How Did The Muslim World Go So Wrong?



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Syed Zubair Ahmed

You often run into people who look down upon the Muslim world, pointing at the chaos, armed terror groups, militia rule and dictatorship to conclude that there is something fundamentally wrong with Muslims and their religion. Others take the opposite view, arguing that the Muslim world's present-day turmoil owes much to the West's repeated interventions and historical injustices. Both arguments offer partial truths, but they miss the broader reality: much of the Muslim world, especially in West Asia, lies in ruins. The causes are complex and layered, but the evidence is undeniable.

From the shattered boulevards of Tripoli to the bombed-out alleys of Aleppo, from Baghdad's sectarian heartlands to Gaza's crumbled skyline, a common image emerges – of nations torn apart, societies hollowed and futures stolen. This devastation is neither natural nor inevitable. It is the cumulative result of decades of war, opportunistic foreign interventions, proxy conflicts, repressive regimes and colonial legacies. And in all of this, ordinary people, displaced, disillusioned and discarded, are the ones who suffer the most.

Aftershocks Of Empire

This is not about defending despots or absolving extremists. It is a plea for consistency, justice and memory. It is a call to understand how historical interference, political hypocrisy and selective moral outrage have turned one of the world's richest cultural regions into a perpetual battleground. The story of the Muslim world's chaos is not just about religion or governance. It is about the aftershocks of empire, the exploitation of oil and ideology, and a world order that has failed millions.

In the 1920s, Winston Churchill famously quipped that he was not in favour of allowing "the Arab tribes" to control their own affairs in Palestine. This imperial disdain wasn't just personal opinion; it was policy. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France carved up West Asia through the Sykes–Picot Agreement, drawing arbitrary borders and installing loyalist rulers. These new 'nation–states' were not crafted with local realities in mind but were designed to serve European interests – strategic positioning, oil pipelines and control of trade routes.

This era of manufactured states and manipulated societies set the stage for future instability. Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, each is a product of imperial drawing boards rather than organic nation–building. As regimes collapsed and identities clashed, these fissures widened. The West may have formally exited the region in the mid–20th century, but its legacy never left. Instead, West Asia continued to be haunted by postcolonial trauma, Cold War alignments and economic dependency.

Sea Of Ruin

Take Libya. Muammar Gaddafi ruled it for over four decades with an iron grip. He was a tyrant, but he also provided free education, healthcare and relative stability. NATO's intervention in 2011, under the guise of humanitarian protection, toppled him but offered no plan for what came next. Libya descended into chaos, with rival militias carving up the country. Weapons looted from Libyan arsenals flooded Mali and Syria, fueling other wars. Gaddafi's fall wasn't the birth of democracy; it was the opening act of a long, bloody disintegration.

Iraq offers an even starker example. The 2003 US–led invasion, based on false claims of weapons of mass –destruction, dismantled not only Saddam Hussein's regime but also the entire Ba'athist (party) state structure. The de Ba'athification programme purged thousands of civil servants and military officers, creating a vacuum that was quickly filled by sectarian militias and, eventually, the dreaded and bloodthirsty Islamic State. Iraq went from dictatorship to a failed democracy haunted by car bombs and assassinations. Once a cradle of civilisation, it now struggles to keep the lights on.

Syria, too, became a battlefield of global ambition. What began as peaceful protests in 2011 soon morphed into a full-scale civil war, drawing in Russia, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Israel and countless non-state actors. While Assad's brutality is undeniable, so too is the damage inflicted by competing foreign agendas. More than half of Syria's population has been displaced. Cities like Aleppo and Raqqa have become modern ruins.

Afghanistan was a theatre of invasion and war, resulting in total collapse of the existing system. First it was the Communist USSR that invaded the country in the late '70s. It was ultimately ousted with the American money, muscle and machine guns after a decade of misrule. Then, the US-led allied forces invaded it in 2001, claiming to install stability and democracy. The experiment failed miserably. The ousted Taliban made a dramatic comeback in 2021, with Western forces making an inglorious retreat. They have left the local population, women and children, at the mercy of the extremist Taliban.

Iran's Turn Now?

And now it is Iran, dangerously poised to be on the road to ruin. It has been subjected to cycles of isolation, sanctions sabotage, and now, open threats of regime change. Its current hardline government owes its survival not just to repression but also to an embattled nationalism born from decades of foreign pressure. From the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-backed 1953 coup that ousted Prime Minister Mossadegh to present-day nuclear tensions, Iran's story is as much of external meddling as of internal strife.

Meanwhile, regimes like those in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar continue to enjoy Western patronage. These nations are no less autocratic, no more democratic. Yet, their wealth and alignment with Western strategic interests insulate them from criticism. Human rights violations, censorship and state-sponsored religious extremism are quietly tolerated. The West does not oppose dictatorship, it opposes defiant dictators.

This selective morality has real consequences. When Western powers punish some regimes while shielding others, they lose credibility. Worse, they stoke cynicism and anger across the Muslim world. Young people see the hypocrisy. They see the bombs dropped in the name of freedom and the silence that follows when friendly monarchs crush dissent. In that silence, extremist narratives take root; terror groups do not emerge from cultural voids, they are born in environments of injustice, humiliation and betrayal.

Even Sudan, often omitted from this conversation, has a familiar story. Its colonial past, where the British pitted ethnic groups against each other, laid the groundwork for later divisions. Post-independence governments, often backed or sanctioned by foreign powers, struggled to hold a fractured society together. The current infighting isn't just a power struggle, it is the delayed detonation of a colonial time bomb, exacerbated by modern meddling from Gulf rivals, the West, and even Russia.

Gift Of Nostalgia

Amid all this, it is the ordinary people who pay the highest price. Families displaced across generations. Children growing up without schools or safe drinking water. Doctors operating by flashlight in makeshift clinics. Artists silenced. Intellectuals exiled. Hope becomes a rare commodity. In Gaza, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, to name just a few, the future has become just a concept.

In such an environment, the past – even a past ruled by dictators – can seem strangely preferable. Say what you will about Saddam or Gaddafi, many in their countries recall the order, security and predictability of life under their rule. That nostalgia isn't about love for tyranny but about despair at what followed.

What the Muslim world needs isn't more interventions, more bombs, or more regime–change fantasies. It needs principled action from the global community. It needs investment in peacebuilding, infrastructure and local civil society. It needs space to breathe, heal and rebuild.

The West Learns No Lessons

This is not an ode to the past. It's a warning. If history continues to repeat itself, it won't just be West Asia that suffers. Instability radiates. Refugees flee. Radical ideologies spread. And global trust erodes. The price of selective intervention is paid not just in Baghdad or Tripoli, but in Paris, London and New York, too – mostly in boats full of refugees and immigrants.

It's time to move beyond the tired binaries: West vs. East, Islam vs. modernity, stability vs. chaos. The real battle is between integrity and hypocrisy, between memory and amnesia. Only when Western powers hold themselves to the same standards they demand of others can we begin to imagine a different future for the Muslim world.

Let that future be written not in the language of conquest or control but in the vernacular of justice, sovereignty and dignity – and hope for a better future for the Muslim world.

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