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A Note from Prison Legitimate Accounts, Wrong Accountants

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September 11

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The carnage which started with the suicidal bombing of New York's World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11 has resumed with massive American bombing of Afghanistan on the evening of 7 October 2001. It is the first war of the 21st century, pitting the world's strongest, richest, most technologically advanced country against a country that is among the poorest and least developed. It also happens to be between a Western, predominately Christian country and a Muslim, Middle Eastern country; between a secular democracy and an avowed theocracy. The list of contrasts probably contains many more dichotomies – making the Huntingtonians applaud the seeming fulfilment of their 'clash of civilizations' prophecy.

I am writing from my Egyptian prison cell in the fourth week of the American air campaign against Afghanistan. By the time these reflections are published, the present battle may be over, but not the war itself. The next battles of this war are bound to break out and could be anywhere in what Zbigniew Brzezinski aptly called the 'arch of crisis'. Just over ten years ago, a similar battle involving the US and another Middle Eastern country – Iraq – broke out and has never been completely ended. Before Iraq and Afghanistan, the US became militarily involved with ground forces and/or air power in Lebanon (1982/83), Iran (1980/81), Libya (1980s), Somalia and the Sudan (1990s). No other world region has experienced as many active American military intentions in the last three decades.

The fact that America is part of 'the West' and that the Middle East is part of 'the Rest' may or may not be a coincidence. Intellectuals are forcefully taking sides, but the empirical evidence is still insufficient for testing Huntington's 'grand theory' of the late 20th century. My reflections here do not address that grand theorizing; not for lack of temptation to do so, but for lack of references at hand and diminished margins of freedom in a Middle Eastern prison.

Instead, I will address far more modest questions. Why does our part of the world generate these frequent battles with the West, specifically the US? And why do the Middle Eastern antagonists keep losing the battles, with no apparent end to the war with the West? The brief answer to the first question is that peoples of the Middle East have truly legitimate accounts to settle with the West; and to the second question is that wrong accountants impose themselves on our people to settle those accounts. Proper accountants are yet to emerge – true Arab-Muslim democrats. But this is another story, for a future set of reflections, hopefully from the freedom beyond this prison.

Grievances

The accounts to be settled, as perceived by the Arab-Muslim world, abound. The list of grievances would vary somewhat from one Arab-Muslim country to another, and from one specific constituency to another within each country. The list would include diverse and even contradictory items – such as restrictive migration measures against Turks and North Africans into Western Europe, American military presence in the Gulf, the frequent US congressional threat of withdrawing American units from the multinational forces in Egyptian Sinai, one-sided support for Israel, MacDonald's, Coca-Cola, decadent Hollywood movies, excessive Western corporate presence, too little Western investment in the Arab-Muslim Middle East, and enforced values like consumerism and family planning. It all depends on who you talk to, in which country, and at which point in time.

But there is a core of common grievances that nearly all Arabs and Muslims deeply

hold against 'the West'. These include military humiliation, colonial occupation, pillaging of resources, political domination, cultural subjugation, and territorial fragmentation of the Homeland. Half a century ago, 'the West' was concretely the Dutch to Indonesians at one end of the 'arch of crises', and the French to Algerians and Morocco at the other end of the arch. In the middle, it was the British to peoples and cultures – Malaysians, Bengalis, Urdu, Afghanis, Persians, Mashreq Arabs, and Egyptians. More recently, the West has become condensed and symbolized by America.

Ironically the US was never a colonial power in the classical imperial sense – at least not in the Arab-Muslim world. But there are symbolic and instrumental reasons for this collective perception, and it is more than an implication by kinship with the old colonial powers of Europe. This will become more evident shortly.

At the very epicentre of Arab-Muslim core grievances towards the West is Palestine. It has been an open wound in the most sensitive spot at nearly the exact midpoint. The pains of that open wound may have been felt less by those far away – say, the peoples of Indonesia and Morocco at the two peripheral ends of the arch. But thanks to the electronic media, scenes of brutalization of Palestinians have become daily news on television screens in the most isolated hamlets of Java and Agadir. How else could any fair observer account for the post-September 11 demonstrations witnessed in some of these countries – albeit to the embarrassment of their own official leadership, which dutifully paid homage to the victims of the American tragedy. For sizeable segments, though by no means all of the public opinion in the arch, it was divine justice at work – retribution for all the injustices perpetrated by the West upon 'us' in Palestine, Iraq, and elsewhere for so long. America is perceived to be the permanent supporter of the Zionist Israeli state, while keeping the Arab-Islamic world 'divided, sapped, weak, dominated, exploited and humiliated'. Some may add that all of this is really about protecting oil interests in the Gulf, and now in the Caspian Sea.

Responses to the war

For most Arabs and Muslims, arguments about defeating the terrorists responsible for innocent victims of the WTC and the Pentagon may have been sympathetically listened to between September 11 and October 7, though with the caveat 'and what about the innocent Palestinians and Iraqis?' – in an obvious reference to the fact that they have been killed or bombed by American weapons either directly or at the hands of their 'Israeli clients'. After October 7, the American bombing of targets in Afghanistan was labelled by the leading mainstream *Al-Ahram al-Arabi* weekly (3 November 2001) as outright barbarism. In this view, no excuse or pretext justifies American air

raids, which could never avoid victimizing innocent Afghan civilians.

By November 7, one month after the start of the bombing, one could hardly find an Arab columnist of any note who would justify the American war against Afghanistan. It was no longer a 'war against terrorism' as sanctioned by the UN Security Council for legitimate action in self-defence. In the heat of battle all such legalisms are pushed to the margins. By now, the approximately 3,000 innocent American civilians killed by a premeditated act of terrorism seem to have been forgotten or deeply pushed into the Arab-Muslim collective subconscious. Now, it is only the moving picture of Afghanis – starving children in refugee camps on the border with Pakistan – or the mutilated bodies in the aftermath of American bombs, some of which invariably fall on civilian targets. These media images compete with similar ones from Palestine which have been displayed throughout the 13 months of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. A cartoon on the front page of the most secular liberal *Al-Wafd* daily (1 November 2001) summed it up: American President Bush and Israeli Prime Minister Sharon standing in two adjacent, but obviously competing, butcher shops, each busily slaughtering children – 'Afghani flavour' and 'Palestinian flavour' respectively – with a big sign advertising discount prices for Muslim meat.

Combat statistics, in view of images and cartoons like these, lose their relevance over time. Thus to say that the US lost in one hour three times more than the combined losses of Palestinians in one year (700) and Afghanis in one month (2,000) seems irrelevant to an average citizen in Pakistan, Egypt, or Morocco. It is what social psychologists call the 'immediacy effect' – American victims were killed two months earlier, but Afghanis and Palestinians are 'being slaughtered right now, now, as we speak, do something about it!'. It is this immediacy effect, thanks again to satellite communications displaying the maimed and displaced, which accounts for the anti-American demonstrations in Arab-Muslim capitals.

But there are other effects which play in favour of Taliban Afghanistan in fuelling similar demonstrations in other countries far beyond the Arab-Muslim World – e.g. Korea, Japan and several Latin American countries. Among these other effects is a David vs. Goliath syndrome (Bin Laden vs. Bush), or the Taliban as a 'Cinderella hero'. There is no doubt of the presence of a quota of envy among the poor and marginal vis-à-vis US power, wealth, and hegemony in a unipolar world system. Among a limited sample of fellow prison inmates (both political and criminal), I have detected satisfaction, if not outright delight, in observing American humiliation and widespread fear because of the suicide bombings and subsequent Anthrax panic. This degree of spite, coming at a moment of a colossal human

tragedy, could only be a function of deep bitterness, un-redressed historical grievances, and contemporary open wounds.

Usama Bin Laden is fast emerging as a folk hero to millions of the angry and frustrated in the Arab-Muslim world. To them, he has eluded and frightened the sole superpower and its other Western allies. He and his modest Taliban allies with minimal weapons, primitive technology, access to one regional television channel (Al-Jazeera) and a tiny resource base have already stood up and resisted the firepower of the strongest country in history for four weeks – i.e. longer than Saddam Hussein with his one million-strong army in the 1991 Gulf War; and five times longer than Egypt, Syria, and Jordan stood up to much less Israeli firepower in the 1967 Six Day War. By these standards, Arab-Muslim youngsters may be justified in their admiration of Bin Laden's defiance. He has largely won the current battle over the hearts, if not the minds, of the Arab-Muslim world.

Legitimate accounts

But will Bin Laden and his Taliban brothers win the war against the West?

From the humble view of an Arab prisoner of conscience, the answer is a big 'NO'. Bin Laden is one in a chain of Arab-Muslim leaders who defied, challenged, and engaged the West in grand battles. But in the end, they have all lost their wars against the West. This all started with Egypt's Nasser half a century ago, and continued with Libya's Qaddafi, Syria's Assad, Iraq's Saddam, and now Saudi-Afghani Bin Laden. The initial battle cry of each one of these challengers resonated deeply and widely with the Arab-Muslim masses. Some cried out under the banner of Arab Nationalism, others under the banner of Islam. All of them invoked the cause of Palestine and specifically the liberation of Jerusalem. These two causes have tremendous emotive power. However, each of the above challengers tagged Palestine and Jerusalem on to his own personal ambitions for power and his ideological hopes for remaking the world.

Initial successes in overpowering local foes or bleeding external enemies, using zealous true believers, whipping up the cheers of spectators – all are tempting, and always deceiving. Sheer grand vision and scores of zealots have never alone been sufficient, in our region or elsewhere in the world, in sustaining a credible challenge, much less in achieving ultimate victory. History is a vast graveyard of the likes of Bin Laden and his pan-Islamic Al-Qa'ida network, the Taliban movement and millions of distant admiring but powerless masses. All we need to anticipate the unfolding of events in this particular drama is to look back to Egypt's Nasser in the 1960s. As then, Bin Laden made a thunderous entrance onto the world stage. He may very well end the same – i.e. withering away after a resounding defeat, or getting

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killed in battle and going down as a martyr Che Guevera style.

Yes, Bin Laden may have touched on most if not all the Arab-Muslim world's historical grievances. He may have demanded forcefully to settle legitimate accounts. In these respects he is echoing the deep yearning of at least eight generations of Arabs and Muslims – as his fellow desert reformer-warrior Mohamed bin Abul-Wahab had tried at the end of the 18th century. But Bin Laden's medieval language of discourse, his Wahabi austere fundamentalist version of Islam, the oppressive model of society imposed in Afghanistan, and the terrorist methods used to settle legitimate accounts with the outside world, all put him outside the mainstream of history. They make him the wrong accountant. His only remaining value, if any,

may be that of shocking mankind into consciousness that there is urgent regional-global business that must be equitably and forcefully addressed, before another Bin Laden – possibly more lethal – forces his way to the world's centre stage again, and takes us all to the brink of apocalypse.

*Saad Ibrahim, a prominent political sociologist at the American University in Cairo and founder of the Arab Organization of Human Rights, is currently serving a seven-year prison sentence for his activities at the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Development Studies.
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