trends, riots broke out in Dublin in July. Slogans such as "Irish lives matter" showed the febrile nature of the debate.

The reality is that the international community has utterly failed to find solutions to this issue. Consequently, one can only forecast that these numbers will continue to rise and that migrants will take ever great risks to reach their desired destinations. Solutions seem scarce and, as long as that is the case, the lure of extremist, racist, far-right political trends will continue to grow.

The tragedy is that, with greater effort and investment, the richer world could help in dampening the drivers of migration through effective policies that assist the affected countries and by helping to resolve long-running wars. Greater consideration should be given to safe routes, whereby migration can take place away from the criminal gangs and be managed more effectively and safely.

Finally, a change in attitude is also required. Immigrants are often victims of overt hostility. They are always portrayed negatively. Yet so often the real story is one of extraordinary success, in which immigrants have helped transform and energize economies and societies.

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Spare your hands, for there is no one left in this house to respond. Do not await a reply, for the people of love have departed. And have mercy on the house; do not awaken its sorrows, for homes, like people, carry souls of their own.
Hatem Qassem (Contemporary Palestinian poet)

Opinion2024



TOMORROW
Luke Coffey on why expecting a swift and straightforward resolution to the Ukraine war could be unrealistic.

Gaza's plight has somehow worsened

It is inconceivable that, as this year comes to an end and planet Earth completes another full circle around the sun, the war in Gaza is still raging with devastating impact after descending into a multifront war for Israel.

When 2023 drew to a close, few would have imagined that, on the cusp of 2025, a ceasefire in Gaza would still not have been reached, many innocent people would still be being killed every single day, Gaza would be in ruins, many of its people would be displaced several times over and suffering from starvation and a lack of medical care, while the hostages would still be languishing in Hamas' hands. It is equally mind-boggling that, despite playing a crucial role in this disastrous state of affairs, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is still managing to hold on to the most powerful office in the country.

Israel could not have had a worse leadership to guide it through what has become its most harrowing period since 1948, nor could it be caught in worse political-social circumstances to face the challenges that have emerged from Hamas' horrendous attack. At the end of the day, the fear that such life-and-death decisions might be handed to a prime minister who was also a defendant in a most disturbing corruption trial proved to be justified by the nightmarish circumstances and consequences that have come to pass.

There were very few who questioned Israel's right to militarily respond to Hamas' attack of Oct. 7, 2023, and go after its leaders and military capabilities, but that outrageous spree was no license to go after the civilian population and collectively punish them for deeds they had not committed, nor to treat them as mere collateral damage in the war with Hamas.

Much of the way this war has been conducted was dictated by the initial failure to avert the Hamas attack. Since then, between the trauma and the will to avenge the victims of that attack, the Israeli government and its security forces have taken the view that almost everything in this war is permissible. None more so than Netanyahu, who is motivated by revenge and the prospect of redemption that would help him remain in power; and thus far he has managed to achieve what seemed impossible only a short time ago.

After all, it was he who masterminded the idea that funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to Hamas would both pacify this extremist movement and preserve the rift between it and Fatah — and, by such a divide-and-rule tactic, prevent a Palestinian state from ever materializing. He could not have been more mistaken. Netanyahu misread Hamas' intentions, weakened Israeli society and its resilience through his assault on the democratic foundations of the country and, whatever the faults of others in Israel's security forces, it was on his watch that the defense of the communities along the border with Gaza collapsed within hours, leading to the biggest loss of Jewish lives in one day since 1945. This, on its own, should have led any leader with even just a minimal sense of integrity or decency to accept full responsibility and leave politics for good.

But this is not in Netanyahu's DNA and his many and various denials of responsibility have become even more emphatic since he was investigated and subsequently indicted on three counts of corruption. His trial has been deliberated by the court for more than four and a half years, yet only this month did Netanyahu begin giving his evidence, which, by all accounts, has brought the



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The Israeli government and its security forces have taken the view that almost everything in this war is permissible

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ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: AXEL RANGEL

entire country into disrepute.

Throughout 2024, it became increasingly evident that the aims set by Netanyahu at the beginning of the war — of eliminating Hamas and ensuring the return of the hostages — were not and could not be compatible. Moreover, to see Hamas only through a military prism and to ignore it as a political and ideological movement has been another conceptual failure. Additionally, his claim that only military pressure would bring the hostages home proved to be another of Netanyahu's empty promises, aimed mainly at appeasing his base and his right-wing coalition partners.

The vast majority of the hostages released so far owe their freedom to a negotiated deal, while those killed outnumber by far those released through military operations. Meanwhile, about 100 still languish in captivity. From all the evidence available to us, including, and perhaps especially, the repulsive incitements by Netanyahu's toxic machinery against the hostages' families, it is clear that the government has given up on those in captivity in Gaza and would prefer to see them die rather than release more Palestinian prisoners or agree to a ceasefire.

What motivates Netanyahu is his desperate quest to stay in power and, consequently, he almost totally relies on the support of the far-right parties of Otzma Yehudit and Religious Zionism. If, in his earlier years in politics, his populism, divisiveness and

fear-mongering propelled him to power, today the more he becomes entangled in his legal affairs, the more he and those around him are becoming increasingly venomous in their attacks on the judiciary, the various gatekeepers of democracy and anyone else who opposes them, while their behavior knows no boundaries.

Netanyahu knows that, in the Israeli and Jewish ethos, releasing hostages should be the highest priority, as most of the nation demands. Nevertheless, because of his dependence on a small group of right-wing religious-messianic zealots, whose dream is to annex the West Bank and now even the Gaza Strip, while making life a living hell for Palestinians in the Occupied Territories in an attempt to force them to either submit to the settlers' wishes will or leave, the prime minister will not allow a ceasefire deal to be concluded. To this end, he was even prepared to sacrifice his defense minister, Yoav Gallant, in the middle of a war.

Gallant was almost the only Cabinet member with substantial military experience and, despite his extremely hawkish views, he had the common sense and honesty to question the aims of the war, to call for a ceasefire deal that would also see the return of the hostages and to establish a state inquest into the disastrous failures of Oct. 7. In addition, he demanded that ultra-Orthodox youth be drafted into the army to ease the burden on those reservists who serve for months on end. These were all very sensible demands, but not in Bibi's world, where they

threaten his government's stability.

Instead, it is becoming increasingly evident that the Israeli military is planning to stay in Gaza for at least the next few years, which is a strategic folly likely to be deadly for both sides. Leaders of the settler movement are already circling over potential locations in Gaza to build settlements and the even more lunatic among them were promoting the idea of settling areas of south Lebanon before last month's ceasefire deal, which called for the army's withdrawal to the Israeli side of the border.

In its war on Hezbollah, Israel's security forces have scored considerable military successes, from the mass explosions of paggers to eliminating most of the militia's leadership. However, despite these tactical achievements, there is a lack of any strategy to reach a lasting political settlement.

From Day 1 of the war, Netanyahu's calculus has lacked a long-term strategic rationale. This is not by accident, but because the end of the war would likely terminate his political career and, in doing so, scupper his attempts to further derail his corruption trial. Matters have reached a point where one doubts whether he is capable of distinguishing between what serves him personally and what is in the national interest. Furthermore, following his recent indictment by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, there is a genuine danger that he will dig his heels in even further, which makes the situation even more dangerous.

عَدُوُّ الْعَقْلِ الْغَضَبُ
(علي بن أبي طالب - ر)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Wrath is the enemy of reason.
Ali bin Abi Taleb
(The fourth caliph)



Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Charles Ferguson on how
the AI revolution depends on
a series of races between
technology and humans.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: HEEMIN

Trump 2.0 and the Ukraine war

As Europe gets used to the fact that President Donald Trump is returning to the White House, many are wondering what this means for the war in Ukraine and the future of NATO. Almost three years into the conflict, Russia's invasion of Ukraine remains the most consequential moment in transatlantic security since the Second World War.

This has been a critical year for the war. In 2024, Russia made minor gains in Ukraine but at a high cost and made a record increase in airstrikes on Ukrainian cities. Meanwhile, Ukraine undertook a bold invasion of Russia's Kursk Oblast and started developing weapons that can hit targets hundreds of kilometers deep inside Russia. Finally, this was the year that North Korean ground troops entered the conflict on the side of Russia. In sum, it has been an eventful year in the conflict.

After Ukraine's lackluster performance during its 2023 counteroffensive, few of its supporters held high hopes for a major operation this year. Instead, the focus of Ukraine's Western allies shifted to rearming, refitting and training the Ukrainian armed forces in preparation for further counteroffensive operations in 2025. This effort was complicated by political delays in the US Congress, which postponed crucial aid for months. By early 2024, the consequences of this delay were severe. When US aid finally passed in March, Ukraine was running low on air defense missiles, artillery shells and even basic ammunition for front-line soldiers.

During a summer marked by small but tactically significant Russian gains, especially in the Donetsk region, Ukraine took advantage of newly arrived American assistance and launched an audacious invasion of Russia's Kursk Oblast. This operation was arguably the most surprising and consequential event of the war in 2024. It demonstrated that Ukraine could succeed on the battlefield when supplied with the necessary resources.

The capture of Russian territory by Ukraine all but guarantees that the front lines cannot be "frozen" where they currently are in any future peace talks. Furthermore, Ukraine's

incursion into Russian territory forced Moscow to divert resources and troops to defend Kursk, reducing the pressure on other parts of the front.

In 2024, the war in Ukraine also became directly linked to East Asian security. Open-source intelligence had already confirmed that North Korea had supplied Russia with more than a million artillery shells and ballistic missiles. However, in the fall, Pyongyang escalated its involvement by sending about 10,000 troops to support Russia. This development, in turn, sparked renewed cooperation between Ukraine and South Korea, North Korea's long-time adversary.

Meanwhile, Russia has intensified airstrikes on Ukrainian cities at a level not seen since the war began in 2022. Each month, thousands of drones and missiles are launched at Ukrainian targets, many hitting civilian infrastructure. These attacks have severely tested Ukraine's air defense capabilities, but Kyiv has so far mitigated the worst effects, thanks to ongoing Western support.

Diplomatically, Ukraine faced disappointment at the NATO summit in Washington in July, which marked the alliance's 75th anniversary. Many hoped for a clear path to NATO membership, understanding that immediate accession was unrealistic while Kyiv remained at war with Russia. However, Ukraine received only vague promises of eventual membership without a concrete roadmap. This was a missed opportunity for NATO and Ukraine, turning what could have been a historic milestone into a mere celebration of its past.

The outcome of the US presidential election in November could also drastically shape the war's trajectory. Although the conflict did not dominate the campaign, it surfaced occasionally, with Trump and Vice President Kamala Harris offering differing perspectives. Trump repeatedly claimed he could end the war quickly and asserted that the invasion would not have occurred under his leadership. Harris, on the other hand, echoed the current administration's commitment to supporting Ukraine without offering specifics on how her approach might differ from President Joe Biden's,



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particularly regarding increased aid or lifting restrictions on US weapons.

With Trump returning to the White House in January, speculation is rife about his plans for Ukraine and NATO. There is widespread debate over what Trump will or will not do regarding the conflict. While he appears sincere in wanting to end the war, his exact strategy remains unclear.

To anticipate Trump's approach, one can look at his handling of key foreign policy issues during his first term, notably his withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear deal with Iran. Despite pledging to withdraw from the Iran deal during his 2016 campaign, Trump did not take immediate action upon assuming office in 2017. Instead, an interagency review led to a phased withdrawal, culminating in May 2018. This was about one-third of the way through his first term. In its place, Trump introduced a "maximum pressure" campaign. Regardless of one's opinion on this decision, it was not executed hastily or without a plan.

A similarly methodical approach is likely for Ukraine. Although some of Trump's past remarks have been perceived as sympathetic to Russia, there is room for cautious optimism. Trump will want to avoid appearing weak or defeated. A settlement viewed as a Russian victory would be politically damaging for him. In terms of America's image in the world, an outcome to the war in Ukraine that makes Russia stronger while leaving Ukraine weak would be on par with the outgoing administration's disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While Ukrainians are very grateful for the aid that Biden has provided since February of 2022, there is growing frustration among many about the slow pace of the assistance in recent months and the tight restrictions placed on the use of American weapons by the White House. Since Harris never expressed that she would do things differently from Biden, Trump's election victory is viewed by many in Ukraine as a potential positive.

Additionally, Trump's recent interactions with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky have been described as constructive. The two had a good meeting in person

back in September. Within 24 hours of Trump's reelection, the two leaders spoke again on the phone, signaling continued dialogue. Furthermore, key appointments in Trump's new administration bode well for Ukraine. National Security Adviser Mike Waltz and Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio have both expressed support for Ukraine in the past.

While Trump may pursue a resolution to the conflict, expecting a swift or straightforward outcome would be unrealistic. The world should not be surprised or disappointed when the war does not find a satisfactory conclusion in 2025.

Next year's NATO summit in the Netherlands will be another critical juncture. Trump's well-known criticism of the defense spending of America's NATO allies could resurface, but the alliance he returns to in 2025 is significantly different from the one he encountered in 2017. At that time, only a handful of member nations met the 2 percent of gross domestic product defense spending target. Now, 23 out of 32 members meet or exceed this benchmark, with more expected to follow.

Additionally, European countries have collectively increased their financial support for Ukraine, often surpassing the amount of aid provided by the US. While Trump may continue to press Europe to do more, he can take credit for pushing NATO toward greater military investment during his first term.

As 2024 comes to a close, the war in Ukraine remains at a pivotal crossroads. Despite numerous setbacks, Ukraine's resilience and ongoing Western support have prevented Russia from achieving its broader objectives. However, the future remains uncertain. The coming year will test the diplomatic, military and political resolve of all parties involved, with global security hanging in the balance.

Trump should use his second term to build out his foreign policy legacy. At the top of the agenda could be a fair and just conclusion to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and an increase in military spending on the enhancement of the NATO alliance in Europe. Achieving this would go a long way to making America strong again.

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
*The beauty in us makes us see other people's beauty,
our hearts' purity makes us love them, and the
desire to be charitable creates friendships.*
Fatimah Abdullah
(Contemporary Lebanese journalist and writer)

Opinion2024

TOMORROW
Dr. Ramzy Baroud on
how 2025 might see the
world finally ready to start
holding Israel accountable.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS PEP BONTELLA

Our AI near-future

We are now two years into a transformation comparable in importance to the first Industrial Revolution. But with expert forecasts of the impact of artificial intelligence ranging from Panglossian to apocalyptic, can we really say anything yet about what it portends? I think we can.

First, human extinction will not come anytime soon. Instead, we can look forward to many years of instability. AI technology will continue to make rapid progress, with ever more remarkable capabilities. We have not even exhausted the current transformer-based models (which rely heavily on brute-force computation) and enormous efforts are underway to develop better models, semiconductor technologies, processor architectures, algorithms, and training methods. Eventually, we will get to artificial general intelligence systems that equal or surpass human intellect.

For now, though, AI remains remarkably limited. It cannot even cook a meal or walk your dog, much less fight a war or manage an organization. A malevolent superintelligence will not be taking over the planet any time soon. But how the AI revolution plays out — and the ratio of progress to pain — will depend on a series of races between technology and human institutions. So far, technology is leaving human institutions in the dust.

I am very much an optimist about AI's potential benefits and I see exciting and encouraging developments in education, art, medicine, robotics, and other fields. But I also see risks, most of which are not being addressed. What follows is a brief, necessarily simplistic, tour.

As was true during the first Industrial Revolution, the employment and income effects of AI will be capriciously distributed, often appearing with little warning. The overall trajectory of gross national product might look wonderfully positive and smooth, but underneath that clean curve will be a great deal of pain and anxiety for considerable numbers of people, at every level of society, along with new opportunities for many and enormous fortunes for some.

Currently, AI is most suited to automating highly complex but also highly structured

activities: navigating streets, classifying images, playing chess, using languages (both human and computer). But the actual effect of AI on a given human activity depends on three variables: the rate and degree of automation; the human skill levels associated with the activities that can (and cannot) be automated; and — crucially — how much additional demand will be created by the availability of inexpensive AI automation.

What this means in practice can be quite surprising. Consider some examples, starting with language translation. I recently spoke with two eminent AI experts, one after the other. The first argued that AI will soon eliminate human translators completely, because AI translation will be essentially perfect within five years. But the second expert argued that we will need more translators than ever. As AI enables the rapid, inexpensive translation of absolutely anything, there will be an explosion in translated material, with human oversight required to train and improve AI systems and also to review and correct the most important materials.

Upon further investigation, I concluded that this second view is more accurate. There will be a huge explosion in what gets translated (in fact, there already is) and, for some things, we will still want human oversight. Translation is not just for weather reports and menus, it is also for chemical companies, medical device manufacturers, emergency room doctors, world leaders, surgeons, airplane pilots, commandos, and suicide-prevention hotlines. While human translators' roles will shift toward training, monitoring and correcting AI systems, we will probably need translators for a long time to come.

Similar questions arise in other fields. Many believe that software engineers' days are numbered, because AI is getting really good at doing what they do, using only nontechnical human instructions. But others argue that this trend will drive a huge increase in the quantity and complexity of software produced, requiring many human specialists to conceptualize, organize, verify, and monitor this massive body of code. Here, there is not yet a consensus about AI's net labor effects.

For lawyers, the future looks tougher. It is still early days, but I have already had numerous conversations that go like this: We needed an employment/investment/



CHARLES FERGUSON

partnership/acquisition agreement but our lawyer was taking forever, so we asked Perplexity (an AI service) to do it instead and it works. We had a lawyer check it and it was fine, so we do not need lawyers anymore, except to review stuff.

And, unlike language translation, it seems unlikely that AI will lead to a thousandfold explosion in legal work. So, I anticipate that lawyering will indeed come under pressure, with humans handling only complex cases that require highly trained experts. Conversely, in some other professions — accounting and auditing are often mentioned — AI will alleviate severe shortages of trained professionals.

Now consider driving. The current (and fully warranted) focus on autonomous vehicles has obscured something else: AI has already de-skilled driving as a profession. Twenty years ago, an urban taxi driver had to be smart, alert, and have a superb memory. All that is no longer needed. The availability of AI-driven turn-by-turn directions on every phone has turned professional driving into mindless gig work for ride-hailing platforms. And when autonomous driving gets good enough (and it is almost there), these jobs will disappear completely.

Next, consider robotics (of which autonomous vehicles are, in fact, just one example). With generative AI, we are witnessing a revolution that will eventually affect all physical activity, from manual labor to housework to warfare. Venture capital investment in robotics has sharply increased to billions of dollars this year, suggesting that the venture capital industry is making huge bets that robots will start to replace humans on a massive scale within the next five years. The first activities to be fully automated will be in highly structured, controlled environments — warehouses, fulfillment centers, supermarkets, production lines. Automation will take longer for unstructured activities near humans (like in your home or on the road), but there too progress is being made.

Another domain where AI has made terrifyingly rapid progress is weaponry. Here, the relevant analogy is not the Industrial Revolution but the First World War. In 1914, many on both sides thought that the war would be relatively painless; instead, new technologies — machine guns,

explosives, artillery, and chemical weapons — brought horrific mass carnage.

And I fear that, at present, few political or military leaders understand just how deadly AI-driven warfare could be. AI will remove humans from many combat roles, but it will also mean that any humans who are in combat will be killed with extreme efficiency. Will this result in sanitized wars with no human combatants or in unprecedented slaughter? The early evidence from Ukraine is not encouraging.

Inexpensive, AI-driven systems are also destabilizing the sources of national military power by rendering expensive human-controlled systems such as armored vehicles, ships, and aircraft extremely vulnerable to inexpensive AI-controlled weapons. Worse, this is occurring at the onset of a new cold war and during a period of heightened domestic political instability across the world.

A final concern is disinformation. While AI is already capable of producing somewhat realistic fakery in text, images, short videos, and audio, many observers have taken comfort from the apparently minor role that AI fakes have played, up to now, in elections and the news media. But declaring victory would be dangerously premature.

For now, it is easy enough for reputable news organizations, major internet platforms, and national intelligence services to determine what is real and what is fake. But AI technology is still in its infancy. What will happen a decade from now (or possibly sooner) when nobody is able to say with certainty what is real?

These issues will play out in many domains. One obvious implication is that countries need to reinvent and strengthen their social safety nets and educational systems to navigate a world in which skills and entire professions will be appearing and disappearing fast and often. The anger we see among people left behind by the last 30 years of globalization is likely to seem mild compared to what AI could yield unless we prepare for it. Similarly, we need extremely stringent regulation of deepfakes, including labeling requirements and stiff criminal penalties for producing or distributing unlabeled ones.

Welcome to the future. I hope we can get our heads around it because it is coming whether we like it or not.

Charles Ferguson, a technology investor and policy analyst, is director of the Oscar-winning documentary "Inside Job."
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*Life becomes more enjoyable when you
meet a clement and tolerant individual
imbued with knowledge and wisdom.*
Al-Jahiz
(Abbasid-era Arab polymath)

Opinion2024

TOMORROW
Christopher Phillips on the
West's risk of further weakness
due to the continued popularity
of right-wing populism.

Gaza — genocide and steadfastness

The Israeli war on Gaza is epitomized by the story of Beit Lahia, a small Palestinian town in the northern part of the Strip. Beit Lahia is a microcosm of Israel's failed war in the Strip: a bloody grind that has led nowhere, despite the massive destruction, the repeated ethnic cleansing of the population, the starvation, and the genocide. Every day of Israel's terrible war on the Palestinians serves as a reminder that there are no military solutions and that the Palestinian will cannot be broken, no matter the cost or the sacrifices involved.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, however, remains unconvinced. He began this year with more promises of "total victory" and ends it wanted by the International Criminal Court on war crimes charges.

Israel's objectives have remained unclear in 2024, although some Israeli politicians have provided clues as to what the war on Gaza is really all about. In January, several ministers, including 12 from Netanyahu's Likud party, took part in a conference calling for the resettlement of Gaza and the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. "Without settlements, there is no security," extremist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich said.

For that to happen, the Palestinian people themselves, not merely those fighting on the ground, had to be tamed, broken, and defeated. Thus the "flour massacres," a new Israeli war tactic that aimed to kill as many Palestinians as possible as they waited for the few aid trucks that were allowed to reach northern Gaza.

Aside from a few statements of concern by Western leaders, little was done to bring the genocide to an end. Only when seven international aid workers with the World Central Kitchen charity were killed by Israel was a global outcry heard, leading to the first and so far only Israeli apology of the entire war.

Desperate to distract from its failure in Gaza, as well as the northern border with Lebanon, and keen on presenting the Israeli public with any kind of victory, the Israeli military began escalating its war beyond Gaza. This included the strike on the Iranian Consulate building in Damascus on April 1. Despite repeated attempts, which included the July assassination in Iran of the head of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, an all-out regional war has not yet come to pass.

Another escalation was taking place, this time not by Netanyahu but by millions of people around the world who demanded an end to the Israeli war. A focal point of the protests were the student movements that spread across US college campuses and, ultimately, worldwide.

Meanwhile, the US continued to block international efforts aimed at producing a ceasefire resolution at the UN Security Council. Ultimately, on May 31, US President Joe Biden delivered a speech conveying what he termed an "Israeli proposal" to end the war. After some delay, Hamas accepted the proposal, but Israel rejected it. In his rejection, Netanyahu referred to Biden's speech as "incorrect" and "incomplete." Strangely, but also unsurprisingly, the White House blamed the Palestinians for the failed initiative.

Losing faith in the American leadership, some European countries began changing their foreign policy doctrines on the conflict, with Ireland, Norway, and Spain recognizing the state of Palestine on May 28. The decisions were largely symbolic but indicated that Western unity around Israel was faltering.

Israel remained unfazed and, despite international warnings, invaded the Rafah area in southern Gaza on May 7, seizing control of the Philadelphi Corridor — a



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: YAN LONG



DR. RAMZY BAROUD

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buffer zone between Gaza and the Egyptian border that extends for 14 km.

In August, another heart-wrenching massacre took place, this time at the Al-Tabaen School in Gaza City, where 93 people, mostly women and children, were murdered in a single Israeli strike. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, women and children were the main victims of the Israeli genocide, accounting for 70 percent as of Nov. 8.

An earlier report by The Lancet medical journal stated that, if the war had stopped in July, "186,000 or even more" Palestinians would have been killed. The war, however, went on. The genocide in Gaza seemed to maintain the same killing rate, despite the major regional developments, including the Iranian-Israeli tit-for-tat strikes and the major Israeli ground operation in Lebanon.

Still, Israel failed to achieve any of its strategic goals of the war. Even the killing of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar in battle on Oct. 16 would not alter the course of the war in any way.

Israel's frustration grew by leaps and bounds throughout the year. Its desperate attempt to control the global narrative on the Gaza genocide largely failed. In

July, after listening to the testimonies of more than 50 countries, the International Court of Justice issued a landmark ruling that "Israel's continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is illegal."

That ruling, which expressed international consensus on the matter, was in September translated into a UN General Assembly resolution "demanding



Beit Lahia is a microcosm of Israel's failed war in the Strip: a bloody grind that has led nowhere, despite the massive destruction

an end to Israel's occupation of Palestine within the next 12 months."

All of this effectively meant that Israel's attempt at normalizing its occupation of Palestine and its quest to illegally annex the West Bank were considered null and void by the international community. Israel, however, doubled down, venting its rage against West Bank Palestinians, who have also been experiencing one of the

worst Israeli pogroms in many years.

The Palestinian Health Ministry stated in late November that at least 777 Palestinians had been killed in the West Bank since Oct. 7, 2023, while hundreds more had been wounded and more than 11,700 arrested.

To make matters worse, Smotrich called for the full annexation of the West Bank. This call was made soon after the election of Donald Trump as the next US president, an event that initially inspired optimism among Israeli leaders, but later caused concern that Trump may not serve the role of savior for Israel after all.

The International Criminal Court last month issued its historic ruling to seek the arrest of Netanyahu and his former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. The decision represented a measure of hope, however faint, that the world is finally ready to hold Israel accountable for its many crimes.

The year 2025 could indeed represent that watershed moment. This remains to be seen. However, as far as Palestinians are concerned, even with the failure of the international community to stop the genocide and rein in Israel, their steadfastness, or "sumoud," will remain strong until freedom is finally attained.

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Nothing is as valuable in a human as his true nature. Thus, always seek the pearl, not its shell.
Jihad Jeha
(Contemporary Syrian poet)

Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Dr. Dania Kolehlat Khatib
on her conviction that
Lebanon is set to rise like
a phoenix from the ashes.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS ALEX GREEN

MENA's key climate change role

Climate change continues to be a firm fixture on the agendas of governments in the Middle East and North Africa due to the profound impact it has on the region's economies, communities and ecosystems. Cities and areas across the MENA region are at the center of multifarious climate risks, highlighting the urgent need for ambitious adaptation and mitigation efforts.

Experts are sounding the alarm on the necessity of climate action plans to mitigate the effects of climate change on the region, where vulnerabilities are intensifying by the day. The MENA region is prone to extreme heat, with a World Bank study forecasting that temperatures will soar as high as 56 degrees Celsius if global temperatures rise by 4 C above pre-industrial levels. This would translate to summer heat in parts of Algeria, Saudi Arabia and Iraq intensifying by up to 8 C by 2100, highlighting the dire implications of inaction for one of the world's hottest regions.

Furthermore, data derived from 2018 figures published by the Food and Agriculture Organization paints a gloomy outlook for water resources. The MENA region is currently the most water-stressed area globally, with about 60 percent of the population residing in areas experiencing severe water stress. According to projections made by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an increase in temperature of up to 2 C could lead to devastating impacts, with freshwater availability in the region declining by between 15 percent and 45 percent. Consequently, this climate-driven water scarcity is projected to negatively impact the region's gross domestic product growth, potentially causing a substantial decrease of 6 percent to 14 percent by 2050.

The MENA region is also facing heightened risks from rising sea levels. Nearly a

quarter of the region's coastal GDP and a fifth of its urban coastal areas are highly susceptible to these changes. By 2030, some 100 million residents could be exposed to coastal flooding, threatening critical infrastructure, including 43 major port cities.

Due to these multiple uncertainties, climate change is likely to weaken regional food systems and domestic agricultural productivity, thereby severely aggravating the food insecurity situation in the region and pivoting communities to increased reliance on food imports, which are frequently subject to price and supply fluctuations. The World Bank estimates that 132 million people will be flung into poverty due to severe climate events jeopardizing the lives and livelihoods of low-income communities.

Moreover, extreme weather events will pose significant public health risks, with an estimated 40 percent of lost working hours being due to heat stress by 2030. This will also exacerbate existing health burdens, leading to a number of health-related illnesses and deaths, particularly among vulnerable populations. Furthermore, it is estimated that the rates of climate migration will increase substantially due to the effects of climate change.

Such perilous projections accentuate the urgency for regional governments to adopt sustainable climate adaptation strategies in order to mitigate the effects of climate change. That is why last year's COP28 climate change conference was a pivotal milestone toward accelerating the progress toward a more sustainable future in the region.

The UAE's presidency of COP28 was instrumental in shaping the global climate agenda, culminating in the UAE Consensus, which outlines comprehensive agreements to tackle climate challenges, in addition to a set of declarations to advance climate actions globally. On the first day



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of COP28, a landmark agreement was made to activate the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage, for which \$853 million has been pledged thus far. It aims to arrange funding solutions for developing countries that are vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change.

The key outcomes of COP28, through the UAE Consensus and across the Presidential Action Agenda, included the unprecedented and noteworthy decision to shift away from fossil fuels in energy systems, emphasizing the importance of doing so in a manner that is fair, systematic and inclusive of all affected communities. Additionally, an agreement was set to accelerate the global energy transition, reflected in tripling renewable energy capacity and doubling energy efficiency by 2030, while also significantly reducing non-carbon dioxide greenhouse gas emissions.

Another milestone agreement was the launch of a global initiative to end deforestation by 2030. Additionally, emissions are targeted to peak by 2025 in alignment with the 1.5 C climate pathway, focusing on both sustainable development and poverty eradication. COP28 also sparked significant momentum toward advancing climate adaptation finance, going beyond the initial goal of doubling funding. Other declarations addressed the growing need to design and implement policies that maximize public health benefits from climate change mitigation and prevent dire health impacts, in addition to providing ample support to vulnerable agricultural producers impacted by climate change.

The MENA region has been making significant strides in the area of climate action, demonstrating its commitment to aligning the region's contributions to the global climate agenda. At COP28, the UAE and the Gates Foundation announced a joint \$200 million investment aimed

at leveraging artificial intelligence and technology to tackle climate change's impact on global food systems.

This funding supports several key initiatives, which harness the power of AI to enhance agricultural services for small-holder farmers in low- and middle-income countries, in addition to finding solutions to protect palm trees from pest threats and bolstering agricultural resilience through climate vulnerability diagnostics, mitigation-adaptation assessments and high-quality weather forecasting technologies.

At COP29 last month, the UAE announced the Mangrove Alliance for Climate Strategy, which is designed to accelerate global mangrove conservation efforts and emphasize the UAE's commitment to restoring 100 million mangroves by 2030. In tandem, the UAE also unveiled the Global Energy Efficiency Alliance, with the goal of doubling global energy efficiency rates by 2030.

The Middle East Green Initiative, led by Saudi Arabia, is the largest afforestation program in the world and it aims to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by expanding green spaces across the Kingdom and other MENA countries. Its ambitions include the planting of 50 billion trees across the region and restoration of 200 million hectares of degraded land.

In another pioneering example, the Saudi Electricity Company has partnered with King Abdullah University of Science and Technology to launch a groundbreaking research project at the Rabigh Power Plant. This initiative, overseen by the Ministry of Energy, focuses on testing innovative carbon capture technology that utilizes freezing techniques to capture carbon and treat various pollutants. The process achieves a carbon purity of up to 99 percent, marking a significant step forward in the country's efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

السَّكْتُ بَيْنَ النَّائِمِ وَالْأَخْرَسِ
(ربيعة الرأي)
YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
*Silence is a gray zone between
slumber and speechlessness.*
Rabi'a Al-Ra'i
(Eighth-century religious authority)

Opinion2024

TOMORROW
Hafed Al-Ghwell on how
the journey toward a
world free of poverty will
be arduous and complex.

What's next for Lebanon?

This has been a terrible year for Lebanon. Many of the country's problems had been accumulating for years; they most notably started with the financial crash in 2019, followed by the Beirut port explosion in August 2020 and then the deadlock in electing a president since 2022. The Gaza war has also had a spillover effect on Lebanon, as skirmishes erupted between Hezbollah and Israel on Oct. 8, 2023. In September, however, the dynamic of the conflict changed, and Israel began an all-out war on Lebanon, targeting all areas of the country, not just Hezbollah strongholds. Lebanon has reached the abyss. The question now is: will there be a way out in 2025?

This year has been mainly marked by a political deadlock, which reflects a highly polarized society, and by the Israeli war.

When the mandate of President Michel Aoun expired at the end of October 2022, the political class could not agree on a replacement. Hezbollah insisted on their candidate, Suleiman Frangieh, while the anti-Hezbollah camp categorically rejected him. As a result, no president was elected and the country was run by a caretaker government. One year later, the Gaza war started and Hezbollah opened a "support front." The group found in this conflict another excuse to defer the issue of electing a president.

The war in Gaza was a threat to Hezbollah. It knew that, if Israel was successful, it would be next. This is why Hezbollah opened its support front. While it was portrayed as a war of solidarity, for the group it was a security need. Prior to the war on Gaza, the group was under scrutiny for not abiding by UN Security Council Resolution 1701. The international community was exerting a lot of pressure to push the group to comply with it. The solidarity front was a gamble that Hezbollah took.

The bet was on an early ceasefire, which the group could use to claim victory and cash in on it politically. In September, however, the tide of the conflict changed. It is likely Israel had been preparing for this war for years. In its 2006 war on Lebanon, Israel realized the deficiency it had on the intelligence front. So, it started focusing on gathering intelligence.

Hezbollah also became a business empire, from having its own bank to multiple other businesses. It has also been accused of being involved in the Captagon trade. The group became porous. Top Hezbollah commanders became known to Israel. Tel Aviv used sophisticated technology to identify and target them. This led the group to rely on pagers, which are more basic and hence more difficult to trace.

Then came September's attack on Hezbollah's pagers. This attack changed the tide of the war. In a highly effective operation, Israel was able to tamper with the pagers used by Hezbollah members. It was able to target important operatives in the group. Afterward, Israel went on a bombing and assassination spree in Lebanon. All this was happening while Lebanon had no president and no real government or any effective diplomacy. In the 2006 war, Lebanese diplomacy worked to find an end to the war, with then-Prime Minister Fouad Siniara dispatching the highly qualified Dr. Tarek Mitri. Today, Lebanese diplomacy is at best numb.

On Nov. 22, Lebanon marked its worst independence day since the civil war. Four days later, a ceasefire deal was signed. Can Lebanon now resurrect itself or will it linger as a failing state for the next 30 years? Which option is more likely? The renowned Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq



DR. DANIA
KOLEILAT KHATIB

This year has been mainly marked by a political deadlock, which reflects a highly polarized society, and by the Israeli war

Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib is a specialist in US-Arab relations with a focus on lobbying. She is co-founder of the Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building, a Lebanese nongovernmental organization focused on Track II.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: AGNES ROART

Abdulla asked me two days before writing this piece: What is next for Lebanon; is it scenario one or scenario two?

I personally think the situation will improve. It might get worse before it gets better. But it cannot get much worse because, as I said, we have reached the abyss. A quarter of the buildings in the south of Lebanon have been damaged or destroyed.

So, what is next? What should happen so that we can have a better future?

Unlike 2006, when Arab countries donated money for the country's reconstruction with no strings attached, this time any aid will be conditional on three elements. Firstly, the Arab states and the wider international community will not accept the dominance of an armed faction in Lebanon. Secondly, they will want a credible government to handle the reconstruction process. Thirdly, they will want a transparent process. They will not compromise on good governance for the sake of stability like they did before.

Hence, Hezbollah will, on Jan. 9, be pushed to elect a consensual president, who will then appoint a credible

government that can garner the trust of the Arab world and the international community. This credible government will probably be a government of technocrats that is focused on elevating Lebanon. This is unlike previous governments, in which the different ministers were busy dividing the pie among the various members of the

Donors should insist on a government of technocrats that is focused on governance, not political polarization

political class. The donor community should insist on a government of technocrats that is focused on governance, not political polarization.

The good news is that there is a nucleus of good governance. The calamity that has been inflicted on Lebanon has brought with it an opportunity: The

country established a government emergency committee that came up with a transparent, efficient and effective process to handle 1.2 million displaced people. This process includes the management and monitoring of aid deliveries. It could be replicated in different government departments and developed to manage Lebanon's recovery and reconstruction.

The other positive element is the fact that Lebanon is a small country. A few billion dollars would be enough to rebuild infrastructure and jump-start the economy. The country has human capital, and the Lebanese are known for their entrepreneurial spirit. Recovery can happen quicker than we might expect. Also, members of the diaspora will come back and invest if they see that there is a credible government and that the country is stable and no longer controlled by a corrupt political class.

However, this is all speculation and maybe my analysis has been influenced by my own wishful thinking. However, deep down, I have a conviction that my country, like the phoenix, will rise from the ashes.

مَنْ لَمْ يَخَفْ عُقْبَى الضَّمِيرِ
قِيمَنَ سِوَاهُ لَنْ يَخَافَا
(محمد مهدي الجواهري)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

*He who is not afraid of one's
conscience would fear nothing.*

Mohammed Mahdi Al-Jawaheri
(20th-century Iraqi poet)

Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Kerry Boyd Anderson on the
many ways in which Trump's
second presidency will be
different from his first.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: PEP BOATELLA

Poverty — our last great challenge

In an era where technological advances and economic integration promise unprecedented opportunities, nearly 700 million people worldwide continue to live in extreme poverty — surviving on less than \$2.15 per day. This staggering figure not only signifies a monumental humanitarian failure, it also highlights the complexity and multidimensional nature of poverty, which remains deeply entrenched globally.

Despite decades of progress, the reduction in global poverty has slowed to a virtual standstill, exacerbated by periods of sustained low economic growth, the still-palpable repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased fragility in vulnerable regions.

But just what is poverty?

Poverty, often perceived in simplistic terms as mere economic deprivation, is a multifaceted phenomenon. Beyond the immediate lack of financial resources, poverty encompasses a range of deprivations, including limited access to education, healthcare and basic amenities. It entrenches social exclusion, stifles potential and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

For instance, about 3.5 billion people, or 44 percent of the global population, grapple with poverty by the standard of \$6.85 per day. This reveals a chilling reality: Economic growth alone has not been sufficient to uplift large swaths of humanity.

Poverty, far from being a mere statistic or a transient economic shortfall, is an omnipresent attribute of all societies across the planet, with extensive implications. It does not just manifest as mere lack or a myriad other deprivations, it also encompasses deficits in nutrition, education and healthcare — cornerstones of human development. A critical understanding of poverty's persistent and pervasive nature reveals its ability to perpetuate cycles of disenfranchisement and exclusion.

This self-reinforcing loop is responsible for some 1.1 billion people living multidimensionally impoverished lives around the world — with nearly half of them trapped in conflict zones, where barriers to poverty alleviation are impossibly high.

Despite an extensive array of analytical tools, policy frameworks and development programs proposed over decades, the

eradication of poverty remains a formidable challenge. In other words, while our understanding of poverty may have vastly evolved — with the global community even sharing a deep awareness of poverty's roots and its repercussions — finding a universal remedy remains as elusive as ever.

The persistence, elasticity and complexity of poverty are nowhere more evident than in sub-Saharan Africa, where 67 percent of the global population living in extreme poverty resides, despite the region accounting for only 16 percent of the world's population. The implications are profound: Without significant changes to the current trajectory, an estimated 622 million people are projected to remain in extreme poverty by 2030. Moreover, about 3.4 billion people will subsist on less than \$6.85 a day, illustrating that the scope of poverty extends far beyond the extreme, affecting nearly half of the global population.

The Middle East and North Africa region, on the other hand, faces a deeply embedded crisis of poverty and inequality driven by structural failures in governance and persistent socioeconomic disparities. Chronic poverty afflicts nearly two-thirds of the region, with key indicators revealing 41 percent of citizens in some states classified as poor and 25 percent as vulnerable. In addition, the middle class is shrinking, notably in non-oil-producing countries, where it has decreased from 45 percent to 33 percent. This widespread economic struggle is compounded by systemic issues such as labor informality, with more than half of the region's workforce engaged in the informal sector, where pay is often low and erratic, without any protections.

Furthermore, the region's demographic pressures, heightened by recent increases in fertility rates, further strain inadequate social services and stagnant economic systems, entrenching poverty across generations. Poor governance in addressing corruption and deploying effective reforms worsens prevailing crises. It is fostering a sense of perceived injustice and helplessness among citizens given the still-growing disparity in wealth — where the top 10 percent of individuals hold nearly two-thirds of the region's wealth.

Going forward, poverty must be understood as a multidimensional threat. It



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undermines social cohesion, exacerbates vulnerabilities to climate change and fosters inequality. High inequality remains concentrated in the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, reflecting a dearth of socioeconomic mobility and inclusive growth. Today, about a fifth of the global population lives in countries grappling with significant inequality, hindering their prospects for economic advancement and poverty reduction.

Furthermore, the climate crisis looms large as a formidable barrier to poverty alleviation. One in five individuals globally faces the risk of extreme weather events during their lifetime, threatening to dismantle the fragile gains made in poverty reduction. Climate change amplifies existing vulnerabilities and necessitates a dual approach: reducing greenhouse gas emissions while simultaneously enhancing risk management to protect the most vulnerable populations.

As we look toward 2025 and beyond, the future of global poverty is painted with a cautious yet necessary pessimism. Despite incremental advances in poverty reduction, fast-growing populations in the world's most vulnerable regions threaten to outpace these modest improvements. While statistics may show a decrease in the percentage of people living in extreme poverty, the absolute number of individuals facing dire economic conditions remains daunting.

Population growth in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia particularly exacerbates this issue, with millions more expected to struggle with inadequate access to sanitation, healthcare and education. Such complexities require the global community to rethink its approach and scale up investments radically if it is to have any hope of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by the 2030 deadline.

At present, tackling acute poverty necessitates an unprecedented level of international cooperation and investment. Smart investments in health, education, energy, agriculture, infrastructure and digitization have been identified as critical drivers to markedly improve living conditions. Funds should be redirected from military expenditures to allow a push forward with the "Pact for the Future," a strategic UN framework aimed at addressing global challenges. The

pact outlines actionable interventions across sectors vital to human security and development, while offering structural financial foundations to address poverty at its roots.

To feasibly combat acute poverty, the world must also ensure that financial assistance, technological support and development aid are not just increased but strategically targeted. Enhancing social protection, fostering climate resilience in agrarian communities and implementing fair trade policies represent some of the concrete steps that could transform the current trajectory.

Despite these actions, the global community's failure to classify multidimensional poverty as a planetary threat akin to climate change is perplexing. Multidimensional poverty encompasses various deprivations beyond mere income, including health deficiencies, educational gaps and a lack of basic services, yet it has not galvanized the same global urgency as climate issues. This lack of recognition might stem from a segmented approach to policymaking, in which economic development, social welfare and environmental sustainability are often treated as separate domains rather than interconnected crises.

Addressing this misalignment is vital as we move forward; otherwise, we risk superficial improvements that fail to address the broader, underlying causes of poverty. Indeed, the grim reality faced by millions, especially women and rural populations, suggests that a real-world perception of improvement will remain an elusive goal without deeper systemic changes.

In sum, poverty remains the world's last great challenge due to its profound, interconnected impacts and the sheer scale of those affected. Breaking the cycle of poverty requires more than just economic growth; it demands targeted, inclusive and sustained efforts to improve education, healthcare, infrastructure and job creation. International cooperation and innovative policies tailored to the unique needs of different regions are imperative. Achieving a world free of poverty on a livable planet is not merely a matter of economic expedience but a moral imperative. The journey will be arduous and fraught with complexities, yet it is the definitive test of our collective resolve and humanity.

مَنْ لَمْ يَصُنْ نَفْسَهُ لَمْ يَنْفَعُهُ عِلْمُهُ
(الشافعي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
*He who does not keep himself well
would not benefit from his knowledge.*
Al-Shafe'i
(Abbasid-era religious authority, writer and poet)

Opinion2024

TOMORROW
Alistair Burt on 2024's
confirmation that the
rightward, populist trend
in Europe is continuing.

Cash crisis imperiling climate action

A 2024 report by the Independent Expert Group on Debt, Nature and Climate revealed that many of the world's 144 developing economies are on an unsustainable fiscal trajectory. On average, these countries spend 41.5 percent of their budget revenues — or 8.4 percent of gross domestic product — on debt service, severely limiting their scope for public investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure and innovation, which are essential for economic growth.

Without growth and greater fiscal flexibility, repaying sovereign debts becomes unfeasible. Consequently, developing countries urgently require a massive injection of affordable capital and, in some cases, outright debt relief from both international and domestic creditors.

The developing world's debt crisis is compounded by two related factors. The first is climate change: global temperatures have already risen by 1.2 degrees Celsius and are projected to increase by an additional 0.2 C to 0.3 C per decade. This "climate debt" is exacting an enormous toll, with damages in vulnerable countries — currently estimated at roughly 20 percent of GDP — stalling their economic development.

Over the past few months alone, record floods have struck Spain, Nepal and parts of West Africa, unprecedented wildfires have ravaged Canada, Brazil and Bolivia and hurricanes Helene and Milton have battered the Caribbean, Central America and the southeastern United States. In Chad, torrential rains have led to widespread flooding, affecting 1.9 million people since late July.

Equally urgent, though less understood, is the nature crisis. Natural ecosystems act as a crucial buffer against climate change, absorbing half of the carbon dioxide produced by human activity. But deforestation and land-use changes are eroding the planet's natural defenses, with most of the world's forests — including the Amazon — now emitting more carbon dioxide than they absorb, thus accelerating the climate crisis instead of mitigating it.

Natural ecosystems also generate half of the rainfall needed for agriculture and human survival, with the rest supplied by ocean-formed clouds. But deforestation in the Amazon and Queensland is already threatening agriculture in regions like the Cerrado and eastern Australia. The situation in Africa is just as grim: Nigeria, which has the world's highest deforestation rate, has lost more than half of its remaining forests in the past five years to logging, subsistence farming and firewood collection.

This "nature debt" continues to grow at an alarming rate, with \$7 trillion pouring annually into industries that drive deforestation, overfishing and other destructive practices. By contrast, in 2022, nature-based projects received only \$200 billion.

Together, these forces have created a triple debt crisis that threatens the economic and political stability of the world's poorest countries. Ernest Hemingway's famous adage about how one goes bankrupt — "gradually, then suddenly" — holds true for developing economies: unless they reduce their debt burdens, they cannot invest in climate resilience and environmental restoration. And without curbing nature loss and reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the world risks crossing critical tipping points that will exacerbate the climate debt crisis, with severe macroeconomic consequences.

Given the stakes, the international community must unite under the G20's



**VERA SONGWE AND
GUIDO SCHMIDT-TRAUB**

Developing countries urgently require a massive injection of affordable capital and, in some cases, outright debt relief

Vera Songwe, founder and chair of the Liquidity and Sustainability Facility, is senior adviser at the Bank for International Settlements' Financial Stability Institute and co-chair of the Group of Experts to the G20 Taskforce for a Global Mobilization Against Climate Change.

Guido Schmidt-Traub, former executive director of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, is partner at Systemiq.

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ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: ANTONELLO SILVERINI

Common Framework to facilitate a global investment agreement that promotes sustainable growth by providing developing countries with affordable long-term funding and, where needed, swift debt restructuring.

Achieving this goal requires decisive leadership. The G20 must demonstrate its commitment to fiscal responsibility by adopting robust emission-reduction targets that stimulate global growth without triggering another inflationary surge. While most G20 countries have embraced decarbonization and green growth as pathways to economic development, they must also share technology and expertise with low-income economies. Debt-distressed countries, overwhelmed by high borrowing costs, cannot reach carbon neutrality without innovative financial mechanisms, grant-based funding and technical support.

Regrettably, this year's annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, together with October's UN Biodiversity Conference in Colombia, revealed that global leaders and financial institutions are still not prepared to invest in climate solutions at the necessary scale. This is surprising, given that investments in climate and environmental resilience yield high economic returns. Credit rating agencies have already downgraded several small island states and other climate-vulnerable countries, thereby driving up borrowing costs and potentially trapping

them in a vicious cycle of financial and environmental instability. These countries do not just need temporary relief to stay afloat; they need resources to help them achieve sustainable growth.

In addition to the fiscal constraints imposed by the current debt crisis, two key barriers to global climate action stand out. First, macroeconomic frameworks — including the IMF's Debt Sustainability Analysis — still do not recognize investments in climate resilience as productive. While the IMF has started to address this issue, the process remains slow and overly complex.

To advance sustainable development, the IMF and the World Bank must adopt the independent expert group's recommendations and incorporate the effects of immediate climate shocks and longer-term environmental risks into their baseline macroeconomic and fiscal projections. They should also account for the cost savings and enhanced economic stability implied by anticipatory disaster financing, resilience-strengthening investments and insurance solutions.

The second, more politically charged barrier to effective climate action is the lack of international support for developing country governments seeking to invest in climate resilience. This fuels cynicism toward rich countries, whose repeated promises to provide climate financing remain largely unfulfilled. Consequently, developing countries find themselves in a double bind: without

immediate relief, they cannot escape the climate debt trap; and without necessary financing, they struggle to devise credible investment strategies, thereby reducing their chances of receiving the concessional funding they urgently need.

Although the G20's ongoing climate funding review is a promising first step, much more is needed. Mobilizing the \$1 trillion in external financing proposed by the Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance requires a systemic overhaul that includes increasing multilateral development banks' lending, providing an additional \$100 billion to the International Development Association and fostering greater cooperation between governments, the private sector and philanthropic organizations.

The coming year offers wealthy countries a rare chance to prove that their climate financing commitments are more than just talk. The 2025 G20 summit in South Africa, the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year and the UN's COP30 climate change conference in Brazil could advance a sovereign debt deal and significantly increase investments in climate resilience.

Meanwhile, the IMF, the World Bank and other multilateral institutions must work together with forward-thinking governments, the private sector and other allies to show that investing in resilience can dramatically improve economic outcomes. Only then can the world overcome the triple debt crisis and pave the way for a sustainable future.

إن القَتِيلَ مُضَرَّجاً بدموعِهِ
مِثْلُ القَتِيلِ مُضَرَّجاً بدمائِهِ
(الأمير الصنعاني)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

*One who drowns in tears is like
one who drowns in blood.*

Al-Amir Al-Sana'ni

(17th/18th-century Yemeni religious authority and author)

Opinion 2024

TOMORROW
Dr. Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg on
how the only way to defuse the
West Bank crisis is through
ending the occupation.



ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: LUCA DI BARTOLOMEO

Europe's resilience put to the test

Europe entered 2024 with some trepidation. War was still raging on the continent for the first time since 1945. The echoes of renewed conflict in the Middle East were reaching into its major cities. The continental economy was limping. A series of elections were imminent, with an uneasy public likely to look for alternatives to mainstream parties. No one was sure who would be left standing at the end of the year.

Only the glorious backdrop of the Paris Olympics held out some promise of relief. But despite the many challenges to be faced, there were hopes that Europe would end the year better than it started it. The run of elections, for national and European parliaments, would allow the public to have their say on the direction of the continent and perhaps usher in a period of stability with which to face the future.

That has not necessarily been the outcome. We are learning that elections do not settle a democracy as they once did. The bitter polarization of politics, encouraged by a relentlessly negative social media, suggests that elections have become mere staging posts of anger in unending partisan political wars. Indeed, just four months after an emphatic win at the polls, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer faced a petition of nearly 3 million signatures demanding another general election.

It has been some year.

This year has confirmed that a rightward, populist move in Europe is continuing and that there is little stability in its two most powerful and significant nations. Provincial elections in Germany and the European Parliament vote in France debilitated both countries' governments. The year ends with Germany marking time until snap federal elections in February after the collapse of Olaf Scholz's government, while a weakened President Emmanuel Macron is perhaps a prisoner of Marine Le Pen and the far right until the next French presidential election in 2027.

Toward the end of the year, another

election further disturbed the European mood. For months, there had been widespread speculation about the result of the US presidential contest. For democracies that uphold the peaceful transfer of power as sacrosanct and the best answer to the creep of authoritarianism now stalking the continent, the idea that a defeated candidate associated with an insurrection could return to office was surely inconceivable.

There was a moment, with the stepping down of an almost-certain-to-be-defeated Joe Biden, when hope sprang for European centrists that the gathering momentum of Donald Trump would be halted. Notwithstanding that the policies of Kamala Harris toward trade and conflict in the wider world were barely known, she could not be worse than the fears accumulating around the prospect of Trump 2.0.

On Nov. 5, we learned the truth. Europe was not to deal with a conflicted or disputed outcome this time, but a newly, and substantially endorsed, President-elect Trump, winner of the popular vote and the undisputed master of his own destiny.

Europe's fears were far from fanciful or based solely on the past. In his first term, President Trump had made no secret of his disdain for NATO — the cornerstone of peace and security for Europe against external threats for some 75 years — claiming it to be an expensive insurance policy costing the US much and the rest of the alliance much less. He had threatened those states not paying their way with abandonment and, while his talk had the political effect of making European states look to their own commitments on defense, its wider impact on states close to an aggressive Russia was deeply unsettling.

On Ukraine, his boast that he could end the war within 24 hours led to not unreasonable speculation that this could only be done by some degree of sacrifice from the victim of the conflict for the benefit of the aggressor — the wrong lesson of history for a continent forever scarred by the mistakes of the 20th century.

Comments of those around him are



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hardly conducive to overcoming those fears. Donald Trump Jr. went on social media to mock the leader of a beleaguered country fighting for its existence to say that President Volodymyr Zelensky was "38 days from losing your allowance."

Europe has to work with Trump and his Cabinet. The strangeness of some of his choices for office must be of no consequence to the professional diplomats and politicians who are working toward the transition of power. They are trying to ensure, as far as they are able, that Ukraine is in the best possible situation it can be for an anticipated negotiation in 2025. It will be an early test of the relationship and the future.

Europe's fears are not confined to defense and security. The economic health of the EU is also not strong, as made clear by September's landmark report on competitiveness from former Italian prime minister and president of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi. A tariff war, as threatened by President-elect Trump, is of significant concern.

But the debate about President Trump is moving on. Whatever the views of him may be, there is an awareness that it is no use blaming an incoming US administration for all that needs to change across the European continent. Europe needs to spend more on defense, regardless of who is in the White House. And economic progress, sluggish when compared with the US and China over many years, has to deliver its own prescription for success in 2025. In one telling statistic, Draghi looked at the global investment into artificial intelligence: Of \$35 billion poured into AI startups in the first half of 2024, the EU attracted just 6 percent. A tariff war will not help, but Europe has to take greater charge of its own economic destiny in 2025.

This year unsettled Europe further with two unrelated, though not entirely disconnected, phenomena.

Migration to Europe, whether those seeking to make their way without papers across the Mediterranean from the Middle East or being absorbed into workforces and

family reunions, is increasingly cited as a driving force behind the resurgent political right. Mainstream politicians struggle to keep up not just with the rhetoric from the right, amplified by aggressive social media, but with their answers of fences and the turning back of boats.

The events in Gaza and Lebanon have produced civil unrest in Europe's big cities, where the identification of large Muslim populations with those suffering devastating bombardment has heightened awareness of their presence and political influence, contrasted with the seeming indifference of European governments. The agony of the Middle East is now being accompanied by an identifiable increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia, dismaying populations unconnected with either community, who are being whispered at by often anonymous sources on social media that their countries are not what they were.

And as if politics was not enough, Europe is increasingly aware that global climate change is not only driving refugees toward them, but that it is also having an impact on their domestic populations. The shock of the violence of the floods in Valencia, Spain, which took more than 200 lives in September, was matched only by the intensity of the anger toward the government and officials, who were blamed for their lack of foresight and response. There is little confidence that such scenes will not be repeated.

But Europe is a resilient continent. Investment is flowing in from friends in the Arab world and beyond to new industries and technologies. Europe's universities remain attractive to the world's brightest and best. It will respond to the challenges to its security and defense. Already, a developing European Political Community includes the EU and those beyond, while Brexit has not prevented London, Paris and Berlin working closely together. Its diplomacy will reach into the conflicts of the Middle East, as a new future for the region is formed that cannot afford the catastrophe of continuing conflict.

Europe may yet use the shocks of 2024 as the springboard to a defiant 2025.

Opinion2024



TOMORROW
Sara Al-Mulla on the sustained
efforts that will be necessary
to meet both regional and
global climate targets.

The evolution of power dynamics

Superficially, 2024 has not differed greatly from 2023 when it comes to global power dynamics. Many of the key features were already with us, whether the growth of populism in the West, the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine or the rise of middle powers. Yet, even if these trends are not new, the past year has seen them continue to build a momentum that points to a gradual shift toward a multipolar world order and a weakening of the West. The year's most dramatic development, the election of Donald Trump, looks likely to accelerate this. For, while the new White House could make the US a fiercer international player, it could also weaken the West as a whole.

The wars in Ukraine, Gaza, and Lebanon have been damaging for Western states over 2024. In Ukraine, Russia has made slow but steady progress. Despite Kyiv's audacious Kursk offensive in August and an increased willingness to launch attacks inside Russian territory, the war has gone badly. While the year began with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky still insisting all occupied territory could be recovered, it has ended with a seeming acceptance by his Western allies that a negotiated peace is inevitable. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's call with Vladimir Putin in November was symptomatic of this gradual softening.

Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon have presented different challenges. Unlike in Ukraine, where the West's ally is struggling, Benjamin Netanyahu's government has had a successful year militarily. Hamas has been crushed, with Oct. 7 mastermind Yahya Sinwar killed, while Hezbollah has been decimated, with most of its leadership, including Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, assassinated. Some commentators even argue Israel might be able to use these military successes to reorder the Middle East.

However, the scale of the destruction in Gaza and Lebanon, with more than 45,000 Palestinians and almost 4,000 Lebanese killed, has battered Israel's international reputation. Unlike with Ukraine, initial Western unity behind Israel has fractured. In May, Norway, Ireland, and Spain officially recognized the state of Palestine in protest at the Gaza war, while France and the UK have sanctioned settlers, with London even symbolically suspending a handful of arms licenses.

The UK, France, Ireland, and Italy have also all indicated they would arrest Netanyahu should he visit following the arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court. This is in sharp contrast to the US which, despite some criticism, rejects the court and has steadfastly backed Israel. Trump looks set to expand on this, potentially opening up further rifts with Europe.

Israel's wars have also damaged the reputation of Western states in the Global South, as they have continued to arm and support Israel and done too little to rein in Netanyahu. Though Israel ignored the International Court of Justice's ruling in July that its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza is unlawful, the case, brought by South Africa, pointed to a shift in the global order.

Non-Western states are increasingly willing to use Western-established institutions like the International Court of Justice to highlight what they perceive as Western hypocrisy. Geopolitically, both China and Russia have made much of this in the past year, arguing that they are more reliable partners to the Global South than the hypocritical West. While a ceasefire in Lebanon appears to be holding, the longer the Gaza war continues, the more damage it could do to the integrity of the Western alliance and its global reputation.



CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS

Trump might make the US ostensibly more powerful and, in contrast to the Biden years, a more central actor in world affairs

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ILLUSTRATION FOR ARAB NEWS: JOSÉ DAVID MORALES

The Western alliance risks further weakness from the continued popularity of right-wing populism at home. The year 2024 has seen populists triumph in the Austrian elections, enter government in the Netherlands, and come close to power in France. The growth of popular nationalism undermines the principle of collective security and points to a more transactional approach to intra-Western relations.

The Ukraine war is a case in point. Initially, Western states were united behind Kyiv, but increased criticism has been led by populists. Hungary's Viktor Orban is the most vocal, but the Netherlands' populist Party for Freedom has also questioned aid to Ukraine. Meanwhile, Alternative for Germany, which won a state-level election for the first time in 2024 and looks set to do well in the upcoming national elections, has also historically been pro-Russia and critical of Kyiv.

Until now, European unity against Russia has largely held despite the election of populists, either because they have proven less isolationist in power, as with Italy's Giorgia Meloni, or because they govern smaller states like Hungary. But should Alternative for Germany enter power in 2025, this could seriously impact Europe's Russia policy.

Already, Europe faces a tricky 2025 due to the incoming Trump administration. If Trump presses ahead with tariffs on allies, it will both damage European economies

and further strain US-EU relations, both of which will weaken the Western alliance. Moreover, if Trump insists, as expected, on reducing America's NATO commitments and on Europeans paying higher defense costs, this will further challenge EU economies. It could also make them more insular, focused on defending Europe rather than projecting power further afield. The net result would be a weaker Western alliance globally.

Beyond Europe, 2024 has been a mixed year for America's geostrategic rivals. Russia has recovered from some of the isolation it experienced in 2022-23 by embracing non-Western powers, ensuring its isolation is limited to the West rather than being global. Hosting the expanded BRICS conference in October underlined this, with the leaders of China, Türkiye and Egypt, among others, traveling to Kazan to meet Putin.

The expansion of BRICS, which formally welcomed the UAE, Egypt, Ethiopia and Iran in 2024, also boosts China, which is keen for the bloc to rival Western-dominated international institutions. But Beijing is somewhat less confident as the year ends, as it faces the twin problems of sluggish growth in its economy and the return of Trump, who has appointed several China hawks to his Cabinet and appears to be gearing up for a trade war.

Herein could lie the paradox of Trump's return for geopolitics. His combative approach, particularly his willingness to use

trade as a weapon, understandably concerns both his European allies and his Chinese rivals — even if another foe, Russia, may be hoping he will broker a favorable deal for Moscow in Ukraine. This might make the US ostensibly more powerful and, in contrast to the Biden years, a more central actor in world affairs. But Trump's transnationalism and a seeming lack of commitment to the Western alliance could leave the West as a whole weaker on the world stage, with it already suffering as a result of geopolitical shifts and the rise of isolationist populism at home.

Moreover, the US today lacks the power to push global actors into an anti-Chinese trading position in the way it might have done during either the Cold War or the post-Cold War era of US dominance. Washington may damage China's economy, but this is unlikely to seriously limit Beijing's influence in the Global South and non-Western world. Likewise, other powerful economies like India, South Africa and Brazil, while conscious of not provoking Trump, will not likely bend excessively around him in a way they might have during the 1990s and 2000s.

Trump's return will therefore likely represent a shift in style rather than a fundamental change in global geopolitics. This year continued the trend toward a weakening West within a multipolar world and 2025, with Trump in the White House, looks set for that to largely continue.