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Religious extremism remains the world's top enemy

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“Pacifying the Middle East will be a long and painful process but there is no alternative other than wasting another 16 years or more fighting shadows.”

September 11 will be the 16th anniversary of the 2001 terror attacks that destroyed the Twin Towers in New York and damaged the Pentagon just outside Washington. Those attacks led to the beginning of the so-called war on terror as then US President George W. Bush called it.

As a handful of Middle East analysts asked at the time, how do you launch a war on terror? You can wage war on terrorism, yes; or on terrorists, yes; but terror is an emotion. Declaring war on terror is akin to waging war on fear.

As expected, these terror attacks against the United States brought about swift military ripostes, which came in the form of the invasion of Afghanistan and the invasion of Iraq. Just as Pearl Harbour had direct or indirect implications on the lives of millions of Americans, so, too, did the 9/11 attacks affect

the lives of many people around the globe.

There were political and military chain reactions to various aspects of people's daily lives, many of which continue to be felt. As a direct result of the 9/11 attacks, for example, Big Brother is everywhere, watching through a vast and extended network of CCTV cameras. There are added security measures imposed on all travellers at airports.

Analysts have often noted similarities between the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941. There are correlations, yes, but also differences.

Official statistics state that 2,403 people – mostly US military – died in the Japanese air raid on Pearl Harbour, the headquarters of the US Pacific Fleet in Hawaii. The fatalities of the 9/11 attacks amounted to 2,996.

The attack on Pearl Harbour was described by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt as “a day that will live in infamy” and drew the United States into the second world war, a conflict in which some 58 countries fought and which resulted in the death of at least 50 million people and caused millions more to become refugees.

From the outset of the war until the capitulation of Nazi Germany and Japan, six long years passed – four for the United States, which officially entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Thankfully, the fallout from September 11 is far from the casualty figures of the second world war, even if the war in Afghanistan has lasted four times longer. Unlike the raid on Pearl Harbour, which necessitated the participation of thousands of Japanese military personnel – from planners to pilots to thousands of sailors aboard the Japanese fleet in the Pacific Ocean

– and the mobilisation of military hardware at the cost of billions of dollars, the 19 terrorists who carried out the 9/11 attacks were armed only with box cutters and religious fervour.

Herein lies the key to resolving the Middle East conflicts: Address religious fervour. Its advocates remain very much in the battle.

Sixteen years after the 9/11 attacks, the United States remains involved militarily in one manner or another in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Americans can expect to remain so until the religious fervour is addressed. For that to happen, the countries concerned need to adjust school curricula and remove parts calling for the elimination of non-believers, including members of the Shia community.

Pacifying the Middle East will be a long and painful process but there is no alternative other than wasting another 16 years or more fighting shadows.

Condoleezza Rice has news about democracy in the MENA region

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“And yet, Rice defends the Iraq war. She recently indicated there was little to regret and much to celebrate.”

For all those who despair of the patchy and imperfect delivery of democracy after the Arab uprisings that started seven years ago, Condoleezza Rice has news.

Democracy is in fine fettle, she says, or words to that effect. Occasional hiccups matter little in the long term. Just look at the American experience and all will be clear. Rice makes these assertions in her new book “Democracy: Stories from the Long Road to Freedom.”

It's worth taking note of her views.

Mostly of course because Rice was President George W. Bush's secretary of state and, before that, his national security adviser. Her attempt at so-called transformational diplomacy, which was supposed to spread democracy around like love, was an important policy platform of the Bush era. And it had blowback.

Rice's chief claim to fame is her role in the Bush administration's regrettable attempt to establish democracy in Iraq – by means of war. It doesn't matter that Rice now insists the invasion was “not for democracy promotion” but was a benign act to topple a brutal dictator.

In March 2004, a year after the invasion, she triumphantly and all too clearly spelt out the Bush-led America's objectives as follows: “Iraq and Afghanistan are vanguards of this effort to spread democracy and tolerance and freedom throughout the Greater Middle East. Fifty million people have been liberated from two of the most brutal and dangerous tyrannies of our time. With the help of over 60 nations, the Iraqi and Afghan peoples are now

struggling to build democracies, under difficult conditions, in the rocky soil of the Middle East.”

It's another matter that Afghanistan is not in the Middle East but Rice was wrong on other counts, too. The US invasion may have overthrown a regime that no one need mourn but it spectacularly failed to replace it with the organic scaffolding of democracy – local institutions and norms of accountability, limited experiments with local elections to see what works, enabling the slow build-up of different political and civil society groups without paying them for their work.

But on March 19, 2003, the day before the invasion, Rice was declaring “our intention to help the Iraqi people liberate them-

selves... and to very early on, put in place with Iraqis – from outside the country and inside the country – an Iraq authority that can administer and run the country.” We all know how that turned out.

And yet, Rice defends the Iraq war. She recently indicated there was little to regret and much to celebrate. Without mentioning the hundreds of thousands dead as the result of an illegal attack on a sovereign country, Rice declared: “I would rather be Iraqi than Syrian today. I would rather be Iraqi with a prime minister who might be weak but he's accountable to the people. With 25 different newspapers and radio stations and Arab satellite available and where my govern-

ment doesn't actually use barrel bombs and chemical weapons against me. So when I hear about how poorly the Iraqis are doing, I want to say in regards to what or in comparison to what?”

In this context, Rice makes one crucial contribution to the raging debate around the world about the democratic recession, which has increasingly illiberal democracies such as Turkey, Israel, Russia, Hungary, Poland and India shamelessly franchising a system that allows for elections but fewer freedoms.

She reminds those who've lost faith in the flowering of democracy in the Middle East that it takes a long time to build and progress is not linear. There will be backsliding and half-measures.

That bit makes sense. In one-party China after all, village elections were introduced in the 1980s and by 2008 more than 900 million Chinese villagers had exercised their sovereign right to vote for their local representatives.

Sometimes, too, democracy may take the form of unusual start-ups such as the small Syrian town that recently voted for the first time since 1953 in a direct election. Saraqib, in eastern Idlib, chose its local council even though its geography might be considered inimical to ballot boxes. Idlib, it's worth remembering, was recently described by Brett McGurk, US special presidential envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, as “the largest al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11.” Saraqib's experiment with local democracy has been hailed by Manhal Bareesh of the Syrian opposition but in itself it means little.

Only time will tell if a native strain of democracy will do better than a transplant.



Little to regret. Condoleezza Rice, 66th secretary of state of the United States, speaks during a ceremony inside the Joyce Center at Notre Dame in South Bend, on September 1. (AP)

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