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The Future of Democracy in America

by Anatol Lieven

In this feature essay based on the new updated edition of his book *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, which appears this month, Anatol Lieven argues that the Tea Parties in America draw their strength not only from the current economic crisis but also from their deep roots in the American tradition. With the economic and demographic decline of the White middle classes likely to continue indefinitely, he sees this radical conservative tendency as posing a serious threat to the effectiveness of US government and even to the future of US democracy.

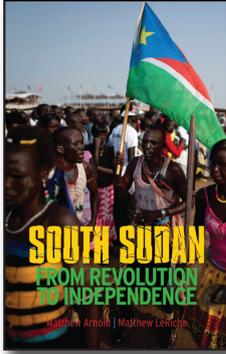
WINTER IS COMING

by Matthew Ford

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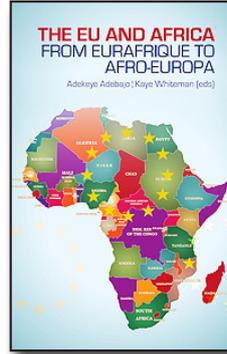
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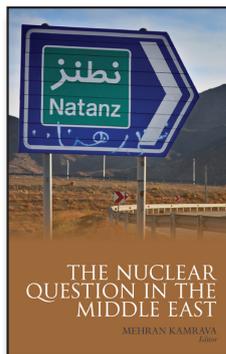
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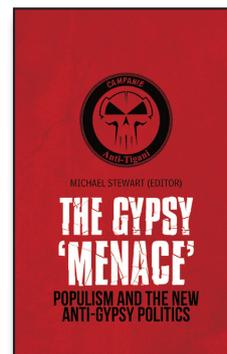


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THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

by Anatol Lieven

THE TEA PARTY movement as such may have passed its peak, but its soul will go marching on through the Republican Party. This in turn will mean that the tendency that the Tea Parties represent will be able to go on blocking any US economic and social policy. As Kate Zernicke of the New York Times has argued in her book *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America*, “if the Tea Party might never run things, it was never going to be defeated either.”

For while most opinion polls put Tea Party support at 20 per cent of the population at most, a democratic majority is not needed to block legislation (among other things) in the US. The US Constitution gives even the minority party in the Senate enormous powers to block not just legislation, but also executive actions of which they disapprove. A committed 20 per cent of the electorate is more than enough to dominate the Republican Party and to achieve this blocking role in the legislature.

As a result, whether Obama or Romney wins in November, US economic policy will remain largely paralysed, and reform of America’s government impossible. This is not good news, at a time when the US and world economies are in such trouble, and when the rise of China is facing America with a challenge the like of which it has never encountered in its history. Moreover, deep underlying social, economic and demographic trends in the USA make it highly unlikely that American radical conservatism – whatever form it takes - will weaken in the years to come.

When Tea Party supporters speak of the people they represent as the historical backbone of the USA and US democracy, they have a point. In the end, in most countries around the world democracy has stood or fallen according to the strength, the values and the loyalty of those groups called in America “middle class” (which include what in Europe would in the past have been called upper working class). The alienation of large sections of these classes from the political elites and the system of government, as demonstrated by the Tea Party movement, is deeply worrying.

The power of the Tea Parties reflects both the gathering crisis of the US middle classes and the old cultural lineage of radical conservatism in America. Far from being simply a specific response to the Obama administration and to the post-2008 recession, they are only the latest in a series of radical conservative movements which have emerged in recent decades. These in turn stem from a populist tradition which is much older still.

The conservative populist movements of the past generation stem largely from a decline in the economic and social status of the white lower middle classes and working classes which has been gathering pace for more than three decades, and which has accelerated sharply over the past five. The most worrying aspect of US decline is the increasing middle class economic hardship that is helping drive the Tea Party movement and increase its hysteria. Stagnation of middle class incomes has now been gathering pace for almost four decades. Since 2008, it has become a steep decline. Compared to the decades before the Great Depression and from the 1940s to the 1970s, most individual middle class and working class incomes from the 1970s to 2008 stagnated or fell. By 2009, the US male median wage had dropped 28 per cent in real terms since 1970. Since 2007, median household income has fallen by almost 10 per cent.

This has been a truly shattering fall, which was only made bearable for a while by the entry of married women into the workforce, which supported overall family income – while at the same time increasing childcare costs and strains on family life. Adding enormously to the strain has been the rise of job insecurity even for those in good work, with unionized labour being replaced by short-term contracts without benefits.

This strikes at the very heart of the American Dream: sober, respectable, hard working people are guaranteed good jobs and better futures for their children. It has been this history of middle class prosperity which in the past allowed America to overcome previous episodes of political extremism and return to moderation. It has also been through the reality of the middle class American Dream – as well as the strength of US institutions and values – that successive waves of immigrants have been integrated into the American system.

Without this steadily rising prosperity, both the integration of immigrants and the willingness of the existing population to accept them are likely to be radically reduced. Moreover, white middle class economic anxieties reflected in the Tea Parties are indeed being strengthened by the relative demographic decline of the White population. The Tea Parties also draw their strength from certain long-standing ideological traditions in America. One explanation of the appeal of the Tea Parties is that they combine American civic nationalism, with its devotion to the Constitution and the institutions of US democracy, with elements of chauvinism and conservative religion.

Finally, the Tea Parties are also a response to very real problems. As Edward Luce of the *Financial Times* brings out in

his brilliant and terrifying new book *Time to Start Thinking: America and the Spectre of Decline*, the institutions of government in Washington are increasingly dysfunctional and make any strategy of promoting economic development almost impossible, while the US taxation system is a nightmare which is beginning to inflict serious damage on the US economy. However, as Luce also indicates, the Tea Parties' diagnoses of the reasons for these problems are largely mistaken, and their proposed cures often verge on the insane.

Neither the Christian rightist movement of the 1970s, the "Republican Revolution" of the 1990s, nor the Tea Parties in recent years have succeeded in making their own candidates the Republican nominee for president, let alone win the presidency. In the end, the party has always chosen a candidate with a chance of appealing to centrist voters. At the same time, it is all too apparent how each right-wing populist wave, as it recedes, leaves the Republican Party several notches to the right from where it had been previously. This has been demonstrated by the way that the essentially moderate Mitt Romney (author of a health care reform in Massachusetts which went somewhat further than Obama's) has been dragged towards radical positions.

An old-style Republican (though still more radical than Eisenhower), David Brooks, wrote as follows of the Tea Party role in encouraging the Republicans to reject compromise with the Obama administration in the debate over raising the US debt ceiling in July 2011, which almost led to a national default:

If the Republican Party were a normal party, it would take advantage of this amazing moment. It is being offered the deal of the century: trillions of dollars in spending cuts in exchange for a few hundred billion dollars of revenue increases... But we can have no confidence that the Republicans will seize this opportunity. That's because the Republican Party may no longer be a normal party. Over the past few years, it has been infected by a faction that is more of a psychological protest than a practical, governing alternative. The members of this movement do not accept the logic of compromise, no matter how sweet the terms. ..The members of this movement do not accept the legitimacy of scholars and intellectual authorities. A thousand impartial experts may tell them that a default on the debt would have calamitous effects, far worse than raising tax revenues a bit. But the members of this movement refuse to believe it. If responsible Republicans don't take control, independents will conclude that Republican fanaticism caused this default. They will conclude that Republicans are not fit to govern. And they will be right.

As a result of this decades-long tendency, the Republican Party today would be largely unrecognisable to Dwight Eisenhower or even Richard Nixon – while the feral hatred of most Republicans for Barack Obama is directed at a president who has in fact governed – to the bitter disappointment of the American Left – as a kind of Eisenhower Republican. Even Ronald Reagan's Republican election platform of 1980 was far closer to Obama's of 2012 than to Mitt Romney's.

An irony here is that it is the Eisenhower years of the 1950s to which Tea Party members look as a vanished golden age, and which they wish to restore. This desire for a return to an idealized past, of a culturally and ethnically purer nation, a stable, traditional society, and a "moral economy" in which decent, hardworking people are guaranteed a decent job has been characteristic of radical conservative movements around the world.

Classes and groups in decline, or faced with new and unprecedented pressures, have always looked back in this way. In US history, such pressures are not new, even if they have become exceptionally severe in recent decades. For even while the country as a whole has grown colossally over the centuries, important sections of the population have always felt under threat from economic, social, cultural and demographic change.

To understand both the power of the Tea Party movement and why its impact (if not the movement itself) is likely to prove enduring, it is important to understand that while on the one hand the Tea Parties reflect the growing hardship and cultural anxieties of conservative middle class whites in recent years, they are also only the latest in a series of radical conservative movements which have emerged in recent decades; and these in turn drew their strength from certain ideological traditions in America which stretch back for centuries – some of them even to the 17th Century England and Scotland from which the first American colonists were drawn. These traditions have been thoroughly Janus-faced: helping to lay the basis for American democracy and economic success, but also contributing greatly to what the American historian Richard Hofstadter (1917-1970), in a famous essay, called the "paranoid style in American politics".

This sense of defeat and embattlement stemmed originally from the original, "core" White Anglo- Saxon and Scots- Irish populations of the British colonies in North America; the specific historical culture and experience of the white South; and the cultural world of conservative Protestantism.

In America, the make-up of radical conservative forces has changed with almost every generation, as formerly "outsider" immigrant groups join the white middle classes and form a new synthesis with the older Protestant culture. The stream of feelings of dispossession and loss, however, has flowed continually from one cup to another, from the old "Protestant nativism" through McCarthyism to the Christian and nationalist Right and the Tea Parties of our own day.

Hence the phenomenon—so strange at first sight, but perfectly sincere, and entirely characteristic of the history of radical conservatism worldwide—of defenders of the American capitalist system like Newt Gingrich describing themselves as "revolutionary republicans," and adopting a style and rhetoric of radical alienation from the supposed ruling elites and dominant culture. Hence the popularity on the Right and the Tea Parties of rhetoric about "taking America back".

The Tea Parties can be best described as the reflection of an anguished white middle class state of mind, rather than a political movement in any traditional sense, let alone one with a program for government. Sarah Palin's highly emotional books, for example, are astonishingly free of specific policy prescriptions of any kind, beyond a vague and general

demand for tax cuts and smaller government. The nearest that she comes in her books to a detailed domestic policy is to quote the banner of a “sweet old lady at the Boston Tea Party rally holding up a copy of the Constitution: ‘When All Else Fails, Read the Instructions.’” And a return to the letter of the original Constitution is indeed – together with lower taxes – the only demand that unites all Tea Party members.

In parts of the USA with high Latino populations, however, the Tea Parties do tend to be associated with one concrete policy demand, a tougher approach to immigration. Although in general the Tea Parties are very different from radical rightist movements in Europe, “nativist” opposition to immigration does provide one important link.

Extremist politics produced by threatened middle classes are a familiar enough sight in European history, and are returning in parts of Europe under the impact of economic crisis and immigration. Two other key aspects of American radical conservatism are however very unfamiliar to contemporary Europeans, and largely explain the bewilderment with which Europeans regard American politics. Both have to do with religion: The first, with fundamentalist religious belief in the strict sense; the second, with what has been called “the American Creed”, the passionate civic nationalist faith in the letter of America’s constitution.

At around 60 percent, the proportion of Americans who declare in opinion polls that religion plays an important part in their lives has remained steady for more than a generation. Nor is there anything especially odd about this. When it comes to religious faith and its role in politics, it is of course Europe (and certain former European colonies like Australia) and not the United States that is the “outlier” in the world. Max Weber was right about many things, but his belief that economic modernisation brought with it the inevitable “disenchantment of the world” does not appear to have been one of them. In most places outside Europe, religion is doing just fine, even if its institutions and forms may have changed.

Christian fundamentalism does not dominate the Tea Parties, but is certainly strongly present in them, and seems to play an important part in shaping the Tea Parties view of America and its government. Republican Congresswoman, Tea Party leader, and former presidential candidate Michele Bachmann’s faith and views were strongly influenced by the fundamentalist thinker Francis Schaeffer, who preached that the Renaissance and the Enlightenment both represented dangerous turns away from the “total truth” of the Bible.

According to CNN, 57 percent of Tea Party supporters polled agreed with the statement that “America is and always has been a Christian nation.” On issues like gay marriage and abortion, majorities of between 59 and 64 percent of Tea Party supporters agreed with conservative religious positions, while 44 percent of self-declared conservative Christians polled agreed with the Tea Parties, against only four percent who disagreed. In practice, it seems likely that Christian conservatives are even more important than these figures suggest, given their well-recorded tendency to higher levels of mobilisation and participation than other groups. Both Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann are deeply committed evangelical and fundamentalist Christians, whose faith has profoundly shaped not only their politics, but their personal lives. It should also be said that in both cases, their religion has inspired real efforts and sacrifices.

American fundamentalist Protestantism retains elements of thought which have come down with relatively few changes from much earlier eras. The religious historian Dean Kelley described it as one of the “huge political icebergs” of American life, which “move through time with massive stability, changing slowly and surviving in their essential form for many generations.”

Its origins are pre-Enlightenment, and its mentality to a very great extent is anti-Enlightenment. For convinced adherents of this tradition, much of modern American mass culture is a form of daily assault on their passionately held values, and their reactionary religious ideology in turn reflects the sense of social, cultural, and racial embattlement among their white middle class constituency.

Fundamentalist religion has also always embodied an element of class and regional resentment against the religiously liberal “East Coast elites” on the part of what Thomas Jefferson called “the honest South and West”, but what Republicans today would call “the Heartland” (Including most of the Midwest). Billy Graham: “Let me tell you something: when God gets ready to shake America, he may not take the PhD and the DD. God may choose a country boy. God may choose a shoe salesman like He did D.L.Moody...God may choose the man that nobody knows, a little nobody to shake America for Jesus Christ in this day.”

Thomas Franks (author of “What’s the Matter with Kansas”) and other have studied the way in which these class resentments on the part of lower middle class and working class whites have largely been channelled into cultural hatred of the “liberal elites” rather than – as was the case from the 1890s to the 1930s – into economic protest. A key reason for this shift has been the new cultural divide in the US since the 1960s between conservative religious believers and educated elites who are often at no pains to hide their contempt for religion.

Fundamentalist religion has thus played an important part in driving the polarisation of US politics, and also in increasing the contempt for scientists and experts of every kind which is such a strongly marked feature of the populist Right and the Tea Parties. The reason for this was summed up with perfect clarity by my fundamentalist landlady in Washington 15 years ago, who told me that “I am very sorry to have to say this, but if a person doesn’t believe in God, well, I just can’t really trust them on anything else.” And when you come to think about it, this is a perfectly logical and sensible attitude to take, if one accepts the original religious faith.

In Europe and elsewhere in the past, right-wing populism always had an authoritarian and anti-democratic cast (though that may have changed in recent years if one looks at the current run of extreme right-wing parties). In the USA, with the exception of a politically irrelevant fascist fringe, that has never been the case. Episodes of chauvinist hysteria directed at racial, ethnic, religious and political groups and foreign enemies have always been expressed in terms of a defence of democracy and the Constitution – a combination brilliantly analysed by Louis Hartz in his largely forgotten classic, *The Liberal Tradition in America*.

This phenomenon of chauvinist extremism in defence of liberal democracy would seem to have two roots. The first is the Frontier, where White communities with at least an appearance of rough democratic equality fought for their lives against American Indians who were considered altogether outside the law. Together with the exclusion and suppression of the Blacks in the South, this bred a tradition of communal solidarity in defence of American civilisation and against outsiders, and a belief that while democracy and the Constitution must be defended at all costs, their protections only apply to those who are committed to defend them.

The second source of what Hartz called “Lockean absolutism” is the sheer power of American civic nationalism itself. Instilled relentlessly in Americans by the school system, the media and popular culture, this faith has only intensified over the past century as it has become a central part of the process of assimilating successive waves of immigrants. In the words of Richard Hofstadter, “It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.” The phrase “American Creed” expresses the almost religious power of this civic nationalist belief.

A British journalist, Andrew Gumbel, has a fine description of the relentless instillation of this civic nationalist Creed through the education system – quite as relentless (though significantly different in content) as the instillation of nationalist ideas by 19th and early 20th Century state education systems in Europe. Gumbel describes his reaction when his son first went to school in California in 2003:

Even after five years in the United States, I continue to be surprised by the omnipresence of patriotic conformism . . . With my son’s education at stake, I can’t help pondering the link between what is fed to children as young as six and what American adults end up knowing or understanding about the wider world. There is much that is admirable in the unique brand of idealism that drives American society, with its unshakeable belief in the constitutional principles of freedom and limitless opportunity. Too often, though, the idealism becomes a smokescreen concealing the uglier realities of the United States and the way in which it throws its economic, political and military weight around the globe. Children are recruited from the very start of their school careers to believe in a project one might call Team America, whose oft-repeated mantra is: we’re the good guys, we always strive to do the right thing, we live in the greatest country in the world. No other point of view, no other cultural mindset, is ever seriously contemplated . . .

Gumbel quotes a song from his son’s elementary school class:

America, I love you!
From all sorts of places,
They welcomed all the races
To settle on their shore . . .
To give them protection
By popular election,
A set of laws they chose.
They’re your laws and my laws,
For your cause and my cause
That’s why this country rose.

These words would cause any historically aware black or American Indian to grind his or her teeth—but, as Gumbel points out, are taken by most American children as simply natural.

The idea that democracy and the Constitution are coterminous with US national identity is so deeply rooted among Americans that it is extremely difficult to analyse them critically without feeling that you are in some sense placing yourself outside the community. Or at least, this is true of the White middle classes, for whom this patriotic faith is part of their folk identity. For obvious reasons, Blacks, Latinos and American Indians have a very different perspective on the US tradition.

A quasi-religious faith in the Constitution permeates the language of many American conservative intellectuals. Thus the Mount Vernon Statement (“Constitutional Conservatism: A Statement for the Twenty-First Century”) of February 2010, drawn up by a long list of such intellectuals, begins as follows:

We recommit ourselves to the ideas of the American Founding. Through the Constitution, the Founders created an enduring framework of limited government based on the rule of law. They sought to secure national independence, provide for economic opportunity, establish true religious liberty and maintain a flourishing society of republican self-government. These principles define us as a country and inspire us as a people. They are responsible for a prosperous, just nation unlike any other in the world. They are our highest achievements, serving not only as powerful beacons to all who strive for freedom and seek self-government, but as warnings to tyrants and despots everywhere.

American faith in democracy is deeply moving, and it is also justified by history: the history of its role in shaping the United States, and the role of the United States in spreading and upholding democracy in the world. There is nothing wrong with the American Creed as such. The problem comes with the quasi-religious worship not of democracy but of the letter of a Constitution drawn up more than 200 years ago by a small number of White oligarchs, and the belief that this Constitution cannot be changed to suit the needs of a very different America from that of 1787 AD.

Above all, as already noted, both the power of the U.S. Senate and its internal rules (especially the filibuster) give

immense power to a minority in that body to block legislation. This not only frustrates the entire democratic process, it boosts the wasteful government spending which the Tea Parties and the Right say that they desire to reduce—because it helps give senators the ability to extract massive subsidies and benefits for their states in return for their votes.

The increasing radicalization of the Republican Party, and the retaliation it has provoked by the Democrats, has led to an immense expansion of the use of the filibuster. In the 1960s, around eight percent of bills were faced with a filibuster. In the 2,000s, it has been around seventy percent. This is not a recipe for the decline of progressive government; it is a recipe for the decline of effective government in general. Worship of the Constitution makes it even less likely that Tea Party—influenced Republicans will contemplate even small changes to the Senate's rules, let alone the Constitution in general.

Their refusal to do so is not, however, irrational from their own point of view. For any serious consideration of a change to the U.S. Senate is bound, sooner or later, to come to the conclusion that bad as they are, it is not the rules of the Senate that are the greatest barrier to the will of democratic majorities in America; it is the composition of the Senate.

The existing distribution of U.S. Senate seats is colossally weighted in favour of White conservatives. The rule that every state of the United States has two senate seats irrespective of population was framed at a time when the largest state (Virginia) had twelve times the population of the smallest (Delaware). As of 2012, the largest U.S. state, California, has more than seventy times the population of the smallest, Wyoming—but they both have two senators. Above all, this means that six western states with only three percent of the U.S. population have twelve senators between them and are thus in a position to block any legislation that displeases their mainly White conservative populations. This has already contributed enormously to blocking legislation on a range of issues which affect the populations of those states either emotionally or materially, from gun control to carbon taxing.

As long as the United States as a whole had an overwhelmingly White majority, the issue of disproportionate representation did not become couched in racial terms. This is very unlikely to remain the case, however, as the White proportion of the population declines. According to the projections of the U.S. Census Bureau, Whites will cease to be a majority (while remaining a plurality) sometime between 2040 and 2050. The proportion of Latinos meanwhile will have grown to almost a quarter of the U.S. population. Long before that, Latinos will be in a majority in conservative states like Texas and Arizona.

Even in times of growing economic prosperity, a shift on this scale would have been bound to cause tensions (especially when a sizeable proportion of the change is due to illegal immigration)—and the next three decades do not seem likely to be ones of growing prosperity for many less- educated Whites.

Of course, the White population of the USA does not constitute anything like a united bloc, and barely a quarter of them express support for the Tea Parties. The issue is not White power as such, but the disproportionate power which the makeup and rules of the Senate give to conservative Whites from a small number of states. The cultural-political divide among White voters can be almost drawn with a knife in parts of the US, for example in Oregon and Washington, where the liberal coast is sharply divided from the conservative, small-town and rural interior.

Nevertheless, certain trends with a partly racial aspect are already apparent. In 2008, Obama failed to gain a majority of the White vote, and was elected only because Blacks and Latinos turned out to vote in highly unusual numbers. As important as the "White" element is the "Grey" one. A large majority of older White voters cast their ballots against Obama, but he won a majority among younger Whites. In contrast to most previous elections, however, the Democratic vote was noticeably down among less educated Whites.

Barring complete economic collapse on the scale of 1929-32, for a long time to come older middle class voters will have a strong interest in keeping taxes low, resisting reform of Medicaid and social security, and also resisting state education and health programmes intended to help younger Americans. As a higher proportion of these younger Americans become non-White, it seems likely that more and more politics will be defined by a "Grey-Brown" divide, with parts of the existing Constitution as a cause of increasing resentment among "Browns" and a matter of fanatical attachment among "Greys".

The constitutional principle of states' rights has been used as a racial tool, in one way or another, for most of U.S. history. From the 1840s to the 1960s, this was the White South's principal tool and argument in trying to block first freedom and then civil rights for the Blacks. Indeed, the current Republican and Tea Party obsession with states' rights is one aspect of the much-remarked "southernisation" of the Republican Party since the 1960s.

In both the 1860s and the 1960s, however, White majorities in the United States as a whole eventually overcame Southern White resistance. In the future, there is a real risk that as a result of growing White middle class anxieties about economic, demographic, and national decline, a majority of White will come together in defence of an increasingly dysfunctional and unrepresentative constitution which is more and more obviously being used to defend White dominance at the expense of non-Whites. Such a development would mark the end of America's greatness and her democratic example to the world. In such circumstances, the wild rhetoric of the Right about resorting to arms in defence of the Constitution might also lead to something more than mere rhetoric.

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About the Author: Anatol Lieven is a professor in the War Studies Department of King's College London and a senior fellow of the New America Foundation in Washington DC. A new, updated edition of *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*, is republished this month by Oxford University Press.

WINTER IS COMING: ENGAGING WITH THE ARCTIC

by Matthew Ford

THE ARCTIC REGION is undergoing significant change. Not only is global warming fundamentally altering the existing nature of the ice cap but changes to sovereignty are being brought about by the third round of the United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Made famous by Artur Chilingarov's expedition to place a Russian flag on the Arctic seafloor, UNCLOS allows countries to create Exclusive Economic Zones 200 nautical miles beyond their coastline and lay claim to any contiguous continental shelf that extends from their land mass. With political uncertainty in the Middle East having forced hydrocarbon hungry nations to diversify their energy supply and Somali piracy costing around US\$7bn per annum, the possibilities found in the Arctic have become more financially viable and are now taking on global significance.

The opportunities are impressive. If the Northern or North West passage were to become sufficiently ice free then shipping distances between Shanghai and Rotterdam could be reduced by 22%. Similarly, with as much as 13% of the world's oil and 30% of the world's gas reserves, the region offers both a potential bonanza for the energy industry and another means of supply that is independent of more volatile parts of the globe.

Realising these possibilities is not straightforward. Apart from the difficulties that come from operating in the region, the three-month long Deepwater Horizon disaster stands as a testament to the ecological and environmental risks posed by oil extraction. The 13.1 million indigenous people living in the Arctic have traditionally been underrepresented in domestic politics.

Consequently issues associated with environmental protection have primarily been left to green NGOs who have worked hard to highlight the increased threat they see in the oil and gas industry.

Holding this volatile political mix of issues together has been the Arctic Council. The Council offers both the means for managing Arctic governance and the chance to coordinate the activities of the eight countries that exist inside the polar cap. Whereas WikiLeaks cables suggest deep political rifts exist between members scrambling for resources, it is also likely that the Council has informally helped in the process of mediating UNCLOS boundary disputes

By contrast, countries such as China increasingly seeking ways to assert their interests in the region have found the process of gaining observer status to the Council frustrating. In this respect, recent developments in Chinese-Norwegian relations may be indicative of future diplomatic sticking points. The suggestion that cyber attacks on the Nobel Organisation's website originated in China following the award of a Nobel Peace prize to Liu Xiaobo has underlined the strained nature of relations between the two countries and left Norway openly questioning whether the Chinese should be given observer status on the Council.

All that said, while boundary disputes are being successfully managed through diplomatic channels, conflict in the region is unlikely. However, this situation will only remain this way so long as the Arctic Council and its observer nations, including the United Kingdom, continue to develop and deepen existing cooperative arrangements. With costs associated with exploiting hydrocarbons set to compare with space exploration at around US\$250 to US\$400bn it is clear that for those corporations and countries geared up to support these efforts there is a great deal of potential wealth to be generated. For the UK, situated at the centre of a number of international networks including the insurance industry and with expertise in the Antarctic and North Sea oil exploration, the opportunity to shape and influence the future development of the Arctic should not be underestimated.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: A fully footnoted version of this essay is available online. URL: <http://www.currentintelligence.net/analysis/2012/8/29/engaging-with-the-arctic.html>



TAJIKISTAN: POWER AND THE AGA KHAN

by Faisal Devji ❖ OXFORD DIARY

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In the early morning of July 24th, without any warning, government troops were sent into Tajikistan's eastern province of Gorno-Badakhshan, apparently to deal with an armed group involved in the smuggling of narcotics, tobacco and even women to and from neighbouring Afghanistan. The immediate provocation for this large-scale mobilization was meant to be the killing of a security official by one of his subordinates, with both men alleged to be part of the murky dealings attributed to those who are posted on the Tajik-Afghan border. But the military incursion into the provincial capital of Khorog was not commensurate with this narrative, including as it did helicopter gunships, armoured vehicles, snipers and checkpoints posted across the town, effectively bringing life there to a halt. The province's road and communications links were also cut, thus isolating its entire population of some 250,000 in the series of interconnected valleys that make up this mountainous region.

Instead of cowing the people of Khorog, however, this deployment appears to have decided them upon resistance, and in the ensuing violence anywhere between 40 and 200 civilians as well as soldiers are said to have been killed. Taken aback by the tenacity of the opposition, the government is now engaged in negotiations with local notables and "civil society", though the violence apparently continues in a sporadic fashion. Insofar as it has picked up this story from a place invariably described as "remote", mainstream media in the West has only repeated some version of the Tajik government's line, about rooting out corruption and militancy on its border with Afghanistan. But the reality behind this easy stereotype is much more interesting. Indeed I will argue here that far from being yet another example of the difficult post-Soviet transition to democracy, this story is about the failure as much as the future of "global civil society".

Gorno-Badakhshan has been an autonomous province since Soviet times, and is home to a Shia Muslim subsect that forms the country's most significant religious minority. It was also one of the two regions of Tajikistan that supported the United Tajik Opposition, which stood against other regional elites who took power during the bloody civil war that followed the Soviet collapse in the early 1990s. Although much of the commentary on last month's events has been dominated by rumours of Islamic militancy among the rebels, Gorno-Badakhshan's community of Ismailis, as they are now known, is a group that keeps no mosques and practises few of the Islamic rituals common among their Sunni compatriots. Indeed the civil war relied more upon ethnic than religious distinctions, with the Ismailis' faith defined almost entirely by their ethnic identity as Pamiris, those who inhabit the valleys of the Pamir mountain range.

After taking more than 10,000 lives, the civil war finally

drew to a close in 1997, with an agreement brokered by outside parties, including Russia, the US and the UN, but the recent violence in Gorno-Badakhshan suggests that it has never in fact ended. For what the government has done is to breach the peace agreement by violating the province's autonomy and attempting to exert direct control over it. Of course any state would want to take complete possession of its national territory, especially if this happens to be an expansive border region occupied by a minority population. How, then, is it possible to reach a satisfactory agreement in this context, and why did the one that stopped the civil war in 1997 come apart in the meantime? This is where the story departs the familiar script of post-Soviet transition and becomes intriguingly global in character.

Cargo cult

One of the outside parties crucial in arranging for the agreement that paused, if it did not quite end the civil war in Gorno-Badakhshan, was a faith-based NGO headed from a suburb of Paris by the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the world's Ismailis. Cut off from his Pamiri followers during the 70 years of Soviet rule, the Aga Khan and his organization stepped to the fore in the 1990s, and, probably with both Russian and American support, made a ceasefire possible in the region without the direct intervention of any foreign government or international body like the UN. It was an extraordinary and even unprecedented achievement for a non-state actor, based abroad, to seal an agreement ending years of brutal violence. And though it was not publicized, probably in order to protect the Aga Khan from unwelcome questions and suspicion from rival Muslim groups, I can think of no other event that so clearly represents the claims of a so-called "global civil society" to address issues as intractable as a civil war.

In addition to reclaiming the allegiance of his Central Asian followers, many of whom didn't even know their Imam's name, the Aga Khan was able to deploy his NGO, which had already been active among a related population of Ismailis in the mountains of northern Pakistan for a couple of decades, to provide the Pamiris with much-needed food supplies, medical help and eventually educational, economic and other forms of development assistance. The consequences were practically miraculous, with thousands saved from certain starvation and death by the many specialized organizations that are all part of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Relying upon a community of wealthy Ismailis with origins in the Indian subcontinent, but now also scattered in Britain, Canada and the US, the Aga Khan was able to mobilize finances, expertise and manpower for his Pamiri following, to say nothing about the support of Western governments and development agencies, given his exemplary record as a social entrepreneur and pro-Western Muslim leader.

So much for the bright side of "global civil society", whose darker aspect I will now show is entailed in its very virtues. The agreement ending the civil war involved the Aga Khan asking his followers to disarm, in return for which their military commanders would be absorbed into the Tajik armed forces, as were both the officer killed last month and his alleged murderer. The AKDN would then set up relief and development projects not only in Gorno-Badakhshan but the rest of the country as well, and in addition raise funds and support for Tajikistan

internationally. This plan worked well for a few years, but once the government's rule had become more stable, and especially after 9/11, when its support in providing military bases and medical facilities was needed in the War on Terror, the AKDN was suddenly no longer indispensable. Of course this should have been evident from the beginning, since only a very weak or a very strong state would put up with such a situation, and Tajikistan is neither one nor the other.

Once the opposition had been persuaded to disarm, what hold did the AKDN have over the government to make it honour its promises? Apart from the local support that the rebel fighters had also enjoyed, it had nothing but some degree of influence abroad and what at the time of the agreement appeared to be a great deal of money. Like any NGO, in other words, the AKDN could only enforce the state's compliance by threatening to publicize its misdeeds, something that is highly unlikely in the circumstances, or to pay its way out of any difficulties. For as an international organization dependent on outside donors, and therefore not accountable to the people it serves in any representative fashion, the AKDN, unlike the opposition fighters of the past, is unable to act with popular backing. It cannot act politically and is forced to rely almost entirely upon the power of money and influence, which is to say on the secretive dealings of brokerage that, however useful, are anti-democratic in nature.

After 2001, therefore, Pamiris started noticing that the state was beginning to assert its control over their province, especially through the secret service that had once been part of the KGB. They also noticed, more worryingly, how President Rakhmon was no longer as deferential to the Aga Khan as he once had been, even referring to him disparagingly to the Imam's own followers in Gorno-Badakhshan. For Tajikistan is now full of Chinese goods and Indian funds, with the Russians and Americans bidding for military bases and influence, while a stream of money rolls in from the illicit trade in opium and tobacco. Gorno-Badakhshan is also rich in yet untapped mineral resources, which suggests that it might eventually become a battleground for corporate and political forces of all kinds to control. In the meantime a large proportion of the country's young men, who would have been unemployed at home, are working in illegal and often hazardous conditions in cities like Moscow, their remittances now accounting for more of Gorno-Badakhshan's income than the AKDN.

Delusions of development

And yet the AKDN is everywhere in the province, and possibly even its largest employer, creating the illusion of prosperity and the reality of increasing class hierarchies by its racially differentiated salaries in US dollars. For "locals" are paid in accordance with a "local economy" that has been so distorted by the NGO as not in fact to exist. Khorog's highly-paid Ismaili and other expatriates, after all, are keeping this fake economy alive by paying rent for houses and retaining the services of local drivers, cooks, secretaries and the like. The consequence is an utterly illusory world sustained entirely from without, but sucking in the best Pamiri minds and talent. Despite all the imaginative projects launched, like building a university of international stature, the general economic situation is completely

unsustainable, though it does, of course, keep many Pamiri men and women employed, and offers a number of others remarkable opportunities to work or study abroad.

In effect, Khorog has become a smaller version of post-conflict cities like Sarajevo or Ramallah, that are made into models of cosmopolitan life by infusions of cash from abroad. But this money ends up transforming many local people into the dependents of global networks, while leaving others stranded in a completely shadow "local" economy. And as in Ramallah or Sarajevo, what this does is simply to defer violence and poverty for all but a few. The very benefits brought by "global civil society", then, turn into problems, and nowhere more so than in political life, where the wealth and unelected power of an NGO like the AKDN allows it to subvert an admittedly corrupt political system, but at the same time to destroy the collective will and action of ordinary people. For when an autocratic state deals with an unaccountable organization, both speaking in the name of such people without ever consulting them, democracy must be the first casualty.

The violence unleashed upon Khorog in July demonstrates how fragile and, in fact, unreal the NGO vision is, for the only thing that has given the government pause and forced it to negotiate are the old resistance fighters supported by ordinary people. Among the hasty and surreptitious communications I have been receiving from a Khorog under siege is an account of its first couple of days that speaks about the re-emergence of a truly political will and practice among the townspeople. Initially fearful and overawed by the APCs, troops, circling helicopters and snipers, these civilians were suddenly inspired by news that one of the armoured vehicles had been attacked and destroyed. What they did next was organize local councils to decide on a course of action, felled poplar trees lining the main street to prevent military vehicles from moving freely along it, and demonstrated in front of government buildings. Pamiris living abroad as students, interns or migrants have also been instrumental in attempting to publicize the military incursion by demonstrating in cities like Moscow and New York while circulating demands for a cessation of hostilities.

These democratic and collective actions would not have been possible within the framework of an NGO like the AKDN, which, relying as it does on secretive deal-making, has remained conspicuously silent about conditions in Gorno-Badakhshan. They illustrate that the only way of reaching a genuine agreement with the government is by participating in the political process and relying upon one's own strength. For by organizing themselves people possess a collective power that no NGO does, depending as these do on money and influence alone. This is why the state might prefer to deal with the AKDN, which helps to pacify Pamiris both by disarming and speaking for them, without any threat more powerful than money in its arsenal. And so the latest news I have from Khorog is that the security officer wanted for his superior's murder has surrendered his arms, supposedly at the Aga Khan's behest, and that the government is negotiating with a body of doubtlessly sincere and concerned Pamiris, as well as some of the AKDN organizations, but nobody from the local councils I have described. Will we see a repetition of the initial civil war agreement? And will this new agreement have any more force behind it than the old?

All its good works and intentions apart, the AKDN very likely adds to the troubles of Gorno-Badakhshan's residents by continuing to speak for them long after the civil war formally ended, with the Aga Khan's representative in Tajikistan, invariably an Ismaili of Indo-Pakistani origin, serving as the paymaster of a vast network of clients, which is how power is bought and sold in the NGO sector. Indeed it is sometimes difficult to see what the real difference is between this exercise of power and the autocratic state's reliance on very similar kinds of clients. Moreover there are now rumours emerging from Afghanistan, retailed by two members of parliament with constituencies abutting Gorno-Badakhshan, that its own Ismailis, along with those of Tajikistan and northern Pakistan, are plotting with support from the West to set up their own state in these roughly contiguous areas. This dangerous myth, which is meant to inspire sectarian hatred among their neighbours, has been doing the rounds in a Pakistan wracked by sectarian strife for years now, which is only natural given the fact that Pakistan was itself created in this way, by carving out Muslim territories from India. But surely its dissemination across Central Asia is an inadvertent by-product of the AKDN's "global" character and presence in all three countries.

The local politics that "global civil society" dislikes and distrusts so much is the only thing that is capable of setting and keeping a people free. Whatever the result of the current negotiations, it would be an act of the greatest folly for the people of Gorno-Badakhshan to return to the bubble of an NGO-led society. The AKDN has played an important and positive role in the region, but perpetuating itself there by the constant reproduction of expatriate life, as it has done for well over a decade now, is only a way of risking the diminution of its own legacy. After all its expatriates, including the foreign Ismailis there to "serve" their Pamiri "brothers and sisters", are the first to leave at any sign of trouble, as they did last month, and not for the first time, by way of a "special corridor". Yet the

continued presence of British, Canadian or American citizens in Khorog at such times might well do much to deter the Tajik state. And in the meantime there are unconfirmed reports that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan has offered to support the Pamiri resistance, thus indicating that the exit of one kind of international actor opens the door for the entry of another.

Of course Pamiris are unlikely to accept the questionable and dangerous support of an Islamist party, but do they realize that the AKDN plays, in its own way, a similar destabilizing role in Gorno-Badakhshan's local politics? Neither "global civil society", nor the "frontierless brotherhood" of Ismailism that mimics it, can be allowed to define or rather stifle this local politics. The AKDN should be made fully Tajik in character, and give way to elected representatives of the people in any negotiations with the state. As I write, government forces are murdering ex-opposition commanders (including a paraplegic) and civilian demonstrators one by one to avoid any outcry, and rumours are swirling around the capital, Dushanbe, that Pamiris there will be subjected to the kind of large-scale torture and killing they had experienced there during the civil war. Not so long ago a lavish Ismaili Centre had been opened amid much fanfare in the same city, by an Ismaili leadership that was clearly oblivious to the continuing threat that faced their people. They had been fooled by their own propaganda about "global civil society" and were unable to recognize that it must collapse like a pack of cards without real political backing. Will the current crisis afford an opportunity for a newly democratic politics to emerge from the local councils set up during it, or is Gorno-Badakhshan to remain the victim of "global civil society" forever?

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CHINA TENSIONS

by Kit Dawney ❖ CHINA DISPATCH

The institutionalisation of ties between Beijing and Washington has stabilised relations between the two powers. Indeed, recent disputes, involving human rights activist Chen Guangcheng and the South China Sea, have demonstrated their strength.

The corollary to this success, though, is that a change of government could unsettle relations. From October 2012 to March 2013, a new administration will take office in Beijing, presenting two particular challenges. The first is establishing who in the entwined party and state apparatus has greatest clout; hence, Dai Bingguo, state councillor, carries more weight than does foreign minister Yang Jiechi. The second challenge is the staggered transition, with changes formalised at the Eighteenth Party Congress in October, but with the State Council continuing work until the March 2013 establishment of a new government.

These changes come amidst rising tensions. Friction derives in part from the US Pacific rebalancing. The

trading relationship between the US and China and US fiscal constraints may preclude any containment strategy, but perceptions can affect relations. More narrowly, tensions are also rising in relation to two territorial disputes.

The first of these is a dispute between China and Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Japan's Noda government expressed support for the purchase of three disputed islets on 6 July. Three Chinese fisheries enforcement vessels then entered contested waters on 11 July, and Chinese activists travelled to the islands in August. The Japanese ambassador to Beijing, Uichiro Niwa, criticised the plan, but Noda seems intent on shoring up popularity ahead of elections. So ties with Japan may sour.

The second is the dispute in the South China Sea, which continues to escalate. The Philippines and Vietnam are taking a more assertive line towards Chinese encroachments, by establishing new administrative boundaries and a garrison in the sea. Divisions within the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are sharpening. The organisation failed to agree a final communique in Phnom Penh in

late July; current president, Cambodia, refused to mention the dispute. The US and China also engaged in August in an unusually public disagreement over the sea.

The leadership transition in Beijing may contribute to tensions. After all, appetite for moderation in Beijing appears weak, perhaps deriving from a growing People's Liberation Army role in policy making, perhaps from the US rebalancing, or perhaps from Beijing's desires to play up nationalist issues as it changes leadership. A rise in tensions in the months ahead thus seems likely.

It is not clear, though, how tensions will affect Asia. The most direct consequences may derive from Beijing's willingness to rely on economic coercion. China imposed tougher inspections on imports of Philippine fruit, such as bananas, ostensibly for mealy bug infestation, but perhaps in response to the Scarborough Shoal incident (although concerns predate the stand-off). Similarly, China limited rare earths exports to Japan after a 2010 dispute. Beijing also used its economic sway over Cambodia to influence the ASEAN communique.

Tensions, then, could lead to trade diversion. The Philippines' President Aquino has called on banana growers to find new markets. Japan also introduced policies on the recycling of rare earths. Furthermore, the 2005 anti-Japanese riots in China encouraged Japanese investment in Vietnam rather than China. The opportunity costs are hard to calculate, but may be significant.

A further consequence may be that the ASEAN split retards the birth of a regional community. The 2015 date for its establishment already appeared optimistic,

given members' differences, the weakness of the next presidencies – Cambodia, Brunei and then Laos or Burma – and protectionist sentiment in Indonesia. With the US and China stoking division, though, consensus may prove harder to secure.

Yet it is too easy to play up risks. After all, the region's strange combination of cooperative economics and nationalist jealousy has not yet slowed growth. Relations between China and Japan, for instance, worsened between 2001 and 2006, thanks to visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by Japan's then-prime minister, Yunichiro Koizumi. That period, though, also saw China become Japan's most important trading partner (in 2004). Furthermore, ASEAN has previously proven adept at resolving differences.

Current signs of tensions affecting business are also scant. The Lloyds insurance market in London, specifically through its Joint War Committee, has shown few concerns about tensions. A brief glance at the committee's lists shows locations in South East Asia designated as concerns, but does not mention the broader South China Sea.

The risk of new administrations misunderstanding one another is real, though. Much depends on the relationships between Xi Jinping's new government and its counterparties. Investors should thus be wary of assuming that commerce will continue unaffected. At some stage, frictions may reach a tipping point.

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OLYMPIC NATIONALISM

by *Stephen Saideman* ❖ XENOPHILE

Given that my column here is entitled 'Xenophile', it is probably rather strange that I have not posted on nationalism in quite some time. Perhaps because nationalism is no longer relevant? As the recently concluded London Olympics reminded us, nationalism is still very much a force that shapes how people view the world around them. The are three keys to keep in mind:

- **All politics is local:** nationalism trumps supra-nationalism any day since the people inside boundaries tend to be the ones who select leaders and these people tend to be self-centered. That is they are more concerned about their own plight than that of those elsewhere.
- **Nationalisms are more complex than usually asserted:** it is not just about who is more or less nationalist or even the difference between ethnic and civil nationalisms but which elements of a nationalist identity are getting more attention, that are more

salient. The battles are often not over who is a nationalist but which elements of the nationalism should be most important.

- **Symbolic politics is still politics:** politicians will compete over largely symbolic issues, but those stances matter both to voters or other selectors (the military) and many will have real impacts on people's lives.

So, with those three guidelines in mind, let's consider Olympic nationalism where the irony is that the Games are supposed to bring countries together even as it fosters more rivalry and competition among them. Just before the games started, Mitt Romney was generous enough to give the folks of Great Britain cause to unite. His concerns about the adequacy of the preparation served as glue among the folks who had recently been the least united. The Scots are pursuing a separatist referendum, London burned just a year ago, and austerity measures are creating much conflict. But all it took was for one American presidential candidate to appear to insult the British to inspire a common reaction. Nationalism is very much about us versus them, the 'us' and 'them' changing depending on

context – in this case, Romney's 'them' solidifying the population of 'us' (the 'British'). That the games went very, very well according to nearly everyone meant that such 'us-ness' may last a little while longer.

The second reminder that the Games and Nationalism go together like track and field was the order of the contingents in the opening ceremonies. Macedonia came into the stadium among the 'F' countries like Fiji and France rather than among the 'M' countries like Mali. Are they bad spellers? No. Greece has continued to triumph in international by insisting that Macedonia can only join under the name of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (or 'FYROM'). Yes, this farce continues twenty years after Yugoslavia's demise. It does make perfect sense, however, to scholars of nationalism. In short, it is hard not to be a hardliner on the name issue in Greece, since it is easy for politicians to accuse each other of being bad Greeks if they accommodate Macedonia at all. It is similar to, but more destructive than, the flag pins that American political candidates must wear on their lapels to show that they are good, patriotic Americans. The only real benefit is to those who actually manufacture the pins (China?). Greece's hostility to Macedonia, on the other hand, has had real consequences.

Nationalism also comes into play when we want to suspect enhanced performance. It should be no surprise that a 16 year-old Chinese girl would face much more suspicion when she swam faster than one might expect of someone of such tender years. China is not too popular these days, especially in the US. Michael Phelps did not face such criticism at home either when he won his first medals at a similar age - or for other reasons (possibly due to the fact that marijuana has never been seen as performance enhancing for swimmers).

The semifinal game for the Women's football (soccer) between the US and Canada gave Canadians ample opportunity to fall back on the undercurrent of anti-Americanism that unites Canadians. Given the similarities between Americans and Canadians, the latter must continually remind themselves of their differences. That the US did benefit from some very fortunate calls allowed the Canadians to raise the possibility of a fix.

As an American, I am biased in all of this. I tend to see that we are not the White Hats at these games and in the world, but rather the bullies who dominate everywhere but in/with China. The US is hardly unique in this, as all nationalisms are part of social process to positive self-identification.. As Donald Horowitz argued thirty years ago, these nationalisms are a product of competitive self-esteem—that we feel better about ourselves when our group is elevated, even if that elevation is more perceived than real.. The Olympics make this abundantly clear (at least to cynical political scientists). Athletic competitions in the pool, on the track, in the gym, on the field, on the water and everywhere else nicely mirror the competitions between and among nations witnessed daily in international affairs.

The outlier in all of this was the participation of four individuals who were essentially state-less but allowed to participate anyway, appearing in the Opening Ceremonies as as the 'Independents'. Since they did not actually win any medals, what we might learn from them is that those without identities (or at least, without traditional identities and the social and material support that these imply) are doomed to failure. This goes back to the basics of social identity theory. We identify and form groups because those who don't compete poorly against those who do. The tendency to form groups was and remains a key ingredient of fitness in any situation where only the fit survive.

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About the Author: Stephen Saideman holds the Paterson Chair in International Affairs at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA), Carleton University. His publications include three books: *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy and International Conflict*; *For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism and War* (with R. William Ayres); and *Intra-State Conflict, Governments and Security* (with Marie-Joelle Zahar). He spent 2001-2002 on the U.S. Joint Staff working in the Strategic Planning and Policy Directorate as part of a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship.

IN THE MEDIA

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. The venerable magazine's online 'News Channel' published a short report on maritime piracy in West Africa, in which it sourced an essay published earlier this year in *Current Intelligence*. Writer Dan Klotz, arguing that there is strong evidence of a connection between overfishing and increased acts of piracy, noted that 'A few years ago a scientific survey was released that mapped out where fisheries were being depleted around the world. This was about the same time that pirates from Somalia achieved a large degree of prominence by seizing a cargo ship full of tanks, with news reports bemoaning how global shipping lanes brought cargo ships close by a country with unemployed men and no rule of law to keep them in check.' Seeing a similar pattern of developments in West Africa, Klotz asked colleagues whether they thought the region could become 'the next piracy hotspot', a point highlighted by Dr. Jessica Lincoln in her essay, 'Thinking Globally: Countering Piracy in West

Africa', published in the Spring 2012 issue of *Current Intelligence*.

NatGeo: <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2012/09/06/pondering-the-piracy-and-overfishing-link/>

RADIO FREE EUROPE. Picking up on Faisal Devji's essay in this issue on the Aga Khan, power and politics in Tajikistan (originally titled "Politics Dies in the Pamirs"), RFE/RL correspondent Zach Peterson spoke to Devji via Skype. Their discussion elaborates on points raised in the original essay. The interview was video-recorded, and posted to the RFE/RL site and to YouTube.

RFE/RL: <http://www.rferl.org/content/transmission-deep-dive-tajikistan-aga-khan/24700508.html>

YouTube: <http://youtu.be/d1qcJQt2aWM>