

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



February 26, 2017

Historical Sites and Relics in Danger

Insecurity has influenced Afghan society in various ways. With the unfortunate loss of lives and injuries to thousands of people, it has also generated different sorts of issues that have their lasting impacts on Afghan social and cultural lives as well. Once, the land that now forms Afghanistan, was part of a rich culture and had worthy traditional values; however, those cultural and traditional traces and values are now in danger of being lost because of the persistent insecurity. There is no sufficient attention being paid to rich historical and traditional sites and relics that could have strengthened a feeling of pride in the historical depth of our rich civilization. Ultimately, it is Taliban and other insurgents who take full advantage of the situation and use these valuable sites and artifacts for their ill intentions.

According to a statement by the Directorate of Culture and Information (DoCI) of southern Helmand province, of the 80 historical castles in Helmand province, 40 are in places controlled by the Taliban and under threat of destruction. Bost Castle (Qala-e-Bost), surrounded by three acres of land, is one of those historical places grabbed by powerful men. Government negligence, rains, storms and water rising for the Helmand River contribute to the destruction of that Bost castle. And, it is not only Bost Castle that is being destroyed, but 50% of Helmand's historical sites are under Taliban control.

Unfortunately, the situation in many other parts of the country is not different. The historical and cultural sites and monuments have not been preserved well and there are serious concerns about them as the insecurity, instability and government negligence seem to be on the rise.

Bamyan is also one of the provinces in Afghanistan that is known worldwide for historic Buddha statues that were believed to be carved out thousands of years ago. However, the people of Afghanistan have not been very much careful about them. Recently cultural activists in the province have voiced out their concerns that the historic sites are in dilapidated condition and government authorities are negligent about their protection and maintenance.

They warn if proper attention is not paid, the sites may extinct. The government authorities fail to understand that the initiatives to safeguard Afghanistan's cultural and historical heritage are really important for the feeling of national splendor in the members of Afghan society, which at the moment are non-existent. The cultural heritage and historical treasure can play a tremendous role in uplifting national sentiments. However, it is also a fact that many years of civil wars and clashes have had severe impacts on Afghanistan's socio-political scenario.

Though there has been relative peace and stability and there have been efforts to reestablish the Afghan society after the downfall of Taliban, a lot more has to be achieved to make a real difference in the society. It is necessary, at the present scenario, that Afghanistan must have a sense of national integration and harmony.

It must be reiterated for the people of Afghanistan that they once had a rich culture and civilization and they had times in their history that knew nothing of violence and terrorism and a relatively peaceful and rich civilization flourished on their land. Moreover, this should be insisted for them that they have to preserve the traces and remains of their rich history that should help the new generations realize the worth of their history and tradition. Unfortunately such insistence is very rare to see in the society where most of the discussions are centered on clashes and terrorism.

It is really unfortunate to find that the members of Afghan society themselves have not been very much careful about the rich traditional remains and artifacts. There have been culprits even from within Afghan authorities who have been involved in the filthy business of selling their traditional treasures. It is impossible to imagine that the artifacts that are sold illegally could reach to the Black Market without the support of the responsible authorities.

Moreover, the instability and the absence of a particular system to take care of such treasure also help in their smuggling. It is truly tragic to note that Taliban, during their rule in the country, played a negative role regarding the preservation of the rich Afghan tradition. The destruction of the Buddha of Bamiyan in this regard was clear indication that Taliban had not respect for the historical wealth and they considered them to be the remains of the non-Islamic civilization. However, they forgot the fact that they depicted the truth about the history of Afghanistan and they also depicted a more peaceful and tranquil era.

Though it may seem contradictory, the foreigners have been more helpful for Afghanistan to keep alive its tradition and history and have assisted Afghanistan in this regard to a great extent. International community and international organizations have made efforts every now and then to safeguard the cultural heritage of Afghanistan and at the same time attract the investors and visitors for their revival and promotion. On the other hand, the insensitive attitude of the Afghan authorities themselves is unfortunate and requires to change quickly. It can never neglect such issues, particularly at a time when the country requires a strong integration to stand on its own as a nation.



Geneva Talks – A Glean of Hope

By Simin Haidery

Terrorism fills the air with a strong sense of fear. Life has turned cheap everywhere. Bloodcurdling incidents trigger an outpouring of grief and disappointment. Women and children, who are the most susceptible part of societies, pay high sacrifices in terrorist attacks.

The scourge of war and violence blackmail the entire globe and inflict indescribable harms upon the war-torn countries such as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Radicalism gave birth to the self-styled caliphate in Iraq which spews forth its venom nationwide.

This organized guerilla group has played highly destructive role since its establishment and from the declaration of the caliphate, on June 2014, until early 2016, some 90 terrorist attacks were either carried out or inspired by ISIL in 21 countries around the globe.

The ISIL group is largely involved in militancy in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, it seems to lose ground in the battle against Iraqi government and Iraqi forces have entered a neighborhood in the western part of Mosul for the first time since the launch of an offensive to retake the city from ISIL last year.

The operation to retake Iraq's second-largest city was officially launched in October last year, and in January its eastern half was declared "fully liberated". Mosul is ISIL's last major urban stronghold in Iraq, but the battle to retake its western half is expected to be the most challenging yet, since the streets are older, narrower and is densely populated with an estimated 750,000 civilians trapped in the area.

In an incident, two suicide car bombers reportedly struck army and paramilitary forces west of Mosul on Monday, killing and wounding a number of troops with ISIL claiming responsibility for the attacks.

Similarly, a series of suicide attacks on military installations in Syria's government-held city of Homs have killed at least 32 people, including the army's intelligence chief General Hassan Daabul - a close confidante of President Bashar al-Assad and critically wounded Brigadier Ibrahim Darwish, head of the State Security Branch.

The rebel alliance known as Tahrir al-Sham is believed to have carried out the attack.

It was formed earlier this year from several groups including Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as al-Nusra Front, which was al-Qaeda's Syrian branch until it broke formal allegiance in 2016.

Since it was formed, Tahrir al-Sham has fought other rebel groups, including some that fight under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, as well as a faction linked to ISIL group, in northwest Syria.

The attack came as peace negotiators held talks for the second day in Geneva over Syria's six-year-old civil war that has killed nearly 500,000 people, wounded more than a million, and displaced nearly half the population.

Like its rival ISIL, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham is not party to a ceasefire between government forces and opposition groups taking part in the Geneva talks. The Syrian opposition has described the fourth round Geneva meeting "generally positive".

"We heard positive ideas and suggestions from Mr. de Mistura," Nasser al-Hariri, the lead opposition negotiator is cited as saying.

Hariri added the opposition presented its "understanding" of points in UN Security Council Resolution 2254 that discuss political transition in Syria, including governance, the formation of a new constitution and new UN-supervised elections.

The opposition's participation in the latest round of Geneva talks was aimed at finding ways to implement "mechanisms" to "force the Syrian government to comply with UN Security Council resolutions surrounding Syria, if it refuses to do so".

Though the Geneva talks are seen as the most serious effort in months to put an end to the Syrian war, the starkly different political objectives of the rival sides remain unchanged from previous rounds of negotiations, casting doubt on the possibility of achieving progress. For the Syrian opposition, a political transition that ensures the removal of President Bashar al-Assad remains the only option for peace - an issue that his Damascus-based government has consistently refused to consider. "The only solution that we will accept is to establish a transitional governing body, which Bashar al-Assad will have no role in, not in this transitional period, and not in the future of Syria," Salem al-Muslet, spokesperson for the opposition delegation, is quoted as saying.

No wonder, now that the ISIL and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham are not included in the talks, they seek to play the role of whistle-blower and continue violence and bloodshed. It is self-explanatory that if the talks come to fruition and a new government be established in Syria, their terrorist activities will be hampered in one way or another.

On the other hand, brokering agreement between the negotiators will be highly significant in mitigating insurgency and civilian casualties.

Assad's regime and the opposition group sustained great harm within the six-year war without a positive result, though.

The only panacea for the problem seems to be nothing other than negotiation with bona fide intention. Terrorism is not a problem only for Syria or Iraq but for the entire world. All terrorist networks, mainly the ISIL group, will have to be dismantled - be it in Syria or elsewhere. What is highly instrumental in combating terrorism is putting an end to war. Otherwise, mitigating insurgency will be impossible. It is hoped that the world will invest on peace so as to ensure the protection of the individual's rights and freedoms.

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The Politics of Historicide

By Richard N. Haass

In a world of disarray, the Middle East stands apart. The post-World War I order is unraveling in much of the region. The people of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya have paid an enormous price.

But it is not just the present and future of the region that has been affected. An additional casualty of today's violence is the past.

The Islamic State (ISIS) has made a point of destroying things it deems insufficiently Islamic. The most dramatic example was the magnificent Temple of Bal in Palmyra, Syria. As I write this, the city of Mosul in northern Iraq is being liberated, after more than two years of ISIS control. It will not come soon enough to save the many sculptures already destroyed, libraries burned, or tombs pillaged. To be sure, destruction of cultural artifacts is not limited to the Middle East. In 2001, the world watched in horror as the Taliban blew up the large statues of Buddha in Bamiyan. More recently, radical Islamists destroyed tombs and manuscripts in Timbuktu. But ISIS is carrying out destruction on an unprecedented scale.

Taking aim at the past is not new. Alexander the Great destroyed much of what is now called Persepolis more than 2,000 years ago.

The religious wars that ravaged Europe over the centuries took their toll on churches, icons, and paintings. Stalin, Hitler, and Mao did their best to destroy buildings and works of art associated with cultures and ideas viewed as dangerous. A half-century ago the Khmer Rouge destroyed temples and monuments across Cambodia. In fact, what might best be described as "historicide" is as understandable as it is perverse. Leaders wishing to mold a society around a new and different set of ideas, loyalties, and forms of behavior first need to destroy adults' existing identities and prevent the transmission of these identities to children.

Destroying the symbols and expressions of these identities and the ideas they embody, the revolutionaries believe, is a prerequisite to building a new society, culture, and/or polity. For this reason, preserving and protecting the past is essential for those who want to ensure that today's dangerous zealots do not succeed.

Museums and libraries are invaluable not only because they house and display objects of beauty, but also because they protect the heritage, values, ideas, and narratives that make us who we are and help us transmit that knowledge to those who come after us.

The principal response of governments to historicide has been to ban traffic in stolen art and artifacts. This is desirable for many reasons, including the fact that those who destroy cultural sites, and enslave and kill innocent men, women, and children, acquire the resources they need in part from the sale of looted treasures.

The 1954 Hague Convention calls on states not to target cultural sites and to refrain from using them for military purposes, such as establishing combat positions, housing soldiers, or storing weapons. The goal is straightforward: to protect and preserve the past.

Alas, one should not exaggerate the significance of such international agreements. They apply only to governments that have chosen to be a party to them. There is no penalty for ignoring the 1954 Convention, as both Iraq and Syria have done, or for withdrawing from it, and it does not cover non-state actors (such as ISIS). Moreover, there is no mechanism for action in the event that a party to the Convention or anyone else acts in ways that the Convention seeks to prevent.

The hard and sad truth is that there is much less in the way of international community than the frequent invocation of the term suggests. Indeed, a world that is unwilling to fulfill its responsibility to protect people, as has been shown most recently in Syria, is unlikely to come together on behalf of statues, manuscripts, and paintings.

There is no substitute for stopping those who would destroy cultural property before they do it. In the case of today's principal threats to the past, this means discouraging young people from choosing radical paths, slowing the flow of recruits and resources to extremist groups, persuading governments to assign police and military units to protect valued sites, and, when possible, attacking terrorists before they strike.

If a government is the source of the threat to cultural sites, sanctions may be a more appropriate tool. Indicting, prosecuting, convicting, and jailing those who carry out such destruction might prove to be a deterrent to others - similar to what is required to stop violence against persons.

Until then, historicide will remain both a threat and, as we have seen, a reality. The past will be in jeopardy. In that sense, it is no different from the present and the future. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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