

Anniversary reflections on 9/11

By Sayeed Hasan Khan and Kurt Jacobsen

IN his grim concentration camp memoir 'This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen', Tadeusz Borowski, a Polish poet and survivor of Buchenwald and Auschwitz, tells the story of a ferocious SS camp guard shot in the stomach by a desperate female inmate who grabbed his gun while he was molesting her. "My God, my God," the stricken sadist cried. 'What have I done to deserve this?' He hadn't a clue. It looks like a parable for our time.

Nations are very quick to trumpet their glorious virtues and, even quicker, to produce self-satisfying excuses whenever they fail to act according to exquisitely high standards, which is most of the time. Their spin doctors trot out reassuringly to announce that, in order to get along in the gruesome global arena, they regretably must play as dirty as the other guy does. The other guy invariably is pictured as so vile as to rule out absolutely nothing. Whatever we do, even preemptively, are mere reprisals.

The US public cannot grasp why anyone except 'evil-doers' can be angry at America, nor can many Israelis understand hostility toward 'Eretz Israel', nor can most Indians or Pakistanis comprehend opposition to their own great and good states. This blinkered 'realism' is geared to cloud, not aid, realistic thinking.

The irony of realism is that although it operates as a mental framework that promotes the sober weighing of one's forces against those of opponents and thereby, usually, counsels compromises, the more power you wield, as US does today, the more uncompromising you become. That's being 'realistic,' no matter how much harm you may do to others or, ultimately, to your own country. Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld is determined to invade Iraq if no one physically prevents it. So let us kindly forget that as a Reagan envoy in the

What, for example, are non-Kashmiri jihadis doing in Kashmir? A good many were trained in the 1980s by the United States, utilizing Pakistan's ISI as an arms conduit and as drill instructors, to fight the Soviets. In the oceans of indignation in the pages of the American press after September 11 one could hardly discover that the US government at an earlier stage supported the very Islamist extremists who attacked them in a spectacular 'blow-back.' Everyone who consorts with religious extremists pays a price, often a fatal one, as did Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish fundamentalist assassin, Anwar Sadat by the Muslim Brotherhood, and Indira Gandhi by the extreme Sikh sect of Bindranwhale. US policy makers played with volatile forces and imagined their nation wouldn't get burned. They pretend it never happened.

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intervention.

Other ironies arise. The human rights record of Turkey, a staunch American ally, is not markedly better than Iraq's. Yet the unpredictable whims of realpolitik make Turkey act as a welcome brake on US policy because of fear of regional fallout from a dismembered Iraq. "There should be no doubt in anybody's mind that this man is thumbing his nose at the world," Bush said of Saddam Hussein, as he was thumbing his own. Allegations of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction are no more proven than recurrent charges of American germ warfare in Korea.

Terrorism seems a remarkably fluid category where designations change with a snap of the fingers. The grave of the Baruch Goldstein, who killed sixty Muslim worshippers in Hebron in 1994, is a pilgrimage site for Jewish extremists. Are they not

terrorists?

Some American news reports are bold enough today to point out that there may be more (American-backed) terrorists in Miami than in Cuba. The KLA was a terrorist group in 1998 and an America ally a year later. How does the notorious Abu Sayyaf stack up as a threat versus the Moro National Liberation Front in the Philippines who ask for autonomy, as do the Kashmiris? How do we sift out the differences? It depends on who does the sifting.

More irony? The BJP wound down the feverish level of threat along the Pakistan border but prefers military forces to remain there for a second round. The reckless way that BJP adherents prattled about nuclear weapons was appalling and, irony again, can be

blamed for irrevocably 'internationalizing' the Kashmir conflict — precisely what Indian policy sought to avoid. The European powers and the US cannot afford a South Asian nuclear war that poisons the rest of the planet.

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So the United States after September 11 gallops off (once again) to police the world as if it was dispatching the 7th Cavalry to rescue an embattled wagon train, the Israeli government consecrates its own right to crush the Palestinian nuisance, and India's BJP-led coalition amasses an assault force along the western border where contested Kashmir is the sorry site of many injustices of Indian as well as Pakistani origin.

Yet what were wagon trains doing on native American lands anyway, why are the Israelis defending fanatical settlers, and what good are India and Pakistan doing of the ordinary Kashmiri? Asking these questions and spurring debate opens up ground for a more rational policy, and for hope. Can you spot the mote in your own eye or the gleam in the eyes of your national leaders?

If 'regime change' is what one seeks, and if democracy is the goal, then seamy American exploits in Venezuela regarding Hugo Chavez stand little scrutiny. The widest application of 'pre-emptive' action is old hat for seasoned US operatives. Look at the Guatemalans, Chileans, Vietnamese, Indonesians, Cubans, East Timorese, Nicaraguans and the increasingly restive Afghans, among others.

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Fortunately, Israel is a seriously divided society where many courageous dissidents challenge their own authorities and provide a flickering hope for a just settlement someday. With the western immigrant pool drying up, a just settlement might improve the image of Israel so that it need not transport, as it has recently, 90 clueless converted Peruvian Indians to settle in the West Bank. (In reaction to such desperate measures, a number of Jewish intellectuals in Britain renounced their 'right to return'.) In targeting Saddam, as the Iraqi political elite in exile observes, the US wants a palatable replacement to keep the local populace in line.

Earlier this week the US assembled a well-tailored group of anti-Saddam Iraqi exiles as a ready-made replacement regime, although, according to Abdul Bari Atwan, the leading Arab journalist working in Britain, they have no popular following inside Iraq. If Saddam is deposed, why should the new regime fare any better than that of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan who, as we have seen, won't last a day without an American bodyguard and American funds purchasing the loyalty of the Northern Alliance?

Despite politically correct rhetoric, the Israelis, like the American administration, are very wary of the spread of democracy. For, if one could wave a magic democratising wand over the Middle East, the new democratic Arab states afterward would be averse to allowing the Israeli occupation without mounting a serious

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The BJP enabled Musharraf to come off as a reasonable political figure inasmuch as he is firmly in power and therefore need not rouse the drumbeat of zealotry. Musharraf, commendably, is tamping down fanatics who are murdering Shia doctors and attacking Christian institutions, even though he surely also carries the taint of responsibility for training some of these people and for the Kargil misadventure. There are no clean hands anywhere but that is a counsel not for despair but for pragmatic initiatives.

Musharraf, of course, is no epauletted angel. Apart from installing a militarized National Security Council as a "check" on parliament and banning key opponents from the October elections, he approved a statute permitting only university graduates to run for office. In Pakistan the largely illiterate electorate never put fundamentalists in parliament, while disdained politicians and generals often backed and used them. If he continues in this vein, support will evaporate. As for Kashmir, the rote reiteration last week calling it a "sacred trust" (Musharraf) and an "inalienable part" of India (Vajpayee) was not terribly helpful.

The Indian political establishment clings to the view that if Kashmir becomes a separate identity, it will adversely affect the secular character of India so that Muslims in other states will be harmed. What happened in Gujarat this year and to the Babri mosque in 1992 (where Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani played an instigating role) demonstrates that this argument is a distressingly dubious one. Governments may have extremist inclinations and eruptions too. Government also can be spurred to overcome them through informed public debate. American public support for an Iraqi invasion is falling steadily.