Landscapes

1 Bush Is Right: Democracy Is the Answer

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On April 9, 2003, Muslims throughout the world watched with a mixture of shock and awe as a statue of the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was pulled down in the center of Baghdad. Few may have regretted the fall of the statue. Islam bans images and icons as symbols of *shirk*, or pantheism—the gravest of sins in Muhammad's strict monotheistic vision. There is another reason few lamented the regime: Saddam's reign of terror had entered Islamic history as one of the blackest chapters of the postcolonial era.

So it is true that the Muslim world felt shock and awe, but not in the way the U.S. military intended. The actual feelings they felt and the reasons for those feelings need to be carefully understood.

Shock and Awe: The Real Thing

The shock and awe that many Muslims felt that April was real enough. It was as if the clock of history had been turned back to the early days of colonialism in the nineteenth century. For the first time in more than eight decades, Western armies were marching into the capital of a major Muslim state with the express mission of overthrowing its regime.

The entry of the American-led army into Baghdad had a far more dramatic effect than the Red Army's march into Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, on Christmas Eve 1979. Back then, appearances had been preserved: a puppet Afghan regime had invited the Soviets to intervene, ostensibly to ward off attacks from Pakistan. In addition, most Muslims see Afghanistan as a wild realm—they call it "the land of insolence"—on the margins of Islam. Iraq, however, is regarded by many as the very heart of the Muslim world, recalling the "golden era" when Baghdad was the capital of an Islamic empire stretching from China to the Mediterranean Sea.

There was another reason for shock and awe. Whereas no one had seen the Soviet entry in Kabul on live television, the U.S.-led conquest of Baghdad, after just three weeks of what looked like an easy march from Kuwait, was broadcast live and watched by hundreds of millions of viewers.

The Muslim Debate

No one knows how long the shock-and-awe effect of Iraq's liberation may last in the Muslim world. What is certain is that the events of April 2003 could have an enduring effect on Muslims in general and Arabs in particular. What happened in Iraq could either work as a wake-up call to Muslims, especially Arabs, or serve as the leaven for a fresh bread of bitterness.

Both possibilities are present in the torrent of Arab and Muslim comment that preceded, accompanied, and followed the liberation of Iraq. There have been many calls on Arabs and Muslims in general to use the occasion for posing questions about their place in a world built and managed by "others." Some commentators have called on Muslims to adopt the cause of social, political, and economic reform and to attempt a long overdue *aggiornomento*.[1] Others have called for the opposite, demanding that Muslims close ranks, further distance themselves from the "alien world," and nurse their chagrin in the hope that, one day, Allah shall offer them an opportunity for revenge.[2]

A period of introspection and stocktaking may well be useful for both Muslims and the coalition of democracies led by the United States. Sooner or later, however, the two sides will have to enter into a dialogue to review their relations and work out a new modus vivendi.

What should that dialogue really be about?

In the year that preceded the American-led intervention in Iraq, the George W. Bush administration advanced a number of at times contradictory reasons and claims to justify the war. The main reason put forward in the diplomatic arena was that Hussein's regime had violated seventeen UN resolutions and was building an arsenal of forbidden weapons. Those reasons were, and remain, justified. But the principal reason for the U.S.-led intervention must be sought in the Bush administration's national security doctrine.

1. Among those who have sounded the wake-up call are such columnists as Turki al-Hamad, Abdul-Rahman al-Rashed, and Bakr Oweida among the Arabs and Ahmad Ahrar, Abdul-Karim Sorush, and Emadeddin Baqi in Iran.

2. The theme of a defensive wall has been hammered in by sympathizers of the now largely defunct al Qaeda terrorist organization, but it has received some support from more traditionalist Islamic thinkers, such as the Moroccan Muhammad Abed al-Jaberi.

Shaped in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the Bush Doctrine identifies global terrorism, sponsored or supported by "rogue states," as the principal threat to U.S. and global security. The analysis on which the doctrine is based asserts that only the dismantling of the rogue regimes and their replacement with democracies can once and for all remove the threat of global terrorism. That is because democracies do not sponsor terrorism, nor do democracies become bases of aggression against each other. Seen in that context, the regime change in Baghdad is only a first step on a long road that is to lead, first, to the establishment of a democratic system in Iraq and, then, to democratization throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

This, of course, is precisely what President Bush declared to be his goal in his November 6, 2003, speech at the National Endowment for Democracy. This goal constitutes a generational commitment to a vast program, one that is bound to go beyond President Bush's second term, provided he is reelected.

With few exceptions, the Muslim world, and the Arab countries in particular, represent an area of darkness as far as democratization is concerned. Few in the Muslim world have been touched by the historic changes that started with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nor have many of them adapted well to the economic changes introduced under globalization since the 1990s. The Muslim world, representing some 18 percent of the planet's population, accounts for almost 70 percent of the globe's political prisoners and more than 80 percent of the world's political executions. Of the fifty-three predominantly Muslim countries, only two, Bangladesh and Turkey, hold reasonably fair elections that lead to orderly changes of government.

Most Muslim countries have also experienced economic

stagnation or decline in the past twenty years, as their demography has spiraled out of control. A by now well-known UN-sponsored report on human development in the Arab world, published in 2002, told a tale of woe about countries that, though endowed with immense natural resources, live close to starvation with little prospects of sustained development.[3]

To assert further that the Muslim world provides fertile ground for terrorism is an understatement. In at least thirty Muslim countries, terrorism, practiced either by the state or its opponents, is an integral part of political life. In several others, more classical forms of violence, including political murder, are used in the context of an often zoological struggle for power. A string of transnational terrorist groups enjoy varying degrees of support and maintain different types of logistical, financial, and training bases in a number of Muslim countries.

At the same time, the Muslim world really is the theater of what could be described as a civil war of ideas between modernizers, who preach democratization, and traditionalists, who urge Muslims to wall themselves in and adopt a defensive attitude toward what they regard as a hostile international system. Although this is not the first time this debate has been started, it is a peculiar debate this time around. For the first time in decades, perhaps a few centuries even, none of the Muslim countries can claim a leadership role and offer a coherent world vision. Traditionally, three Muslim countries—Iran, Turkey, and Egypt—have offered the Muslim world intellectual leadership in political and cultural fields. Today, however, none is in a position to do so.

Iran finds itself in an historic impasse under a discredited regime. Turkey has set aside its Muslim credentials in favor of

3. The UN Development Programme report on *Human Development in the Arab Countries*, 2002.

European ambitions shared even by the neo-Islamist coalition now in power. Egypt, under a septuagenarian dictator, has lost even its traditional audience in the Arab world. One other country that might have provided a measure of leadership is Saudi Arabia, but this kingdom is politically paralyzed under a geriatric leadership that has proved unable to shape a vision for its own country, let alone the Muslim world as a whole.

The Right American Role

Since the Muslims cannot drive their own debate to a useful conclusion, the United States must push them to do it—and it should, not least because the Bush administration's central thesis is correct: democratization is essential, not only for American security but also for social and economic development in the Muslim world. The question is how to bring about that democratization.

The Iraqi experience may or may not work, though I think it will. Provided the United States is prepared to stay the course, as it did in postwar Germany and Japan, President Bush's dream of transforming Iraq into a model of democracy for the Muslim world has a decent chance of success. But obviously, the United States cannot invade all Muslim states and occupy them long enough to establish democratic institutions, and the demonstration effect of a successful Iraqi democracy will not, by itself, be enough to reshape the region.

At the same time, the Muslim world simply cannot work its way out of the historic impasse in which it finds itself without outside help, at least not in the foreseeable future. In a sense, the Muslim world today resembles the Communist bloc in the late 1980s. Obvious differences notwithstanding, both exhibit a bankrupt ideology, corrupt elites, and economic decline—all combined with a growing desire at the base for

opening to the West and seeking a share in the freedom and prosperity offered by the modern world. Perhaps this similarity offers a clue as to what to do.

Toward the end of the 1960s, the Western democracies decided to engage the Communist bloc in a network of relationships that went beyond the confrontational approach of the early Cold War. The new approach led to the diplomatic recognition of Communist China, the "opening to the East" exercise in Germany, and, more broadly, the policy of détente developed by the first Nixon administration.

A case could be made (and certainly was made) that these exercises merely prolonged the life of the Soviet bloc by providing it with economic aid, credit facilities, access to markets, and, perhaps more important, a presumption of moral equality with the West. Those who support that argument insist that the Soviet bloc ultimately collapsed because it could not meet the military, economic, and ethical challenge presented by a confrontational Reagan administration in the 1980s.

Many have considered the two trajectories of U.S. policy from the late 1960s to the late 1980s as contradictory. In retrospect, however, the two paths appear more as two phases of a dialectical movement. The policy of détente obliged the Soviet bloc to adhere to minimum rules of conduct that it might have otherwise rejected. Those rules promoted standards for behavior both inside and outside the bloc. The dissident movements could take shape without fear of executions and mass deportations, as had been the case in the Stalinist era. Advocates of change within the Soviet bloc knew that they were not alone and that the Western democracies regarded them as allies. The prospect of Soviet tanks again rolling into the capitals of Eastern Europe, as they had done in 1956 and 1968, receded. Reagan's confrontational approach succeeded partly because the Soviet bloc had become so

dependent on the West in trade, economic, technological, and diplomatic terms and partly because, thanks to Western penetration of various kinds, the Kremlin lost its verve, its self-confidence, and its own sense of moral singularity.

Encore! Another Final Act

One key element of détente consisted of negotiations that led to the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Though not a binding treaty, it was, in a sense perhaps, more important: It promulgated standards of behavior that could not be ignored. It took the political debate out of the ideological context, fixed by Marxist-Leninists, by emphasizing rules that would one day be claimed by Mikhail Gorbachev as "universal values." The question is: Can the Muslim world be engaged in a similar dialogue, leading to accords similar to those of the Helsinki Final Act?

The question merits consideration. Muslim states need political, social, and cultural reforms. They need to review their behavior at home and abroad. But few, even if they had the incentive, enjoy the legitimacy and the political strength to propose such reforms, let alone to implement them.

Nevertheless, all Muslim states are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to almost all the conventions drafted to implement it. It is no mystery, however, that almost all of those states violate the spirit and the letter of the declaration on a daily basis. It is important for the democratic world to insist that Muslim states honor their own signatures and respect their own commitments. Muslim states must be made to understand that there is a global public space regulated by international law that, though respectful of religious and cultural diversity, rejects transgression in the name of "alterity."

Committing the Muslim states to something like the Helsinki Final Act would be only the first step. The democracies also need to review their overall relations with the Muslim world, not least the political aspects of the West's high-end commercial relationships, especially with the Arabs.

For some major industrial nations, the Muslim world is nothing but a source of raw materials, notably oil, and a lucrative though distorted and lawless market. Some Western businesses, including major multinationals, have violated many rules when it comes to dealing with Muslim states. For example, Muslim states account for almost 27 percent of all arms purchases outside the NATO area. It is no mystery, too, that more than a thousand Western and Russian companies helped build Saddam Hussein's war machine, including his nuclear center of Osirak. As is well known, or ought to be, France built Osirak after Jacques Chirac, then prime minister, signed an agreement with Saddam Hussein, then vice president of Iraq, in 1975. There are striking photographs of that day that make for most interesting viewing.

Muslim despots are very much encouraged by the lack of courage that some Western governments show in attempting to defend and promote democratic values and human rights. The European Union, for example, has agreed to change the label it uses for talks with Iran from "critical dialogue" to "comprehensive dialogue" to please the mullahs, who believe they are above criticism. Although the EU has feigned toughness in dealing with the Iranian nuclear weapons program, it refuses to call obvious Iranian violations of the Nonproliferation Treaty what they are. The EU also refuses to seriously hold up the implementation of trade arrangements over the matter. The EU's view toward the Iranian mullahs closely resembles the fellow who keeps feeding carrot soup to a lion in the belief that the lion will eventually become a vegetarian.

Unrolling the red carpet for despots, including those open to charges of crimes against humanity, and visiting them in their capitals to pay respect are other signs of European cowardice when it comes to upholding the values that provided the backbone of the Helsinki Final Act.

This is not an entirely new idea, by the way. Committing the Muslim nations to common standards of behavior was one of the goals pursued by the late Malaysian prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, who subsequently became secretary-general of the Islamic Conference Organization. In 1970, Abdul Rahman circulated the text of a proposed charter that spelled out an "Islamic understanding" of human rights and that committed the Muslim states to a wide range of reforms. The proposed charter envisaged the nonrecognition of regimes created through military coups d'état and sanctions against governments found guilty of violating the basic rights of citizens. The proposal went nowhere because most Muslim states saw the risks as too high and the rewards as illusory.

Turgut Özal, then Turkey's prime minister, made a similar proposal in 1986. But he, too, achieved little success because his call for reform was not backed by economic and military power.

Since then, various Muslim states have committed themselves to similar standards of behavior by joining a variety of regional groupings that include Western and other non-Muslim powers. These groupings include the Barcelona process and the Asia-Pacific summit. In addition, the EU has concluded bilateral accords with a number of Muslim states. It is important now *to link all those accords and reinforce them in the form of a single memorandum of understanding between the Muslim world and the major democratic powers*. Such a memorandum would provide the terms of reference that the democratic world could use to provide moral and material support for the

growing reform movements in the Muslim world. Military action against some despotic regimes may still be necessary, but the idea that the Muslim world could be democratized through military invasion and occupation, on the Iraqi model, is unrealistic, to say the least.

In most Muslim countries today, there are identifiable democratic forces that the major democracies must support. Establishing contacts with thousands of nongovernmental organizations in the context of a people-to-people relationship will enable the democracies to help strengthen civil society in many Muslim countries. The time to pursue these goals is now.

This scenario *is* possible. Everyone who cares about this subject, which, after all, will define much about our future, must realize that the debate between the Muslim world and the democracies is not a theological one. Whatever version of Islam may be in the ascendancy in the Muslim world at present is irrelevant to the purpose at hand. People are, and ought to be, free to believe whatever they like. What concerns the rest of the world is the effect of any set of beliefs on the international public space. And there lies the problem. The Muslim world is sinking in economic failure, political despotism, cultural turpitude, and social crisis—all of which produce violence and terrorism. To emerge from this quagmire, Muslim states need a helping hand. It is in the best interests of the democracies to offer that helping hand. No time like the present.