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MODERN RUSSIA: IDEOLOGY, POLITICS, ECONOMICS, CULTURE AND RELIGION

ANASTASIA OBUKHOVA. PROSPECTS OF RUSSIAN-IRANIAN ECONOMIC RELATIONS

Keywords: Russian-Iranian projects; energy and logistics of Iran and Russia; de-dollarization of trade; emerging International Division of Labour.

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Abstract. The article surveys the status of Russian-Iranian economic relations in the context of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East and Central Asia. Russia accelerated its "shift to the East" back in 2022, having become an almost irreplaceable supplier of energy resources and certain technologies to Asian countries over the past two and a half years. Russia has remained in the top-five largest trading partners of Iran, who sees the potential for a tenfold increase in bilateral trade with Russia going forward.

Currently, trade between Iran and Russia is significantly limited by the lack of the banking channels and payment systems. Measures to de-dollarize the bilateral trade resulted into the ruble-to-riyal exchange mechanism settlement in 2022, while the Russian payment system might be integrated with the Iranian one by spring 2025. The article notes that joint investment projects in such countries as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and China, imply a great unlocking potential both for Russia and Iran. According to the author, the countries processing resources (including human ones, land, fuel, electricity) and the base for developing relevant technologies would become the key beneficiaries of the emerging new International Division of Labour (IDL) being formed by the Global South. The author concludes that cooperation with such a long-standing partner as Iran would allow Russia and Iran to lead the reformatting of the global energy balance, to promote the sustainability of regional energy security, to develop new technologies more effectively, to lead the reforming IDL.

The Role of Russia and Iran in Shaping the Global Energy Market

The Middle East's role in maintaining global energy security has grown since the early 20th century and remains critical today. Five of the world's ten largest oil producers – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, and Kuwait – hold nearly half (46,2 per cent) of global oil reserves (BP 2020 estimates). In 2023, they produced a combined 27,2 million barrels per day (b/d), accounting for 28 per cent of global oil production and 41 per cent of global oil exports[1]. Approximately three-quarters of their production is exported. Meanwhile, the Middle East–Asia route handles up to 40 per cent of all seaborne crude oil trade[2].

Currently three Middle Eastern countries – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – rank among the world's top ten natural gas producers, collectively accounting for 13 per cent of global output. In 2023, they produced two-thirds of the region's total gas (2,680 billion cubic meters)[3]. While Iran, Saudi Arabia (KSA), and Qatar hold 33 per cent of global natural gas reserves, only 15 per cent of Middle Eastern gas production is exported[4].

The top five countries by proved gas reserves (trillion cubic meters, Tcm) are: Russia (37,4), Iran (32,2), Qatar (24,6). Turkmenistan (13,5), United States (12,6). Collectively, Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Qatar hold 57 per cent of global gas reserves, confirming that the world's primary natural gas reserves are concentrated in Russia and the Middle East.

The Sustainability of Iran's Economic Development: Reliance on Energy Resources

Throughout its 46-year history, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has faced international pressure and near-constant isolation. However, the US and EU have failed to achieve its complete economic isolation. Between 2000 and 2022, Iran maintained international trade with both EU and Asian countries. Despite sanctions and restrictions, Iran continues to export oil, petroleum products, and petrochemicals as a member of OPEC. From 1994 to 2023, Iran's trade balance was positive during 2000–2021, with its current account balance negative only in three years: 1998, 2018, and 2019[5].

Iran Annual GDP YoY in Per Cent, 2018–2023[6]

The main exporting countries to Iran are Russia, the UAE, Türkiye, Oman and Pakistan, while Iraq, the UAE, Türkiye, Pakistan, and Afghanistan are the main importer of Iranian goods. In the first half of the Iranian year 2024/25 (21 March – 20 September 2024), Iran's non-oil exports reached $49,6 billion, and imports totaled $32,6 billion (including $2,5 billion in gold bullion imports). Thus, Iran's total non-oil trade turnover was $82,2 billion. Seven major importers accounted for 82 per cent of Iran's non-oil exports: China ($7,2 billion, 15 per cent), Iraq ($5,2 billion, 11 per cent), UAE ($3,4 billion, 7 per cent), Türkiye ($2,4 billion, 5 per cent), Afghanistan ($1,1 billion, 2,2 per cent), Pakistan ($1,0 billion, 2 per cent), India ($0,9 billion, 1,8 per cent). Regarding imports, Iran's main partners were: UAE ($10 billion, 31 per cent), China ($8,5 billion, 26 per cent), Türkiye

($5,1 billion, 16 per cent), Germany ($1,2 billion, 3,7 per cent), Russia and India ($0,8 billion each, 2,5 per cent)[7].

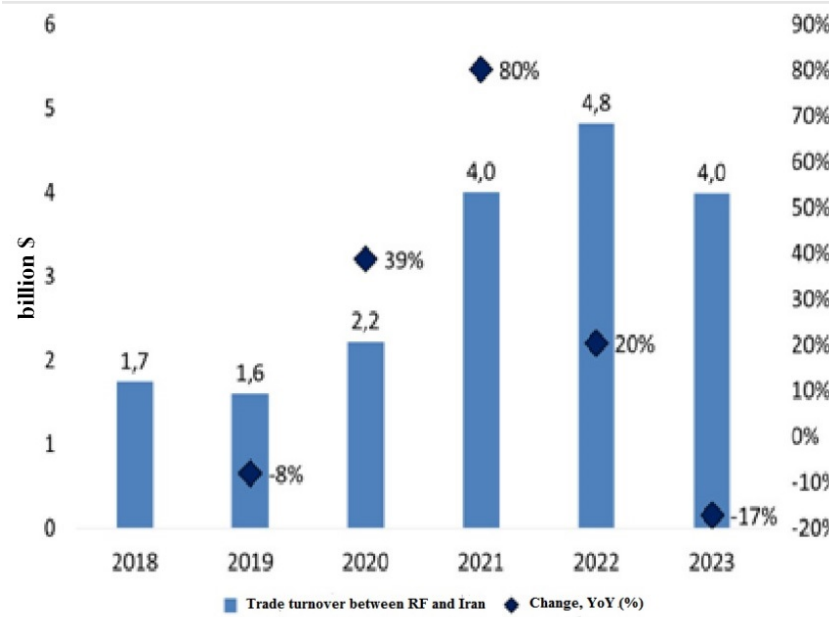

Fig. 1.
IRI-Russia Trade Turnover, 2018–2023[8]

In the Iranian calendar year 2023/24 (ending 19 March 2024), Iran's exports to Russia grew by 26 per cent YoY, while imports from Russia increased by 9 per cent YoY. Agricultural products, petrochemicals, and refined petroleum products were the largest exports from Iran to Russia. In Q1 2024, Russia's exports to Iran surged by 77 per cent YoY, and its imports from Iran rose by 13 per cent YoY.

However, during the first five months of the current Iranian year 1403 (21 March – 20 August 2024), non-oil trade between Iran and Russia fell by 19 per cent YoY to $968,8 million, though Russia remained among Iran's top five trading partners. Notably, in

December 2022, Iran stated potential for a tenfold increase in bilateral trade with Russia from the 2022 level of $10 billion[9].

Currently, IRI – Russia trade is severely constrained by the lack of shared banking channels and payment systems. Iranian banks minimally utilize SPFS (Russia's SWIFT alternative) and the Mir Payment System (MPS). De-dollarization efforts led to a ruble-rial exchange mechanism in August 2022, but transaction volumes remain low, with ~80 per cent of Russian exports to Iran conducted via barter and offsets. However, in September 2024, Iran began integrating the MPS with its domestic "Shetab" system; operational integration is expected within six months after testing.

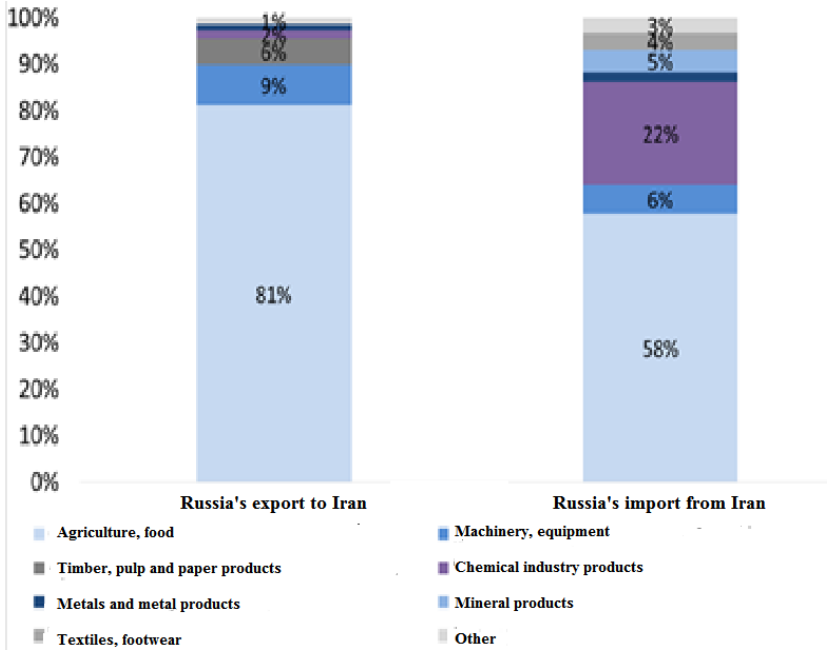

Fig. 2.
Structure of IRI-Russia Exports and Imports, 2023[10]

Russia's Integration into Asia Trade and Investment Processes

Russia accelerated its "pivot to the East" following the start of the Special Military Operation (SMO) in 2022, becoming a virtually indispensable supplier of technology and energy resources to Asian countries[11]. The results of this crucial shift in Russia's foreign economic vector eastwards are evident in its largest trading partners, which include China, India, Türkiye, the UAE, and Iran: the first three account for about 50 per cent of Russia's import-export operations.

Russia's highest trade turnover is with China, which reached a historical maximum in 2023, increasing by 26 per cent to $240,11 billion compared to $196,5 billion in 2022. In the reporting year, Russian export revenues from China amounted to $110,97 billion, while import expenditures were $129,13 billion[12]. The structure of Russia-China trade has remained stable over the past two years: energy resources account for approximately 70 per cent of Russian exports to China, while gadgets, machinery, and equipment make up half of Russian imports. Between 2022–2023, China became Russia's leading trade partner by share of total national trade turnover (which reached $710 billion in 2023), growing to 34 per cent ($240 billion) from 16 per cent in 2019 (pre-pandemic). China is the largest buyer of Russian and Iranian oil, and the volume of Russian gas purchased by China is projected to increase to 48 billion cubic meters per year by 2027. The combined oil production and export volumes of Iran and Russia could supply China with sufficient volumes to sustain its industrial growth for decades to come.

India's dependence on Russian energy supplies also increased during 2022–2023: bilateral trade nearly doubled in 2023 to a record $65 billion, of which $60,1 billion (92 per cent of total trade) represented Russian export revenues. Roughly 88 per cent of this came from oil supplies. Consequently, India became Russia's second-largest trading partner after China.

Türkiye became Russia's third-largest trading partner in 2023, with bilateral trade reaching $57 billion. Russian exports

accounted for 81 per cent ($46 billion) of this total, with supplies of Russian oil, pipeline gas, and LNG comprising nearly 25 per cent[13].

In Russia's trade structure with Iran, agricultural products hold significant weight. Russian agricultural exports to Iran reached $2,2 billion in 2023, representing 81,1 per cent of Russia's total exports to the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). This contrasts with the 58 per cent share of agricultural products in Iran's exports to Russia. Cooperation in the military-technical sphere is likely to intensify, with potential growth in supplies of military equipment. Notably, while energy resources play a major role in Russia's trade with its largest partners, the structure of Russia-Iran trade indicates a sufficient degree of parity. For example, in 2023, Russia exported 500 tons of oil refining catalysts to Iran, while Iran also exported catalysts (of different specifications) abroad. Thus, both countries replaced up to 80 per cent of their catalyst imports through mutual trade. Strengthening trade ties with Middle Eastern countries (Iran, Türkiye, UAE) enables Russia to solidify its technological presence in the East and enhance the energy, technological, and food security of its friendly partner nations.

The conflict in the North Black Sea region has stimulated a shift in the direction of Russian cargo flows. Friendly countries (primarily China and India) have partially replaced European buyers of Russian energy resources. Starting in 2022, following the realignment of trade routes and the intensification of Russian-Chinese energy cooperation, traffic commenced on the first railway bridge across the Amur River (the natural border between Russia and China). However, the logistics infrastructure in the Russian Far East is not yet fully developed, and currently, some cargo is delivered to Asian buyers via sea routes (through the Suez Canal from the Black and Baltic Seas). Russian shipments along the maritime route could be restricted at any time by NATO bloc countries, given the presence of American military bases (including in the Bosporus). To reduce logistics dependence on unfriendly nations and to boost exports, Russia is developing the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the International

North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Via the NSR, Russia plans to increase cargo shipments to China from the current 36 million tons to 200 million tons by 2030[14].

As early as 1999, Russia, India, and the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) signed an agreement on export-import transportation via the INSTC route: Sri Lanka – India – Iran – Caspian Sea – Russia. India and Iran ratified the agreement in 2001, and Russia ratified it in 2022. India has invested $2,1 billion in developing the INSTC, including funding for transport infrastructure construction in Iran. Currently, 11 countries participate in the corridor: Kazakhstan, Belarus, Oman, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Syria, who joined the project between 2003 and 2006, with Belarus also serving as an observer since 2006. The corridor runs from India's Jawaharlal Nehru Port (Nava Sheva), located south of Mumbai, through the Gulf of Oman, overland across Iran, across the Caspian Sea to Astrakhan, and then through the European part of Russia to St. Petersburg. The length of the INSTC is 7,200 km, which is more than twice as short as the 16,000 km route via the Suez Canal.

In May 2023, an agreement was signed for Russia to finance the construction of the missing 162-kilometer Rasht-Astara section of the western branch of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). This will ensure the full operation of the corridor's western section. Russia's investment in the development of the INSTC could amount to 250–280 billion rubles by 2030[15].

According to the President of the Russian Federation, the INSTC "should become an example of the broadest international cooperation, involving the formation of new logistics routes for the accelerated economic and social development of Eurasia and the Global South. This will significantly diversify global transportation flows, turning Iran into a hub for Russian goods destined for the Middle East, Asia, and beyond"[16]. However, the main goal of developing the INSTC is to ensure the competitiveness of Russian goods on the Indian market. It is worth noting that, according to forecasts, Indian demand for

energy resources (oil, gas, coal) will remain high at least until 2030, unlike in China.

Milestones in the Development of Russian-Iranian Economic Relations

Despite the challenging geopolitical landscape, Russia and Iran have been progressively developing both bilateral and multilateral cooperation in trade, energy, and logistics over the past thirty years.

1. 1997–2004: The Kazan Aircraft Plant (KAZ) named after S.P. Gorbunov held negotiations with the Iranian side on the supply of 20 aircraft, their maintenance transfer, personnel training, and joint production of Tu-214 and Tu-334 aircraft, but the contract was not signed.

2. The first unit of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant in Iran was built by Rosatom in 2011; two more units have been under construction since 2017.

3. 2021: JSC "Power Machines" began construction of the combined cycle power plant in Sirik (Khozmorghan), located 130 km from the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas (Persian Gulf coast, Hormozgan Province).

4. 2022: The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) signed a $40 billion strategic Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with PJSC "Gazprom".

5. The countries are implementing a standardization procedure for oil catalysts, which will eliminate dependence on supplies from unfriendly countries for both Iran and Russia. A similar standardization procedure is also needed for power engineering products, as Russia specializes in producing low-capacity turbines, while Iran specializes in medium and large-capacity ones.

6. September 2024: At a meeting of BRICS Energy Ministers, Iran's Minister of Energy, Abbas Aliabadi, proposed linking Russian power grids with the grids of the UAE and KSA (Saudi Arabia) via Iranian territory.

Russia is gradually accelerating the development of energy cooperation with Iran. In June 2024, PJSC Gazprom and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) signed a Memorandum on Strategic Cooperation. This provides for Russian investments in the development of oil and gas fields in South Pars, the construction of LNG plants and export gas pipelines, and the development of a system for organizing supplies of Russian gas to Iran. Under this plan, up to 300 million cubic meters of gas per day are to be supplied to Iran, with Iran able to resell the surplus to other countries. The contract will be concluded for 30 years and is expected to bring Iran approximately $10–12 billion per year[17]. Last year, Iran became a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, signed an agreement on establishing a Free Trade Zone (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and for the first time Iran sent Russia 1 million barrels of oil via tanker.

The countries are also developing multilateral cooperation. In 2023, the first test deliveries of electricity were carried out via the Russia – Azerbaijan – Iran electricity corridor. That same year, Iran and Russia discussed creating an energy hub and the possibility of establishing an electronic gas trading platform in southern Iran with the participation of Qatar and Turkmenistan. Tajikistan could become the country for implementing trilateral energy investment projects involving Russia and Iran: in May 2024, Tajikistan rejoined the Unified Water and Energy System of Central Asia; its power grids are synchronized with Russia's, which could form the basis for joint energy and water projects. Rosatom is carrying out nuclear legacy cleanup work in Tajikistan, while Iran is jointly constructing the Sangtuda-2 Hydroelectric Power Plant with Tajikistan.

Iran could export its natural gas via the proposed Iran-India pipeline, which has been under discussion for the last twenty years. The land-based version of this 1,700 km project envisaged annual supplies of 33 billion cubic meters (bcm), with 3 bcm destined for Pakistan and 30 bcm for India[18]. Delays in constructing an offshore pipeline (shelf or deepwater) are attributed to excessive capital costs. Russia is India's largest oil

supplier, while Iran is gradually increasing its oil shipments. A consortium of Russian companies (including PJSC Rosneft and UCP) controls Essar Oil Limited, which owns one of India's largest refineries, Nayara Energy, along with a port and a network of ~8,000 fuel stations. Until 2022, PJSC Gazprom supplied India with 2 million tons of LNG annually via Gazprom Germania (seized by Germany in 2022). Russia is also boosting exports of coking coal to India, where metallurgical capacity is expanding.

Moreover, neighboring Pakistan depends on external energy supplies for over 90 per cent of its needs, but complex geopolitical conditions have derailed energy projects with both Russia and Iran. Russian oil supplies materialized only as a "pilot" shipment in June 2023; the "Pakistani Stream" pipeline (from Pakistan's southern coast to northern industrial zones) remains in the planning stage; and China is constructing Pakistan's nuclear power plants. For the aforementioned Iran-India land pipeline, Iran completed its section to the Pakistani border by 2017, but Pakistan never commenced construction of its segment. Iran's lack of indigenous large-scale LNG plant technology could serve as a starting point for gas cooperation with Russia, enabling Iran to expand natural gas exports and access new markets.

Meanwhile, Afghanistan seeks to attract Iranian FDI for mining development and prioritizes imports of food, fuel, medicine, medical equipment, and construction machinery. Notably, 80 per cent of Afghanistan's economic needs are met through imports, with Iran supplying a quarter of these imports and handling half of Afghanistan's import-export transit[19]. Afghanistan is also negotiating with Iran on investments in mining, solar energy, railways, and establishing a joint economic and mining zone.

Russia's economic policy from 1992–2014 (and in some sectors until 2022) of "we'll buy everything abroad" transformed the country from a global decision-making center into a dependent participant in the international division of labor within strategic sectors like energy, logistics, and proprietary

technologies[20]. The primary beneficiaries of the new international division of labor emerging in the Global South will likely be countries with abundant resources (including human, land, fuel, and power) and a foundation for developing cutting-edge technologies. Cooperation with a longstanding partner like Iran will enable Russia and Iran to spearhead the restructuring of the global energy balance, enhance regional energy security resilience, develop new technologies more effectively, and assume leading positions in the newly forming international division of labor.

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PLACE AND ROLE OF ISLAM IN REGIONS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

KANYBEK KUDAYAROV, AYGERIM MAKSYMBEKOVA. CENTRAL ASIAN POLICY OF CHINA IN THE MATERIALS OF THE EXPERT COMMUNITY OF TÜRKIYE

Keywords: Türkiye's analytical centers; China's policy in the region; China; Central Asia; Russia; energy resources; logistics; trade and economic relations.

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Abstract. The article endeavours to review the materials of the analytical centers of Türkiye for the study of the Central Asian vector of

China's policy in the region. Despite the periods of bilateral 'thaw' and 'chill' between Türkiye and China, as well as ideologically loaded foreign policy rhetoric, Turkish experts have generally adopted a fairly consistent and objective approach when analyzing the geopolitical and economic stance of the People's Republic of China in Central Asia.

Among all the analytical centers examined in this paper, the materials of INSAMER, ANKASAM, AVIM and SETA deserve special attention.

Speaking about the works as a whole, we should note that the presented in the reviewed materials assessments of the described events and trends concerning China's policy in Central Asia are rather general and similar in nature.

Before reviewing China's Central Asian policy, it is necessary to briefly address the current state of Turkish-Chinese relations. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1971. Since then, bilateral relations have repeatedly experienced "ups and downs."

Economically, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is viewed through a dual lens – as both an investor and a competitor in the Turkish market. "The Belt and Road Initiative"[1] holds significant importance, with Türkiye assigned a crucial role in the logistics chain connecting China to Europe.

China is Türkiye's largest trading partner in Asia and its third-largest globally. Infrastructure projects like the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route and BRI substantially align Beijing and Ankara. However, the existing trade balance[2] favors China over Türkiye, a situation dissatisfactory to the latter, which seeks to narrow the gap through tourism revenue. For instance, the number of Chinese tourists visiting Türkiye in the first seven months of 2024 reached 230,819 – a 102,46% increase compared to the same period last year [1]. Türkiye plans to further expand its tourism capacity and estimates its potential at 10 million Chinese tourists annually.

Politically, Türkiye positions itself as a protector of Turkic or Turkic-speaking populations worldwide and the primary

advocate for Turkic unity. Institutionally, this is reflected in the establishment of the Organization of Turkic States. It should be noted that Türkiye's moderate Islamists, led by the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalıknma Partisi, AKP) – which is in coalition with the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) – create a symbiosis of moderate Islamism and Turkism. Moreover, the secular version of Turkism has increasingly taken on religious overtones, leading to a split in the MHP (into the MHP and Good Party (İyi Partisi)). The MHP prioritizes cooperation with Turkic-speaking states in foreign policy, making the Uyghur issue a primary concern in bilateral relations. In recent years, this issue has been partially mitigated by Chinese loans and investments in Türkiye's economy. Nevertheless, the moderate Islamist AKP and nationalist MHP cannot "sidestep" the Uyghur issue, as their electorate would not allow this topic to be "closed."

Beyond the MHP, other right-wing and far-right parties in Türkiye also vocalize concerns and consistently remind authorities about the Uyghur issue.

Expert Genul Tol (Genül Tol) believes that Türkiye's strained relations with the West facilitated the rapprochement between China and Türkiye, as Ankara seeks to diversify its foreign policy. However, it cannot be claimed that Turks view relations with China as an alternative to engagement with the West [2]. Türkiye currently has no alternative, as its primary investments originate from Western countries – specifically, over $160 billion from the EU.

Geopolitically, Türkiye and China exhibit several "misalignments." Notably, China supports Cyprus and advocates for its unity, as securing European support is crucial for China's continued economic expansion into Europe. China views Cyprus as a "window" into Europe, disregarding Türkiye's position on the Cyprus issue.

Another problem concerns the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Türkiye has designated a terrorist organization since the 1980s. While China sold weapons to Türkiye during its conflict with the PKK, Turkish experts note that significant

quantities of Chinese-made weapons and ammunition have been seized from the PKK by Turkish armed forces.

In its foreign policy toward Ankara, Beijing focuses not only on economic aspects but also on security issues. China is particularly irritated by Türkiye's Middle Eastern operations and urges joint action, recognizing that Turkish policies in the region could impact China's own security.

Another critical issue for China is Taiwan. Türkiye maintains contacts and active cooperation with Taiwan across various matters, which also provokes China's ire. Experts at INSAMER think tank argue that China's "One China" policy and potential military dominance over Taiwan cannot be classified as occupation under international law. However, China's position may be deemed contrary to international law when, as a UN member, it adopts an aggressive stance while purportedly seeking peaceful dispute resolution. Thus, China establishing military dominance over Taiwan through force would violate international law and lack legitimacy [3].

Regarding analyses of Chinese policy in Central Asia within Turkish expert circles, it should be noted that materials primarily originate from Turkish think tanks rather than the broader expert community.

A review of Turkish think tanks reveals that they primarily analyze China's policy in regions bordering Türkiye – namely the Middle East, the Balkan Peninsula, and the EU – paying less attention to Central Asia. Turkish experts focus significantly on China's Africa policy, analyzed by the SETA think tank. Additionally, numerous publications address U.S. – China relations [4], including their economic wars [5], dynamics within the U.S. – China – Russia triangle [6], and India – China contradictions. Publications specifically addressing Turkish – Chinese relations remain relatively scarce.

Uyghur Issue in China

Among the think tanks in Türkiye, one of the few that openly publishes materials on the violations of the rights of

Uyghurs in the XUAR is the INSAMER Analytical Center. One of the main publications reflecting the position of the Analytical Center is the work "Rights Violations in East Turkestan and an Assessment of the UN Report on Uyghurs", published at the end of 2022. In particular, it states that multiple human rights violations are committed in the Turkestan region, including: forced displacement, forced labor, forced disappearance, sterilization, unauthorized collection of personal data and their use, violation of privacy of personal life, everyday life through illegal settlements, demographic engineering, discriminatory activities against a certain group, forced detention of people in camps, various forms of violence, cultural and religious assimilation and the impact of propaganda activities. The report also states that this list of violations corresponds to only a small part of the offenses committed in the region governed by the Chinese Communist Party [7].

Expert Ayse Kurban (Ayşe Kurban) believes that "at this point it seems obvious that the goal of this Chinese policy was not to eradicate the Uyghur society, but to dissolve it into the Chinese population through assimilation" [8].

The UNHCR report does not directly attempt to declare genocide on the part of the Beijing government. However, Kurban believes that even the statistics on the forced sterilization of Muslim women support the thesis that what happened could have been a complete genocide.

The EU countries believe that achieving political diversity and democratization in the region is difficult in the short term, so the Europeans prefer to protect their interests through dialogue with the ruling regimes, without entering into geopolitical rivalry with anyone.

In their opinion, any disagreements with these regimes will lead to a decrease in the influence of the European Union in the region. The Europeans are also aware of the strong influence of Russia and China in these countries, which, according to the author, strongly support the authoritarian regimes existing in Central Asia. In addition to all this, China and Russia view the EU's political steps in the region as open interference, accusing

the Europeans of manipulating the region under the pretext of protecting human rights and democracy [9], INSAMER expert Yasin Asma believes.

Another example that has caused a storm of indignation in Turkish society is the Extradition Agreement between Türkiye and China [10], ratified by the Turkish parliament in May 2019, which provides for the extradition of citizens wanted in criminal cases. Despite the absence of official deportations from Türkiye to China, there is an opinion in the media that the Turkish authorities could expel Uyghur political activists through third countries, for example, through Tajikistan [11].

Due to its declared ideological and foreign policy priorities, official Ankara is forced to respond to each crisis in East Turkestan by tightening its rhetoric. In 2024, Türkiye once again tried to send a delegation to the XUAR to get acquainted with the situation of the Uyghurs, who have been experiencing oppression by the authorities for several years (in particular, they are prohibited from fasting during the month of Ramadan, conducting religious services, etc.), but the Chinese authorities do not want to let anyone into their territory, considering what is happening in the XUAR to be their internal affair.

China's Policy in Central Asia

According to V. Hasanzade, an expert at the "21st Century Türkiye Institute," the geopolitical significance of Central Asia (CA) is growing, with a renewed "Great Game" unfolding – this time primarily involving Russia, China, and Türkiye as key players [12].

Political analyst B. Onder (B. Önder) highlights CA's strategic importance for all regional and global powers, evidenced by multilateral platforms such as: C+C5 (China + Central Asia), EU–Central Asia, C5+1 (U.S. + Central Asia), CA5+Russia, which makes this region even more "valuable" for China. Cengiz Buyar[3], a professor at Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University (KTMU), asserts that China is leveraging geopolitical turbulence and Russia's waning influence in CA to establish

regional leadership. He cites China's initiative to host the China – Central Asia Summit as symbolic and politically significant for both Beijing and regional states [13].

Concurrently, China aims to solidify its leading role in advancing a multipolar world order. This ambition is reflected in its diplomatic activism across the Middle East and Africa, mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and broader global engagement [13].

Experts from the Institute of Eurasian Studies of the Akhmet Yassawi International Kazakh-Turkish University reflect the general opinion of Turkish experts. They believe that Central Asia is important for China to ensure the security of Chinese borders, energy supplies and the development of the OBOR project. However, the Chinese authorities lack the cultural component, which will most likely be emphasized more than before [14]. However, Onder (Önder) and Gokcelık (Gökçelik)[4] contend that CA states recognize the importance of China's economic and military-political presence *without* cultural ties, as China delivers "peace and prosperity" to the region [15].

Expert Aydin (Aydın) argues that China's soft power, positive image, and cultural influence should radiate through Kazakhstan – viewed by Beijing as CA's political "heavyweight." Astana thus attracts special attention from both China and Türkiye[5]. Aydın notes that regional organizations, particularly the SCO, serve as key platforms for Türkiye to engage Kazakhstan and other CA states [16].

Sevınc Alkan Ozcan (Sevinç Alkan Özcan) largely aligns with other Turkish analysts regarding China's CA interests but cautions that claims of Chinese advancement without cultural influence are premature. While Chinese cultural sway is gradually expanding, it remains incomparable to Russia's deep-rooted political and cultural footprint – a legacy of CA's history, Russian-speaking diasporas, and the Russian language's regional dominance. Özcan also acknowledges widespread "Sinophobia and fear of Chinese expansionism" in CA [17].

On economic dimensions, Burak Onder (Burak Önder) posits that China's trade wars with the U.S. could heighten its

aggression in regions like CA — where China already holds excess capacity [18]. He concurs that China seeks energy security through CA resources but disagrees with J. Aydınov's claim[6] that China intentionally bypasses Russia via CA as a "soft underbelly." Instead, Önder attributes this shift to the Ukraine crisis disrupting China's Eurasian rail logistics through Russia.

Conversely, KTMU experts D. Eraslan [19] and C. Buyar offer stark assessments: Eraslan argues Kyrgyzstan "failed to adequately respond" to China's expansionism. Chinese grants / loans hindered economic development while deepening dependency – a pattern repeating across CA states.

Cengiz Buyar fully supports his colleague's assessment, arguing that in trade and economic relations with the region, China acts with extreme selectivity. It does not open its market to Central Asian (CA) goods, favoring only raw materials and energy imports. In exchange for commodities exported by CA states, China exports high-value-added finished products to the region – a telling imbalance. Evaluating China's loan policies, Buyar contends that CA populations generally oppose accepting Chinese loans, viewing them as threats to their countries' sovereignty.

Summarizing China's regional policy and analyzing all aspects of its engagement, Buyar concludes that over the past decade, China has developed more stable relations with CA states than Russia. However, given the shared Soviet legacy, the prevalence of Russian language, and Russia-led multilateral organizations involving CA countries, Russia undeniably maintains a stronger position in Central Asia than China.

Experts Seyma Kizilay (Şeyma Kızılay) and Itır Bozdag (İtir Bozdağ) from the ANKASAM think tank [20] align with other analysts regarding the significance of the C+C5 (China+Central Asia) format in advancing China-CA relations [21]. Like Buyar, Kızılay emphasizes China's ambition to strengthen its CA foothold amid Russia's decline, while acknowledging that the Ukraine crisis has multiplied the region's strategic value – forcing China to compete not only with traditional actors but also the EU and U.S. [22]. Think tank experts Ş. Dolen (IKV) [23]

and Gulnur Gungor (Gülnur Güngör) (AVIM) [24] argue that China aims to fill the vacuum created by Russia's distraction in Ukraine. China will enhance East-West connectivity through CA, becoming more active in Afghanistan affairs, regional security, and border issues of Tajikistan / Kyrgyzstan — without involving Russia.

Turkish analysts note that Ankara must still determine how deepening China-CA political and economic cooperation will affect Türkiye's export prospects in the region.

Despite post-Cold War efforts to strengthen ties with regional capitals, Türkiye has failed to achieve dominance comparable to Moscow or Beijing [25]. Yet given Türkiye's ethno-cultural and linguistic affinity with CA states, China seriously fears Ankara's growing influence[7]. Considering Türkiye's regional geopolitical ambitions and leadership in the Turkic world, China's concerns are well-founded.

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Notes

1. "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) – a transcontinental long-term strategy and investment program designed to develop infrastructure and accelerate economic integration among countries along the historic Silk Road routes.
2. In 2023, Turkey imported Chinese goods worth a staggering $45 billion, while exporting only $3.3 billion to China. This resulted in a trade deficit exceeding $40 billion — Turkey's largest bilateral trade imbalance. URL: https://www.eurasiantimes.com/chinas-power-has-limits-and-turkey-must-seize-the-opportunity/#:~:text=China%2DT%C3%BCrkiye%20Trade&text=In%202023%2C%20T%C3%BCrkiye%20imported%20a,among%20Turkey's%20bilateral%20trade%20relationships (date of access: 12.03.2025).

3. Cengiz Buyar is a professor at the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University (Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan). The publication “Kriter,” where his article appears, belongs to the pro-government think tank SETA.
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ISLAM IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

OLGA BIBIKOVA. ON THE ISSUE OF ANTAGONISM BETWEEN SUNNIS AND ALAWITES IN SYRIA

Keywords: Alawites; Sunnis; Ottomans; France; Alawite State; Ba'ath Party; Assad; military coup; "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham"; massacre; humiliation.*

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Abstract. In Syria, there was a massacre of Alawites living in coastal areas. The jihadists who have seized power in Syria are introducing Islamic rule in the country, which is going to curb the rights of non-Muslims. The actions of the current government can be described as an act of revenge against the Alawites – the community of the al-Assad family, which ruled the country for over 50 years.

The origins of the Alawite religious movement trace back to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (599–661) – the fourth Caliph, cousin, and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. According to tradition, the ancestors of the Alawites lived on the al-Jazira

* Banned in Russia (hereinafter).

plateau in Northern Mesopotamia even before the Arab conquests began. The dominant tribe there was Taghlib, one of the most powerful and cohesive nomadic tribes of the pre-Islamic era. By the late 9th century, the inhabitants of the region began actively interacting with Arab tribes living on the fringes of the Syrian Desert who practiced Shi'a Islam. At the end of the 9th century, the Hamdanid clan emerged from the tribal elite. As allies of the Kharijites of al-Jazira, they opposed the rule of the Abbasid[1] caliphs.

In the 930s, the Hamdanid leader Nasir al-Dawla established an autonomous emirate in northern Iraq, making the city of Mosul on the Tigris River his residence. In turn, his brother, Sayf al-Dawla[2], created his own emirate in 945 with its capital in Aleppo. Both emirates lasted until 1002.

Neighboring Byzantium was experiencing an upswing during this period due to the wise rule of the emperors of the Macedonian dynasty (867–1056). The Byzantines periodically seized territories from the Hamdanids and then returned them for ransom. Emir Sayf al-Dawla, who ruled northern Syria from Aleppo between 945 and 967, became Byzantium's most significant opponent. Aleppo was an important point on the Great Silk Road passing through Central Asia and Mesopotamia. Emir Sayf al-Dawla was renowned for his hospitality and patronage of men of letters, as his court in Aleppo was considered a center of science and Arabic literature. It is specifically known that he patronized the poet al-Mutanabbi[3].

The Taghlib tribe, not being Muslim at the time, remained aloof from the events that contributed to the formation of early Islam and the Muslim state during the time of the Prophet Muhammad. However, it is known that Taghlib contingents fought as mercenaries against Muslim armies in Iraq and Upper Mesopotamia during the Islamic conquest of Persia (632–637). The daughter of the leader Utba Rabi ibn Bujayr[4], named Umm Habib, was captured and sent to Medina, where she entered the harem of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, later venerated by Shi'as as the first Imam. She bore him twins – Umar al-Kabir and Ruqayya. During the First Muslim Civil War

(656–661), members of the Taghlib tribe fought on the side of Ali ibn Abi Talib at the Battle of Badr (656) and the Battle of Siffin (657). However, at Siffin, a significant number of Taghlib also fought on the side of the Umayyads. The Hamdanid emirates lasted almost until the end of the 10th century; they suffered a heavy defeat from the Buyids, and their lands fell under the control of the Uqaylids and Marwanids.

Those known today as Alawites, influenced by Shi'a Islam and Christianity through cross-cultural contacts, developed a syncretic religious doctrine incorporating several spiritual and intellectual currents of late antiquity and early Islam. The founder of the doctrine is considered to be the theologian Muhammad ibn Nusayr from Basra (d. 883). His followers were long called Nusayris, and since the 1920s, Alawites. Alawites recognize a series of prophets from Adam to Christ, as well as Muhammad. Besides them, they venerate several figures from classical antiquity, such as Socrates and Plato, and some Persian (pre-Islamic) religious authorities. From Plato and Pythagoras, they adopted the concept of reincarnation (metempsychosis). They also venerate Christian apostles, celebrate Christmas and Easter, believe in the transmigration of souls, have no prohibition on wine, and women have greater freedom. Being outcasts in the Sunni world, Alawites conceal their teachings from outsiders. Their sacred book, "Kitab al-Majmu" (The Book of the Collection), contains 16 surahs. In case of danger, they resort to "taqiyya" (dissimulation of faith)[5] to protect their culture and avoid situations where they feel their lives are threatened. Like the Imamis / Twelvers, they adhere to principles common to Shi'as, such as monotheism, divine justice, the prophethood of Muhammad, and they also recognize the divine nature of the Twelve Imams and the Day of Judgment.

According to American journalist David Kirkpatrick (The New York Times), "The Alawites have been persecuted by the Umayyads, Abbasids, Mamluks. The Ottomans, since they occupied the Levant in 1516, also persecuted the Alawites. However, the Turks repeatedly instigated conflicts between Syrian tribes and confessions. This allowed them to intervene in

the situation and gradually subjugate the conflicting parties, making them dependent. After another massacre in Aleppo, in which thousands of them perished, the Alawites took refuge in the mountains of Latakia...” [1]. It was important for the Ottomans to deprive the Alawites of their leaders, so they killed tribal sheikhs and heads of clan lineages. Deprived of leadership and land, the Alawites were forced into servitude to Sunni landowners.

The Ottomans tried to convert the Alawites to Sunnism. Five fatwas were issued against the Alawites. The first three fatwas[6] were issued in the 14th century by Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyyah. The fourth and fifth were promulgated during the Ottoman Empire period. Virtually all the fatwas declared the Alawites heretics. Ibn Taymiyyah[7] stated that “the Nusayris are more infidel than the Jews or Christians, and more infidel than many polytheists. They have caused more harm to the community of Muhammad than the warring infidel factions, such as the Franks or Turks… Whenever possible, they shed the blood of Muslims… They remain the most implacable enemies of the Muslims… War and punishment as defined in Islamic law against the Nusayris are among the most important pious acts and the most important duties (of Muslims)” [2]. Unlike many other sheikhs, Muhammad Hajj Amin al-Husseini[8] believed that the Alawites’ belonging to the Muslim world would help protect Arab unity. As part of a process beginning in 1952, Shi’a religious authorities in Syria recognized al-Husseini’s fatwa. In 1973, the Shi’a religious leader Musa al-Sadr[9] (at the request of H. Assad) issued a fatwa definitively clarifying that Alawites are true Shi’a Muslims. It was these decisions that facilitated the rapprochement of the Alawites with Ayatollah Khomeini and his successors in Iran.

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Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century, its former provinces sought independence. After Syria came under French administration (1920–1946), the

Alawites appealed to the French authorities with a proposal to create a separate state in their area of concentration. Among the most vocal advocates for statehood was Ali Sulayman al-Asad, father of the late Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and grandfather of Bashar al-Assad. He changed his surname from "Wahsh" (Wild) to the more noble "Asad" (Lion).

The Alawite State (*Dawlat Jabal al-'Alawiyyīn*) was established on July 1, 1922 [3]. The port city of Latakia was declared its capital. As noted by French researcher Bruno Paoli, "France's policy in Syria aimed to support minorities, primarily Christians, but also Druze and Alawites, in order to counter the Sunni majority and Arab nationalism. The French supported the idea of creating a federation of independent states. Concurrently with the Alawite State (1920), the State of Greater Lebanon (modern Lebanon), the State of Damascus, and the State of Aleppo were created. Two years later, in 1922, the Druze State was established... However, ultimately, under pressure from nationalists, they were compelled to accept the idea of Syrian unity in 1936" [4].

The Alawite State lasted until 1936, including from 1930–1936 under the new name "Sanjak of Latakia." In December 1936, the sanjak was incorporated into Syria. Edmund Burke III, a history professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who researched French policy in Syria and Morocco, wrote about the situation of Syrian Alawites: "At that time, the Alawites were a poor peasant population in the mountainous regions and coastal cities, subordinate to Sunni and Christian notables. <…> Among them were many semi-literate young men from rural communities who joined the French forces by enlisting in the Special Troops for social advancement" [5].

During the French Mandate, Alawites, like other representatives of national minorities (Druze, Kurds, and Circassians), were actively recruited into the army. Specifically, Alawites formed four out of eight infantry battalions performing police and intelligence functions. By 1945, Alawites constituted one-third of the personnel in these forces. They did not serve in other units. Naturally, belonging to the police forces generated

negative attitudes towards them from the majority of the country's population – the Sunnis. There was also an economic reason explaining the large number of Alawites in the police forces – the low pay was unattractive to Sunnis, while for Alawites, it represented a stable income. Additionally, police service provided a sense of personal security.

Under the French Mandate, society was divided along religious and geographic lines; the landowning families and 80 per cent of the population of the port city of Latakia were Sunni Muslims. Over 90 per cent of the entire province's population lived in rural areas, of whom 82 per cent were Alawites [6]. Alawites also constituted a significant part of the population in the Sanjak of Alexandretta (now Hatay in Türkiye). The territory of modern Latakia and Tartus provinces roughly corresponds to the former Alawite State. In both regions, the majority of the population is Alawite. Furthermore, parts of the territory of modern cities like Al-Suqaylabiyah (in the northwestern region of Hama province), Masyaf, Tell Kalakh, and Jisr al-Shughur also belonged to the Alawite State.

As Philip Khoury noted in his book "Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism": "the French patronized religious minorities such as the Druze and Alawites, attempting to isolate them from the dominant nationalist culture... These troops, recruited from minorities, were often used to suppress civil unrest" [7]. Naturally, under such conditions, antagonism between Sunnis and Alawites intensified.

The French left Syria in 1946, and the new independent government lasted only three years (until the military coup of 1949). The former army, still largely structured under the French Mandate, became the Syrian Republican Army. Its lower ranks continued to be drawn from Alawite, Druze, and rural (Kurdish and Sunni) communities. However, after the 1949 coup, Alawites began gradually dominating the officer corps" [6]. For many Alawites, training at the Military Academy in Homs represented a social and professional goal, while sons from wealthy Sunni families disdained a military career. Their dismissive attitude

towards the army led to Alawites gradually taking control of the Syrian state apparatus. Nevertheless, at the very top of the military hierarchy, Sunnis still occupied the main positions.

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Between 1949 and 1954, Syria experienced three military coups led by Sunnis. During this period, political organizations proclaiming different paths for the country's development began to emerge.

In April 1947, the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party was founded in Syria, based on the "Arab Resurrection" (*Al-Ba'ath al-Arabi*) organization. Its founders – Michel Aflaq (Christian), Salah ad-Din Bitar (Sunni Muslim), and Zaki al-Arsuzi (Alawite) – created an ideology combining elements of socialism (in the Arab context) and pan-Arabism. In 1963, another military coup occurred (the "March 8th Revolution"), bringing the Military Committee of the Syrian Regional Branch of the Ba'ath Party to power. Although the Syrian population reacted rather indifferently to the change in power, it was not bloodless. The new regime executed 20 people. Researchers note that it was "after 1963 that the Muslim Brotherhood* in Syria acquired another characteristic feature – an emphasis in ideological and propaganda spheres on fighting the ruling regime as 'infidel' and 'anti-Islamic' – 'Alawite' and 'Christian' " [8].

A new attempt to change power occurred in 1966. This time, the Syrian government led by Ba'ath Party founders Michel Aflaq and Salah ad-Din Bitar was overthrown. Representatives of the Ba'ath Party's "young wing," led by Salah Jadid (1926–1993, Alawite), who became the de facto leader of the country until 1970, came to power. As for H. Assad, a key participant in the coup, he became head of the country's Air Force and later, after the 1966 coup, Syria's Minister of Defense.

It was then that the Ba'ath Party, previously considered pan-Arab, split into two independent organizations – pro-Syrian and pro-Iraqi. Upon coming to power, the Syrian Ba'ath attempted to restrict the role of religion in the country.

Retrospectively, the emerging situation can be characterized as a confrontation between the Ba'ath Party's ultra-secularist ideology and the traditional Islamic way of life, the defense of which was taken up by religious associations like the Muslim Brotherhood*.

The latter believed that the Islamic religion plays a central role in shaping state laws. In turn, the secular Ba'athist ideology emphasized Arab nationalism and advocated for secular authority, opposing religious extremism. In particular, Zaki al-Arsuzi, who in 1966, along with Salah Jadid and Hafez al-Assad, was officially proclaimed one of the main ideologues and founders of the Ba'ath, believed that the Arab nation would be united when the Arab people restored the Arab identity lost over the last 1000 years. According to the intellectual al-Arsuzi, who studied at the Sorbonne, the key to Arab unity is the Arabic language [9].

The Ba'ath Party's nationalist, reformist, and socialist policies were met ambiguously in the country. This is evidenced by popular uprisings (e.g., in 1968–1969), some of which required police and army intervention.

On November 13, 1970, another change of power occurred under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad, then Minister of Defense. This event later became known as the "Corrective Movement" (*Harakat at-Tashih*), as a result of which H. Assad became President of Syria.

Three years later, the adoption of a new Constitution was announced. The provision stating that the President of Syria must be a Muslim was removed from the previous Constitution. The new version of the Constitution drew sharp criticism. The Muslim Brotherhood, local religious figures, and their sympathizers called on Syrians to protest, labeling the president an "enemy of Allah." In some cities, sheikhs called for jihad against the authorities.

Under public pressure, Assad conceded. Concurrently with Assad's abandonment of this constitutional provision, Musa al-Sadr, an influential Shia preacher, issued a fatwa

declaring the Alawite community adherents of Shia Islam, i.e., Muslims.

In subsequent years, H. Assad gradually curtailed the power of the Sunni religious hierarchy, reduced the number of religious educational institutions, after which some Sunni leaders left the country. Simultaneously, he proposed to Alawite sheikhs to introduce into their worship rites the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad and some Sunni historical figures. On his orders, new mosques began to be built in the country, including in Alawite-populated areas. He personally visited Sunni mosques, participated in prayers, and congratulated believers of other faiths on their holidays.

However, by the mid-1980s, Syria's economic situation deteriorated sharply due to the impact of plummeting world oil prices, economic recession in oil-producing countries, reduced income from Syrian exports, and a decrease in financial inflows from wealthy Arab monarchies because of Damascus's support for Iran in its war with Iraq. Another blow was a multi-year drought (2006–2011), which affected agricultural production, and the cessation of agricultural subsidies in 2008–2009 caused mass migration of peasants to cities. This, in turn, led to unemployment, increased crime, etc. According to experts, these factors were precisely the cause of the "Arab Spring." The sharp economic deterioration forced the population onto the streets. After the violent crackdown on protesters in several cities, a protracted civil war began in the country.

In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died, and his son Bashar (b. 1965) became the new president. The country's economic situation continued to worsen, and with the start of the civil war in 2011, the European Union, USA, Canada, and Switzerland imposed a series of economic sanctions and restrictions aimed at preventing the Syrian government from using violence against its citizens and stimulating political reforms. In response, the authorities strengthened the role of the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*), which carried out arrests of opposition figures. The young and inexperienced President B. Assad had many enemies. Even former allies of his father, who wanted to preserve their

positions in the country's leadership, reacted negatively to ideas for economic reform. Concurrently with the drought, Türkiye cut off Syria's water supply in the spring of 2017 by halting hydroelectric operations on the Euphrates, causing a significant drop in reservoir levels. By early 2016, over 6 million internally displaced persons needed humanitarian aid.

Anti-government protests began in various Syrian cities. The Muslim Brotherhood* began assassinating prominent Syrians: In February 1977, Damascus University Rector Mohammed Fadel was killed; in April 1978, Damascus Prosecutor General Adel Mini was killed. On Saturday, June 16, 1979, a massacre of cadets occurred at the Aleppo Artillery School, organized by a group of members of the "Fighting Vanguard" (*Al-Talia al-Muqatila*), part of the Muslim Brotherhood*. The duty officer summoned the cadets on Saturday for an alleged "urgent event." When they arrived and lined up in the academy canteen, a group of Islamists opened fire on them with automatic weapons and fled. It was later revealed that the vast majority of the cadets were Alawites. The Syrian government's response was the execution of 15 prisoners belonging to the "Islamic Resistance Movement." From this time on, terrorist attacks began occurring almost daily in Aleppo and other northern cities. In 2013, a massacre occurred in the town of Adra (40 km northeast of Damascus), infiltrated by militants from the Al-Nusra Front* and the Islamic Front. The death toll exceeded 80 people [10]. On February 9, 2014, an Islamist group perpetrated atrocities against Alawite civilians in the town of Ma'an (Hama province).

The most intense protests occurred in the city of Hama (1982), long considered a "stronghold of landowning conservatism." The Ba'athist authorities reacted brutally to the uprising provoked by Islamists, deploying heavy military equipment. The army, commanded by the president's brother, Major General Rifaat al-Assad, was sent against the rebels. He first isolated the city, cutting off food supplies; furthermore, media censorship was imposed, and communications and electricity were cut off. The operation lasted two weeks, resulting

in significant parts of the city being destroyed, with the death toll estimated at between 20,000 and 40,000. However, the half-destroyed city remained a center of popular opposition...

After Russia intervened on the side of Damascus, repelling attacks by ISIS* radicals, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, leader of the terrorist organization Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*[10] (and now President of Syria Muhammad al-Sharaa), as early as 2015, called on militants to intensify attacks against the Alawite religious minority supporting President Bashar al-Assad in retaliation for Russian airstrikes: "There is no choice but to escalate the war against Alawite targets... I call on all our allies to bombard their villages with hundreds of rockets just as the Alawites attack our cities and villages" [11].

Since December 2024, a series of massacres and atrocities against Alawites has continued, primarily in the country's coastal region. Characteristically, the new authorities blamed the Alawites for instigating the bloodshed. However, the brutal atrocities and humiliation of Alawites (before execution, they were forced to crawl on their knees, bark, and bleat like animals) were so extreme that even indifferent Europeans managed to discern the true situation. Dutch Secretary of State for Justice and Security Eric van der Burg condemned the European Union's official reaction to the massacres [effectively supporting the jihadists. – *O. B.*], stating that it "swaps the roles of the guilty and the victims. The responsibility here lies with the regime" [12].

Characteristically, militants sent from Central Asia, who had previously joined ISIS*, were used to carry out the slaughter of Alawites. Among them was the terrorist group "Kata'ib Tawhid wal-Jihad*," comprising Uzbek-speaking militants. Thus, Ahmed al-Sharaa continued the vile practice of eliminating his enemies using others' hands – a tactic used historically by the Turks, who employed *bashibozouks* to massacre Armenians in Adana, or the Israelis, who preferred to send Phalangists (Lebanese Christians) to massacre Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila camps (Lebanon).

The new authority in Damascus needs an internal enemy to unite various Islamist groups into a new Syrian army. The

Islamists crave revenge and consider the entire Alawite community linked to the former regime and responsible for 50 years of Ba'athism. In this situation, the Alawite community is the perfect scapegoat. As noted by French researcher Fabrice Balanche, a witness to the current events in Syria, "Alawites, like Christians, Druze, Yazidis, and Ismailis, are anxiously waiting to see what course the new authority will take and whether they will be able to live peacefully in the future without fearing for their safety" [13].

We also note that Alawites face the greatest threat – both as relatives and associates of the Assad family and as those who served the state for many years.

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Notes

1. Abbasids (749–1258) – descendants of the Prophet's uncle al-Abbas from the Meccan Hashim clan. They came to power by overthrowing the Umayyad dynasty.
2. Abu l-Hasan Ali Sayf al-Dawla (916–967) – Hamdanid dynasty emir nicknamed "Sword of the State", younger son of the dynasty's founder Abdullah ibn Hamdan. He waged continuous wars against Byzantium with varying success.
3. Al-Mutanabbi (915–965) – an outstanding Arab poet. Over one hundred qasidas (odes) and up to two hundred short poems survive. His name translates as "Like unto Prophet".

4. 'Utba ibn Rabi'a al-Qurashi (d. 624) – a prominent representative of the Quraysh tribe who expressed doubt about Muhammad's prophetic mission. Killed at the Battle of Badr.
5. Taqiyya – prudent concealment of faith. A practice accepted in Shiism allowing one to refrain from following the principles of their faith when life is in danger.
6. Fatwa – a religious document explaining the application of Sharia norms.
7. Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) – Muslim preacher, jurist, and critic of bid'ah (innovations) in Islam.
8. Muhammad Hajj Amin al-Husseini (1895–1974) – Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, leader of Palestinian nationalists, follower of Hitler during the war years, uncle of Yasser Arafat.
9. Musa al-Sadr (1928–1978) – Iranian-Lebanese Shiite theologian and philosopher.
10. At that time, the predecessor of the organization "Hayat Tahrir al-Sham" (Levant Liberation Committee) – "Jabhat al-Nusra" (Victory Front) – was the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. Both organizations are banned in the Russian Federation.

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VASILY OSTANIN-GOLOVNYA. DEMOGRAPHIC FACTOR OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SAUDI ARABIA AT THE PRESENT STAGE

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; demography; demographic factor; social and economic development; Saudi Arabia census 2022; Vision 2030; Saudization.

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Abstract. The article examines key demographic trends such as urbanization, demographic transition, and Saudization, and their impact on social and economic development of Saudi Arabia. Over the past decade, the Kingdom's leadership has been implementing large-scale reforms under Vision 2030, aimed at changing the country's social and economic landscape and reducing its reliance on oil. However, the implementation of these ambitious plans faces a number of challenges related to the economy's high dependence on the oil and gas sector, a shortage of skilled labour in the country, and high youth unemployment. In addition, there is a significant gender disparity in the labour market.

Demography is one of the most important factors that have a direct impact on political, economic and social processes. The demographic factor is of particular interest when it comes to countries with economies in transition and rapid development, which, in particular, include Saudi Arabia. Over the past ten years, the KSA, being one of the leading states of the Arab East, is at the next stage of large-scale reforms, which, according to the Vision: 2030 program, should "completely change the socio-economic landscape of the country," thereby opening a "new era of development and prosperity of the kingdom" [1].

However, on the way to implementing the ambitious reform program proposed by Crown Prince Muhammad ibn Salman in April 2016, there are a number of problems that are rarely covered in the official information resources of the kingdom. At a minimum, Saudi Arabia, being one of the world's largest oil exporters, still receives, according to various estimates, from 30 per cent to 40 per cent of its real GDP due to Saudi Aramco's income in the form of rent [2]. For this reason, the rental economy of the kingdom is fundamentally based on government spending, which transforms the fiscal role of the state apparatus: it turns into an agent for the allocation of resources.

Not in vain, the founder of the KSA, Abd al-Aziz ibn Abd al-Rahman, described his monarchy as "a huge confederation of tribes united through incredible efforts: military victories, marriage or bribery" [3, p. 85]. Of course, at the present stage, we are talking about "bribery" only in cases of corruption, but the

tradition of generous gifts (albeit in the format of significant social subsidies) by the ruling dynasty remains as one of the basic political practices. In this context, the socio-economic aspects of Vision: 2030 can be considered not only as necessary elements of the program to rid the kingdom of the "oil needle," but also as an attempt to update the Saudi model of the relationship between power and society, which was originally built on the foundation of the traditional system for Arabian tribes patron-client ties.

In many ways, such trends in the reforms of the Crown Prince are due to the "rejuvenation" of Saudi Arabia, which is taking place both at the level of political elites and in the demographic dynamics of the kingdom. Muhammad ibn Salman, the de facto ruler of the KSA, was born in 1985, in 2015 he became one of the youngest defense ministers in the world, and his appointment as crown prince in 2017 completely changed the established sequence of succession, where the over-aged sons of the founding king replaced each other: Salman ibn Abd al-Aziz ascended the throne at the age of 80, and his predecessor, Abdullah, at the age of 81. This shift towards the younger generation of the ruling dynasty, is mainly aligned with the change in the average age of the inhabitants of the kingdom, which at the present stage is less than 30 years.

Labor Immigrants and the Politics of Saudization

According to the open data of the General Statistical Office of Saudi Arabia (GASTAT – General Authority for Statistics), in the period from 2010 to 2022, the number of inhabitants of the country increased from 24 million to 32,2 million people [4], i.e. in 12 years the population has increased by more than a quarter. At the same time, in the analytical materials of GASTAT, special emphasis is placed on such factors as 1) *an increase in life expectancy,* 2) *a decrease in the birth rate and* 3) *an increase in the number of labor immigrants*.

To begin with, it is worth paying attention to the last factor, because the ratio of Saudis and non-Saudis in 2022 was 58,4 per

cent to 41,6 per cent, or about 18,8 million to 13,3 million. In 2010, similar indicators were 58,75 per cent to 41,25 per cent, or about 14,1 million to 9,9 million. Of course, against the background of other monarchies of the Gulf, the situation with labor migrants in Saudi Arabia does not look critical. For example, in Kuwait, the share of foreigners before the increase in the number of deportations in 2018 exceeded 60 per cent [5], in Bahrain as of 2021 it reached 52,2 per cent, in Qatar – from 85 per cent to 90 per cent, in the United Arab Emirates - over 88 per cent [6, p. 45–50].

However, the leadership of Saudi Arabia, since the mid-1970s, has been striving to reduce the number of labor immigrants and replace them with citizens of the kingdom. At the official level, the policy of Saudization (nationalization of the workforce) has been entrenched since the inclusion of the relevant points in the Fourth Development Plan (1985–1989), during the implementation of which many undocumented guest workers were deported, and the entry rules and the process of obtaining work visas were significantly tightened. Later, the KSA leadership decided that in the process of Saudization by 2003, the share of citizens among employees of companies where more than 20 people work should be 30 per cent and further increase by 5 per cent annually [7, p. 298].

Nevertheless, the real state of affairs left much to be desired, and the government's aspirations were contrary to the interests of companies. In the mid-2000s, company executives began negotiating with senior officials in order to achieve a reduction in the indicators outlined in the Fourth Development Plan, because the domestic labor market could not meet the demand for either low-skilled or highly skilled labor. As a result, in the summer of 2006, King Abdullah (2005–2015) agreed to reduce the required percentage of citizens among company employees from 30 per cent to 10 per cent.

In December 2014, one of the leading English-language publications of the KSA – Arab News – reported, that, according to Saleh al-Aytem, president of the National Committee of Young Entrepreneurs, The Ministry of Labor "shows no signs of interest in new [Saudization] projects and does not promote its

decision to create additional jobs for the Saudis," while over the past year, more than 212 thousand enterprises, under pressure from supervisory authorities, ceased their activities due to the refusal to hire citizens and "tweak" books [8].

Such materials in the heavily censored Saudi media were a red flag. One of the main tasks of the Ninth Development Plan (2010–2015) to reduce the unemployment rate to 5,5 per cent was not fulfilled, and the KSA Ministry of Labor developed a law according to which employers involved in fictitious Saudization were to be punished with 5 years in prison or a fine of up to 10 million riyals (about $270 thousand) [9]. The document also stated that companies that violate the law will be deprived of the right to hire employees, receive government loans and participate in government tenders.

The Problem of Unemployment and Youth

It should be noted that by "fictitious Saudization" the kingdom's authorities mean a situation where a company registers a KSA subject with the social security authorities as an employee, without actually employing him, in order to formally accomplish the state quota for hiring Saudis. To combat such violations, the Ministry of Labor has been developing a special register since the mid-2010s on the website of the Social Security Service, where every unemployed Saudi can check his personal data using the number of the national identity card. If an unemployed citizen of the kingdom finds himself in the database, then he is obliged to promptly report it to the ministry via a hotline or through a special section of the official website of the department.

To optimize this process and strengthen control over employment in February 2020, by decree of King Salman, the Ministry of Labor was merged with the Ministry of Civil Service into a new department – the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, one of the main goals of which was "creating conditions for employment of Saudis" [10]. However, despite the ongoing reforms, the situation with unemployment among citizens in Saudi Arabia remains quite difficult.

According to the data of the General Statistical Office GASTAT for the fourth quarter of 2023, the total unemployment rate in the kingdom (both among citizens and among foreigners) decreased by 7,7 per cent, and the employment-population ratio in Saudi Arabia increased by 0,2 per cent compared with the 3rd quarter of 2023 and reached 47,4 per cent [11]. At the same time, the share of the working-age population as a whole is 72,8 per cent (slightly more than 23 million people), of which 64,8 per cent are men (about 14 million) and 35,2 per cent are women (about 8 million) [12].

It is worth pointing out that even within the framework of official statistics, there is a clear imbalance in the level of participation of Saudi men and women in the employment of the working-age population of the kingdom. Among women in Saudi Arabia, the employment-to-population ratio reached 30,7 per cent in 2023, but their representation in the total workforce dropped to 35,5 per cent, which led to unemployment among women of working age reaching 13,7 per cent by early 2024. At the same time, among the men of Saudi Arabia in 2023, the ratio of the number of employees to the total population and the level of participation in labor activity was 63,5 per cent to 66,6 per cent, respectively.

At the same time, the major part the unemployed among young people (both among men and women) are people with higher education. According to the Center for Strategic and Contemporary Research, in 2022, approximately 67 per cent of all Saudis belonged to the age group under 34 years old, and over 60 per cent of all unemployed were people from 20 to 29 years old, of which 53,5 per cent had a bachelor's degree and 24,9 per cent had a master's degree or a higher degree [13]. To a great extent, this situation is due to the fact that government programs to support higher education (in particular, abroad through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program) are much more effective than the policy of replacing foreign workers with citizens of the kingdom.

Although the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development is actively promoting laws on Saudization in the

sphere of higher education, the academic sector of Saudi Arabia was poorly prepared for such changes, although public and private universities, unlike private business, obeyed the new requirements. The posts of teachers and researchers in higher education institutions of the KSA are still distributed approximately equally between citizens and foreigners, while administrative positions (deans of faculties, heads of departments, executive directors of research centers, methodologists, managers for international cooperation, etc.) are almost completely assigned to the Saudis [14, p. 33–34]. Moreover, teachers from among the citizens receive indefinite contracts, and foreigners, as a rule, conclude contracts for a period of 3 to 5 years.

Nevertheless, the academic sector of Saudi Arabia is not able to provide enough jobs for youth with higher education. In addition, not every holder of a diploma in the kingdom has the necessary specialty or qualifications to work in oil or investment companies, which are the largest employers in the KSA, and the state apparatus does not need such a number of employees.

Urbanization and Demographic Transition

In such a situation, the leadership of Saudi Arabia needs to create and develop new sectors of the economy that would not only provide jobs for young people with higher education, but also implement the goals of the Vision: 2030 program to diversify the economy and get rid of the "oil needle." In particular, at the initiative of the Crown Prince, at the present stage, an infrastructure for non-religious tourism is being created in Saudi Arabia, and the entertainment industry is actively developing.

Notably, according to official data from the Ministry of Tourism, in the post-pandemic period, the number of tourists visiting the kingdom increased by more than one third: if in 2022 16,64 million foreign tourists visited Saudi Arabia, then in 2023 the figure reached 27,42 million people [15]. At the same time, the number of pilgrims in 2023 amounted to 11.46 million people, which brought over 77 billion riyals (about $20 billion),

and the number of non-religious tourists was almost half – 6,25 million people, thanks to which the kingdom earned a little more than 21 billion riyals (about $5,6 billion). Of course, such indicators in official statistics raise certain doubts, because in the public space there is very little third-party and independent analytics due to the lack of open data.

However, the volume of investments by the leadership of Saudi Arabia in the tourism infrastructure and entertainment industry indicate that new sectors of the kingdom's economy will continue to develop actively in the coming years. For example, KSA is preparing to host the Olympic Esports Games in 2025 and the World Cup in 2034, and as part of the implementation of the National Gaming and Esports Strategy (NGES) in 2022 created 39 thousand jobs in the field of game development and organization of specialized events [16].

Nevertheless, if we ignore the official statistics and the prospects for the development of the Saudi economy, then there will be a number of serious problems on the way to the implementation of the ambitious plans of the new generation of the KSA leadership, namely, the uneven distribution of the population in the context of a demographic transition and high rates of urbanization.

More than 67 per cent (over 21,7 million people) of the total population live in three regions of the kingdom – Mecca (8,021,463 people), Riyadh (8,591,748 people) and the Eastern Province (5,125,254 people) [17]. This situation is explained by the fact that the largest cities of Saudi Arabia are located in these administrative districts, which attract new residents with a high rate of infrastructure development, housing and jobs. According to some estimates, population growth in Jeddah, Mecca, Riyadh and Dammam is 45 per cent, which exceeds the national average by 34 per cent [18]. At the same time, the largest outflow of population to cities is noted among young people.

As for the demographic transition in Saudi Arabia, it becomes obvious when considering changes in the age structure of the population, which has already been discussed in detail earlier. It should only be noted that an increase in life expectancy

and a decrease in the birth rate (the total share of the disabled population is more than 27 per cent) against the background of youth unemployment significantly increases the financial burden on the leadership of Saudi Arabia, which is obliged to engage in social security not only to ensure the basic functions of the state, but also to maintain one of the key practices of the entire traditional political system of Saudi society.

Conclusion

Thus, in the context of the analysis of the demographic factor in the socio-economic development of Saudi Arabia, we can say that the kingdom today is at a critical stage. With the current dynamics, the share of the working-age population will only increase in the coming decades, and if the situation on the labor market does not change, the unemployment situation may reach a critical level, which will subject the financial situation of the kingdom to serious tests and may cause massive discontent among the population.

However, Saudi Arabia is very likely to cope with the problems successfully that arise against the background of the demographic shift, because the strategic development program "Vision: 2030," provided the successful implementation of the socio-economic projects included in it, is able to neutralize most of the crisis phenomena by accelerating the pace of Saudization of existing sectors of the economy and job creation through the formation of new sectors – non-religious tourism and the entertainment industry.

Nevertheless, only 5 years remain before the completion of the necessary reforms, and the situation in the region and on the world stage poses new challenges for the KSA leadership, to overcome which it is necessary to redirect significant resources from domestic development to the foreign policy direction. So far, Muhammad ibn Salman has managed to maintain a balance in foreign policy, as evidenced by the normalization of relations with Iran and a balanced position on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but the current dynamics of conflicts in Yemen and Syria threatens stability throughout the region.

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DANILA KRYLOV. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AS A TOOL OF NATIONAL MODERNIZATION AND FOREIGN POLICY STRATEGY (2023–2025)

Keywords: United Arab Emirates; UAE; digital transformation; digital sovereignty; smart state; financial technology; technological diplomacy; artificial intelligence; international alliances; global competition; international relations.

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Abstract. The article examines the digital transformation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) between 2023 and 2025 as a systemic vector of national modernization and foreign policy. It analyzes the institutional architecture of the digital state, including the development of the smart-state infrastructure, fintech, transport and environmental digitalization, and the UAE's participation in global technological alliances. Special emphasis is given to digital sovereignty and multivector diplomacy in the context of global technological fragmentation. The study argues that the UAE has positioned itself as a neutral platform ("digital bridge") between competing technological blocs, with digitalization evolving from a functional tool into a project of strategic development.

In modern international relations, digital technologies are becoming one of the key factors in the formation of state power, especially for small and medium-sized powers tending to compensate for limited military and demographic resources through innovative approaches. Digitalization has a transformative impact on state institutions, public practices and foreign policy subjectivity, becoming an important object of analysis within the framework of the concept of "smart power," digital sovereignty and global technological competition.

Using the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as an example, digital transformation appears as a strategic component of a national modernization project. Since the beginning of the 2010s the country has been implementing large-scale initiatives in the field of electronic control, artificial intelligence (AI) and big data processing. The policy documents – UAE Vision 2021, UAE Centennial 2071 and National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2031 – consolidate digitalization not only as a tool to increase administrative efficiency, but also as a means to increase global competitiveness and strengthen the country's geo-economic weight.

The digital paradigm in the UAE is based on close synergy between government agencies and the private sector, which

makes it possible to adapt international technological practices to national specifics. In this context, the Emirates is an example of a hybrid technological state that combines centralized strategic planning with the market mechanisms of the digital economy [1].

At the institutional level, the development of digital infrastructure is of particular importance – from smart urban platforms (Smart Dubai, Abu Dhabi Smart City) to electronic identity cards (UAE Pass, TAMM). According to the UN e-Government Development Index, the UAE is consistently among the leaders in the Middle East and North Africa region in terms of digital governance, reflecting the effectiveness of the digital state model. Finally, the UAE's involvement in global digital chains – including telecommunications highways, data centers and transport innovations - demonstrates the formation of the country as a reliable and neutral technological platform in the face of growing geopolitical fragmentation and clustering. The involvement of companies such as Amazon Web Services, Google Cloud, Huawei and Nokia serves as an indicator of the technological authority and "recognition" of the United Arab Emirates. Thus, the digital transformation in the UAE is not only an internal modernization, but also an instrument of foreign policy influence, which allows the country to take an active position in a multi-level system of international relations – from logistics and financial technologies to AI regulation and cybersecurity.

Public Investment and Infrastructure "Smart State"

The policy of digital transformation of the United Arab Emirates in the post-pandemic period demonstrates stable dynamics, supported by consistent state investments in the formation of the infrastructure of the "smart state." This infrastructure involves strategically important sectors – transport, healthcare, urban management, financial technology and environmental monitoring – and relies on the introduction of artificial intelligence, the Internet of Things, quantum

computing and big data processing [2]. Thus, digitalization is becoming not only a technological, but also a structural factor in the new government.

The key area of modernization is the transformation of the urban environment. So, in 2023, the phases of digital integration of city services were completed in Dubai and Abu Dhabi: as part of the Digital Dubai initiative, more than 1,300 services were converted into electronic format, with recurrent interdepartmental connectivity. A logical continuation of this trend was the beginning of the implementation of the Smart City Hub project in Ajman in 2024, an experimental zone in which digital algorithms provide comprehensive management of energy consumption, transport and communal infrastructure.

In the transport sector, digitalization is aimed at achieving autonomy and adaptability of urban mobility. In 2023, Dubai started testing routes with support for V2X (vehicle-to-everything), providing information interaction of transport with the urban environment. In March 2025, an autonomous taxi project was launched in Abu Dhabi with the participation of the Chinese company WeRide. In parallel, a system of automatic verification of digital tickets has been introduced in the Dubai metro, optimizing access procedures and reducing the burden on staff. Among other things, this technology is aimed at preventing men from entering women-only wagons.

A large-scale update is also observed in the health care system. In 2024, AI systems for interpreting tomographic data were introduced in clinics in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah, which increased the accuracy of early diagnosis of cancer. In March 2025, a pilot platform for the detection of tuberculosis based on X-ray image analysis, developed jointly with the UAE Ministry of Health, was presented. The concomitant introduction of digital health cards ensured the synchronization of data from private and public medical institutions, strengthening the integration of the sector [3].

In the sector of financial technologies, the emphasis is on achieving digital sovereignty. In 2023, the UAE Central Bank launched a platform for cross-border settlements using the

central bank's digital currency (CBDC), tested in cooperation with Saudi Arabia and China. In February 2025, the national payment system Jaywan, built into the Al Etihad Payments platform, was introduced, and a system of non-card transactions using biometrics was announced. These steps are aimed at reducing dependence on global acquiring systems and the formation of a localized architecture of settlement services.

The digital transformation of the economy of the United Arab Emirates in the period 2023–2025 covers not only high-tech sectors, but also traditional industries, forming a model of the economy based on innovation and human capital. In addition to major sectors, alternative forms of the digital economy are beginning to play a prominent role. The growing interest in the production of synthetic diamonds highly demanded in the jewelry and electronics industries illustrates the desire for diversification through niche areas.

Tourism and creative industries are also integrating digital solutions into the growth strategy. In 2024–2025 augmented reality systems, smart guides, digital booking platforms and analysts of tourist behavioral models were introduced. As a result, Dubai entered the top three tourist megacities in terms of technological saturation and digital attractiveness, which is confirmed by international ratings.

The environmental component is also becoming an element of digital transformation. In 2023, within the framework of the UAE National Transparency Monitoring, Reporting and Verification System in Dubai, a network of air quality and carbon emission monitoring sensors has been deployed in Sharjah and Al Ain, the data from which are used to predict climate risks. In 2025, artificial intelligence algorithms began to be used to analyze the sustainability of planning and zoning decisions, integrating environmental priorities into the digital planning model.

Thus, the development of the "smart state" infrastructure in the UAE demonstrates not only technological maturity, but also institutional depth. By combining strategic planning, regulatory support and integration of innovation, the Emirates is

forming a sustainable governance model that can adapt to external challenges and strengthen the country's international position. In addition, digitalization is becoming an integral element of the UAE's economic strategy, providing structural transformation, technological autonomy and resistance to global risks [4].

International Technology Alliances as Part of UAE's Foreign Policy Strategy

In the context of increasing geo-economic competition and fragmentation of the global digital space, technological alliances are gaining importance for the UAE not only as a tool for modernization, but also as a key resource for foreign policy positioning [5]. Unlike traditional forms of diplomatic and military-political interaction, technological cooperation allows the state to implement a strategy of "soft power" in the digital dimension, combining flexibility, pragmatism and diversification of international partnerships [6].

The most significant in this context is the strategy for forming multi-vector alliances. In 2024, a trilateral agreement was concluded between the telecommunications operator du, the American cloud platform Amazon Web Services (AWS) and the Finnish corporation Nokia, providing for the development of the fifth generation network infrastructure (5G) and the construction of new data centers. This project was an important milestone in strengthening the UAE's digital sovereignty while expanding ties with Western technological ecosystems.

At the same time, the strategy of digital neutrality remains an important element of the Emirates' foreign policy pragmatics. In 2023–2024 agreements were concluded with leading companies, including Google Cloud, Microsoft, Alibaba Cloud and Huawei. Thus, the Huawei regional cloud center, opened in Dubai in 2023, has become part of an initiative to localize computing power and support government digital projects, without reference to geopolitical guidelines.

The transport and logistics sphere, as a space of intersection of national interests with global innovations, especially clearly illustrates the multi-vector nature of technological alliances. Thus, a partnership with China is developing within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, which involves transport, aviation and digital areas. For example, in 2024, China Eastern Airlines expanded its route network, strengthening the aviation connectivity of Emirati hubs with East Asian megacities.

In 2025, the UAE entered into an agreement with the American Archer Aviation to conduct pilot tests of eVTOL electric aircraft. At the same time, the Japanese corporation Toyota held a closed demonstration of unmanned concept cars in Dubai. Thus, the country is securing the role of an experimental platform for testing new technological solutions outside the framework of geopolitical dependence.

The foreign policy importance of technological alliances is strengthened by the active participation of the UAE in the formation of a global regulatory framework. In 2024–2025 the country participated and initiated a number of international forums, including the Global AI Governance Summit and the World Government Summit, where initiatives to standardize artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital currencies were promoted. Simultaneously, national certification and accreditation centers are developing, which increases the confidence of transnational partners in the Emirati digital infrastructure.

Therefore, in 2023–2025 UAE technology diplomacy has ceased to be a peripheral element of state policy and has acquired a systemic nature. Against the backdrop of global technological polarization, the Emirates are forming the identity of a "digital bridge" – an institutionally stable, normatively transparent and geopolitically neutral platform. This model combines technological inclusivity with economic attractiveness and regulated openness, making technology alliances a fundamental resource of long-term foreign policy strategy.

Problematic Aspects and Challenges of the UAE Digital Transformation

Despite the stable dynamics of the digital transformation of the United Arab Emirates and the demonstrated institutional successes, a number of structural risks and challenges remain in the process of digitalization that can limit the long-term sustainability of the smart state model.

One of the most pressing challenges remains cybersecurity. With global digital interdependence and enhanced geopolitical competition, the UAE's critical infrastructure is becoming a potential target for cyber attacks. Previously recorded incidents, including attacks on government portals and banking systems, indicate the continuing vulnerability of the country's digital ecosystem and the need for constant modernization of cyber defense mechanisms.

Another important aspect is the risk of digital inequality. The rapid adoption of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing and blockchain requires a high degree of digital literacy and adaptation from the population. However, disparities in access to digital resources, especially among older citizens, migrants, and residents of peripheral territories, can deepen social stratification and generate new forms of marginalization.

An additional problem is dependence on global technology corporations. Despite the multi-vector policy of technological alliances, a significant part of infrastructure solutions is implemented with the participation of foreign companies. Such dependence potentially reduces technological autonomy and leaves the UAE vulnerable to political sanctions, export restrictions or the transformation of international data norms.

In the field of policy management, issues related to the rights to personal data, transparency of algorithmic decisions and responsibility for the actions of automated systems remain unresolved. The use of biometric identification and video analytics systems in public space requires the development of an ethically

and legally balanced regulatory framework that can ensure a balance between security and the protection of individual rights [4].

Thus, the strategic digitalization of the UAE is associated not only with institutional advantages, but also with a number of challenges, overcoming which involves strengthening regulatory, social and technical sustainability. Achieving the long-term effectiveness of digital transformation requires strengthening cyber resilience mechanisms, developing an inclusive digital environment, and creating a full-fledged sovereign digital context.

Conclusion

Digital transformation in the United Arab Emirates 2023–2025 demonstrates a systemic model of institutional development in which technology is not an auxiliary element, but forms the core of national modernization. The UAE is building a holistic digital state architecture that combines sustainable infrastructure, regulatory flexibility, global cooperation and strategic autonomy.

At the internal level, digitalization ensures the efficiency of public administration, economic adaptability and improving the quality of life. The integration of artificial intelligence, big data and the Internet of Things in key areas illustrates the transition to a platform management model focused on sustainability and security.

In the foreign policy dimension, digitalization is becoming a tool for expanding international subjectivity. Through technology alliances, multi-vector partnerships and participation in global forums on the regulation of AI and digital currencies, the UAE is securing the status of a "digital bridge" between competing technological blocks. The strategy of technological neutrality allows the Emirates to form a unique zone of digital trust, attractive to both Western and Eastern partners.

The economic dimension of digital transformation is manifested in the formation of a new structure of national wealth – from financial technologies and e-commerce to creative industries and sustainable industries. In this context, the UAE is becoming

not just a consumer of technology, but a generator of new forms of digital economy that can have cross-border influence.

Thus, the digital transformation of the UAE takes form of a strategic project, within the framework of which technological renewal serves as the basis for both internal stability and modernization, and for proactive foreign policy expansion. This gives digitalization not only applied, but also geostrategic significance, making it one of the key vectors of the country's positioning in the changing architecture of international relations.

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EKATERINA KOCHETKOVA. DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION IN MALAYSIA

Keywords: Malaysia; economy; bumiputra; Anwar Ibrahim; Southeast Asia.

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Abstract. The article examines the current demographic and socio-economic situation in Malaysia, the peculiarities of the ethno-confessional

structure of Malaysian society, as well as key factors contributing to the successful economic development of the country, despite the difficult global situation and a number of internal problems faced by the government headed by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Malaysia, known for its rich cultural traditions and beautiful tropical landscapes, contrasting with modern dynamic cities, can rightfully be called the economic center of Southeast Asia. The country is divided by the South China Sea into two regions: Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia on the island of Kalimantan. Peninsular Malaysia shares a land border with Thailand, while East Malaysia borders Indonesia and Brunei. Its maritime borders divide Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines.

According to the latest UN data as of January 25, 2025, the population of Malaysia amounted to 35,795,710 people [1]. It ranks 44th in the world in terms of population and 18th in Asia. Malaysia accounts for 0,44 per cent of the world's population and 0,74 per cent of the population of Asia [2].

According to experts, the country's population in mid-2025 will reach 35,977,838 people. The average age of Malaysian residents is 31 years [3].

As of January 2025, Malaysia's population density was 105 people per square kilometer (272,3/mi2). According to the United Nations Statistics Division, Malaysia has a total area of 329,740 km2 (127,313 mi2). The total area is the sum of the land and water areas within the international borders and its coastline. The population density is calculated as the constant number of Malaysian residents divided by the total area of the country [4].

However, these indicators do not reflect the real situation completely, since only coastal zones can be considered well-inhabited, while dispersed small semi-nomadic groups of aborigines who do not actively participate in the economic life of the country live on high grounds covered with dense vegetation of impenetrable jungle. In peninsular Malaysia, more than 70 per

cent of all its inhabitants are concentrated on the developed western coastal part.

Approximately three-quarters of Malaysia's population lives in cities, among which there are several large metropolitan areas. The capital Kuala Lumpur is the largest city in the country with a population of 1,809,699 million people [5], at the same time it is also the center of all financial and commercial activities of the country. Although Kuala Lumpur is the only city with more than a million people, there are several major cities with between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people, including Kajang, Seberang Perai, Subang Jaya, Klang, Johor Bahru, Shah Alam.

In 2024, Malaysia's natural population growth was positive, as the number of births exceeded the number of deaths by 411,864. Due to external migration, the population increased by 105,186 people. The sex ratio in the total population was 1,029 (1029 males per 1000 females), higher than the global average. As of 2024, the global sex ratio was approximately 1016 males per 1000 females [3].

In 1950, the population of Malaysia was about 6,02 million, an increase of 494 per cent over 74 years. Annual population growth ranges from 400 thousand to 500 thousand people [2].

In the 1960s the population of Malaysia was 8,16 million people, which gradually increased to 10,91 million in 1970. In 1980, the population of Malaysia grew to 13,83 million people, after which there was a sharp jump, and in 1994 the population reached 20,21 million people. Finally, in 2011, the population was already 28,86 million people [6].

The life expectancy of men at birth is 71,1 years, women – 76,7 years. The total life expectancy (of both sexes) at birth in Malaysia is 73,8 years. This is higher than the average life expectancy at birth in the world, which is about 71 years (according to the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs) [3].

If external migration remains at the level of the previous year (2024), the population will increase by 106,778 people in 2025 due to migration processes. This means that the number of people who move to Malaysia (not their homeland) to settle in

this country on a permanent basis (immigrants) will exceed the number of people who leave the country to permanently settle in another country (emigrants) [7].

The population growth rate is 1,149 per cent [8], which indicates its stability. In addition, high natural population growth, as well as the sex ratio, which is constantly within the normal range, have a positive effect on the future development of the country. Life expectancy at 73,8 years further confirms the stability and quality of life in Malaysia. Continuing migration processes also have an impact on the overall demographic situation in the country.

This steady positive trend, which has been observed since 2016 and is projected to continue at least until 2029, also goes along with growth rates in other ASEAN countries.

As fertility rates gradually decline, population growth rates should also gradually shrink. However, according to statistics (since life expectancy is gradually increasing), this factor can still stimulate population growth. In Malaysia, this results in a healthy age structure with a large group of working-age people who can provide for fewer older and younger people. Thus, the population of Malaysia is growing steadily due to the natural growth and growth of migration.

The continuing increase in population and, hence, labour force, should also lead to an increase in gross domestic product (GDP) and economic performance in general. This becomes especially noticeable if the country has a high employment rate. Given the generally low unemployment rate in Malaysia, it may safely be assumed that GDP will continue to grow in the near future.

Even though Malaysia is a secular state and its constitution guarantees religious freedom, Islam is the state religion. According to the latest census conducted by the Malaysian government in 2020, 63,5 per cent of the population professes Islam, 18,7 per cent – Buddhism, 9,1 per cent – Christianity, 6,1 per cent – Hinduism, 1,8 per cent - atheism, and 0,9 per cent belong to other religious groups, including animists, Confucians, Taoists, Sikhs and Baha'is. Almost all Muslims in the country

profess Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i madhhab [9]. Ethnic Malays, who are born Muslim under the federal constitution, make up more than half the population. Rural areas, especially on the east coast of the peninsula, are predominantly Muslim, while the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo have relatively more non-Muslims. Malaysians of Chinese descent mainly practice Buddhism; some are Christians or Muslims, and live mainly in states on the west coast, especially in Kedah, Pinang, Perak, Selangor, Malacca and Johor. Malaysians of Indian descent are mostly Hindu, although some are Muslim, Christian or Sikh. The northern districts of Kedah and Kelantan states have a very small Malaysian Thai Buddhist community. Two thirds of the country's Christian population live in the eastern states of Malaysia - Sabah and Sarawak [9].

Buddhism is the second largest religion, practiced by 18,7 per cent of the population. 83,6 per cent of the Chinese population of Malaysia consider themselves Buddhists, while a significant number of believers profess Taoism (3,4 per cent) and Christianity (11,1 per cent), among them there are also a small number of Muslims in regions such as Pinang.

Among other groups, 9,1 per cent of the population professes Christianity, 6,1 per cent – Hinduism, 1,3 per cent – Confucianism, Taoism and other traditional Chinese religions. The remaining 2,7 per cent do not identify with any religion, which can mean agnosticism, atheism or "nothing concrete."

The majority of Indians in Malaysia profess Hinduism (86,2 per cent), with a significant minority identifying themselves as Christian (6,0 per cent) or Muslim (4,1 per cent). Christianity is the predominant religion of the non-Malay Bumiputra community – the indigenous people of the country (46,5 per cent), while another 40,4 per cent consider themselves Muslims [10].

Malaysia's constitution defines the secular nature of the polity, but Islam has an undeniable and growing influence on Malaysia's legal foundations and the country's political institutions. Malaysia has a dual legal system: one handles most civil and criminal cases and is based on the common law system, while the other includes sharia courts, which deal mainly with

family and some civil cases of Muslims. Although sharia courts only formally have jurisdiction over cases involving Muslims, their influence often extends to other issues as their decisions often deal with conversion to Islam and issues such as child custody, burial sites and inheritance.

The Malaysian leadership maintains a parallel legal system in which some civil issues for Muslims are governed by Sharia. In the legal system, the question of the relationship between Sharia and civil law has not yet been resolved, while the responsibility for observing Sharia lies with state governments. The federal and state governments have the right to establish doctrines for Muslims and promote Sunni Islam, giving it the preference over other religious groups. The government continues to impose restrictions on religious gatherings and rites of Islamic religious groups that are not Sunni. Sedition laws criminalize comments that "incite malice, hostility or hatred on religious grounds." The law prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing in Islam. To prevent conversion, the law prevents Muslims from learning other religions. Punishments vary from state to state and include imprisonment and flogging. The law allows Muslims to proselytize without restrictions.

National identity cards must indicate religious affiliation, and the Government uses them to determine which citizens are subject to Shariah. Muslims are identified by fingerprints on the front side of the card, for representatives of other recognized religions in Malaysia, religious affiliation is encrypted in a smart chip inside the identity card. Muslims who are married must carry a special identity card with a photo of themselves and their spouse as a proof of marriage [9].

The population of Malaysia is made up of various ethnic groups. The inhabitants of the country are of Austronesian descent and make up the majority of the population and are known as Bumiputra. Among the Bumiputra, Malays are the main and most numerous group and make up about half of the total population of the country. Bumiputra status is also granted to some non-Malay indigenous peoples, including ethnic Thais, Khmers, Chams, and indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak.

According to the latest available data, 58 per cent of the population are Bumiputra Malays (12,2 per cent are other Bumiputra representatives are aborigines), 22,6 per cent are Malaysian Chinese, and 6,6 per cent are Malaysian Indians [11]. Among Indians, Tamils make up the largest subgroup. Other nationalities include the Malayalis, Telugu and Punjabis. Arabs and Nepalese also make up a significant part of the population.

The formation of a grand coalition government (the so-called "unity") under the leadership of Anwar Ibrahim[1] after November 15, 2022 has brought greater ethnic and religious diversity back to the government. Notably, several non-Muslims have been given key posts. The new opposition, which includes the pro-Malay PAS and Bersatu parties, has made it clear that they are ready to "add fuel to the fire" of ethnic tensions, which could put the country's leadership led by Anwar Ibrahim to new tests. Thus, it is unclear whether the new government will be able to reverse or even slow down some of the processes started by conservative Islamist movements. Local human rights organizations and religious leaders continue to express concern about the increasing "Islamization" of politics, citing sophisticated social media campaigns that conservative Islamic organizations use to encourage young people to adopt a more conservative interpretation of Islam. People who have converted to Islam from other religions sometimes face serious stigmatization. Muslim women who do not wear headscarves or do not conform to religious beliefs of modesty are often condemned in public or on social media. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that while 62 per cent of adults said that religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity makes the country a better place to live, about half of Muslim respondents believe that the growing number of Christians and Buddhists pose a threat to Islam in the country. [9].

Southeast Asia is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world, and Malaysia is at the center of it. It is called the new Asian tiger because of its rapid economic growth. Malaysia's favorable demographics, strategic location and growing middle class have led to a longstanding period of economic growth that

began in the 1990s. Malaysia tends to reach an upper-middle-income level by 2026. The country has one of the highest living standards in Southeast Asia and a low unemployment rate, which in 2024 remained at the same level of 3,3 per cent [12]. Despite significant reductions in poverty and income gaps between ethnic groups over the past few decades, Malaysia still has regional disparities in both income and human capital outcomes. The country's low tax revenues, at 12 per cent of GDP, are well below the average of 18 per cent for upper-middle-income countries. These limited financial opportunities are constraining the poor initiatives and investments that could boost inclusive growth. In general, the IMF estimated the country's GDP per capita (PPP) in 2023 at $37,083 [13].

The average monthly income of the population of Malaysia in 2024 was 730,5 dollars. The level of labor force participation in the Malaysian economy remained at the same level of 70,3 per cent [12].

Among its neighbors in Southeast Asia, Malaysia is distinguished by high labor productivity, which is reflected in its high position in the competitiveness rating. Malaysia's economy is diverse and includes developed agriculture, fishing, rich hydrocarbon reserves, and services. The production of electronics and household appliances, the automotive industry is actively developing. Malaysia also remains one of the world's leading exporters of palm oil and rubber.

The major factor of Malaysia's economic growth is the country's strategic location in the Southeast Asian region, which provides access to the world's fastest-growing economies, such as China and India. In addition, Malaysia's diversified economy, based on industries such as manufacturing, services, and agriculture, is another major driver of its economic growth.

Malaysia has a strong trading performance. It is highly dependent on trade, exports account for about 70 per cent of the country's GDP [14]. Malaysia is a major exporter of manufactured goods, including electronics, machinery and chemicals. It is also a major exporter of natural resources such as palm oil, rubber, oil and gas. Despite the difficulties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Malaysia's trade performance has remained high. Malaysia's

exports rose 26 per cent to a record level of 1,2 trillion Malaysian ringgit (RM) in 2021 from the previous year, according to data from Malaysia's Department of Statistics (DOSM), as the country's December figure increased 29,2 per cent to 123,8 billion Malaysian ringgit, boosted by sales of electrical and electronic products to major importers such as China, the US and Singapore. The department stated that the increase in the value of Malaysia's exports in 2021 was also due to an increase in sales of petroleum products and palm oil-based products [15].

Particular attention is paid to attracting foreign direct investment, in particular, in high-growth high-value-added (HGHV) industries, including electrical and electronics, smart agriculture and renewable energy. Skilled personnel and relatively low wages are increasing Malaysia's interest in the eyes of foreign manufacturers who are moving their production facilities to the country. Tourism is actively developing, which annually brings tens of billions of US dollars to the Malaysian economy.

Malaysia also invests in technology and innovation to foster economic growth and promote the adoption of advanced technologies such as automation and artificial intelligence in manufacturing and other industries.

Malaysia's economy ranks third in Southeast Asia after Indonesia and Thailand. In 2023, Malaysia's GDP was estimated at $445,52 billion, and GDP per capita – at $13,315 [13].

In recent years, economic growth in Malaysia has been relatively stable: on average over the past decade, it was about 5 per cent per year, a temporary decline was observed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the economic situation in Malaysia underwent significant changes in July 2024, when GDP growth in the third quarter slowed to 5,3 per cent year-on-year, compared with 5,9 per cent in the second quarter. Nevertheless, growth was faster than markets expected and was generally stable [16]. The country's trade balance in July 2024 amounted to only $6,40 billion decreased by $7,90 billion month-on-month [17]. One of the most visible signs of Malaysia's economic problems may be the depreciation of its national currency – ringgit. In mid-2024, the government was actively discussing the

possible reasons for such a significant change, including external trade sanctions, fluctuations in export markets and domestic economic factors. The Ministry of Economy was preparing measures to mitigate the negative consequences of this decline and stabilize the economic situation in the country. In general, citizens poorly reacted to the deterioration of Malaysia's economic situation, and the middle strata were most affected. Despite the fact that the Malaysian economy is historically one of the fastest growing in Southeast Asia, the country's GDP growth in 2023 fell to 3,6 per cent, the economy went through hard times, this is the second lowest figure in more than ten years [18].

Malaysia's economic performance improved as expected in the third quarter of 2024, almost reaching official economic forecasts due to increased investment and domestic spending.

Gross domestic product rose 5,3 per cent in the July-September period from a year ago, in line with a preliminary estimate and the median forecast in a Bloomberg News poll of analysts. According to the Bank of Negar and Statistics Malaysia on November 15, 2024, over the previous three months, the economy grew by 1,8 per cent. Malaysia's economy has largely recovered from 2023, keeping officials optimistic that the full-year figure will hold, which could exceed the initial forecast of 4–5 per cent growth.

The Ministry of Finance in October 2024 raised its forecast for annual growth from 4,8 per cent to 5,3 per cent and expects further improvement in 2025, as it plans to raise the minimum wage and position the country as a neutral haven for international investors, assuming that US President Donald Trump will impose duties against China [19].

The Central Bank estimates that the shrinking interest rate differential between Malaysia and the United States, as well as domestic factors, are likely to continue to support the national currency, the ringgit.

The Malaysian ringgit became the only emerging Asian currency to strengthen against the dollar by the end of 2024.

At the same time sustained rapid and inclusive economic growth for half a century has brought Malaysia closer to the

threshold of being a high-income country. The economy has proved resistant to recent shocks, and inflation remains subdued.

Overall, Malaysia's multi-year development is largely due to the successful use of five-year strategic plans to implement management programs. The current economic strategy of the country is expounded in the MADANI economic program. The program has two goals: to restructure Malaysia's economy to regain its status as a leading Asian economy or "Asian tiger," and to ensure a fair distribution of wealth. It also includes a number of roadmaps and strategies, including the National Energy Transition Road Map (NETR), the New Industrial Master Plan 2030 (NIMP), the mid-term review of Malaysia's Twelfth Development Plan (12MP) and the current budget [20].

Malaysia tends to transform the existing manufacturing sector, which is an important component of Malaysia's economy, and get benefit from global trends, focusing on high value-added industries such as electronics and electrical engineering (including semiconductors), machinery and equipment, petroleum, chemicals, and chemical products.

Malaysia seeks to accelerate the digitalization process to benefit from the digital market. In this regard, a new Ministry of Digital Technology has been established in the country, which will conduct the digital transformation of the government. Malaysia plans to expand the digital market in 2025 to 22,6 per cent of GDP. The country has one of the highest rates of digital penetration in Southeast Asia: more than 80 per cent of the population are active Internet users [18].

The Malaysian government has taken a number of measures to support economic growth, in particular increasing spending on infrastructure projects and social welfare programs.

Malaysia is working on diversifying its economy to reduce its dependence on natural resources and move towards more lucrative industries such as technology and services. This strategy has been successful: the service sector now accounts for about 56 per cent of Malaysia's GDP [21]. Further diversification of the country's economy is expected to contribute to GDP growth in the long term.

Another important factor contributing to Malaysia's economic growth is the country's political stability. Since the government of Anwar Ibrahim came to power, the political situation in Malaysia has remained quite stable, which attracts significant foreign direct investment in the country. Malaysia aims to become a regional leader in clean energy. With huge potential in solar, hydropower and biomass, the authorities have introduced a number of incentives to attract green investments. Obviously, the growth of the Malaysian economy will continue in the near future, albeit at a slower pace due to various factors such as commodity price fluctuations, geopolitical tensions, etc. The government's efforts to support economic recovery are also expected to contribute to Malaysia's economic growth in the coming years. The country has every chance to recover and continue to grow due to factors such as its strategic location, diversified economy, investment in technology and innovation, and political stability.

Malaysia has a well-educated workforce that meets many of the needs of an export-oriented economy, although the country still depends on low-wage migrant labor. Ethnic divisions rooted in the colonial era remain a serious problem and have been exacerbated by growing interfaith divisions. Infrastructure generally meets the requirements of the well-developed west coast of the Malay Peninsula, but there is a lack of infrastructure in rural areas and parts of East Malaysia.

The Government of Malaysia effectively uses available human, financial and organizational resources. The administrative staff of the Government is also generally considered to be highly professional.

A number of projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) were initiated about 10 years ago. These include, for example, the "Malacca Gate" (a planned coastal development project near Malacca), the East Coast railway line, and the Trans-Saharan gas pipeline. Several key projects were abandoned or suspended following the election of Mahathir Mohamad's[2] government and the pandemic for a number of reasons, including apparent close ties between project developers and

former political leaders, unclear economic justifications and a lack of transparency in the procurement process.

While domestic problems continue to attract the attention of politicians, Malaysia's diplomatic ties may face difficulties in an increasingly difficult external environment. Both the United States and China are exerting pressure on Malaysia to "take the side." Malaysia resolutely adheres to strategic neutrality, while maintaining the ability to cooperate with different parties on a variety of issues. From the point of view of Malaysia, this approach is the most reasonable and balanced. However, the situation may become more volatile as commitments to various international agreements enter into force, including the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Malaysia needs to work even more closely with its regional neighbors to ensure the desired central role of ASEAN and to prevent external forces from influencing the internal established architecture in the region.

Moreover, Malaysia seeks to benefit from its strategic position, existing infrastructure as well as "plus one" strategies aimed at ensuring economic security and supply chain sustainability.

All these factors highlight Malaysia's efforts to strengthen its economy, overcome global challenges and maintain domestic political and social stability in the near future and in the long term.

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Notes

1. Anwar bin Ibrahim (born 1947) is a Malaysian statesman and politician, the 10th Prime Minister of Malaysia since 2022.
2. Mahathir bin Mohamad – statesman and politician of Malaysia, Prime Minister of the country in 1981-2003 and 2018–2020.

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VLADIMIR KIRICHENKO. SHIA COMMUNITIES IN THE UK

Keywords: the UK; Shia Islam; Isma'ilism; diasporas.

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Abstract. The article examines the situation of Shia Muslim communities in the UK. Their members are of different ethnic origin and are adherents of different branches of modern Shia Islam. Over time, a large number of Shia Muslim centers have been founded in the UK.

Shia Muslims living in the UK have diverse backgrounds, including those originating from South Asia, East Africa, Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan [1]. Since the early 1970s, Brent[1] has been the London borough where Shi'ites from Iraq and the Gulf States have been settling in large numbers. Immigrants tended to choose Brent due to the rise in housing and rental prices in Central London [2, p. 291]. There are many Shiite organizations located in this part of the capital city of the United Kingdom.

One of the most prominent Shia organizations in the UK is the Khoei Foundation[2], founded in 1989. The main objective of the foundation is education and social welfare of Muslim communities [3]. The Imam Khoei Islamic Centre, one of the foundation's educational institutions, is located in Brent. We should also mention that such centers always have a room for prayers.

Another notable Shia organization is Dar al-Islam, a community center acting as the London base for the Da'wa Party, the main Iraqi Shia Islamist party that led the government between 2005 and 2018. Founded in 1991, the center hosts religious events in accordance with the Shia Islamic calendar. One of the objectives of the institution is to strengthen the ties of British Shia Muslims from Iraq with their homeland. The center attracts mainly middle-class and upper-class Iraqis with secular education that have attained a certain social and economic status. The organization acts as an intermediary between the Da'wa Party in Iraq and the Iraqi diaspora in London. For example, in 1992, the party's political programme was developed by its leaders in London. After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, many members of Dar al-Islam returned to Iraq; some of them even held key political, economic and cultural positions. Two Iraqi Prime Ministers after 2003 – Ibrahim al-Jaafari (b. 1947) and Haider al-Abadi (b. 1952) – have ties with the center [2, p. 296].

Even though precise information on the religious affiliation of Shia Muslims in the UK is unavailable since the UK census does not include question on religious denominations, Iraqi and Iranian Shia Muslim organizations are predominant in London.

It should also be noted that due to the policies of the Iranian regime, especially following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, most Persians in the UK tend to be secular, i.e. religious non-practitioners; therefore, it's mostly Iraqis who go to mosques [4].

According to the 2021 UK census, there were approximately 20 thousand Iraqi citizens living in the country [5]. However, this figure did not include ethnic Iraqis born in the UK or people with Iraqi heritage.

The Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) triggered a wave of Shia immigration from Iraq to the UK in the 1980s. Among the immigrants were the members of the Da'wa Party and their families. In Iraq, they were accused of being of 'Iranian ancestry' and were deported by the regime. The stream of Iraqis flowing to the UK was rather diverse, ranging from traders who had lost their fortunes to semiskilled and unskilled workers with low levels of education. Another wave of migrants arrived in 1990–1991 during the Gulf War and following the Iraqi uprisings of Shi'ites and Kurds. Wealthy Iraqis were able to seek asylum through official channels, while those who had limited resources were dependent on the UK social welfare system.

It is also worth noting that the demographic composition of the Iraqi Shia community in more affluent Kingston somewhat differs from that of Iraqis in North and West London. In Kingston, there are more Iraqis that arrived in the UK before the political exiles of the 1980s; they are typically better off than those who have settled in other parts of London.

Due to their insufficient knowledge of English, those living in less respectable northwest London often drive taxis or work in pizzerias, despite having been engineers, doctors or lawyers at home. Moreover, many Iraqis initially settled in Kingston in the hopes of getting a higher education, only to lose their social status after failing to achieve their aspirations [4].

However, in 2007, more than 1,900 Iraqi-trained doctors were registered with the General Medical Council and working in public hospitals or private healthcare facilities across the UK [6].

According to the Embassy of Iraq in the UK, in 2024, Iraqis formed the second largest group of students after Indians at the

Royal College of Physicians [7]. This can be explained by the fact that there is a shortage of medical specialists in the UK (those living in the cities along the English Channel often go to France for treatment), as well as the high quality of medical education in Iraq[3].

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It should be noted that, Shi'ites in the UK tend to follow certain spiritual leaders, just like in their homeland. This is an inherent characteristic of Shia Islam, which distinguishes it from Sunni Islam. Thus, the followers of Mohammad al-Shirazi (1928–2001) and his younger brothers hold a special place among the Shi'ites of London. Having met Imam Khomeini in Iraq in 1965, al-Shirazi supported the Islamic Revolution in Iran. He then travelled to Iran following the 1979 Revolution. However, al-Shirazi always advised his supporters to maintain independence. His own political and religious ambitions soured his relationship with Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution.

Al-Shirazi believed that Khomeini monopolized key decision-making in the country [8]. Mohammad al-Shirazi also opposed Khamenei's (one of Khomeini's allies at the time) fatwa forbidding tatbir (a ritual involving striking oneself on the head with a sword, practiced on the day of Ashura that commemorates Imam Husayn). After that he was placed under house arrest, remaining confined until his death in 2001. Grand Ayatollah Sadiq al-Shirazi is currently the senior cleric in the al-Shirazi family [9].

In Brent, the al-Shirazi husayniyya[4] – Al-Rasul Al-A'zam ('The Greatest Prophet' in Arabic) – attracts worshipers from the lower middle class and the working class. The Khoei Foundation and Dar al-Islam, on the other hand, are focused on the middle and upper classes. Since the distinguished clerical family comes from Karbala (one of the major Shia cities), the followers of al-Shirazi in London are largely from the same city [2, p. 299–300].

We should also mention the activities of the Al-Hussaini Association (al-majlis al-husayni), referred to as Balaghiyyeh, which is run by the Balaghi family from southern Iraq [10, p. 10]. As noted by the Swedish researcher O. Scharbrodt, "The organisers of the Balaghiyyeh, as natives of Najaf, follow the clerical leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani[5], and his London representative and son-in-law Murtadha Kashmiri regularly attends… the gatherings. In one of his talks, given during 'Ashura' in 2015, Kashmiri was critical of young Iraqis leaving their country…" [2, p. 298–299].

There are many among the Shia immigrants, for example from Iraq, who used to work as translators for the British army. Once they arrived in the UK, they experienced difficulties in finding employment. For example, Donna Covey, chief executive of the Refugee Council, noted that "many of the refugees resettled here are highly skilled, and it is little wonder they feel frustrated that they have not been able to find jobs in the UK. These are people who were forced to flee Iraq due to their work for the British forces…" [11]. Indeed, even today, Iraqis who have previously worked for the US and UK armies not only have failed to find jobs, but are also snubbed by their fellow citizens within the diaspora.

During the struggle against the Islamic State[6] of Iraq* (2014–2017), Shia Muslims of the Iraqi diaspora in the UK lauded the Iraqi Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a paramilitary group composed mainly of Shi'ites, but also including Christians and Sunnis fighting against ISIS*. Interestingly, during the Holy Month of Muharram, when Shia Muslims commemorate the death of Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 (Ashura), they used banners and leaflets linking the killing of Imam Husayn to the killing of Shi'ites committed by ISIS*. The event participants sought to highlight the differences between Shia Islam and Sunni Islam, as well as remind the public that Shia Muslims were the primary victims of ISIS* [12].

The Iraqi diaspora is fragmented along a number of lines and categories, including ethnicity, religious conviction,

denomination, class, ideology and geographical location in the UK. Therefore, it is a mistake to talk of the Iraqi diaspora as a homogeneous group; rather, it is a set of diverse groups each living in accordance with their own traditions. There is little overlap between these groups. Consequently, there is no unity or sense of a collective Iraqi identity within the diaspora [12].

Another group of predominantly Shia Muslims living in the UK are the Iranians. Most of them fled Iran due to the events of the Islamic Revolution of 1978–1979 and its aftermath.

In 2021, there were approximately 37 thousand Iranian nationals living in the United Kingdom (excluding those born in the UK) [13]. The first wave of Persians arrived in the country after Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941–1979) was overthrown. It consisted mostly of wealthy families who used to hold high-ranking positions under the monarchy. However, many of those who arrived "were already fluent in English and familiar with the London lifestyle and reside in affluent boroughs of London, such as Kensington and Chelsea, Knightsbridge, Richmond, Hampstead, Swiss Cottage and the City of Westminster" [14].

It is worth mentioning that wealthy Iranian immigrants are engaged in promoting Persian and Islamic art in the UK. For example, Nasser Khalili (b. 1945), a prominent collector and philanthropist, set up a special foundation, which he used to sponsor the establishment of the Research Centre for the Art and Material Culture of the Middle East at Oxford University, as well as the Department of Art and Archaeology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London[7].

With the start of the Iran–Iraq war, members of ethnic and religious groups, political activists from various parties and families fearing the military draft fled Iran. It is important to add that the UK has often been a transitory destination for those waiting to obtain visas to enter the US. Due to their different social backgrounds and prior education, Persians integrate into British society in a variety of ways. Many Persians managed to set up their own businesses, such as restaurants, shops, laundries or taxi companies [14]. Some of them achieved success in the field of finance, technology and science. However, other

immigrants from Iran find it hard to get a job due to their insufficient knowledge of English or lack of work experience in the UK [15, p. 2–3].

Notably, in 2022, the Islamic Centre of England, which has ties to the Iranian government, was under investigation over "serious governance concerns" and failure to comply with guidelines for such organizations [16]. The charitable aims and objectives of the center included "advancing the religion of Islam and education, and the provision of social and religious welfare facilities". According to a press release by the Charity Commission, the decision to launch an investigation followed "extensive engagement with the charity over recent years, which has included issuing the charity with an Official Warning". As explained by the commission, this warning followed two events held at the charity's premises in 2020 that extoled Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani, sanctioned by the British government. At the memorial service after the assassination of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps general killing in a US drone strike on January 3, 2020, he was referred to as a "martyr" [16]. Earlier, the commission stated that it was "assessing" a speech by the center's director, Seyed Moosavi, in which he labelled Iranian anti-government protesters "soldiers of Satan."

Moreover, protesters took to the streets of Iran following the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 while in custody of the so-called 'morality police.' Amini, 22, was detained in Tehran and accused of breaking the law requiring women to cover their hair and wear loose clothes [17].

The Islamic Centre of England has been subject to frequent vandalism by members of the UK Iranian diaspora opposing IRI. On one occasion, police even had to intervene to stop clashes between protesters and local Shia Muslims defending the mosque [16]. The Islamic Centre was closed in 2023. The mosque in Holland Park, an upscale neighbourhood in Kensington, London, is also under Iranian influence.

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The Isma'ilis hold a prominent place among the Shia communities in the UK. As noted by the Russian researcher S. Prozorov, "The beginning of the Isma'ili movement is traditionally associated with a split among the Shi'ites in the middle of the 8th century. Most of them recognized Musa al-Kazim (d. 799), the son of Ja'far al-Sadiq, as the seventh imam; they were later known as the Imamites. However, some Shi'ites recognized Isma'il, the eldest son of Ja'far, as the heir to the imamate; and since he died during his father's lifetime (762), they recognized his son Muhammad as the seventh imam" [18, p. 110–111].

There was another split among the Isma'ilis following the death of al-Mustansir, the eighth Caliph-Imam of the Isma'ilis. Nizari Isma'ilism and Musta'li Isma'ilism emerged. Moreover, "the Nizaris (supporters of Nizar, the eldest son of the Caliph) predominated in Iran, Syria and other countries of the East that were not part of the Fatimid Caliphate. The more 'moderate' wing of Nizari Isma'ilism was the Musta'li Isma'ilism (Egypt and Western Muslim countries); they were the spiritual predecessors of the modern Isma'ili Bohra community in India (Bombay). The political disagreement between the Nizari and the Musta'li resulted in changes in the structure of their organizations and led to dogmatic differences" [18, p. 111]. In turn, Musta'li Isma'ilism broke into Hafizi Isma'ilism and Tayyibi Isma'ilism. In the 16th century, the Tayyibi branch split into the Dawoodis and the Sulaymanis in a dispute over the legitimate succession to the office of spiritual leader (Da'i) [19, p. 3].

Over the past half century, the Nizari Isma'ili community (Khoja), headed by the Aga Khan IV (b. 1936), has become well established in the UK. It comprises over 15 thousand men and women from all segments of society, including businessmen and students from many countries. In the UK and Europe, they represent diverse backgrounds and cultures: predominantly from East Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and more and more often from Central Asia and the Middle East. Around

700 Isma'ilis were volunteers at the London Olympic Games, and more than 2 thousand members of the community are volunteering in teams, working to improve community welfare, healthcare, economic affairs, well-being and education [20].

As noted by researcher A. Aiupova, "Among the Pakistanis of the UK, the Isma'ilis stand out for their vigorous and successful entrepreneurial activities. Among the richest people in the UK are several Khojas – millionaires Madhvani, Maji, Gokal, Habibji and Adamji." The economic success of the Khojas can be attributed to the fact that the Muslim tax on wealth for charity (zakat) and the property tax (ushr) are distributed within the community [21, p. 124].

It is important to note that economic prosperity of the Isma'ilis of Pakistani descent in the UK is rather an exception to the situation of Pakistanis in other countries. Russian researcher T. Kondrateva notes that "the status of different Muslim ethnic groups in the country's labour market varies significantly. In this regard, the most successful are Muslims from India, comprising 9 per cent of the entire Muslim population of the UK. Their level of education and employment rate are much higher than that of Muslims in general… Pakistanis and people from Bangladesh are the least advantaged group of British Muslims" [22, p. 80].

The Imami Khojas (or Twelver Khojas) comprise another Shia community living in the UK. A part of the Nizari Isma'ili community, they are adherents of Imamism. There are about 125 thousand of them in the UK. In 1976, the Imami Khojas established a body called 'World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna'asheri Jamaat'. Through this organisation, they opened religious centers throughout the world [23]. Among the most famous representatives are Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, and his sister, Fatima Ali Jinnah [24].

As directed by Aga Khan III (1885–1957), the spiritual leader of the Nizari Ism'aili branch, the Nizari Khoja community declared its separate identity, distancing itself from Twelver religious practices [24].

Among the Twelver Khojas is London-based British businessman Saleem Asaria, CEO of Cambian Group plc, one of

the largest health service providers in the UK. Also noteworthy is Shan Hassam, managing director of a privately-held business worth £40 million, based in Birmingham. Hassam's Veenak International Limited is one of the leading wholesalers of pharmaceutical and healthcare products in the UK [25]. Most of the Twelver Khojas are followers of Iraqi Ayatollah al-Sistani [26].

The Dawoodi Bohras is a Muslim community that has lived in the UK since the 1960s. There are over a million Dawoodi Bohras in the world, including over 2 thousand households in the UK. The community is spread across nine cities from Manchester to London. Despite being relatively few in number, the Dawoodi Bohras play a significant role in supporting both local and national charities.

The Dawoodi Bohras are an Isma'ili community originating primarily from Gujarat, a state in the western region of India. Many Dawoodi Bohras are involved in business. The word "Bohra" itself comes from the Gujarati word meaning "trade". Dawoodi Bohras are guided by a spiritual and temporal leader, or Da'i al-Mutlaq. The office is currently held by His Holiness Dr. Mufaddal Saifuddin, the 53rd Da'i al-Mutlaq; he resides in India [27].

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Among the Shia communities in the UK, we should also mention the Hazaras. The Hazaras are a Persian-speaking people of Mongolian origin, predominantly practicing Shia Islam. They live in Afghanistan and Pakistan [28].

There is the Hazara Committee in the UK (formerly known as the Hazara Council of Great Britain), a public charity working to create an inclusive platform for Hazara communities across the UK to connect, collaborate and integrate into society. The organisation was founded in 2013 [29].

In 2013, over 40 Hazaras protested at the King George V monument opposite the Houses of Parliament. They were outraged by the bombing of a vegetable market on February 16, 2013 in Quetta, Pakistan, that killed 91 Hazaras and injured

190 others. The protest organised by the Hazara Council of Great Britain was part of a larger wave of Hazara political and cultural activism around the globe, aimed at improving the position of Hazaras in the countries in which they live [30].

Notably, Shakardokht Jafari, a Hazara inventor and pioneering physicist from Afghanistan, won the prestigious 'Dynamics' award for 2024 in the UK. She studied at the University of Surrey in the UK on an International Atomic Energy Agency scholarship. After earning a master's degree in medical physics, Jafari continued her academic pursuit at the doctoral level at the same university, graduating in 2015. She subsequently became the first female medical physicist from Afghanistan, author of over 40 scientific articles and creator of two major inventions. Ms. Jafari's first invention, the 'Dosimeter Device' for recording radiation in cancer radiotherapy, was registered in the UK in 2019. In 2021, the scientist patented her second invention, 'Three-Dimensional Radiation Dose Measurement.' The innovation "comprises a three-dimensional dosimetry system implanted within cancer patients, accurately registering radiation doses during radiotherapy sessions, thereby assisting doctors in treatment planning" [31].

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There are various Shia communities in the UK. Most Shia Muslims living in the country are of Iraqi and Persian background. It is quite often that representatives of various branches of Shia Islam achieve success in commerce, science and other sectors of British society.

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Notes

1. The London Borough of Brent is one of 32 London boroughs, located in northwest Outer London. It is part of Greater London. Brent takes its name from the River Brent, which runs through the area. It lies within to the historic county of Middlesex. Greater London is an administrative area in England, commonly known as London. It consists of 32 districts (London boroughs) and the City of London. It was established in 1965, replacing the County of London and absorbing parts of other nearby counties. Before the creation of the current administrative unit, the term "Greater London" was used to refer to different areas.
2. Sayyid Abu al-Qasim Khoei (1899–1992) is considered a leading Shia religious figure, a Grand Ayatollah, and one of the most influential scholars of Shia Islam.
3. Many Iraqi doctors have moved to neighboring Jordan, which is now considered one of the top 'medical tourism' destinations in the Middle East – editor's note.
4. Husayniyya is a hall where Shi'ites gather for mourning ceremonies on the day of Ashura.

5. Ali al-Husayni al-Sistani (b. 1930) is a senior religious scholar in Iraq and the spiritual leader of Iraqi Shi'ites, as well as Shi'ites in other countries. He was born in the holy Shia city of Mashhad, Iran, to a prominent family of theologians.
6. Hereinafter, organization is banned in Russia.
7. Editor's note.

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THE MOSLEM WORLD: THEORETICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

YURY ZININ. THE HOLY MONTH OF RAMADAN IN ARAB COUNTRIES: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Keywords: Islam; Quran; Arabs; fasting; Ramadan; Prophet Muhammad; Iftar; festival of breaking the fast; Suhur; Tarawih; theologians.

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Abstract. The article examines the key provisions and guidelines of the annual fast that takes place during the lunar month of Holy Ramadan, the observance of which is obligatory for every Muslim believer worldwide. The author describes its course in the countries of the modern Arab world, relying on both original sources and literature, and his personal observations during business trips to different parts of this region. It is emphasized that throughout its vast territory, the fast is observed according to centuries-old spiritual regulations and traditions. However, cultural, ethnic and other realities in individual countries of this region leave their mark on this religious event, adding uniqueness.

The annual fasting (sawm in Arabic) during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam. A believer must refrain from food and drink in the daytime, and break the fast after dark, "until the white thread of dawn becomes distinct to you from the black thread." The main reason for the sawm is spiritual purification, the readiness to humbly endure the hardships of hunger and thirst, and to do pious deeds.

Fasting lasts for a month, which is called Ramadan in the Islamic lunar calendar. Muslims use the lunar or Hijri calendar in their religious life. Ramadan is the ninth month of the year and is considered the most important one, since it was then that the Quran, the Holy Book of Islam, was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Since the length of the Hijri year is 354 days and 8 hours, this month, if compared with the solar-based Gregorian calendar, tends to 'migrate' throughout the seasons. It falls on the same date every 36 years.

To determine the beginning of Ramadan fasting, Arab and Islamic countries rely on the observations of the Moon's disk conducted in astronomical observatories, which is why Ramadan does not start at the same time in different Muslim countries. The date varying by one or two days is acceptable, although in recent years, there has been growing agreement among imams that the start and end dates for Ramadan should to be unified. According to preliminary data, in Russia, Ramadan 1446 AH/2025 is expected to start on Saturday, March 1, and last 29 or 30 days.

Fasting is obligatory for all healthy adult Muslims. The sick, the elderly, pregnant women, children, and those who cannot observe fasting due to circumstances (traveling, staying abroad, feeling unwell, etc.) are exempt from it. One must also refrain from smoking, inhaling perfume and incense, fulfilling marital duties, that is, from everything that is distracting a Muslim from religious practices. If the fast cannot be observed for some reason, it is possible to postpone it and perform it later [1, p. 208].

As for small children and minors, and there is a large proportion of them in the Arab world, there is a practice of easing

them into sawm. At first it is half a day of fasting, then a day, a week, and so on, depending on their health and well-being.

Throughout the vast Arab world with a population of over 430 million people, fasting is observed in accordance with centuries-old religious guidelines and traditions. However, cultural, ethnic and other characteristics of individual countries in the region leave their mark on the religious occasion in some way.

The strictness of fasting depends on the specific country. In the past, the sharia judges (qadis), police and Muslims themselves were supposed to supervise this. Today, it is difficult to achieve such tight control, so fasting is a matter of personal piety. At the same time, outright neglect for fasting is considered an offense.

According to a modern Muslim preacher from the charitable House of Hadith in Mecca, a believer that deliberately breaks the fast even for a single day has to repent and fulfil the required expiation. Among others, there is an option to feed 60 poor people. In particular, according to the recommendations for Ramadan, issued by the Ministry of Interior of Iraq before the American invasion in 2003, any Muslim seen smoking or eating openly could be detained for five days.

At the same time, theologians take into account modern lifestyle trends and work specifics. For example, back in the late 20th century, there was a religious ruling (fatwa) issued in Algeria that allowed steelworkers at the Annaba steel plant, built with the assistance of the USSR, to not observe fasting. Their valuable work was equated with jihad, which was interpreted as a "zealous dedication to the faith and national interests."

Life and Fasting Rules During Ramadan

The Holy Month of Ramadan transforms the daily routine and rhythm of life in the entire Arab world. In these countries, most organizations operate on a reduced schedule during the month of sawm, usually only until 2 or 3 p.m.; general activity in the public and private sectors drops off. Restaurants and coffee

shops are closed during the daytime hours. No one dares to smoke in the streets. During the day, foreigners, i.e. non-Muslims living in Muslim countries, can have a meal only in hotels where foreign tourists are staying. Jordan Tourism Board recommends that tourist-oriented restaurants operate as usual during Ramadan, provided that they serve customers indoors and not on the patio. Amusement parks and nightclubs are also closed, with the exception of (five-star) hotel bars [2].

In Muslim countries where alcohol sales are legal, the liquor sections in department stores are usually closed during the fasting period, and the shelves with bottles of alcohol are covered with curtains. However, in the countries on the Arabian Peninsula, these restrictions are gradually becoming more relaxed due to the desire to keep expats and not drive tourists away. But at the same time, women cooking at home are advised to close the windows so that the smell of food does not bother passers-by.

The train timetable is changed for the convenience of those fasting. In some countries, football championship matches get postponed; on weekdays, they are held after 9 p.m.

Ramadan is not the best time for official visits or negotiations with foreigners. Major political and business meetings are put off until after Ramadan, unless, of course, something out of the ordinary is going on.

Also, it is important to take into account the season of fasting. During the warmer months, when the sun is scorching from early morning until sunset, the period of daylight is the longest, making fasting harder. When the heat subsides and the air cools, the day becomes shorter, which makes abstaining from eating and drinking easier.

When talking about Ramadan fasting, the picture would not be complete without mentioning suhur, the pre-dawn meal for which people are awakened before sunrise. In cities and villages, alike, the sleepy streets are still being filled with the sound of drums or loudspeaker announcements. Sometimes, a man goes around the neighbourhoods shouting “Ramadan Al-Karim...”, thus waking up the faithful so that they have time to fortify themselves before dawn.

When the Holy Month of Ramadan begins, friends, relatives and colleagues celebrate the event by giving each other colourful postcards. Mosques, shops, and institutions are festively decorated; lanterns adorn streets, building facades and even some trees, lighting up in the evening. As historians believe, this tradition appeared during the Fatimid dynasty that ruled from 909 to 1171. The Sultan himself led his entourage to the highest point of Cairo, the Mokattam, to determine the position of the moon and, therefore, the beginning of fasting; it was ordered that the path to the mountain should be well-illuminated for his convenience.

Over the years, this tradition spread to most Arab countries. Though lantern making is a seasonal industry, it continues throughout the year. Lantern makers take a creative approach to designing their shapes and models. The lanterns range in size from huge meter-long ones made of coloured glass to as big as a palm. In the capital of Egypt, workshops specializing in the production of these religious objects are clustered along Al-Mu'izz Street.

An essential attribute of fasting is the so-called "Ramadan Cannon". The cannon fires a blank shot, notifying people of the sunrise and sunset and the time for the fast-breaking evening meal – iftar. According to historians, this custom originated in Egypt in the early 19th century, during the reign of Muhammad Ali. Later, it spread to Mecca, and then to Kuwait, where the cannon was fired for the first time during Ramadan fasting in 1907. Afterwards, the tradition spread to all the states of the Persian Gulf, as well as to Yemen and Sudan. Media in Kuwait claim that the cannon, installed in 1907 during the Ottoman rule, is still functioning during the *sawm*.

Located in different parts of Dubai, six cannons dating back to World War II announce the beginning and end of Ramadan. They fire 200 blank shots, signalling both the start of *iftar* and the arrival of Eid al-Fitr, the festival of breaking the fast that marks the end of Ramadan. The cannons have become a landmark, attracting both locals and foreign tourists alike.

The life of the cities transforms during *iftar*, and the well-lit streets are bustling with activity. Walking around Cairo, one can hear songs about the Blessed Month, welcoming the start of Ramadan fasting. Plenty of children flood the streets to play with lanterns and watch Ramadan fireworks displays. Muslims who settle down by the roadside to ease their hunger are sure to invite passers-by to share a meal with them.

The aroma of coffee and fresh food begins wafting from the restaurants, diners and coffee shops. Street vendors roll out their food carts, selling grilled corn on the cob, beetroot, sweet potato, etc. There are many of them in Cairo; the busy city is filled with the day-to-day concerns of millions of its inhabitants and their hustle and bustle, and there are plenty of places where to have a bite. However, beans are a staple food for most Cairo residents. Black beans are boiled in copper pots; served with olive oil, they make *ful medames*, a national dish that is washed down with a glass of strong, sweet tea.

Apart from tea, all sorts of refreshing lemonades are very common. Among them are *erq sous*, a brown-coloured thick beverage made from liquorice root, and a tincture prepared on pomegranate flowers or crushed violet flowers. Another popular traditional drink is *asab*, a greenish juice made from sugarcane, which is extracted right there on carts by crushing sugarcane in a mill.

In each country there are different favourite dishes served during Ramadan, with soup being the centrepiece of the meal. In the Arabian Peninsula, most people eat some sort of lentil vegetable soup. In the Maghreb, *harira* (of Andalusian origin) made with a mix of lentils, chickpeas, meat and greens, is considered to be the main dish for *iftar*.

No *iftar* is complete without sweets, and plenty desserts are prepared during Ramadan: *ma'amoul* (honey cookies filled with dates), *baklava* (layers of filo pastry filled with nuts soaked in honey), *qata'if* (a pancake made of sweet dough filled with nuts), *knafeh* (a dessert layered with goat cheese and soaked in rose water and sugar syrup), *luqaymat* (deep fried dough balls spiced with cardamom syrup) and *Om Ali* (a bread pudding with nuts and a caramel crust). Sweets were included in the Ramadan

menu during the Umayyad dynasty. It is said that when Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan (reigned 661–680) complained of a pain in his body during fasting, his doctor advised him to indulge in *knafeh*.

Traditionally, most Muslims prefer to break their fast at home. According to Tatyana Gharibi, a Russian woman living in Tunisia for 30 years, "*Iftar* in the evening has become a good tradition, with the whole family – adults, children and close relatives – gathering around the table... For *iftar*, we prepare special dishes that ladies of the house usually have neither the money, nor the time, nor the patience to make. Normally, everyone is busy, and it is a rare occasion that we all get together like this. So Ramadan is a good reason to share a meal and catch up."

In the UAE, special tents are set up for *iftars*, that is, for the fast-breaking evening meals; they are old-fashioned Bedouin style tents, where dressed up public gathers late in the evening for a *majlis*, a meeting with friends that can last until 3 a.m. At the same time, foreigners are invited to immerse themselves in the nomadic lifestyle, explore their ancient cuisine, try authentic Bedouin coffee, and smoke a hookah.

It should be noted that during the fasting period, more people attend mosques than usual. During Ramadan, some Muslims prefer to perform night prayer (*tarawih*). The prayer lasts two hours; the word *tarawih* comes from *tarweeha* which means 'to rest', since the prayer is paused several times, letting the believers rest while sitting and listening to the recitation of the Quran. Thus, one *juz'* – one of thirty parts of the Quran – is recited per night. As a result, during *tarawih* prayer, people get to listen to the whole Quran in a month.

Among the dates associated with Ramadan, there are several that are usually singled out: the birthday of al-Husayn, the Prophet's grandson (the 6th day of fasting), and the anniversary of the Battle of Badr (the 17th day). This was the Prophet's first large-scale battle with the pagan Meccans at the wells of Badr (150 km from Medina) in March 624.

The 27th night of Ramadan is especially revered, since it was during Laylat al-Qadr ("Night of Power") that Muhammad

received his first revelation. Also, it is believed to be the night when the Almighty makes decisions about the fate of people; according to the Quran, it is "better than a thousand months" [1, p. 1988].

Ramadan in the Media and Social Networks

During Ramadan, the mass media is full of materials dedicated to fasting and spiritual matters in general. The media often invite religious leaders to give sermons, and talk about the moral and ethical virtues of *sawm*, quoting the hadiths of the Prophet on this subject. One of them says that "Five things spoil a man's fast – lying, slander, calumny, the false oath and the lustful look" [3]. At the same time, virtuous deeds, generosity, and voluntary donations to the poor and needy are praised. *Zakat* – a form of almsgiving for Muslims in need – holds a special place; it is traditionally paid in the month of Ramadan. The amount is usually small and differs between countries in the Middle East. In lieu of money, one can do something good for a neighbour or give a certain amount of food during Ramadan.

On TV shows and in the press, healthcare workers, experts, and nutritionists talk about the role of nutrition in fasting and its impact on the health of citizens. TV channels organize roundtable discussions and debates with political scientists, sociologists, economists, and public figures as participants.

The media are joined by online publications and bloggers, publishing all sorts of information about fasting. During Ramadan, some websites in Arab countries even hold fasting-themed quizzes, containing questions on the history of Islam, its teachings, knowledge of the Quran and Sharia, etc. Contests intended for young children in order to unlock their creative potential through calligraphy and art are also popular. There are also Quran recital competitions, where both well-known masters of recitation and beginners can participate. Thus, in April 2023, to celebrate the end of the Holy Month of Ramadan, a

competition among young men and women for the best Quran reciter called "On the Path of Allah" was held at the Chechen State University. In many countries, recital competitions are an integral part of Ramadan fasting. The winners receive awards and prize money.

It seems that in the Middle East, fasting is now becoming more and more social in nature. Ramadan is about sympathy and solidarity with those who do not always have enough food. Therefore, in many countries, charity meals are organized for orphans, the disabled, and other low-income citizens; food parcels are also distributed. In Dubai mosques, the author saw temple employees dole out food baskets, specifically prepared for believers in need who come for evening prayer. During Ramadan, in different parts of Libya, there are charity events and youth volunteer programmes, aimed at helping disadvantaged and poor families. For example, a fundraiser to support the children's oncology center in Tripoli [4].

In Baghdad, for the past 19 years, free *iftar* meals have been provided for those in need during Ramadan. Every day, the event is attended by at least a thousand fasting people: men, women, children and the elderly. The local news agencies have published photos of these dozens of meters long, parallel tables on one of the streets in Al-Kadhimiya District. According to the local publications, the event is financed entirely by wealthy people and shop owners, without the involvement of politicians or religious leaders [5]. Interestingly, Muslims living in Europe organize similar events, inviting their non-Muslim neighbours to be part of them.

In March 2024, during Ramadan, the Saudi Arabian authorities sought to develop a cultural and educational campaign around the *sawm.* In public spaces around Riyadh, Jeddah and on the Dammam Corniche, interactive events under the slogan 'Enlighten Our Nights' were held, designed to demonstrate experiences that combine the past and the present, as well as an innovative approach to culture. They included

tours and exhibitions aimed at expanding the public's understanding of traditional crafts, some sporting events such as the Ramadan Marathon, electronic and board game championships, etc. [6] It's curious that in areas with predominantly Christian population (for example, in Lebanon), one can see large posters depicting Christians wishing their Muslim compatriots a happy Ramadan.

Fasting as a Driver of Creative Activity

Ramadan and the TV industry of Arab countries is a whole other topic. In the evening, millions of people spend their leisure time watching TV with their families, sharply increasing the number of viewers and thus motivating TV channels to release new programmes.

In 2018, Netflix (an American streaming service for movies and TV shows) conducted a survey to determine the behaviour of Arab viewers during Ramadan. It was carried out among 1,548 people over the age of 18 in three Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia. According to the survey, the viewing time increase by approximately 78 per cent, which is equivalent to additional 90 hours during the month [7].

One Arab political writer called Ramadan the 'driver' of TV production. Spurred on by their ambitions and competition in the market, screenwriters, actors and filmmakers work on the production and distribution of new films, trying to seize their chance. Every year, despite many local viewers criticizing new programs interrupted by multiple ads and feeling nostalgic for old shows, everyone is looking forward to something new.

According to Iraqi film critic Dr. H. Al-Zubaidi, satellite channels, especially those based in the Gulf States, are competing for the rights to show the best Egyptian, Syrian and Syrian-Lebanese series; also, Moroccan dramas are in high demand. The themes and content of the programs are diverse.

Topics that are relevant to the Arab world are not left out either. As the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip escalated, Al-Araby 2 TV channel aired a 30-part series *Bleeding Dust* in 2024. The series was filmed by a young Palestinian filmmaker near Nablus in the West Bank of the Jordan River, in the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, the Palestinian security services provided technical assistance by arranging the filming in a local prison [8]. Along with historical TV shows about the arrival, spread and establishment of Islam, battles with the Crusaders, etc., there are also television plays about modern full of contradictions and psychological dramas, featuring popular stars.

In the last few decades, in Egypt, the television programming has included some entertainment series produced especially for broadcasting during Ramadan. Among them, we can single out *Fawazeer Ramadan* (Riddles of Ramadan), originally an Egyptian radio show that began in 1961. From 1967 it was a full-fledged television series; the vaudeville based on subjects from Arab history included Bollywood-style belly dancing and actors in extravagant costumes. Airing every day for a month, each episode of the show ended with a riddle. The correct answers to the 30 riddles were not revealed until the very end of Ramadan. By solving them, viewers could win valuable prizes after the end of fasting. Thanks to the appearances of famous Egyptian actors, the series gained universal recognition not only in Egypt but also throughout the Arabic-speaking world and ran for 45 seasons. Eventually, due to criticism of the series as being too secular (because of overly bold scenes and dances), as well as the proliferation of satellite television, *Fawazeer Ramadan* was cancelled [9].

In the region, state authorities and the public are often dissatisfied with the contents and artistic merit of some TV programs airing during Ramadan. Thus, in March 2024, Algerian Minister of Communication, Mohamed Laâgab, rebuked the directors of 20 state and private television channels because the

programs airing during the month of fasting (especially dramas) contained too many "violent scenes that are unsuitable for the moral principles of the individual and society." He also criticized "the abundance of TV commercials during Ramadan as being not in the interests of average viewers" [10].

Similar opinions are also voiced in Iraq. Exhausted by the terrors of interfaith war, A number of political parties, religious organizations, and citizens have appealed to the authorities, demanding that they should stop broadcasting a TV series, which they believe "challenges religious symbols" [11]. There are many examples of such criticism in other countries.

Ramadan: Social and Economic Implications

According to many sociologists and publicists, the Holy Month of Ramadan has social and domestic aspects besides religious ones, since it encourages communication between family members, friends and colleagues, as well as enhances mutual support and solidarity. The media report the popularity of collective *iftars,* attended by prominent political, religious and public figures, along with journalists; conversations extend beyond the religious topic, with the interlocutors discussing relevant political and international issues. As a rule, non-Muslim foreigners are also invited to attend such events. "This helps to foster social ties and relations between people of different nationalities, faiths and generations," a columnist for the Saudi newspaper *Okaz* sums up [12].

At the same time, in the regional public discourse, one can find numerous articles and speeches on the multidirectional impact of fasting on the current social and economic situation. Statistics published by the media make researchers wonder how to reconcile spiritual and moral values and traditions of fasting with the challenges of an ever-changing life, and the fact that the priorities of developing market economies of Arab states are production and advancement.

As the Saudi newspaper believes, "It can be said that the month of fasting is the time for people to change their lives. For a month, many people alter their rhythm of life and daily schedule, as well as their usual menu, which affects their sleep and rest, performance and productivity... Thus, fasting provides an opportunity to replace unhealthy eating habits with healthier ones, and make a change in the lifestyle, including quitting smoking, etc." [13]

Another Saudi writer, Omar I. Al-Rashid, has put forward the idea of "electronic fasting," suggesting that one should "keep away" from tablets and social networks, replacing them with "achieving tranquillity by studying the Holy Quran in solitude, while enjoying the sense of freedom" [14].

Ramadan: Anti-Wastefulness and Unregulated Market

At first glance, it would seem that food consumption and sales at markets should decrease during the Muslim fasting due to people abstaining from meals. In reality, the opposite happens. According to the National Office of Statistics (ONS), Algerian households spend an average of 42 per cent of their consumer budget on food every year. However, approximately 60 per cent of their income goes mainly to food during Ramadan fasting. As practice shows, Algerian families buy more food during this period than usual in order to prepare a decent *iftar* that is as good as anyone else's. Ladies of the house tend to increase their spending in order to stock up on all kinds of products, anticipating price fluctuations in the market.

Moreover, even before the start of fasting, many choose to purchase various ingredients for traditional dishes, such as dried fruits, nuts, seasonings, spices and condiments for preparing sweets and *knafeh*, and drink mixes for famous Ramadan juices and beverages. Some families see these expenses as inevitable, even though they lead to financial difficulties later on [15].

On the other hand, in a market economy, retailers cannot help but respond to increased demand. To attract customers, traders work from 7 p.m. until nightfall. In the month of fasting, a swarm of street vendors and hawkers comes to life, wanting to capitalize on the 'Ramadan business opportunities.' They prepare and sell various street foods: pastries and beverages from products of sometimes dubious quality, all the while violating trade rules and regulations. Naturally, this sparks discontent among the population. In order to rein in traders during these days, in Arab countries, financial inspectors carry out raids on stores and markets, checking product quality and price tags and sometimes fining violators. If transgressions continue, they may even close a retail outlet altogether. The media publish the results of their investigations, while simultaneously ripping into dishonest businessmen.

To avoid violations and price distortions infringing on the population, the state authorities are working to maintain price stability and supply of staple food products. At the same time, local news outlets report extensively on all the measures taken. Before Ramadan fasting starts, a number of countries announce steps that can be called a mobilization. This includes increasing the import of a range of products, tightening control over their storage, as well as distribution at wholesale vegetable and fruit markets and in retail outlets.

According to Minister of Trade and Export Promotion of Algeria, in 2024, to avoid disruptions in the supply of the most widely consumed staple foods, the production of semolina, edible oils and raw sugar was increased; among other things, 110,000 tons of red meat instead of the usual 20,000 tons was imported [15]. Also, the media are discussing the ways to reduce household food consumption and keep enterprising traders in check, as well as the problem of wastefulness – the irrational buying and consuming food during Ramadan.

Experts from the Ministry of Environment Water and Agriculture of Saudi Arabia have found that the amount of food waste grows annually during Ramadan.

As Saudi economist and official representative of Saudi banks Talaat Hafez notes, an average person throws away 184 kilos of food every year; the cost 4 million tons of food waste exceeds 40 billion riyals per year [16].

According to estimates by the Libyan website Al-Wow, one-fifth of the food purchased or prepared during the Holy Month of Ramadan ends up in dumpsters or landfills. The website quotes the well-known *āyah* 31 of *Surah* Al-A'raf: "Eat and drink, but do not waste. Surely He does not like the wasteful." Indeed, extra food could be offered to those in need… [17]

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The Arab region is the home of Islam and the overwhelming majority of its present-day population is Muslim. Islam is established as the state religion in all Arab countries and is at the heart of ideology; it regulates the lifestyle, culture, and behaviour of the followers. The annual fasting as one of the pillars of Islam fits into the spiritual and cultural atmosphere of the Arab world.

According to Islam, people regardless of their background and social standing must patiently endure the hardships and constraints during the Holy Month of Ramadan. At the same time, support is extended to those who are in some way socially disadvantaged for a variety of reasons.

Passed down from generation to generation for centuries, fasting as a tradition is part of the national identity in these countries. It adapts to the contemporary multifaceted nature of life in different spheres, and as we can see, modern reality, in turn, adjusts to the requirements and specifics of this phenomenon.

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