

SYRIA'S "GOLDEN AGE" OF BARBARISM

THE WAR ON TERRORISM

The ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria is just one chapter of the so-called "global war on terrorism", which is a growing business intended to be permanent. This "disaster capitalism" benefits various sides in Syria and abroad and is largely engineered and sustained by the US government. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria like al Qaeda is a CIA inspired phenomenon, at once supported and feared by the Gulf monarchies and used as a weapon against statist powers in the region. This article reviews the regional scenario and suggests some alternative policies to end terrorism and restore peace.

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"You cannot have a war on terrorism because that is not an actual enemy; it's an abstract. It's like having a war on dandruff. That war will be eternal and pointless. It's idiotic. That's not a war; it's a slogan. It's a lie. It's advertising, which is the only art form we ever invented in America. And we use it to sell soap, wars and presidential candidates in the same fashion"—Gore Vidal

The above statement by one of America's greatest twentieth century literary figure Gore Vidal, is aptly applicable to the wars on terrorism currently raging in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi civil war, now in its twelfth year, continues in different forms with new players deepening its fragmentation beyond recovery. To the west, Syria has been destroyed as a civilised united country and its social fabric shattered beyond repair. The war on terrorism has been

waged effectively on both nations—dissecting and dismantling them as political entities. The “collateral damage”, to use a favourite American military term, has impacted mostly the innocent, turning proud peoples into refugees wandering aimlessly in neighbouring countries and along the fringes of Europe—all due to the euphemistic slogan of the “war on terror”.

Missing from Vidal’s definition however is the fact that the war on terrorism is fundamentally a platform for antagonists to hold on to power for financial gain and perpetuate a situation that enables them to continue making money or rather more of it. The war on terrorism is a business, pure and simple. In its conduct, barbarism has reached a zenith at a point in history where capitalism has arrived at its final stage by making the war on terror an enterprise irrespective of human cost. The failure of the international community to recognise the pecuniary aspect of the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars and to cast them in religious and regional power struggle terms obstructs the vision regarding the true nature of both conflicts. More disheartening, even shameful, is the tolerance accorded by the “civilised world” to barbarism, which is celebrating its “Golden Age” in both nations at the start of the twenty-first century.

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THE SYRIAN REGIME’S WAR ON TERRORISM

In the case of Syria, holding on to power to continue making money is the primary motive for perpetuating a tragedy inflicted mostly on the poor and neglected segments of society. The country has been emptied of its people. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that more than twelve million or fifty percent of the population has been rendered as refugees internally and in neighbouring countries. Trickle of refugees venture into the Mediterranean Sea at great risk while the “lucky” ones that reach southern European shores are received with contempt. Those that remain in Syria are treated to a life of misery where basic foods are rationed and services such as electricity and water provided sporadically and only in major cities. In rural

areas, people are left to fend for themselves against extortion by revolutionaries, regime thugs or terrorists—terms used interchangeably depending on whether the reference is out of sympathy or contempt. As there is no effective government, grievances are not addressed. In fact, complaining is risky and often leads to arrests requiring payment for release.

In spite of the propaganda war waged by the regime on terrorism, there is a surreal atmosphere of normalcy in the capital. On a bright day in November 2014, construction workers in a fashionable neighbourhood west of Damascus were busy completing a four-lane road that connects the Mazze Boulevard to the beltway, which was completed before the start of the war in March 2011. The road is being executed to the highest international standards—smooth asphalt, paved sidewalks, slim silver poles of sparkling light and a circle adorned by flowerbeds and manicured lawn. Adjacent to the new road is a large parcel of land that was until recently planted with fruit trees, but has been converted into a real estate development project where luxury villas will be built. Obviously, the government is constructing the new road to serve the future occupants of the villas. At the intersection where the new road joins the beltway, a few middle-aged women cloaked in black dresses sit with stacks of bundled bread for passing motorists to purchase. The women buy the bread from a nearby bakery for 15 Syrian pounds per bundle about seven and a half US cents and sell them for 25 pounds to people unwilling to stand in lines, making a profit of five cents per bundle. On average, they usually sell 20 bundles per day, making 200 pounds or one US dollar.

Across the new road from the planned development, about 100 meters on the other side of the beltway, a single artillery battery is placed behind an earth embankment with its barrel pointed in the direction of the town of Daraya. The Syrian army had encircled the town where revolutionaries took positions at the start of the war and starved the people, until an agreement was reached to let the civilian populace leave. Revolutionaries however are still entrenched in the town with supplies reaching them by back roads. The Mazze military airbase is equidistant between the artillery battery and Daraya. Sporadically throughout the day, the artillery battery fires a round and the sound of machine guns is heard in the distance soon thereafter. The parties seem to signal to each other that they have received their respective messages, as if communicating by Morse code. In the early afternoon, tranquillity reigns in the neighbourhood as children return from school, most of them chauffeured in black cars.

The revolutionaries strategically positioned to the west of Damascus control the city's water supply—water is cut-off and then flows again as if by agreement. The rebels are also about three kilometres from the Damascus–Beirut main road and could easily stop traffic between the two cities. However, traffic flows normally and an impending threat is not foreseen. Instead, six roadblocks manned by Syrian security forces along the road are spread over a few kilometres. Vehicles are inspected in both directions and truck drivers forced to unload their cargos and load them back, a daunting task which forces them to make a payment to pass without harassment. Passenger cars are also stopped and searched and young males arrested until their families pay a bounty. It is rumoured that a single roadblock raises a million Syrian pounds per day in extortion money.

The above are snapshots of life in an affluent Damascus neighbourhood and surrounding areas and demonstrate the striking dichotomy between the war on terrorism rhetoric fed to the media and carried to world capitals and the reality on the ground. The revolutionaries have encircled Damascus and the small surrounding towns where they are entrenched have long been vacated of civilians. Most observers are puzzled at the stalemate and wonder why regime forces have not been more aggressive in breaking the siege. A blanket bombardment overnight could easily flatten these small towns and flush the revolutionaries out. The towns of Daraya and Jobar—the two closest to Damascus—are built haphazardly and could benefit from new plans. Observers argue that if Dresden could be rebuilt back to its glory after British forces had flattened it during the Second World War, so could the two Syrian towns.

On the economic front, Syrian industry has been destroyed and agriculture and commerce reduced to naught. Since the start of the war almost four years ago, the country's financial reserves have been depleted, while the currency has lost five folds of its value in relation to the US dollar—from 46 per dollar to above 200 at the end of 2014. The government has two lines of credit of a billion US dollars each from Iran and Russia to finance food purchases. Iran also

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provides gasoline and petroleum products, while Russia supplies weapons and ammunition on credit, which is likely to be forgiven in the future, as has been done in the past. Thus, the regime has little to worry about in the short run and can focus attention on the sole issue that matters most to it—its own survival.

Meanwhile surrealism reigned at a conference held in Damascus to discuss the reconstruction of Syria. Regime economists and other luminaries offered insight and speculated on the amounts expected from the international community to rebuild the country—the estimated figure being between \$100 and \$150 billion. With self-assurance and serenity, the government has formed a ministerial committee to discuss measures to clear the debris of destroyed buildings and awarded contracts to its business associates. The work involves crushing the cement of destroyed buildings for reuse as building material while extracted iron bars are contracted at rates deeply discounted from market value. The regime, its economists and business associates are now all looking forward to a future when money will flow again like milk and honey into their bank accounts.

The price paid in blood and destruction is staggering—more than 200,000 people have been killed, some by chemical weapons, hundreds of thousands have been maimed, burned, or incapacitated, while thousands still linger in prison. Entire neighbourhoods and cities have been destroyed and half the Syrian population has been either rendered homeless or become refugees. The human tragedy inflicted on citizens has spared few. The devastation includes the Alawi minority in whose name the regime rules. Alawi villages have been emptied of able-bodied males called to the front to fight for the regime. No Alawi family has been spared by death as it is estimated that more than 50,000 have been killed. Members of other minorities counted among the regime's supporters that could have left the country have already done so, while those that remain are scared of revenge against them by either the regime or its adversaries.

In reality, the Syrian administration is not interested in ending the conflict and in fact prolonging the war works to its advantage and has become a strategic objective. It hopes to exhaust the opposition to the point of forcing it to recognise the futility of its fight. It also postpones the moment of truth when it would have to face opponents in negotiations requiring serious concessions. The regime would be interested only in cosmetic and meaningless adjustments to satisfy the opposition that would leave the current system intact. Meanwhile, the leadership and its associates reap the benefits of humanitarian assistance from the international community. The government reasons that if it could hold on to

its present position and survive its predicament, it would obtain more financial rewards and from this perspective, the war on terrorism has been paying good dividends.

THE AMERICAN WAR ON TERRORISM

For the United States of America (US), the war on terrorism has been profitable as well. There are approximately 35,000 military personnel and 40 naval ships stationed in the Gulf region. Building up these forces was originally motivated by the need to counter Iran's threat to shipping lines carrying oil from the Gulf to world markets. These forces have also provided deterrence to Tehran in its long-standing conflict with Washington and in later years in furthering its nuclear programme. However negotiations between the West and Iran have recently led to a preliminary agreement which will probably result in a permanent understanding involving the removal of UN and even US sanctions. Iran is thus no longer deemed a potential threat to shipping in the Gulf. Although securing steady and uninterrupted supplies of oil from the region was a major US strategic objective in the past, it has become less important as its own oil resources now

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surpass those of Saudi Arabia, the world's leading oil producer. While the need for such large American forces in the Gulf has become increasingly difficult to justify, withdrawing them would be counterproductive in financial terms. The US is the main supplier of arms to Gulf countries with which it has long-term military agreements. They are also the principal buyers of its Treasury Bonds and their investments, voluntary or otherwise, support the American budget deficit. The presence of large military forces in the Middle East guarantees the continuity of these vital interests. American strategic objectives outlined above have been formulated in close coordination with the Central Intelligence Agency, which serves as both instigator and validator of foreign policy. Once

formulated, policies are disseminated by likeminded US think tanks and then circulated in Congress, whose members often cater to special interest groups. In fact, corporations that serve the military are the most conspicuous contributors to electoral campaigns of both democratic and republican members. Ever since President Dwight D Eisenhower coined the term “military–industrial complex” to which he attributed the formulation and driving of American foreign policy, creativity has not ceased in fomenting conflicts and militarily addressing them around the world—military personnel cannot sit idly by and wait for conflicts to happen. In the Middle East, a proactive approach calls for creating conditions where such forces find for themselves a useful role to play. Arab governments are unique in the manner of their subservience to the US and receptive to an approach which calls for meddling in their internal affairs and their relations with other countries in the region.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

The declaration of the Islamic State in mid-2014 has been a work in progress. It was initially confined to Iraq and Syria, then extended to other states in the Levant (Lebanon and Jordan) and later stretched to cover North Africa and beyond, including other African as well as Asian countries. Several decades earlier, the US had created the *Taliban* in Afghanistan to combat the Soviet army and akin to that situation is today counting on Saudi Arabia to provide financial backing for its new ventures in Iraq and Syria. For years, the Saudis have been concerned about the rising power of Iran and the loss of power by Sunni Muslims in both Iran and Syria. Redressing the balance of power in the region calls for a reduction of power of the Shias in Iraq and bringing down the minority Alawi regime in Syria. From a Saudi perspective, the Islamist factions affiliated with *al Qaeda* in Iraq could serve both objectives.

Shortly after the declaration of the Islamic State, the US announced that the war on terror was likely to take a long time and fifteen or even thirty years were mentioned in some statements. The pronouncement was received with puzzlement in the Middle East and many wondered how a few bands of terrorists, no matter how well organised, could survive the onslaught of the mighty American military machine over such a long period. Indeed, some even suspected Washington of being behind the military coup against

former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, as it had become disenchanted with his dictatorial style and obstinacy, which excluded other Iraqi political parties from sharing power. Many believe it plausible that a tacit US military coup to dislodge him was a logical move to convince him that his position was untenable and bring a more "inclusive" government to the country. Thus, when his top generals transferred their new and advanced American weapons to Islamic State fighters in Iraq, no one believed it could have been done without US acquiescence.

Ironic as it may seem, the US thought that the creation of the Islamic State, by design or fiat, could be useful to serve other objectives as well. Saudi Arabia has been critical of the American administration and its Western group in their negotiations with Tehran to conclude an agreement that recognises Iran's right to produce nuclear fuel. The Islamic State could thus be helpful to tame Saudi Arabia by curtailing its claim of leadership of the Islamic world based on its position in Arabia, the cradle of the original Islamic state and even more so by its financial largess to Islamic groups around the globe. Indeed, the formal title of the King of Saudi Arabia, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques (at Mecca and Medina) is equivalent to the title of

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Caliph. The claim of the Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to be the Caliph of all Muslims around the world thus poses a particular challenge to the House of Saud. The situation is reminiscent of the struggle for the Caliphate in the seventh century when the Omayyad House's assumption of the caliphate in Damascus with its green banner was challenged by the Abbasid House's claim to the same title in Baghdad with its black banner. The rival caliphates revived the dormant conflict that split the Muslim world into Sunni and Shia, a division that persists to the present day. The schism was nurtured during the days of the British Empire as a matter of policy and the seeds were sown that are now blossoming in the Fertile Crescent. The US presence in the Middle East at this time allows it to be the arbiter between the two contenders for the Caliphate, as well as the ancient Sunni–Shia rift for many years to come.

WINNERS AND LOSERS IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

At this point, one issue is of the winners and losers in the current war on terrorism in Iraq and Syria. After 12 years, the situation in Iraq seems to have been settled along nationalist and religious lines within a federated structure still struggling to take final shape. The battle against the Islamic State appears to be progressing well with Iranian support and American reinforcements in materials and military advice—it is only a matter of time until it is won. While the situation in Syria may be more complex, it would not be as difficult to resolve as most think, as long as winners and losers are identified and a clear strategy adopted and implemented expeditiously.

Syria: As of this writing, the clear winner in the war on terrorism is the Syrian regime, which has managed to hold on to power and seems intent on surviving the war and even prospering financially from reconstruction. In spite of the destruction and human tragedy inflicted on the country, the establishment stands defiant. The debate on whether the real perpetrators of terrorism and those responsible for the destruction are the terrorists, the regime or both will continue well into the future.

Israel: The other winner is Israel. The disintegration of Syria as a cosmopolitan country on its northern borders encompassing historically various religious and ethnic groups living together in harmony serves to demonstrate that Israel is right in its determination to retain its character as a Jewish state. Israel never worried about the rhetoric of resistance emanating from Syria's rulers, fully aware that for them the survival of the regime took precedence to what over time has become a trivial claim of sovereignty over lost territories. Israel has declared on many occasions that it prefers the devil it knows to the devil it does not. Therefore, the perpetuation of the civil war in Syria and the survival of the regime are in its national interest. In case of the regime's defeat, Israel would welcome and possibly even support the creation of a satellite Alawi state along the East Mediterranean between Lebanon and Turkey.

The United States: The US stands to lose no matter what policy is adopted or course of action taken. It lost credibility in the Middle East a long time ago and is faulted for whatever sinister event takes place in the region. Its special relationship with Israel has condemned it to scorn. Even if the regimes in Iraq

and Syria win their battles against the Islamic State with American support, both countries would certainly take the credit for success themselves and be anxious to see US forces withdraw beyond their borders. This fact has been recognised in the US, where policies discussed above and their protagonists have been at variance with President Barak Obama's position. This explains his lukewarm support for the international alliance to combat the Islamic State. His reluctant stand opened him to criticism for lack of clarity by his own Secretary of Defence who resigned in protest. Contrary to the held belief that the president formulates foreign policy, Obama often finds himself in the unenviable position of having to cast a veto on policies formulated elsewhere.

Obama came to the presidency with a pledge to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, not start new ones. His speech in Cairo early in his presidency was along the lines of President Woodrow Wilson's a century earlier with his declaration of the right of people to self-determination. This explains his resistance to intervention in the civil war in Syria and insistence that Bashar al-Assad has lost his legitimacy to govern. Like Wilson he still pretends that morality and law are by themselves sufficient tools for political change. It sounds naïve, but Obama is well aware of the power of the military-industrial complex and its efforts to subvert his commitment to end wars and his reliance on global diplomacy as the preferred tool to settle conflicts. This explains why the American military has been dragging its feet in the war against the Islamic State, hoping that a peaceful settlement in Syria would spare the need for full military intervention.

Gulf Countries: The Gulf States also stand to lose in the war on terrorism. Unlike Afghanistan, this time the costs associated with Saudi Arabia's support of America's new ventures in Iraq and Syria have gone beyond initial calculations in both security and monetary terms. Supporting independent Islamic fundamentalists has risked creating a rival religious authority, indeed a caliphate, to contest its leadership of the Islamic world. The Gulf countries are hated throughout the Arab world for their wealth and their financing and spreading of fundamentalist Islamic teachings. They are criticised for their support of Islamic *jihadists* abroad while denying their own people basic human rights. These countries suffer from the psychological delusion that *jihadists* returning home would be indifferent to the domestic situation and would bask in their wealth as if nothing had changed. Therefore, Saudi Arabia the initial main arms and money supplier of *jihadist* fighters in Iraq and Syria has come to recognise that this dangerous undertaking

could backfire with drastic consequences for its own security.

Turkey: The idiosyncratic interpretation of justice and development of Turkey's present government has left little room for advancing its own agenda in the Syrian civil war. Even its own internal policies that seem to work incrementally to reverse the course of Turkey's modern history are likely to fail. In any case, Syrians of all political persuasions and beliefs are adamant in their determination to deny the Ottoman Turks any role in shaping their future.

Iran: Iran has staked its reputation on supporting the regime in Damascus. Its relationship with Syria, started under different times and circumstances, has now changed. Late President Hafez al-Assad was a shrewd politician who tactfully navigated through the subtle Arab–Iranian rivalry. However, the two sons he left in control did not inherit his nuanced diplomacy. This has dragged Iran into the Syrian civil war at a significant cost in terms of men and finance. Iran's reputation has been tarnished in the Arab world because of its involvement in the civil war.

Russia: Russia has made enormous investments in the West Asian nation for over half a century. Generations of Syrian professionals trained at Russian academic institutions continue to occupy senior positions in the regime. Russian arms are the main staple of Syria's armed forces and its naval base the only one outside Russian territorial waters. Russian oil and gas industries are also heavily invested in Syria. Moscow stands to lose all its investments if the current government were to fall and an Islamist or pro-Western regime took its place. Mindful of this predicament the Syrian government has exploited Russia's interest in maintaining a foothold in the country to its benefit. Opposition forces blame Moscow for the regime's atrocities against its own people. Indeed, Russia's efforts to extract itself from the Syrian debacle by hosting negotiations between President Bashar al-Assad and some of his opponents is its most daunting task.

ENDING THE WAR ON TERRORISM IN SYRIA

The above analysis tips the scale in favour of the Syrian regime and Israel. If the current script of the war on terrorism as written by the US continues to be followed, all players involved stand to lose. Therefore, ending the war on terrorism requires a theoretical re-examination of the meaning of terrorism and

its root causes. Else, governments, international organisations and the world community could go on parroting a slogan that keeps the war machine grinding together with mounting casualties

The debate on whether a terrorist is a common criminal or a political actor is an old one (Fehmy Saddy, "International Terrorism, Human Rights and World Order", *Terrorism: an International Journal*, vol5, no4, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 1982). It is generally agreed that a common criminal is a person motivated by earthy material gains such as money, while a terrorist is judged as a political actor motivated by political ideas or ideology. At least, jurisprudence in both Europe and the US has been settled with these respective designations. Furthermore, it is widely agreed that terrorism is a violent activity undertaken by the weak to compensate for their inferior capacity to inflict harm vis-à-vis the state, which by virtue of sovereignty retains the exclusive right to use force. Developing countries had previously argued at the United Nations and other fora that those considered terrorists by Western colonialists were in fact freedom fighters. Now that developing countries have gained independence and corrupt brutal regimes have become entrenched, as in most Arab countries, they now use the term terrorist as a derogatory designation to silence opponents. In fact, no other member of the United Nations has used the freedom fighters argument more vehemently than Syria, particularly in the context of the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation.

The initial peaceful uprising in Syria was crushed by sheer force, which escalated the upheaval and led to the intervention of regional actors to serve their interests. The root causes of the uprising were grounded in the regime's longevity of over 50 years during which the Syrian people faced corruption, a denial of justice, long-term imprisonment, oppression and physical liquidation. Nevertheless, all this may have been tolerated if the entrenched regime had provided employment opportunities for the people to survive the harsh economic

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conditions and participate in the visible prosperity that benefited a few but eluded their own dreams.

Many Syrian revolutionaries are freedom fighters involved in the kind of terrorism that seeks to topple an oppressive regime that has long outlived its *raison d'être*. They want a future where people can live in peace and dignity and are willing to fight under the banner of whoever pays them for their families' maintenance and offers the prospect of a better future, irrespective of ideology. As long as Islamic fundamentalist movements provide them basic necessities, they will continue as enlisted soldiers in the fight against the regime.

Ending the war on terrorism in the Middle East may take time. However, resolving the civil war in Syria could offer a model for other countries to emulate. To begin, the current political structure must be changed. The regime's two pillars—Russia and Iran—must use their financial and military leverage once they recognise that peace necessitates the removal of an apparatus that has been terrorising the Syrian people for over half a century. The two billion US dollars allocated to the Syrian regime could be used for building infrastructure projects to create employment and attract all those enlisted with Islamic fundamentalist movements. After the US financial market crash of 1929, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had believed this to be the quickest way to resolve the dire unemployment problem and forestall impending chaos in the country. He was proven right—it worked. 