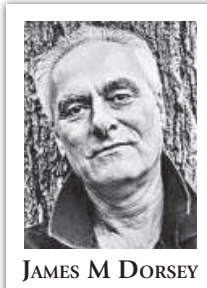


US military strikes in Iraq stir regional hornet's nest



JAMES M DORSEY

THE United States stirred a hornet's nest that stretches far beyond Iraq when it attacked an Iranian-backed militia on the weekend. The fallout of the US strikes

was immediate in Iraq with pro-Iranian militiamen besieging the US embassy in Baghdad in scenes reminiscent of the run-up in 1979 to the 444-day occupation of the American diplomatic mission in Tehran.

The strikes threw into question the future of the US military presence in Iraq, 17 years after US-led forces toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein.

They came at a moment that mass anti-government demonstrations are demanding a radical overhaul of Iraq's political system.

If protesters focused their demand for a withdrawal of all foreign forces primarily on Iranian influence prior to the US strikes, they now focus equally on the presence of US forces.

Of equal, if not more far-reaching consequence, is the fact that the strikes potentially bolster efforts to counter moves by Saudi Arabia to position itself as an Islamic hegemon based on its financial muscle and appeal as the custodian of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.

The backing of the efforts by allies and states with whom the United States maintains, sometimes increasingly complex relationships, including Malaysia, Turkey and Qatar, complicates issues for the Trump administration.

The efforts involve both joint initiatives that last month culminated in an Islamic summit in Kuala Lumpur outside of the confines of the Riyadh-based, Saudi-controlled Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that groups 57 Muslim majority states.

Ultimately, the summit dashed hopes that an anti-Saudi block would challenge the kingdom by taking on major problems confronting the Muslim world, including China's crackdown on Turkic Muslims in its troubled, north-western province of Xinjiang; repression of Rohingya

in Myanmar that has prompted hundreds of thousands to seek refuge in neighbouring Bangladesh; and civil wars in Syria and Yemen.

Despite its billing, the summit avoided such sensitive issues. Nonetheless, it signalled strong currents in the Muslim world that seek to counter the influence of America's closest allies in the Middle East.

Part of the Kuala Lumpur summit's problem was that rivalries in the

investing in the building of mosques and religious entities in countries as far-flung and seemingly marginal as Cuba and New Zealand and the funding of key Muslim institutions.

The rivalries are also fought geopolitically in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean gas race and the Horn of Africa where rivals back opposing sides.

The US military strikes, widely viewed as a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, potentially handed a

That could, however, change with Iraqi public demands for a withdrawal of all foreign forces and pro-Iranian militias ending their siege of the US embassy in Baghdad on condition that parliament adopts a timeline for the withdrawal.

Pro-Iranian militias are counting on the fact that they are Iraqis with close ties to the Iraqi security establishment, which they expect will exclude them from the moves to withdraw foreign

believed to be one of the instigators of the Kuala Lumpur summit, from attending the gathering.

Saudi Arabia reportedly threatened to withdraw some USD 10 billion plus in investments and financial aid to Pakistan if Mr Khan participated.

Saudi opposition to the gathering coupled with Chinese concerns that it would target the crackdown in Xinjiang influenced Indonesian president Joko Widodo's decision not to participate.

Indonesian Vice-President Amin Ma'arif, a leading figure in Nahdlatul Ulema, the world's largest Muslim organisation, cited medical reasons for not attending.

A forced US withdrawal from Iraq, even if countries like Saudi Arabia are able to limit the fallout in the Muslim world, would significantly bolster anti-US forces and hand them a victory on par with the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The anti-Soviet insurgents, despite being backed by the United States and Saudi Arabia, ultimately turned their backs on their benefactors.

A forced US withdrawal from Iraq would likely not spark the jihadist movement that emerged from Afghanistan, but it would put considerable wind in the sails of those seeking to counter US and Saudi influence in the region.

"Everyone is breathing a sigh of relief. A situation that could have easily escalated out of control was handled with tactical restraint, and everyone was able to walk away," said Major Charlie Dietz, a spokesman for the US military in Baghdad, after protesters withdrew from the US embassy.

The problem is the relief is temporary at best. Seventeen years of engagement in Iraq and USD 1 trillion later, the United States risks the kind of humiliation it suffered with the 1979 occupation of its Tehran embassy.

Only this time, it may occur against the backdrop of a United States that has suffered a loss of credibility and whose power is perceived to be waning, irrespective of whether by design or default.

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Protestors and militia fighters gather to condemn air strikes on bases belonging to Hashed al-Shaabi, outside the main gate of the US Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq, December 31, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Muslim world transcend political and geopolitical fault lines in an environment of a few cash-rich and a majority of economically and financially troubled states.

Countries like Saudi Arabia; the United Arab Emirates, the kingdom's closest ally; Turkey; and Iran are, moreover, competing with one another globally using religious soft power by

whip to Saudi Arabia's detractors at a moment that the summit spotlighted the divisions in the Muslim world and participation in the gathering was determined in part by the kingdom's ability to wield its financial muscle to prevent states from attending.

Russia and Iran were quick to condemn the US strikes. So far, others have remained silent.

forces that would primarily target the United States.

For its part, the Trump administration is likely counting on Saudi and UAE financial muscle to prevent the Iraqi crisis sparking a groundswell of anti-US sentiment elsewhere in the Muslim world.

Saudi financial muscle persuaded Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan,

Tribute to Sir Fazle Hasan Abed

A compassionate listener and an innovative problem solver

KAMAL AHMAD

IT is with deep sadness that we learned of the passing of Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, our *Abed bhai*. In one life time, he founded Brac and transformed it into the largest and one of the most respected, effective and sustainable development institutions in the world. He was a fountain of ideas to address the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities, and a genius in finding ways to implement them. In my personal association with *Abed bhai*, even more striking has been his unceasing interest in the work of others and his generosity to help them every step of the way. The creation and growth of the Asian University for Women (AUW) is an example of *Abed bhai's* abiding interests in and support for other institutions that aid in the struggle to overcome poverty and ignorance.

At the time of its conception, AUW did not have an office or staff or any other tangible asset. As we pursued the idea, we turned to *Abed bhai* to temporarily use Brac as our address. He agreed without any hesitation and

throughout the early years of AUW's planning, 66 Mohakhali Road in Dhaka where Brac's premises used to be served as our contact address.

When we applied for a major grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Gates Foundation sent a young officer named Rajiv Shah (now the President of the Rockefeller Foundation) to do their due diligence. We had nothing to show, as we were still an organisation without any staff or office or other resources. So, accompanied by Mrs Rokeya Rahman, we took Rajiv Shah to meet with *Abed bhai* (and Dr Muhammad Yunus). And that was enough—the Gates Foundation made a significant start-up grant to AUW that enabled the institution to come into being.

At a later point, AUW faced some hurdles with the land that the government had allocated for its campus. As was our habit when we faced any serious problem, we went to *Abed bhai* for counsel. His response to our perceived crisis was that Brac had a sizable piece of land not too far from where the designated site for AUW was. If we needed it, we could have it. Two



Sir Fazle Hasan Abed

days later I was at that Brac property assessing our options. We did not need to find an alternative site for AUW in the end. But *Abed bhai's* assurance that day had a profound effect on us and our belief of what would be possible for AUW.

As a regional women's university, AUW had a particular interest in serving women in Afghanistan who arguably suffered most from lack of

educational opportunities. It was not easy for AUW to connect with people and institutions in Afghanistan in the midst of all its conflict. So, once again, we went to *Abed bhai*. Brac became the organisation through which AUW would recruit Afghan students. Today Afghanistan is the second largest source of students for AUW—over 60 Afghan students have graduated and another 150 or so are currently attending the university. Brac remains our partner in recruiting these students from that country. It is possible that without *Abed bhai's* intervention, AUW would have never reached Afghanistan; it certainly would not have done so as early as it did, in 2009.

Abed bhai also had an uncanny way of simplifying the most complex and difficult challenges in order to render them actionable. He was once speaking at a standing-room-only meeting with the Clinton Global Initiative in New York. When the question arose as to what it takes to successfully execute scale-up programmes, you could see everyone drawing to the edge of their seats to hear from the man who was undeniably the best at it.

Abed bhai's answer: "Well, you have to get good HR people; you have to get really good accountants." What he was saying was that if you got the right people and created an honest institution, you could deliver the services that you had set out to provide.

At another meeting in Boston at the offices of AUW's Chairman and former head of the Harvard University endowment, Jack Meyer, somebody asked *Abed bhai*, "How do you know what programmes to develop?" All the consultants from McKinsey and others pulled out their yellow pads. *Abed bhai* answered, "Well, I go to the communities and sit down with the women there and ask [them what] they need. We provide what *they* tell us they need."

As we mourn the passing of this extraordinary soul and celebrate his great achievements, we at the Asian University for Women express our profound gratitude to *Abed bhai* for helping us to bring our idea into reality. We will miss his kindness, his unfailing grace and his wise counsel. We will miss him.

Kamal Ahmad is Founder, Asian University for Women.

QUOTABLE Quote

JORGE LUIS BORGES
(1899–1986)

Argentine poet, essayist, and short-story writer whose works became classics of 20th-century world literature.

Plant your garden and decorate your own soul, instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Animal hides
- 6 Cricket or crew
- 11 Turn aside
- 12 Copier need
- 13 Annual celebration
- 15 "Entourage" agent
- 16 By way of
- 17 Hankering
- 18 Whodunit
- 20 Colony member
- 21 USN rank
- 22 Jason's ship
- 23 Factions
- 26 Make broader
- 27 Attention-getting sound
- 28 Setting item
- 29 Blazing

DOWN

- 1 Old airline
- 2 Each
- 3 Clark's partner
- 4 Take a stab at
- 5 Justice succeeded by Kagan
- 6 Wander off
- 7 Not neg.

30 Die down

- 34 King Kong, for one
- 35 Schedule C org.
- 36 Goat sound
- 37 They're often broken in January
- 40 Houston player
- 41 Draw out
- 42 Snouts
- 43 Billing info

8 Three feet

- 9 Vindictive quest
- 10 New Jersey capital
- 14 Broadcasts
- 19 Abound
- 22 Goals
- 23 Like much of Africa
- 24 Optimistic exclamation
- 25 Loathes
- 26 Man of many words
- 28 Wise teacher
- 30 Farm towers
- 31 Folder's phrase
- 32 Tango or trot
- 33 Moves cautiously
- 38 Vein contents
- 39 Lupino of films

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

CRATE THOR
REMIX HIRE
AGENT ADAPT
VAN RAW TAR
ENDLESS LOVE
LEMS ARES
CLOVE ABYSS
RILE PRE
ENDLESS LOOP
WET VIE APE
EMILE NASAL
DAMON ALERT
NEXT LASTS

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

MY WIFE WANTS TO PLAY GOLF WITH ME TODAY

HE SAID IT'S OK AS LONG AS WE DON'T TELL HIS WIFE

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

HOW DID THE BOOKSTORE INTERVIEW GO?

I THINK I BLEN IT.

SHE ASKED ME WHAT BOOKS I'M CURRENTLY READING, AND I ACTUALLY TOLD HER.

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

DON'T LET THE PIGEON DRIVE THE BUS AND EVERYBODY ROOPS!

HEY, THOSE ARE CLASSICS!