The quest for a better life

It should not lead to death!

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

THIRTY-nine migrants seeking a better life perished in a refrigerated van, and their bodies were found in an industrial site about 25 miles east of central London. Ambulance services found the truck early one Wednesday morning, October 23, and while it has not yet been fully ascertained how they all died, it is a fair guess that the 31 men and 8 women froze to death while the truck driver who is known to law-enforcement as a human smuggler was driving them to their drop-off points.

The reason such tragic incidents arouse so much emotion is that these martyrs died after travelling from South East Asia and came so close to their dreamland. These 39 brave souls were fighting for a cause that we are all familiar with, i.e., a better life and to put food on the table. According to the police report, the trailer arrived from Zeebrugge in Belgium and somehow managed to go to the British port of Essex. Originally they were thought to be Chinese, since many of them had Chinese passports, but then the story got complicated. It is now believed that these workers came from Vietnam and then travelled to China where they secured fake Chinese passports before heading for Europe. It is almost certain that these aspiring migrants, one as young as 19 years old, were hoping to find jobs in the UK after their months-long ordeal had ended.

As an economist, I have to hold my emotions in check when I write my columns. However, as everyone knows, economists are also taught about the distinction between normative and positive economics. Positive implies "what is" and normative refers to "what ought to be". For example, positive economics tells us that resource-poor countries often do not offer employment for all able-bodied humans, while normative economics, (as opposed to positive economics) expresses the value judgment that society must be fair and offer employment at living wages to all.

Police are seen at the scene where bodies were discovered in a lorry container, in Grays, Essex. | PHOTO: HANNAH MCKAY/REUTERS

The death of the migrants who were only looking for better-paying jobs in the UK are victims of a cruel system, a world economy that does not pay a decent wage but also forbids them from going to another country (the UK) which can do so. This is not the first time in recent history that migrants seeking better economic opportunities have taken dangerous routes in search of better prospects. And for these migrants, the economic and human cost had been enormous.

Bernie Gravett, a former British police officer advising the European Union on human trafficking, opined that families try to help their loved ones travel abroad and pay large sums of money to human-smugglers. He told BBC Breakfast, "In Vietnam it is assessed at 20,000 to 30,000 US dollars, from China it's 40,000 to 50,000 US dollars." This amount was confirmed by journalists on the ground with families of some of the deceased who came from the same village in northern Vietnam.

People knowledgeable about the illegal migration racket, paint a very scary portrait of the conditions, the risks, and the financial cost that poor families in the Chinese and Vietnamese rural areas bear to send loved ones to Europe. Gravett told BBC Breakfast: "The Chinese would generally come down through Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, across through Turkey and then up what we call the Balkan route. With Vietnamese it's very different, they take a northern route, so generally the victims I've dealt with in the past are flown to Moscow and then they take a land route across northern Europe and then come down from there."

The latest incident highlights: i) the struggle for millions to make a living; ii) the nationalistic policies which forbid migration; and iii) the tug of war between superpowers and the open warfare (in Ukraine, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq) which are depriving poor people of their means of livelihood. The Vietnamese migrants had lost their jobs due to factory closures.

What kind of jobs do these illegal migrants find in their chosen land? They are not really offered an El Dorado. Many live in an underground economy of similar people. In some instances, those who come from China on student visas never show up at their academic institution, and take cash under-the-table jobs. In most cases, they live in communal housing that is owned by someone legitimate.

The ones who are brought in by traffickers have the hardest time. They arrive inside a truck and are taken to a secluded location where nobody can see, where they're let out. They are then completely on their own in a foreign country. "The traffickers have usually robbed them of all their money. Sometimes they are collected by people running an illegal sweatshop and given employment and housing for no wages at all—slavery without shackles."

It is well-known that there is a shadow or underground economy where the illegals find ready employment for chores that the British workers avoid. Maids, cleaners, and nannies in private homes. Or, even worse, in illicit cannabis farms, nail bars, massage parlours, and brothels.

But, why do the migrants pick Britain? "One of the reasons could be the UK's liberal economy, making it easy to rent property, or start businesses as well as comparatively restrictive drugs policies compared to other EU countries." Other factors include the ease with which the illegals can use the passports and National Insurance Numbers of friends and relatives who are already in the UK legally. Indian and other South Asians can get jobs in South Asian owned small businesses, and fast-food restaurants. Vietnamese illegals are known to be involved in the marijuana cultivation business and Turkish migrants are involved in the drug trade.

Shalini Patel, a lawyer with Duncan Lewis Public Law who represents trafficking victims, said a large part of the problem was the lack of safe and legal routes for migrants. "It is our duty as a country to ensure these journeys are safe and people are not exploited to come to the UK in such horrendous situations where they end up dead."

Duc Tuan, a coordinator of the Vietnamese Luncheon Club in Poplar East London, told the press that other smaller things could be done. "Why doesn't the government set up a helpline or something," he said. "It costs around 2,000 pounds to make an asylum application. The Home Office has the money. Why don't they just make a film to tell people in Vietnam what it is really like so they won't come?"

The British government has added to the problem by taking a tough stance on legal avenues of immigration and using Brexit to spread fear among prospective immigrants. The British Prime Minister Boris Johnson sent condolences to the victims on October 28, saying that "the whole nation, and indeed the world, has been shocked by this tragedy." He added that they were "innocent people who were hoping for a better life in this country." He also promised to bring the criminals to justice. "In condemning the callousness of those responsible for this crime we in the government of the United Kingdom resolve to do everything in our power to bring the perpetrators to justice." However, once Johnson delivers on Brexit, life for prospective immigrants will become hellish.

So what is the policy implication and what can an idealistic society do to ease the pain suffered by the migrants and those seeking asylum? To get some ideas for the "migration conundrum" I turned to my wife, a trained sociologist and a university administrator in the Social Work Department. She did not flinch and replied right away, "We should have countries without borders", or "les pays sans frontieres"! Yeah, dream on.

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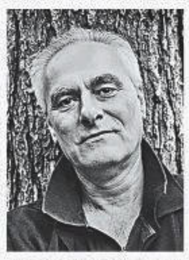
COUNTERING CIVILISATIONALISM

Lebanese and Iraqi protesters transcend sectarianism



JAMES M DORSEY

PROTESTS in Lebanon have evolved into more than a fight against failed and corrupt government that has long stymied development in the Middle East and North Africa.

The protests constitute a rare demand for political and social structures that emphasise national rather than ethnic or sectarian religious identities in a world in which civilisational leaders who advocate some form of racial, ethnic or religious supremacy govern the world's major as well as key regional powers.

"One, one, one, we are one people," is a popular slogan chanted by Lebanese protesters irrespective of their denomination.

Tens of thousands of protesters emphasised last Sunday the quest for a political structure and identity that transcends sect by forming a human chain that stretched along Lebanon's Mediterranean coast.

"We are one people. 'Our' leaders have been fooling us for decades that we are not one nation, but a group of nations. The past 10 days have shown that we are truly one nation, we are Lebanese, and that's why you only see the Lebanese flag," said Sobhi Jaroudi, a 67-year old Beirut resident who joined the chain.

"It's a do or die situation...We are ready to face fear and face responsibility that comes with facing a sectarian structure that has been in place for 30 years," added Mohammed Shamas, a young protester, insisting he had no desire to live in a country of corrupt, sectarian politicians that have dragged the country down for their own benefit.

The protesters may not frame their demands in terms that go beyond their fragile Lebanese nation state even if those demands, stemming from constitutionally institutionalised sectarianism, have broader significance.

If they succeed in transforming Lebanese identity and translating that into constitutional reform, Lebanese protesters will have contributed to securing the future of protest as an effective tool of change.

That future depends on protesters' perceptions of a common interest that transcends sect, ethnicity and class becoming part of the fabric of society.

Lebanese protesters' success this week in forcing Prime Minister Saad Harari to resign also highlighted the difficulty in transcending sectarianism.

Sunni Muslim voices noted that it was a Sunni Muslim politician that had stepped down, reinforcing calls by

Demonstrators form a human chain next to a graffiti during ongoing anti-government protests in Jal el-Dib, Lebanon, October 27, 2019. | PHOTO: ALKIS KONSTANTINIDIS/REUTERS

protesters that he form a new cabinet of technocrats only.

Nevertheless, Mr Hariri's resignation buoyed primarily Shiite demonstrators in Iraq, whose anti-sectarian instincts, according to Fanar Haddad, an Iraq scholar at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute, have been reflected in increasingly issue- rather than identity-oriented demands since 2015.

Following in Lebanon's footsteps, Iraqi prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi is under increasing pressure to step down.

In the most recent Iraqi protests, those instincts were evident in slogans denouncing Iranian influence in the country and the government's perceived prioritisation of Iranian over Iraqi interests.

Protesters blamed Iran and its Iraqi proxies for the harsh response by security forces that has cost the lives of more than 200 people.

The *Guardian* quoted an Iraqi intelligence officer as saying that the operations room coordinating the security response to the demonstrations was run by Iranian and Iraqi militia commanders. "These militia became the tool to oppress the demonstrations," the officer said.

The anti-Iranian slogans also reflected attitudes expressed by Ayatollah Ali Husseini Sistani, one of Shiite Islam's foremost scholars and spiritual leaders known as the "safety valve of Iraq," who has sought to counter sectarianism, keep a distance to Iran, and steer Iraq towards a more cohesive society.

They also amounted to what journalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad termed "anger towards a corrupt religious oligarchy."

Ayatollah Sistani signalled his support for the protesters with the handing out of free food, water and drinks and the provision of toilet facilities to the protesters by the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf that is run by his representative.

The anger, like a rift in the power base of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shiite political movement and militia, and Amal, another Shiite group led by parliament speaker Nabih Berri, fits a trend evident not only in the broader Middle East, but also in countries like Russia where criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church is mounting because of its close association with the Kremlin.

A poll of Arab youth earlier this year showed that two thirds of those surveyed felt that religion played too large a role in their lives, up from 50 percent four years ago. Seventy-nine percent argued that religious institutions needed to be reformed while half said that religious values were holding the Arab world back.

To be sure, Iraqi denunciations of Iran were rooted in a history of Iraqi Shiite allegiance to the state evident in the fact that a majority of the Iraqi soldiers who died in the 1980s fighting an eight-year long war against Iran were Shiites, and long standing rivalry between Najaf, the Iraqi holy city that is home to Ayatollah Sistani, and Iran's Qom.

It's a history, despite the vicious sectarian violence in the years following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, that contrasts starkly with the historical emphasis in Lebanon on sectarian identity that exploded in 1975 in a 15-year long civil war.

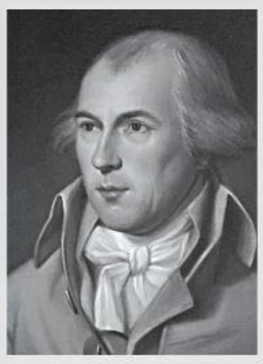
As a result, Lebanese protesters were more explicit in their rejection of a sectarian-based political system. Even supporters of Hezbollah transcended sectarian identities by ignoring a call by the group's leader, Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah for an end to the protests.

"I'm financed by the embassy of Hela Hela Hela Ho-stan, who's financing you?" said a demonstrator's placard on Beirut's Riad Solh Square, using a chant popular with the protesters.

Added protester Alaa, a Nasrallah supporter: "His priorities here are different from our priorities, we want to change the system, get ourselves a better life; in short we want a new life, while Hezbollah's priorities are keeping the system and making sure they're on good terms with their allies. For the first time ever, we are having a clear diversion in vision."

Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University's S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, an adjunct senior research fellow at the National University of Singapore's Middle East Institute and co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute of Fan Culture.

QUOTABLE *Quote*



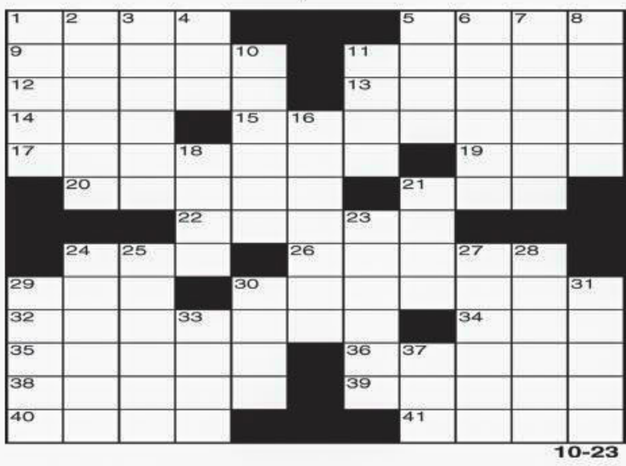
JAMES MADISON
(March 16, 1751[b] – June 28, 1836)
American statesman, lawyer, diplomat, philosopher and Founding Father who served as the fourth president of the United States

The advancement and diffusion of knowledge is the only guardian of true liberty.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Like bucks
5 Get news of
9 Deplete
11 Clinic worker
12 Puppeteer Lewis
13 Wed in secret
14 Charged particle
15 Brought ino existence
17 Sounded like old floorboards
19 Frozen over
20 Periphery
21 do something
22 Playwright Joe
24 Do a checkout job
26 Pitched perfectly
29 Used a couch
30 Folded
32 Defeated soundly
34 Fido's foot
35 Texas landmark
36 Humiliate
38 Varnish ingredient
39 1983 Streisand movie
40 Peepers
41 Sunrise site

DOWN
1 Band output
2 On the beach
3 Inclined
4 Afr. neighbor
5 Island dance
6 Steamy
7 Facet
8 Frail
10 Field worker
11 Must have
16 Make good as new
18 Wildly eager
21 "Lonely Boy" singer
23 Eventually
24 Brewer's grain
25 Comfortable
27 Sevilla's nation
28 Baker's supplies
29 Frighten
30 "You know you want to!"
31 Lived
33 Writer Kingsley
37 Hive resident



10-23

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

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