Reflections on the Partitions of India and Palestine after 70 years

A Full Day Workshop Jointly Organized by Middle East Institute (MEI) Transsystemic Law Research Cluster and Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS)

ASEF Conference Room | Asia-Europe Foundation
31 Heng Mui Keng Terrace | Singapore 119595
Workshop Statement

Despite the similarities between the partitions of British India and Mandate Palestine, there have been few comparative studies. This is surprising as partition was raised as a possible solution to the dispute in Palestine as early as 1937. In 1947, both Indian and Pakistani diplomats took leading roles in debates at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on the Partition Plan for Palestine, arguing in favour of a federal scheme that the Indian National Congress had rejected in India. Just over three months after the partition of British India on 15 August 1947, the UNGA voted by a slim majority to partition Palestine. The United Kingdom abstained, while India and Pakistan voted against the Plan.

The UN Partition Plan for Palestine, adopted by the UNGA on 29 November 1947, was frustrated by the outbreak of war between Israel and the Arab states in 1948. Yet, despite that war, and the numerous conflicts between Israel and the Palestinians since then, the UN Partition Plan continues to be cited in UN debates to this day. Indeed, the two-state solution is, in many ways, a truncated form of partition. In contrast, the partition of British India has consistently been viewed in a more critical light, especially in India.

This workshop, one of the first of its kind, will provide opportunities for scholars to break out of the mold of looking at the partitions of the Middle East and South Asia individually, and to look at the bigger picture and the tapestries that link them. What do these pivotal moments tell us about the state of international relations in this period, and about partition more generally? Rather than thinking of partition as a uniquely South Asian, Palestinian Arab, Jewish or British phenomenon, we argue it is necessary to look at partition holistically and at the political leaderships, ideologies, laws, and institutions that connect them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08.30am</td>
<td>Registration and Refreshments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.00am</td>
<td>Welcome Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.00am</td>
<td><strong>Mr Bilahari Kausikan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.00am</td>
<td>Chairman, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.10am</td>
<td>Introductory Remarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.10am</td>
<td><strong>Professor C Raja Mohan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.10am</td>
<td>Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.20am</td>
<td>Introductory Lecture: What is Partition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.20am</td>
<td><strong>Dr Victor Kattan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.20am</td>
<td>Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09.50am</td>
<td>Photo Taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td>Panel Discussion One: The Partition of British India (August 1947)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td><strong>Chairperson</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td><strong>Dr Gyanesh Kudaisya</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td>Associate Professor of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td><strong>Panellists</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td><em>The Mountbatten Viceroyalty Revisited: Personality, Prestige and Strategic Vision in the Partition of India</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td><strong>Professor Ian Talbot</strong></td>
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<td>10.00am</td>
<td>Professor of Modern British History, University of Southampton, United Kingdom</td>
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<td>10.00am</td>
<td><em>The Paradigmatic Partition? The Pakistan Demand Revisited</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td><strong>Professor Ayesha Jalal</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00am</td>
<td>Mary Richardson Professor of History, Tufts University, United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00am</td>
<td>Question and Answer Session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.30am</td>
<td>Break</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Workshop Schedule

11.45am  Panel Discussion Two:
The Partition of Mandate Palestine (November 1947)

 **Chairperson**
Dr Victor Kattan  
Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute,  
National University of Singapore

 **Panellists**
* A Lasting Imprint: The Peel Commission and Postwar Partition Planning  
Professor Penny Sinanoglou  
Assistant Professor of History, Wake Forest University,  
United States

* Partition and the Question of International Governance: The 1947 United Nations Special Committee on Palestine  
Professor Laura Robson  
Associate Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History, Portland State University,  
United States

 **Question and Answer Session**

01.15pm  Lunch

02.15pm  Panel Discussion Three:
The Partitions of India and Palestine compared

 **Chairperson**
Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury  
Principal Research Fellow, Institute of South Asian Studies,  
National University of Singapore

 **Panellists**
* Whispers, Rumours and Footnotes: Connecting the Partitions of Palestine and India  
Professor Amrita Shodhan  
Senior Teaching Fellow, University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies,  
United Kingdom

* India's Dilemma of Pragmatism vs. Principles: Nehru’s Preference for a Partitioned India but a Federal Palestine  
Professor P R Kumarsawamy  
Professor at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University,  
New Delhi, India

 **Question and Answer Session**

03.45pm  Tea Break
Workshop Schedule

04.00pm  **Panel Discussion Four: Consequences of Partition for South Asia, the Middle East and Beyond**

**Chairperson**  
Dr James M Dorsey  
Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

**Panellists**  
*Partitioned Identities? Caste, Religion and Linguistic Identity in Post-1947 Indian and Pakistani Punjab*  
Dr Iqbal Singh Sevea  
Visiting Research Associate Professor, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore

*The Partition of Palestine of 1947 in Islamist Eyes: Explaining the Specific Place of Palestine in Islamic Mobilizations and Narratives*  
Dr Mohamed-Ali Adraoui  
Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellow, Georgetown University School of Foreign Service, United States

**Question and Answer Session**

05.30pm  **Closing Remarks**  
Dr Victor Kattan  
Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

05.45pm  **End of Workshop**
What is Partition?

There have been so few collective works examining partitions that one might be forgiven for thinking that the subject one is studying is a phantom. The problem has been compounded by the lack of an agreed understanding of partition, either in the social sciences or humanities. One way of thinking about partition is to use the technique of an international lawyer and to look at the common features that apply to all cases of partition. In other words, to look at the diplomatic practice. From this practice, we can see that partition is a form of statecraft: a policy that leads to the division of territory to preserve order in world affairs amongst great powers.

Accordingly, partition is an imperial phenomenon: an expression of power and the ability to project that power in rearranging the cartography of the world. But partition also presupposes the existence of a subject that is being divided; a community, a nation, a people, who claim ownership of territory. This is why partition is frequently invoked as a pejorative by communities that are being divided without their consent. While Ireland, India, and Palestine are the paradigm cases of partition, and have been the subject of much study, they were not unique. In fact, it could be argued that the excessive focus on those cases may have distorted our understanding of partition, which was a much broader phenomenon, if we care to look.

Victor Kattan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is also an Associate Fellow at NUS Law. Victor has published widely in his field and is the author of numerous articles in international law journals and the author of two books: From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1891 - 1949 (Pluto 2009) and The Palestine Question in International Law (BIICL 2008).

Victor has taught courses at Yale-NUS College, NUS Law, and the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy at the University of London’s School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). In 2012, Victor was awarded his PhD from SOAS on the subject of partition. In 2017, Victor was announced the winner of the Asian Society of International Law Younger Scholar Prize. He writes regularly for newspapers and is an occasional contributor to Haaretz, the longest running print newspaper in Israel.
The Mountbatten Viceroyalty Revisited: Personality, Prestige and Strategic Vision in the Partition of India

Seventy years later, controversies continue to swirl around the Mountbatten Viceroyalty. At their core are the claims that the final British Viceroy both constantly favoured Congress interests during the negotiations that led to India’s Independence and Partition and that he recklessly accelerated the British withdrawal. More concerned with pomp and circumstance than practical planning, critics claim that he created the conditions for the large scale massacres, migrations and Indo-Pakistan hostility that still scar the Subcontinent. Mountbatten’s exaggeration of his role in the Transfer of Power in later life strengthened such criticisms.

This paper approaches the British decision to Partition India from a wider policy perspective, whilst not ignoring Mountbatten’s personal role at this crucial moment in South Asian history. It argues that Partition was firstly a pragmatic response to pressures from below arising from anti-colonialism and communalism in the Subcontinent. Secondly, it was part of a wider reassessment of how to maintain British informal influence and prestige in a context of diminished economic and military resources, but continuing imperial commitments. This policy shift grasped the need to adjust Britain’s role in the post-war world and represented an attempt to bring a ‘Commonwealth moment’ to decolonisation in the Subcontinent.

Ian Talbot is Professor of Modern British History at the University of Southampton. His publications include A History of Modern South Asia (Yale University Press); The Partition of India (Cambridge University Press) (co-authored with Gurharpal Singh) and Divided Cities: Partition and its Aftermath in Lahore and Amritsar which was published in 2006 with Oxford University Press. He is currently working on a history of the UK High Commission in Pakistan (1947-2008).
More than seventy years after its cataclysmic enactment, the partition of India continues to loom large on the subcontinent’s political horizon, scarring relations between as well as within the nation-states of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. More than just an event, partition is an ongoing process with neither end nor beginning that continues to structure the post-colonial South Asian experience. An institutionalized form of dividing and disconnecting, partition has been the founding myth of post-colonial nation-states and ferrets out people, communities, and linguistic cultures that were once historically indivisible. If there are multiple slippages, elisions, and contestations in narratives about the great divide that occurred seventy years ago, there are strange silences about its constant reenactments in the post-colonial nation-states of South Asia.

This paper will revisit the demand for Pakistan, as envisaged by the All-India Muslim League and its leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and point to the multiple elisions and distortions in interpretations that have crept into the contending state narratives of India and Pakistan. More than three decades ago, I had shown that Jinnah's aims had been different from the final outcome of 1947. A more balanced understanding of the historical dynamics in the final decades of the British raj not only points to alternative conceptions of sharing power, but also dramatically different ways of dealing with its effects on politics and everyday life in the South Asian subcontinent. This paper will highlight the major shifts in the historiography of the partition of India while offering some comparative remarks about the partitions of Ireland and Palestine.


Ayesha Jalal

Mary Richardson
Professor of History,
Tufts University,
United States
The Peel Commission, a royal commission sent to Palestine in the immediate wake of the Arab uprising that began in 1936, is famous for having authored the first official British partition proposal in 1937. Equally famous, perhaps, is the fact that the Peel Commission’s partition plan was soon abandoned by a British government seeking to pacify Palestine, and indeed the wider Middle East, on the eve of World War II. This paper argues, however, that the Peel Commission had a lasting effect on partition planning that stretched well beyond the demise of its 1937 plan. Tracing cartographic, demographic, financial and political ideas and practices from interwar British Palestine to postwar India and Palestine, this paper demonstrates the many ways in which key personnel and concepts from the Peel Commission helped to shape plans for and debates over partition in the postwar period.

Penny Sinanoglou is an assistant professor of history at Wake Forest University. She received her PhD in History from Harvard University, and her BA in History and Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University. She has published on British partition planning for Palestine in The Historical Journal and edited volumes, and has recently finished a monograph entitled Partitioning Palestine: British Policymaking at the End of Empire. Sinanoglou is broadly interested in the intersections between British imperial power and international systems of oversight and governance; the role of ethnic, religious and national identity in imperial politics; and the changing legal statuses of imperial subjects in the colonial and postcolonial eras. She is currently writing a legal history of marriage in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century British empire.
From its beginning, the modern state of Palestine served as a central venue for experiments in new forms of internationalism. In creating Palestine not only as a mandate territory, but also as a designated space for an externally sanctioned and supported European settler colonialism, the League of Nations was ensuring its own relevance: its members anticipated that the project of creating and defending a Jewish “national home” in Palestine would cement the League’s importance as a mediator and facilitator of Middle Eastern territory for the foreseeable future. This Palestinian role would become even more apparent in 1947, when the newly constituted United Nations (UN) seized on the idea of taking over the defunct League’s role as a political puppet-master over Palestine. The task of deciding what would happen to Palestine following the British withdrawal offered the UN – a new institution uncertain about how to define itself or understand its own purpose – the opportunity to cast itself in a central role in the making and maintaining of a regional postwar order across the Middle East.

The split commission of 1947 whose majority report recommended the partition of Palestine was divided not only on the fate of Palestine itself, but also on the role the UN would play in the postwar world. The proposal for a federated unitary state – supported, notably, by the commission’s India representative and prepared by the subcommittee’s Pakistani chair – represented not only an alternative vision for the future of Palestine, but also a different and more limited vision of the state-making capacities of the newly formed UN. This paper looks at Palestine as a locus of arguments about internationalism, sovereignty, and external governance, arguing that the UN’s decision for partition in 1947 represented a step towards a more interventionist state-building strategy for the “Third World” whose ramifications would go well beyond Palestine itself.

Laura Robson (PhD Yale, 2009) is Associate Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at Portland State University. Her most recent book, States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East (University of California Press, 2017) explores the history of forced migration, population exchanges, and refugee resettlement in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine during the interwar period. She is also the author of Colonialism and Christianity in Mandate Palestine (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) and editor of Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives.
Speakers

Panel 3

Whispers, Rumours and Footnotes: Connecting the Partitions of Palestine and India

This paper looks at the real connections in personnel, policies and ontologies between the two locations – Mandate Palestine and British India. It examines connections starting with the years of the Great War and the demand for self-determination, through the various governance options that developed under the League of Nations, as well as the ideas of representation initiated in the two places, through regional partitions and discussions at the Round Table, Oxford, to the laws and practices of the Government of India Acts, the Peel Commission Reports and the various laws and ordinances enacted to effect a legal if not orderly living together in the two places of Mandate Palestine and British India. The paper is an attempt to bring together the evidence in whispers, rumours, footnotes and broad analytical discussions in recent research to see whether and/or how we can make sense of the connections between the two places. Can these connections give us a new perspective or a new agenda to make sense of the partitions that occupy these places?

Amrita Shodhan

Amrita Shodhan is a Senior Teaching Fellow (on Leave), SOAS, University of London. She will be a visiting lecturer at Chinese University of Hong Kong from 2018-19. She is interested in colonialism, nationalism, patriarchy, religion examined through the legal and juridical processes in South Asia. Her interest in partition stems for her concern for the transformation in religious and legal structures under common law frameworks in South Asia. Amrita is the author of A Question of Community (Kolkata: Samya, 2001)
Partition and federation were former Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s preferred options for India and Palestine respectively and having achieved independence through a partition, Nehru was urging the Arabs and Jews of Palestine to live under one roof through accommodation and cooperation. The Federal Plan is not only a sign of Indian naivety, but also a reflection of its hypocrisy; its political pragmatism was confined to the subcontinent but moral eloquence elsewhere. Therein lays the irony of Nehru’s contradictory positions vis-à-vis the two partitions!

Professor P R Kumaraswamy teaches contemporary Middle East at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and is the author of India’s Israel Policy (Columbia University Press, 2010) and Squaring the Circle: Mahatma Gandhi and the Jewish National Home (New Delhi, ICWA and KW, 2018). He is also the Honorary Director of Middle East Institute, New Delhi (www.mei.org.in).

From the conflict in Kashmir and international disputes over water resources to conflicting claims over historical figures, the partition of India continues to impact states in South Asia in numerous ways. This paper focuses upon how social identities in Punjab, which was partitioned between India and Pakistan, were and continue to be influenced by or demonstrate resistance to the events of 1947. Instead of assuming the fixity of the subjects being historically analyzed, this paper will explore how identities have themselves been impacted upon both by the varied and complex retellings of the trauma of the partition. While drawing upon census reports, religious publications and official historiography, the paper will focus specifically upon how folklore and Punjabi cinema reflect complex shifts in (and resistance to) post-partition realities.

It will study the multiple representations of two rebellious figures – Dulla Bhatti and Maula Jatt. Dulla Bhatti is a 16th century rebel celebrated for his resistance against the Mughal emperor, Akbar. Though tales of Dulla Bhatti continue to be sung in India and Pakistan, post-1947 realities are reflected in the retellings. For instance, in some versions, Dulla Bhatti is a Sikh resisting Muslim oppression. In others, he is an orthodox Muslim resisting Akbar’s irreligious empire. Yet, in others, he is the paradigm of Punjabi regional and Rajput caste pride resisting the centralizing attempts of the foreign power – that is the Mughals. Maula Jatt is an extremely popular cinematic rebel who has featured in numerous Pakistani Punjabi films. Films featuring Maula Jatt are largely centered around caste and regional pride, and often demonstrate a rejection of state and religious institutions. By examining the multiple retellings of the adventures of these two figures, this paper will demonstrate how regional (Punjabi), linguistic (Shahmukhi, Gurmukhi and Urdu), religious and caste identities were (and continue to be) recast by and resist the events of 1947.

Iqbal Singh Sevea is an Associate Professor of History at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Visiting Research Associate Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore. He is interested in the socio-cultural, political and intellectual histories of modern South Asia. His publications include, The Political Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal: Islam and Nationalism in Late Colonial India (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Islamic Political Thought in Modern South Asia (forthcoming: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Current research projects concern, among other things, humor and Islam in South Asia; popular culture in Pakistan; and the role of the Mirasis, a caste of performers and musicians, in the oral transmission of religious ballads, stories, and genealogies in Punjab.
The Partition of Palestine of 1947 in Islamist Eyes: Explaining the Specific Place of Palestine in Islamic Mobilizations and Narratives

The paper addresses the issue of how Islamists reacted to the partition of Palestine in 1947. Using official archives from that period, I show that the Palestinian cause was, from the very beginning, a core question within Islamist circles (and beyond), not only leading to the ‘Islamization’ of Palestine, but also reinforcing for many decades since then both Islamist mobilizations and narratives.

The paper will particularly highlight the debates, demonstrations, speeches and political actions undertaken by Islamist forces (with a specific focus on Egyptian, Syrian as well as Jordanian cases) that encountered the official birth of the state of Israel which was seen as alien in the region.

I will explore the foundations and the connections between Islamist actors undertaking to put an end to the partition plan, and the official installation of Israel in the Middle East. I will also look at the words and expressions used to describe the partition and how it was religiously and politically framed; Was it a rupture with the non-Islamist ways of reacting to the partition? Finally, in the aftermath of partition, how have Islamists used the turmoil in the Middle East to promote their role as the true defenders of Islam as well as of an ‘amputated’ Umma?

Dr Mohamed-Ali Adraoui is currently a Marie Sklodowska Curie Fellow at Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. His ongoing research deals with the history of US policy towards the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Formerly a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute as well as a Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore, he holds a PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris for his work on contemporary Salafism. He has published and edited a volume on the foreign policies of the Islamist parties (Edinburgh/Oxford University Press, 2018) and published an article focusing on how the issue of borders and sovereignty has been historically framed in Islamist and Jihadist thought in International Affairs (2017).
Mr Bilahari Kausikan is currently Chairman of the Middle East Institute, an autonomous institute of the National University of Singapore. From 2001 to 2013, Mr Kausikan was first the second Permanent Secretary and then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He was subsequently Ambassador-at-Large until May 2018. He had previously served in a variety of appointments in the Ministry, including as the Deputy Secretary for Southeast Asia, the Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and as Ambassador to the Russian Federation. Raffles Institution, the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York all attempted to educate Mr Kausikan.

Professor C Raja Mohan is Director, Institute of South Asian Studies. Earlier, Professor Mohan was Professor of South Asian Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Professor Mohan was the Henry Alfred Kissinger Chair in International Affairs at the United States Library of Congress, Washington DC, from 2009 to 2010. He served on India’s National Security Advisory Board. He led the Indian Chapter of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs from 1999 to 2006.

Professor Mohan is one of India’s leading commentators on India’s foreign policy. He writes a regular column for the Indian Express and was earlier the Strategic Affairs Editor for the Hindu newspaper, Chennai. He is on the editorial boards of a number of Indian and international journals on world politics. Professor Mohan has a Master’s degree in nuclear physics and a PhD in international relations. Among his recent books are Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific (2013) and Modi’s World: Expanding India’s Sphere of Influence (2015).
Dr Gyanesh Kudaisya
Associate Professor of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore

Gyanesh Kudaisya is Associate Professor of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore. He has held visiting research appointments at the Asia Research Institute and the Research School of Pacific & Asian Studies at ANU. He is the author (with Tai Yong Tan) of *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, (Routledge Series in the History of Modern Asia 3) New York & London, Routledge, October 2000, hardback edition & paperback edition February 2002; and *Partition and Post-Colonial South Asia* London, Routledge, 2008, in 3 volumes.

Dr Victor Kattan
Senior Research Fellow, Middle East Institute
National University of Singapore

Victor Kattan is a Senior Research Fellow at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He is also an Associate Fellow at NUS Law. Victor has published widely in his field and is the author of numerous articles in international law journals and the author of two books: *From Coexistence to Conquest: International Law and the Origins of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1891 - 1949* (Pluto 2009) and *The Palestine Question in International Law* (BIICL 2008).

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Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury
Principal Research Fellow, Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore

Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury was Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh from 2007 to 2009. During his four decades of public service, he has held posts as Ambassador and Permanent Representative to both New York (2001-2007), and Geneva (1996-2001). At the United Nations (UN), he has also been Chairman of the Social Commission, Population and Development Commission, Second (Economic) Committee, Information Committee, and President of the Conference on Disarmament.

He was knighted by the Pope in 1999. In 2004, the New York City Council issued a Proclamation naming him as “one of the world’s leading diplomats”, acknowledging his global contribution to advancing welfare, alleviating poverty, and combating terrorism.

Dr James M Dorsey
Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

James Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University. A veteran, award-winning foreign correspondent for four decades, James has covered the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, Europe and the United States for publications such as The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times and The Financial Times.

James writes a widely acclaimed blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, has published a book with the same title, and authors a syndicated column. His latest book China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom will be published by Palgrave in September.
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