

Colonial echoes

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It is almost too easy to reveal what really lies behind the Greater Middle East Initiative

A few lines into the text of the Greater Middle East Initiative one is gripped with puzzlement. The initiative tops the agenda of the G8 conference scheduled for June in the US. The text, published on 13 February in the London-based Arabic-language newspaper Al-Hayat, gets into the drawbacks of Arab societies by line three. A small introductory paragraph and we are faced with the horrors of the Arab world. The combined GDP of members of the Arab League is less than that of Spain, for example. About 40 per cent of Arab adults, or 65 million persons, are illiterate, two-thirds of these women. The list goes on, establishing the claim, made in the first sentence of the text, that the situation presents a "challenge and unique opportunity to the international community".

An opportunity for what exactly? For reform? In what field? For renaissance? In what area? The initiative cites three areas of reform, based on the two Arab Human Development Reports issued by the UNDP in 2002 and 2003. The text cites the UNDP reports frequently, stressing the fact that their authors were Arabs. So their conclusions about the problems of their own countries must be beyond question, right? The initiative's text notes three areas where the Arabs are particularly at fault: (a) democracy, (b) knowledge, and (c) women's empowerment. The initiative speaks at length of the "expansion" of economic opportunity in the Arab world.

The first thing that must come to the Arab mind is: what a bundle of nonsense is this? What business do you have interfering in our affairs? Have we complained to you about our democracy, knowledge and women, and asked for help? The more one thinks of it, the more outrageous the whole thing seems. For one thing, the ailments the text mentions -- democracy, knowledge, women -- go back a long way, decades if not centuries. So, why the sudden interest in righting the wrongs? Why now?

Moreover, our political and economic relationship with the United States is nothing new. Egyptian-US bonds became particularly close since the 1970s when Nixon visited Egypt and the latter then embarked on a policy of economic openness and started disengagement talks with Israel. With US blessing, Egypt launched close cooperation with the IMF and the World Bank, a development that facilitated the flow of loans and financial aid from these two prominent financial organisations, as well as the US government, to the country. So why has anyone not mentioned these problems earlier? It would have been easy to mention them, apply gentle prodding, even hint that the continuation of such intimate liaisons and aid hinges upon the introduction of reforms? Why has not anyone done that?

Other Arab countries had, and still have, close ties with the United States, even before Egypt drew close to Washington. This goes for the entire Gulf area (including Iraq in the first 20 years of Saddam's rule). So why has the virtuous outrage come so suddenly?

The only explanation the Greater Middle East Initiative offers is that the deplorable

conditions in Arab countries spawn Arab and Islamic terror and the latter threatens US and European security, as the 11 September events show. So something has to be done at last. According to the text of the initiative, "the three drawbacks mentioned by the Arab authors of the two UN Arab Human Development Reports for 2002 and 2003 - - freedom, knowledge, and women empowerment -- create conditions detrimental to the national interests of all G8 members. So long as the number of people deprived of their political and economic rights is rising, the region will witness an increase in extremism, terror, international crime, and illegal immigration."

The claim that the Greater Middle East Initiative aims, wholly or partly, to eliminate terror of the type seen on 11 September 2001 is unconvincing, for several reasons. One is that there is still doubt that the September attacks were the outcome of Arab and Islamic terror. No conclusive proof to this effect is yet available. Many writers, American and European, as well as Arab, suspect that the attacks were carried out by Americans, or with American assistance, or that Americans knew about them and kept silent. Such doubts are strong and rest on damning evidence, but the US administration forcefully censors them and bans any discussion of the matter -- something that, by the way, makes one suspect the US administration's commitment to "knowledge". But enough of that.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that the September attacks were truly the outcome of Arab and Islamic terror. Let's also assume that so-called Arab and Islamic terror is a phenomenon truly independent from any foreign intervention. Let's assume that Arab and Islamic terror has not been helped and abetted by intelligence services from other parts of the world; services that provided support to terror in order to overthrow communist regimes; services that continue to use terror for other purposes, including that of advancing schemes such as the Greater Middle East. Let's assume that Arab and Islamic terror is purely Arab and Islamic, emanating from Arab sources, grown on Arab soil. Even if this were true, the claim that terror is the outcome of the lack of freedom, knowledge and women's empowerment is still untenable, for several reasons.

Firstly, on the basis of what rigorous analysis can you claim that the cause of terror is the lack of democracy, knowledge and women's empowerment? The terror you complain of is a terror directed against you. What guarantee do you have that an Arab government that is democratic and faithfully expressing the sentiments of its own people would not engage in acts of terror against you, or encourage certain individuals to carry out such acts? Take, for example, the case of the Iranian government, which came to power in 1979 as a result of a popular revolt overwhelmingly supported by the Iranian people. Was it not under that government that Ayatollah Khomeini issued an edict sanctioning the murder of UK writer Salman Rushdie for writing a novel thought to be anti-Islamic? Perhaps democracy is not sufficient to eliminate terror, one would think.

As for the lack of knowledge, what do you have to say about the young Arab men who you say piloted the planes that crashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon? Weren't they well educated, with enough technical sophistication to commandeer commercial planes? So, knowledge is not sufficient to eliminate terror, one would think. Or do you mean something else by knowledge? For if you mean knowledge of international literature and humanities, please say so, as it is much easier to catch up in that domain.

Concerning women, what do you have to say of the Palestinian girls and women --

people who you definitely regard as terrorists -- who blew themselves to pieces in protest against the usurpation of their national rights, hoping their sacrifice may bring back Palestine? Most of these women were educated, independently minded and loaded with confidence. Yet you would see their actions as high terror. So women's empowerment is not sufficient to eliminate terror. Or is it another type of empowerment you have in mind?

It is much simpler to assume that the main cause of terror is not related to inadequate democracy, knowledge and women power, but to the special relations we have with the US, and to the US position on the Palestinian issue and Israel. If so, then the Greater Middle East Initiative is likely to increase, rather than temper, the region's inclination for terror. Because such a project would strengthen the region's relationship with the US, and make this relationship even more lop-sided. The initiative seems geared towards worse treatment of the Palestinians -- for one thing, it does not have anything to say of the Palestinians and their suffering. The only country in the region the initiative has a good word for is Israel.

Secondly, let's assume, for the sake of argument, that a regime more democratic, more dedicated to education and knowledge, and more respectful of women can eliminate terror. How long would that effort take? All these matters are slow to change, and their beneficial consequences would only be felt in the long run. Are you really willing to put up with terror for that long? Or should we be looking for a faster and more effective way to eliminate terror, such as the elimination of counter-terror, of the type Israel practises in Palestine, and the US in Iraq?

Thirdly, if the three reforms -- democracy, knowledge, and women -- were truly capable of eliminating terror, as you define it, why hasn't anything been done about them in the past 30 years in which you had immense influence in most Arab countries? Mind you, many omens preceded the 11 September attacks, including acts of violence against tourists and Copts in Egypt, for example.

If the doubts mentioned above are justified, and I think they are, then this sudden interest in reform has ulterior motives, such as controlling Iraq's oil, carving off regional markets, softening the region for Israel's domination. Since none of these motives are in the interest of Arabs, they had to be sugarcoated with slogans superficially compatible with Arab interests: democracy, knowledge, women's empowerment and development.

Freedom and democratisation would make Iraq's occupation more palatable. Changing the education curricula -- under the guise of fortifying knowledge and improving the lot of women -- would make students accept the idea of cooperating with Israel. Television channels created with US funding, on the pretext of improving knowledge and the media, would help sell US and Israeli goods. Creating a Middle East development bank, as mentioned in the initiative, would give Israel a share in the distribution and sharing of oil revenues and any foreign aid coming to the region. It is no wonder, therefore, that an initiative exclusively critical of Arab countries should be envisioned at the scale of a Greater Middle East -- for its aim is to bring the prey closer to the predator, to help the top dog have its way.

The Greater Middle East Initiative reminds me of the leaflet Napoleon Bonaparte distributed to the Egyptians when his armies invaded Egypt in 1798. The similarity is striking, although the French and US projects are two centuries apart. I went back to Napoleon's statement, cited by one of his Egyptian contemporaries, the historian Al-

Gabarti. The statement opens on a devout note and proceeds to advocate democracy and equality, while maligning the local rulers of the country for treating foreigners unjustly. "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, Who has not Son and no Partner ... this is issued by the French authority, on the basis of freedom and equality, on orders from the chief of staff, the commander of French Army, Bonaparte ... for a long time, the chieftains who control Egypt have been inflicting humiliation and scorn on the French community, treating French merchants unjustly, subjecting them to harm and assault in many ways."

Interestingly, the statement is phrased as if it were written first in French then given to an Egyptian to translate it. Its awkward phrasing recalls that often noticeable in the Arabic versions of the Arab Human Development Reports -- so often referred to in the US initiative. It is as if parts of the two reports in question were originally written in English.

Just as the US initiative does two centuries later, Napoleon's statement proceeds to promise the Egyptians progress and prosperity under French rule. "From now on, no Egyptian is to despair of assuming high office or moving up to high places. The scientists and the best minds of the nation would be in charge, and this would improve the situation in the country." Napoleon spoke softly, but like the Americans of today, carried a big stick. "Any village rising against French soldiers would be put to the torch," goes Article II of the French statement.

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