

Trump hits Syria

A gambit and a war crime

STRANGER THAN FICTION



TAJ HASHMI

THERE are contradictory opinions about who on April 4 used chemical weapons, which killed more than 80 civilians, including

children in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhun in Syria. Some pundits impute the deadly Sarin gas attack to Bashar al-Assad, while others believe terrorists belonging to the al-Nusra Front, which is an al Qaeda surrogate and friends with pro-western Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are behind the attacks. There is, however, no ambiguity about America's missile attacks on Syria's Shayrat airbase in the early dawn of Friday, April 7. US government sources have confirmed 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles fired from US warships in the Mediterranean hit the air base, from where they claim Assad's forces launched the deadly chemical attacks on Syrian civilians.

Trump's missiles killed nine civilians including four children in villages near the base. Meanwhile, Republican and Democrat leaders, analysts, and media in the US are supportive of the attack, which seems to have boosted President Trump's self-confidence as the "Leader of the Free World", a hyperbolic expression Americans use in self-glorification. The illegal missile attack is likely to improve the president's sinking popularity among Americans, which was around 35 percent last week, one of the lowest in US history.

What's surprising – and extremely sickening though – is the way Western governments, media, analysts, and some of their counterparts across the world are analysing the short- and long-term effects of the missile attack,

without outright condemning it as a war crime. As if only the Assad regime is responsible for human rights violations and war crimes, while the US is just "defending democracy and freedom", as Americans always claim before and after all major wars and invasions it makes across the world. Sadly, only a handful of US analysts and politicians are publicly criticising the Trump administration for attacking Syria without a UN Security Council resolution, and without seeking any approval from the US Congress either. However, the Congress approval for invading a country by the US doesn't bring any stamp of legitimacy for the crime in international law.

Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran are openly condemning the attack. NATO and EU countries in general, and Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey in particular, are seemingly very happy with Trump as he punished Assad for "crossing the redline". Some even praise Trump for not behaving like another Obama, who despite his promise, didn't retaliate against Assad for "crossing the redline" by allegedly using chemical weapons against his own people in 2013. While China isn't relishing the attack, Russia has announced retaliatory steps against such attacks. It's also going to strengthen Syrian air defence capabilities. Iran and Hezbollah have also registered their strong protests against this unlawful attack.

So far so good! However, those who are happy about the so-called "retaliatory attack" against Assad for his alleged use of chemical weapon against his own people don't know several anti-Assad rebel groups also have piles of chemical weapons, and some of them have already used it in the recent past. On several occasions, neutral UN observers pointed fingers at some Syrian rebel groups, backed by the US, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey



The wreckage of destroyed planes on Shayrat air base in Syria.

PHOTO: MIKHAIL VOSKRESENSKIY/SPUTNIK

in 2012-2013, for chemical weapon attacks.

The Syrian civil war is a cumulative long-drawn effect of multiple proxy wars in the region, between Washington and Moscow, and Tehran and the Riyadh-Telaviv-Ankara triumvirate, backed by Washington. It's time to understand, Russia and China along with Iran and Hezbollah aren't going to give up their interests in Syria. They aren't going to accept a pro-Western regime there. In Syria, Russia has its very strategically important and only military base in the region. It has many "advisers" in the country. So, Trump's missile attack in Syria is going to become an episode without any fruit for Washington and its allies. It's time to reflect on what former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan emphatically stated in June 2012 after the failure of the UN-sponsored peace plan in Syria: "Syria is not Libya, it will not implode; it will explode beyond its

borders."

Now, is Syria only a "strategic issue" or a battlefield for multiple proxy wars? No. It's a small country with very diverse population, who profess different faiths and are racially multi-ethnic as well. It used to be a peaceful country. Thanks to the influence of the Israel Lobby, America has had a problematic relationship with Syria since 1948. In March 1949, CIA toppled the democratically elected President Shukri al-Quwatly through a military coup d'état, and installed Colonel Husni al-Zaim (the "American Boy") to power. Zaim legitimised Israel by signing an armistice with it, and allowed the ARAMCO to pipe Saudi oil to go through Syria to the Mediterranean coast. Afterward, America staged multiple military coups in Syria. Eventually, Syria became a self-reliant, free, modern, and secular dictatorship under Hafez al-Assad, who ruled from 1971 to 2000. His son Bashar al-Assad

has been the president since 2000.

In view of the above, there's no reason to assume that what America, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and their allies are doing in Syria is anything but promoting democracy, human rights, and secularism. Syria is possibly the most secular country where Shia, Sunni, Maronite, Druze, Christian, atheists, pagans, and women enjoy much more freedom and equal opportunities than anywhere else in the Muslim World. If promotion of democracy and freedom is the prime US objective in Syria, one wonders as to why it is teaming up with Saudi Arabia and its reactionary allies, the thuggish Jabhat al-Nusra, Free Syrian Army, and last but not least, ISIS! As Fareed Zakaria told CNN this Friday (April 7), ISIS is a bigger threat to the free world than the Assad regime. "The weaker Assad gets, ISIS becomes stronger", he spelled out.

Despite the sound and fury about

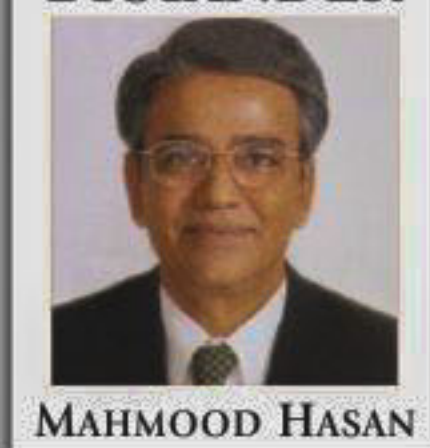
Trump's missile attack in Syria – which amounts to war crime – it's nothing more than a balderdash, so much so that it's only going to boost Trump's sinking popularity among Americans, who are historically great admirers of presidents who invade countries and kill tens of thousands of civilians, in the pursuit of democracy, freedom, and glory for the "Greatest Nation on Earth". Since the attack has agitated and angered Putin a lot, it could work like a steroid shot for Trump. He can now defend himself better from those who think Putin's hackers were somehow instrumental in his victory in the presidential election.

Nevertheless, a war crime is a war crime! The US has no international mandate to work as the custodian of any world order. There's nothing called "US exceptionalism" in any textbook on international law or diplomacy. Any unilateral invasion of another country, without prior approval from the UN Security Council, is a flagrant violation of international law, hence a war crime. Unfortunately, the US has been behaving like a bull in the china shop since its annexation of Mexican territories in the 1840s. It's invading countries almost non-stop and with impunity from Hawaii to the Philippines, Hiroshima to Honduras, Indo-China to Indonesia, Afghanistan to Iraq, Libya, and Syria – and in the process, has killed multiple millions of innocent civilians across the world. Instead of justifying the latest US aggression in Syria, it's time to condemn it as war crime. The UN should ask the US to apologise to Syria, and pay compensation for the illegal attack.

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Erdogan's bid to become the new Ataturk of Turkey

FROM A BYSTANDER



MAHMOOD HASAN

TURKEY will hold a referendum on April 16 for a new Constitution, which if passed will fundamentally change the political

character of the government. Since the failed coup of July 15 2016, the third extension of the State of Emergency was made on January 19, 2017 for 90 days. Thus the referendum is being held under stifled conditions.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan argues that the existing parliamentary system often led to weak coalition governments that were unable to make bold decisions and function properly. A strong presidency will bring stability to the government and defend Turkey against internal threats like the Kurdish insurgency and external threats like terrorism.

The proposed amendments were in the ruling AKP's (Justice and Development Party) manifesto since the 2011 general elections. AKP wanted to hold the referendum after the general elections of June 2015, but was denied majority. After gaining majority five months later at the snap election in November 2015,

Erdogan started pushing for the amendments.

People have been asked to approve/reject 18 amendments to the existing Constitution. The most significant amendments relate to the introduction of an executive presidency, replacement of the parliamentary system of government, abolishment of the post of prime minister, raising the number of parliament seats from 550 to 600, and changes in the supreme board of judges and prosecutors. If the amendments are approved, the changes will become effective after the 2019 general election. The plan to make Erdogan an all-powerful president is apparently the reason that triggered the military coup in July 2016 in the first place.

Erdogan is in an unenviable position because of developments in and around Turkey. Tremendous economic pressures from the burden of three million Syrian refugees; American bombing of Al Shayrat airbase in Syria on April 7 following chemical weapon attacks on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun; uneasy relations with Russia following the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet over Syria in November 2015; Turkish army still smarting after the failed coup of July 2016, which Erdogan luckily survived; the massive purge of civil services with hundreds of thousands

losing jobs and sent to jail in the aftermath of the coup; repeated terrorist attacks that already cost more than 400 lives; the ongoing "Operation Euphrates Shield" in Syria against the Kurds; the unfinished battle of Raqqa; etc. And what is worse is that the recent diplomatic spat with Germany and the Netherlands has left Erdogan terribly isolated in Europe, Turkey's



PHOTO: AFP

closest economic partner.

If the amendments are approved, through this referendum, it will vastly increase the authority of the president – most importantly the president will bear party identity. This would increase the president's influence over the majority party in the parliament if they are from the

same party. The president will be empowered to dismiss the parliament anytime and call for fresh elections. Assuming that the current parliament continues and the next scheduled elections are held in November 2019, the proposed amendments could give Erdogan two five-year terms as president i.e. until 2029. More importantly, the Parliament will lose its authority to oversee the executive

Major political parties have taken opposing positions on the referendum. Erdogan's ruling center-right Justice and Development Party (AKP) is championing a "Yes" vote that is supported by the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). The once dominant Republican People's Party (CHP), the opposition party in Parliament, is leading the "No" campaign, supported by the Kurdish-sympathetic HDP and several leftist groups.

Erdogan armed with the State of Emergency has already mounted a crackdown on all dissidents, which include opposition lawmakers, journalists, intellectuals, writers and the media. Only the government-friendly media is publicising the "Yes" campaign. Since open campaigning is not possible under emergency, the opposition parties are relying on social media and whispers, which are being closely monitored by the government.

What was most unusual was Erdogan had tried to drum up support for the "Yes" vote amongst the nationalist Turkish diaspora living in Europe. After Germany refused to allow rallies, Erdogan had to cancel his trip and accused Berlin of "Nazi practices". This led to a sharp response from Angela Merkel, describing the comparison "unacceptable". After

rallies in Netherland, Austria, and Switzerland were also banned, an angry Erdogan threatened to "open the gates" to Syrian refugees to go to Europe and accused the EU of a "crusade" against Islam.

However, the Turkey-EU spat has been popular amongst the Turkish diaspora, which looks upon devout Erdogan as a strong leader comparable to Kemal Ataturk. Opinion polls suggest that Erdogan's popularity soared to 88 percent after the failed coup, and 60 percent of the electorate will vote 'Yes' in the referendum. If Erdogan wins the referendum, Turkish foreign policy will surely become more hawkish.

A presidential system is not bad as long as there is separation of powers among the main organs of the government with proper checks and balances. Excessive concentration of powers may lead a president to become authoritarian.

Erdogan said the referendum "will be the rebirth" of Turkey. It is a pity that Erdogan, who was admired as a popular Prime Minister until he became president in 2014, is now walking down the murky lane of autocracy instead of strengthening the democratic institutions. One wonders whether Erdogan can survive another Fetullah Gulen like episode.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Secretary.

A WORD A DAY



DERACINATE
Verb literary

To tear something up by the roots

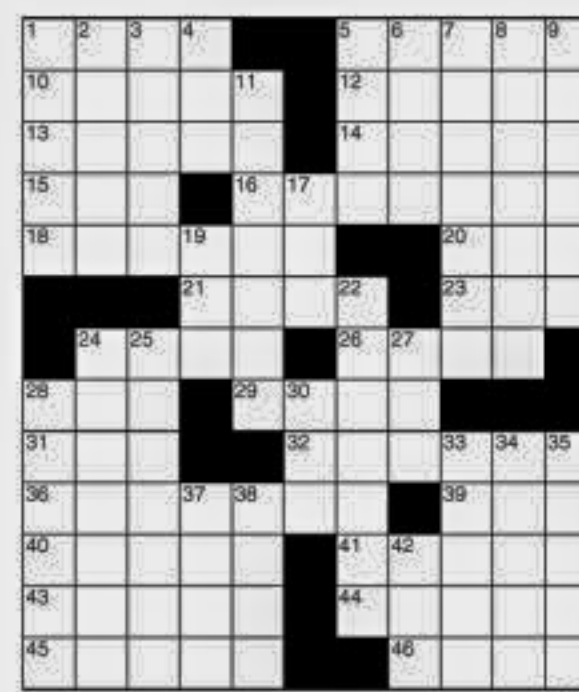
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Portion
- 5 Diamond comers
- 10 Speculate
- 12 Without help
- 13 Wired message
- 14 Gettysburg general
- 15 Geologic period
- 16 Burst into laughter
- 18 Accumulate
- 20 Anger
- 21 Beliefs
- 23 Homer's neighbor
- 24 Wind indicator
- 26 Kin of assns.
- 28 Small dog. for short

DOWN

- 1 Fond fellow
- 2 "Thais", e.g.
- 3 Sachet scent
- 4 Hydrocarbon suffix
- 5 Crimson Tide, for short
- 6 Guinness of film
- 7 Like heavy rains
- 8 Survives
- 9 Oozed
- 11 Forgave
- 17 LP speed unit
- 19 Reunion group
- 22 Fizzy quaff
- 24 Electrical measure
- 25 Congenial
- 27 Bird of myth
- 28 Flock leader
- 30 Clerk on 'The Simpsons'
- 33 Reeves of "Speed"
- 34 Goaded on
- 35 Facial treatments
- 37 Like some dorms
- 38 Designer Michael



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

A B A S E D A M E N
P U R E L Y R O V E
E N C A S E D U E T
M E S S E S
A C H Y I N E P T
B O O P A N T H E R
E M U R I G O R E
T E S T E R S L I E
S T E E P W E L D
H A S S L E
W O O S L O A D U P
I D L E I N V I T E
T E D S P E E P E R

BEETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

