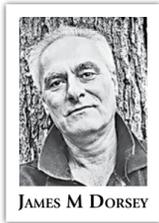


Coming home to roost: War threatens to spill beyond Syria's borders



JAMES M DORSEY

As tens of thousands of refugees shiver in the cold on Turkey's borders with Europe and a new phase of the brutal Syrian war erupts, Russia, Turkey, the European Union and the international community are being presented with the bill

for a flawed, short-term approach to the nine-year old conflict that largely lacked empathy for millions of victims and was likely to magnify rather than resolve problems.

The failure of western policymakers to adopt an approach that would have served Europe's longer term security interests and sought to end Syria's suffering in ways that may have held out the promise of a sustainable resolution of the conflict is compounded by the failure to exploit what was always a fragile alliance between Russia and NATO-member Turkey.

With that alliance under strain, both in Syria, where Russia has warned that it cannot guarantee the safety of Turkish aircraft in Syrian airspace, and in Libya, where the two allies support opposing sides, multiple regional conflicts have begun to mesh.

Some analysts have suggested that Russia was seeking to enlist the support of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Syria so that it could dump Turkey with which it is on the brink of military blows. The two Gulf states oppose Turkish ambitions in the Middle East and beyond.

The analysts point to recent contacts between Emirati, Russian and Syrian officials and the establishment of relations between Syria and Libya's UAE and Russian-backed rebel force led by renegade commander Khalifa Haftar.

The various manoeuvres constitute variations on a theme.

The international community, including

Russia, did little in the early years of the war to stop militant groups and regional powers from contributing to the violence by exploiting Syria's power vacuum to their immediate advantage. That changed selectively when the Islamic State gained a territorial foothold in Syria and Iraq.

Similarly, much of the international community falsely assumed that a Syrian victory in Idlib, Syria's last rebel stronghold, would create a fait accompli that Turkey would accept and that would pave the way to an end to the war and reconstruction.

Like in much of the Middle East where a failure to put one's ears to the ground and hear the widespread discontent simmering at the surface that produced a decade of revolution and brutal counterrevolution, neither Russia nor its detractors read the writing on Syria's walls.

If militants and external powers turned what started in 2011 as peaceful protests demanding reform rather than the overthrow of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, the international community failed to recognise that nine years later criticism of the regime is widespread among an impoverished population traumatised by war.

Rather than creating an environment for reconciliation and reconstruction, Russian-supported Syrian military successes in retaking territory from rebels by force or in negotiated handovers have not been accompanied by a relieving of economic and social hardship, sparking intermittent anti-government protests and stepped up repression.

Much of the criticism focuses on the government's failure to improve economic and living conditions, but, like in the early days of the popular revolt, shies away from calls for regime change.

The improbability of a Russian-Syrian military victory putting Syria on a road towards peaceful resolution and recovery is highlighted by the fact that snap polling suggests that less than 10 percent of the

millions of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons would be willing to return to or remain in a country that continues to be ruled by Mr Al-Assad and his regime.

As a result, Russia and Mr Al-Assad appear to have adopted the kind of scorched earth policy that Israel's military rejected in the late 1980s during the first Palestinian intifada or uprising.

In contrast to the military that told then Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin that the resolution needed to be political because the cost of a military solution would be too high, Russia and Mr Al-Assad have concluded that no cost is too high. It is an approach that emulates Russia's brutal crushing of rebellions in Chechnya in the 1990s.

"Russia realised that it cannot cement its military victories into permanent political gains through diplomacy within the projected

remaining lifetime of the regime. Instead, it decided to employ the "Crozny doctrine" of complete annihilation of all those who stand in the way of its strategic goals and bring the conflict to an end before the regime collapses," said Syrian activist Labib al-Nahhas De La Ossa, referring to the Chechen capital that was virtually destroyed by Russian forces.

It's an approach that in violation of international law takes no heed of the consequences for innocent millions in Idlib or the fact that many, rather than supporting Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an erstwhile Al Qaeda affiliate that controls part of the province, have repeatedly protested against it.

It's also an approach that potentially could spark a renewed refugee crisis in Europe with Turkey, already home to some four million refugees, no longer stopping fleeing Syrians

and others from trying to cross its Greek and Bulgarian borders with the European Union.

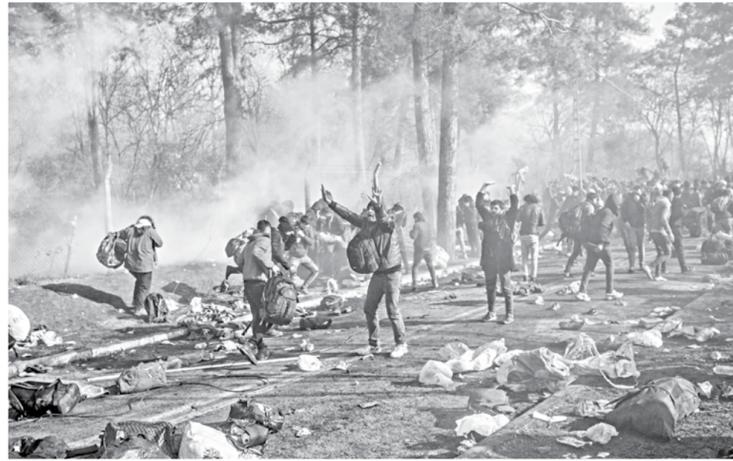
Russia, in a cynical twist of irony, would likely be happy to see a repeat of the 2015 refugee crisis that fuelled support for far-right, anti-immigration and nativist forces in Europe who are empathetic to Moscow's effort to weaken the trans-Atlantic alliance as well as the European Union with its adherence to western values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

Even with that being the case, Russian policy towards Idlib and the rest of Syria is likely to only produce problematic outcomes: ensuring total victory for Mr Al-Assad risks a break-up with Turkey, a key regional player, and forecloses chances for a sustainable resolution of the Syrian conflict that would allow for the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons.

Continued Russian and Iranian-backed support for Mr Al-Assad's brutal regime will at best temporarily stabilise Syria and potentially open the door to a forced return of some refugees and displaced persons while setting the stage for another round of conflict.

An equally unsustainable alternative scenario, envisioned by Mr De La Ossa, would involve a Russian-Turkish agreement to cram three million refugees into a tiny slice of Idlib in what would amount to sub-human conditions.

Mr De La Ossa said: "The humanitarian catastrophe that is Idlib has shown that the lessons from the beginning of World War II still apply: Appeasing dictators who are willing to kill massive numbers of people to realise their delusions of grandeur never works. But if the US, Europe, and the international community at large fail to heed these lessons, it will not only be Syrians who pay the price."



Migrants clash with Greek police on the buffer zone of Turkey-Greece border, at Pazarkule, in Edirne district on February 29.

PHOTO: AFP

Remembering professor AJ Farida Banu

SAIRA RAHMAN KHAN

It would be an understatement to say that women in Bangladesh have always had to struggle to get anywhere. It's the same all over the world. Gaining foothold in all spheres of life, be it social, legal, political or cultural, has always been a challenge. Nevertheless, there are those who have succeeded in doing this and Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu was one of them.

Born on April 28, 1938, in Calcutta, she was the second of four daughters in a family of 11 children (one of whom did not survive infancy), born to Syed Mohammad Abu Sayeed, a

In 1967, Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu joined Dhaka College as a lecturer in Bangla. In 1970, she was promoted to assistant professor of Bangla and became associate professor in 1984.



Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu (April 28, 1938 to February 17, 2020)

physician practicing in Metiabruz and Begum Amatur Rasul, a homemaker, both from Birbhum, West Bengal. As a child, Farida Banu and her younger sister joined Mukul Fauz in Calcutta, one of the oldest children's organisations in the subcontinent. There she learnt to sing, did physical training and other youth related activities and even took up stick fighting. In 1947, when she was barely 9-years-old, the effects of Partition hit her family, and like many Muslim families in Calcutta at that time, moved to East Pakistan, where her father was posted to the Munshiganj Sadar Hospital.

In East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Farida Banu and her sisters attended schools wherever her father was posted. This included schools in Munshiganj, Chittagong, Jessore and near the Dhaka Central Jail quarters (when her father became a doctor for the jail) and finally at Quamrunessa Girls School, from where she completed her matriculation. She started college at Eden Girl's College and then went on to study Bangla at Dhaka University, where she was also elected as Cultural Secretary of the Women's Hall. Her singing continued at school and college cultural programmes

and even at university hall functions.

Her marriage, at the age of 20, was arranged to a young doctor, Ashequr Rahman Khan, of the first batch to graduate from Dacca Medical College. He was also one of the young interns who took part in the Language Movement in 1952. They moved to Karachi in 1964, where Dr Ashequr Rahman Khan completed his M.Phil., while Farida Banu, a young mother, took up the task of homemaker, never forgetting to read books and journals. They returned to Dhaka in 1966, where she took a 14-day long physical defence training course and also commenced post-graduate studies in Bangla. A determined Farida Banu was taking full advantage of her father's belief that all children must have education and freedom. She completed her Master's degree in Bangla at that time, from Dhaka University.

In 1967, Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu joined Dhaka College as a lecturer in Bangla. In 1970, she was promoted to assistant professor of Bangla and became associate professor in 1984. She was also a regular artist on Dacca Radio. After independence she made regular appearances on Bangladesh television and Bangladesh Betar. Her forte was Rabindrasangeet. Respecting her decisions and supporting her choices all the way was her husband. In 1990 she joined Eden Girls College as professor and Head of its Bangla Department. She retired from government service in 1996.

As a mother, Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu never discriminated between her children when it came to education. Her son became a lawyer, one daughter became a doctor and the other holds a Master's Degree in marketing. Her daughters followed her footsteps and joined Chhayanaut for singing lessons and appeared in Notun Kuri, a children's show on BTV. She encouraged her children to do what they wanted, as

long as it did not harm others and was for a just cause.

I came into Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu's life in 1995, when I became her daughter-in-law. In some ways we were similar. I admit, I was in awe of my mother in law. Her quiet, but powerful presence penetrated the whole house. She was always immaculately dressed, even when she was not going anywhere and when she did leave the house there was not a single hair out of place. With my English medium background, "western" habits and stubbornness, I suppose I was something of an enigma to her. She was very patient with me. The first lesson I learnt from her was to talk "proper" Bangla with crisp endings and no "common" dialect. My sisters used to make fun of me, but my father was very pleased. I was definitely not her vision of a daughter-in-law, but she understood that if her son was happy, that was all that mattered. That was her greatness. She never spoke ill of anyone.

Till 1998, a tabla player would come to the house and my mother-in-law would practice her songs. She stopped singing on TV and the Radio sometime in 1996, saying that it was too tiring. When the tabla player came to the house, my father-in-law would be in the living-room listening to his wife sing, thoroughly enjoying being the sole audience. They were inseparable. They immensely enjoyed the arts. Both were life members of the Bangla Academy and for as long as they could, attended all its programmes. They would reminisce about road trips together soon after marriage, get-togethers with friends, music and food, a particular flower or someone's garden that caught their eye. Neither of them would talk about their experiences during the Language Movement or the Liberation War. They would not talk about all the social services they did. They were loving, humble and private people, with warm and generous hearts.

By 2015, both professor Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu and Dr Ashequr Rahman Khan were suffering from ill health.

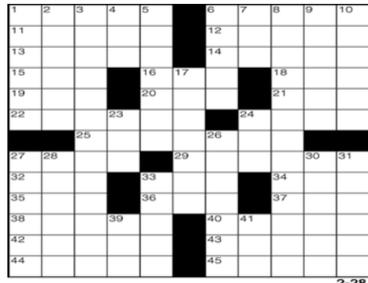
While my father-in-law, weakened from a heart attack and then chemotherapy, began a slow and frustrating decline into dementia, my mother-in-law became dependent on a walking frame and wheelchair due to debilitating arthritis and heart problems. It was a constant visit to the hospital with both of them—sometimes together. Although my mother-in-law was bedridden by 2017, her mind was alert. She read books, continued to take interest in what her grandchildren were up to, loved to see us all dressed-up in our finest and going out. She was also extremely concerned about my father-in-law, who had almost stopped eating properly by 2017. When my father-in-law passed away in his sleep in the very early hours of May 18, 2019, at home, I instructed the hospital ambulance men not to say anything in front of her and we told her we were taking him to the hospital as he had a temperature and had to stay there for observation. Her daughters broke the news to her later in the morning. I am grateful I was not there when he did. Akhtar Jahan Farida Banu and Ashequr Rahman Khan were like turtle doves. My mother in law's health took a steady decline after her husband's demise. No amount of physiotherapy gave her relief or comfort. On February 17, 2020, she had a massive heart attack and crossed over to where, most probably, my father-in-law was eagerly awaiting her arrival.

I am sure the story of my mother-in-law is a story similar to other women of her time. However, in the era she grew up in, families with such values were not very common. My parents-in-law had a wonderful partnership. Their life is a lesson in mutual respect that we can all learn from.

Saira Rahman Khan is a Professor of Law at BRAC University.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Unable to do well
 - 6 Quarterback John
 - 11 Skylit lobbies
 - 12 Paris sight
 - 13 Fire starter
 - 14 Airs
 - 15 Yale rooter
 - 16 Lamb's mother
 - 18 Monk's title
 - 19 - Andreas
 - 20 Caret's key
 - 21 Refiner's supply
 - 22 Magnate
 - 24 Symbol of grace
 - 25 Robin Hood
 - 27 Stew meat
 - 29 Houston team
 - 32 Thurman of film
 - 33 Soccer's Hamm
 - 34 Take in
 - 35 Toe count
 - 36 Gifted
 - 37 Brood watcher
 - 38 Low cards
 - 40 Winter gliders
 - 42 Long-plumed bird
 - 43 Singer Haggard
 - 44 Takes a breather
 - 45 Moves cautiously
 - 6 English county
 - 7 Summer sign
 - 8 Workers with squeegees
 - 9 Soft yarn
 - 10 Toadies
 - 17 Shoe style
 - 23 Punch-in-the-gut response
 - 24 Boston team, for short
 - 26 "I have no clue"
 - 27 Stick in the fridge
 - 28 Come into view
 - 30 Pester
 - 31 Detects
 - 33 Ship poles
 - 39 So far
 - 41 Pasture
- DOWN**
- 1 Most contemptible
 - 2 Frolicking
 - 3 Clog treatments
 - 4 Vacuum lack
 - 5 Adopts



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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

BEETLE BAILEY



BABY BLUES



QUOTABLE Quote



MO YAN (BORN 1955)
 Chinese novelist and short-story writer renowned for his imaginative and humanistic fiction.

The young must not scoff at the old, for flowers don't bloom forever.

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.