

## **Those Young Arab Muslims and Us**

The months that have passed since September 11, 2001, have prompted much reflection among Arabists, as among all Americans. We professional Arabists, in particular, have asked ourselves this question: Why have young, male, Arab Muslims figured so prominently in the terrorist annals of the past quarter-century?

To name but a few incidents, there were the 1970 assassination of defense attaché Bob Perry in Amman, and of Ambassador Cleo Noel and his deputy, Curt Moore, in Sudan in 1972; the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983; the two separate bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut in 1983 and 1985; the 1985 murder of Leon Klinghoffer aboard the Achille Lauro; the 1988 murder of Lt. Col. William Higgins in south Lebanon; the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center; the 1998 destruction of U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam; the 2000 attack on the USS Cole; and then the awfulness of September 11. Long as this list may seem, this is by no means all.

There are various reasons for the anger that some young Muslims, raised in the sterile hatcheries of the refugee camps, or the religious schools of Saudi Arabia, feel toward us. Most often mentioned is our support of Israel. But this issue deserves a closer look.

## **Not About Palestine**

It is sad but true that America has never gotten much credit for what it actually does for the Palestinians. For half a century, we have provided a plurality of the funding to the United Nation's Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestinians. For nearly as long, we have led international efforts to advance the Middle East peace process.

President Clinton personally oversaw the intensive negotiations that led to the 1993 Oslo agreement and the creation of the Palestinian Authority. He devoted two weeks, moreover, of his waning presidency to sketching out and attempting to cajole the parties to endorse the outline of an imaginative agreement - only to have Yasir Arafat refuse even to accept it as a basis for discussion. And we rarely hear of U. S. efforts to succor Muslims in Kuwait, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

Yet once, when I appealed to Saudi foreign minister Prince Sa'ud to give more assistance to UNRWA, he replied: "You Americans created the refugee problem. You solve it." In response, I asked if he could imagine, had a catastrophe driven half a million Canadians into North Dakota, Idaho, and Minnesota, that three generations later, those populations would still be held in refugee camps? How differently the half-million Jews driven from Arab lands in 1948 were received by Israel, compared to how the half-million Arabs driven from Palestine that same year were received by their Arab neighbors.

The truth is that for Arab governments, the Palestinian issue is - among other things - a convenient tactic. By "waving the bloody flag," Arab governments can distract their subjects from misrule, oppression, and misery at home. In particular, Palestinians'

grievances against Israel have their match in the half-century of neglect and oppression they have endured from supposedly "brother" Arab regimes.

In fact, as things stand now, even if the Palestinian -Israeli dispute were quickly solved by exterior diktat, we would still be the target of alienated young Arab Muslims. Why? Because the Arabs' dispute with Israel is only a symptom of a deeper problem, one that cannot be solved by shuttle diplomacy, special envoys or conferences at Wye Plantation.

This deeper problem exists at two levels. Superficially, it has to do with the failure of Arab political and intellectual institutions to address the needs of their young populations. How can being a citizen of Syria, or Lebanon, or Egypt, or Algeria, or Sudan give young Arabs the sense of patriotic identity that we get from being citizens of the United States? Arab states have little emotional hold on the loyalty of their populations; most Arab regimes are corrupt and morally discredited.

This particularly applies to Saudi Arabia, which has shored itself up externally through its ties to the United States, while at home, it both has placated and suppressed opposition by giving "power of attorney" for social affairs to reactionary, xenophobic Muslim clerics (ulema). What personal attachment can Saudi Arabians - 60 percent of whom are under eighteen - feel for their rulers? The king and many of the leading princes are all in their seventies, and must seem more remote from most Saudis than, say, George Washington is from us.

Arab intellectuals have also failed the young Arabs. Where are the Arab Reinhold Neibuhrs, Christopher Dawsons, Karl Barths, Martin Bubers? Where are the politically engaged intellectuals who can help a young Arab make coherent, responsible sense of a troubling modern world? They scarcely exist in the Arab world. The few that even try are threatened, jailed, forced into exile - or worse.

In January 1985, I contacted the Sudanese presidency to plead for the life of a freethinking Islamic reformer, Mahmud Muhammad Taha. During his trial for heresy under Muslim canon law (shari'a), Taha had refused to recant his liberal views and was condemned to death. I was told that the president would not speak to me and that no appeal was possible from the ruling of the religious tribunal. Taha was publicly hanged.

Accordingly, many young and sensitive Arabs - especially members of the educated elite - are deprived of moral and intellectual leadership from their own religious institutions. Bereft of meaningful guidance, they use violence to fill the void, to provide some sort of an answer - even a negative one - to "Who am I?" Jellyfishes, many of them are drawn to the rocks of Usama bin Ladin's Luddite worldview.

### **Modernity's Challenge**

More fundamentally, though, all Arab Muslims - and not just young, educated males - are challenged cosmologically by the modern world. From the start, Muslims saw Islamic society as a "City of God" upon earth. Islamic society was built upon the perfect

teachings of God's own revealed word, dictated and unalterable: the Qur'an. In a spirit reminiscent of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, instructions for even the minutiae of everyday life were divinely vouchsafed therein. Conveniently, Islam's immediate rapid expansion, its political and cultural triumphs, represented incontrovertible evidence to Muslims that God had provided mankind with his perfect and final instruction, for the present and evermore. And Arabs saw God's revelation of the Qur'an to the Arabs and in Arabic as a mark of special divine preference.

From a Muslim's standpoint, the challenges before Muhammad were of a magnitude that, indeed, could only have been overcome by divine guidance and inspiration. He was the prophet, the bearer of God's final revelation. But given Arabia's political anarchy, its social and intellectual disorder, and the proximity of the Sassanid (Persian) and Byzantine empires, he also had to found the Islamic state. He needed to establish the political and legal institutions that could protect and give lasting expression to his teachings.

As a religious figure, Muhammad was more a Moses than a Christ. Yet in Sunni Islam, both the secular and religious sides of Muhammad's mission came to be equally sanctified and immutable - and in theory have remained so to the present. Muslims were supreme in worldly affairs because they were right, and they were right because they were supreme. Only in the eighteenth century did this comforting, complacent alliance between revelation and power begin to break up. That breakup has continued - and accelerated - ever since.

Under Christianity, in contrast, the relationship of politics to revelation was very different. The Christian revelation came to pass under the Roman imperium and Rome's established legal and political institutions. Early Christianity tended to accept them as givens. It expected an early return of the messiah and sought its center in the spiritual, otherworldly aspects of Christ's revelation. Christianity's development, accordingly, was not much constrained by divine prescriptions for the practical organization of man's life upon earth.

So how should a young Arab Muslim today answer the great question, "How, then, should I live?" and its corollaries: "How do we reconcile the Qur'an's assurance of divine favor and worldly power with daily proofs that we Muslims are falling behind? That we are falling behind not just the United States and Europe, but even their despised 'step-child' Israel? Where today are the happy, successful, and above all, powerful states of Islam? How can God allow his people to be so confounded? Are our tribulations a punishment for our flawed practice of his teachings?" An increasingly common answer to all these doubts is this: "I should resolve to become ever-more-and-more intensely and rigorously observant."

Alas! This prescription will never bring relief to the sense of political or moral abandonment of many young Arabs. They are trapped, so to speak, at the bottom of a well, and try to escape by excavating downward - to China. The solution only makes the problem worse. Their anger and frustration at the West grows, and particularly toward its

standard-bearer, the United States. Our worldly success, our mere existence, threatens to refute those beliefs and traditions that give meaning to the lives of Arab youths.

What is to be done? The longer-term solution to the tribulations of Arab Muslim civilization must be found in the inner resources and recuperative powers of Islam itself. But here we encounter another problem: the passive, rigid, uncreative way in which Islamic culture has been transmitted since the Islamic Middle Ages. Modern Arab societies lack a tradition of self-criticism, of rational analysis.

Without the ability to analyze successfully the doings of the world around them, or even of their own societies, the Arab public ego has experienced many reverses. It has become defensive and insecure. Public discourse is dominated by a zeitgeist that attributes any bad news to the workings of various exterior, malevolent powers: British intelligence, the Zionist conspiracy, the U.S. Central Intelligence - but never to one's own shortcomings. Such an alibi absolves Arab egos from any blame or responsibility for every setback.

Consider one fairly recent example: the Egyptian government's refusal even to consider the possibility that on October 31, 1999, the pilot of Egypt Air Flight 990 deliberately flew his plane into the ocean, killing himself, the other crew members, and the 271 passengers aboard. To investigators at the National Transportation Safety Board, the cause of the crash was obvious: the pilot had intentionally pushed the aircraft to its doom. But, to this day, the Egyptian government uncritically pursues ever-more ingenious and far-fetched strategies of denial. Multiplied across any number of similar instances, however, such denial leaves Arabs feeling themselves to be impotent, the playthings of unseen but always hostile forces.

It is hard for us Westerners, even "speaking as a friend," to help heal the uncomprehending, wounded pride of a great civilization. We will not be listened to. There is no ecumenical tradition in Islam. There are mosques all over America - there is even one in Rome - but Christians may not bring so much as a Bible into Saudi Arabia. It is inconceivable that anywhere in the Islamic world, the head of a divinity school would establish professorships in Buddhism, women's studies, and the role of religion in international conflict, as Father Bryan Hehir did at Harvard. In Islamic cultures, the foreigner's extended hand receives no response; indeed, the gesture is likely to be rebuffed or misconstrued.

Similarly, a Muslim might try to proselytize a Christian or a Jew. But for him to engage in a genuine dialogue with them would suggest that their faiths contained some fraction of truth not found in the Qur'an and from which Muslims might benefit for the more perfect worship and understanding of God. And such a possibility is literally inconceivable to a true Islamic believer.

I'll not forget King Faysal's polite but frosty dismissal of my naive suggestion - as a young chargé d'affaires in Jeddah in 1973 - that much benefit might accrue to both the West and to the Arab world, were Saudi Arabia to send some young Islamic scholars to

divinity schools in the United States. A royal adviser afterwards reproached me for raising the question: "You were asking his majesty to mingle truth with falsehood!"

### **Terms of Engagement**

What could Muslims themselves do to rejoin the modern world on terms consistent with our times and with Islamic revelation? Some thoughts follow.

First and foremost, Muslims must try to escape from the flies-in-amber position in which history has placed them. What was revealed ever so long ago as canonical for Islam's secular and spiritual life has become its prison. Islam, like other religions, dazzled and overwhelmed by the deity's transcendent force, has elaborately wrought to tame and to confine that force so that it may be safely observed, or even put to useful work, by mortals. Or to put it another way: not unlike the clerical class of other faiths, the Islamic ulema have made of religion a sort of divine containment vessel - a rule book, a mechanical code that promises power and salvation to true believers.

The various Muslim clerics and their supporters throughout the Arab world will naturally fight any challenge to the lucrative monopoly of interpreting the Qur'an they have enjoyed for well over a millennium. But meanwhile, the world is changing ever faster about them; it is leaving them, and the societies they purport to guide, further and further behind. The latest catastrophic failure of militant, political Islam may represent the death throes of a crusade that went badly astray. After September 11, and after the Taliban's destruction in Afghanistan, will many young Muslims still want to emulate Usama bin Ladin? Who now remembers the mahdi, defeated at Omdurman by Kitchener in 1898, or the much-feared Assassins of Alamut, destroyed by Hulagu Khan in 1256?

<>One may hope that the Taliban's destruction, in particular, will clear the way for Muslims to look again at where they are headed. At the macro level, young Muslims may begin to see the heretical nature of aggressive, political Islam, which diverts its followers from the worship of God and the pursuit of social justice, to a distracting crusade for power in this world. There is an idolatrous quality to political Islam that makes earthly power the principal object of Muslim aspiration. One thinks of the Roman historian Livy's denunciation of any religion "in which the will of the gods is offered as a pretext for crimes."

And at the micro level, one sees young Muslims not refuting, but simply ignoring, the dysfunctional aspects of their tradition. Many sincere, pious Muslim men and women are making their own "right reason" accommodations to modernity. They are acting as many Catholics do, following their own consciences on birth control and other social issues - despite papal claims to infallibility in faith and morals.

With the Qur'an widely accessible to more-or-less educated Muslims, Sunni Islam may be ready for its own Protestant Reformation. God in Islam has always had a personal, direct relationship with his believers: "I am closer to you even than the artery of your neck," says the Qur'an. Might Muslims - from the ground up - be ready to break from the

orthodoxy fastened upon them so long ago? The present moment may be right for the appearance of a chastened, realistic, more flexible Muslim approach to the twenty - first century. If individual Muslims can strike out for themselves, and if necessary, re-open the "gates of ijihad" - that is, to legitimize new interpretations by contemporary scholars - there may be hope for their community's reconciliation with our time.

In Islam's Arab heartland - Egypt, Syria, and Jordan - such an initiative might creatively be led by educated, assertive, Arab professional women. Elsewhere, such an effort might occur in the Muslim diaspora - in Indonesia, or India, or even the United States. And what about the Shi'ite branch of Islam? It would be ironic if Shi'ites, who accord great interpretive authority to their jurisconsults, the great ayatollahs, should lead the Islamic world to a more relevant and better adapted form of Islam.

There may be hope. But, as our distinguished late ambassador to Saudi Arabia, William Porter, used to say, "Hope is a good companion, but a poor guide." As fellow monotheists, as admirers of Islam's contributions to civilization, we may hope that Islam will not let itself be trapped in an obscurantist cul-de-sac. History, however, is unsparingly Darwinian toward societies disfavored by natural selection.

History serves up winners and losers. Where now is classical civilization? In our cultural genes, in our museums. Byzantium? It survives as a truncated, disputatious fraction of "that which once was great." The tempo of the modern world is accelerating. It is harder and harder for non-performing societies to keep up, much less catch up. And, imagine the violence, the pain, the awful grinding, if Islamic civilization, half-brother to the West, were to be drawn into history's rock crusher! As friends of Islam, we can stand watch by the bedside - and hope and pray.

### **How America Can Help**

But, there are a few other things we could do. I would propose first, that when speaking or writing in English, we all stop using "Allah" when we mean "God." A reader or listener might conclude that the God of Muslims is horrific, a Moloch, or something drawn from Aztec mythology. If we can't agree that we worship the same God and that he listens equally to all our prayers - the prayers of Jews, Christians, and Muslims - we will never agree on the smaller issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Second, the United States, with its never-equalled political, economic, and military might, should peremptorily put a stop to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It has already wasted too many lives, taken up too much of our attention, and consumed resources that could have helped move the area forward. It has been too much of a distraction.

The expression "confidence-building measures" has a fantastical, even cynical air of unreality to it, at least as applied in the Middle East. The so-called "peace process" has proven to be little more than a diplomatic perpetual-motion machine. It provides excuses for all to keep things on hold. Between Arab anti-Semitism and Jewish fear of Arab revanchism, no agreement is likely to be reached or to hold unless we take a strong hand.

To us and to many other friends of the region, the outlines of a settlement are pretty clear: they would resemble the Camp David proto-accords. There would be a Palestinian state committed to living in peace with Israel; Israel's West Bank settlements - a bone in the throat to any peace effort - would be dismantled. There would be security guarantees for both Israel and the Palestinians. As a corollary to any agreement, there should be measures in place to monitor the sort of Palestinian state that would emerge; one Taliban-dominated state has been enough.

We should work hard to enlist the association and support of our Western allies in this effort. But we should not get bogged down in details. We should ignore and bypass those who would slow our peace efforts by reviving objections drawn from over fifty years of failed peacemaking. It has been my experience that when the United States makes it clear to all the world that we are utterly determined that something must be done, reality tends to rearrange itself in a complaisant pattern. Once we do, Arab and Israeli leaders could turn to their populations and say with a shrug, "What could I do against the might and desire of the United States?"

Third, our foreign policy should more forcefully and consistently reflect America's ideals. When Secretary Powell eloquently denounced the Taliban's oppression of women, was I the only listener to think he would have made just as much sense if he'd said "Saudi," whenever "Afghan" was mentioned?

Our government wants, it says, to reach Muslims' hearts and minds, to reach "the street." But how to do it? There is a lesson for us in the political landscape of the Middle East. Where governments are friendly to us, we are often unpopular with the Arab street. Where the regimes are unfriendly to us, we are usually popular. The reason may be that in one case we are seen as a government, as an accomplice to the unpopular local power, while in the other we are viewed as a liberating civilization.

American exceptionalism has never been more clearly demonstrated than after the events of September 11 and our victory in Afghanistan. We stand unique in world history, virtually unconstrained by traditional considerations of the balance of power. For the moment, we face no credible adversary. Therefore, we are free to make fuller use of the source of our strength and our appeal. Yet, in Reinhold Niebuhr's words, "We should be humble hawks." We should seize this millenarian moment and work for an international community that better reflects our ideals, which are neither of the East nor of the West, and whose appeal transcends most cultures.