Sri Lanka: The Nation In Question
‘The best book yet on the war in Sri Lanka. It is subtle and intimate, human and generous.’

MICHAEL ONDAATJE

War, Captivity and Return in Sri Lanka

a long watch

COMMODORE AJITH BOYAGODA

as told to

SUNILA GALAPPATTI
Here is my latest piece, a review of some recent books about Sri Lanka published in the Ceylon Today newspaper.

Mark Salter, 29/12/2017

2016 has been a good year for books about Sri Lanka. (Interest disclaimer: Hurst, the publishers in focus here, released my book on the country last year) First up was A Long Watch: War, Captivity and Return in Sri Lanka by Commodore Ajith Boyagoda, as told to Sunila Galappatti, a writer and former Director of the Galle Literary Festival.

As befits a prisoner of war memoir A Long Watch is couched in direct, lucid prose. It tells an extraordinary story. In September 1994, at the height of the civil war, Boyagoda was commanding one of the Sri Lankan Navy’s largest warships, the Sagrewardene. South of Mannar it came under attack by LTTE vessels and eventually sunk. Unlike many of his crew Boyagoda survived the assault, only to be pulled out of the sea with the other survivors and hauled away by LTTE cadres.

The highest-ranking officer ever captured by the Tigers, Boyagoda spent the next eight years in captivity, eventually being released in 2002, as part of a prisoner exchange deal. The majority of the book covers his long years of imprisonment. The picture that emerges is a complex one. Boyagoda makes no bones about his rejection of conventional ‘evil terrorist’ characterizations of the Tigers. He is also at pains to emphasize how fairly he was treated by his jailors, expresses sympathy for the injustices visited on the Tamil population, and even shows empathy for his captors, many of whom were, as he notes, forcefully conscripted by the Tigers in their youth.

As Galappatti has acknowledged elsewhere, telling a story as exceptional and as potentially charged as this one was never going to be an easy task. As a consequence she sticks firmly to a first-person narrative, keeping herself and her opinions
firmly in the background. Inevitably, the resulting account has proved controversial. In particular, following its publication accusations that in a war time version of the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’ Boyagoda had sold out – even spied for – the Tigers were voiced in a number of quarters.

Certainly, the return to the South in 2002 did not prove easy for Boyagoda: eventually released from the Navy, initially he struggled to relate to his children and family, from whose lives he had been separated for so long. Overall, the account of Boyagoda’s wartime captivity is best read for what it is: one man – albeit a particularly thoughtful, sensitive one’s – experiences, as opposed to what it is not: an objective, critical account of the Sri Lankan conflict.

Next came, Madurika Rasaratnam’s *Tamils and the Nation: India and Sri Lanka Compared*. An altogether denser, more academic work of comparative political history, Rasaratnam’s book is a magisterial effort to address a central question. Why did India and Sri Lanka’s post-independence evolution follow such hugely differing trajectories with respect to their Tamil populations? Why was it the case, for example, that whereas by the late 1960s, previously independence-oriented political parties such as the ADMK had fully embraced the notion of Tamil Nadu’s place within the wider Indian polity, in Sri Lanka the Sinhala-dominated State’s continuing failure to accommodate Tamil aspirations eventually succeeded in transforming political forces that had vocally advocated independence from Britain and national unity into advocates of Tamil Eelam – and eventually into those, such as the LTTE, with no qualms over the use of violence to achieve that goal?

Not that all was perfect on the western side of the Palk Straits. As Rasaratnam’s book makes clear, for all the Indian National Congress (INC)’s success in accommodating Tamil demands within a broader pan-Indian nationalist framework, the story with respect to another key minority – Muslims – was rather less rosy. In particular, in the lead up to
independence Rasaratnam highlights growing antagonism between a nascent Hindu nationalist movement and its Muslim counterpart as a source of – arguably still unresolved – tension within Indian society.

Nonetheless, the overall picture of a nation-in-the-making struggling and in a number of important respects succeeding in accommodating cultural, social and ethno-religious differences is a fascinating one. Not least, as noted above, on account of the vital successes India later achieved with respect both to Tamils and other Southern Dravidian cultures.

What then, of Sri Lanka? Space doesn’t permit a full review of Rasaratnam’s account of Ceylon, and later Sri Lanka’s dealings with its minority communities. At least the post-independence part of the story is well known to students of the civil war, notably pivotal events such as the 1956 Sinhala Only Act and the succession of ultimately failed pacts negotiated between Sinhalese and Tamil political leaders in the 1950s and 1960s.

What needs underscoring here is the lessons this story carries for the Sirisena Government in its efforts to move beyond the post-war morass it inherited from the Rajapaksas. First of these –underscored by Indian experience – is the central importance of a concerted effort to articulate and promote an inclusive national consciousness. An effort, moreover, that needs to go beyond simply devising a new constitutional framework (though undoubtedly it does need to include this).

In other words, while necessary for reaching a ‘political solution’ to the ethnic conflict, devising a new Constitution incorporating a revised framework of devolved governance embodying and even going beyond the 13th Amendment won’t do the trick by itself. What’s needed is a concerted attempt to frame a new national vision in which minorities crucially, Tamils and Muslims are given a central place in the country’s essential self-understanding and political practice.
'There ain't no black in the Union Jack', as British Jamaican poet Benjamin Zephaniah memorably pointed out. And the related question for Sri Lanka is this: can it put the colours excised by Sinha Le supporters back in the national flag in ways that will help make Tamils and Muslims as proud to be Sri Lankan as their Sinhalese compatriots in future?

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Siege of Aleppo: many truths to tell?

Siege of Aleppo: many truths to tell?
Robert Fisk, iconoclastic as ever: this time on Syria. Some of his argument here – that the rebels in Aleppo include a large number of radical jihadi slamists, that they have killed civilians and committed other heinous crimes during the city’s siege – seem uncontroversial. Even if his contention that reporting of these in international media has been knowingly circumscribed in deference to Western political agendas seems a bit far-fetched.

What’s really missing, however, is any sense of proportion. Syrian forces and their Russian, Iranian and Iraqi Shia militia allies are in possession of over-whelmingly stronger military firepower, and have accordingly been responsible for damage, destruction and killing on a far, far wider scale than anything the ‘insurgents’ have managed. This, moreover, alongside the fact that as a ruling government, the Assad
regime has a fundamental duty to protect their country and citizens – not barrel-bomb, gas and shoot them. There is, as Fisk says, more than one truth to tell from Aleppo. But not all stories – as he seems to be implying – carry equal moral or political weight. The main (but not only) story from Aleppo – it seems to me – remains the one encapsulated in the UN Commissioner for Human Right’s contention that there’s evidence suggesting that war crimes may have been committed in Aleppo over the last week.

And no amount of special pleading should be allowed to obscure that grim fact.

There is more than one truth to tell in the awful story of Aleppo

Our political masters are in league with the Syrian rebels, and for the same reason as the rebels kidnap their victims – money.


Western politicians, “experts” and journalists are going to have to reboot their stories over the next few days now that Bashar al-Assad’s army has retaken control of eastern Aleppo. We’re going to find out if the 250,000 civilians “trapped” in the city were indeed that numerous. We’re going to hear far more about why they were not able to leave when the Syrian government and Russian air force staged their ferocious bombardment of the eastern part of the city.

And we’re going to learn a lot more about the “rebels” whom we in the West – the US, Britain and our head-chopping mates in the Gulf – have been supporting.

They did, after all, include al-Qaeda (alias Jabhat al-Nusra, alias Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), the “folk” – as George W Bush called them – who committed the crimes against humanity in New
York, Washington and Pennsylvania on 11 September 2001. Remember the War on Terror? Remember the “pure evil” of al-Qaeda. Remember all the warnings from our beloved security services in the UK about how al-Qaeda can still strike terror in London?

**If Assad takes eastern Aleppo he thinks he will have won the war**

Not when the rebels, including al-Qaeda, were bravely defending east Aleppo, we didn’t – because a powerful tale of heroism, democracy and suffering was being woven for us, a narrative of good guys versus bad guys as explosive and dishonest as “weapons of mass destruction”.

Back in the days of Saddam Hussein – when a few of us argued that the illegal invasion of Iraq would lead to catastrophe and untold suffering, and that Tony Blair and George Bush were taking us down the path to perdition – it was incumbent upon us, always, to profess our repugnance of Saddam and his regime. We had to remind readers, constantly, that Saddam was one of the Triple Pillars of the Axis of Evil.

So here goes the usual mantra again, which we must repeat ad nauseam to avoid the usual hate mail and abuse that will today be cast at anyone veering away from the approved and deeply flawed version of the Syrian tragedy.

Yes, Bashar al-Assad has brutally destroyed vast tracts of his cities in his battle against those who wish to overthrow his regime. Yes, that regime has a multitude of sins to its name: torture, executions, secret prisons, the killing of civilians, and – if we include the Syrian militia thugs under nominal control of the regime – a frightening version of ethnic cleansing.

Yes, we should fear for the lives of the courageous doctors of
eastern Aleppo and the people for whom they have been caring. Anyone who saw the footage of the young man taken out of the line of refugees fleeing Aleppo last week by the regime’s intelligence men should fear for all those who have not been permitted to cross the government lines. And let’s remember how the UN grimly reported it had been told of 82 civilians “massacred” in their homes in the last 24 hours.

But it’s time to tell the other truth: that many of the “rebels” whom we in the West have been supporting — and which our preposterous Prime Minister Theresa May indirectly blessed when she grovelled to the Gulf head-choppers last week — are among the cruellest and most ruthless of fighters in the Middle East. And while we have been tut-tutting at the frightfulness of Isis during the siege of Mosul (an event all too similar to Aleppo, although you wouldn’t think so from reading our narrative of the story), we have been willfully ignoring the behaviour of the rebels of Aleppo.

Only a few weeks ago, I interviewed one of the very first Muslim families to flee eastern Aleppo during a ceasefire. The father had just been told that his brother was to be executed by the rebels because he crossed the frontline with his wife and son. He condemned the rebels for closing the schools and putting weapons close to hospitals. And he was no pro-regime stooge; he even admired Isis for their good behaviour in the early days of the siege.

Around the same time, Syrian soldiers were privately expressing their belief to me that the Americans would allow Isis to leave Mosul to again attack the regime in Syria. An American general had actually expressed his fear that Iraqi Shiite militiamen might prevent Isis from fleeing across the Iraqi border to Syria.

Well, so it came to pass. In three vast columns of suicide trucks and thousands of armed supporters, Isis has just swarmed across the desert from Mosul in Iraq, and from Raqqa
and Deir ez-Zour in eastern Syria to seize the beautiful city of Palmyra all over again.

It is highly instructive to look at our reporting of these two parallel events. Almost every headline today speaks of the “fall” of Aleppo to the Syrian army – when in any other circumstances, we would have surely said that the army had “recaptured” it from the “rebels” – while Isis was reported to have “recaptured” Palmyra when (given their own murderous behaviour) we should surely have announced that the Roman city had “fallen” once more under their grotesque rule.

Words matter. These are the men – our “chaps”, I suppose, if we keep to the current jihadi narrative – who after their first occupation of the city last year beheaded the 82-year-old scholar who tried to protect the Roman treasures and then placed his spectacles back on his decapitated head.

By their own admission, the Russians flew 64 bombing sorties against the Isis attackers outside Palmyra. But given the huge columns of dust thrown up by the Isis convoys, why didn’t the American air force join in the bombardment of their greatest enemy? But no: for some reason, the US satellites and drones and intelligence just didn’t spot them – any more than they did when Isis drove identical convoys of suicide trucks to seize Palmyra when they first took the city in May 2015.

There’s no doubting what a setback Palmyra represents for both the Syrian army and the Russians – however symbolic rather than military. Syrian officers told me in Palmyra earlier this year that Isis would never be allowed to return. There was a Russian military base in the city. Russian aircraft flew overhead. A Russian orchestra had just played in the Roman ruins to celebrate Palmyra’s liberation.

So what happened? Most likely is that the Syrian military simply didn’t have the manpower to defend Palmyra while closing in on eastern Aleppo.
They will have to take Palmyra back – quickly. But for Bashar al-Assad, the end of the Aleppo siege means that Isis, al-Nusra, al-Qaeda and all the other Salafist groups and their allies can no longer claim a base, or create a capital, in the long line of great cities that form the spine of Syria: Damascus, Homs, Hama and Aleppo.

Back to Aleppo. The familiar and now tired political-journalistic narrative is in need of refreshing. The evidence has been clear for some days. After months of condemning the iniquities of the Syrian regime while obscuring the identity and brutality of its opponents in Aleppo, the human rights organisations – sniffing defeat for the rebels – began only a few days ago to spread their criticism to include the defenders of eastern Aleppo.

Take the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. After last week running through its usual – and perfectly understandable – fears for the civilian population of eastern Aleppo and their medical workers, and for civilians subject to government reprisals and for “hundreds of men” who may have gone missing after crossing the frontlines, the UN suddenly expressed other concerns.

“During the last two weeks, Fatah al-Sham Front [in other words, al-Qaeda] and the Abu Amara Battalion are alleged to have abducted and killed an unknown number of civilians who requested the armed groups to leave their neighbourhoods, to spare the lives of civilians...,” it stated.

“We have also received reports that between 30 November and 1 December, armed opposition groups fired on civilians attempting to leave.” Furthermore, “indiscriminate attacks” had been conducted on heavily civilian areas of government-held western as well as ‘rebel’ eastern Aleppo.

I suspect we shall be hearing more of this in the coming days. Next month, we shall also be reading a frightening new book,
Merchants of Men, by Italian journalist Loretta Napoleoni, on the funding of the war in Syria. She catalogues kidnapping-for-cash by both government and rebel forces in Syria, but also has harsh words for our own profession of journalism.

Reporters who were kidnapped by armed groups in eastern Syria, she writes, “fell victim to a sort of Hemingway syndrome: war correspondents supporting the insurgency trust the rebels and place their lives in their hands because they are in league with them.” But, “the insurgency is just a variation of criminal jihadism, a modern phenomenon that has only one loyalty: money.”

Is this too harsh on my profession? Are we really “in league” with the rebels?

Certainly our political masters are — and for the same reason as the rebels kidnap their victims: money. Hence the disgrace of Brexit May and her buffoonerie of ministers who last week prostrated themselves to the Sunni autocrats who fund the jihadis of Syria in the hope of winning billions of pounds in post-Brexit arms sales to the Gulf.

In a few hours, the British parliament is to debate the plight of the doctors, nurses, wounded children and civilians of Aleppo and other areas of Syria. The grotesque behaviour of the UK Government has ensured that neither the Syrians nor the Russians will pay the slightest attention to our pitiful wails. That, too, must become part of the story.

Colombia Needs Help to Make
Peace Last

Colombia Needs Help to Make Peace Last

President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia at the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize concert in Oslo on Dec. 11. Vegard Grott/European Pressphoto Agency

Here’s a strong appeal to the international community from the US special envoy to the country to help make Colombia’s final peace agreement work in practice. Not least because it’s possibly the most far-reaching such agreement ever to be reached in Latin America – and even, perhaps, beyond the continent.
Colombia Needs Help to Make Peace Last


OSLO — On Nov. 29, a 6-year-old Colombian girl, Yisely Isarama, was killed by a land mine in Choco Province. The same day, the Colombian Senate voted 75 to 0 to ratify peace accords to end the 52-year war between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known as the FARC.

In microcosm, the two events encapsulate Colombia’s past and its potential future.

In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech here on Saturday, the president of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, the architect of the peace settlement, called the war “a half-century nightmare.” It claimed 220,000 Colombian lives, most of them civilians’, and drove six million from their homes. In United States population terms, that would translate into 1.3 million dead and 36 million displaced Americans. Colombians year after year are killed or injured by land mines at rates higher than in any country except Afghanistan.

Under the agreement, FARC combatants will disarm and demobilize over 180 days under United Nations supervision. For most Colombians, it will be their first day living in a nation at peace. But the peace settlement, hammered out in Havana after four and a half years of negotiations, and revised following the loss of a plebiscite, aims to do far more than silence the guns, as welcome as the end of the conflict is.

The peace accord sets out to bridge the great historic divide between what President Santos calls “the two Colombias”: the Colombia of developed, modern urban centers and the Colombia of the vast, impoverished interior, where historically there has been little or no government presence and, as a result, little security, justice, rule of law or access to roads,
health care and education. That is where the war was fought.

To close this gap, the government has committed itself to a far-reaching program of rural development for the largely peasant population that includes provision of land, titles, credit, roads, and crop substitution programs. To allow arable land to be cultivated safely, land mines must be removed.

The Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, which is monitoring the enforcement of the agreement, reports that half of all negotiated peace settlements fail and the conflict resumes. Those that succeed address not just security, but also the social and economic roots of the war. The institute says Colombia’s agreement addresses root causes more comprehensively than any other negotiated settlement has.

That is no accident. More than in any previous conflict negotiation, Colombia put victims at the center of the process. Victims’ issues were not only on the table; victims themselves were at the table, regularly and often, asserting their rights and concerns. As a result, the agreement stipulates that the worst perpetrators of wartime atrocities – whether guerrillas, paramilitaries, or state actors – must confess their crimes, make reparations and accept sentences that include up to eight years of “restorative justice,” such as removing land mines, that are deemed acceptable to their victims and “effective restrictions on liberty.” Displaced persons must be compensated or returned to their homes and the remains of the disappeared, where possible, identified and returned to loved ones.

To fulfill these and other commitments, the government must create far-reaching programs and policies that will cost billions of dollars and take years to carry out. It must establish a system of transitional justice, a truth commission and investigative and protective units to safeguard the lives of demobilized former combatants and human rights activists.
Colombia will bear the largest burden, but the international community, led by the United States, must continue to help.

The United States has no closer strategic partner in Latin America than Colombia, and our interests in the region are intertwined. Colombian trainers and troops are working today with their American counterparts to help Mexico and Central America’s Northern Triangle countries – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – combat the drug cartel violence that is fueling refugee flows, largely of unaccompanied minors. If, in turn, Colombia with American assistance can reverse its recent upturn in coca leaf production, it will take pressure off the Northern Triangle’s embattled governments and institutions.

Two decades ago, Colombia was nearly overrun by guerrilla armies, paramilitaries and drug cartels. Colombians, at great sacrifice, fought back, strengthened their democratic institutions, and created today’s opportunity for peace. Colombian leaders and citizens deserve the greatest share of the credit. But steady, sustained bipartisan American support and assistance for 16 years under Plan Colombia made a crucial difference.

If the peace agreement succeeds, Colombia will emerge as the strongest democracy in Latin America, a political and economic model for the region. As in the past, the United States should help Colombia reach that goal with continuing bipartisan support. Passage of President Obama’s request for $450 million in fiscal 2017 for an economic assistance program called Paz (Peace) Colombia would send the hemisphere, where support for Colombia’s peace process is universal, an encouraging signal about American staying power.

In September, at the United Nations General Assembly, Secretary of State John Kerry and his Norwegian counterpart, Borge Brende, secured commitments of $106 million from a coalition of 25 countries to help Colombia clear its land mines by 2021. President Santos showed the group a pamphlet
that teaches Colombian children how to avoid land mines on the way to school.

Mr. Santos said he dreamed of the day when such pamphlets would teach Colombian students only science, art, mathematics or poetry, because Colombia would be land-mine free. Helping turn that dream into a reality would be a fitting memorial to Yisely Isarama.

*Bernard Aronson*, the United States special envoy to the Colombian peace process, was assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs from 1989 to 1993.

The crisis of multilateralism and the future of humanitarian action

Vigorous think piece by one of the authors of the forthcoming ‘Planning from the Future’ report. Strong on diagnosis of the weaknesses of the current system, even if correspondingly a little weak on positive suggestions/alternatives.

All in all, well worth a read.

The crisis of multilateralism and the future of humanitarian action

Antonio Donini, IRIN News 30 Nov. 2016

“The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great
variety of morbid symptoms appear.’ – Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, circa 1930.

Long before the November 2016 US elections, there were clear signals that multilateralism was in crisis. In fact, Donald Trump’s election is just the continuation of a downward spiral that has been under way for some time.

The most obvious symptom of this trend is the inability of the so-called international community to address armed conflict in any meaningful way. From Afghanistan to Ukraine, from Libya to Yemen, from South Sudan to Syria: the UN Security Council is blocked, and there is no respite in sight for civilians. Many conflicts are now “IHL-free war zones”: international humanitarian law is marginalised and humanitarian principles are jettisoned – whether by state or non-state armed groups. Slaughter, torture, and “surrender or starve” strategies thrive, despite much hand-wringing. Those who do manage to flee war zones do not fare much better.

Well before Trump’s election, the cradle of the Western enlightenment, Europe, had become a flag-bearer for an untrammelled rollback of rights. Many state parties to the 1951 refugee convention have abandoned their legal responsibilities, investing instead in deterrence measures aimed at blocking those seeking refuge from the terror of war zones or from tyrannical regimes. Europe is externalising its borders and pursuing short-sighted and aggressive return policies, undermining refugees in places such as Turkey and the Dadaab camp in Kenya, and making aid to the Sahel and Afghanistan conditional on pushbacks or migrant suppression. Meanwhile, the Global South, including some of its poorest countries, continues to host 86 percent of the global refugee population.

“Donald Trump’s election is just the continuation of a downward spiral”
As the refugee convention looks increasingly tattered, other negotiations on crucial issues have ground to a halt: witness the lack of any concrete intergovernmental consensus since the Paris climate change agreement (which is itself now in peril), including the absence of meaningful outcomes at the three major humanitarian conferences held this past year (the international Red Cross conference in December 2015, the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016, and the New York summits on refugees and migration in September). Issues are raised, the rhetoric is loud and pompous, but action itself is avoided, or the can just kicked down the road.

More agreements are also falling apart. The erosion of the International Criminal Court and significant hostility to the “Responsibility to Protect” agenda, as well as the general decline of international respect for human rights, may well signal the dawn of a “post-human rights era”, meaning that the enforcement and expansion of human rights standards through binding international law is in decline. Meanwhile, populism, nationalism, and jingoism advance all around Europe, in Russia, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Accompanying these trends is a manifest decline in support for globalisation – and for international norms – coupled with a rise in tensions around growing inequality, as power shifts from West to East.

Under a Trump presidency, these and other “morbid symptoms” are likely to intensify. This might include the United States distancing itself or even withdrawing from the Paris climate change agreement, cuts to UN budgets and other “unfriendly” international agencies, and the slashing of US humanitarian and development aid, particularly to those countries “that hate us”. It could also lead to further disarray in NATO and in the post-Brexit EU, signalling a retreat from established or traditional interstate diplomatic practice. The rise of populism in Europe and despondency vis-à-vis the European project, the spread of anti-politics, and the growth of the Uber economy, as well as narcissistic cults of the individual
only compound these symptoms. Echoes of the 1930s perhaps, with an increasingly irrelevant UN following in the steps of the League of Nations?

Changes to expect

It is not too early to start reflecting on the possible consequences of rapidly declining multilateralism and its implications for global governance, international law, the refugee regime, war-affected communities, and humanitarian endeavour everywhere. By and large, it does not look good. A few hypotheses on where we are headed:

- (Western) humanitarianism has reached its historical limits and is now on the cusp of retreat. The transition from the romantic phase to the technological, institutional, and governance phase is now complete. In other words, the energy that made humanitarianism a means to accomplish valuable ethical ends is waning. The chasm between charisma and bureaucracy is likely to widen, and the propulsive force of the humanitarian “mobilising myth” may sputter. This myth provided a generation of aid workers, individually and collectively, with answers to questions about their place and social functions in the international arena. It has now lost its pathos. It may be replaced by other mobilising myths (non-Western, sovereignty-based, transformational, solidarity-based, or overtly politicised). There are no easy recipes for tackling what has become a system-wide existential crisis.

- Multilateralism is in retreat and this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. This will have significant impact on humanitarian action (funding, access, challenges to humanitarian principles, less emphasis on protection). It will also affect the ability of the so-called international community to address the factors that drive crises, such as climate change and a
faltering international peace and security apparatus. The void left by the partial retreat of the US into isolationism combined with the global war on terror, now euphemistically re-branded as “countering violent extremism”, and a new coldish war will only deepen this humanitarian malaise. A multi-polar world may not be as sympathetic to humanitarian values and will pose new challenges to humanitarian actors worldwide and particularly to Western-led humanitarianism, which will increasingly find itself outside its domineering comfort zone.

The functions that “humanitarian” action performs in the international sphere will change, perhaps dramatically. Historically, humanitarian endeavour – in its discourse, norms and practice – has grown in parallel with the expansion of Western economic and cultural power. Humanitarian action’s multiple functions have included acting as a conveyor belt for Western values, lifestyles, and the promotion of the liberal agenda, while making countries safe for capital. If the West is now in retreat, other centres of humanitarian discourse and practice are bound to blossom and grow. Meanwhile, Western humanitarian action is already being press-ganged into the service of containment (Fortress Europe, for example). This process will likely intensify. If so, this will be a major reversal for humanitarianism as we know it. For decades, humanitarian action represented the smiley face of globalisation. It was one of the West’s ways of opening up to the rest of the world. Now, it is much more about closure, about containment, about shutting the door. It is about keeping the bulk of refugees and “survival migrants” away from the ring-fenced citadels of the North.

What next?

Caught between the pessimism of reason and the flagging optimism of will, what is the reflective humanitarian to do?
Perhaps the first thing is to stand back from the current crisis, the confusing background noise, these “morbid symptoms”, and ask: how did we get here? What are the forces for change and how do we engage with them?

Organised humanitarianism is stuck in the eternal present and is poorly equipped to adapt to a more complex, insecure, and threatening world.

“Transformational change in the international system only happens in the aftermath of a major shock”

A more narrowly focused “back to basics” humanitarian enterprise – smaller in size, informed solely by the views and needs of the crisis-affected, and focused on saving and protecting lives in the here and now – would not necessarily be a bad thing.

It would perhaps be the best way of nurturing the values and ethos of an enterprise that may be battered, bruised, and often abused but is still often the only available safety net for people in extremis.

In any case, it is past time that organised humanitarianism acknowledged that it is in crisis and came to grips with a possible reform agenda. Ideas for change are already on the table. For example, the “Planning From the Future” report, available this week, offers a diagnosis of what ails the system and a broad outline of what change could look like. (Disclosure: I am one of the authors of the report).

It also underscores that transformational change in the international system only happens in the aftermath of a major shock. Will the combination of the crisis of multilateralism, climate change, ongoing vicious wars, and massive displacement provide such an impetus?

What is certain is that the current humanitarian system,
broke, broken or both, won’t serve us well in the new international and political landscape we face. The challenge is to foster one that will.

Advice for Young Muslims

Here’s an excellent excerpt from a new book of letters to his son by a senior UAE diplomat. Sane and compassionate, amounting to nothing less than a call for a humanistic revival within Islam. Recommended.

Published in this month’s issue of Foreign Affairs.
Advice for Young Muslims

How to Survive in an Age of Extremism and Islamophobia

By Omar Saif Ghobash

Saif, the elder of my two sons, was born in December 2000. In the summer of 2001, my wife and I brought him with us on a visit to New York City. I remember carrying him around town in a sling on my chest. A few days after we got back home to Dubai, we watched the terrible events of 9/11 unfold on CNN. As it became clear that the attacks had been carried out by jihadist terrorists, I came to feel a new sense of responsibility toward my son, beyond the already intense demands of parenthood. I wanted to open up areas of thought, language, and imagination in order to show him—and to show myself and all my fellow Muslims—that the world offers so much more than the twisted fantasies of extremists. I’ve tried to do this for the past 15 years. The urgency of the task has seemed only to grow, as the world has become ever more enmeshed in a cycle of jihadist violence and Islamophobia.

Today, I am the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates to Russia, and I try to bring to my work an attitude of openness to ideas and possibilities. In that spirit, I have written a series of letters to Saif, with the intention of opening his eyes to some of the questions he is likely to face as he grows up, and to a range of possible answers.

For the full article visit https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-11-29/advice-young-muslims?gpp=MOGqN0rMKDBJEOl2sCRiHTpURURUME1XMmdsQkRpR0c5dVNKNk1xb3FDNUVpTS9YcWMrRDBZU2cvMERYQUcvVTQ1Sk5JcnRqNHNDV0NC51hT0mUzYWm4MGIzZTE5MzRiMmI2MzNmYjI1ODI2YzEwMzZkMDE2N2FjMDU1ZGIwN2Y1
People listen to music during Eid Mela in Birmingham, England, August 2013. Darren Staples / REUTERS