

# U.S. WAR ON TERROR — A MIDDLE EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

A decade ago, when the U.S. was in the process of building a broad coalition with the aim of kicking the invading Iraqi army out of Kuwait, average Arabs and Muslims were heavily lectured on the need to put in place a “New World Order.” Since the Sept. 11 attacks, the predominant American theme has been “The War on Terrorism.” On the streets of Arab and Muslim countries, skepticism and cynicism are the prevailing reaction then and now. The most recent U.S. campaign again raises questions about U.S. credibility in the region. This skepticism reveals that an extremely large proportion of Arabs and Muslims do not trust Americans.

In fact, whenever something is suspected of being fake, the spontaneous question asked by an average Egyptian is “Is that genuine or American?” The Americans, in their turn, have a growing belief that all Arabs and Muslims do hate them. Whenever an anti-American attack takes place, fingers of blame are immediately pointed at an Arab or a Muslim. It seems, then, that the roots of skepticism are pretty mutual. And furthermore, they date back far before the destruction of the WTC and the Pentagon.

It would be ludicrous and illogical to assume that any in-depth analysis, however thorough or objective it may be, can provide the one and only explanation for the growing wall of distrust between the U.S. and many in the Middle Eastern countries — Arab and Muslim peoples. A recipe for bringing down that wall of mutual mistrust is neither handy nor

expected. Yet it would be a shame not to at least try for an explanation.

## Clash of Civilizations

Over the past decade, many in the Muslim world have developed a strong belief that since the demise of communism as a viable blueprint for the right ideological foundation for any given group of nations, Islam has been painted as the West’s Enemy No. 1. Israel, according to the proponents of this belief, has been very much behind promoting a vicious picture of Islam as posing a political, cultural and security menace for the U.S. and Europe — as was the case with the now-defeated enemy communism. Many think that the Jewish state and its lobbies have sought to implant this idea to serve their own ends. Surely one of these purposes is a massive crackdown on Palestinian resistance groups as part of the “war against terror” or “Israel’s strike back,” as many U.S. media outlets have called it.

During the Cold War era, the West saw communism as more than an ideology embraced by a group of people and a number of societies. The U.S.-led camp saw it as a set of political, economic and social doctrines diametrically opposed to those followed by the West. Just as the Western media focused on the “ugly face” of communism, Islam is now being demonized. The media are making a point of reporting the marked differences between life in the West and life in the Muslim societies.

“Either with us or with the terrorists,” “Dead or alive,” and other bellicose slogans repeatedly used by senior U.S. officials, led by President George Bush himself, have not gone over very well in the Arab world. Muslims have inter-



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## ON THE ARAB STREET, SKEPTICISM AND CYNICISM ABOUT THE U.S. PREVAIL.

BY KHALED ABDULKAREEM

preted it as an indication that they are in the ‘other’ camp. It was also a reminder of the Churchillian language that dominated the years following World War II and the Truman Doctrine, which remained an integral part of American foreign policy for four decades.

Unfortunately, some voices in the West and in the U.S. media appeared to re-echo the core ideas of *The Clash of Civilizations*, in which Samuel Huntington contends that “the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate world politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.” Or consider Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who recently spoke of the superiority of Western civilization over that of Muslims and Arabs, whom he painted as lagging behind in the “race of civilizations.” And President Bush has slipped more than once into using the word “crusade” in reference to the campaign against al-Qaida, the Taliban and any other “terrorist” entity. That term did not go over well with Arabs and Muslims.

### **War Hawks Fly Again**

Mere references to the Crusades by Western leaders are enough to cause skepticism in the Middle East. Arabs and Muslims still remember that the expansion of land, trade and religious relics were among the ulterior motives of the religious battles whose declared goal was to recover the “Holy Land” (Palestine) from the Muslims. And as the Crusades began with an impassioned sermon given by Pope Urban II, Mr. Bush began the “war on terror” with a remarkable speech to Congress on Sept. 20. Both messages found great appeal, but many of those who answered the call in both cases took up arms, not for the causes of “Christianity” and uprooting “terrorism,” but to serve their own agendas. It is true that the Bush administration has been trying assiduously to avoid the ideological underpinning of its “war on terror.” Yet recurrent negative references to “Islamic militants,” “Islamic extremism,” and “Islamic charities,” and the law

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enforcement campaign against Arabs and Muslims, push many to question U.S. efforts.

U.S. history books refer to the “War Hawks” — a group of Republicans in the United States Congress who advocated war with Britain in 1812. It was the War Hawks who swung the close vote when Congress was called upon by President

James Madison to declare war on the British in June 1812. Some historians believe the true motive behind the War Hawks was not resolution of shipping problems with Britain, but rather the desire to annex parts of southern Canada to the United States.

As fate would have it, such “War Hawks” have the upper hand in U.S. politics once again. Both in Congress and the Bush administration, there is a group of ardent “War Hawks” who are advocating expansion into countries such as Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Iran and Syria — all of which are Muslim. It is a coincidence, of course, but it adds to deep-seated Muslim doubts about American intentions.

Some speak of Arabs and Muslims as people obsessed with conspiracy theories, self-defeating scenarios and the inability to look into the root causes of “poverty and extremism” plaguing their societies. This could be a legitimate line of thought. But there is also a need to acknowledge the legitimate concerns of Arabs and Muslims, which should not be sidetracked or ignored in the tendency toward American unilateralism.

### **Way Out**

It would not be practical at all to imagine that a quick fix is possible for years of eroding trust between Muslims and the West, especially the U.S. But one possible way toward bridging the gap is for the Americans to show more respect — not just in words but in actions as well — to the cultural and religious make-up of the Arabs. A less biased policy (nobody is expecting full justice) may help improve America’s image in the Middle East. Arabs and Muslims have their side of the story as well. A fresh perspective, free from exaggeration, should be adopted in painting the Western world to the average people in the East. Such a process of healing may take many years. In short, the camp fond of demonizing each side should give us a break. ■