

What Snow “Storm Stella” Engulfing New York Can Teach Us About War

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It's been more than a week but they are still out there– machines and people –pushing it, chopping it, lifting it– moving it, somehow, out of the way, out of our routine pathways. Under attack by salt, sand and sunrays, the mountains of snow slowly retreat. Although early April forecasts warn this may not be the end. We groan at the thought.

People will be talking about Storm Stella for a decade. I had never seen so many plows— lumbering monsters, lights flashing, orange twelve-foot-wide metal wings lunging through the whiteness; plows with sand and salt sprayers follow the heavier machines. Narrower roads are tackled by ATVs, shovels and buckets newly fixed to their bumpers. Snow blowers of all sizes are ferried by truck to inaccessible homes and office buildings.

As we dig ourselves out, we are uncertain if another day of snow is due. Do we have enough food? What if electricity fails?

Following the dig out, neighbors exchange memories of the last blizzard in upstate New York. Gregg says it was 2003; others claim 1996 was the worst in memory.

I don't remember the winter of '96. Where was I?

Now I recall: in Iraq documenting the staggering impact of the United Nations sanctions (a U.S. initiated and policed blockade) against the country. (An action which Washington forced the UN to endorse.)

By 1996 the blockade on Iraq had been in effect for almost six years. By 1996 its people no longer waited for the isolation and shortages and illnesses and deprivations and heart attacks to end. By 1996 they ceased expecting any change in the United Nations position or fair treatment from waves of rude inspection teams. So many agencies were making millions (funds allocated by the U.S. from Iraq's frozen bank accounts) from monitors and conferences, reviews and reports about the crippled nation's poverty, sanctions compliance, and human rights accounting, there was no incentive to end the embargo.

The assaulted, besieged population adjusted, if adjust is the right word for survival. If anyone can adjust to personal losses and war, deprivations, indignities and manifold injuries. “Whatever we suffer today, we know only that tomorrow will be worse”, she noted. I don't remember her name, but I know her voice—low and angry, lips pressed together. She was no more than 20. Her words slap against my brain cells, again and again, twenty years later.

Along with millions of other Iraqis she waited day after day, year after year. (And they still wait.)

Even though the embargo ended after 13 years and elections were held, many millions perished or moved abroad. Except for planning how to get whatever crumbs one may manage to suck out of the government, the only thing to look forward to is escape. A quarter century of uncertainty- under dictatorship, under occupation, under democratically elected governments-persists.

Feeling the (temporary) assault and isolation created by Storm Stella's engulfing New York last month, it occurred to me:

Suppose it doesn't stop? Suppose another one hits before we have cleared this away; suppose all available plows are diverted to the city and we are forgotten? Suppose this goes on, the snow accumulating day after day, until May, and then suppose a week of rain follows? Suppose the melt-off and the downpour trigger floods, and roads are washed out? I didn't feel panic; but for the first time, I really imagined what the accumulation of year after year after year of war could create.

I'd been in war zones. In Iraq observing crumbling infrastructure, closed hospitals, abandoned clinics, no flights, no medicines, no milk powder, heading for summer, I was nevertheless able to escape every time slipping in June away to avoid the searing heat. I had moved through Occupied Palestine, hearing tanks rumbling through a neighborhood, witnessing curfews and endless check points, school cancellations, shops shuttered, playgrounds locked. Since 2011, I've followed Syria's trauma, with families and houses isolated from one another, declining services each month, utility cuts, shortages, one hardship piled on another, no one to call for help.

Spring is suspended indefinitely in all these places. For all these inhabitants, all these souls.

A dystopian winter image set off by barely three days of interruption in my routine created by Storm Stella, brings me closer than anything else I had experienced to what millions are living inside those endless wars where the cruelty of winter storms goes on and on and on.

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