

BAHRAIN

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The war against Afghanistan: Compromising international conventions

The visitors of Dubai's Gitex computer exhibition held last month were not only astonished to see the almost empty venue, but were overwhelmed by the gloomy picture of the market in one of the most active in the Arab world. They were told many of the exhibitors cancelled their plans soon after the 11 September events, and many visitors were too terrified of flying to venture out in an aeroplane to the Gulf. It may look remote from the war scene in Afghanistan but the roots of the problem are not totally detached from the Gulf geopolitics.

After all, Osama bin Laden who is wanted by the United States alive or dead, is a Saudi and many of his followers come from the mainland Arabia. The degree of sophistication of his operations and mental framework is not totally detached from the religious tendencies in that part of the world. The irony is that despite the enormity of the event and the anger of the United States of America, religious figures in Saudi Arabia have gone on the record to condone what Bin Laden is being accused of doing. Internet cites carry the edicts of these scholars, while the Saudi authorities struggle to maintain a balance between its internal and external affairs.

It could be argued that the Saudi government is facing one of its most crucial tests in its balancing acts. The success or failure of this test will have long-term consequences. The Americans may be able to defend the Saudis against an outside threat, but the internal situation is one that has had adverse effects not on the Saudis but on the Americans themselves.

The war against Afghanistan is seen as a show piece of warmongering. It is unlikely to solve the crisis created by the zeal of the anti-American groups in the region. It is true that the war against terrorism is one that is long-term, but how long?

Even the American people will become wary if the war atmosphere persists for a long time. It will adversely affect their lives and create fears and anxieties that

could lead to a backlash against the government. The sensible approach to this war is to tackle its causes first. Pursuing the terrorists is only half the problem. For in this pursuit new terrorists will be created and the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence will remain unbroken.

At the heart of the problem is the American foreign policy in the world especially in the Middle East. So far, two aspects of this policy have been mentioned; the US unequivocal support of Israel and its defence of undemocratic regimes in the region. Unless a fresh approach to the Middle East is undertaken the anti-American feelings will remain. At times these feelings may be expressed in violent terms leading to terrorist acts. It is this expression of anti-Americanism that the US government is now fighting against. But could this solve the crisis?

Two points are of interest here. First the anti-American sentiments are a reflection of the general anger against the Israeli brutal policies in the occupied territories. To overcome this, the Americans need to re-evaluate their policies, disengage from the support it gives to the Israeli occupational forces, address the grievances of the Palestinian people and end the fatalistic approach to the region in terms of democracy and human rights.

Second comes the American response to the 11 September events. Three key policies are being implemented in addition to the military campaign against Afghanistan. First, both the United States and Great Britain have tilted towards the practice of censorship of their media. They have objected to the broadcast of Ben Laden policy statements, and sought to adopt pressure on others, most notably, Qatar whose Al Jazeera satellite station has been the main conduit for Ben Laden's messages in recent weeks.

The media corpse in the two countries has refused to adopt the policy of censorship. In reality they have succumbed to the

wishes of the politicians. Secondly, George W Bush has given directives to the CIA that effectively annul the 1976 directive (No 12333) by President Gerald Ford banning the agency from carrying out assassinations against the US foes.

Assassinations by Americans are now likely to take place. This single step is tantamount to endorsing terrorist practices. Assassinations carried out by unfriendly countries have always been considered acts of state terrorism. Extrajudicial killings are banned by the United Nations human rights charter. Thirdly, FBI officials are reported to have said they would resort to torture in order to extract confessions from suspects detained after 11 September. Commentators have distanced themselves from this and have rejected any justification for evil practices such as torture. It is disturbing to learn of the intentions to torture political suspects whose guilt has would not have proven at the time of torture.

It seems the world is about to witness dramatic changes in the political and human rights perceptions. Prior to the war against Afghanistan, censorship, assassinations and torture were taboos in the modern political thinking. To have this reversed as a reaction to a dreadful act by some individuals or groups is tantamount to succumbing to the dictates of evil and abandoning the most valuable achievements of the human race in terms of the dignity and sanctity of human beings. Universal values of human rights must be upheld especially by powerful nations such as the United States of America. They are not commodities that could be exploited for political ends before being abandoned.

In fact, the foundation of modern civil society are to be found in the respect of human rights and personal liberties. The Geneva Conventions regulating the conduct of war are yet another example of the achievements of mankind.

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To compromise these principles is an inhumane act that could only lead to more disenchantment and anger and will be gross violations of the international spirit. It will demonstrate the lack of commitment to this spirit and will certainly undermine the moral standing of the US.

Many people in the Gulf region have expressed unease about the crisis. While they have rejected the terrorist acts of 11 September, they have also called for an end to the military campaign against Afghanistan. A solution must be sought through the United Nations that would deal with the symptoms of terrorism as well as its underlying causes. It is not the time for rejoicing as thousands of innocent lives have been lost since 11 September.

It is time to reflect seriously on many issues especially those relating to the politics of world which is dominated by one superpower. Religion is not at the heart of the crisis as some would like to assume. The crisis is borne out of political mismanagement over the past five decades, and is exacerbated by the Israeli occupation of Palestine. It will be a great service to the human race if those in position to take serious decisions act in accordance with international law, respect human rights values, end Israeli occupation address the grievances of the people of the region and tackle the issues of poverty, economic disparity and end exploitation of the natural resources of the Middle East.

Bio-terror scares

The evacuation of American Express building in Bahrain on 21 October following anthrax alert is one of a series of terrorist alerts hitting the US company. It had been evacuated in the week before following a hoax phone call. The Bahraini Health Ministry confirmed that "some loose powder spilled on the ground of the coffee room," and resulted in the anthrax scare.

Similar bio-terror scares were reported on 22 October and two buildings, one belonging to the National Bank of Bahrain and the other to Bahrain Telecommunication Company had to be evacuated for some time.

On Friday, 20 October, some 300 people picketed in Adleya, Manama, after Friday Prayers. Demonstrators called for an end to attacks on Afghanistan and denounced the US policies in

the Middle East. One of the organisers, Mr. Mohammed Abdulla Fakhro, stated that a person from outside the demonstrators raised the picture of Osama bin Laden while others tore-up the US flag.

Mr. Fakhro confirmed that these two acts were not part of the actions planned by the original demonstrators. He was also quoted by Reuters saying "It was a public gathering aimed at condemning U.S. policies against our Islamic and Arab causes, especially the Palestinian and the Afghan problems," "We are against terrorism, but we are also against treating terror with terrorism,".

Amir pledges more openness

The political environment is becoming more active following the remarks made by the Amir in mid-October that he is prepared to allow the functioning of political parties if the parliament to be elected before 2004 were to allow it. However, there was a concern regarding the lack of clarity in some of the statements attributed to the Amir. While one statement made it clear that any changes to the 1973 Constitution would only be processed through the mechanism prescribed by Article 104 (which requires the elected parliamentarians to debate the changes), another statement indicated that the first changes to be introduced into the Constitution will be processed through an Amiri decree. This process will be beyond Article 104 and hence may not gain the needed constitutional legitimacy.

Unemployment

In a regrettable development on 2 October, a peaceful gathering of some 40 unemployed inside the Ministry of Labour developed into clashes with the security personnel that were called-up to contain a volatile situation. Five unemployed were detained by police but were later released on orders from the Amir.

Following on from that incident, more than a hundred unemployed met in a grand mosque in Bani Jamrah village on 2 October, and they were joined by representatives from the General Committee of Bahraini Workers (GCBW) and the Bahrain Human Rights Society. The meeting of the unemployed decided to call for another bigger and more representative meeting within two weeks to elect a com-

mittee that will represent the unemployed for six months and will negotiate with governmental departments.

The meeting also decided that there would be no more pickets inside the Labour Ministry so long as the unemployed will be able to organize themselves in association with the General Committee of Bahraini Workers. The meeting to be held in two weeks will be made up of representatives (who must be unemployed) nominated by the Charity Funds around the country. These Charity Funds are elected and hence those who are nominated will have a popular legitimacy. One of the problems is that there had been a committee made-up of several unemployed persons which was negotiating with the Ministry of Labour. However, most of the members of the said committee were given jobs by the Ministry and hence became employees rather than representatives of the unemployed.

It is to be noted that the GCBW is expected to be dissolved in the near future and a Labour Union will be allowed to function in Bahrain for the first time. The Labour Union is expected to list the problem of the unemployed as one of its top priorities. There are many causes for having some 20,000 citizens unemployed while there are more than 200,000 foreign work-force. One of the causes relates to the corrupt practices of some influential people who import the so-called "free-visa" foreign workers and dump them in the job market. A corrupt free-visa importers of say 1000 foreign workers would illegally extract BD 20 (around US \$54) per person per month. This means that a corrupt trader would get some BD 20,000 (US \$54,000) every month for dumping a thousand free-visa foreign workers in local market. This and other types of corruption must be uprooted before unemployment could properly be resolved.

US statements infuriates Bahrainis

Bahrainis are expressing their concern and condemnation of the war and statements made by US officials following the start of war against Afghanistan. While Bahrainis do not support terrorist groups anywhere in the world, they would not want to be part of a war led by the USA. The US President and his Defense Secretary have said that their war and bombing will not be limited to Afghanistan. Such statements are rejected by Arab and Muslim nations who are suffering from

terrorism, particularly the state-sponsored and US-backed Israeli terrorism.

The Bahrain Freedom Movement believes that the Taliban regime is one of the most reactionary and backward among the governments of the Muslim world. The terrorist acts in New York and Washington were condemned by the vast majority of Muslims who affirmed that Islam does not allow the killing of innocent people or the adoption of terrorist methods. The elements who are accused by the US to have carried out terrorist acts were initially fostered by the Americans and the Pakistani secret service. These groups then became anti-American after the second Gulf war.

Muslims oppose the war against Afghanistan. This is because the main losers are the innocent civilians. Iraq is one of the clearest examples, when Saddam Hussain was spared, while the Iraqi people have suffered and are still suffering from the sanctions. When the Iraqis took to arms against Saddam Hussain in 1991, the US allowed the Iraqi army to fly helicopter gun-ships to slaughter them.

The US has infuriated the Arab and Muslim worlds with its pro-Israeli policies. In an American poll published few days ago, 56 percent of the Americans believe the terrorist attacks were the result of the US support of Israel.

The present military campaign is being carried out by the US and has mainly been supported by Britain only. The UN has been bypassed. Terrorism has its causes, and military means cannot eradicate these causes. The US policies need to be overhauled especially those relating to Palestine and support to repressive regimes.

Women to launch their union

On the other hand, Bahraini women are expected to launch their union in the coming months following the completion of all preparatory work. Next Monday, there will be a meeting of the preparatory committee responsible for launching the General Union of Bahraini Women. It is expected that the women union will be made up of three different types of membership. The main category will be women societies that will be represented by ten persons for each society. The second category will be for professional/social socie-

ties that have women's committees and these will be given three representatives each. The third category will be for individual members who will directly join the women union and these will be represented by three persons to be elected by all individual direct members.

Interview with Peter Cathcart

Mr. Cathcart is a British lawyer with in-depth knowledge in politics of the Middle East.

VOB: As a British citizen and legal expert with in-depth knowledge in politics of the Middle East, how do you view the impact of the terrorist bombing in the US, especially as there had been hundreds of British victims in last week's terror?

Cathcart: The political impact of the bombing in the long run will be very significant. I do not believe that major changes will result from any significant shift in US Foreign Policy, more from a global shift resulting from the realisation that terrorism is a worldwide and major problem which needs to be tackled by all countries working together. So far, they have not done so.

What happened in the US was horrific and totally unforeseen. Forget Star Wars as a means of defence. Many countries suffer from internal terrorism which they need to tackle. Many terrorists work from safe havens in other countries. All countries will realise that global co-operation to defeat terrorism is essential. No country is immune. If it can be done in the US it can be done virtually anywhere.

The economic impact is already being felt in many countries. Travel will diminish, poorer countries will suffer more than rich ones because they do not have the resources to cope in a downturn, and the major losers will be the poor and destitute. More powerful countries will be channelling resources into the fight against terrorism, rather than the fight against global poverty, the greatest indictment of the modern world.

VOB: Bahrain is going through a transitional reform process, what are the main concerns with regard to the effects of recent events on political reforms in the region in general?

Cathcart: Recent events will not change the reform process underway

in Bahrain. The changes are gradual, sustainable, and at a pace which allows change to be effective. Rapid change is often unsustainable. Rome was not built in a day. A democratic child is not a democratic father, and needs to learn and develop the skills, experience and expertise of the democratic father. In the region as a whole change is on the way - and recent events will have little effect. If anything, the need for greater security may impinge on the speed of change. We are becoming a global village and the benefits enjoyed by many need to be nurtured for the less fortunate.

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

Cathcart: In the medium term perhaps marginally slower, but in the long run change is inexorable and inevitable. Change needs to be external, not just internal. We need to become nations of equals, not nations of gross inequality. That is the greatest challenge not just for the region, but for the world as a whole. We should not just look to our own needs, but rather to the needs of the people of the world generally.

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

Cathcart: Islam is one of the great religions of the world. Sadly, outside the Islamic world it is often associated with fundamentalism and, more recently, horrific terror. Those within the pro-democratic Islamic movement need to understand how the outside world views Islam. It is portrayed round the world as something it is not. The terrorists were not Moslems, they were simply mass murderers taking the cloak of Islam to justify their horrific crimes. What they did was fundamentally contrary to the teachings of Islam and the Koran. It is therefore even more essential these days for those seeking to pursue democratic aims to do so peacefully and strictly in accordance with the true tenets of Islam. It is also vital for that message to be made clear to the outside world. It is too easy for those seeking to pursue democratic change to be tarred with the same brush as those simply using Islam to pursue their own totally undemocratic aims. Remember always that when you pursue your lofty goals it is the men, women and children of the rest of the world who do not have proper food and shelter who most need your assistance.

Democratisation by Decree - Part 3

Dr. Abdulhadi Khalaf

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The Amir has the power to determine what social groups and what opposition networks are to be included in or excluded from actively participating in the liberalisation process. In turn, the Amiri options, however, will be constrained by the unresolved squabbles within the core of the ruling family. Of these the most conspicuous is conflict between the Amir and his uncle, the country's undisputed strong man for the past three decades.

Two sets of factors may influence the shaping of the Amiri options. The first is formed by the extent to which leaders of the opposition, religionist or otherwise, are capable of maintaining a credible united front and of maintaining their hold on their respective constituencies. The second is formed by the extent to which the regime and its loyal opposition manage a smooth the transition towards codification and implementation of the National Action Charter and the reinstatement of commitment to constitutionality. A long history of clientalist politics provide some difficult and unexpected hurdles on that path.

Elevated popular expectations fuelled by both the Amir and his euphoric opposition of dramatic changes are not likely to be satisfied by reforms that stop at an elected parliament and self-proclaimed constitutional monarchy. For their own different reasons, the Amir and his loyal opposition pushed popular expectation of change to unrealistic levels. In spite of the initial limitation imposed on the social and political spaces that are affected by controlled liberalisation, and in spite of the stringent control, liberalisation could gather its own momentum. As more people become aware of their collective civic power, they are likely to act to expand the perimeters of liberalisation by pressing for additional and possibly far-reaching demands.

On the Amir's side, the old guard is too strong to be ignored. For, in spite of all euphoric statements, and in spite of minor changes among mid-level security officers, the old regime remains in place. No one can be certain of when the old guard, or the Amir himself, will consider it necessary to call for a 'corrective move' when things, from their perspective, will seem to get out of hand. Corrective moves could be triggered by the unavoidable cutbacks in the ruling family's privileges when the elected parliament starts monitoring state revenues and its budgetary outlays. 'Corrective moves' launched by disgruntled members of the old guard are not the only threats to the current project of controlled liberalisation.

A number of threats could come from unpredictable consequences of the 'snowballing of democratic demands'. (Robinson, 1998:390).

On the side of the loyal opposition, the 'snowballing of democratic demands' may become counterproductive. The current infitah is due partly to a sustained national-based movement that transcended those social segmentations enforced by the old regime. For decades, effective manipulation of existing divisions within society and pre-empting the opportunities for horizontal interaction have provided the old regime with a strategic asset to maintain its rule.

The expected 'snowballing of demands' would give rise to competing and often incompatible demands by representatives of ethnic groups and sub-groups, of urban and rural cleavages, and of tribal and confessional corporatives.

Aside from shattering the remaining façades of the opposition unity, such a development could allow the regime to once again roll out one of its most trusted and effective instruments of rule: a fragmented and self-disillusioned opposition. In other words, nationification of politics is a prerequisite for sustaining the current political reforms and for their evolution into a serious liberalisation process. This, obviously, is contingent on the ability of the Amir and other political leaders to sustain required levels of reciprocity and trust as well as their ability, and will, to transcend those forms of social segmentation that reinforced the old regime for so long.

Standing Still ?

In a recent appraisal of the political reforms initiated by King Mohammad VI in Morocco, Abdeslam Maghraoui (2001) concluded that they remained largely symbolic gestures. He notes that Mohammed VI

"has appointed no serious team of reformers and announced no discernible has appointed no serious team of reformers and announced no discernible program of reforms. Three important signs confirm the new king's inability to reform the authoritarian system he has inherited. His initiatives seem impulsive and ad hoc rather than guided by a clear reformist strategy. He bypasses due process and formal decision-making institutions, diluting his professed aim to establish the rule of law. Third, King Mohammed's personal initiatives reproduce, in a different form, the old image of the benevolent despot. The medi-

eval mechanisms of exercising political authority in Morocco are still in place.

Mirroring his Moroccan and Jordanian counterparts, the Amir of Bahrain after more than two years on the throne, has introduced a number of adjustments to system. Certainly, many Bahrainis are grateful to him for improving their lot. But Hamad bin Isa's political reform process did not effect a systemic change. Notwithstanding his genuine modesty and his visible concern for the future of the country, the Amir of Bahrain, like King Mohammed VI and King Abdulla II, remains hostage of the ancien régime, its politics and institutions.

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