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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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07.09.2021

## *Afghanistan and the Dark Side of American Power*

Tarzan is a neighborhood mutt in Istanbul, his back bending under children who ride him, serving as their target for stone-throwing contests, surviving attempts by dogcatchers to kill him. His luck turns when an American family moves in, making him a coddled pet. Yet when the Americans prepare to leave along with the dog, neighbors put up a fierce fight to claim him as their own. Left behind, Tarzan ends up exactly as he had been before, chased and tormented with no other place to go.

I read this short story by the Turkish satirist Aziz Nesin as a teenager in my native Tehran in the mid-1960s. It was before the fall of Saigon, before the Carter administration would cut and run with the advance of Islamic revolutionaries in Iran, and indeed before this day of the Biden administration leaving Afghanistan in a lurch. All the same, the story rang true to me.

Raised under the shah's authoritarian rule in the thick of the Cold War, when Iran was a key American ally against the Soviet Union, I understood power and politics from an early age. I knew that there would come a day when mighty America, with its strong diplomatic, foreign aid and military presence in Iran, would exercise its prerogative to leave. Many among the post-9/11 Afghan generation, recipients of American taxpayer aid once their country's corrupt elite took most of it, were lulled into complacency, counting on a continued U.S. presence. That leaving was so sudden and irresponsible, as it was also in Iran, came to them as a shock that I well understand.

I left Iran for the United States to become a foreign student in 1966, promising to return and "serve my country," with the secret resolve never to return. Knowing of the weakness beneath the shah's royal pomp, I could see the calamities to come. I either had to "stretch"

my education, amassing degrees from an A.A. to a Ph.D. to remain in the country on a student visa, or find myself at an airport among the clamoring thousands to flee. President Carter opting to pull the rug from under the shah in 1979, punishing him for his leadership of drastic OPEC oil price hikes, was as sudden as the decision to throw Afghanistan to the Taliban. I was left with nightmares to deal with, sorting out my finances and adjusting my immigration status, but at least I was in the relative safety of America.

Curiously, as the shah fell, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Even as Washington found the Iranian fundamentalists hostile to its every wish and interest, it started to sponsor other regional Islamists to counter the “Godless Soviets.” So were born the Mujahedeen, with close cooperation of the Pakistani intelligence, to evolve into today’s fat, sassy and well-armed Taliban. Trump’s Qatar negotiations, meant to end America’s long, costly presence in Afghanistan, essentially let them take over as a principal would designate the terror of the school as hall monitor. Knowing of America’s deal, top Afghan military commanders surrendered, making their own deals with the Taliban who were surprised themselves by their own swift takeover.

Afghanistan and Iran are in fact a part of a regionwide pattern of seemingly haphazard decision making with little regard for any consequences. Washington told Hosni Mubarak of Egypt to step down, sending him to jail and hospital, with no clear idea of who would succeed him to the Egyptians’ eternal chagrin. Many Iraqis feel betrayed today as the United States allows the manifestly corrupt and incompetent to lead their country. Americans themselves have suffered in the whirlwind of shambolic departures. Fifty-two Americans were held captive at the Tehran embassy for 444 days, three died at the diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya. Thirteen American service members and 170 Afghans died at the Kabul airport, ten family members perishing in a drone strike on the final days before the “endless war” finally ended.

Actually, “blunders” such as Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya are not altogether unintentional. A weak Middle East and North Africa (MENA), mired in tension and corruption, keeps oil prices low. It also secures the West a staging ground for the day when a military faceoff with Russia, China or both would become necessary. Caught in these calculations are so many human beings at home or in exile, just as dispensable as Tarzan.

That an unsettled MENA will also invite the inevitable terrorist blowbacks is factored in. The constant sense of insecurity and possible loss of life at home and abroad are considered as “acceptable damage” in the parlance of a world so thoroughly hidden from

the majority of trusting Americans. If confronted, the engineers of these decades-long policies deep within the intelligence apparatus, merely shrug to say they are making the best of a bad situation. America can clearly do better, first replacing a nineteenth century colonial mindset with an understanding of today's global realities. "Metastasized terrorism" across the region, as President Biden calls it, increasingly threatens to surpass acceptable damages.

There is also a lesson to learn here about the psyche of some among the American elite and the arrogance of power. No one has put it better than F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...." This is the true dark side of a nation on whose overwhelming grace, tolerance and hospitality I have counted so long to go from an adolescent to a white haired man and from a foreigner to a citizen.

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CounterPunch 06.09.2021