

# Why do bombs fall on the hungry poor?

## AN OPEN DIALOGUE

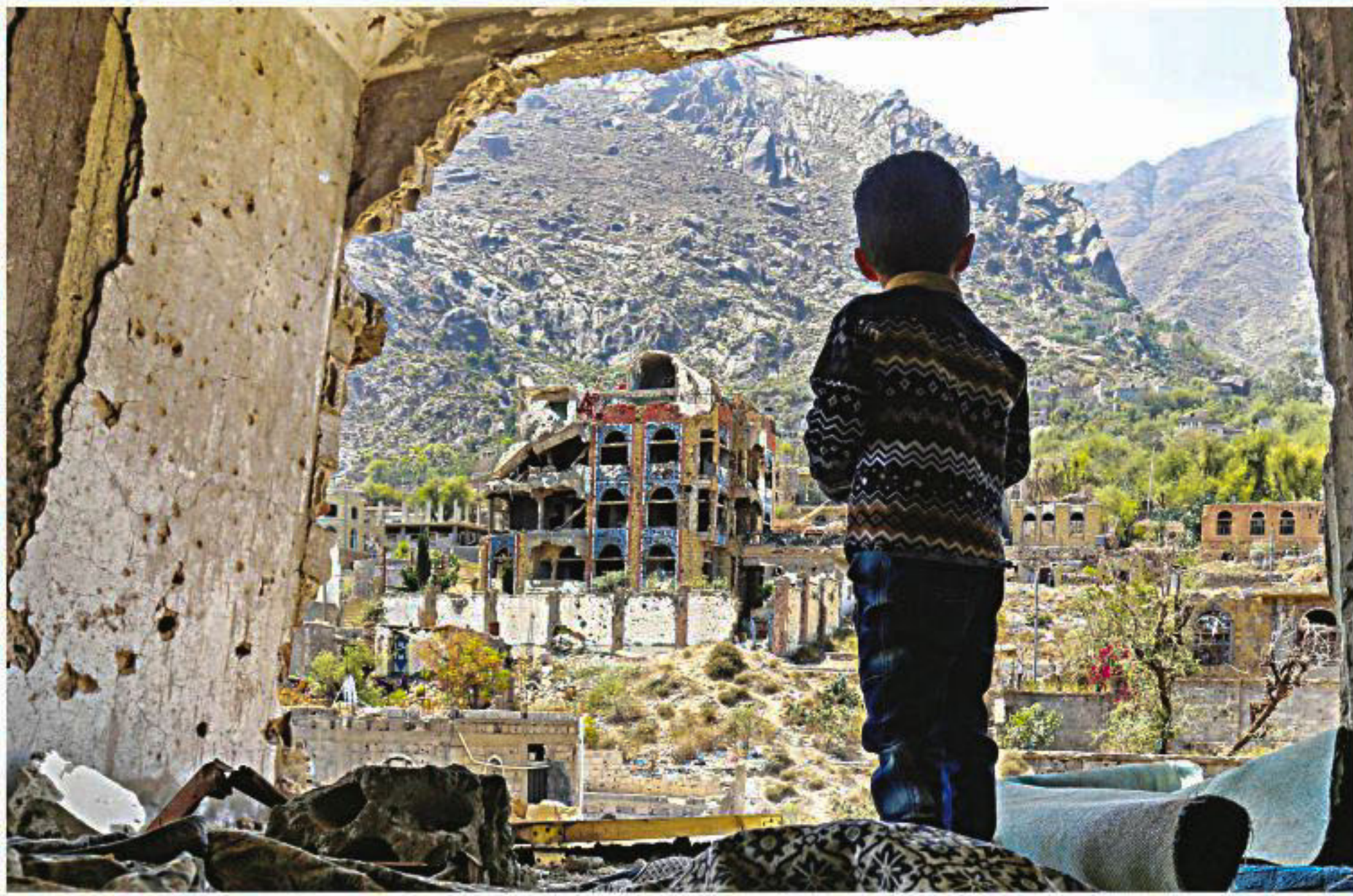


ABDULLAH SHIBLI

IN Angola, an oil-rich country in Africa, over 2.3 million people are now on the brink of starvation due to drought. In Yemen, the United Nations warned that 13 million people are facing the prospect of famine. In eastern Ukraine, where Russia and its supporters launched an invasion five years ago, more than 13,000 people have been killed and land mines dot the landscape. These three examples are offered to bring into relief the situation that we face: while humanitarian organisations go begging for resources to feed the hungry, there are a few rich and powerful countries including the US, Saudi Arabia, and Iran which spend billions of dollars in wars to fight real or imaginary enemies, as well as to fan the flames of conflicts in every nook and corner.

The world today is full of paradoxes. At this moment, I am thinking about ongoing military engagements in many areas of the world which coexist with hunger and lack of food and basic amenities in other parts of the world, sometimes only a few miles away. One report indicates that military spending is now topping two trillion dollars, and in sharp contrast to that, millions of our fellow human beings eke out a miserable existence in Angola, Syria, Yemen, Congo, and Ukraine, to name just a few countries. We must ask, what can we do to resolve this difference in our moral values? Why do we allow armies to fight endlessly for a parcel of land when they kill everyone in sight to reach this goal?

Let me offer a few more details on the issues and facts I just brought up. Ukraine, which is a European country and hopes to join NATO and EU one day, is grappling with mounting civilian and military casualties. It all began in 2014 when Russia, supported by Russophone Ukrainians, invaded Eastern Ukraine and occupied 20 percent of



A Yemeni child looks out at buildings damaged in an airstrike in the southern Yemeni city of Taez, on March 18, 2018. PHOTO: AFP/AHMAD AL-BASHA

Ukraine. The occupiers set up two "People's Republics" in Donetsk and Luhansk but the unintended consequences of this farce are paid by hapless Ukrainians who lost some basic services including gas, electricity, and running water.

The war in Yemen is entering its fifth year. It is, by all accounts, one of the most brutal wars but has nonetheless managed to slip out of the headlines of CNN and other western media (except possibly BBC), because the terrain is difficult for the news media to cover and Yemen is not a major oil producer. Every day hundreds are killed by bombs or die of hunger. We saw footage of parents trudging miles up a steep mountain, carrying sick and emaciated children on their backs, to get to a clinic or move them out of the range of roaring guns.

As of March 2019, Saudi Arabia and a coalition of Arab states have launched more than 19,278 air raids across Yemen. In

August last year, a Saudi airstrike on a school bus killed 51 people, including 40 children. In the aftermath of the airstrike, US Congress passed a resolution to cut off military funding for Saudi Arabia. However, President Trump exercised his veto power to stop the "Yemen War Powers Resolution".

In Libya, the latest round of battles began when Khalifa Haftar, a Libyan-American military officer and a warlord ensconced in the eastern region of the country, decided to advance towards Tripoli. Libya, which was just beginning to recover from the scars of the civil war that has been raging since Muammar Gaddafi was overthrown in 2011, is now moving towards more bloodshed. "The attack on Tripoli was both audacious and cynical. It came exactly when UN Secretary-General António Guterres was in the city to prepare for a peace conference that would set a timetable to unite the country, rewrite the constitution and hold democratic

elections. Instead, Gen. Haftar handed Libya a fresh civil war, and the body count is rising," reports Toronto's Globe and Mail.

Needless to mention, the human cost of Haftar's offensive is enormous. In Tripoli, heavy fighting and blocked roads have left civilians trapped in homes for days at a time. "We cannot move because of the shelling from both sides. Our homes have been damaged. We are trying to leave the area to a safer place," said Mohammed al-Trapoulisi, a 43-year-old father of three from Abu Salim. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said the clashes have displaced over 41,000 people.

In all war-torn countries, people go hungry because of the lack of infrastructure, railroads, or a delivery system. In Yemen, Libya, South Sudan, and Ukraine, years of war have left these countries with little food to deliver or lack of basic amenities to sustain life. Sadly, there is no place for the bystanders to hide, and the children face the prospect of famine. A reporter for the British newspaper *The Independent* wrote about a very heart-wrenching case. "The young mother steps onto the scale for the doctor. Even with all her black robes on, she weighs only 38kg. Umm Mizrah is pregnant but starving herself to feed her children. And her sacrifice may not be enough to save them."

A common feature of the wars in the Middle East is that forces facing each other consist of local fighters generously funded by external financiers. The wars in Yemen and Libya have been characterised as "proxy wars" where big powers fuel the flames. The USA, Saudi Arabia, Iran, UAE, France and Turkey are all backing one party or the other in these two civil wars. The countries that underwrite the wars often have large military budgets, and see the wars fought under their patronage as "war games". As a result, we witness the proliferation of these conflagrations which allow the manufacturers of arms and military hardware to test them in real time.

Two sets of statistics capture the essence of the challenge we now must confront. The first relates to the number of people who

go hungry every day because of the lack of resources. Add to that the headcount of innocent civilians killed by bombs, terrorists, or other means. The second statistics is the sum of global spending on arms and ammunition in the name of "self-defence". One only needs to connect the dots and uncover why military spending and wars go hand in hand.

A few years ago, UN officials at a food summit in Rome indicated that only USD 30 billion a year could feed the world's hungry population. "Worldbeyondwar.org", a platform for anti-war activist groups, puts it dramatically, "With the globe spending roughly USD 2 trillion per year on militarism (roughly half of it by the United States), we can also say that 1.5 percent of GLOBAL military spending could end starvation on earth."

How did the situation come to such a pass? The message I wish to convey here can be summarised by posing a few questions. If we can spend two trillion dollars on military defence, why shy away from spending a fraction of that money to feed the hungry? Why are oil-rich countries in the Middle East continuing their airstrikes which are killing civilians and contributing to what the UN says could become "the worst famine in the world in 100 years"? Why is the US government asking NATO countries to spend more for its military rather than cutting its own budget to bring it on a par with the latter's?

Finally, some words of wisdom: "Military budget sucks up an enormous amount of resources without making the world more peaceful or democratic," according to research done by Lindsay Koshgarian of the Institute for Policy Studies, a think-tank in Washington, DC. It is my firm conviction that if we cut military spending, there will be much less spent on fighting wars, and hopefully more resources available to feed the hungry.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# India's new social media politics



SHASHI THAROOR

WITH India's general election a few weeks away from its conclusion, a crucial question needs to be revisited: what role have social media played in them?

Conventional wisdom had it that, in the Indian context, one should always be sceptical about the reach and political impact of social media. In 2013, a year before the last general election, the IRIS Knowledge Foundation and the Internet and Mobile Association of India conducted a study suggesting that in 160 constituencies (of 543 in the Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament), the margin of victory was smaller than the number of social media users, or over 10 percent of the population was on social media. It estimated that by the 2014 election, as many as 80 million Indians would be using social media, and asserted that this was a vote bank that no politician could afford to ignore.

If that was true then, it's a lot truer now. I haven't seen a comparable study recently, but the numbers have of course grown since 2014. With some 625 million Internet users in India, and upwards of 80 percent of Internet use on mobile phones, there could be 625 million pairs of eyes looking at social media during the 2019 election—nearly eight times more than in 2014.

At the same time, though I was a Twitter pioneer among Indian politicians, my own view is that no Indian election can be won or lost on social media alone. While perhaps a

bit more than a third of India's population, and perhaps above 40 percent of its voters, use social media, there are no reliable studies of how frequently they use it for political news and views. They could be in WhatsApp group chats or sharing Facebook snaps of their beach weekend, rather than debating the merits of the political parties contending in their constituency. There's still no substitute for mass rallies, street-corner addresses, door-to-door canvassing, handshakes at marketplaces and busy junctions, and Jeep-top tours.

And then there are the numbers. Twitter, the most "political" of social media, has only 30 million active users in India; it is dwarfed by Facebook and WhatsApp, with over 240 million active users each. And, given parliamentary constituencies of some two million people each, Twitter is of little help in political mobilisation. Unlike the US, Twitter would be useless for organising a mass rally, or even convening a large public meeting. It cannot be a substitute for conventional campaigning.

Nonetheless, political parties have been turning to social media extensively this year. Aside from its usefulness for issuing messages through memes, digital posters, and WhatsApp forwards, social media's indirect impact (as a source for "mainstream" media stories) makes it an indispensable communications tool for politicians. And that's where the trouble starts.

WhatsApp is the favoured medium, because 82 percent of India's mobile phone users have downloaded the app, and because it's targeted to specific people. A political party can create groups defined by their interests, caste, or religious identity, or by a specific issue or cause, and bombard them



A crew member walks in front of a hoarding displaying the logo of BOOM, one of Facebook Inc's fact-checking partners in India, at a studio in Mumbai, on March 12, 2019. PHOTO: REUTERS/FRANCIS MASCARENHAS/FILES

with messages to reinforce their biases and convince them that the party is with them. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the master of this technique, running an estimated half-million WhatsApp groups across the country. Its IT cell head, Amit Malviya, declared in March that, "The upcoming elections will be fought on the mobile phone... In a way, you could say they would be WhatsApp elections."

The problem, however, is that the use of social media is not always benign. Disinformation is rife on the BJP's groups, including concocted accounts of what leading Congress politicians (including

me) have said and photoshopped images portraying traitorous behaviour by opposition leaders. "Fake news" exists because it has been manufactured to serve the political interests of its disseminators. The danger, therefore, is that many votes will be cast on the basis of disinformation. The BJP's attitude is that all is fair in love, war, and politics; but Indian democracy is becoming collateral damage.

Having been informed of the political misuse of its services, WhatsApp took steps to limit the damage, limiting forwards, for example, to just five recipients in order to impede lies from going viral. It also decided

to block numbers identified by the Election Commission of India as guilty of spreading "fake news," though this might slow, but not stop, the guilty parties, who quickly find alternative numbers and create more groups. The BJP benefits from vast armies of people, some paid and some volunteers, whose job is to feed the voracious appetites of these WhatsApp groups.

The fears of democrats are not unfounded: people have been killed on the basis of fake WhatsApp rumours. It is striking that when the Easter bombings took place in Sri Lanka, one of the government's first reactions was to shut down the country's social media. But the stakes are different when it comes to political messaging; in India, when the government itself has a vested interest, it tends to turn a blind eye to the excesses of its partisans. In the ongoing election, there has been little progress in stopping "fake news," arresting its perpetrators, or limiting its spread.

Social media offers a marvellously useful set of communication tools that democratises the expression of public opinion. But in the hands of unscrupulous politicians who see it as a means of manipulation, social media can undermine democracy itself. Once you have voted for the wrong people on the basis of false information, there is nothing you can do about it until the next election. In that fact lies the danger posed by social media to Indian—and not only Indian—democracy.

Shashi Tharoor, a former UN under-secretary-general and former Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and Minister of State for Human Resource Development, is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs and an MP for the Indian National Congress.

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## QUOTABLE Quote



PLATO

(428/427–348/347) BC  
Athenian philosopher

One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

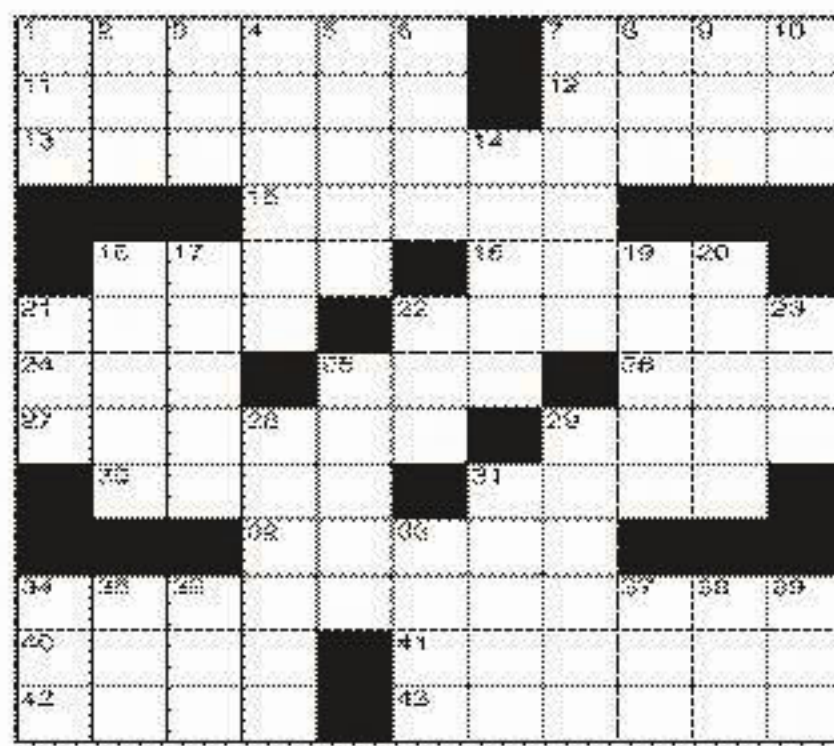
### ACROSS

- 1 Picasso, for one
- 7 Earth neighbor
- 11 Like
- 12 Soothing plant
- 13 Bygone gaming parlor
- 15 Church leader
- 16 On the house
- 18 Nanny or billy
- 21 Hoe target
- 22 Star followers
- 24 "—a Rock"
- 25 — Francisco
- 26 Count start
- 27 Camera support
- 29 Steel ingredient
- 30 Sirius, for one
- 31 Hearty dish

### DOWN

- 1 Beret, for one
- 2 Luau instrument
- 3 Storage site
- 4 Wanting
- 5 Fashion
- 6 Swamp croaker
- 7 President of France
- 8 In the style of
- 9 Scepter
- 10 Take in

- 14 Daughter of Lear
- 16 Dreads
- 17 Mail, as payment
- 19 Love to pieces
- 20 So far
- 21 Humor
- 22 Craze
- 23 Fellows
- 25 Apologetic word
- 28 Hocked
- 29 Cornell's home
- 31 Boosted
- 33 Actor Rickman
- 34 Chum
- 35 Yale rooster
- 36 Formerly called
- 37 Gift tag word
- 38 Preceding time
- 39 Wine choice



## YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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## BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



## BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott



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