

Analysis

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Washington Watch

15 years later

By Dr James J Zogby

Over the next few weeks, I want to take a look back to February and March of 2003, to those fateful days leading up to the Bush administration's disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq. I remember all too well the lies that were told, the hysteria that was created, the bullying tactics that were used to silence debate, and the mass mobilization that was organized in opposition to the war.

In the end, then President George W Bush ignored American public opinion and the sage advice of senior Republican statement like former Secretary of State James Baker and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and invaded Iraq leading to the most consequential disaster in recent US history.

The Iraq war has had a staggering impact that continues to grow over time. The magnitude of this disaster can be measured in lost lives, treasure, capacity, and prestige. From 2003 to the formal withdrawal of US fighting forces in 2011, the war took the lives of 4,500 Americans and well over 150,000 Iraqi civilians. And more than 600,000 US thousand veterans of these wars are now registered as disabled.

To fully understand the war's impact, however, we must also factor in the number of young men and women, who after multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan (400,000 served three or more tours of duty in these two wars) have returned home suffering from post-traumatic shock disorder (PTSD) - about 10 percent of veterans suffer from PTSD.

A great number of them have tragically joined the ranks of the homeless or the addicted or they have committed suicide. Studies show that on an average night almost 40,000 veterans are homeless. And in recent years, the average number of suicides among this group of PTSD veterans is a staggering 22 per day - meaning that more young veterans of these two wars die each year at their own hands out of despair than died in battle in both wars combined.

The direct costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been estimated to be almost two trillion dollars, with trillions more needing to be factored in to cover the long-term healthcare and disability payments to the wars' veterans. The two long unwinnable wars resulted in grounding down and exhausting the US military. It also demonstrated their inability to decisively beat insurgencies and resistance movements. This proved demoralizing to US troops and also established the limits of the world's most powerful and expensive military machine.

At the same time, the Bush Administration's reckless and arrogant unilateralism ("you're either with us or against us") caused friction with allies and contempt for public opinion world-wide. By the end of the Bush Administration, US favorable ratings were at their lowest point, worldwide. US abhorrent behaviors exhibited during the war (Abu Ghraib, torture, Guantanamo, etc) also fueled extremist currents giving new life to Al-Qaeda which, though routed in Afghanistan, metastasized, spreading their anti-American hate across many continents. And the weakened and depleted US military spawned the unforeseen consequence of enabling the emergence of multiple and competing regional powers who were emboldened to expand their influence.

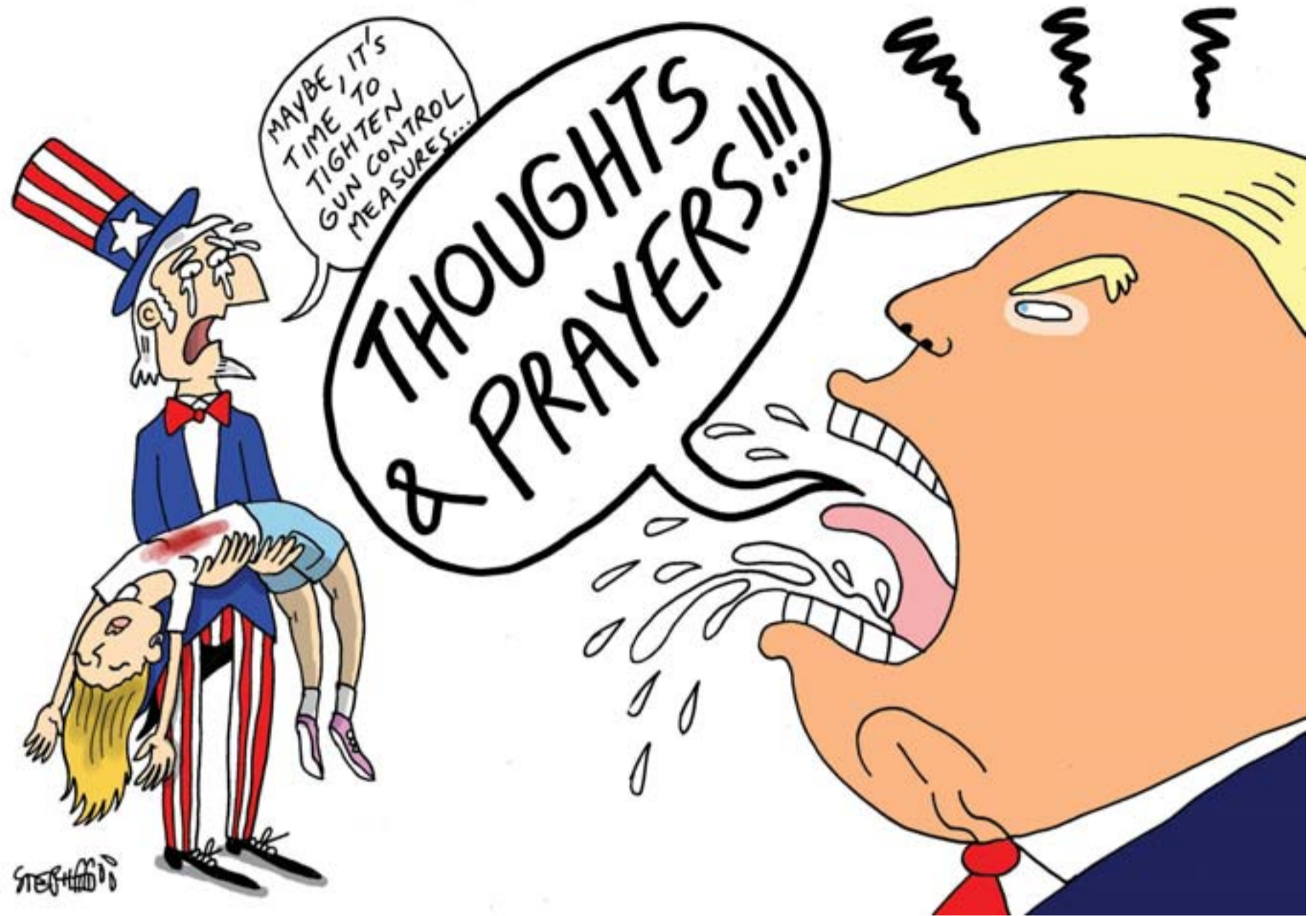
Of course, it wasn't supposed to be that way. As envisioned by the wars' main protagonists, the neo-conservative "Project for a New American Century", a decisive US victory in a war like the one they encouraged in Iraq was needed to secure American hegemony in the New World Order. They worried that at the end of the Cold War the US had to project decisive strength to dissuade any would-be competitors. After a display of overwhelming force, they were convinced that the danger of a multi-polar world could be averted and the 21st Century would be an American Century.

Campaign of lies

As they rushed to war, the Bush administration and its neo-conservative acolytes engaged in a massive propaganda campaign of lies to win support for an invasion. When I say that they lied, I don't mean their fabricated case about Saddam's "nuclear program" or their false efforts to portray the Iraqi regime as the region's principle sponsor of terror - this was the brief presented by then Secretary of State Colin Powell at the United Nations in his failed effort to win international backing for the invasion. No, the more serious lies they told were done so in their effort to sell the war to the American as an easy, cheap, and lofty venture.

In Congressional testimony and press briefings, high-ranking administration officials argued the war would only require between 60,000 to 90,000 troops (in fact, the Administration fired the Pentagon general who at a Congressional hearing had admitted that the invasion and occupation of the country, if they were to succeed, would require over 350,000 troops). The fighting, administration spokespeople said, would be over in a few weeks. US troops would be greeted as liberators. And the total cost to the US treasury would be between \$1 to \$2 billion before Iraqi oil production would kick in and cover the rest. If all this were not fanciful enough, the promoters of the war repeatedly told the American people that when the dust settled Iraq would become a "model democracy" that would serve as a "beacon for the New Middle East". In his speeches leading up to the invasion, Bush went further saying that the war "will free people" and that his motivation was to bring "God's gift of freedom" to the Iraqi people.

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



Fears of expanding war might trigger peace

Syria's civil war is in danger of flaring into a regional or even global conflict, but some diplomats hope the high stakes could, paradoxically, pave the way for a peace accord. Last week, five Russians were likely killed in a US-led coalition bombing on pro-regime Syrian fighters, the Russian government said. A few days later Israel lost an F-16 warplane in reprisal attacks against Syrian and Iranian military targets after intercepting an alleged Iranian drone.

These serious and unprecedented events were discussed in an urgent mid-week UN Security Council meeting. "The ingredients for a regional or potentially major global confrontation have come together now, and the risk must be taken seriously," France's UN ambassador Francois Delattre told AFP. Since the destruction of the Iranian drone "there has been no escalation", said a colleague of Delattre's on the UN Security Council, speaking on condition of anonymity. But there is now a risk of direct confrontation between the United States and Russia, possibly with new deaths, another diplomat countered.

Russia cooling on Syria?

On Wednesday, a Security Council meeting on Syria that was initially slated to be public but was ultimately held behind closed doors, suggested a turning point had been reached. The language that emerged was a mix of tension and caution that converged on one point: The need for unity to calm things down. UN ambassador Nikki Haley said peace "is urgent" in Syria, then blamed Iran for its role in the violence. "On every front of this conflict, we find fighters imported by Iran from Lebanon, Iraq, and

Afghanistan," she said. Haley described it as "a dangerous game of pushing boundaries, instead of behaving responsibly and committing to peace."

Russian ambassador Vassily Nebenzia told reporters that his country is "doing everything to prevent any major international confrontation in Syria. We are working on that hard". According to Nebenzia, no country has "delivered more than us on the political process in Syria." He

committee to amend the Syrian constitution. Syria does not want its make-up to be dictated by the United Nations, nor does Moscow seem keen on seeing Iran making inroads in Syria and risk regular clashes with Israel.

'Dark hours'

In closed door meetings, Russia, which may be at the end of its military and financial commitment in Syria, speaks of its will to get out of the conflict, insists it has no hidden agenda, and even goes so far as seeking Western help to persuade Damascus, according to this diplomat. This is a new position after the series of Russian vetoes in late 2017 of Western resolutions that went against Syria. "The road to peace will come when all of the parties stop provoking each other, and choose the responsible path," Haley said.

In that sense the risk of a major international clash in Syria might open the doors for a breakthrough. This can serve as "leverage to obtain a peace accord in Syria at a time when lines are beginning to move," said Delattre. After seven years of a complex and devastating war that has brought in many regional and international actors, "we are back to the darkest hours," diplomats say.

They point out a list of besieged areas such as eastern Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin, the target of a Turkish military operation against Kurdish militia forces allied with the United States. The operation has created tension between the United States and Turkey, two key members of NATO, a military alliance dominated by Washington. Due to this tension, NATO strategic interests are now affected by how the balance of power in the Syrian war evolves. —AFP



Need for unity to calm things down

cited Moscow's ties with the Damascus regime and the opposition, its support for so-called "de-escalation zones," and peace talks in Astana and Sochi which Russia says are aimed at facilitating other talks in Geneva.

A diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that Russia is losing ground even after all it has invested militarily in Syria. Moscow's influence over Damascus remains tentative, as seen in a recent warning from the Syrian regime on the results of talks in Sochi aimed at forming a

Pak could face pain from return to 'grey list'

The prospect of Pakistan being placed back on a global terrorist financing watchlist could endanger its handful of remaining banking links to the outside world, causing real financial pain to the economy just as a general election looms. Washington and its European allies have co-sponsored a motion calling for the nuclear-armed nation to be placed on a "grey list" of countries deemed to be doing too little to comply with anti-terrorist financing and anti-money laundering regulations, with a decision expected next week when member states of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) meet in Paris.

The move is part of a broader US strategy to pressure Pakistan to cut its alleged links to Islamist militants waging chaos in Afghanistan. Pakistan, which denies such links, last month shrugged off a US aid suspension worth \$2 billion. But inclusion on the FATF watchlist could inflict real damage, bankers and government officials say. Islamabad has sought to head off the motion by amending its anti-terrorism laws and by taking over organizations controlled by Hafiz Saeed, a Pakistan-based Islamist whom Washington blames for the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 166 people.

But there are concerns Pakistan's nearly \$300 billion economy, expanding at its fastest rate in a decade at above 5 percent, could lose steam if it ends up on the FATF watchlist, from which it was removed in 2015 after three years. "We don't think the consequences are going to be drastic but it's definitely not good," said one senior finance ministry official.

Military successes against militants and massive Chinese infrastructure investments have restored some vim to an economy hobbled by a long-running Islamist insurgency and wrecked by the 2008/09 global financial crisis. Officials are aiming for economic expansion to hit 6 percent this fiscal year (July-June) and Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi's ruling party will want to

avert a slowdown in the lead up to a general election due in about six months.

Being placed on the FATF watchlist carries no direct legal implications, but brings extra scrutiny from regulators and financial institutions that can chill trade and investment and increase transaction costs, according to experts. Mike Casey, a partner at law firm Kirkland & Ellis in London, said being put back on the grey list would heighten Pakistan's risk profile and some financial institutions would be wary of transacting with Pakistani banks and counterparties. "Others might elect to avoid Pakistan altogether, viewing the legal risks associated with doing business there to outweigh any economic benefits," he said.

Current account deficit

A decline in foreign transactions and a drop in foreign currency inflows could further widen Pakistan's large current account deficit, the Achilles heel of an economy that required an IMF bailout in 2013 following a balance of payments crisis. Another major worry is that the likes of Standard Chartered, the largest international bank in Pakistan with 116 branches, or Citibank and Deutsche Bank, who mostly deal with corporate clients, would pull out.

Banks have been retreating from high-risk countries in recent years amid intense pressure from global regulators to guard against money laundering and terrorist financing. "The level of due diligence is already high in countries like Pakistan, but if this goes ahead then the banks will really have to reassess the risk-reward scenario," said a senior executive with a large foreign bank, which has business interests in Pakistan.

In September, Pakistan's biggest lender, Habib Bank, was fined \$225 million and effectively forced to shut its US operations by the New York regulator due to compliance failures over money laundering and terrorist financing. US watchdogs have dished out more than \$16 billion in fines for anti-money laundering (AML) compliance failings since the end of 2009, according to data compiled by Hong Kong consultancy Quinlan & Associates. "No one wants to be get caught in a situation where for a few million dollars of business the bank will have to pay billions in fines," added the foreign bank executive. —Reuters

Indictments could set stage for more Mueller charges

Special Counsel Robert Mueller's indictment of 13 Russian individuals and three organizations for allegedly interfering in the 2016 US presidential election sets the stage for the prosecution of Americans who may have helped the Russian effort, some legal experts said. Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein told reporters on Friday there was no allegation in the indictment that any American knew about the alleged scheme. It said Russians did contact "unwitting" members of the campaign of now President Donald Trump in a bid to support him while denigrating his opponent, Democrat Hillary Clinton.

The indictment said the Russians conspired "with persons known and unknown", which could include Americans. "While they went to great pains to say they are not indicting any Americans today, if I was an American and I did cooperate with Russians I would be extremely frightened today," said former federal prosecutor Patrick Cotter. The White House took a different view, issuing a statement saying that Trump had been briefed on the matter and was "glad to see the Special Counsel's investigation further indicates there was NO COLLUSION between the Trump campaign and Russia."

Mueller has been silent on where the probe is headed. It has so far led to guilty pleas from Trump's former national security advisor and a one-time campaign aide to lying to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, as well as indictments of his former campaign manager Paul Manafort and Manafort's business partner Rick Gates. Moscow has denied meddling in the election.

Leah Litman, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine, said that meant the Russian government was extremely unlikely to turn over any of its nationals for US prosecution. There is no

formal extradition agreement between the United States and Russia. There is no crime called collusion in US law, but former federal prosecutor Randall Eliason, now a professor at George Washington University Law School, said the same conduct is often covered by the offense of conspiracy. "The fact is that collusion is potentially a crime," Eliason said. "This has always been clear, and it is even clearer now."

The indictment alleges a scheme to impede the functioning of the US Federal Election Commission and other government agencies. Prosecutors also accuse the Russians of opening bank accounts under false names and unlawfully using stolen identities of Americans to post on social media in support of Trump. To charge an American with conspiracy, legal experts said, Mueller would need to show that person was aware the Russians were trying to interfere in the election and knowingly aided them.

For example, people who participated in activities to support the Trump campaign could be charged if they knew Russians had organized them to help sway the vote. If an American helped direct the Russian acts, that could lead to charges as well, said Harvard Law School Professor Alex Whiting. "If there were meetings between the Trump campaign and the Russians, and the Trump campaign officials encouraged the Russians or guided them to particular types of work, or provided their assistance so that they could focus their interference, that would be collusion," said Whiting, a former federal prosecutor.

Some experts said Friday's indictment does not indicate Mueller's probe was broadening. Bill Jeffress, a criminal defense lawyer at Baker Botts, said he thought it was significant that Mueller made clear that members of the campaign only dealt with Russians unwittingly. "If they had enough evidence that an American were complicit they would have included it," said Jeffress. But Cotter said the narrative set forth in the indictment could easily include many more participants. "The net is tightening," he said. "They have moved up a whole other step on the ladder." —Reuters