

BAHRAIN

Issued by the "Bahrain Freedom Movement" for Promoting Human and Constitutional Rights

"War Against Terrorism": Underlying causes must also be tackled

"War against terrorism" is not a conventional combat between regular armies. The Americans coined the phrase termed "war against terrorism", and gave a new dimension to a deep-rooted international crisis with its roots in the Middle Eastern crises. It is highly assumed that the coalition being sought by the United States of America and the United Kingdom will focus its war strategy to "uproot" terrorism from the world.

A more cautious note was given by Collin Powell, the US Secretary of State who admitted that it would not be possible to uproot terrorism but "to bring it under control." The success of the operation is open to question, as the term is highly controversial. A person who is a terrorist to someone may be a freedom fighter to another.

The spiral of events took a sharp turn after the worst terrorist act in the American history. The bombing of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre and Pentagon on 11 September caused a human, psychological and political devastation to a nation that had always thought itself the superpower of the world that could not be humiliated. It now recognises the limits of any political or military power in the face of new types of threats. Terrorism has become sophisticated in its aims and means.

Although there have been numerous threats against the US over the past few years, few had expected such a large-scale attack especially at a time of supposedly high alert. It also demonstrated that terrorism has become a nightmare to the world and that if it is allowed to operate, the consequences to world peace will be colossal. These facts are agreeable among the countries of the world. No civilised government would condone such terrorist and indiscriminate attacks. What is a matter of disagreement is the way to tackle the problem.

In the immediate aftermath of the at-

tacks on 11 September 2001, the first reaction of the US administration was to carry an all-out war against Afghanistan. The initial reaction was that the Government of Taliban must be bombed out of existence. Carpet bombing, nuclear bombs and all other forms of conventional warfare would be utilised to achieve this aim. The tension within the administration forced a rethink of the reactive policies and the US started to think of an alliance of forces against terrorism.

Britain gave an almost a blank cheque to the US, but the European Union countries gave a qualified support. Although they invoked article 5 of the NATO Charter which makes an attack on a member country equivalent to an attack on all them, voices were raised against a fast reaction that could only cause more motives for further violence and terrorism. There was clear reluctance from many important countries in the world in joining what President George W. Bush called "crusade." There was unease with the use of such provocative term.

After many consultations, the scene has now been set for a sustained war against terrorism involving the use of military, economic, intelligence and political warfare. The success of this operation will highly depend on the way the US deals with the crisis and its willingness to act within a collective spirit. Most of the Arab and Muslim countries are of two minds.

Those who support military action against terrorism do so under fear from antagonising the US. The others are reluctant to present a solid viewpoint in case it is taken as an indication to their possible involvement in terrorism. Many diplomats have expressed their anger and dismay at what they perceive as another form of political terrorism.

The whole "crusade" is now presented as against the Saudi-born Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organisation. The Taliban

regime of Afghanistan is in deep trouble and is being targeted because of its failure to hand in Ben Laden.

Islam is against causing harm to people. It is also fair to say that such acts are condemned and are unlikely to lead to peace and security in the region. But it is also important not to side-step the need to identify the causes of terrorism as a complementary step in the war against terrorism. There is no smoke without fire, and the US and its allies are unlikely to eradicate terrorism if the underpinning causes remain.

With regards to the Middle Eastern politics, the unlimited support of the US to the occupational forces in Palestine is one of the most fundamental causes of instability in the Middle East and has led to violence and counter-violence. The US will be well-advised to revise its strategy in the Middle East, stop their unqualified support to Israel, stop the Zionist lobby from its active role in formulating the US foreign policy to support Israel at all levels, at all costs and in all times. The US has sheltered the Israelis in the world political arena over the years. It has vetoed UN Security Council resolutions against Israel and supplied it with the most sophisticated hardware to attack the Palestinians.

The US has also targeted Iraq, causing colossal damage to the people but sparing the regime. These factors have contributed to the high emotional antipathy towards the US government. It will be a step forward to address these issues at the same time as the "War Against Terrorism" is being conducted. The United Nations must be involved in the crisis. The tragic events of 11 September will remain in the memory of the people for a long time to come. The war being planned by the US and its allies will determine the success or failure of these powers in tackling the sophisticated politics surrounding the issue of terrorism in the world. The world will be a better place terrorism is eradicated by all the means including the removal of its causes.

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Interview with Dr. Alaa Al-Yousuf, Bahraini economist and political activist.

VOB: As an economist who worked for the IMF in Washington DC and who now operates in the City, London, how do you view the political and economic impact of the terrorist bombing in the US on Muslims and on the politics of the Middle East?

Al-Yousuf: The victims of the crime that was perpetrated on Tuesday 11 September 2001, are many, but first and foremost are the thousands of innocent people who lost their lives. Much has already been said about the shocking scale and nature of this carnage. On Friday, 14 September, almost the whole world expressed its condemnation of the crime and its grief for the bereaved families of the victims. Those who abstained or, even worse, rejoiced, will have joined the terrorists, not in the murder, but in adding to the incalculable damage on the other victims of the atrocity, namely, Islam as a faith, Muslims and Arabs as peoples, and possibly the Palestinian cause.

The terrorists and their apologists managed to sully Islam as a faith both in the eyes of many Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While it is the duty of every Muslim to behave in an exemplary manner to "exalt the name of Islam", those people, and others before them, have succeeded in putting the words Islam, Muslims, Koran, and Allah in the same sentence as the words Crime, Atrocity, Terrorism and Evil, in newspapers and radio and TV broadcasts around the world. Although the evidence about the terrorists is still scant, the mere fact that Islam is one of the prime suspects is enough to bring shame on many innocent Muslims.

What, in my view, has made matters worse was the reaction of a minority of Muslims, both in the UK and the Middle East, to the atrocity. By rejoicing or abstaining from condemning the atrocity they have failed the basic moral test of telling right from wrong. It is the duty of every parent and teacher to teach children right from wrong. Islam, like other religions, reinforces this sense. It also teaches us "do not let your grievances against some people make you unjust, be just, it is closer to piety". The fact that Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, with American support, has been a crime does not justify crimes by Muslims. Two wrongs do not make a right. Muslims and Arabs living in the West could suffer reprisals, whether physical, verbal or in more subtle forms. It could now be even more difficult for Muslims to set up schools and mosques and campaign against possible discrimination. It will be even more difficult for Muslims to be treated sympathetically when claiming to be genuine refugees. In general, political opinion in the west towards Muslims and Arabs could harden and affect foreign aid policies.

This could very well affect adversely

the Palestinian cause. Rather than force the US government to change its policy towards Israel and the Palestinian, the atrocity could backfire. Israel is already busy taking advantage of this situation. Moreover, any Middle Eastern government that cracks down on its domestic opponents on the pretext that they are Muslim fundamentalists, could get away with it because governments and human rights NGOs in the west will not be able to muster enough popular support to counteract such policies. The global war against terrorism that is about to be waged could be used as a cover to punish peaceful Muslim communities in China, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Russian Federation. So-called "political Islam" could be targeted in countries as diverse as Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia and the Gulf. The atrocity could be seen as evidence not just of "political Islam" condoning terrorism, but worse still, as evidence that "political Islam" has failed to teach its followers the basic difference between right and wrong, and that the ends justify the means. It will not be difficult to find plenty of evidence that could support this argument.

The only way to counteract such fears is for Muslim public figures, e.g. leaders of countries, parties, communities, and prayer congregations, as well as opinion makers, to take a lead in raising popular awareness of the moral teachings of Islam as they relate practically to this tragedy. Those who hold other views should be allowed to express them peacefully and freely. This is an important lesson in establishing a political culture based on moral principles and debate rather than hatred and injustice. I am delighted to see that many wise and enlightened leaders in many Muslim countries have said and done the right things and I hope that their wisdom and resolve will not desert them in the trying moments that we are likely to witness in the days to come. This would include condemning any criminal actions against innocent people taken by the US and its allies in seeking to eradicate global terrorism.

One-minute silence to honour those killed in the US

Bahraini and Iranian football players held a minute of silence on 14 September before Asian World Cup qualifying match in Tehran to honour those killed in terrorist attacks in the United States. Both Bahrain and Iran remain unbeaten in their qualifying group but the latter tops the table with eight points while Bahrain is in second position with six points.

Inside Bahrain, religious leaders denounced the terrorist attacks in the US. During the Friday prayer, Sheikh Al-Jamri said "I express my rejection and denunciation of all attacks against civilians and innocent people and I denounce all those operations that contradict the teachings of Islam which call for peace and justice".

Interview with Lord Avebury

VOB: From your leading position as a human rights campaigner, how do you view the political and economic impact of the terrorist bombing in the US on the Middle East?

Avebury. Apparently it was only too easy for the terrorists to get enough training to be able to fly large airliners, and to get through the rather casual security precautions at US airports. No doubt the authorities will be undertaking a root and branch overhaul of their own security services, and their links with the services of friendly countries in the Middle East which might be able to shed some light on this operation, and the possibility that further exercises of a similar magnitude could be in the course of preparation. The Khobar Towers atrocity, and the bombing of US Embassies in Africa, may be seen as the precursor of the World Trade Center and Pentagon operations, and it would be naïve to assume that the terrorists have no further shots in their locker.

For the moment, every single Government in the Middle East except that of Iraq has condemned the atrocity. The Americans have to consider their response very carefully, and only to strike against proved terrorists and their protectors. A much wider retaliation could have a baleful effect on public opinion in the region. There are already people who actually approved the World Trade Center atrocity, because they felt it revenged US support of Israel's continuing violations of Palestinian human rights, and the harm to civilians caused by the policy of sanctions on Iraq. If, now, the American response is not seen as measured and proportionate, the result could be to alienate further sections of public opinion in the region.

It is too early to say whether the US will become more or less engaged in the Middle East as a result of this disaster. Some policymakers may conclude that if the US is less involved, both in terms of physical presence and in trying to help broker a settlement, the terrorists would have less motive for attacking Americans. Others would argue that the existence of groups with such a total disregard for human life, including their own, makes it all the more imperative that political solutions should be sought.

I think everybody, and not just the Americans, will try to understand the mindset of the terrorists, and whether it is connected directly with the question of the Middle East. If there are groups which are ideologically committed to the destruction of the US, they constitute a different kind of enemy from those who are angry about US Middle East policy. They would not be the sort of people you could sit down and argue with on a rational basis, nor would they themselves have any reason to discuss their grievances. The fact that no statement has been made about their motives does seem to confirm that scenario.

VOB: Bahrain is going through a transitional reform process, what are your main concerns with regard to the effects of recent events and would they have negative effects on political reforms?

Avebury: I have a general concern, that in their anxiety to protect themselves from terrorism, states everywhere may feel compelled to adopt authoritarian measures. Of course, Bahrain is at present moving away from the controls of the past, towards a more free and open society. If people enjoy political freedom, there is no reason why anybody should want to use terrorist methods. The Irish like paradoxes, and it was an Irishman who said, when Ireland was still under British rule, that 'violence is the only way of securing a hearing for moderation'. This should mean that once people are able to talk about political choices, and to make those choices through the ballot box, there is no longer any justification for the use of force to gain any political objective.

The general welcome that has been given to the reform process in Bahrain shows that the further advance of democracy, human rights and the rule of law has widespread support among the people. The goals of the terrorists are not to do with the internal affairs of GCC states, and there is no reason to believe they would have even noticed the Bahrain Spring.

It is understandable that such a devastating attack on the heart of the mightiest country in the world should have an unsettling effect on the minds of statesmen everywhere, including the Gulf. These groups, whoever they are, pose a deadly threat not just to the United States, but the order and security throughout the world. I am sure that GCC countries will see the need to cooperate with the rest of the international community in making sure that the mass murderers are caught. But I hope, and believe, they can do this without interrupting or delaying their progress towards freedom and justice.

VOB: On the medium and long-term, do you see our troubled region heading towards democratisation?

Avebury: Yes, very definitely. Over the last century there has been a steady advance towards self-government and political freedoms everywhere in the world, and no region can remain insulated from these trends. Empires have crumbled one by one; autocrats have been toppled, and peoples are developing their own brands of democracy based on their cultures and traditions. In the Gulf, already we can see the development of self-rule, and the underpinning of a thriving civil society which is the essential foundation of a healthy democracy. Democracy is not merely about voting once every few years; it means also the existence of organisations representing all the various interests in a society such as the trade unions, women's and young people's organisations, single issue pressure groups and university societies. I think the Gulf region still has a long way to go before its

states have a fully developed civil society, but they are moving towards a legal framework that makes it possible for all these organisations to work freely together, feeding ideas into the political system.

VOB: What do you see as the priorities for the pro-democratic Islamic movement at this stage?

Avebury: I have to answer this question in very general terms, because it would be presumptuous of me to speak in any detail about priorities for the pro-democratic Islamic movement, or for any other movement in Bahrain. Up until recently, it seemed right for all pro-democracy elements in Bahrain to come together in the Committee for Popular Petition, asking for a strictly limited return to the 1972 Constitution and the 1973 Assembly. Now that more than that is on offer, and there is the prospect of an elected Parliament with legislative powers, the pro-democratic Islamic movement will no doubt consider whether it is expedient to form a political party, to contest elections at local and national level. If the Party is a conventional organisation of members, presumably it will elect its leader and officials; establish committees to draft its programmes, and raise money so that it can print and distribute literature when the election campaign begins. It might wish to establish contact with sister parties in other countries, and to send officials to observe how elections are conducted abroad. It would look for a Party Headquarters, from which it would organise branches in the villages, issue press statements, train party members, and run campaigns.

The pro-democratic Islamic movement has also an important role in the development of Islamic political theory. Several countries claim to have synthesised democracy and Islam, with varying degrees of success, but there is more work to be done on the theoretical basis for Islamic democracy, which could be of importance not just for Bahrain, but the whole Islamic world.

Jobless problem requires more serious actions

Unemployment threatens to blow-up now and then in Bahrain. It is a complicated problem with political, economic and cultural aspects interacting with each other to prevent some 20,000 citizens from securing employment, while at the same time there are more than 200,000 foreign work-force in the country.

It was in June 1994, when a group of jobless picketed in front of Labour Ministry demanding jobs. Then, they were crushed and that incident was to be one of the sparks for the uprising, which erupted in December 1994. When the jobless gathered again last April in front of the Labour Ministry, the Amir was at the forefront to prevent a repetition of what happened in 1994. In 2001, he ordered the Labour Minister to involve a committee representing the jobless to participate in all meetings of the

ministry aimed at finding jobs. He also ordered 25 million dinars (around \$70m) to be spent over 6 months on finding jobs and on temporary benefits for those registered as jobless. About 10,000 citizens were registered by that time, leaving the other half to struggle for receiving the temporary benefit, and hence many had difficulties getting the benefits.

The temporary benefits calmed down the situation for several weeks. By last month the pickets returned in front of the Labour Ministry. An angry demonstration was planned by the youths to go ahead on 25 August and it was only prevented in the last minute following intervention by senior opposition and religious figures, such as Sheikh Abdul Amir Al-Jamri and Sheikh Isa Qassim.

Then on 1 September a group of about 300 jobless graduates gathered at the Education Ministry complex in Isa Town and demanded an end to the unemployment problem faced by Bahraini teachers. They also asked for a personal meeting with Education Minister Dr Mohammed Al-Ghatam to discuss their demands, but the minister refused to meet them or to meet any members of their newly formed delegation in the presence of the media.

The group then staged a sit-in protest and demanded a response to their calls for the ministry to give priority to the employment of Bahraini teachers. The group also demanded to know why teachers from East Asia, Jordan and elsewhere were being hired to work in the schools while they remain without jobs. The group, who described themselves as unemployed graduates from Bahrain University, then issued a statement about the growing problem they were facing and premised to stage similar pickets in the following weeks.

As stated, there are many complexities related to the problem of unemployment, some of which are:

1. The Labour Ministry can only influence the private sector (the public sector is regulated by the Civil Service Bureau). However, the regulations for the private sector are so distorted that the Bahraini businessmen will always favour cheap labour from the Indian Subcontinent. There are several job markets in Bahrain, with the Americans and Europeans getting the top high-pay jobs and the Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are given the very low-pay jobs. The pay-gap is astronomical and the citizens are trapped near the bottom of the scale unable to compete with the cheap labour force.

2. There are many influential individuals who trade in cheap labour and are continuing to import such labour only to dump them in local market in return for a commission on their earning. This inhuman practice is not yet checked and many, including the poor expatriates, are suffering.

3. Many Bahrainis are still not prepared to join the hard-work environments in industries such as construction and fish-

ing. These two sectors can absorb all the unemployed. However, even those citizens who are prepared to join these sectors can not accept the very low-pay which the foreign expatriates from the Indian Sub-continent get.

4. The government is not yet trusting some sections of Bahrain society in relation to jobs in Defence and Security. Hence, the foreign personnel in the Defence and Interior ministries are being naturalised and many natives are still barred from entering these fields.

Nevertheless, some good steps are being taken to address some aspects of the problem. A BD5.5 million scheme aimed at providing training and employment opportunities for 4,000 job seekers over two years took a step closer to reality on 4 September when the Labour and Social Affairs Minister signed a BD480,000 deal with Ernst and Young, making the latter responsible for administering a project for placing job-seekers suitable jobs. The money will be extracted from the BD25 million that was allocated earlier in the year for the jobless. Job-seekers selected for the project will be provided with a job suited to their capabilities and qualifications and guaranteed proper training by their employer. The Minister said "We will require the employer to provide a monthly salary of not less than BD150 to the job-seekers. Out of this, the ministry will pay BD50 towards the salary". The ministry will also earmark BD600 per month for the training of people selected for this scheme.

Several schemes for strengthening the Informational Technology sector were also announced. On 3 September, it was announced that a BD100,000 (\$277,000) specialised academy to train people in computer networking will open to provide training opportunities for 1,500 people in 2001/2002. On 4 September, it was announced that the Birla Institute of Technology International Centre (BITIC) – opened 3 years ago – will be upgraded to a university to offer four-year degree courses (B Tech) that are industry-oriented. The training and educational programmes are expected to cover production engineering and information technology.

All these are welcome steps. However, there is a need to address two underlying issues. The first one must be government-led and it relates to seriously eliminating sectarianism and discrimination amongst the citizens and between citizens and foreigners. There must only be one job market for all people and this job market must be based on merits only. The latter also requires the existence of a truly representative trade union to protect labour (of all types and nationalities) from abuse. The second underlying step is a cultural one requiring the co-operation of all sides in spreading a culture that values hard work and achievements. It is only when these underlying factors are dealt with that the programmes for IT and placements of the jobless would be fruitful.

Democratisation by Decree - Part 2

Dr. Abdulhadi Khalaf

(...Continued from last issue)

7. Allocating temporary benefits for the unemployed and allowing a committee of citizens to monitor the work of the labour ministry in relation to finding jobs for the unemployed.

8. Authorising the formation of labour and women unions.

9. Lowering the fees for the university students.

10. Announcing future plans for improving the housing conditions.

(Voice of Bahrain: July 2001)

Whether Bahrain has taken its first steps towards political liberalisation, or, if you wish, democratic transition, remains a matter of debate. Bahrainis have several causes for scepticism. The Jordanian and Moroccan experiments in 'democratisation by royal decree' are faltering. While Morocco marks the second anniversary of Muhammad VI's accession to the Alawite throne, it is becoming increasingly evident that he has failed to live up to his promises. Like his Bahraini counterpart, The Moroccan king "impressed public opinion by the speed with which he took measures in regard to greater freedoms, political exiles and victims of repression; and his skill in handling Islamist groups and the sacking of the former interior minister were welcomed as evidence of his desire for progress. But recently this progress has come to a halt, leaving society impatient for the real change it expects" (Dalle, 2001). Worse are the ominous signs that can be read from the Jordanian model itself. In spite of eleven years of 'pre-emptive liberalisation', the era of democracy has not yet dawned on Jordan. Indeed, the advent of political liberalization in Jordan enhanced the regime's ability to prevent real dissension and/or democratisation as well as to regulate the opposition through an array of bureaucratic and legal mechanisms. (Wiktorowicz, 2001).

Commenting on 'experiments of controlled liberalization' in the Arab world at the beginning of last decade, Krämer (1992:22) notes that they are "notable for the absence of what are commonly regarded as basic socio-economic, political and cultural prerequisites of liberal democracy, such as involvement of broad sections of 'civil society', government dependence on internal mobilization of resources rather than oil or political rent, and a stable regional environment".

A decade later, the Bahraini infitah is not an exception. Nevertheless, certain events of the last few months have given a substantial boost to talks on the process of democratisation in the country, and have at the same time opened up at least the prospect of reshaping the local political order.

Students of other regions, who have

examined disjunction between increased demands for the freedom and participation and the insufficient supply of these political goods, have identified some major impediments that have fuelled collective scepticism about democratisation and democratic transition in Authoritarian states. In an insightful review of the African processes of political reforms Celstin Monga (1997) notes eight phenomena that hinders democratic transition in Africa. These are: the weakness of political organisations; the strength of alternative networks and corporatives; constriction of the political field; constrained civil society; state-controlled media; confidence in sources of external support; institutional corruption, and clientalism. Students of the evolving situation in Bahrain are likely to appreciate the relevance of most of the problems identified by Monga.

Admittedly, remedying some of these phenomena which hinders democratisation can take several generations of political reformers. However, some of these obstacles are so acute that one cannot imagine the launching of a serious political reform, let alone a process of democratisation, without first resolving them. In the following I will discuss the effects of some of these obstacles on the pace of political reforms in Bahrain.

In spite of all the praise hailed at the Amir and his project of 'political reform and democratisation', the changes he introduced remain manifestly fragile and are hostage to a number of factors including the balance of power within the ruling family. There are, however, anecdotal indications that reveal the seriousness of quarrels within the ruling family, and in particular its top echelons. While Al-Khalifa's squabbles are public knowledge, the family as a whole has remained outwardly united.

I have already noted that cohesion of the ruling family remains a key to the regime's future and, to the future of the infitah in Bahrain. Whether the Amir can rely on this cohesion or whether he, and the country, can afford indefinitely to pay its financial, political and security costs, will determine the pace and direction of the reform process. Can this unity withstand the pressures that would undoubtedly surface as soon as the political reforms start affecting the ruling family's privileges?

A major weakness in the reform process in Bahrain is that it has started as an Amiri initiative. It was launched through a series of makramas, which are exclusive prerogative of the Amir.

In short, the promises of democratisation remain subject to Amiri decrees. For the time being, only he has the power to chart the future of the liberalisation process, its perimeters, its intensity and its extent. (To Be Continued...)