

review

# the year

the big idea

2009 the year that was

the tangled web



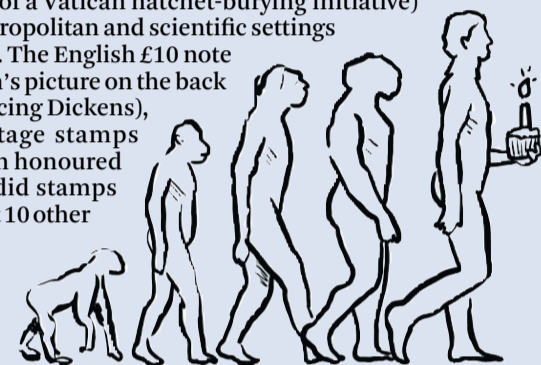
A poster of the late Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, who was assassinated by car bomb in February 2005, and his son, Saad Hariri, hangs in a Beirut street. Saad Hariri's March 14 coalition retained power in the nation's general elections, held in June. Sharif Karim / Reuters

## The Darwin show

It has been history's biggest birthday party. On or around 12 February 2009 alone – the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, "Darwin Day" – there were more than 750 commemorative events in at least 45 countries, and, on or around 24 November, there was another spate of celebrations to mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. In Mysore, Darwin Day was observed by an exhibition "proclaiming the importance of the day and the greatness of the scientist". In Charlotte, North Carolina, there were performances of a one-man musical, *Charles Darwin: Live & in Concert* ("Twas adaptive radiation that produced the mighty whale; / His hands have grown to flippers / And he has a fishy tail"). At Harvard, the celebrations included "free drinks, science-themed rock bands, cake, decor and a dancing gorilla" (stuffed with a relay of biology students). Circulating around the university, student and faculty volunteers declaimed the entire text of the *Origin*.

On the Galapagos Islands, tourists making scientific pilgrimage were treated to "an active, life-seeing account of the life of this magnificent scientist", and a party of Stanford alumni retraced the circumnavigating voyage of HMS Beagle in a well-appointed private Boeing 757, intellectually chaperoned by Darwin's most distinguished academic biographer. The Darwin anniversaries were celebrated round the world: in Bogotá, Mexico City, Montevideo, Toronto, Toulouse, Frankfurt, Barcelona, Bangalore, Singapore, Seoul, Osaka, Cape Town, Rome (where it was sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Culture, part of a Vatican hatchet-burying initiative) and in all the metropolitan and scientific settings you might expect. The English £10 note has borne Darwin's picture on the back since 2000 (replacing Dickens), but special postage stamps and a new £2 coin honoured him in 2009, as did stamps or coins in at least 10 other countries.

Steven Shapin  
London Review  
of Books  
lrb.co.uk



## A true nightmare: the year of the shark

Who could have said that today, our life would change this way, and no matter what we can try, we are surely about to die. It started a few moments ago, and why it happened we do not know, as we were peacefully patrolling the sea, my hundred friends and me. Our swimming path was blocked, and in a trap we were all caught, as from the ship fell a huge net, which we knew would mean our death. We had seen these nets before, and we all knew what was in store, for friends of ours had died this way, and now this was our final day. As the nets closed compressing us tight, we all tried uselessly to put up a fight, and as we were lifted out of our sea, panic engulfed my friends and me. On the ship's deck we were released, and we saw humans grinning with greed, as one by one they took us away, for on this ship we would not stay. And as they pinned us to the floor, we each felt pain like never before, as our fins and tails were cut off with a knife, and our mutilated body thrown back to sea alive. As now we cannot swim any more, and slowly drop to the ocean floor, our imminent death is so very near, and for our species' extinction we fear.

Alex "The Sharkman"  
Buttigieg  
year-of-the-shark-2009.org



## Year of the barefoot runner

Historians will remember 2009 as the year barefoot running surged in popularity. Google Timeline reveals the huge increase in 2009 in searches for information about barefoot running on the internet.

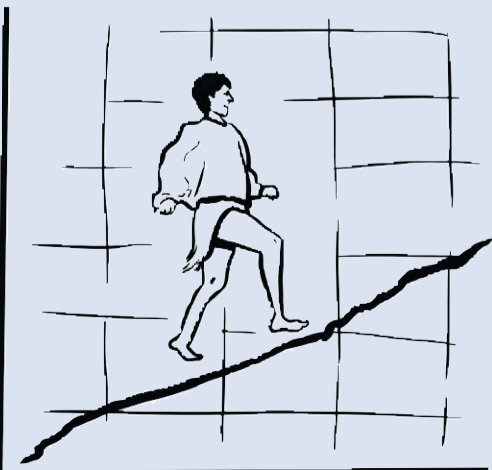
Many factors account for this recent explosion of interest in barefoot running: runners realising that running shoes are mostly hype/advertising, a general interest in alternative medicine and holistic healing, and a dedicated group of barefoot runners educating the public with websites, online discussion forums, and even barefoot running clubs. However, the biggest factor, in my opinion, was Christopher McDougall's book *Born to Run*.

McDougall's book was released in May, and according to Google Timeline the dramatic burst in barefoot running occurred in July. Clearly, this isn't just a coincidence. McDougall went on a one-man marketing mission to sell copies of his book and in the process, whether he had intended to or not, sold barefoot running.

McDougall talked to any reporter who would listen. A Google search on him and his book brings up nearly a million hits (yes, I like Google). More than sell books, McDougall gave barefoot running credibility. He made running barefoot respectable, and he backed up his claims with first-hand accounts of the Tarahumara Indians and their "running" way of life. His book is not scientific fact, but a compilation of interviews and observations with the Tarahumara and others, including respected scientists. It was also his journey.

Runners and even non-runners will find McDougall's transition to barefoot running fascinating. Clearly, if there is a barefoot education superstar in the fight to spur public interest, scientific research, and barefoot running credibility, it is Christopher McDougall. He is the barefoot runners' Man of the Year.

Dr Nirenberg  
America's Podiatrist  
americaspodiatrist.com



Illustrations by Sarah Lazarovic for The National

# Twelve months

## Elias Muhanna reviews a year of realignments in Middle Eastern politics

The year 2009 began with the Middle East ablaze. On January 1, for the fifth day running, Israeli jets continued to pummel Gaza in advance of a ground invasion that produced over 1,000 Palestinian deaths and hundreds of thousands of refugees. The war's effects rippled across the region in an all too familiar way: suicide bombers in Iraq targeted groups of civilians protesting the Gaza invasion, while America's allies in the region criticised Hamas for provoking the onslaught. Meanwhile, Iran castigated Egypt for collaborating with the enemy and Syria called off its peace negotiations with Israel. The region had slipped back into the trenches of its Cold War, in which a single Katyusha could trigger a massive military response and an international diplomatic crisis.

A year later, the atmosphere in the region is markedly different. Bitter rivals have visited each other's capitals to mend fences and the media is full of reports about a new age of reconciliation and diplomatic engagement. Following the turmoil of the previous five years, which witnessed a series of proxy wars between the Western-supported Sunni Arab regimes and the axis consisting of Iran, Syria, and their non-state allies (Hamas and Hizbollah), the relative calm that prevailed in 2009 was just one of many signs that a realignment of interests had begun to take shape.

The reasons for this realignment stem from two basic uncertainties. On the one hand, there is a question mark about the effects of a new – and still seemingly undefined – American policy for the region. Indeed, as disruptive as the neoconservative experiment was to Arab power dynamics, the presence of a new administration in Washington with a different outlook and a different set of priorities has forced the region to reorganise itself once again. On the other hand, Iran's growing influence and the concomitant challenges to its regime's authority have further muddied the waters, as its allies and adversaries try to gauge the health and durability of the Islamic Republic on its 30th anniversary. When these two unknown variables are combined, in attempts to assess shifting American policy toward the volatile regional heavyweight, the tea leaves become all the more difficult to read.

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Arabs heralded Obama's election as though he were one of their own, laying claim to his Muslim ancestry and Arabic name, and holding out hope that his administration would bring about a major reorientation of America's diplomatic posture in the Middle East. These hopes crested in early June, when Obama delivered his famous address to the Muslim world from Cairo. Following the speech, he was lionised for weeks by the Arab press, with some commentators going so far as to claim that it was Obama's influence that led the March 14 coalition to victory in the Lebanese parliamentary elections and ushered the Iranian Green Movement into the streets of Tehran.

A gross overstatement, to be certain. But there was no mistaking the new American approach, from Obama's much-discussed Persian New Year greetings, to his "Day One" strategy vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli peace process, which had lain dormant for seven years under Bush. At the same time, however, the inchoate character of this new policy meant that while many of the old battle lines had been rubbed out, the new ones had yet to emerge. The result: a sea of uncertainty and bet-hedging, as the region's political elite shifted their foreign policies into neutral – if not yet into reverse.

Nowhere was this sense of ambivalence more evident than in Lebanon, always a trusty barometer of regional political dynamics. A historic parliamentary election resulted in a repeat victory for the pro-American majority and a surprise defeat for the Iran and Syria-backed opposition. However, rather than leveraging the win into an effort to curtail Hezbollah's military capabilities – once a central plank of the March 14 agenda – the Lebanese prime minister, Saad Hariri, spent four months putting together a national unity government that gave his former political opponents a large share of power.

This accommodation was virtually mandated by a larger rapprochement between Lebanon's two principal foreign sponsors, Saudi Arabia and Syria, whose leaders also buried the hatchet in 2009 after four years of deep hostility and proxy warfare. As the Obama White House signalled its openness to re-establishing diplomatic relations with Syria, the Saudis silenced their media attacks on Damascus and began to explore ways in which to woo Bashar al Assad away from the encroaching influence of Iran. Indeed, the "Iranian question"

looms large in the new calculus of Arab reconciliation. As America has shifted its attention from the Gulf to Afghanistan, Iraq's neighbours have found increased latitude to shape the occupation's aftermath. Their main concern has been to check Iran's influence over the Shiite-dominated government, empowering Sunni factions to provide a counterbalance thereto. Washington's determination to deal with Tehran through engagement rather than coercion has fuelled Arab suspicion that Obama sees an expanded Iranian sphere of influence as an acceptable price to pay in the larger calculations about America's global strategy.

At the same time, Iran's allies have their own reasons to worry. In June, a landslide victory for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad prompted accusations of vote-rigging by the opposition. What began as a street demonstration quickly blossomed into a full-fledged confrontation between Iran's opposition forces and the regime. The potent mixture of popular disenchantment,

a young population, and the global reach of internet media captured the attention of the entire region and resulted in unprecedented expressions of dissent towards the central symbols of the Islamic revolution itself: Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Council of Guardians. Although the challenge was put down, opposition has continued to simmer, prompting further uncertainty regarding the regime's ability to project power overseas.

In 2009, therefore, the political deck seemed to be reshuffled. In some corners of the Arab world, this led to a policy of reconciliation and wagon-circling, while divisions in other places remained impermeable to mediation and engagement. Interminable talks between Hamas and Fatah have failed to reconcile the Palestinians to each other, and for all of the hype about a commitment to the peace process, Israel successfully rebuffed the State Department's efforts to broker anything meaningful in 2009. Furthermore, while Syria and Saudi Arabia are speaking again, the Egyptians remain as cold as ever, joined in their animosity towards Damascus by the Maliki government in Baghdad.

The outcome of this year of realignments rests in large part with America, how it decides to engage with the reshuffled deck in the Middle East, and how the region responds. But with the Obama administration having promised to turn its attention to creating jobs, stimulating its economy, and defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Middle East seems to have been relegated to the second tier. This is in large part because, for the first time in several years, it can be. There are no urgent and highly visible threats to America's regional interests and little political capital is to be gained on the domestic front from robust interventionism. Unfortunately, a policy of benign neglect could mean that opportunities to achieve diplomatic breakthroughs on issues such as Arab-Israeli peace and broader regional stability might be lost, precisely at a time when the possibilities of success are greater than they have been in years. In the absence of decisive policy, this year's realignments may soon be consigned to the footnotes of history.

Elias Muhanna, a regular contributor to *The Review*, writes the *Lebanese affairs* blog *Qifa Nabki*. He is a PhD candidate in Arabic and Islamic studies at Harvard University.

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