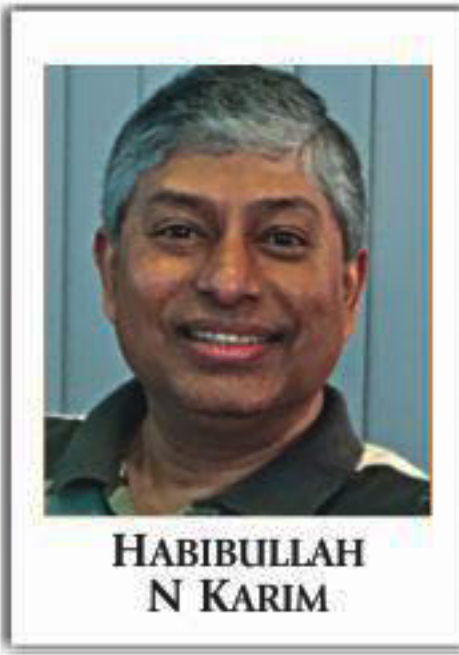


Mysteries of the past that stupefy us

There is a need to preserve our heritage



HABIBULLAH N KARIM

THE world is full of wonders and some of these wonders are from a past that defies belief. Seven hundred years ago, the Incas of pre-

Columbian South America formulated an elaborate knotted-string-based record-keeping system that accurately maintained the tax liabilities of distant taxpayers in their kingdom. Known as the "Inca string coda" in academic parlance, this record-keeping system kept the largest South American empire of the Middle Ages functioning like a well-oiled machine despite having no written script. With the Portuguese conquest of South America in the fifteenth century, the Incan empire vanished along with their knowledge of the string coda. Archaeologists are still scratching their heads over how to decipher the Inca string coda that managed the coffers of the empire in pre-modern times.

Another world mystery is the Antikythera mechanism—an analogue computer built more than 2,000 years ago that could accurately predict solar and lunar eclipses. It was discovered among the relics of a sunken vessel off the Greek island of Antikythera over a century ago, and scientists and researchers have yet to figure out how

an ancient civilisation could have the technology and the mathematical prowess to build such a computer two millennia ago when metallurgy, astronomy and numerology were in their infancy. The Antikythera mechanism was built with 47 brass gears with built-in adjustment mechanisms to accurately predict lunar eclipses, taking into account even the minutest variation in the lunar orbital plain. Such sophisticated observation and modelling of lunar and solar trajectories in the heavens only happened in the last three centuries. So how did the ancient Greeks come by it then? In the absence of any historical records, we keep scratching our heads too.

Another mystery that has stupefied the experts and the laity alike over the last few hundred years is the Voynich manuscript. Preserved at the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University in the USA, this colourful hand-illustrated manuscript is dated to be from the fifteenth century based on the carbon dating of the parchment it is written on. However, it has defied attempts over several centuries at deciphering its contents, written in a script hitherto unknown to man. Very recently, however, a Turkish linguist has claimed that it is written in an ancient Turkic script using an encryption known as "phonemic orthography".

Bangladesh also has its share of mysteries from the past. The Bhitargarh

fortress city—in the northern part of Bangladesh in what is present-day Panchagarh district—is nearly a millennium old and no one knows who built this quadruply-fortified castle. Bhitargarh is truly an ancient land of mystique and fables, not far from Tetulia, the northern-most tip of the country. This relic from more than eight centuries ago is not as old as other more famous relics such as Mahasthangarh in the north-western part of Bangladesh, but it is quite remarkable for its footprint and design.

Just imagine, straddling across nearly twenty-five square kilometres of land lie the ruins of an ancient township that was fortified by four layers of rectangular ramparts and moats—a township of such arrangement is unheard of in our part of the world. The majestic ramparts are still quite visible and the ancient bricks used to build the high walls are still intact in many places. Limited excavations within the inner-most quadrangle have produced a wide range of ancient artefacts that highlight the great promise of these ruins as an archaeological discovery.

The 53-acre man-made lake within the confines of the town is astounding for the beauty of the buttressed embankments and straight demarcations centuries after the architects of this ancient kingdom vanished from the pages of history. The most fascinating aspects of these ruins are the dark mystique and the haunted fables that visitors are regaled with by

local villagers. What, however, is the biggest tragedy of all is that the ancient ruins lay before us for centuries without any serious endeavour on the part of the state or researchers to uncover the hidden stories and historical significance of a kingdom that could build a city as large as 25 square kilometres and prosper for nearly 500 years, as one of the largest such settlements of its time in the world, before vanishing from sight almost eight hundred years ago.

However, continued neglect over the years has brought the ancient city to a stage where, without urgent measures for its protection and preservation, it can literally vanish without a trace within our own lifetime. The majestic ruins of Ancient Bhitargarh Walled City need to be protected from further dilapidation and all remaining structures need to be preserved for fully-fledged, methodical research to unearth the mysteries of this once thriving human habitation.

The government, universities, international bodies, business houses and citizens must come forward to join hands with heritage lovers in the noble endeavour of protecting, preserving and promoting the Bhitargarh city and other heritage sites of the country so that our children can achieve greatness by discovering who we are as we learn what we were in our glorious past.

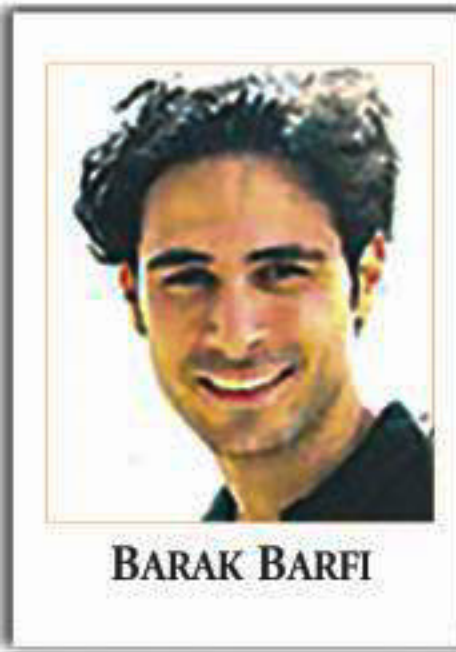
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A group of students are doing excavation work on the site of the ancient Bhitargarh Walled City in Panchagarh, Bangladesh. COURTESY: SHAHNAJ HUSNE JAHAN

PROJECT SYNDICATE

The US-Saudi relationship after Khashoggi



BARAK BARFI

THE alleged killing of the Saudi Arabian dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a permanent resident of the United States,

in the Kingdom's consulate in Istanbul has unleashed a tidal wave of criticism. In the US Congress, Democrats and Republicans alike have promised to end weapons sales to Saudi Arabia and impose sanctions if its government is shown to have murdered Khashoggi.

But significant damage to bilateral ties, let alone a diplomatic rupture, is not in the cards, even if all the evidence points to a state-sanctioned assassination. Saudi Arabia is simply too crucial to US interests to allow the death of one man to affect the relationship. And with new allies working with old lobbyists to stem the damage, it is unlikely that the episode will lead to anything more than a lovers' quarrel.

Saudi Arabia's special role in American foreign policy is a lesson that US presidents learn only with experience. When Bill Clinton assumed the presidency, his advisers were bent on distancing the new administration from George HW Bush's policies. Among the changes sought by Clinton's national security adviser, Anthony Lake, was an end to the unfettered White House access that Saudi Arabian Ambassador Bandar bin Sultan enjoyed during the Reagan and Bush presidencies. Bandar was to be

treated like any other ambassador.

But Clinton quickly warmed to Bandar, and Bandar and the royal court would become crucial to Clinton's regional policies, ranging from Arab-Israeli peace talks to containing Iraq.

Before Donald Trump assumed office, he frequently bashed the Saudis and threatened to cease oil purchases from the Kingdom, grouping them with freeloaders who had taken advantage of America. But after the Saudis feted him with sword dances and bestowed on him the highest civilian award when he visited the Kingdom on his first trip abroad as US president, he changed his tune.

Even the terror attacks of September 11, 2001, could not damage the relationship. Though al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, himself a Saudi national, recruited 15 of the 19 hijackers from the Kingdom, senior Saudi officials dismissed the implications. In a November 2002 interview, the Saudi interior minister simply deemed it "impossible," before attempting to redirect blame by accusing Jews of "exploiting" the attacks and accusing the Israeli intelligence services of having relationships with terrorist organisations.

Americans seethed, and it appeared that the awkward alliance between a secular democracy and a secretive theocracy, cemented by common interests during the Cold War, was plunging into the abyss separating their values. But the alliance not only survived; it deepened. Bandar provided key insights and advice as President George W Bush planned the 2003 Iraq invasion.

Today, American politicians are again ratcheting up their rhetoric following Khashoggi's disappearance.

The Turks claim they have audio and video revealing his death, and Senator Lindsey Graham warned, "If it did happen there would be hell to pay," while Senator Benjamin Cardin has threatened to target sanctions at senior Saudi officials.

But Saudi Arabia wears too many hats for America to abandon it easily. Though the US no longer needs Saudi oil, thanks to its shale reserves, it does need the Kingdom to regulate production and thereby stabilise markets. American defence contractors are dependent on the billions the Kingdom spends on military hardware. Intelligence cooperation is crucial to ferreting out jihadists and thwarting their plots. But, most important, Saudi Arabia is the leading Arab bulwark against Iranian expansionism. The Kingdom has

supported proxies in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen to contain Iran's machinations. Any steps to hold the Saudis responsible for Khashoggi's death would force the US to assume responsibilities it is far more comfortable outsourcing.

It is a role America has long sought to avoid. When the United Kingdom, the region's colonial master and protector, decided that it could no longer afford such financial burdens, US leaders ruled out taking its place. Policymakers were too focused on Vietnam to contemplate action in another theatre. Instead, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger conceived a policy whereby Iran and Saudi Arabia, backed by unlimited US military hardware, would police the Gulf. While Iran stopped playing its role following the 1979 Islamic

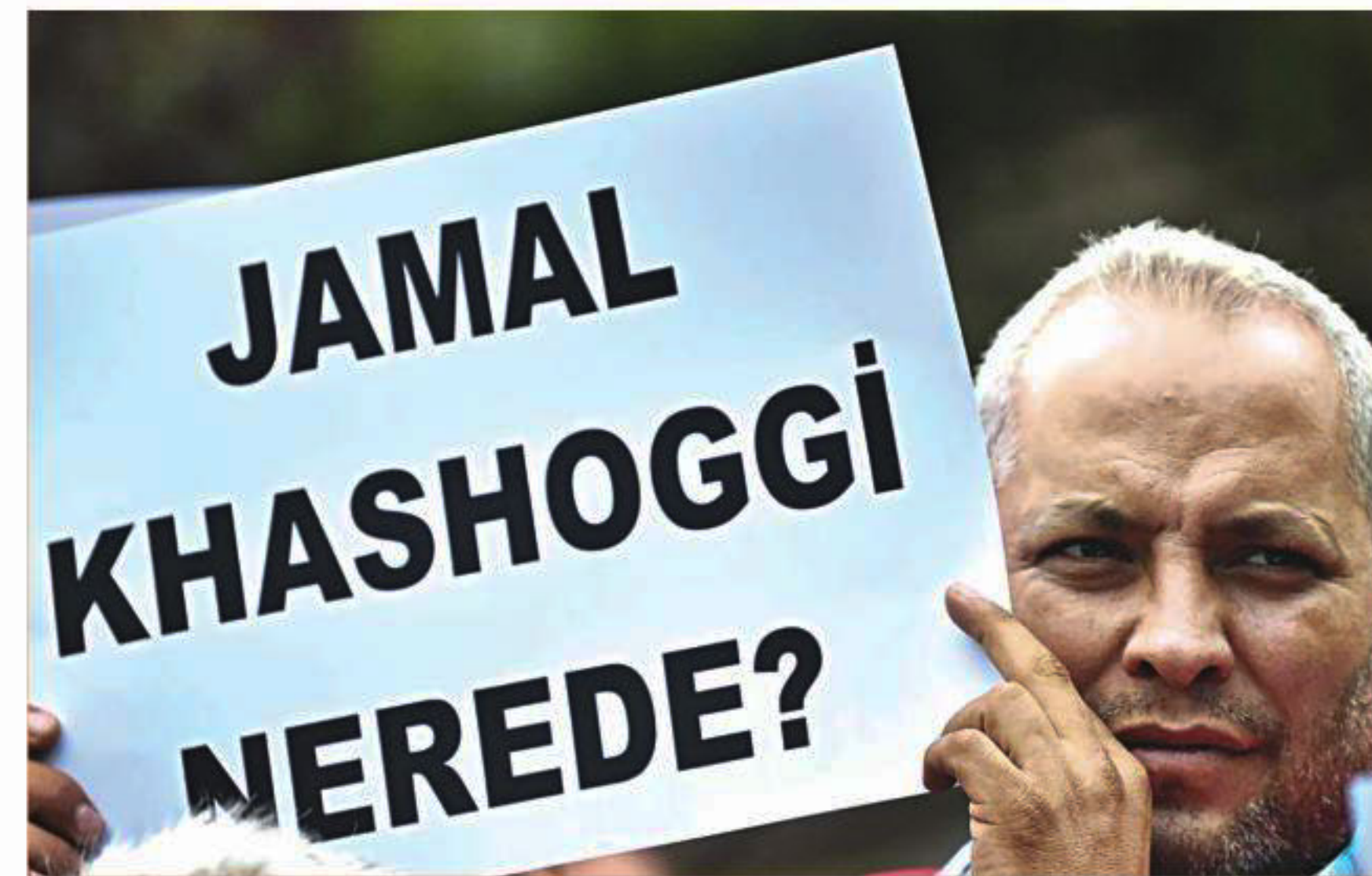
Revolution, the Saudis still do.

It is a quandary Trump seems to grasp. Though he vowed "severe punishment" if the Saudis did indeed kill Khashoggi, he refused to countenance cancelling military contracts, instead lamenting what their loss would mean for American jobs.

It is not only defence contractors who are going to bat for the Saudis. Before Khashoggi became Washington's topic du jour, the Saudis paid about ten lobbying firms no less than USD 759,000 a month to sing their praises in America's halls of power.

But it may be the Saudis' new best friend who will throw them a lifeline. As Iran has become the biggest threat to Israel, the Jewish State has made common cause with the Saudis. Former Saudi bashers such as Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's confidant Dore Gold now meet with the Kingdom's officials. Following the 2013 military coup that toppled Egypt's democratically elected government, Israeli leaders urged US officials to embrace the generals. They are likely to do the same today if US anti-Saudi sentiment imperils their Iran strategy.

The US-Saudi relationship has been a rocky one, and its setbacks and scandals have mostly played out away from the public eye. Yet it has endured and thrived. This time, too, in the wake of Khashoggi's disappearance, common interests and mutual dependence will almost certainly prevail over the desire to hold the Saudis to the standards expected of other close US allies.



A man holds a placard reading "Where is Jamal Khashoggi?" during a demonstration in support of Khashoggi, in front of the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul. PHOTO: AFP

Barak Barfi is a research fellow at New America. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2018. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

QUOTABLE Quote

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE
(1859-1930)
British writer

It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Snowman's eyes
- 5 Speaker's platform
- 9 Buffalo NHLer
- 10 Coral island
- 12 Tire feature
- 13 TV, radio, etc.
- 14 Car safety feature
- 16 Pen fill
- 17 Cow calls
- 18 Halloween hue
- 21 Play on words
- 22 Spheres
- 23 River floaters
- 24 Cookie bits
- 26 Ballpark official
- 29 Black Sea peninsula
- 30 Vicinity
- 31 Tear
- 32 Talkative one
- 34 Plentiful
- 37 Window cover
- 38 Honeydew, for one
- 39 Choir member
- 40 Transmit
- 41 Over again

DOWN

- 1 Broadway star Len
- 2 King of the fairies
- 3 Saudi natives
- 4 Mother of Castor and Pollux
- 5 Beavers' creation
- 6 Had lunch
- 7 Thyroid need
- 8 Arm supporters
- 9 Mailing need
- 11 Huron or Erie
- 15 Place for woods and irons
- 19 Decays
- 20 Crunch targets
- 22 Stadium event
- 23 Mai-tai base
- 24 Police blotter list
- 25 Small wave
- 26 Polished
- 27 Grazing spot
- 28 Beeper's kin
- 29 Pack tight
- 30 Pale
- 33 Nick and Nora's dog
- 35 Chaney of films
- 36 Finish

Write to us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

LOOK! SARGE IS TAKING A SHOWER IN HIS BOOTS!

I KNOW

WHEN HE WAS SLEEPING, ROCKY PAINTED HIS TOENAILS PINK!

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

COME ON, GUYS! OLD FAITHFUL IS GOING TO BLOW!

STAND THERE AND I'LL GET A SHOT OF YOU GUYS IN FRONT OF IT!

I'LL CALL THIS ONE "GEEZERS & GEYSER"

WE HEARD THAT!

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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