

Thoughts about America and the Future

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I

I don't know a single Arab or Muslim American who does not now feel that he or she belongs to the enemy camp, and that being in the United States at this moment provides us with an especially unpleasant experience of alienation and widespread, quite specifically targeted hostility. For despite the occasional official statements saying that Islam and Muslims and Arabs are not enemies of the United States, everything else about the current situation argues the exact opposite.

Hundreds of young Arab and Muslim men have been picked up for questioning and, in far too many cases, detained by the police or the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Anyone with an Arab or Muslim name is usually made to stand aside for special attention during airport security checks. There have been many reported instances of discriminatory behaviour against Arabs, so that speaking Arabic or even reading an Arabic document in public is likely to draw unwelcome attention. And of course, the media have run far too many 'experts' and 'commentators' on terrorism, Islam, and the Arabs whose endlessly repetitious and reductive line is so hostile and so misrepresents our history, society and culture that the media itself has become little more than an arm of the war on terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere, as now seems to be the case with the projected attack to 'end' Iraq. There are US forces already in several countries with important Muslim populations like the Philippines and Somalia, the build-up against Iraq continues, and Israel prolongs its sadistic collective punishment of the Palestinian people, all with what seems like great public approval in the United States.

While true in some respects, this is quite misleading. America is more than what Bush and Rumsfeld and the others say it is. I have come to deeply resent the notion that I must accept the picture of America as being involved in a 'just war' against something unilaterally

labelled as terrorism by Bush and his advisers, a war that has assigned us the role of either silent witnesses or defensive immigrants who should be grateful to be allowed residence in the United States. The historical realities are different: America is an immigrant republic and has always been one. It is a nation of laws passed not by God but by its citizens. Except for the mostly exterminated native Americans, the original Indians, everyone who now lives here as an American citizen originally came to these shores as an immigrant from somewhere else, even Bush and Rumsfeld. The Constitution does not provide for different levels of Americanness, nor for approved or disapproved forms of 'American behaviour,' including things that have come to be called 'un-' or 'anti-American' statements or attitudes. That is the invention of American Taliban who want to regulate speech and behaviour in ways that remind one eerily of the un-regretted former rulers of Afghanistan. And even if Mr Bush insists on the importance of religion in America, he is not authorised to enforce such views on the citizenry or to speak for everyone when he makes proclamations in China and elsewhere about God and America and himself. The Constitution expressly separates church and state.

There is worse. By passing the Patriot Act last November, Bush and his compliant Congress have suppressed or abrogated or abridged whole sections of the First, Fourth, Fifth and Eighth Amendments, instituted legal procedures that give individuals no recourse either to a proper defence or a fair trial, that allow secret searches, eavesdropping, detention without limit, and, given the treatment of the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, that allow the United States executive branch to abduct prisoners, detain them indefinitely, decide unilaterally whether or not they are prisoners of war and whether or not the Geneva Conventions apply to them – which is not a decision to be taken by individual countries. Moreover, as Congressman Dennis Kucinich (Democrat, Ohio) said in a magnificent speech given on 17 February, the president and his men were not authorised to declare war (Operation Enduring Freedom) against the world without limit or reason, were not authorised to increase military spending to over \$400 billion per year, were not authorised to repeal the Bill of Rights. Furthermore, he added – the first such statement by a prominent, publicly elected official – 'we did not ask that the blood of innocent people, who perished on September 11, be avenged with the blood of innocent villagers in Afghanistan.' I strongly recommend that Rep. Kucinich's speech, which was made with the best of American principles and values in mind, be published in full in Arabic so that people in our part of the world can understand that America is not a monolith for the use of George Bush and Dick Cheney, but in fact contains many voices and currents of opinion which this government is trying to silence or make irrelevant.

The problem for the world today is how to deal with the unparalleled and unprecedented power of the United States, which in effect has made no secret of the fact that it does not need co-ordination with or approval of others in the pursuit of what a small circle of men and women around Bush believe are its

interests. So far as the Middle East is concerned, it does seem that since 11 September there has been almost an Israelisation of United States policy: and in effect Ariel Sharon and his associates have cynically exploited the single-minded attention to 'terrorism' by George Bush and have used that as a cover for their continued failed policy against the Palestinians. The point here is that Israel is not the United States and, mercifully, the US is not Israel: thus, even though Israel commands Bush's support for the moment, Israel is a small country whose continued survival as an ethnocentric state in the midst of an Arab-Islamic sea depends not just on an expedient if not infinite dependence on the United States, but rather on accommodation with its environment, not the other way round. That is why I think Sharon's policy has finally been revealed to a significant number of Israelis as suicidal, and why more and more Israelis are taking the reserve officers' position against serving the military occupation as a model for their approach and resistance. This is the best thing to have emerged from the *Intifada*. It proves that Palestinian courage and defiance in resisting occupation have finally brought fruit.

What has not changed, however, is the United States position, which has been escalating towards a more and more metaphysical sphere, in which Bush and his people identify themselves (as in the very name of the military campaign, Operation Enduring Freedom) with righteousness, purity, the good, and manifest destiny, its external enemies with an equally absolute evil. Anyone reading the world press in the past few weeks can ascertain that people outside the United States are both mystified by and aghast at the vagueness of US policy, which claims for itself the right to imagine and create enemies on a world scale, then prosecute wars on them without much regard for accuracy of definition, specificity of aim, concreteness of goal, or, worst of all, the legality of such actions. What does it mean to defeat 'evil terrorism' in a world like ours? It cannot mean eradicating everyone who opposes the United States, an infinite and strangely pointless task; nor can it mean changing the world map to suit the United States, substituting people we think are 'good guys' for evil creatures like Saddam Hussein. The radical simplicity of all this is attractive to Washington bureaucrats whose domain is either purely theoretical or who, because they sit behind desks in the Pentagon, tend to see the world as a distant target for the United State's very real and virtually unopposed power. For if you live 10,000 miles away from any known evil state and you have at your disposal acres of warplanes, 19 aircraft carriers, and dozens of submarines, plus a million and a half people under arms, all of them willing to serve their country idealistically in the pursuit of what Bush and Condoleezza Rice keep referring to as evil, the chances are that you will be willing to use all that power sometime, somewhere, especially if the administration keeps asking for (and getting) billions of dollars to be added to the already swollen defence budget.

From my point of view, the most shocking thing of all is that with few exceptions most prominent intellectuals and commentators in this country have tolerated the Bush programme, tolerated and in some flagrant cases, tried to go

beyond it, toward more self-righteous sophistry, more uncritical self-flattery, more specious argument. What they will not accept is that the world we live in, the historical world of nations and peoples, is moved and can be understood by politics, not by huge general absolutes like good and evil, with America always on the side of good, its enemies on the side of evil. When Thomas Friedman tiresomely sermonises to Arabs that they have to be more self-critical, missing in anything he says is the slightest tone of self-criticism. Somehow, he thinks, the atrocities of 11 September entitle him to preach at others, as if only the United States had suffered such terrible losses, and as if lives lost elsewhere in the world were not worth lamenting quite as much or drawing as large moral conclusions from.

One notices the same discrepancies and blindness when Israeli intellectuals concentrate on their own tragedies and leave out of the equation the much greater suffering of a dispossessed people without a state, or an army, or an air force, or a proper leadership, that is, Palestinians whose suffering at the hands of Israel continues minute by minute, hour by hour. This sort of moral blindness, this inability to evaluate and weigh the comparative evidence of sinner and sinned against (to use a moralistic language that I normally avoid and detest) is very much the order of the day, and it must be the critical intellectual's job not to fall into – indeed, actively to campaign against falling into – the trap. It is not enough to say blandly that all human suffering is equal, then to go on basically bewailing one's own miseries: it is far more important to see what the strongest party does, and to question rather than justify that. The intellectual's is a voice in opposition to and critical of great power, which is consistently in need of a restraining and clarifying conscience and a comparative perspective, so that the victim will not, as is often the case, be blamed and real power encouraged to do its will.

A week ago I was stunned when a European friend asked me what I thought of a declaration by 60 American intellectuals that was published in all the major French, German, Italian and other continental papers but which did not appear in the United States at all, except on the Internet where few people took notice of it. This declaration took the form of a pompous sermon about the American war against evil and terrorism being 'just' and in keeping with American values, as defined by these self-appointed interpreters of our country. Paid for and sponsored by something called the Institute for American Values, whose main (and financially well-endowed) aim is to propagate ideas in favour of families, 'fathering' and 'mothering,' and God, the declaration was signed by Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, Daniel Patrick Moynihan among many others, but basically written by a conservative feminist academic, Jean Bethke Elshtain. Its main arguments about a 'just' war were inspired by Professor Michael Walzer, a supposed socialist who is allied with the pro-Israel lobby in this country, and whose role is to justify everything Israel does by recourse to vaguely leftist principles. In signing this declaration, Walzer has given up all pretension to leftism and, like Sharon, allies himself with an interpretation (and a questionable one at that) of America as a righteous warrior against terror and evil, the more to

make it appear that Israel and the US are similar countries with similar aims.

Nothing could be further from the truth, since Israel is not the state of its citizens but of all the Jewish people, while the United States is most assuredly only the state of its citizens. Moreover, Walzer never has the courage to state boldly that in supporting Israel he is supporting a state structured by ethno-religious principles, which (with typical hypocrisy) he would oppose in the United States if this country were declared to be white and Christian.

Walzer's inconsistencies and hypocrisies aside, the document is really addressed to 'our Muslim brethren' who are supposed to understand that America's war is not against Islam but against those who oppose all sorts of principles, which it would be hard to disagree with. Who could oppose the principle that all human beings are equal, that killing in the name of God is a bad thing, that freedom of conscience is excellent, and that 'the basic subject of society is the human person, and the legitimate role of government is to protect and help to foster the conditions for human flourishing'? In what follows, however, America turns out to be the aggrieved party and, even though some of its mistakes in policy are acknowledged very briefly (and without mentioning anything specific in detail), it is depicted as hewing to principles unique to the United States, such as that all people possess inherent moral dignity and status, that universal moral truths exist and are available to everyone, or that civility is important where there is disagreement, and that freedom of conscience and religion are a reflection of basic human dignity and are universally recognised. Fine. For although the authors of this sermon say it is often the case that such great principles are contravened, no sustained attempt is made to say where and when those contraventions actually occur (as they do all the time), or whether they have been more contravened than followed, or anything as concrete as that. Yet in a long footnote, Walzer and his colleagues set forth a list of how many American 'murders' have occurred at Muslim and Arab hands, including those of the Marines in Beirut in 1983, as well as other military combatants.

Somehow making a list of that kind is worth making for these militant defenders of America, whereas the murder of Arabs and Muslims – including the hundreds of thousands killed with American weapons by Israel with United States support, or the hundreds of thousands killed by US-maintained sanctions against the innocent civilian population of Iraq – need be neither mentioned nor tabulated. What sort of dignity is there in humiliating Palestinians by Israel, with American complicity and even co-operation, and where is the nobility and moral conscience of saying nothing as Palestinian children are killed, millions besieged, and millions more kept as stateless refugees? Or for that matter, the millions killed in Vietnam, Columbia, Turkey, and Indonesia with American support and acquiescence?

All in all, this declaration of principles and complaint addressed by American intellectuals to their Muslim brethren seems like neither a statement of real conscience nor of true intellectual criticism against the arrogant use of power, but rather is the opening salvo in a new cold war declared by the United States in full

ironic co-operation, it would seem, with those Islamists who have argued that 'our' war is with the West and with America. Speaking as someone with a claim on America and the Arabs, I find this sort of hijacking rhetoric profoundly objectionable. While it pretends to the elucidation of principles and the declaration of values, it is in fact exactly the opposite, an exercise in not knowing, in blinding readers with a patriotic rhetoric that encourages ignorance as it overrides real politics, real history, and real moral issues. Despite its vulgar trafficking in great 'principles and values,' it does none of that, except to wave them around in a bullying way designed to cow foreign readers into submission. I have a feeling that this document wasn't published here for two reasons: one is that it would be so severely criticised by American readers that it would be laughed out of court and two, that it was designed as part of a recently announced, extremely well-funded Pentagon scheme to put out propaganda as part of the war effort, and therefore intended for foreign consumption.

Whatever the case, the publication of 'What are American Values?' augurs a new and degraded era in the production of intellectual discourse. For when the intellectuals of the most powerful country in the history of the world align themselves so flagrantly with that power, pressing that power's case instead of urging restraint, reflection, genuine communication and understanding, we are back to the bad old days of the intellectual war against communism, which we now know brought far too many compromises, collaborations and fabrications on the part of intellectuals and artists who should have played an altogether different role. Subsidised and underwritten by the government (the Central Intelligence Agency especially, which went as far as providing for the subvention of magazines like *Encounter*, underwrote scholarly research, travel and concerts as well as artistic exhibitions), those militantly unreflective and uncritical intellectuals and artists in the 1950s and 1960s brought to the whole notion of intellectual honesty and complicity a new and disastrous dimension. For along with that effort went also the domestic campaign to stifle debate, intimidate critics, and restrict thought. For many Americans, like myself, this is a shameful episode in our history, and we must be on our guard against and resist its return.

II

Thinking ahead: after survival, what happens?

Anyone with any connection at all to Palestine is today (7 April 2002) in a state of stunned outrage and shock. While almost a repeat of what happened in 1982, Israel's current all-out colonial assault on the Palestinian people (with George Bush's astoundingly ignorant and grotesque support) is indeed worse than Sharon's two previous mass forays in 1971 and 1982 against the Palestinian people. The political and moral climate today is a good deal cruder and reductive, the media's destructive role (which has played the part almost entirely of singling out Palestinian suicide attacks and isolating them from their context in Israel's 35-year illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories) greater in favouring the Israeli view of things, the United States' power more unchallenged, the war

against terrorism has more completely taken over the global agenda and, so far as the Arab environment is concerned, there is greater incoherence and fragmentation than ever before.

Sharon's homicidal instincts have been enhanced (if that's the right word) by all of the above, and magnified to boot. This in effect means that he can do more damage with more impunity than before, although he is also more deeply undermined than before in all his efforts as well as in his entire career by the failure that comes with single-minded negation and hate, which in the end nourish neither political nor even military success. Conflicts between peoples such as this contain more elements than can be eliminated by tanks and air power, and a war against unarmed civilians – no matter how many times Sharon lumberingly and mindlessly trumpets his stupid mantras about terror – can never bring a really lasting political result of the sort his dreams tells him he can have. Palestinians will not go away. Besides, Sharon will almost certainly end up disgraced and rejected by his people. He has no plan, except to destroy everything about Palestine and the Palestinians. Even in his enraged fixation on Arafat and terror, he is failing to do much more than raise the man's prestige while essentially drawing attention to the blind monomania of his own position.

In the end he is Israel's problem to deal with. For us, our main consideration now is morally to do everything in our power to make certain that despite the enormous suffering and destruction imposed on us by a criminal war, we must go on. When a renowned and respected retired politician like Zbigniew Brzezinski says explicitly on national television that Israel has been behaving like the white supremacist regime of apartheid South Africa, one can be certain that he is not alone in this view, and that an increasing number of Americans and others are slowly growing not only disenchanted but also disgusted with Israel as a hugely expensive and draining ward of the United States, costing far too much, increasing American isolation, and seriously damaging the country's reputation with its allies and its citizens. The question is what, in this most difficult of moments, can we rationally learn about the present crisis that we need to include in our plans for the future?

What I have to say now is highly selective, but it is the modest fruit of many years working on behalf of the Palestinian cause as someone who is from both Arab and Western worlds. I neither know nor can say everything, but here are some of the handful of thoughts I can contribute at this very difficult hour. Each of the four points that follow here is related to the other.

First, for better or for worse, Palestine is not just an Arab and Islamic cause, it is important to many different, contradictory and yet intersecting worlds. To work for Palestine is necessarily to be aware of these many dimensions and constantly to educate oneself in them. For that we need a highly educated, vigilant and sophisticated leadership and democratic support for it. Above all we must, as Mandela never tired of saying about his struggle, be aware that Palestine is one of the great moral causes of our time. Therefore, we need to treat it as such. It's not a matter of trade, or bartering negotiations, or making a career. It is a just

cause which should allow Palestinians to capture the high moral ground and keep it.

Second, there are different kinds of power, military of course being the most obvious. What has enabled Israel to do what it has been doing to the Palestinians for the past 54 years is the result of a carefully and scientifically planned campaign to validate Israeli actions and, simultaneously, devalue and efface Palestinian actions. This is not just a matter of maintaining a powerful military but of organising opinion, especially in the United States and Western Europe, and is a power derived from slow, methodical work where Israel's position is seen as one to be easily identified with, whereas the Palestinians are thought of as Israel's enemies, hence repugnant, dangerous, against 'us.' Since the end of the Cold War, Europe has faded into near-insignificance so far as the organisation of opinion, images, and thought are concerned. America (outside of Palestine itself) is the main arena of battle. We have simply never learned the importance of systematically organising our political work in this country on a mass level, so that for instance the average American will not immediately think of 'terrorism' when the word 'Palestinian' is pronounced. That kind of work quite literally protects whatever gains we might have made through on-the-ground resistance to Israel's occupation. What has enabled Israel to deal with us with impunity, therefore, has been that we are unprotected by any body of opinion that would deter Sharon from practising his war crimes and saying that what he has done is to fight terrorism. Given the immense diffusive, insistent, and repetitive power of the images broadcast by CNN, for example, in which the phrase 'suicide bomb' is numbingly repeated a hundred times an hour for the American consumer and tax-payer, it is the grossest negligence not to have had a team of people like Hanan Ashrawi, Leila Shahid, Ghassan Khatib, Afif Safie – to mention just a few – sitting in Washington ready to go on CNN or any of the other channels just to tell the Palestinian story, provide context and understanding, give us a moral and narrative presence with positive, rather than merely negative, value. We need a future leadership that understands this as one of the basic lessons of modern politics in an age of electronic communication. Not to have understood this is part of the tragedy of today.

Third, there is simply no use operating politically and responsibly in a world dominated by one superpower without a profound familiarity and knowledge of that superpower – America, its history, its institutions, its currents and counter-currents, its politics and culture; and, above all, a perfect working knowledge of its language. To hear our spokesmen, as well as the other Arabs, saying the most ridiculous things about America, throwing themselves on its mercy, cursing it in one breath, asking for its help in another, all in miserably inadequate fractured English, shows a state of such primitive incompetence as to make one cry. America is not monolithic. We have friends and we have possible friends. We can cultivate, mobilise, and use our communities and their affiliated communities here as an integral part of our politics of liberation, just as the South Africans did, or as the Algerians did in France during their struggle for liberation. Planning,

discipline, co-ordination. We have not at all understood the politics of non-violence. Moreover, neither have we understood the power of trying to address Israelis directly, the way the African National Congress addressed the white South Africans, as part of a politics of inclusion and mutual respect. Coexistence is our answer to Israeli exclusivism and belligerence. This is not conceding: it is creating solidarity, and therefore isolating the exclusivists, the racists, the fundamentalists.

Fourth, the most important lesson of all for us to understand about ourselves is manifest in the terrible tragedies of what Israel is now doing in the occupied territories. The fact is that we are a people and a society, and despite Israel's ferocious attack against the Palestinian Authority, our society still functions. We are a people because we have a functioning society which goes on – and has gone on for the past 54 years – despite every sort of abuse, every cruel turn of history, every misfortune we have suffered, every tragedy we have gone through as a people. Our greatest victory over Israel is that people like Sharon and his kind do not have the capacity to see that, and this is why they are doomed despite their great power and their awful, inhuman cruelty. We have surmounted the tragedies and memories of our past, whereas such Israelis as Sharon have not. He will go to his grave only as an Arab-killer, and a failed politician who brought more unrest and insecurity to his people. It must surely be the legacy of a leader that he should leave something behind upon which future generations will build. Sharon, Mofaz, and all the others associated with them in this bullying, sadistic campaign of death and carnage will have left nothing except gravestones. Negation breeds negation.

As Palestinians, I think we can say that we left a vision and a society that has survived every attempt to kill it. And that is something. It is for the generation of my children and yours, to go on from there, critically, rationally, with hope and forbearance.