

16 YEARS AFTER 9/11

# The debris is yet to be cleared



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**T**HE effect of the havoc that was wrought on this September day sixteen years ago still reverberates in most parts of the globe. The new world order that George Bush wanted to create, following the attack on a symbol of US might—a state of international politics where the will of the US would run, and no opposition to its power would be tolerated—had created disorder only.

The first act of disorder was the unilateral action of the US in Afghanistan as the first theatre of its global war on terror, initiated through the saturated carpet bombing of a people. The US became inconsequential; the US didn't bother about a UN mandate because it arrogated to itself the right to "behave multilaterally when we can, and unilaterally when we must," exploiting the sentiments created by the painful pictures of the Twin Tower destruction. And the rest of the world acquiesced without a word of protest. The choice was had—"either you are with us, or with the terrorists." And those who knew better did not want to be against the mightiest power in the world. The invasion of Iraq had been termed illegal by a less a person than the UN Secretary-General.

The question that arises on the mind is whether the objectives for which the two wars were initiated have been met. It would be only fair to say that for the US, a portion of its hidden agenda has been completed. The biggest thorn in the US flesh and indeed the biggest threat to the US proxy in the Middle East, Israel, has been successfully uprooted. Saddam is gone, and with him has gone the only Arab leader who was in any position to challenge US policy in the Middle East. There is little chance of his Sunni successors, if there is any left at all, of retaking the controls of Baghdad.

In Afghanistan the US has continued to retain its presence without getting into the military imbroglio like the erstwhile USSR, forcing it to beat a hasty retreat. But neither the Taliban nor the al-Qaeda has been neutralised. The prospect appears more dangerous with the IS in Afghanistan seeking a space there.

However, the US longest war in its history is not about to end soon. The mission which Bush so gleefully declared "accomplished" on an aircraft carrier in the US naval base in San Diego in May 2003 is far from being accomplished. The US must have realised that the stated aim—the ostensible goal of handing freedom to the two countries—is easier spoken than achieved. It must have "reluctant" that winning a battlefield engagement is not the same as winning a war.

The US, one hopes, has learnt too that while one can start a war, it is not entirely within one's power to draw it to a conclusion. We have said before, there are so many variables and imponderables in a conflict—particularly the one which is motivated by all the wrong reasons, and whose rationale is based on deceit—ending the war becomes all high impossible without effecting an honourable retreat.



Nearly 3,000 people were killed in the 9/11 terror attacks in New York and Washington DC.

PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan is still in turmoil, and nationhood is a chimera. Iraq is trying desperately to see that the country is not broken up into three segments along ethnic lines.

But it would be misleading to equate the situations in Iraq with that of Afghanistan. If there were some links of Afghanistan with 9/11, only because bin Laden was holed up in a cave in the Tora Bora mountains (what about Saudi Arabia in that case, to which 15 of the 19 hijackers belonged?), the methods and means of addressing the problem tempt us to ask once again as to which is worse: the disease or the antidote.

Saddam had nothing to do with 9/11 at all. No wonder the US intelligence faked the evidence. But the world has come to know since then that the plan to attack Iraq had predated 9/11. And it is no wonder that according to a research study carried out in the US, as many as one hundred and sixty rationales were invented by the Bush administration to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Actually it was Iraq and not Afghanistan that was the main US target. The reason that the US was not too eager to commit too many troops to Afghanistan, according to an expert, was because of its anticipated operations in Iraq, which came about less than seventeen months after Afghanistan, in March 2003. The consequence of the policy in Afghanistan that was motivated by the need to avoid a Russia-like situation, save forces for Iraq and prove that air power alone can deliver results, led to very little control of territory. In effect the president of Afghanistan "remains nothing more than the mayor of Kabul."

The report card on the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) looks very bleak. It has fomented terrorism in places where there were none before US invasions of the two countries. Iraq in particular was a "cause célèbre" that attracted many Islamic radicals from other parts

of the world to gravitate towards Iraq. It has invigorated these elements in places where they had remained dormant till then. While it is true that in the last 16 years there have been no large-scale terror attacks in mainland USA, there were many small-scale lone wolf attacks from homegrown radicals in the US.

GWOT has witnessed the emergence of the IS which had so far been in control of a large part of real estate in Iraq and Syria, which happily is shrinking in both countries, but its ability to influence the hearts and minds of young Muslims is not.

US military analysts aver that the so-called "victory in Afghanistan" was not, in the long run, a victory at all. "In fact the US is getting increasingly embroiled; instead of throwing out of Afghanistan, it is investing 4,000 more troops. As for Iraq, according to another expert, "none of the goals that Bush and Blair had set for themselves in Iraq—democracy, security, and a stable pro-Western regime—has been met or will be met. The day Bush decided to have an occupation was the day he ensured defeat."

For South Asia, GWOT has brought the war at its doorstep from where it was centred so long—the Middle East. The double standards of the West have helped the extremist elements, IS in particular, to trigger in young impressionable Muslim youths the urge to establish a world order that would be dominated by the Caliphate, as outlandish as it may sound. And Europe has been the biggest recruiting ground for the IS.

So after more than a decade of the war on terror we repeat the same question that we have been asking since the US launched its campaign against terror: Are we better off than before? I shall not venture an answer.

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## Marshalling pressure on Myanmar

Need for diplomatic push over Rohingya issue

**T**HE persecution of the Rohingyas by Myanmar has only been met by sparse and feeble condemnation by the international community, and consequently we have, Myanmar put an end to what has been described as an ongoing genocide. What we are witnessing today is just the latest of a systematic ethnic cleansing that has been going on in that country for decades. That over five years the violence, arson, rape and torture flare up and a new batch of refugees risk their lives to cross over to Bangladesh points towards the failure of regional and international diplomatic efforts to pressurise the Myanmar government to ensure the fundamental human rights of the Rohingya community. Despite hosting Rohingya refugees in the country for four decades, we have failed to engage with Myanmar about the issue seriously. These episodic efforts have faded every time the situation returned to a semblance of normalcy, and therefore, there has been no meaningful resolution to it. As experts pointed out in a roundtable conference on Saturday, Bangladesh must now launch a big diplomatic push. A major part of this would be to explain the humanitarian as well as regional security concerns that the persecution of the Rohingya entail for South Asia. Getting China and India on board is crucial in this regard.

It is also important to fight the Myanmar narrative of Rohingyas as non-Burmese or as militants. The militancy, in whatever form it exists, is a by-product of the persecution of the community and not the cause. By pushing this narrative and terming the reports of persecution as "fake news", Myanmar is trying to evade its responsibility. Diplomatic efforts must be set right. Bangladesh needs to play the host as long as necessary, as it has been doing out of humanitarian concerns. Proper documentation should be ensured here, not only for future repatriation but also for presenting the records to international courts if the matter needs to be taken to court. But Bangladesh must also work for ensuring the rights of the Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar, free of persecution, needs to start with a diplomatic offensive by Bangladesh and the world.

## Allegations against law enforcers

Their credibility at stake

**W**HILE we would like to support our law enforcing agencies in their endeavours to maintain security for all citizens, we cannot help but feel concerned about some of their methods. The constantly emerging contradictory narratives that surround incidents involving law enforcing agencies cannot provide any positive effect.

On one recent reported incident involving the death of a man while in Rab's custody, alleged by his family, to have been indiscriminately beaten up by Rab personnel both openly and while confined in his room. To no one's surprise perhaps—as this has nowadays almost become the norm—Rab has denied the allegations.

Similarly, we see conflicting accounts emerge in regards to the arrest of alleged neo-MJM members, who according to counterterrorism officials, were arrested on Friday but, their respective families say, were picked up by unidentified men about a month ago. Keeping these two incidents in mind, we wonder why it is that we often see so much discrepancy between the accounts of law enforcers and the families of those arrested. Would people make up stories just to denigrate the image of law enforcing agencies time and time again? Is that really believable?

We have seen many instances of abuse in the past, largely due to the absence of accountability and transparency in the workings of law enforcers. Just this week, a case was filed against 11 law enforcers for allegedly gouging out a trader's eyes for his refusal to pay extortion fees. These do nothing but dent the credibility of law enforcers in the eyes of the public. It is increasingly disheartening to see law enforcing agencies should function in a manner that instils public confidence and upholds the rule of law.

# The secret life of Syrian ultras

**A** nail-biting Iranian-Syrian World Cup qualifier on September 5 has sent political ripples far beyond the Azadi Stadium's soccer pitch in Tehran.

In a boost for the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian soccer 2-2 draw was enough for the team to maintain hopes of Syria reaching the World Cup finals for the first time in its history.

Similarly, the match in which Syrian women, some with their hair uncovered, were granted access to the stadium while Iranian women fans were barred, has sparked public debate in the Islamic republic about the viability of a ban on women attending men's sporting events.

In doing so, the match has achieved in Syria what neither the Syrian government nor the opposition has been able to accomplish: a momentary sense of unity in a country torn apart by a brutal, six-year-old civil war.



The soccer match between Syria and Iran for the World Cup qualifier in Tehran's Azadi Stadium has brought to the fore, among other things, the debate on women's sporting rights in Iran.

PHOTO: AFP

Similarly, the match accomplished what international pressure by international sports federations failed to provoke: public pressure and domestic political support for recognising women's passive sporting rights.

Neither development is certain to produce a lasting one. Syria is more likely to remain splintered even if Syria progresses in its already stalling soccer performance against all odds.

By the same token, support for women's passive sporting rights in Iran is more likely to be undermined by conservative forces strengthened by the lack of an economic trickle-down as a result of the lifting of international sanctions and the Trump administration's

efforts to undermine the two-year-old nuclear deal.

Nevertheless, the admission of presumably predominantly Syrian Muslim women fans to the match, makes defense of the Iranian ban difficult, if not impossible. The Syrians were admitted on the principle that the Iranian ban does not apply to foreign fans. In past incidents, foreign women admitted into Iranian stadiums came primarily from non-Muslim countries.

The case of the Syrians, however, undermined religious arguments in favour of the ban and projected it as one not based on gender but on nationality. Activists on social media charged that the discrimination against Iranian women was humiliating and insulting.

Adding insult to injury, authorities allowed two women members of parliament to attend the match at the request of Tayebeh Siavoshi, a reformist deputy. Parvaneh Salashourian, another member of parliament, refused the invitation.

"At a time when girls of this country have no choice but to dress as men to get into the stadium, I as a representative of these people would not like to be present in the stadium by receiving a special permit. I

Garhavian.

Iran's public debate and increased activism in the immediate aftermath of the World Cup qualifier finds in Iran earlier this year allowing women spectators to attend a premier international men's volleyball tournament on the island of Kish in a rare bowing to international pressure. It constituted a rare occasion on which the Islamic republic did not backtrack on promises to international sports associations to lift its ban on women attending international men's sporting events.

"The issue of women's passive sporting rights promises to split not only moderates and hardliners but also the Iranian sports community. Sports Minister Masoud Soltanifar suggested that the government would look at creating facilities for families in stadiums, a formula that like in Saudi Arabia would create separate public spaces for men and for families, including women. "I am confident that the fans would respect boundaries which need to be respected, Mr Soltanifar said.

In an unprecedented move, Peyman Yousefi, a sports anchor on state-run television, said on air minutes before the qualifier that he was disappointed that women had not been allowed to enter the stadium. Earlier, the Iranian Football Association said that it had no plan for allowing women to attend the qualifier after a website for the first time was selling tickets for women as well as for men.

"In my view, the social conservatism in Syria and women's rights in Iran have anything in common, it is the struggle for unfettered access to stadiums. Nonetheless, if the political ripples of the Iranian-Syrian soccer encounter have any legs, it's more likely to be the case in Iran than Syria. The issue of women's passive sporting rights in Iran is more likely to be pushed by it beyond an issue promoted primarily by activists into the political realm.

In Syria, memories of lost ones and the brutality of the Assad regime were never far even as many opponents of Mr Al-Assad cheered the Syrian national team, aware that the president would use the match to his political advantage.

Beyond the deep scars of the brutal civil war, militant Syrian fans are however already organising to counter governmental pressure to politically contain the sport. The fans united this summer to successfully reject an attempt by authorities to identify members of the country's various groups of ultras, hardcore, often politicised fans.

"They wanted to control who are going inside the stadium and they are going out and why. The six ultras groups that are active in Syria now decided not to give them what they want. It is part of our right as ultras and as football fans to be there," said Nadim Rai, a supporter of Syrian club Hutteen SC.

"In my view, the social conservatism in Syria and women's rights in Iran have anything in common, it is the struggle, but two hands, they are more stronger. So, why we not all stay together, make something, not just football but make something to help our country?" added Rai, a fan of Al Karameh SC.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Stop dumping rubbish under Jatrabari flyover

Jatrabari is a very important part of the capital for many reasons. It is the entrance of Dhaka for the people from the east. In 2013, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated Mayor Mohammad Hanif Flyover, the longest flyover in Bangladesh, which connects Gulistan with Jatrabari. Residents of Jatrabari area had to suffer from the day the construction started. They have endured the trouble in the form of the big project works, hindering the development of this area, and they would eventually get rid of the notorious Sydadab-Jatrabari traffic jam. But everyday the situation beneath the flyover is nothing short of chaotic. Some people including local residents, hawkers and vendors are using the space under the flyover as their dustbin. Even the city corporation is dumping garbage there. This must end.

Md. Ashkur Rahman, Jatrabari

### More traffic police needed to control traffic jam

Dhaka, along with many other cities in the country, is mired in traffic jams. On too many occasions, it has been observed that the drivers' violations of basic traffic rules are the major contributing factors. In contrast, there are hardly adequate traffic controllers in place. In order for the situation to be controlled and the rules to be implemented, the concerned authorities should increase the number of traffic police. Alternatively, enhancing traffic jams would continue unabated.

Sumon Kumar Paul, by email