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ARABS AND THE WEST

by Walid Khalidi

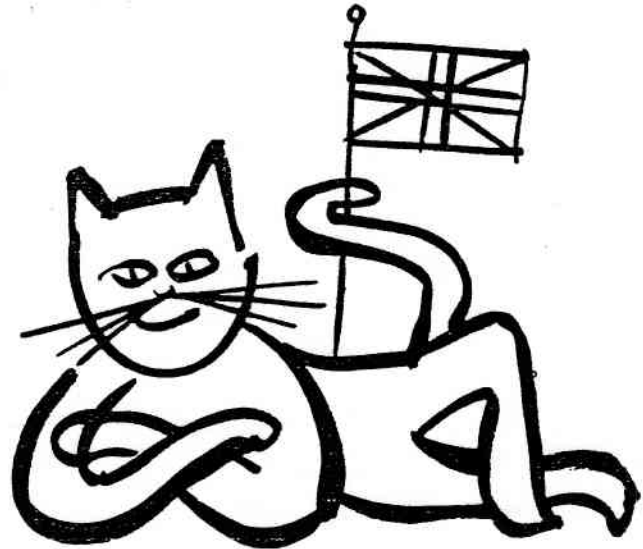
The Arab world has not exactly been handing bouquets to the West in the last few months. Nevertheless Western reactions have often seemed to me to be related not so much to the particular set-backs but rather to the fact the authors of the set-backs were Arabs. In other words, the reactions were not to the material loss sustained but to the psychological shock which the set-back gave to the Western world.

If this is true, Western reactions to developments in the Arab World would seem to reflect a certain attitude to the Arabs upon which, for some reason or other, these developments impinge with particular unpleasantness. So it might be of some use to investigate this Western attitude and see what it really is.

There seems in the first place to be a whole complex of notions and ideas inherited or acquired from the past: some from the recent past and some from more remote times. These could be roughly divided into three strands. The first relates to the great battle between Christian Europe and the World of Islam which began in the 7th century and ended only with the stemming of the Ottoman tide in eastern Europe in the 18th century. All the fears, animosities, and suspicions of these times are reflected, sometimes explicitly and sometimes by implication, in the contemporary Western writings (as indeed they are in the Arabic writings of the time), both prose and verse, lay and ecclesiastical. They therefore form part of the literary heritage of every educated European and are embedded in the subject matter of his general reading. Of course, the modern European and American reader would generally dismiss with a smile as quaint any hostile or discourteous references to the Moor or the Saracen. But he would be less than human if he did not at the same time admit into his subconscious a smaller or larger number of prejudices. One residue of these prejudices is perhaps the facility with which the adjective "oriental" is still pre-fixed to such words as "duplicity", "cruelty", "servility", and "despotism". Another is possibly the general misunderstanding that exists about Islam, to which I shall come presently.



The second strand relates to the period of European expansion beginning in the 17th-18th centuries and culminating in the Arab World with the Western settlement imposed upon the Arabs at the end of the First World War. This was the period of European imperialism par excellence, of exuberant, overwhelming, crushing European material and technical superiority. It was also, and particularly in the 19th century, the period of British global supremacy. Together with the fact of this supremacy there also went a serene consciousness of moral and intellectual superiority, and a belief of varying degrees of sincerity in a British mission to lead the backward non-European nations to civilization. Such sympathy as there may have existed for the indigenous civilizations was at best patronizing or romantic, and was generally coupled



with a belief in their incompatibility with modern progress. The reactions of every European imperialistic power to the native situation in its territories were transmitted to and integrated with those of the other European imperial powers and the general result was one of heightening and intensifying the common European experience vis-a-vis the non-European subject peoples. Moreover, the British outlook in the specifically Arab territories was constantly colored by concepts formed in non-Arab colonial territories—territories which often did not possess the same background of culture and civilization as that of the Arab countries themselves.

The third strand relates to the struggle between the occupying imperialistic powers and the growing national movements which began in earnest after the First World War and is still in progress in some Arab countries. The attempt of the nationalist movements to shake off the foreign power and of the foreign power to yield as little as possible produced the inevitable vicious circle of rebellion and repression, with all the loss of life, the sordidness and the bitterness that go with them. The British were particularly handicapped in their attempts to understand the nationalist movements by two factors: first, their failure to realize the tremendous impact of their vastly superior strength on the weaker nations. When a weak nation, conscious of its identity and of its right to independent existence, lives under the shadow of a great power whom it suspects of wanting to thwart its aspirations, its feeling is one of continuous semi-suffocation and claustrophobia. The great power is conscious of the weak one only intermittently and with, as it were, its peripheral faculties. But, like a mouse in the paws of a cat, there is no point of time when the weak nation is unconscious of the great one. Moreover, its involvement is always complete and at every

level of its consciousness—emotional, cultural, social, intellectual and political. This involvement colors not only its relations with the great power, but also its relations with itself, and with others, and its whole outlook on life and the world in general. Even after independence is conceded, a long time must elapse before the weak nation returns to normality. The second factor which handicapped Britain was that to Britain national liberation is, in the words of T. E. Lawrence, "as tasteless as water". For Britain, as it is now, never lacked national freedom, and consequently perhaps grew accustomed to the notion that national freedom is what one has, not what one acquires, and that some people have it and others do not. Moreover, in the struggle against the great powers, the nationalist movements have to mobilize all the resources of society, and, denied regular military forces, have to resort to underhand methods, to civil agitation and administrative sabotage. The resulting *externals* of the nationalist movement are particularly distasteful to the British mind with its tradition of civil obedience and a quietly efficient governmental machine: strikes of civil servants, murder of policemen, mob hysteria, demagoguery, yelling crowds and, worst of all, students demonstrating and rioting when they ought to be getting on with their Arabic hexameters or working off their surplus energy in a rigger scrum. The means are taken for the ends. If national liberation is liberation from all restraint and discipline, then, it is felt, national liberation must be stopped.

But two world wars, the consequent redistribution of political and economic forces and the ready response which Asian and African peoples made to Western technology and ideas forced the European powers, and chiefly Britain, to yield ground progressively to the forces of nationalism. In the field of Anglo-Arab relations a new emotional factor appeared as far as the British public was concerned. No people in the world enjoy the spectacle of what seems to them to be a diminution in their power and prestige and the British are no exception. The passing away of the imperial heyday coincided with the rise of Arab and other nationalisms. The success of these nationalisms was largely the result, not the cause, of the decay of imperial Britain's power, but the coincidence made a deep impression. It was felt that the new nationalisms had grown at the expense of Britain, that their success was a measure of Britain's loss. Egypt is an Arab country which is particularly liable to be thought of in this context. All this has left and still leaves a nasty taste in the mouth.

IGNORANCE OF ISLAM

Besides this complex of notions there is another one which derives from straightforward ignorance about Islam, the religion of most Arabs, and about the Arabs in general. This ignorance is due partly to a hang-over from earlier times, partly to the difficulties of arriving at a balanced picture of the Arabs and Moslems, even when contact is established, which I shall presently discuss, but perhaps mostly to the fact that the Arab World is removed from the European theatre.

But there is no doubt about this ignorance, whatever its causes, and of the inter-play between it and the body of ideas and notions already discussed. To the average and perhaps more than average educated Westerner, Islam appears as a fanatical, bloodthirsty, reactionary, xenophobic, and largely destructive force. The obvious present-day poverty and material backwardness of most Islamic countries (due to a variety of causes which I cannot go into now) are all too easily equated with Islam itself.

A feature article published by the Cairo correspondent of the London Times in its issue of 29th April 1955 includes this passage:

"Beyond the garden of the Church you may meet Islam.

A man has died and his wife is mourning her loss, helped by many female friends and sympathizers. They squat in the dust of the village street, all shrouded in black....There they sit in the filth (tin cans, fluttering rubbish and indefinable debris) wailing, screeching, and clutching their clothes."



There is no doubt that the correspondent saw these women. He saw a group of very poor women in deep distress who happened to be Moslems in a village with obviously rather inadequate town planning and municipal arrangements, but he did not meet *Islam* in the rubbish.

The pity is that modern orientalism in the writings of Gibb, Arberry, Anderson, Cragg and Cantwell Smith has arrived at a critical estimation of Islam which is at once profound, authoritative and sympathetic. A slight exercise of willpower is therefore all that is required by those interested in the Near East, or embarking on a journey there, to put them right in the middle of the picture.

ARABS AS "EXTRAS"

The same confusion exists about the Arabs as Arabs. This may seem strange, considering the long British connection with the Near East and the British troops stationed there for more than half a century. But it is not all that strange. The difficulties were enormous. There is in the first place the complete strangeness and outlandishness of the Near East, so different from anything experienced on a continental holiday. There is then all the physical discomfort, the precautionary injections, the heat, the flies, the dust, the dysentery, the different sights and smells and the incomprehensible babble. To most British administrators or diplomats, however conscientious, the Arab is "work", he is what you get away from if you want to relax with a whiskey and soda on the terrace of your sporting club. To the soldier cooped up in his barracks the Arab is the thief who creeps up at night and runs away with an unguarded boot, blanket or rifle. Often he is the enemy who throws bricks at you or snipes at you from a safe distance or pushes your comrade into the canal. Even when friendly he is only the pimp or the oily salesman who overcharges you for a Birmingham trinket. And it is in this way, for the most part, that the Arab is reflected in the Western press.

The more sophisticated and free-lancing traveller is not in a much better position. The fascination of the Near East to him lies in the fact that it is a treasure-house of antiquity. It is the historical monuments that are the live personalities of the Near East. The Arabs are like the extras in a film who fill the street outside the hotel where the romance is taking place. If he is sick at heart with what Britain or the West has come to, then it is the bedouin that he hero-worships.

on the way to Petra or Palmyra—the outdoor, cool-limbed, light-travelling, hawk-eyed bedouin with manly locks. On a more pedestrian level it is simply the quaint or exotic that arrests his attention. How many an English traveller has eaten our Arab sheep and how many a sizzling eye has been torn from its horrid socket to be offered with a smile to the honored guest! Even when the implications were political the foreign journalist found the temptation difficult to resist. During the great Arab-Zionist propaganda war of the 30's and 40's it was practically impossible (as it still is now) to interest a foreign journalist, English or otherwise, in a modern Arab venture. He would invariably protest with genuine innocence and professional fervor that unless the Arab camel plough was photographed against the Zionist tractor there would be no "color" in his story.

NOT QUITE HUMAN

There emerged from all this a picture of an Arab which was not, strictly speaking, 3-dimensional. Somehow or other the Arab did not quite possess the full complement of normal faculties and susceptibilities. This picture is best reflected in an official manual given to American troops after their landing in North Africa during the Second World War. The manual is quoted by John Gunther in his recent book "Inside Africa".

According to this manual "Arab boys do not like to fight with their hands and urinate sitting down. One should never shake hands with Arabs vigorously; they have delicate fingers and hate a hearty handshake. Arabs are apt to become hysterical at the sight of blood, and never wash in still water". The troops are further admonished not to perform a private function in public near an Arab, nor to undress near one.

With such an anthropological approach, carried in this last instance to the borderland of zoology, it is not surprising

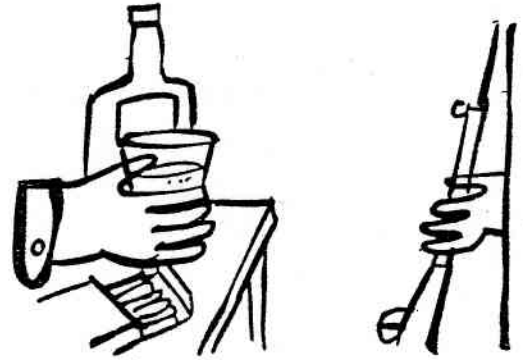


(indeed it is only logical) that false assumptions are constantly made about Arab political conduct. The most dangerous of these assumptions are first that Arab political motives are not serious and second that the Arabs do not possess independent political interests of their own.

The first assumption is seen in the resourceful manner in which developments in the Arab world have been explained away by the Western press and sometimes Western statesmen. In the old days it was the Pashas trying to divert attention from domestic reform, later it was Fascist and Nazi money, more recently it has been bribes from some oil producing Arab countries, Communism, Abdel Nasser and the radio. When serious motives were attributed, they were un-

worthy, discreditable and therefore not really serious, as for example, xenophobia, fanaticism and now, increasingly, megalomania.

The second assumption, that Arabs have no independent political interests of their own, is seen in the surprise occasioned by the fact that the Arabs do not always see eye to eye



with the West and may indeed want to strike out on a path of their own. It is seen in the resentment felt that the Arabs do not want to commit themselves to the same things, at the same time, in the same way, and to the same extent, as the West. It is seen in the persistent over-emphasis on technical and economic aid as though such normal considerations as national pride and self-respect were entirely irrelevant.

It has been suggested that the West is being discredited in the Near East by nothing more serious than words and that the answer is to pour countering words into Near East ears. My considered opinion is that this would be a waste of time and, far from doing the West any good, might even injure it still more.

It is nonsense to say that the West is being driven out of the Near East, by mere propaganda. If the West is losing ground in the Near East, this is due to a great number of complex causes that stretch far back, long before Colonel Nasser or Radio Cairo was born. If any of these causes has a local derivation it is the failure of the West to come to terms with the modern Arabs who are rapidly changing the destinies of their countries.

What is needed is not to broadcast comparisons to the Arab World between the merits of Western democracy, which was never practised by the West in the Near East, and Soviet tyranny, which was never experienced by the Arabs. What is needed above all is a radical revolutionary psychological readjustment on the part of the West to a new dynamic Arab world which is proud and conscious of its ancient heritage and determined to occupy once again its full place among the nations of the world. Such an adjustment would enable the West to concede with better grace not only the right of political independence to the Arab, but also (and quite apart from strategic or oil considerations) the right of *human* independence. ● ●

Walid Khalidi, well known in Britain and the Arab world for his writing on the Palestine problem, lectured in Arabic History at Oxford University until the Suez War when he gave up his post in protest against British action. He is at present teaching in the History Department of the American University. This article is based on a talk given last year on the B.B.C.'s Third Programme.