**War on Terror: 22 Years On**

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General Wesley Clark – a former commander of NATO’s forces in Europe and a 2004 American Presidential Candidate- is the author of the 2004 bestselling book “Winning Modern Wars: Iraq, Terrorism And The American Empire.” He revealed that the Bush administration planned to attack Iraq first before taking action against Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Iran, Somalia and Sudan. A coalition of Western allies including the UN and NATO, helped the US achieve this goal.

Twenty-two years on, let us examine the aftermath of this decision of the US government. Six of the targeted countries are partially or destroyed, leaving only Iran – which is possibly next.

Afghanistan is not on this list but was the first target of the war on terror in 2001. In 2021, after twenty years, the US had to beat a hasty withdrawal post the Taliban advance 2021. Afghanistan today is impoverished, food insecure and an international pariah.

Pakistan too was a target of the US’s war on terror. This was due to neighbouring Afghanistan – given the porous border, tribal affiliations and our role in Afghan Jihad against the Soviets. The US threatened to bomb us into the Stone Age. Musharraf, hence, cooperated with the US, but Pakistan still paid a huge price in the form of a bloody civil war, which exacted a huge toll – economically, militarily, socially and diplomatically.

The US proceeded to attack Iraq in March 2003 under the pretext of finding weapons of mass destruction and spreading democracy. On May 1, 2003, President Bush declared the mission accomplished but the US troop withdrawal was finalized in December 2011. Democracy was established in October 2005. Saddam Hussain was captured in December 2003 and executed in December 2006. Iraq stood destroyed.

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According to the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), Iraq’s oil reserves of 112 billion barrels ranks second in the world, only behind Saudi Arabia – up to 90 per cent of which remain unexplored, Western oil companies were forced out of the country in 1973. However, ExxonMobil, BP and Shell and others were back in the country after the US victory. Russian, Chinese and Singaporean firms are also in business. The US and other Western oil companies and their governments successfully lobbied for Iraq Oil Law, which in 2007 moved Iraq from a nationalized to a largely privatized oil market using Production Sharing Agreements (PSAs). Moving on to Lebanon, the United States supported the Israeli war on the country in 2006. Condoleezza Rice, the then US Secretary of State, termed the war “the birth pangs of a new Middle East.” In August 2021 Lebanon declared sovereign default. The country is bankrupt and in shambles with 265% inflation.

As part of the Arab Spring in 2011, a civil war broke out in Libya to establish democracy. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya. This was followed by NATO bombings of Libya, which were also responsible for Gaddafi’s capture and subsequent horrific and inhumane killing. A September 2013 report by The Independent states that Libya had plunged into its worst political and economic crisis since the defeat of Gaddafi. The production of oil had almost completely stopped and the government had lost control of large areas of the country to the militias, while violence increased throughout the country. By May 2014, conflicts between several factions in Libya had descended into a second civil war. Libya has gone from the African country with the highest standard of living to a worn torn failed state.

The Arab Spring-led civil war also broke out in Syria in 2011. Foreign governments got involved over the years. The world watched desperate Syrian refugees use rubber boats to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Three-year-old Aylan Kurdi’s tragic death moved Europe to open its doors to Syrian refugees. There are now four factions fighting the war: President Asad-led Syrian military forces; Various Syrian forces unified in opposition to Asad; US-supported Kurdish forces; and Islamist resistance coalition of ISIS, AlQaeda, Al-Nusor etc. This is not all as Turkiye is also militarily involved due to the threat of the Syrian Rojava Kurdish separatists links to Turkish Kurd separatists.

The US is currently occupying a third of Syria, in the Kurdish northeast, where oil reserves are located. In 2020, a previously unknown U.S. oil company, Delta Crescent Energy, signed a deal with the Kurds to exploit the oil deposits. Sudan broke into two when South Sudan gained independence from Sudan on 9 July 2011. Sudan is in the news these days because of a fierce civil war, which is a power struggle between the top military general and the top paramilitary general. Foreign nationals, including Pakistanis were perilously rescued from Sudan in the past few weeks.

The US engaged Somalia as part of the war on terror in 2007 and US troops withdrawal took place in 2021. The country is plagued with civil war, famine and the lack of military strength to control terrorism. The Harakat Shabaab al-Mujahidin-commonly known as al-Shabaab-was the militant wing of the Somali Council of Islamic Courts that took over most of southern Somalia in the second half of 2006. It controls a large part of central and southern Somalia. In the ongoing conflict half of Somalia’s 17.1 million population, faces acute food insecurity.

The combined deaths and losses inflicted on eight countries by the US war on terror have been tremendous. According to a report by the Physicians for Social Responsibility, Physicians for Global Survival and the Nobel Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, the true number killed in the ‘war on terror’ could well be in excess of 2 million. This is ten times the official figures propagated by the media and major NGOs.

During his election campaign in 2004, General Clark declared targeting these countries a mistake. He had declared, “the real sources of terrorists – US allies in the region like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia.” He blamed Egypt’s “repressive policies,” Pakistan’s “corruption and poverty,” as well as Saudi Arabia’s “radical ideology and direct funding” for creating a pool of angry young men who became “terrorists.” In the two decades since 2003, Saudi Arabia has transformed in 2023 under MBS, which is proving to be a visionary leader. Saudi law was based entirely on Sharia. No codified personal status law existed, which meant that judges in courts rule based on their interpretations of sharia. However in 2021, codified personal status laws, including the Personal Status Law, the Civil Transactions Law, the Penal Code for Discretionary Sanctions, and the Law of Evidence were implemented by the reformist crown prince MBS, who is also planning to build Neom, a $500 billion futuristic city. He has recently fostered relations with China and Russia and mended fences with Iran. It has distanced itself from the US and is planning to join BRICS. MBS has also termed Israel a “potential ally.” In view of these developments, the days of religious extremism and fundamentalism are behind the Saudis. Under MBS’s leadership Saudi society is transforming and joining the mainstream global culture.

Pakistan has sunk even lower in a cesspool. Power-hungry and corrupt politicians are causing massive civil unrest. Political Islam, Jihadi organizations and democratic political parties are in all business not so much for the cause of Islam or Pakistan but for their relevance, power and resourcefulness. While the country is facing imminent sovereign default, the nation is rioting to feed the political drama of the grandiose narcissist named Imran Khan.

Pakistan escaped being an American target under the able leadership of General Musharraf, or else we would have met the same terrible fate as the countries discussed earlier. The self-serving and power-hungry Imran Khan was using political Islam to dangerously pursue a confrontational strategy with the US. After his ouster by the establishment, he is instigating a civil war and led us to the same path of destruction, which we avoided thanks to Musharraf.

General Clark had presciently opined in 2004 that POTUS George W Bush should have adopted more preventive measures and targeted extremist leaders. “The way to beat terrorists was to take away their popular support.” Clark was spot on. This is exactly what needs to be done in Pakistan. Political Islam needs to be curbed through well-thought-out state action.

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