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"Let us be alert to the season in which we are living. It is the season of the Blessed Hope, calling for us to cut our ties with the world and build ourselves on this One who will soon appear. He is our hope—a Blessed Hope enabling us to rise above our times and fix our gaze upon Him." Tozer

India's Aadhaar Scheme Is Like A New Internet Being Built

All India | © 2017 Bloomberg L.P. | Jeanette Rodrigues, Bloomberg | Updated: March 16, 2017

A new internet is being built: it has 1.1 billion users, a third of the world wide web. Indian banks are running transactions on it and Microsoft has embedded it into Skype.

The biometric identifier program Aadhaar -- or "foundation" in Hindi -- has taken on a life of its own, authenticating loans and job seekers, pensions and money transfers across India. And last week's landslide state election win could embolden Prime Minister Narendra Modi to push Aadhaar beyond its early cost-saving goal, even as questions are raised about the security of its data and the proliferation of private companies seeking to profit from the information it stores.

Other countries are also looking at similar programs, but research shows it's best to develop one standardized system so people can carry their IDs wherever they go in the world, said Paul Romer, chief economist at the World Bank.

"The system in India is the most sophisticated that I've seen," Romer said. "It's the basis for all kinds of connections that involve things like financial transactions. It could be good for the world if this became widely adopted."

Identification is the first step to accessing services such as health and education in a world where 1.5 billion people can't prove who they are. The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals aim to provide legal IDs to all by 2030, triggering the creation of a range of platforms that offer basic rights to citizens of poorer countries while allowing those in the advanced world granular control over their digital data, such as school or medical records, and streamlining immigration.

Fingerprints, Iris Scans

An ambitious government-run project -- just like the Internet at the time of its creation decades ago -- Aadhaar began in 2009 to target payments to the poor across India's vast hinterland.

Other governments are already interested in its potential. Countries such as Tanzania, Afghanistan and Bangladesh have visited India to talk about the system, said Nandan Nilekani, billionaire co-founder of the technology company Infosys Ltd. and former chairman of the Unique Identification Authority of India, who created Aadhaar. Russia, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia have also indicated their interest in Aadhaar, R.S. Sharma, chairman of the telecom regulatory authority of India, told the Mint newspaper in July 2016.

"They're all keen to see how they can replicate this in their countries," Nilekani said by phone. "This is a

great example of how governments can build the most modern digital public infrastructure, and make it available as a public good to everybody."

In its World Development Report 2016, the World Bank said "a digital identification system such as India's Aadhaar, by overcoming complex information problems, helps willing governments to promote the inclusion of disadvantaged groups."

Here's how it works: a unique 12-digit number is assigned to Indian residents, backed by biometrics including fingerprint and iris scans stored in a central database. If an individual wants to open a bank account or buy a mobile SIM card, they need to provide their Aadhaar number and place their finger on a scanner. This action permits the bank or utility to ask the Aadhaar database to verify their credentials.

Earlier, a sheaf of documents were needed as proof of identification, a tough task in a country of 1.3 billion where 40 percent aren't registered at birth and 30 percent can't even read or write their own name.

About 99 percent of adult Indians hold an Aadhaar ID that links to some 84 government services, which will soon include the whole of India's food distribution system, the world's biggest welfare program. The Aadhaar is saving Modi's administration about \$2 billion a year and this could rise to \$7 billion by March 2018, or 0.35 percent of gross domestic product, according to research firm CLSA.

Skype Lite

The private sector is also benefiting from Aadhaar. Reliance Jio Infocomm Ltd., controlled by India's richest man Mukesh Ambani, sold 100 million sim cards in six months -- or about seven each second -- by using this system to verify customers' IDs, while Google is in talks with the government to use Aadhaar.

Smaller companies are creating blood donation registries based on it, and people can withdraw money or make cashless transactions using Aadhaar without needing a secret code or even a card. Microsoft Corp. in February created a lightweight version of Skype for Indians, who can use Aadhaar to identify themselves.

"What's happening is Aadhaar servers are saying 'yes, this person is who they are saying they are'," said Eve Maler, vice president of innovation and emerging technology at ForgeRock Inc., who's worked with governments including New Zealand on data protection. The question is, she says, "how much information comes along with that authentication event"?

'Big Brother'

For all its potential, Aadhaar has also been criticized as enabling the creation of a 'Big Brother' surveillance state.

Indeed, Modi opposed Aadhaar before coming to power, saying it violated national security and the privacy of citizens. Now he counts it as a key part of his push to move India towards cashless transactions and save money on the payment of social security benefits.

"Centralized databases, even if the information contained therein on any one individual is kept to a minimum, pose a risk," said Dakota Gruener, executive director at ID2020, a public-private partnership that aims to create digital IDs for refugees. The individual's "root identity" should be treated as a fundamental right and anyone wishing to do ill -- even a government -- shouldn't be allowed to alter or delete it, she said.

There has been no incident of misuse of Aadhaar biometrics leading to identity theft and financial loss during the last five years, the issuing authority said in a statement on March 5, in response to a spate of news reports about breaches. However in a briefing it said it had shut 12 private websites and 12 mobile

applications and was on the verge of closing 26 more for illegally obtaining Aadhaar numbers or enrollment details.

Privacy at Risk

The debates surrounding Aadhaar -- identity proofing, privacy -- are similar to those playing out in the wrangling over the revision of standards governing the Internet, as government and business struggle to find the perfect tool to authenticate people's identity and safeguard their data.

The U.K. announced in 2010 it was scrapping a plan for a national identity register after objections that it infringed on civil liberties, but it continues to issue biometric residence permits for foreigners. France is debating a mega database for biometric details of citizens. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission said identity theft complaints were the second-most reported in 2015, even as calls intensify to create a biometric identification for all legal U.S. workers.

Aadhaar is designed on the principle of "optimal ignorance," said Nilekani. While Aadhaar knows you're using the system to identify yourself on Skype, for example, it's never privy to the details of the call. Microsoft says it deletes all Aadhaar data once the call has been disconnected.

The problem is not so much with Aadhaar, said Romer, who founded a technology company in 2000, but with the many private firms collecting large amounts of data about people.

"It should be part of the policy of the government to give individuals some control over the data that the private firms collect and some control over how that data is used," he said.

Israel prepares for mass war evacuations

March 23, 2017



Israel prepares for mass war evacuations

There will be mass evacuations of northern Israelis if there is another Lebanon war due to significant unexpected regional changes, an IDF officer said.

Israel's Home Front Command is preparing an evacuation of an estimated one-quarter of Israel's northern residents in the event of a third Lebanon war, according to a report in the Jerusalem Post.

"In the past we didn't think of needing to evacuate whole communities, but now we understand that we will have to evacuate hundreds of thousands of people," a senior IDF officer said.

"It is impossible to evacuate all one million residents, but we are working with the communities as well as emergency services to prepare those living in communities directly on the border for the possibility of a mass evacuation," the officer added.

The Home Front Command's contingency plan is based on updated assessments of the various regional geopolitical changes, particularly on the six-year-old civil war between the Syrian regime and different rebel

factions, many of whom fight against each other.

"The changes on Israel's borders have made it so that the IDF needs to prepare for wars against groups and not armies," noted the IDF officer.

Israel has to worry about the continuous shipment of advanced weaponry to the pro-Syrian government Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah, in light of recent threats made by the organization's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah.

"We listen to everything that Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah says, and we understand there is a real meaning behind his threats," the officer said. Since the United Nations mandated an end to the Second Lebanon War under UN Security Council Resolution 1701, Hezbollah has rebuilt its weapons arsenal with more than 100,000 short-range rockets and several thousand missiles that can reach central Israel. In addition, before leaving his post former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon expressed alarm regarding Iran's military support for Hezbollah.

How will Brussels react to Article 50 being triggered?

By Kevin Connolly

BBC News 28 March 2017



A view of European flags in front of the European Commission headquarters at the Berlaymont Building in Brussels
Image copyright GETTY IMAGES

The first cliché of the Brexit process is about to bite the dust.

For months European officials have batted away questions about the financial and political implications of the UK's departure from the EU with the mantra "no negotiation without notification."

Well, now we are about to have notification, so at least we can look forward to not hearing that form of words again.

That doesn't mean of course that you should expect to see a long queue of Brussels insiders giving their views on the EU's red lines in the coming days.

Prepare instead for days, if not weeks, of consultation between the European Commission - which will take the lead in negotiations for Brussels - and the 27 "remainder" states, together with the European Council, which represents them.

This is, of course, exactly the kind of long-winded, bureaucratic obscurantism that is the curse of European politics if you're a Brexiteer: or the kind of careful, consensual consultation we're going to miss if you're not. The commission's chief negotiator is the former French cabinet minister Michel Barnier, who has been quietly preparing for this moment for several months, visiting the 27 capitals and hammering out common negotiating positions where possible.

So Brussels has some sort of consultation document almost ready to go. When the European side has seen the detail in the UK's Article 50 letter, it will, no doubt, wish to tweak that document.

The expectation in Brussels was always that the British letter of notification would be a fairly substantial document, rather than a one-line declaration of intent, so there might be quite a bit of tweaking to be done. Katya Adler asks if the EU can survive the biggest challenge in its history

The revised document will then be dispatched to the 27 capitals for further consultation, and the result of all that consultation, in theory at least, will be an agreed EU negotiating position with agreed red lines.

The UK will see fairly quickly what the opening position of the Barnier team will be. And, of course, it's been working hard behind the scenes to try to calculate what the bottom line might be.

The initial sense of hurt and shock in Brussels has given way to a kind of resignation about Brexit. Most MEPs you talk to still consider it an act of almost suicidal self-harm and feel that the UK has consciously uncoupled itself from one of modern history's most important drivers of peace and prosperity. And you do hear irritation at some British attitudes. Foremost among the resentments is the idea that a large, rich, European power is walking away from financial commitments to poorer partners.

Individual EU nations have their own greatly differing aims for the Brexit negotiations. But at least one diplomat has pointed out that the UK championed the eastward expansion of the EU into the old Soviet empire and is now leaving the expanded union in part because of the pressure of migration from those new member states.

Still, the romantic notion persists that Brexit might one day be reversed, somehow: the EU Commission's President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has said publicly that he'd "like to see the British climbing back into the boat one day".

Lots of officials would agree with their British counterparts that it is now important to seek a deal that is good for both the EU and the UK. But make no mistake, the mission of Team Barnier is to clinch a deal that is good for the 27.

Those 27 states have wildly differing interests. The Baltic states see the UK as a European leader on security, Poland sees it as a vital source of overseas work and remittances and Spain has to balance the interests of its huge expatriate British population against a historic opportunity to make some diplomatic progress on Gibraltar.

And things might get very tough, very quickly.



The EU side wants to split the talks into two different strands: the terms of the "divorce" settlement and, only after that is settled, the terms of a future relationship.

Border Force check the passports of passengers arriving at Gatwick Airport. Image copyright GETTY IMAGES

The status of migrants within the EU and the UK will be central to the talks

The UK clearly feels that it would be possible to take those two strands in parallel.

I wouldn't expect the two sides to fall out over process and timetabling, but nothing is impossible.

The most "do-able" deal, perhaps, would be on the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British passport holders sprinkled through the various members states (more than 500 in Estonia alone, apparently).

It's in no-one's interests to throw a shadow of uncertainty over so many lives - there are about a million Poles in the UK for example - and it's the closest Brexit will come to raising a genuine humanitarian issue. Expect more problems over money, one of the reasons everyone keeps coming back to the divorce analogy.

The EU says it's made spending plans, to which the UK was a willing party, which stretch for several years into the future and that the UK has a responsibility, whether legal, moral or political, to carry on funding those commitments, perhaps until 2021.

And, beyond that, there are pension liabilities for current EU staff that stretch decades into the future.



A British Pound coin is seen next to Euro notes

Image copyright GETTY IMAGES

A large part of the "divorce" negotiations will concern money

British sources have told us that there's no legal basis on which the UK can be made to pay and, at the very least, if it's presented with a bill for 60bn euros (£52bn) it's going to require a line-by-line itemisation and not just a figure apparently plucked from the air.

The lesson of politics is that you can always do a deal about money, and so it's likely to prove again here. But if there is an issue that's going to spark walkouts and breakdowns before a deal is struck, then this is probably it.

Much more complex will be the issue of future trade relationships, whether they're discussed in parallel with the divorce talks or have to wait until later.

A red line for many in the EU parliament is that the UK shouldn't have a deal which even comes close to being as good as being in the single market itself.

And the relationship with the EU's customs union threatens to be difficult too.

What if a Japanese-owned car maker is assembling vehicles in the UK using components made in Germany and then selling the vehicle in Belgium? Would tariffs be paid on the car parts as they left Germany, or when the completed vehicle left the UK? Or neither? Or both?

Will Dutch trawlers be allowed to catch halibut in UK territorial waters in the North Sea? Or Spanish boats take mackerel in the Irish Sea?

What about the Irish border, which is open because of the peace process: is it now to be closed because

of the different customs regimes?

What kind of relationship will the UK have with the EU's single market and customs union following Brexit? What about Scotland, especially if it ceases to be a region of the UK and becomes a unitary state half way through the talks?

All these difficulties and more have to be resolved.

And once Article 50 is triggered, it will be two years to the day before the UK is out of the European Union for good.

It would be possible, of course, for the two sides to agree an extension to that talks deadline, during which some kind of transitional arrangement with the UK could remain in force, under which things might be pretty much as they are now.

But the UK can't be sure that the EU would agree to such an extension when the alternative might be to have the British negotiating while over a barrel and against the clock.

For most of us, this will be the biggest and most important diplomatic negotiation of our lifetimes, and the outcome is shrouded in uncertainty.

We know when it will start, more or less, and when it will finish. Everything that happens in between will have the capacity to surprise and, every now and then, to shock.