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زبانهای اروپائی

MARCH 16, 2018

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19.03.2018

American Gun Violence From an Afghan Perspective

I landed in the U.S. in the summer of 2015 to pursue graduate study at Lehigh University, Pennsylvania. It was my first trip to America. Two things shocked me the most about the country. One is its broken healthcare system, which continues to take victims. In 2016 alone, 36,000 Americans died due to lack of health insurance. There are still 28 million Americans who don't have health insurance. I expressed my frustration on this issue in an Op-Ed where I argued in favor of a single-payer healthcare system – proposed by Senator Bernie Sanders.

The second thing that made no sense to me is the senseless, brutal and rampant gun violence, which takes place regularly in America, leaving many families emotionally shattered. Last year, more than 15,000 Americans died due to gun violence. And since 1968, 1.5 million Americans have died in gun-related violence. According to Department of Veterans Affairs and iCasualties.org, 1.2 million Americans have been killed in 'every war' in American history. The number of Americans killed in gun-related violence is *higher* than the casualties suffered by American soldiers in *all* wars the nation has fought. This shows the devastation and deadliness of gun violence in America and how serious the issue is. But what is more disheartening and tragic is the campus and school shootings. Many kids and youngsters – the future leaders and managers – have lost their precious lives as a result of these mad shootings. The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Florida is the latest of these tragedies.

Even though this recent shooting – where 17 innocent lives were lost – has triggered heated debate about gun laws, the issue isn't going to get resolved anytime soon. It is way too complicated to force a consensus among lawmakers to enact stricter gun laws. Some of the lawmakers have deep vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Back in 2015, when I was trying to make sense of gun violence, I came across of some very entrenched and stubborn obstacles that prevent any rational debate, leave aside legislation in favor of sane gun laws.

Second Amendment

The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution protects the rights of Americans to keep and bear arms. Since then the amendment remains the strongest legal premise for the proponents of gun rights. Although its language reads: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed”, that language has been the subject of legal debates. But the amendment itself has never been challenged in U.S. Supreme Court. And defenders of the Second Amendment are well organized in the U.S., particularly through NRA. Second Amendment advocates are stronger in the Southern parts of America and exercise a firm grip over the Republican Party.

I consider the Second Amendment a huge obstacle to ending gun violence in America. But current interpretations of this amendment make little sense in the historical context of things. The amendment was adopted long ago, in a totally different context, and for a specific purpose of arming state militias, rather than for personal defense. It might have been needed back then to protect societal order in the context of weak political authority over individuals (relative to today), and due to the shifting territorial demarcation of the country, and with borders being fragile and relatively unprotected. The U.S. was a nascent nation, and there was no regular army to ensure security and manage chaos. But now the U.S. has a regular, modern and well-equipped army. It has police in every municipality and state, and National Guard troops to provide security in terms of crisis. It has all the capacity and training to secure the State and its borders, so, the relevance of the amendment, at least historically speaking, is unfounded.

Any Amendment or law that gives legal precedent to harm citizens should be reconsidered. It is morally and legally unwarranted. However, it is also obvious that the Second Amendment is a political hot potato. Any encroachment on it is politically risky. It can potentially end the careers of politicians. Right wing commentators such as Rush Limbaugh and Fox News will literally grill any politician who talks ill of the Second

Amendment. But progressives should ideally take the initiative and slowly but carefully build consensus to amend the Second Amendment. The modification of Second Amendment deprives the proponents of guns a legal platform to prevent gun control laws. The support of Americans is a prerequisite for any consensus building led by progressives and other right-minded lawmakers.

The National Rifle Association of America (NRA)

The NRA, founded in 1871, advocates for gun rights through political advocacy and publishing. What makes the NRA dangerous is not its steadfast advocacy for gun rights – which it does with its adroit public relations skills. Its vast financial capital is a lethal barrier to gun ownership reforms, which it uses to fund the election campaigns of politicians. In the 2016 financial year, the NRA reported a 10 percent increase in its [revenue](#), at a whopping \$433.9 million. So, it's pockets are deep and it can influence the outcome of any election significantly in its favor. John Bruce and Clyde Wilcox write about the NRA's advocacy methods, specifically its Political Victory Fund, the NRA's political action committee (PAC), which raises funds for candidates who are pro-gun rights and fierce defenders of the Second Amendment. The NRA sends candidates to Congress to defend its interests, and not to propose new gun legislation. NRA lobbyists are constantly watching the political moves of House Representatives and Senators and their voting records on gun legislation. Sadly, the NRA's money is not limited to House and Senate elections. It contaminates presidential elections too. In 2016's presidential election, the NRA endorsed Donald Trump and [spent](#) almost \$30 million for his campaign. The silence of NRA backed lawmakers and Donald Trump makes sense.

Anyone – American or non-American, who has the slightest idea about the corrupt American political system, where money literally elects lawmakers, will be skeptical that legislators would ever pass gun laws to end, or at least decrease this senseless violence. After the disastrous *Citizen United* case which further reduced regulations on limiting money in elections, it is even harder to enact such laws. I wish it was just about NRA's PAC. It is about the role of money in American politics more broadly. It is the powerful millionaires and billionaires and their [dark money](#) that determine who ends up in Congress, and who ascends into the White House. Having understood the negative role of dark money and campaign finance, Senator Bernie Sanders is vigorously campaigning to reform campaign finance system and force dark money out of American politics. It is going to be a hard battle but worth fighting for, as American democracy is at stake.

American Love for Guns

After spending time in the U.S., any foreign visitor will see Americans' love for guns. This love affair is more acute in southern [states](#), where gun ownership is the most concentrated. But I don't blame Americans themselves for this affection. This has been, sadly, inculcated in them. American arms manufacturers are at the forefront of this project. They insert the love for guns through organizing gun shows, advertising the latest gun models, and making it easy to purchase arms. And guns are glamorized in Hollywood. Guns play a central role in action movies; the hero has to have a gun. In fact, arms manufacturers have a lucrative [relationship](#) with Hollywood, showcasing their latest products through Hollywood celebrities. This love for guns has contributed to a poisonous gun culture, turning America into a violent society, and making it one of the most heavily [armed](#) countries in the world, with a rate of ownership of 90 guns per 100 people.

Unfortunately, the love affair with guns and gun culture has pushed America into a permanent state of warfare – domestically and internationally. Domestically, there is an unacknowledged war against African-Americans who are routinely profiled and brutally killed by police. The police, who are supposed to serve and protect, have turned into an armed enemy with a free reign to hunt African-Americans violently with near absolute impunity. Internationally, America is constantly at war. Every so often, America invades a foreign country with bogus pretext, and other times through arming its proxies to do the killing. On both levels, it is the arms manufacturers that gain by selling more guns and reaping profits. American mainstream media, in partnership with arms manufacturers, have been loyal accomplices. They glorify war and bombing. Covering war gives them advertising revenues by showcasing the latest weapons and fighter jets of the weapons industry. Before launching attacks on Syria in April 2017, American mainstream media were portraying Donald Trump as an incompetent narcissistic politician who does not know how to govern. After attacking Syria with 59 Tomahawk missiles, they dubbed him presidential and a real leader. When I was watching the “debate” over the bombing of Syria in the mainstream media, I could see the depth of violence that has crept into the minds of Americans. This happens only in a country where Second Amendment is treated like holy Bible and the NRA regularly buys elections.

The Way Forward

Due to endless war, Afghanistan has been gripped by violence and bloodshed for four decades. Daily, we deal with killings, explosions, and murder. In Afghan society, violence has an external component. It has been imposed on us. But getting your hands onto an assault rifle to shoot innocent people and children is unheard of in my home country. We

don't have gun stores like in the U.S. to purchase arms. We don't have gun shows to promote gun culture and provides access to guns. The access to guns is quite limited. And this is the point. The "easy access" to guns has killed Americans in mass. So, limiting the access, the way Australia did in the 1990s, will likely result in reduction of gun-related violence.

As an Afghan who is intimately familiar with violence and losing loved ones, I urge Americans to use their First Amendment right to mount a direct and nonviolent struggle to limit access to guns. This is a national tragedy. Only Americans can solve it. When Americans come together with determined will, and say "enough is enough", no one can stop them. They can protest, demonstrate, resort to civil disobedience, share vital information and statistics, engage with communities and affected families, and most importantly vote for those candidates who pursue progressive agenda and accept no funding from NRA and arms manufacturers. Only progressives can stand up against the NRA and its lobbyists. In this way, Americans will clean up their political system by limiting the financial influence of weapons industry, corporations and Wall Street. There will, of course, be ideological resistance, but how long are Americans going to see their children and loved ones killed by this senseless gun violence? Only Americans can end this madness.

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