

Remembering Professor Jamal Nazrul Islam

MAHBUB MAJUMDAR

MARCH 16, 2018 marked the fifth death anniversary of Professor Jamal Nazrul Islam. I know everyone is still mourning Professor Stephen Hawking, but Professor JNI was also a larger-than-life figure. It is unfortunate that many people in Bangladesh don't know about him. In my mind, Hawking's greatest achievement was helping fund and create the Centre for Mathematical Sciences (CMS)—the largest mathematics department in the world. Professor JNI did something similar, although he didn't receive the acclaim and support that Hawking received. He established a centre, the Research Center for Mathematical and Physical Sciences (RCMPS), the only such centre in all of Bangladesh. This is an incredible achievement, a nation-building achievement.

People always measure the success of scientists by, for example, what discoveries they have made or what prizes they have won. But discovering something incredible is a haphazard process. You have to be smart. But more importantly, you have to be very lucky. I always think of Sidney Coleman in this context. He was a giant, an unparalleled expert on quantum field theory. He wrote incredibly important papers. Yet, he is not widely remembered because he is not credited with a "great discovery." The same goes for giants like Tom Kibble, who in fact co-discovered the Higgs Mechanism, but was not widely credited for it, and is thus largely unknown to the wider population.



Professor Jamal Nazrul Islam (second row, second from right) and Professor Stephen Hawking (first row, second from left) at Cambridge University, in the mid-1960s.

COURTESY: AUTHOR

But the real measure of a scientist's success is what institutions they leave behind, and the students they have produced. Professor JNI, in that respect, is as large a personality as any in Asia, or elsewhere. His centre predated Cambridge's Centre for Mathematical Sciences by 15 years. Cambridge's centre, several years later, inspired the establishment of the African Institute for Mathematical Science (AIMS) by another one of JNI's Cambridge friends and Hawking protégés, Dr Neil Turok. AIMS is doing revolutionary work to create

mathematical expertise in Africa, and in a way, both AIMS and Cambridge's CMS can be said to have been inspired by Professor JNI's vision of nation-building through mathematical sciences. It is unfortunate that JNI's own visionary institution, RCMPS, is being underutilised, while the centres it fathered and grandfathered, CMS in Cambridge and AIMS in South Africa, are creating change throughout the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, JNI's influence can still be felt everywhere in academia. I myself would not have applied to Cambridge were it not for him. There

are many others he trained and whose lives he touched and who are now guiding later generations of students. The people who we touch academically are, therefore, also the products of Professor Jamal Nazrul Islam.

Let me add one story about the benefits of being in Professor JNI's shadow. In 1995, my younger brother, Mahfuz Majumdar, was doing a science project for the Westinghouse Talent Search Competition despite going to school in Bangladesh. His project was an application of special relativity. He went to the Physics

Department at the University of Dhaka to ask a professor some questions. The professor was very dismissive and even rude when my brother asked whether he could borrow a copy of the famous relativity book *Gravitation* by Misner, Wheeler and Thorne. The professor told my brother that he was a fool for even thinking about reading such an advanced book. Thereafter, my brother contacted Professor JNI about his project. JNI enthusiastically invited him to visit his research centre despite Mahfuz being only a 17-years-old.

My father, brother and I then drove to Chittagong from Dhaka. Professor JNI spent nearly two hours with Mahfuz and was very kind to him. Then he surprisingly invited us to his home. Professor JNI had a huge library of books on physics and

mathematics. I remember standing in awe of his collection for several minutes. He asked me whether I would like to borrow any books. My eyes grew wide. It was obvious I did. I then picked out a book and asked him whether I could borrow it. After another five minutes, I picked out another book and asked him whether I could borrow that one too. This went on until I had asked to borrow about 20 books, and he happily agreed every time.

One thing that everybody knows about Bangladeshi students is that they never return borrowed books. So, in the end I was just shocked by his kindness. I returned his books several weeks later after photocopying every single one of them. But instead of taking them to Chittagong, his daughter Sadaf so kindly agreed to carry them—a huge bag of books—on a flight from Dhaka to Chittagong. Who else in Bangladesh would let a total stranger borrow a huge bag of books and then let that person burden his daughter with carrying them on a plane flight back?

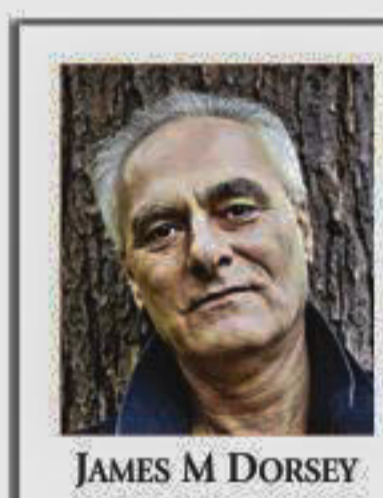
The one thing I remember most vividly from that trip to visit Professor JNI in 1995 is what my father said after meeting him—"a superior human being." That's what my father called him. I had never heard my father, Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar, call someone a "superior human being" before then. And I have never heard him call anybody that since then.

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Fuelling the fire

External powers may exploit discontent among Iranian ethnic minorities



JAMES M DORSEY

There is no indication that this week's protests in Khuzestan were anything more than an expression of popular anger against perceived denial of an Iranian Arab identity.

PROTESTS have erupted in Iran's oil-rich province of Khuzestan barely three months after the Islamic republic was rocked by mass

anti-government demonstrations. Sparked by anger at the depiction of the province's community of Arab descent on an Iranian New Year show about the country's diversity that was broadcast on state-run Iranian television, protesters demanded an apology by the broadcaster, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).

The show featured dolls wearing traditional costumes to illustrate diverse Iran's ethnic make-up. The dolls representing Iranian or Ahwaz Arabs were clad as Lurs, an ethnic group Iranians of Arab descent charge are encouraged to migrate to Khuzestan in a bid to change the province's demography.

Ahwaz or Ahvaz is the way Khuzestan's Arab population identifies itself and is the name of the capital of the south-eastern province that borders on Iraq and sits at the head of the Gulf.

"These programmes and other racist practices are part of the policies adopted by the Iranian central government in its attempt to change the demographic structure by deporting indigenous Arab Ahwazi people from their land through policies of poverty, marginalisation, exclusion, unemployment, and deprivation," the Ahwaz Human Rights Organization said.

It said protesters dressed in traditional Arab garb chanted in Arabic and Persian "Ahwaz is ours, we will never give it up."

The protest, one of a string of protests over several years, prompted by

long-standing charges of discrimination by the government that not only fuel marginalisation but also environmental degradation in Khuzestan, comes against a backdrop of Iranian concerns that the United States and Saudi Arabia may pursue efforts to undermine or topple the regime in Tehran.

Iranian fears are fuelled by the possibility of Trump deciding in May to walk away from the 2015 international agreement that lifted crippling economic sanctions in exchange for curbs on the Islamic republic's nuclear programme; the nomination of Iran hardliners John Bolton as his national security advisor and Mike Pompeo as secretary of state; and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's increasingly tough language toward Iran.

Bolton called at a rally in Paris last July together with Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former Saudi intelligence chief whose remarks at times serve as trial balloons for Prince Mohammed, for regime change in Iran. The rally was organised by the Mujahedeen Khalq, MEK, or People's Mujahedeen, an Iranian opposition group that supported Saddam Hussein in his war in the 1980s against Iran.

"The declared policy of the United States of America should be the overthrow of the mullah's regime in Tehran. The behaviour and the objectives of the regime are not going to change and therefore the only solution is to change the regime itself. And that's why before 2019, we here will celebrate in Tehran," Bolton said referring to the Islamic revolution's forthcoming 40th anniversary.

Speaking last week to an MEK Persian New Year's gathering, former New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani predicted Bolton's appointment before Trump announced it and assured the audience that "if anything, John Bolton has become more determined that

there needs to be regime change in Iran, that the nuclear agreement needs to be burned, and that you need to be in charge of that country."

Prince Mohammed started escalating his rhetoric two months earlier when he vowed that "we won't wait for the battle to be in Saudi Arabia... Instead, we will work so that the battle is for them in Iran, not in Saudi Arabia." The crown prince has since twice compared Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to Adolf Hitler, arguing that his ambitions for territorial expansion were similar to those of the Nazi leader.



SOURCE: TWITTER

In interviews during his ongoing three-week long charm offensive in the United States, Prince Mohammed warned that Saudi Arabia would develop nuclear weapons of its own if Iran reverted to a military programme. He went on to suggest that Saudi Arabia could go to war with Iran in 10-15 years if the international community failed to halt Iranian expansionism.

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arabs have a long history of encouraging Iranian Arab opposition and troubling the minority's relations with the government.

Unidentified gunmen in The Hague killed Ahwazi activist Ahmad Mola Nissi in November. Nissi was shot dead days before he was scheduled to launch a Saudi-funded television station staffed with Saudi-trained personnel that would target Khuzestan, according to Ahwazi activists.

Writing in 2012 in *Ashraq Al Awsat*, a Saudi newspaper, Amal Al-Hazzani, an academic who has since been dropped from the paper's roster after she wrote positively about Israel, asserted in an op-ed entitled "The oppressed Arab district of al-Ahwaz" that Khuzestan "is



SOURCE: TWITTER

an Arab territory...Its Arab residents have been facing continual repression ever since the Persian state assumed control of the region in 1925...It is imperative that the Arabs take up the al-Ahwaz cause, at least from the humanitarian perspective."

For their part, Iranian Arabs believe that the government fears that they are susceptible to foreign Arab influence. That suspicion, Iranian Arabs say, is rooted in Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's bloody eight-year war against Iran that was funded by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

Saddam falsely expected that Iranian Arabs would welcome the opportunity to gain independence from Iran. The Iranian Arab refusal to side with Saddam failed, however, to earn Iranian Arabs the credit they deserved.

Iranian fears that external powers could exploit discontent among Iranian ethnic minorities, who account for almost half of the Islamic republic's population, have been further fuelled by indications that some in Washington and Riyadh may be toying with the notion of trying to destabilise the country by supporting disaffected groups.

Iran's Intelligence Ministry said in January that it had seized Saudi-supplied caches of weapons and explosives in separate operations in Kurdish areas in the west of the country and a Baloch region on the eastern border with Pakistan.

A study published last year by a Riyadh-based think tank, believed to be supported by Prince Mohammed, laid out a plan to support a Baloch insurgency in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan that borders on the Pakistani province of Balochistan. Saudi Arabia has long supported ultra-conservative religious seminaries in Balochistan that dominate the Pakistani region's education landscape.

There is no indication that this week's protests in Khuzestan were anything more than an expression of popular anger against perceived denial of an Iranian Arab identity. By the same token, external forces that view Iranian ethnic groups as a monkey wrench for regime change will no doubt see them as signalling opportunity.

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QUOTABLE Quote

ZAHA HADID (1950-2016)
British-Iraqi architect

Your success will not be determined by your gender or your ethnicity, but only on the scope of your dreams and your hard work to achieve them.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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| ACROSS | 32 Put into words | 10 Attempt |
| 1 "Aladdin" villain | 33 Dwarf tree | 16 Letter after delta |
| 6 Hitter's turn | 35 Thin cookie | 17 Cut off |
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| 13 McCoy's nickname | 42 Boat's back | 21 Rice field |
| 14 Rosy-cheeked | 43 Pithy | 24 Home in the woods |
| 15 Go beyond | 44 Ocean's motions | 25 Pants part |
| 17 Plopped down | | 27 Carry on |
| 19 Good times | DOWN | 31 Strong suit |
| 20 Catch some z's | 1 Boxing poke | 33 Porcy's love |
| 23 Dodges | 2 Before today | 34 Opposed |
| 25 Old Italian coin | 3 Tweaked | 35 Soaked |
| 26 Like some tomatoes | 4 TV's Trebek | 36 Tin Man's tool |
| 28 Tied up | 5 Fireman, at times | 37 Pine's kin |
| 29 Map key | 6 Field units | 39 Hot blood |
| 30 Cardinal | 7 Falling sound | 40 Solution: Abbr. |
| 31 In support of | 8 Misbehaving | |
| | 9 Lend a hand | |

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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