

Nadim Shehadi

Battle of Ideas

How will the tide of ideas turn in the Arab world after the fall of Saddam Hussein? It is assumed Iraq will become a beacon of democracy in the region and set an example for all. But what if the opposite happens and the region turns more radical? Wars and their aftermath generate a basic re-evaluation of values and principles. The United States is now in conflict with most of the tendencies in the Middle East, from the secular Ba'athists to the fundamentalists and nationalists. Battlefield victory does not guarantee triumph in the battle of ideas. After Iraq, it could go either way.

JUST AS BISMARCK WAS THE model for Europe after the fall of Paris in 1870, the Arab elite emerged from the First World War and the end of the Ottoman empire emulating their western conquerors. A snapshot of politicians in Cairo, Damascus, Jerusalem or Baghdad in the 1930s would reveal a nationalist elite fighting for self-determination and democracy with western values.

They sent their children to be educated in France or Britain, dressed like Edwardian gentlemen in their Sunday best with fezzes and trilbies, and produced post-colonial regimes led by notables with secular and liberal aspirations.

The shock of the loss of Palestine in 1948 totally discredited that model and a snapshot in the 1950s would show pan-Arab nationalist dictators in military uniforms that had overthrown what were seen as the corrupt failed lackeys of imperialism. The US supported this new model while Britain was trying to cling to the liberal notables.

Although Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser lost the military side of the war in Suez, he emerged, thanks again to the US, with a moral victory. In the ensuing

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decade or so, our snapshot would show his secular socialist pan-Arab military dictatorship and its ideas replicated in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan

and Libya, with gradual movement towards the Soviet bloc. Even Saudi Arabia under King Faisal was Arab nationalist at that time, with much less conservative religious Wahhabi influence. Lebanon had an army general as its president. The atmosphere was still secular but it gradually became anti-western. Pan-Arabism was seen as the antidote for the fragmentation imposed on the area by the 1916 Sykes Picot agreement and the



west, which led to the creation of Israel.

Then came the humiliating Arab defeat of the 1967 Six-Day war. This model was itself declared bankrupt, heralding the gradual rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Secularism, in all its forms, had simply failed to deliver. The Islamic alternative was given several boosts: the Iranian revolution, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the collapse of the Soviet Union, successive Gulf wars, Afghanistan and the failure of the Middle East peace process. Ayatollahs Ruhollah Khomeini and Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, Hizbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hamas and eventually Osama Bin Laden would dominate the next snapshot – barbers were going out of business. Islam provided the answers where other models failed.

Now the Middle East is faced with another defeat which will certainly alter the status quo and eventually create a new order. The Saddam Hussein regime was the last bastion of an Arab nationalist and secular order. It managed to survive the rise of Islamic ideas and the collapse of the Soviet Union by compromising with Islam in its rhetoric and being useful to the west in containing Iran. His downfall has created a vacuum and the devastation caused will probably produce a movement away from that model. The ripple effect of this latest and no less humiliating defeat will shake the regional order and affect the other Arab regimes perceived to be in disarray and out of tune with their people. Will an imposed liberal democratic order provide the answer? The final outcome is not entirely predictable.

UNITING THE OPPOSITION

One worry is that Washington's new approach has focused opposition on itself. The previous containment policy meant that a balance was maintained between all the contradictory regional forces, allowing them to control each other. Now the US is against every ideological and religious trend.

The main competing philosophies in the Arab world, pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism, both aspire to some form of unity and oppose fragmentation along ethnic and religious lines. The basic ideological division is between secularists and religious fundamentalists. Religious convictions split between Shi'as and Sunnis. Political outlooks divide into radical and conservative pro-western states.

The worst enemies of the fundamentalists have always been the Ba'athists, who dominate Iraq and Syria.

Rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia translates into a global confrontation between Shi'a and Sunni Islam which is present in every mosque. Bin Laden and Al Qaeda capitalise for their support on grievances against the Al Saud family and the western presence in the Gulf.

An album of US enemies would now contain photographs of fundamentalist beards and turbans; the moustaches, caps and berets of the Ba'athi Arab nationalist secularists; and even the flowing robes and Armani suits of its allies, reflecting tension between the US and conservative allies like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan. The 'axis of evil' even includes a secular, a fundamentalist and a communist state.

Washington seems to be at war with every ideological tendency in the Arab and Muslim world and the effect may be to

unite them against the west rather than to divide and rule. Developments in the coming months are crucial. The new order in Iraq has to convince everyone in the region that they have been wrong all along, that only liberal democracy has the answer and that this is the example to follow.

BIN LADEN FACTOR

Islamic movements such as Hizbollah in Lebanon, Hamas, Islamic Jihad in Palestine and Al Qaeda may also emerge victorious from this war. Hizbollah is behind what is seen as the only Israeli military defeat at the hands of Arabs. It was also associated with driving American 'redeployment' after the 1983 Beirut marines bombing. Inspired by this, Hamas and Islamic Jihad have set out to create havoc in Israel. Al Qaeda launched a major, and in its terms successful, terror operation against America.

If things turn wrong and the US is viewed as an aggressor promoting an Israeli agenda, people could be driven towards the Islamic model, which could be regarded as the only alternative able to provide an answer. Radicalisation would spread and Islamic movements would see their numbers swell.

This is what President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt called the creation of hundreds of Bin Ladens. With the majority of Arab regimes denounced as corrupt, undemocratic and failing to meet even the very basic needs of their citizens, Islamic movements could still emerge as the most viable alternative.

ISRAELI AGENDA

It would be easier for the people in the region to believe in the benevolent nature of the American and British invasion of Iraq if the US policy associated with it was not so deeply involved with the Israeli agenda for Palestinians. The right-wing approach seeks to dislodge President Yasser Arafat and reform the Palestine Authority to create a democratic Palestinian entity that Israel presumes it can live with. The influence of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on President George Bush and that of the Israeli lobby on the neo-conservative trend in US policy is too obvious to be dismissed.

Lack of progress on the Middle East peace would re-enforce the view that what is happening in Iraq is not for the benefit of the Arab region. The fact that weapons of mass destruction were not used by Iraq and were elusive in the aftermath, when it is known that Israel possesses them, is

another reason for doubting US intentions.

Occupation has always backfired and is not sustainable. In 1982 the hitherto pacifist Shi'a population of south Lebanon, fed up with paying the price for the Palestine Liberation Organization presence, greeted the Israeli invaders as liberators. A few months later they had become radicalised, not only against occupation but also in opposition to western multinational forces, which were seen as promoting the Israeli agenda of regime change in Lebanon to suit the occupation. Hizbollah, the movement that later routed the Israelis from the south, comes from the same people that threw rice and flowers on their arrival.



The 'liberation' of Iraq was greeted with much less enthusiasm from the start. The Americans are already behaving as occupiers; the symbolism of the Stars and Stripes draped over Saddam's statue is as important as the figure being torn down. The occupation could turn into a scenario like the Spanish civil war, when European intellectuals, poets and radicals flocked to join the action.

Gaining the confidence of Iraqis and the wider Arab world is not eased by the history of American and British intervention in the region, which is seen to have consistently backed oppressive regimes. More recently, the tragedy of the 1991 anti-Saddam uprising, which was not supported by the west, is still in people's memory. So too is the suffering caused by sanctions and turning a blind eye to atrocities committed against the Kurds in the gas attack on Halabja, while Baghdad was supported in its war on Iran.

AL-JAZEERA FACTOR

Such images would travel faster now. The Arab and Islamic world has become much smaller; both ideas and information spread more rapidly because of ready access to satellite television, in particular the talk shows of Al-Jazeera TV. The snapshot in the album has become a kaleidoscope of images. Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians are instantly communicated to an audience from Morocco to Oman. So are Arab fiascos, failed summit conferences, news of double talk by leaders eager to remain in the good books of the US while maintaining rhetoric that aims to satisfy the population.

Other satellite channels are keen to compete with Al-Jazeera, and this has changed the character of Arab broadcasting. Viewers of news and chat shows have instant access to contradictory signals. They saw the fall of Saddam's statue; jubilant people free from a despotic regime and free to express it. They also watch impotent Arab regimes questioned and humiliated, news of suicide bombers, of Islamic resistance, 'collateral damage' and civilian casualties, an Arab capital

bombarded, looted and in chaos, with priority given to oil ministries and installations. They sometimes switch to US channels and are exposed to the arrogance of coalition spokespeople on CNN; their values questioned by Fox News where they learn of the bickering over contracts and post-war spoils.

How will the famous Arab street read all this in the next decade or so and what

values and principles will it embrace? Contrary to expectations, the reaction to the war in Afghanistan has been apathetic; it is too early to judge the response to the fall of Baghdad. The declared aims of the coalition are not too far removed from the aims of the population. The removal of Saddam was greeted with mixed feelings; American criticism of the state of the Arab order echoes the general malaise Arabs feel about their state of affairs, as partially reflected in last year's UN Arab Human Development Report.

It is possible to see this as the final demise of an order that, during most of the twentieth century, has been experimenting with western ideas which have led to the present fiasco. Will liberal democracy be the answer? The end result cannot be imposed and we have to accept it. The Arab mind, in seeking an alternative, will examine all the options.

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