

Opinion

Editorial

Caring for the Arab region's children

Children suffer cruelly, deeply, disproportionately in war zones, which is why it's a relief to hear the new head of UNICEF, the United Nations' second largest agency, pledge to put children's developmental needs first.

In January, soon after she started the UNICEF job, American businesswoman and former USAID administrator Henrietta Holsman Fore spoke about a child development-centred approach in some of the world's most conflict-scarred areas. It can't just be about humanitarian objectives in crises such as Yemen and Syria, Fore said, "you can't forget that there is a development agenda."

She might have added that there is no more powerful sign of a society committed to rebuilding – and to a better tomorrow – than the sight of schools reopening and children in uniform heading to class even if amid piles of rubble. That's what happened in Mosul in January last year.

Unfortunately, not enough attention is paid to the long-term consequences of years of war in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. When children are meant to be at school, far too many are in refugee camps or just on their own. Too often, the educational infrastructure is part of the collateral damage of war. At times, the region's governments just do not have sufficient budgets.

Some 26 million children live in conflict-scarred Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, the Palestinian territories and Sudan. Their humanitarian needs are obvious – adequate housing, safe water, sanitation, health care, etc. Governments and aid organisations from the region and beyond try to address them as best they can but what of those children's developmental needs, primarily education, the best start that anyone can have in life?

This question is rarely asked when war sweeps a land and crisis-management takes priority. In fact, it's not being asked now, when there is dispiriting news of the toll of children's lives from MENA conflicts in January. UNICEF said at least 83 children were killed last month in conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya and the Palestinian territories. With no sign of these conflicts ending, many more children are likely to become casualties of wars that began before many of them were even born.

UNICEF's MENA Regional Director Geert Cappelaere framed January's tragic toll within the larger context spelt out by Fore. "Not hundreds, not thousands but millions more children in the Middle East and North Africa region have their childhood stolen, maimed for life, traumatised, arrested and detained, exploited, prevented from going to school and from getting the most essential health services; denied even the basic right to play," Cappelaere said.

It was a pertinent reminder that the global community needs to stay engaged despite discernible signs of donor fatigue. MENA's children are the region's future. They must be educated and trained to become the decision-makers and doers of tomorrow.

It's clear what needs to happen but there is no certainty it will. Dropout rates must be reduced, digital literacy enhanced and vocational training given a sharp new focus.

The world has a responsibility to the children of MENA but mostly the task devolves to Arab governments, regional institutions and civil society.

The time for action is now.

Syria's humanitarian crisis only worsens

The toll continues to mount in Syria and the ultimate tragedy is that the war, soon to enter its eighth year, shows no sign of ending.

A UN Security Council meeting February 8 sought a temporary truce but Russia rejected it as "unrealistic." Short of a final resolution of the conflict, a reprieve was the minimum required to provide urgent humanitarian assistance and to evacuate the critically ill.

Even as the Islamic State (ISIS) is nearly defeated, the conflict is becoming ever more dangerous, with multiple players aggressively staking claim to territory and regional influence.

Meanwhile, the Turkish incursion into the Kurdish-controlled enclave of Afrin in Syria continues to push up the civilian toll. The same applies to attacks by Russia-supported Syrian troops.

The regime in Damascus is even suspected of using chemical weapons. Such brutal methods have been internationally denounced but, as French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian recently said, there are many other violators of international law, not least Turkey and Iran.

Le Drian has called for "the withdrawal of all of those who ought not to be in Syria, including Iranian militia, including Hezbollah." Turkey, he said, "should not add war to war."

Even in a war seemingly with no holds barred, the world must set – and enforce – some limits.



RETURN OF ISIS FIGHTERS

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Iran's tough talk only hides its weaknesses

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“Iran is still a player in Syria but it is no longer a major player.”

Is the Iranian regime strong or weak? The question comes to the fore because of deteriorating living conditions in Iran.

The city of Isfahan, for example, is without water because its water table has been depleted. Still, Iran continues to flex its muscles outside its borders.

A high-ranking officer in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) recently boasted that both the Syrian and the Iraqi armies would be used to shield the "Islamic Republic." If that is not a game of intimidating neighbours and blackmailing the United States, I don't know what it is.

Iranian Brigadier-General Hussein Salami, IRGC deputy commander, said "it is illogical for any country to limit its security zone to its borders. We consider the Syrian Army and the Iraqi Army as strategic depth for us." He added that "the best strategy for engaging the enemy is from afar."

This clearly shows that, in case of a confrontation with the United States, Iran is ready to move the battlefield to Iraq and Syria where US troops are stationed.

Iran is trying to intimidate Arab countries and push the United States towards concluding a new deal. The United States, however, has exposed the Iranian regime's weaknesses. True, the United

States has, on many occasions, done great services to the Iranian regime, including handing it Iraq on a silver platter. The United States, however, can show Tehran's weakness any time because of its economic and technological power.

The United States is willing to bide its time to achieve a victory. It can afford to make mistakes, as it did in Vietnam and in Iraq. In the 1970s, Vietnam was the place to be for any revolutionary hothead wishing to rub America's imperial nose in the mud. In the end, Vietnam may have won the battle in 1975 but lost the war. Now, Hanoi is welcoming US companies with open arms.

Even China is smart enough not to start a direct confrontation with America. To protect its economic interests, modern China got rid of Mao Zedong's crippling ideology and tackled its numerous internal problems rather than ignoring them and engaging in a race with the United States outside Chinese borders. Thanks to that simple strategic choice, China is the second economic powerhouse in the world. Is there a lesson in that for Iran?

What Iran seems to want is to appear to be the dominant power in the region and that's because the Trump administration wants to get rid of former US President Barack

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Obama's nuclear deal with Tehran. The Trump administration wants to prevent Iran from using that deal to score more victories in the region, hence conditioning the deal on Iran's foreign policies and its ballistic missile programme.

Iran's vulnerability was exposed when it had to ask for Russia's help to keep Syrian President Bashar Assad in power. It should not be forgotten that, in September 2015 – before Russia's involvement in Syria was announced – Qassem Soleimani, leader of Iran's al-Quds Force and the real commander of the sectarian militias in Syria, was in Moscow.

It should also be remembered that Russia is not committing its forces in Syria out of charity or just to please Iran. Moscow has excellent relations with Israel and the latter will do what it can to limit Iran's regional influence and keep Assad's regime in place. To finish with Syria and the Golan Heights once for all, it is crucial for Israel that Assad's regime survives.

On the regional level, Russia's direct intervention in Syria was a turning point. That intervention did not occur in a vacuum but was accompanied by an agreement with the United States on the broad lines guiding the presence of both superpowers in Syria. The US presence would cover the rich areas east of the Euphrates. There was also a role conceded to Turkey inside Syria such that there is more than one regional player in the Syrian theatre.

Iran is still a player in Syria but it is no longer a major player. This fact explains the haughty tone of officials in Tehran. The tactic reflects the Iranian regime's desperate attempts to cover up its non-stop failures in Syria.

To compensate for these failures, the mullahs' regime acts tough in Iran or Lebanon or Yemen or now in Bahrain. Perhaps the mullahs and their dictatorship would be better served by solving the water shortage in Isfahan than by using the question of Jerusalem to score points against the Arabs.



Self-delusion. A clergyman takes a picture of a pro-government demonstration in the south-western city of Ahvaz, last January.

(AP)