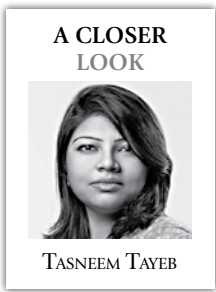


10 years on, the birds of prey circle over Syria



TORTURE, forced disappearance, displacement, chemical attacks, butchery, loss of lives and limbs, death of family and friends, mass murder: the Syrian people have been through it all in the last 10 years.

It all started with protests on March 15, 2011 triggered by a graffiti on a school wall in the southern province of Deraa, which read: "It's your turn now, doctor!" It was written by some students who were clearly not happy with the state of affairs under the leadership of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The doctor in the graffiti referred to the president, who had served as a doctor in the Syrian Army. His specialisation was ophthalmology.

The graffiti was a manifestation of the elephant in the room, and the common people started to rise up to voice their dissatisfaction. Set against the backdrop of the newly-lit flames of the Arab Spring, the protests soon gained momentum and spread like wildfire from one province to another, and eventually throughout the country.

The crackdown on protesters by the Assad regime had been swift and brutal, and soon the protests turned into a civil war, with the people fighting for or against the government. The Syrian political landscape—already rife with factional divisions among the Kurds, the Salafi jihadists, the Sunni groups, and other factions trying to leverage the people's anti-government sentiment to serve their vested interests—splintered into many rebel groups. This is where Syria fell apart.

Foreign powers, regional and global, soon joined in the mad dash for geopolitical power, siding with one party or another. The US, Russia, France, the UK, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, along with other countries, got involved in the war in some way or another. While Iran backed the Hezbollah fighters in support of the Assad regime, Qatar and Saudi Arabia facilitated the rise of various predominantly Sunni militant factions. Turkey's tussle with Syrian Democratic Forces—engaged in the fight against terrorist groups, specifically the ISIS—across the

northeastern border of Syria played a role in strengthening the base of the terrorist group.

The swift emergence of militant outfits in the war-torn country, facilitated by the power vacuum in leadership, turned Syria into a lucrative spot for foreign intervention. Under the pretext of fighting international terrorism, many western powers including the US intervened

the past decade, according to verified data—an average of more than three children a day," reported the Unicef on March 10 this year.

Unfortunately, in the last 10 years, children were not only killed in Syria, but also recruited to fight in the war. According to Unicef data, more than 5,700 children have fallen victim to the bloodthirsty predators. Some of the recruits were as young as seven.

Syrian economy has crumbled under the pressure of the war.

Al Jazeera cited a UN report saying that more than 80 percent of the Syrian population is now living below the poverty line. The Syrian pound has plummeted to 4,000 against one US dollar in the black market. The economic cost of the war over the last decade has been north of USD 1.2 trillion, according to World Vision.

While efforts have been made, especially in recent years, to diffuse tensions in Syria, many of the refugees do not ever want to return to Syria. They just want peace and a life as normal as it can get.

And with the Assad regime still wielding strong political power and control over the majority of the land, one can only wonder why the refugees are unwilling to return to their motherland. Assad's ruthlessness in dealing with dissent is known to the world—156,329 of all the casualties are attributed to the Syrian government—and fear of repercussions remains high among the anti-establishment population.

The protests in Syria, along with the spirit of change that sparked those protests in the first place, have died down, and the country has been crushed by the decade-long conflict. The country has gained nothing in the last 10 years; if anything, it has lost its people, its resources, its infrastructure, its control over itself.

One of the main reasons why this has happened is the inability of the various factions to unite for one single cause: democracy and change. Except for the common people, who had solely taken to the streets imbued with the inspiration of the Araba Spring, all the actors in the Syrian war had been only interested in serving their individual political gains, and it is this failure of the actors to unite behind one cause that has been self-defeating for the common Syrians.



Ten years on, Syria is a country nearly destroyed.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

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with military measures, all vying for greater control in this resource-rich region. And of course, many of these countries engaged in profitable arms trade thanks to the perpetual state of war in the country.

The result: 387,118 casualties till December 2020, more than one-third of them civilians (116,911 civilians, to be more precise). This data was published by the UK-based monitoring group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR).

In addition, around 205,300 people remain traceless—either dead or just missing—including more than 88,000 civilians who are "believed to have died of torture in government-run prisons", as reported by the BBC.

But the worst sufferers have perhaps been the children. "Almost 12,000 children were killed or injured in

And no one knows how many have died in the line of fire.

Thousands of children have been separated from their families or just orphaned with nowhere to go or turn for support. What of those children born of the fighters? Hundreds and thousands of them are living miserable lives in the various camps across Syria. Case in point: camps across northeast Syria, including the infamous Al-Hol camp, which house around "27,500 children of at least 60 nationalities and thousands of Syrian children associated with armed groups," as reported by Unicef.

The Unicef report further added that more than half a million Syrian children under the age of five suffer from stunting due to chronic malnutrition. The prices of food went up by 230 percent in 2020 alone. The

"Even if the war ended today, its cost will continue to accumulate to the tune of an additional USD 1.7 trillion in today's money through to 2035", the World Vision report added.

Yet, those who have been lucky to survive amidst the massacre and the mayhem live on the charity of donors, at times the same ones who had sold arms at lucrative prices to fuel the war. And many have been forced to flee, often multiple times, to survive the carnage of the warring parties.

In the last decade, more than 12.3 million people have been displaced. While 5.6 million Syrians have been registered as refugees outside the country, around 6.7 million have been internally displaced. The total number of displaced is more than half of the pre-war Syrian population of around 22 million.

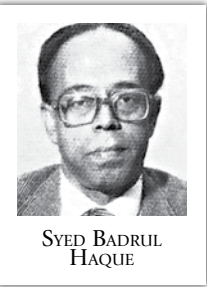
In fact, most of the actors had not been fighting for democracy; they just capitalised on the pro-democracy movement of the people to push for their own control over the land. And this is where the movement died and turned into a bloody mess.

Ten years on, Syria is a country nearly destroyed. Ten years on, efforts to rebuild the nation are meagre. The involvement of the foreign powers—especially those that had been fuelling this crisis—in these rebuilding measures has little visibility. And one only wonders how long it would take for the country to come out of the mess that the political ambitions of the warring parties has created.

With the birds of prey pecking on the carcass of a defeated nation, the future for the Syrians looks grim, if there is a future at all.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

Bangabandhu: A public leader extraordinaire



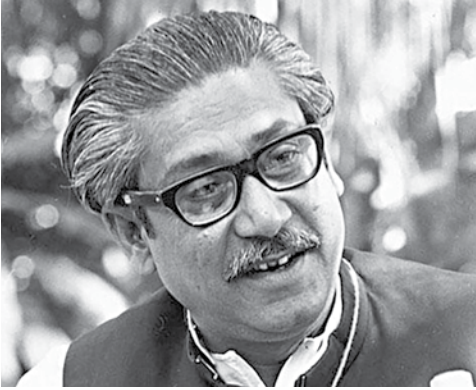
public leader extraordinaire, Bangabandhu suffered extended imprisonment, braved life-risking challenges and finally wrested liberation from the colonial rulers for his people.

My reminiscences about Bangabandhu date back to the late fifties when Bangabandhu took over as a minister in charge of commerce, labour and industries in the provincial cabinet of East Pakistan. On his personal selection, I, with a stint in journalism behind, joined as his press officer. This assignment was obviously the high-water mark of my service career and beyond. I was somewhat nervous initially, but then felt reassured and comfortable when he asked me to send my copies to the news media without his vetting.

The room which he occupied was located on the first floor of the Shahbag canteen

(presently known as Secretariat canteen), which was rather small for ministerial accommodations. Around his secretariat table, there were four wooden chairs without any cushion and a sofa-set that would accommodate only three persons. Visitors were few and far between. His table was never cluttered with pending files. The curtains of his one-door room and two windows were of moderate variety, as was the norm in those days. It exuded a gentleness and a quiet ambience that characterised the secretariat premises at the time.

Regretfully, his room is still unmarked and unrecorded by the secretariat authorities. Also the time that he had spent at the secretariat as a minister rarely finds mention in print or



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. PHOTO: ARCHIVES

Bangabandhu suffered extended imprisonment, braved life-risking challenges and finally wrested liberation from the colonial rulers for his people.

electronic media, although every phase of his career was singularly important in shaping his political thought and career. His tenure as a minister had, in fact, offered him a unique opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the exploitation of the Bengalis by the Pakistani rulers since Partition. It reinforced his conviction that liberation was the only option left for the Bengalis if they were to live honourably in the comity of nations.

Notably, the ministerial job was the only appointment that Bangabandhu had accepted under the Pakistani regime. But then, that was indeed the defining moment to chart his

next political strategy. At times there were moments when he seemed austere private, a loner—it was rather impossible to recognise the inner turmoil in his far-away look and the frozen melancholy of his features.

In one of his official tours to the Faridpur town, Bangabandhu asked me to accompany him during an inspection visit to the district jail. As he was going around the jail premises in brisk steps, he suddenly stopped in front of a cell, and remained standing there for some time. Later he told us that in his student days, he had been jailed for protesting the price hike of daily necessities by a West Pakistani district magistrate. I still vividly remember those moments when he seemed lost in nostalgia.

But before the year's end in office, Bangabandhu elected to opt out from the cosy club of ministerial comfort and authority and be with his hapless people to galvanise them to fight for freedom, albeit on a graduated scale, a role that he seemed to be preparing for all his life. Since then, much time elapsed, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman became Bangabandhu and the Father of the Nation, as Bangladesh emerged on the world map from a classic war of liberation in contemporary history.

In the early days of independence, we had streams of visitors from all corners of the globe. On one occasion, I, then

an information officer, accompanied a venerated German writer during her visit to Bangabandhu at Dhanmondi 32. Bangabandhu received the guest at the doorstep of his residence and took her to the drawing room. The writer complimented Bangabandhu on his unique leadership in the liberation movement that won freedom for the Bengali nation. Bangabandhu was also appreciative of the support extended by her country in building our ravaged economy.

Before seeing the visitor off, much to my surprise, Bangabandhu called me by my first name. He remembered it even after so many years had elapsed. I was close to tears—it was the most unforgettable moment that remained etched in my mind. Like me, so many people have had fond memories of being pleasantly surprised when Bangabandhu called them by their first names, a gesture that showed how deeply he cared about his people.

Presently, as the nation commemorates the centenary of Bangabandhu's birth, let us recommit ourselves to fulfil his dream of Sonar Bangla. The attainment of the status as a developing nation under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is a luminous tribute to his birth centenary on behalf of the nation.

Syed Badrul Haque is a contributor to *The Daily Star*.

CONFUCIUS
(551 BC—479 BC)
Chinese philosopher

Real knowledge is to know the extent of one's ignorance.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	29 Tried to lose	4 Flowed into
1 1992 Nicholson film	32 Fuss	5 Military attack
6 Cardiff's land	33 Energy	6 Character found in kids' books
11 Spring sign	34 Longoria of TV	7 Copying
12 Detached	35 Mythical flyer	8 Becomes bored
13 Orange coats	36 PC key	9 Corner
14 Endures	37 Umbrella part	10 Tahini base
15 Wine choice	38 Pay for everyone	17 Guts
16 Help out	40 Pizzeria sights	23 Writer Harper
18 Important time	42 Therefore	24 Petite
19 Powerful bunch	43 Dance music	26 Address ender
20 Dos preceder	44 Showy flower	27 George's wife
21 Texas's Houston	45 Consumed	28 Loves to pieces
22 Movie photos		30 Show clearly
24 Film editing transition	DOWN	31 Applies daintily
25 Web user	1 Singer Emmylou	33 Piper of rhyme
27 Lion feature	2 Set straight	39 Court feat
	3 Absolves, in a way	41 Through

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

C	U	P	P	A		S	O	U	L	S
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BEEBLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott