

## ‘What is Aleppo’: A nothing on grand scale of American ignorance



Rashmee Roshan Lall

Anyone still surprised at or smirking about the ignorance on Aleppo displayed by American candidate for president Gary Johnson should take a look at choice examples of US statecraft and policymaking.

Just more than 25 years ago, George H.W. Bush, the United States’ 41st president, was advised by senior aides to accept Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait because, so the argument went, the electorate would not care about a country of which it had never heard. No one, said the aides, would even notice the change from one Arab strongman to another. Pulitzer Prize-winning American author Daniel Yergin described Bush aides’ magnificent logic in his 2011 book *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World*.

As it happened, Bush ignored the argument but the fact that it was advanced at all says a great deal about American ignorance and the extent to

which it plays a part in political calculations.  
US President Barack Obama

recently acknowledged his countrymen’s cluelessness while in Laos for the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit. “If you are the United States, sometimes you can feel lazy and think, you know, ‘we’re so big, we don’t really have to know anything about other people,’” Obama said

Consider the Himalayan heights of Americans’ lazy ignorance about the world. Fifteen years after 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, many still consider it to be an Arab and Middle Eastern country rather than in south central Asia. On my way from Washington to Kabul a few years ago, I remember being aghast at some US officials’ stated belief they needed to learn Arabic to make themselves understood in Pashto- and Dari-speaking Afghanistan.

Even Pakistan, which is squarely in South Asia, is sometimes referred to as part of the Middle East. This is largely on account of Americans’ general incomprehension of Islam as a world religion, Arab as a racial category and the reality that Muslims live in different countries all over the world, not just in the Middle East.

A 2011 Pew Research Center survey indicated that 42% of Americans correctly identified the crescent and star with Islam from a set of four religious symbols including the Christian

cross and the Star of David. Ordinary Americans, their political representatives and counterterrorism officials have repeatedly displayed profound ignorance about the difference between Shia and Sunni Islam. A 2008 poll by Newsweek magazine had 39% of respondents acknowledging they did not know which sect represented the majority of Muslims worldwide. A scant 20% correctly identified the Sunnis as the largest group. In 2014, Pew discovered that only 29% of Americans asked knew enough to pick Iran as the Shia-majority nation from a list of four.

This followed a stubborn and predictable chain of ignorance that stretched all the way up to the very top of US intelligence and law enforcement, as well as legislators with oversight of security matters. Ten years ago, in his role as national security editor at Congressional Quarterly, Jeff Stein wrote about his revealing, if dispiriting, straw poll of American officialdom and policymakers’ basic general knowledge of Islam. From the head of the FBI’s national security branch to the vice-chairman of a House intelligence subcommittee, he found little clarity about core concepts.

It may be reasonable to assume that things have not changed much in the last decade. Not because the 2016 US presidential election has thrown up this

embarrassment – third-party candidate Gary Johnson’s lamentable ignorance about Aleppo, Syria’s largest city, the epicentre of the country’s civil war, a time capsule of culture and man’s footprint on our planet. Johnson heads the Libertarian Party ticket, has almost consistently polled less than 10% among American voters and has no serious chance of ever getting to the White House unless it is as a marijuana advocate.

But there is probably no greater manifestation of proud and ignorant American cluelessness than the candidacy of Donald Trump. He has consistently advocated defiantly wrong-headed and misinformed policies. That the presidential candidate of one of America’s two major parties should advance illegal and ethically dubious measures – killing extremists’ families, the torture of suspected terrorists, seizure of the oil wealth of an invaded country and an ideological test for visa-aspirants to the United States, to name a few of Trump’s prescriptions for America’s ills – is proof that many American voters do not see ignorance as disqualifying their leaders.

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## Can Turkey find a way out of its impasse?



Yavuz Baydar

Having been dragged into the vortex of a new wave of punitive measures *en masse*, with a seemingly unending institutional purge that has led to the dismissal of nearly 100,000 state employees and paralysis of the media, Turkey is once more facing an old problem that refuses to go away.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish issue is knocking at Ankara’s door with urgency, signalling further political and social crises.

It did not take a long time before the euphoria stemming from the defeat of the putschists July 15th to turn the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government’s eyes into alienating parliament’s third largest elected group, the People’s Democratic Party (HDP), by way of threats and punishment.

Emergency rule, which was introduced a week after the coup attempt had, from day one, raised concerns that the decree regime would be instrumental to hammer the vast electorate in south-eastern provinces of Turkey, which election after election, solidly stood behind the secular, pro-Kurdish HDP.

As expected, it is now put into practice. Backed by a decree, which was accompanied by the loud approval of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the government ordered seizure of 24 municipalities in the mainly Kurdish provinces under the control of the HDP, based on the accusations that their local funds were channelled to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and its branches. No clear evidence was made public and Kurdish rage is rising.

Jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was allowed a visit – the first in almost two years – by a relative and his message was short.

“What goes on is an endless war, with no winners,” he told his brother. “It was not us who ended the (peace) process. If the (Turkish) state is ready, we can solve this issue in six months.”



Turkish police detain a teacher during a protest in Diyarbakir, on September 9th.

The message has not echoed positively in government circles. Erdogan said the seizure of municipalities was a “delayed measure”. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim implied that other HDP municipalities would be seized and run by appointed trustees, signalling a stronger showdown.

Another top figure of the AKP, Bulent Turan, went further, saying that “the very HDP party must be taken over by a trustee”. Newly appointed Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu joined the chorus, announcing: “We will be ruthless.”

Against the backdrop of deepening tension, with the HDP remaining defiant, there are even more signs of showdown.

Abdulkadir Selvi, a columnist close to the AKP, wrote that the takeover of the municipalities, would be followed by arrests of some HDP deputies, whose parliamentary immunity has already been lifted. There are

already eight of them subpoenaed and the leader of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtas, stands next to be called to interrogation.

The picture is rather clear: After the coup attempt, the AKP seems to have forged a new alliance with the old hard-liner forces of the state and the new strategy is two-fold. Somewhat copying the Sri Lankan model, which annihilated the Tamil guerrillas out of efficiency, Erdogan is gambling on attempting the same. The reasoning that seems to have enveloped Ankara has also a fallback plan – an “exit B” – which is inspired by the way Israel deals with the Palestinian issue: a sustainable crisis.

Its political self-esteem fortified by the rule by decree regime, Erdogan relies on two elements. First is the decision he made in July 2015, before turning down peace talks that imposed Turkey’s National Security Council and the staunch support of the Nationalist

Movement Party (MHP) for the new hard-line policy.

These two elements, he hopes, will lay the ground for him to introduce an almighty presidential system in Turkey, in case of success.

Tactical changes in the counterinsurgency are already under way, as new details emerge through the analysis of some army experts:

The military strategy in the rural areas will no longer be based on employing mobile combat units. With the decree, the government-sponsored village guards, made up of pro-government Kurds – about 90,000 strong and who know the terrain well – will be deployed not only in their home provinces but all over the south-east. The rumours have it that an unknown number of paramilitaries would also be engaged.

Ankara plans to install in cities a neighbourhood guard system, similar to village guards, by arming pro-state Kurdish youth in critical towns. It was what Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said of Oman did in the 1970s when he deposed his father and inherited a war in the southern province of Dhofar. It was the only success story of a rebellion in the Middle East coming to a peaceful end and in which both sides in the dispute got what they wanted.

Regionally, Ankara will try to isolate the PKK by strengthening ties with the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, cooperating more closely with Iran on border security and undermining the Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party domination of northern Syria.

There is nothing new about most of this. Cynics say it is like applying the same experiment over and over, expecting a different result.

What is new is that the old choreography has a different, larger stage – regionalisation of the Kurdish issue. It remains to be seen whether Erdogan’s high gamble will drag Turkey deeper into the regional quagmire or, as many doubt, out of it.

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