

## Analysis

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**YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN**

Editor-in-Chief  
**ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN**

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7  
FAX : 24835620/1  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163  
ACCOUNTS : 24835619  
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.  
E MAIL: info@kuwaittimes.net  
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

## Washington Watch

## It bears repeating: Foolish wars have consequences

By Dr James J Zogby

Fifteen years ago, we were still in the early stages of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. "The war that would change everything." Looking at the Middle East today, I feel an overwhelming sadness as I consider the far-reaching and devastating impact that the Iraq war has had on my country and the region and its peoples. Neo-conservatives had been aggressively pushing the Bush Administration to launch a war against Iraq beginning immediately after the horrific terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. They argued that America needed to forcefully respond to the attacks in order to demonstrate that we were not to be trifled with. A decisive show of strength, they claimed, was necessary to clearly establish America's hegemony and to forestall any move toward multi-polarity in the post-Cold War era.

It bears repeating that the war was based on lies - and by that I don't mean the lies about Saddam's nuclear program or his connection to the 9/11 terrorists. Rather the more insidious lies were: that the "war would be a 'cake walk'"; that it wouldn't require a significant troop commitment or expenditure of resources; that it would be over quickly; that we would be greeted as liberators; that democracy would take hold in Iraq; and that the entire Middle East would be transformed.

Fifteen years later, only one of these claims turned out to be true: the region would be transformed. But it was not the transformation envisioned by the neo-cons. Again, it bears repeating just how devastating that war has been. The war itself exposed the deep fissures in Iraqi society, while the US occupation's unformed bungling only served to exacerbate these divides. With Iraq's army and ministries dismantled, the country fell into chaos with competing sectarian militias unleashing a civil war. This resulted in the massive displacement of civilians - millions of whom became refugees or internally displaced - and the decimation of vulnerable religious minority communities. All of this occurred on Bush's watch.

An additional tragic consequence of the war was the spread of extremism. Al-Qaeda, far from defeated, metastasized into newer and more deadly forms in Iraq, its immediate neighborhood, and countries beyond. In this weakened and fractured Iraq, Iran found a foothold which it parlayed to its advantage. Today, Iran remains a major player in Iraq and not only there. Another unintended consequence of the war was the unleashing of Iran as a regional power.

Subdued, for a time, by its rival Iraq, Iran now felt empowered to extend itself beyond its borders. Preying on growing anti-American sentiment and sectarian tensions in other countries, "revolutionary Iran" was emboldened to meddle in regional affairs. This gave rise to the Arab Gulf states feeling the need to assert themselves against this growing and destabilizing Iranian threat. The neo-cons' war also emboldened Israel to more aggressively pursue its agenda to subdue the Palestinians and to expand its colonial enterprise.

The US, once seen as the dominant super power that had won the Cold War and built an international coalition to liberate Kuwait, now found itself bogged down in a war it could not win with its military weakened and demoralized by losses. The US also stood discredited in the Arab World as a result of its bloody failure and abhorrent behavior in Iraq and its stubborn refusal to confront its client/ally Israel.

The neo-conservative's blindness to Middle East realities did indeed give birth to a "New Middle East", but it was exactly the opposite of the one they had imagined. As the region descended into multiple new crises - with deadly wars in Syria and Yemen - the impact of the Iraq war became even more pronounced. Iran was a player in each of them. The Gulf states also became involved seeking ways to combat aggressive Iranian advances which challenged and threatened them. Al-Qaeda and its offshoots played a new and deadly role in Iraq and Syria. And new players like Russia and Turkey, each defending what they saw as their interests, also emerged as regional actors.

All the while, the US, weakened diplomatically and still licking its wounds from the war in Iraq, was too war weary and wary of becoming directly involved in new regional crises. Some blame the Obama Administration for passivity. But this fails to recognize the reality that the post-Iraq, the US military cautioned against engagement in conflicts they could neither manage nor see how their entry, without a long-term commitment - in which they loathed to engage - could help bring about a resolution.

In this new chaotic multi-polar world, conflicts spin out of control, becoming more deadly and destabilizing as they grew. The Syrian conflict has taken the lives of a half-million while forcing over five million to become refugees. This has created new pressures in neighboring countries and unleashed an xenophobic tidal wave that is now challenging democracies in Eastern and Central Europe. And the battle in Yemen, which began as an effort to restore the legitimate government that had been overthrown by a rebel faction, has morphed into a draining regional conflict and a humanitarian disaster.

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute



## Khan's anti-American rhetoric has many wary

Over the years, Pakistan's Imran Khan has been known for his anti-American rhetoric, once even suggesting he might, as prime minister, order the shooting down of US drones targeting Al-Qaeda figures along the Pakistan-Afghan border. Now that Khan is poised to become nuclear-armed Pakistan's leader, Washington will be watching closely for signs of whether he will follow a path of confrontation or continue with the conciliatory tone he struck in his election victory speech.

His attitude towards the United States and President Donald Trump - to whom Khan has often been compared as a populist shaking up the established political order - could determine the future of a crucial but fraught relationship. Officially allies in fighting terrorism, Pakistan and the United States have a complicated relationship, bound by Washington's dependence on Pakistan to supply its troops in Afghanistan but plagued by accusations Islamabad is playing a double game.

Tensions have grown over US complaints that the Afghan Taleban and Haqqani network that target American troops in Afghanistan are allowed to shelter on Pakistani soil. "We want a relationship with America that benefits both the countries, that it is a balanced relationship, and God willing, we will try our best for that balanced relationship," Khan said in his victory speech on Thursday.

However, some experts believe that his years of anti-American rhetoric, which prompted opponents to mock him with the nickname "Taleban Khan", will make improving relations difficult. "Even if (Khan) starts toning down his rhetoric, I don't know if he can send any signals to make Washington hopeful," said Sameer Lalwani, co-director of the South Asia program at the Stimson Center think-tank.

### Khan largely unknown in Washington

Khan has been vocally opposed to drone strikes on Pakistani soil and questioned the need for an open-ended US military presence in Afghanistan. In the run-up to the



Pakistan's cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan addresses the nation at his residence in Islamabad a day after general election on July 26, 2018. — AFP

2013 election, Khan said that if he came into power he could shoot down US drones if appealing to the United States and going to the United Nations did not work. "If that does not stop them, then Imran Khan will do what Imran Khan needs to do, I will order the PAF (Pakistan Air Force) to bring down any drone," Khan said at the time.

However, the number of drone strikes in Pakistan has reduced dramatically since peaking in 2010, reducing one potential point of friction. A former senior US official also said much of Khan's anti-American rhetoric was for public consumption. "I think he is certainly capable of being more pragmatic ... He is not averse to US interests and we will have to see how campaigning turns into governing," the official, who has met Khan several times, said. He spoke on condition of anonymity.

Though famous in cricket-playing countries as one of the greats of the game with a playboy reputation in his younger days, Khan remains largely unknown in Washington. An early test could come in September, when

he is expected to attend the UN General Assembly meeting in New York along with US President Donald Trump and other world leaders. In a statement on Friday, the US State Department said it would seek opportunities to work with Pakistan. "As Pakistan's elected leaders form a new government, the United States will look for opportunities to work with them to advance our goals of security, stability, and prosperity in South Asia," the statement said.

Khan is viewed by some as similar to Trump - confident in his own abilities despite having little governing or foreign policy experience. "When two leaders have so much in common, there is a high possibility they either will be good friends or sworn enemies," said Jonah Blank, a former director for South and Southeast Asia at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee now with the RAND Corporation think-tank.

### Powerful military

Trump tweeted in January that the United States had "foolishly" given Pakistan more than \$33 billion in aid. Days later, Trump's administration announced the suspension of about \$2 billion in security aid to Islamabad - officially a US ally - over accusations that elements of its military continue to nurture Islamist militants it has viewed as useful proxies in its long rivalry with India. Islamabad denies that it is not doing enough against militants and accuses the United States of disrespecting the hundreds of casualties it has suffered fighting Islamists.

Since then, US officials have said that they have seen positive signs from Pakistan, but that it has to put more pressure on militants, including by arresting, expelling or targeting them. While Khan is more vocally anti-American than his predecessors, he is likely to be reined in by a powerful military that still regards itself as having the final say on Pakistan's foreign policy, officials said. "Ultimately the policy is going to be decided by the security establishment and the security establishment really would like to keep things on a fairly even keel," Blank said. — Reuters

## Cuba president changes style, not substance

Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel has engaged in a nonstop series of public appearances during his first 100 days in office, stopping everywhere across the island nation in an apparent bid to consolidate his leadership position. But the Castro dynasty is still calling practically all the shots. Upon taking office on April 19, some had hoped he might move quickly to breathe new life into reforms aimed at modernizing one of the world's last Communist-run countries.

But the 58-year-old hand-picked successor of Raul Castro has demonstrated limited room for maneuver in what analysts have called a well-orchestrated and only gradual transition from the octogenarian leaders of Cuba's 1959 revolution. Diaz-Canel has appeared daily in meetings broadcast on state television with authorities and in communities across Cuba, playing basketball with school students, hearing the concerns of patients at hospitals and inspecting factories to see the challenges they face.

His outgoing approach is starkly different from Castro's behind-the-scenes style and many Cubans have said they are reminded of Castro's older brother, Fidel, although the bearded revolutionary was far more charismatic and unrestrained. "Every day he is really getting closer to the people, getting to know their problems first hand," said Lazaro Linares, 45, who struggles to get by on the \$20 per month he earns working for a state administered urban garden in Havana. In terms of substance and problem solving, however, Diaz-Canel has made good so far on the

promise made in his inaugural address to defer to his 87-year-old predecessor on key issues. "Beyond frequent emphasis on the need to combat corruption ... it is hard to identify as yet a policy agenda fully his own," said Michael Bustamante, an assistant professor of Latin American history at Florida International University.

It is Castro, for example, who is spearheading the revamp of Cuba's Soviet-era constitution to overhaul its courts and government, and reflect market reforms opening its economy. Last weekend, when Diaz-Canel announced his new cabinet, he retained two thirds of the ministers who served under Castro, including those in key posts like defense, trade and foreign relations. Earlier this month new regulations defining the scope of the fledgling private sector were released, but the bulk were signed by Castro before he left office.

"More than leading the strategic decisions, Diaz-Canel is acquiring a lot of executive management capability in the day-to-day running of the government," said Arturo Lopez-Levy, a former analyst for the Cuban government who now lectures at the University of Texas. "How long will this situation last? Until Raul Castro and (Jose Ramon) Machado Ventura find it proper," he said, referring to the Communist Party's No. 2, an 87-year-old hardline communist ideologue.

According to some, Diaz-Canel will only have full leeway to implement his own policies when he succeeds Castro in the powerful position as chief of Cuba's Communist Party, which is expected to happen at the party's next congress in 2021. "Diaz-Canel will survive the generation of octogenarians who decided on his promotion and only then will he be able to show his true face, hidden now between compromises, fears and the roadmap dictated by others," Yoani Sanchez, a dissident blogger and director of the online news outlet 14ymedio, told Reuters.



Cuban former president and first secretary of the Cuban Communist Party Raul Castro (right) and Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel attend the celebrations of the Moncada Barracks assault's 65th anniversary in Santiago de Cuba on July 26, 2018. — AFP

### 'More captive than captain'

While it is still early days, Diaz-Canel has given few hints he might push more aggressively for reforms to address living standards on the island, Cubans' main concern. Cuba's inefficient state-run economy never fully recovered from the collapse of former benefactor the Soviet Union and now faces declining aid from ally Venezuela and lower Cuban exports. Most Cubans complain they cannot live off the average monthly state wage of \$30 despite free social services and some subsidized food and housing.

Castro had initiated reforms to foster the private sector and foreign direct investment while making state-run companies more efficient, but he faced resistance from Communist Party officials and bureaucrats afraid of losing power. Diaz-Canel has tapped new officials to deal with domestic economic issues under his leadership, according to American University professor of government and Cuba expert William LeoGrande. So far, however, he has appeared "more captive than captain,"

said Richard Feinberg, an expert on Cuba at the Brookings Institution.

To date, the one economic topic Diaz-Canel has highlighted is corruption, but for many this is more a symptom than a cause of Cuba's economic problems. Cubans often argue, for example, that low wages force them to steal from their workplace to get by. Diaz-Canel's only big ideological speech to date came at the annual congress of the union of journalists. He has long championed a more critical state media and the cautious roll-out of Internet in one of the world's least connected societies.

But in his speech, he appeared to attack alternative web-based news outlets that have surfaced in recent years, accusing "new revolutionaries" of trying to subvert the revolution. Lopez-Levy said that if Diaz-Canel's speech on the press was anything to go by "we should expect more changes provoked by economic conditions and pressures, not by a progressive ideology or the new president's political support for democratization." — Reuters