Colonialism in a Postmodern Age: the West, Arabs and "the Battle of Baghdad"

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Abstract

This article argues that history of western influence and political meddling in Arab countries over the past century has resulted in great tensions between the West and the East. These tensions have contributed to a sense of distrust of the West by Arab peoples. This article first narrates a story of a century-long liberation journey. The article also recommends some policy changes for the United States to take in order to start a process of reconciliation with the Arab peoples.

Introduction

Two days after American forces entered Baghdad, Arab television stations in countries like Qatar, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Lebanon broadcasted images of Iraqi opposition to the new occupation. To the surprise of the American people, American forces were greeted with demonstrations and not celebrations. On several occasions, American soldiers fired live ammunition at demonstrators who were just "liberated" from the brutality of the Iraqi regime. Are these quacks of occupation or liberation? Why are some Iraqis opposed to American presence and influence in Iraq? How could Arabs not appreciate the great fortune (i.e. liberation) the United States had bestowed on them? This article finds in the history of the interaction between the West and the Arab world an answer to these questions.

History of western influence and meddling in Arab countries and the relationship between the West and the East over the past century has contributed to a sense of distrust of the West by Arab peoples. This article first narrates the story of almost one hundred years of struggle by indigenous people in the Middle East for liberation – from the West and not by the West. Then, the article presents a set of proposals that would improve the relationship between Arabs and the West.

Arabs and the West: One Hundred Years of Resistance!

Over the past one hundred years, the West has not enjoyed the image of liberator among the people of the Middle East. Many Arab national movements adopt anti-western political speech to gain popularity among their peoples (Bill and Springbord, 1990). Western interests have been at odds with the national and public interests of the Arab peoples. While decolonization would normally mean national independence, tyrants who eventually ruled Arab countries have ensured that Arabs would not achieve self-determination (Alkadry, 2002).

Alkadry and Khalil (2002) summarize the relationship between the West and the peoples of the Middle East in four instances of resistance that lasted a century. The result of these instances is a decolonized Middle East without popular sovereignty and democratic governance. Throughout these moments, western interests prevailed at the expense of human and political rights of the people of the decolonized Middle East peoples.

Betrayal

The first epoch of resistance is one of betrayal of pan-Arab nationalistic aspirations to spare western economic and political interests. In 1917, during the First World War, the Ottomans allied themselves with the Germans against the French and British empires. In what Antonios (1938/1946) refers to as 'The Arab Awakening', he describes how the Arab nations, led by the Shareef Hussein of Mecca, allied themselves with the British and the French and revolted against the Ottomans and helped put an end to an empire which has lasted more than four centuries. The basis of the treaty between Arabs and the Allies was a British promise made to Shareef Hussein - a pan-Arab Meccan leader - that Arabs would form an independent and sovereign nation on the ruins of the Ottoman empire. In return for this promise, the Arabs would revolt against the Ottoman empire which has fallen under the control of the 'Young Turks'. The European victors, however, had other plans for the region. Said (1993) explains that, "the Arabs after liberating themselves from the Ottomans in 1917 and 1918, took British promises for independence as the literal truth"(Said, 1993, p. 247). Antonios (1938/1946) describes what happened at the San Remo conference where British and French leaders changed the geography of the region:

> Whatever else may be said of the San Remo decisions [of spring 1920, in which "the whole of the Arab Rectangle lying between the Mediterranean and the Persian frontier was to be placed under mandatory rule"], they [allies meeting in San Remo] did violate the general principles proclaimed and the specific promises made by the Allies, and more particularly by Britain. The purport of the pledges given in secret is now known: ...with that the Arabs had come into the War and made their contribution and their sacrifices, and that fact alone sufficed to turn the corresponding obligation into a debt of honor. What the San Remo did was, in effect, to ignore the debt and come to decisions which, on all the essential points, ran counter to the wishes of the peoples concerned (305-6).

The San Remo agreement between the British and the French put Arabs under direct colonial rule. Palestinian Arabs had to deal with a new settlement activity which was

encouraged by the British, and which would be the cornerstone of the Arab-Israeli conflict for the last 65 years (Hourani, 1991). At the same time that the British leaders made promises to Arab leaders, they made different promises to the growing European Zionist movement in what became known as 'the Balfour Declaration.' The Balfour Declaration gave Zionists the promise of a homeland in Palestine.

The betrayal of Arabs by the West caused deep resentment and was followed by a period of cultural awakening and revival among Arabs. Hourani (1991) emphasizes the significance, at the time, of developing a revitalized Arab-Islamic identity and culture which could resist the West and "Western Imperial Impingement" on them (Said, 1993, p. 252). Said (1981) argues that the result of this double struggle, on one hand to liberate the nation from the new British colonialism and on the other to revitalize Arabic culture, mixed with western betrayal has been a discourse of 'Arab nationalism'--at the heart of which is a complex of "hope betrayal and bitter disappointment" which resulted in an unfulfilled and incomplete culture, "expressing itself in a fragmented language of torment angry insistence," often uncritical condemnation of outside (mainly western) enemies (Said, 1981).

British and French colonial forces labeled themselves as forces of reconstruction and nation building under a British and French mandate (as compared to colonialism). Arabs were betrayed when suddenly control of Arabs by Muslim non-Arab Ottomans was replaced by non-Muslim Europeans. The audacity of this situation is exacerbated by the fact that Arab activists were misled into helping Europeans achieve this colonial presence.

Inventing Borders

The second epoch was even more dramatic than the first. The French and British administrations immediately transformed the Arab world into several nation-states with arbitrary borders. Arab aboriginals were not consulted and their economic, demographic or geographic interests were of little concern to the new victors of the Second World War (Hourani, 1991). These geographic creations have resulted in many conflicts and problems that have lasted up for decades and up until our current day (Sayegh, 1958). Clapham (1985) notes that "European colonial rule has a major global impact in that it created political territories which were artificial, in the sense that they did not arise from societies which they governed but were instead imposed on them" (p.4). Alkadry and Khalil (2002) note that "this arbitrary delineation of borders is at worst an attempt to fragment the ideas of civil society and citizenship consistent with the divide-and-conquer colonial philosophy, and at best a disregard and dismissal of these two concepts by the colonial powers consistent with colonial dismissal of natives' rights to things that are civilized" (p. 156-157).

After this arbitrary delineation of borders, Arab natives were left with little options but to "[recite] a script written by someone else" (Sayegh, 1958, p. xiv-xv). There were no national identities associated with the newly created states, and the common historical, cultural and political experiences of most of these countries was a yearning for Arab or Islamic unity (Abu Jaber, 1969). In summary, the colonial forces carved up the Middle East, installed non-democratic and traditionally-alien regimes in the newly created

states, and expected Arabs to dance to these newly-introduced colonial tunes (Alkadry, 2002).

Colonial powers, by delineating arbitrary borders to arbitrary states, affected the notion of civil society and solidarity which are very important to the Islamic tradition of Middle East nations (Antonios, 1936/1948; Mansfield, 1973; Abadi, 1983). The colonial forces created states with conflicting ethnicities and divided some coherent and existing ethnic communities among two, three or four states. For instance, the Kurds who lived in a contiguous geographic region were divided among Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey with borders separating siblings and cousins. Since 1922, every Iraqi regime called for correcting the colonial carving of Kuwait out of Iraqi territory after many centuries of Kuwaiti control by Baghdad (Ali, 2002). The creation of the State of Israel – created mostly by settlers who actively worked to expunge Palestinian natives from their homeland– triggered a struggle in the Middle East that has lasted and will last for decades to come (Said, 1981). The resulting Palestinian exodus into neighboring Arab states has also caused civil wars in Lebanon and Jordan (Deegan, 1994).

Colonial Practices

The British and French colonialists suppressed national movements within the colonized nations, silenced voices for national independence and self-determination and installed local puppet leaders to help suppress Arab populations in the newly created states (Bill and Springbord, 1990; Clapham, 1985). The colonial forces, especially the British, introduced western forms of monarchy regimes that are alien to the region and to the historic traditions of its peoples (Lewis, 2000). Throughout the Arab world, the colonial forces suppressed nationalist movements and attempts to hold democratic elections . In 1924, British colonial administrators opposed attempts by the King of Jordan to hold elections for a parliament (Abu Jaber, 1969). The British also opposed elections and the formation of nationalist government in Iraq in the early 1920s, and instead installed a complacent royal regime - that of King Faisal who had been recently exiled from Damascus by French colonial administrators (Bill and Springbord, 1990). In 1942, the British forces surrounded the Egyptian Royal Palace to force the Egyptian King to remove a nationalist government and appoint a pro-British government. French colonial administrators also systematically opposed popular and elected regimes in Lebanon and Syria and rather endorsed political leaders who would be more complacent to the goals and priorities of the French imperialists (Rustow, 1963).

The Betrayal of Arabs and their colonization by the British were only made worse by the mass influx of European and other Jews into Palestine and therefore the demographic displacement of the Palestinian natives. In the late 19th century Jews accounted for less than 10% of the population of Palestine. By the 1930, they accounted for almost one-third (Said, 1981). The culmination of these two factors and the news of the Balfour Declaration, by which the British gave a promise of a Jewish state in Palestine, all gave rise to the Great Arab Revolt in Palestine which has arguably started in 1929 and lasted for almost ten years until 1939 (Kimmerling and Migdal, 1993). The Great Arab Revolt in Palestine was especially important because it has mobilized thousands of Palestinians "from every stratum of society, all over the country." The Revolt was a

response to British colonialism and their refusal to suppress Jewish immigration to Palestine. Young Palestinian nationalists felt that Zionism was not simply a delusion, to be, or that could be, corrected. Rather, Zionism was, part of and, "parcel of Western imperialism in the Middle East, and only the eradication of the latter could halt the advance of the former" (Kimmerling and Migdal, 1993, p.9).

Resistance has occurred at all these instances of confrontation. Colonial administrations in the Middle East and in other Muslim nations faced some fierce resistance from the indigenous peoples. Examples of resistance to colonialism include the Mahdist movement led by Muhammad Ibn Abd Allah against Italian and British Conquest in Somalia, the revolt of 1920 against the British colonial administration in Iraq, the 'Abd Al-Qader revolt against French colonialism in 1830 in Algeria, the Mahdist movement of 1821 against Egypto-British colonialism in Sudan, the revolt by Ahmad 'Urabi against British occupation of Egypt in 1881, the Sanusi resistance against Italian colonialism in Libya, and the Palestinian resistance to British and Zionist colonialism particularly in the uprisings of 1936, 1987 and 2000 (Peters, 1979).

Confrontation between the colonizing Europe and the colonized Arabs lasted decades and did not even end with decolonization and national independence. British colonials installed leaders and regimes in Arab countries who maintained the British influence in the region for decades after the British left. National independence did not translate into self-determination, and ultimately liberation and popular sovereignty, for the people of the Middle East, as colonial forces continued to exert influence over the decolonized people years after decolonization (Said, 1993).

Neocolonialism and Resistance to the US Instead of Europe

The fourth epoch of confrontation is perhaps the one of great significance to American scholars. In the post-colonial period, Arab confrontation with Europe and European colonialism was transformed into confrontation between Arabs and the United States of America. Arabs in the post-colonial era could be found in one of three camps: repressive regimes friendly to the United States, repressive regimes not friendly to the United States, and occupying regimes that are sustained economically and militarily by the United States (Alkadry, 2002).

By economically and politically sustaining ruthless regimes, the U.S. constrains the emancipation of Arab peoples and at the same time ensures a complacency of these regimes in their external relations. The regimes friendly to the United States include Saudi-Arabia, post-Nasser Egypt, Jordan, pre-1990 Iraq, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Tunisia, Morocco, and pre-1979 Iran. Countries not friendly to the United States include Syria, Nasser's Egypt, Sudan, Libya, and post-1990 Iraq. Being a major source of crude oil, the Middle East became the heart pump for the world economy (Nixon, 1980, 1992). In this instance, the United States and Europe sanctioned the oppression of people in the region and the continued prevalence of royal and dictator regimes as "friendly tyrants" (Pipes and Garfinkle, 1991). With direct western support, regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Shah's Iran and Jordan continued to oppress their nationals and to suppress the formation of democratic institutions (Ali, 2002). Egypt and Jordan - essentially dictator regimes -

were cited as models of governance by the United States President G. W. Bush as he searched for complacency for US and Israeli interests by the Palestinian Authority in July 2002 (Al-Jazeera, 7/17/2002). In this moment of confrontation, the socio-political and economic theaters were directed and envisioned not by Arabs or the economic and political interests, but rather by the economic and political interests of the United States and Israel (Kubursi, 1999). The anger about American support for friendly tyrants is obvious in the fact that almost all the terrorists who attacked New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 were almost all from countries ruled by friends of ours but not of their own people (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates). These terrorists did not come from Syria, Iraq, Iran, or Libya - countries that are not considered friendly to the United States.

Besides support for "friendly tyrants," the United States objection to unfriendly tyrants has helped these tyrants sustain themselves through nationalist anti-Zionist, anti-American rhetoric. The United States intervened to deal with unfriendly Arab nationalist movements that toppled pro-colonial regimes in many of the newly-created states. This happened in Iraq, Syria, Egypt (1952-1973), and Libya. These regimes faced what Bill and Springbord (1990) term as a process of "defensive modernization." These regimes used external threats to their national security as excuses to disallow a process of democratization as well as suppress opposition within. Some of these Arab regimes switched roles as defensive modernizers and friendly tyrants. Iraq shifted from a friendly tyrant before its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 to a defensive modernizer afterwards. The Shah of Iran (pre-1979) was a friendly tyrant while Khomeini was a defensive modernizer. Egypt under Nasser (pre-1970) is an example of a defensive modernizer while Egypt under Mubarak and Sadat (post-1973 period) became a friendly tyrant regime.

Finally, Arabs of Palestine have been living under Israeli occupation, or in exile since 1948. Over the past 50 years, Arabs watched Israeli progress from a settler community to a prosperous state. This prosperity would have been impossible without the direct and indirect support by the United States. This support has become sharper in the post-cold war era. The United States in the 1990s used its Security Council veto power to block any sanctions on Israel, any presence of international observers to protect Palestinian rights under the Geneva Convention, or even any investigation of alleged war crimes by Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories. This unconditional support for Israel despite its violation of tens of Security Council resolutions, is paralleled by strict enforcement of all such resolutions against non-friendly Arab states – such as Libya and Iraq. The United States used protecting Israel's right to exist as its rationale for this support. Still, the double-standard in enforcing international law and unconditional support for Israeli occupation of Arab lands are the source of great resentment of United States policies in the region (Chomsky, 2001; Said, 2001).

Western hegemony (Bin Sayeed, 1995) has also triggered some major resistance by the peoples subjected to imperialism. Bin Sayeed (1995) argues that the resurgence of this old phenomenon as "Islamic Resistance to Western hegemony in the Middle East" (p. 5). However, he only looks at resistance by self-proclaimed Islamic states specifically Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan. We submit here that the more threatening form of resistance is that of non-states - organizations such as Al-Qaeda and Islamic Jihad. These

organizations are products of tyrant regimes friendly to the U.S. but not to political freedoms within their own countries. With the suppression of political organizing and oppression of opposition by oppressive regimes that are supported and sustained by the West, political Islam seems more difficult to halt because of the inseparability between religion and politics.

The Product of a Century of Confrontation

In summary, the past century witnessed the prevalence of western interests at the expense of the human and political rights of Arabs. At each period of confrontation, the resistance by Arabs was stronger than resistance in earlier periods. This is evident in the history of the decolonized Middle East as it has experienced wars more than any region in the world for the last fifty years. The region was home to three wars between Israel and its neighbors, a war between Iraq and Iran, a war between Iraq and Kuwait, and two wars between Iraq and the United States. Several countries in the region also experienced internal conflicts: Turkey (Kurds), Iraq (Kurds), Lebanon, Sudan, and Algeria Indeed, the daily tragic pictures coming out of West Bank and Gaza Strip and the inability or unwillingness of the United States and Europe to find a just solution to the Palestinian issue make peoples of the region very suspicious of these two powers.

Colonial administrators carved up the Middle East, oppressed its peoples, and installed regimes and states with no single national identity or common definition of citizenship that would unite their peoples. Western imperialism and defensiveness against it by anti-imperial regimes in the region have ensured that the peoples of the Middle East did not experience true processes of liberation. Those national forces that toppled pro-colonial and pro-imperial regimes found themselves in defensive positions that turned them into regimes as ruthless as their colonial predecessors.

Arabs and the United States in the Post-Hussein Years

Not long ago and in the words of President George W. Bush, Americans engaged in a seemingly innocent debate of how could Arabs hate the United States. "We are so good," the American President announced. The interesting thing about this debate is that it was a debate among Americans – no Arabs invited and no historical context. This article serves to answer that question. At the same time, the article should not be construed as justification for anti-American sentiments. Instead, they are explanations of what went wrong and how long these sentiments have been in the making. Understanding the roots of a problem is the first step to surgically deal with that problem.

The past four decades were particularly damaging for prospects of peace between the United States and the Arab peoples. Reversing this hostile relationship is done not by retaining image spin-masters and purchasing television ads in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and other countries. Nor is this done through invading an Arab country to allegedly liberate its people from a friendly tyrant gone mad, while leaving the liberation of other Arabs from other Arab and non-Arab friendly tyrants contingent on the loyalty of these tyrants to the U.S. A change has to entail fundamental policy changes.

First, ending the Israeli occupation of Arab lands would help ease the tensions between the United States and Arabs. For the last 38 years, Israel has occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip despite many United Nations resolution and outcry of the international community to end this occupation (Keeley, 2002). For more than fifty years, Palestinians have been living as refugees in other Arab states. The Palestinian question is critical for any peace between Arabs and the United States. According to an editorial in Arab News, Saudi Arabia's first English-language daily, "while the strikes in Afghanistan have pushed the Palestinian struggle down to the second-lead position in media coverage, it remains the central issue for the region. Palestine continues to yield, every day, its dead and injured. Until that stops, all agree, there can be no peace in this region" (World Press, 2001).

Second, the US presence in Iraq has to be very transparent and its approach to dealing with Iraq must be both surgical and delicate. Alkadry and Khalil (2002) predicted that the next confrontation between Arabs and the West is at the crossroads of globalization. The US occupation of Iraq seems more appropriate as that fifth moment of confrontation. What the United States needs to ensure is that it does not follow in the footsteps of European colonizers.

Finally, additional confrontation with Syria and Iran does not serve American interests. It reminds Arabs of their helplessness in the face of United States war machinery. Unlike images of natives that are spread by western popular culture (Shaheen, 2001), Arabs are intelligent and able to identify hypocrisy when they see one evil sanctioned because of friendliness to the United States and another targeted because of non-friendliness to the United States. Therefore, any attempt to fight evil in the world must start with the friendly tyrants in the Middle East and elsewhere. Support for friendly tyrants has to end because Arabs have started realizing that western supporters and not only the tyrants is their enemy.

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