

Killings in the desert and the mirage of caliphate

MAHFUZZUR RAHMAN

THE name is now all too familiar, so are the violence and brutality associated with it. A caliphate, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIS, has been proclaimed. A caliph, with a suitable name borrowed from the first caliph of Islam, has proclaimed himself as head of the Islamic State. The evocative name of Baghdad of the glorious days of Islam has been duly affixed to the title.

The caliphate has not been coy about its own image. It has turned the desert into a killing field. It has so far beheaded five western hostages and has put up the gruesome acts on show in the social media. Sweeping down from the heartland of Syria, it has captured vast territories in western and northern Iraq and it has killed thousands: from among the shi'a, the not-so-good sunnis, the Yazidis, and others. It has vowed to pulverise shia cities such as Karbala which it sees as citadels of corrupt Islam. As in ancient times, captured women have in many cases been forced into servitude and sex. The ISIS has imposed strict shari'a laws (according to its interpretation of them) in the lands conquered. This includes requirements of head-to-toe garments for women made of suitable fabrics that truly conceal the female body as well as stoning to death for adultery. A very recent video of life in the Syrian town of Raqqa, the ISIS capital, shows a man crucified for murder still sprawled over a tall cross, for everyone to see. Public beheadings are flaunted on the social media.

To the jihadists of ISIS, the caliphate is as important as its Islamic substance. The caliphate is the antithesis of western democracy. In a modern democracy, sovereignty lies with the people; in a caliphate, as the Islamists understand it, sovereignty and authority belong to Allah alone.

There is little doubt, that the idea of a caliphate has proved attractive to many. Thousands from around the world have flocked to fight for ISIS though its main fighting force is still predominantly Arab. The masked man who beheaded James Foley, the journalist, is said to be British Muslim. There are reports suggesting that young Muslims who have joined the ranks of the caliphate's jihadists from Britain and continental Europe number many hundreds, if not thousands.

The fascination with the idea is strange because the historical caliphates have

proved far less attractive as role models. Nor is the attraction of the idea limited to the jihadists. Professedly peaceable Islamist groups, including quite a few in our own country, wish for an Islamic state modelled on a caliphate. Apparently, they do not know their history or have forgotten it. One remembers too how, way back in the years following World War I, many Muslim political leaders on the Indian subcontinent went lachrymose over the demise of the moth-eaten Ottoman caliphate.

The question of a caliphate arose immediately after the death of the Prophet (sa) of Islam. The difficulty with it also rose almost simultaneously. Tension arose among his companions over succession. Some from the Ansar, Muslims in Medina who hosted the Meccan immigrants, the Muhajirun, in the latter's dire circumstances, wanted a man from among them to be chosen caliph. Abu Bakr and 'Umar, two of the most prominent companions of the Prophet (sa) prevailed on them to back down. Abu Bakr became the first caliph of Islam. The four caliphs, close companions of the Prophet of Islam and eulogized as the rashedun (the Rightly Guided), ruled for only twenty-nine years. Three out of the four were murdered.

Abu Bakr's two-year rule was crucial in solidifying Islamic rule in Arabia. His rule was marked by fighting against a number of apostate tribes and the conquest of most of Arabia. Muslim victories in fights against apostates ensured that Islam in Arabia had come to stay. 'Umar's ten-year rule further consolidated Islam's power, strengthened Medina's central authority and saw rapid Arab imperial expansion. Conquest brought huge wealth to the conquering Muslims. The result was not entirely salutary to a society long accustomed to poverty and deprivation.

The rest of the history of the four Rightly Guided caliphs is of stupendous significance for the idea of caliphates. 'Umar was assassinated by a Persian former slave. On his deathbed he appointed a six-member Consultative Council tasked with choosing the next caliph. The council included prominent associates of the Prophet (sa), 'Uthman and 'Ali among them. After deliberations that stretched over several days, 'Uthman was chosen, much to the chagrin of 'Ali who nevertheless pledged allegiance to the new caliph. 'Uthman's twelve-year rule saw a further consolidation of Islam's power and exten-

sion of the empire. It also saw the beginning of trouble for the caliphate. Opposition to him was brewing. It arose among soldiers in garrison towns sprouting in the conquered territories. There were also serious allegations of nepotism and favouritism on the part of the caliph, especially over appointment of governors. 'Uthman was assassinated after a forty-day seizure of his residence. The Caliph's supporters could not save him. For the first time, blood of a Muslim was shed by Muslims.

'Ali assumed the caliphate amidst a serious fraying of the consensus the Consultative Council was supposed to uphold. Two of the stalwarts in the Council, Talhah and al-Zubayr, declared their allegiance to 'Ali after a great deal of prevarication. The caliphate was marred by the first serious split in the Islamic community. Mu'awiyah, a strongman appointed governor of Syria by 'Uthman, openly defied 'Ali and refused to concede to the new caliph's demand that he give up the governorship. Some of other gubernatorial nominees of the caliph faced opposition in places they were supposed to govern. An acute feeling of insecurity led 'Ali to relocate his capital to Kufah, far from the cradle of Islam in Medina.

The Koran considered fitna, meaning variously tumult and oppression, as well as civil strife, as something worse than slaughter (2: 217). Yet that was exactly what was happening at the time of one of the caliphs. 'Ali's short five-year caliphate saw the first serious fitna, in Islam. Among his prominent opponents were 'A'ishah, the Prophet (sa)'s favourite wife, and Talhah and al-Zubayr, who found in her a valiant adversary of 'Ali. In a battle known as the Battle of the Camel, fought near Basrah, both Talhah and al-Zubayr were killed. The battle itself was brought to a quick end by 'Ali signalling 'A'ishah's camel, which signalled loss of leadership to her forces. 'Ali treated the Prophet's wife with great respect nonetheless. A larger battle was fought at Siffin, near the city of Raqqa, the capital of the present-day ISIS, between the forces of 'Ali and Mu'awiyah. The caliph appeared to have the upper hand and Mu'awiyah avoided defeat and destruction by a ruse and called for arbitration to settle their dispute. 'Ali accepted arbitration.

A new dimension was soon added to the fitna: further dissent arose soon. As described by al-Tabari, some of 'Ali's fol-

lowers who had earlier supported arbitration (which 'Ali had at first been opposing) now changed their mind and considered arbitration a sin, because authority to arbitrate lay with Allah, not with any human being. To 'Ali an agreement had to be honoured and he therefore stuck to arbitration. The challenge to 'Ali was vociferous and increasingly menacing. The protagonists of this idea withdrew their support from the caliph, earning for themselves the nomenclature of the khawarij, or the khwarejite, those who withdrew. Conflict between the two factions, each calling the other sinners and rebels against Allah, became inevitable. Each side was calling for jihad on the other, even though both were Muslim. In their short insurgency, they excelled in brutality. The final battle, fought on the bank of a canal, resulted in a great slaughter of the khawarij.

The khawarij were not eliminated. However, soon three of the dissenters conspired to kill simultaneously both 'Ali and Mu'awiyah as well as Amr b. al-'As, a close collaborator of Mu'awiyah's. In the end it was 'Ali alone who was killed. After a short rule by al-Hasan, 'Ali's son, the caliphate passed on to Mu'awiyah, son of 'Abi Sufyan, an arch antagonist of Prophet Muhammad (sa) till his conversion to Islam shortly before the latter's death. The much cherished consensus to choose a caliph vanished. A long series of caliphs – some pious, a few patrons of intellectual inquiry, others debauched, and yet others indifferent – from the Umayyad and Abbasid, chose themselves, often after bloodbaths, till the Mongols put an end to the Baghdad caliphate in the thirteenth century.

The ISIS is apparently pursuing the mirage of the caliphate of the Rightly Guided caliphs. In its literalist interpretation of Islam, it is like the khawarij. It certainly looks like them in extreme brutality. One can be reasonably sure it will be defeated and destroyed sooner or later. Perhaps it will split or self-destruct. Its seventh century mindset will see to that. Meanwhile other advocates of a caliphate must pause and ponder. It is quite unlikely, though, that the masked killers in the Syrian deserts will.

The writer is a former United Nations economist and author.

Gold galore comments galore

SHAHNOOR WAHID

RABINDRANATH Tagore loved this land and wrote, "Amaar shonar Bangla, ami tomai bhalobashi..." (O my golden Bengal, I love thee so...). He used the Bangla word for 'golden' as a metaphor, to allude to the abundance of beauty of the pristine land. But, after so many decades of his death, our Biman people are trying to establish the fact that Tagore used the word in its pure literal sense. Hence they are hell-bent on flooding Bengal with real gold... gold biscuits... to make the great bard's soul happy in heaven. He would dance and sing in praise of those men and women in Biman for turning his Bengal into a real shonar Bangla.

After a series of raids and recovery of gold biscuits from Biman aircraft toilets, lounge toilets, and some other inconceivable places, some of the raghobs and boals of Biman along with some small fry have been netted already by the intelligence agencies. But the main 'shark', the boss, the Goldfinger, is still out there in the wide wide world watching everything from the dark depth of his lair. He is possibly trying to connect with some powerful people in politics to avoid getting caught in police dragnet. And for a section of politicians this means big business, a chance to earn two-pice, (In reality, few millions), through providing shelter, and keeping sleuths away from him. In exchange the shark will have to cough up some of the gold biscuits.

You see, what is interesting in the whole story is the very fact that all these years gold biscuits have been coming to Bangladesh, Kgs after Kgs, mostly by Biman, and everyone from a cobbler to a blacksmith used to talk about this while having tea at a stall. And yet we didn't see any big fish getting caught so long. It is only last week that some of the big names of that organization have surfaced! Now, one would like to know, what the multifarious intelligence agencies have been doing all these years? How could those corrupt elements avoid getting detected for such a long time?

The gang has been scheduling and rescheduling Biman flights to facilitate smuggling of gold from various overseas destinations and yet no one inside Biman had any idea of what was going on! The gang put their own pilots in the craft so that smuggling became easy, but none of the honest pilots could smell the rat and raise any question! Some of those blessed golden men and women have built palatial buildings in the city and yet no agency inquired about their income source! Where were the tax people, who chase guys like you and me with such frenzy for submitting tax returns?

It is indeed difficult to believe that everything suddenly started to fall into pieces for the investigating agencies and names started to pop up one after another. A couple of thousand people work in Biman, but only about a dozen people have been apprehended so far. The million dollar question is, how could about two dozen people carry out such a secretive operation year after year and become millionaires right under the authority's nose, fooling all with such perfection for such a long time! Now the next million dollar question is, will anything really happen to the powerful network that controls from behind curtains! Let us wait and see.

Ah! The comments galore! It is a free land where everyone has the right to express what she or he believes, isn't it? That is the cornerstone of democracy. We must say whatever comes to the tip of our tongue and draw the attention of the media. We must talk first and think later. The powerful man with a glib tongue from Tangail commented on matters that did not concern him at all on that fateful day, and in consequence now facing the music – music not too pleasant to the senses. He talked about "Reduction", God knows what he had meant by that, but now he finds himself being reduced to that reduction level by the government. When you take away power from a tiger it looks like a wet cat. He now looks like a bewildered cat that was hit by a big club-duh!

Only weeks after this comical act from the Tangail trepidation, a powerful advisor had to comment on things that he should have left alone. It was not his cup of tea and yet he took a sip. Now he has burnt his lips and tongue. It is always the tongue that causes the trouble. Some people, when they reach the top, do not look down at the ground. They keep looking up and want to be there where normal people cannot reach. From that dizzy height when they fall it hurts most-ouch!

Good Lord! Now even death penalty awardees show V-sign and give comments on camera! It has been reported in this daily that Mobarak who has been given death sentence on Monday flashed a V-sign and commented, "The order to hang me has been issued, let the photojournalists take my picture."

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Pneumonia: Deadly childhood disease

DR POONAM KHETRAPAL SINGH

NEARLY 1.7 million children under the age of five years died last year in WHO's South-East Asia Region, with pneumonia and diarrhoea being among the major killers. The Region accounts for 27% of global deaths in this age group. These statistics are alarming and unfortunate as these deaths continue to occur despite availability of well-known evidence based interventions for prevention and treatment of diseases like pneumonia. This is a warning that the Region is far from achieving the Millennium Development Goal – MDG 4 target of reducing child mortality by 2015 end.

Pneumonia in children is responsible for 13% of under-five deaths in the Region. These deaths are unacceptable. We need to review the causes and move forward to end these preventable child deaths.

One of the reasons is that some of the big countries like India, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Myanmar have not been able to achieve high levels of coverage with life-saving interventions for childhood pneumonia and other conditions among under-five children. For example, in India, while 69% children with symptoms of pneumonia were taken to health care providers only 13% were treated with antibiotics that are recommended by the national guidelines. Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life can prevent childhood pneumonia; however it is practiced for 46% of children according to the National Family Health Survey-3. In

Bangladesh and Indonesia, 35% and 51% children with pneumonia, respectively, sought treatment from healthcare workers. Unfortunately, the children that are left out are the ones who are the most vulnerable like the poor and the ones living in rural areas, urban slums or remote areas. Their needs for such life-saving interventions are essential.

The other major cause of childhood deaths is diarrhoea which is responsible for almost 10% of child mortality in the Region. Several preventive strategies and interventions for diarrhoea are similar to the ones for pneumonia in children and could be delivered by the same set of health services. The story of prevention and management of childhood diarrhoea is similar to that of childhood pneumonia.

The Integrated Global Action Plan for Pneumonia and Diarrhoea (GAPPD) proposed by the World Health Organization and United Nations Children Fund is a timely initiative to promote an integrated approach to rapidly reduce childhood mortality caused by pneumonia and diarrhoea. This innovative approach has been designed to accelerate progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goal to save the lives of children under the age of five (MDG4), as well as successful implementation of the "Every Woman Every Child" movement under the UN Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, and to the renewed commitment to child survival to which the countries in the region have promised. The GAPPD provides the road

map for reducing mortality from pneumonia in children under five to less than 3 per 1000 live births, and from diarrhoea to less than 1 per 1000 by 2025.

It is widely accepted that prevention and control of pneumonia and diarrhoea need to be addressed through integrated approaches. National governments must rapidly expand the coverage of tried and tested life-saving interventions such as exclusive breastfeeding, good nutrition for children, hygienic living, safe drinking water, improved cooking stoves to prevent exposure of children to indoor air pollution, zinc and oral rehydration. Solution for managing diarrhoea and amoxicillin for treatment of pneumonia, vitamin A and vaccination are important. The neglected children in remote places, who are most vulnerable must be reached with all these interventions for the desired impact. This would need close collaboration and coordination not only among different programmes within the ministry of health but also with relevant programmes managed by other ministries. Collaboration and coordination among all stakeholders like the government, development partners, donors, civil society, families and communities would be required at the same time. With accelerated and coordinated implementation the gains are likely to be significant in terms of efficient and effective use of scarce resources.

WHO, along with partners and Member States, is working on developing locally applicable national strategies and national and sub-national work plans for preven-

tion and control of pneumonia and diarrhoea. The national government, while taking the leadership role, should engage critical partners in the overall work plan for coordinated and accelerated implementation.

WHO urges countries to strengthen the existing time-tested child health strategies like Integrated Management of Newborn and Childhood Illness at all levels of health care – from home and community to first level and referral level hospitals. At the same time, innovative approaches must be deployed for increasing awareness among communities, increase the demand for services and reach out to the unreached children.

Availability of vaccines that prevent pneumonia against Haemophilus influenzae b and Pneumococcus and Rotavirus vaccine for prevention of serious diarrhoeal disease brings new opportunities to strengthen national efforts in reducing childhood deaths through coordinated approaches.

WHO will continue to support the national governments, partners and civil society to adopt these urgent accelerated and coordinated efforts without which about 400 000 vulnerable children will continue to die from pneumonia and diarrhoea each year in the South-East Asia Region.

The writer is Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region.

QUOTABLE Quote

A woman's mind is cleaner than a man's: She changes it more often.

Oliver Herford

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

- Light wood
- Works the land
- Even a little
- Online messages
- Neighbor of Tibet
- German thanks
- Magnet end
- Baseball's Williams
- Logging-on need
- "Be that - may ..."
- Parson's domain
- On the up-and-up
- Full of passion
- Don Quixote's pal
- Honeyed drink
- Lamp liquid
- Lupino of film
- Butcher's wares
- French thanks
- "The Lion King" hero
- Entreaties
- Less cordial
- Incline
- Use the rink

DOWN

- Criminalize
- Had dinner
- Napkin spot
- Visual humor
- Permit
- Not state or local
- "I - Rock"
- Crazy talk
- Karaoke need
- Winter glider
- Cut off
- Chums
- On the ocean
- Billboard, for example
- Turkey choice
- Words of understanding
- Baseball's Musial
- Jekyll's alter ego
- Stephen King novella
- Mine rock
- Caravan stop
- Little rascals
- Secluded valley
- Region
- Soda container
- Farrow of film
- Wager
- Verb for you

Yesterday's answer

LASTS HUGHS
IDAHO OPRAH
LATER TIARA
AGREED NOD
CIA TEPI DLY
SOPHALOED
SUDAN
GLUMSY COS
FLAMBES ACE
LET ADORED
ARIES UVULA
TINGE MASON
SCOOT BLOTS

CRYPTOQUOTE

XRF WCX MI DFWZFCNROJ NBWQOEVE
EM, EMX QFN. OX ON UFCQ FWNQ XM NWQ
QFN. -- XMEQ KDWOC

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:
I DON'T PAY GOOD WAGES BECAUSE I HAVE A LOT OF MONEY; I HAVE A LOT OF MONEY BECAUSE I PAY GOOD WAGES.
-- ROBERT BOSCH

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

HENRY by Don Trachte