In quest of the Arab springtime

The suicide hijackers’ ultimate dream may yet come true if and when America bombs Afghanistan. Young warriors from all over the Islamic world will reverse their own governments’ involvement in the U.S.-led coalition, and join the international brigade that will defend the Arab homeland from “infidels.” The result will be precisely the self-fulfillment of the “clash of civilizations” that the American analyst Samuel Huntington prophesied.

It is not this “clash” that fuels the hatred for America in the Middle East. Real grievances do. Foremost of these is the whole question of Palestine – how could the world sit by and accept the wrong perpetrated on the Arabs of Palestine? This is an open wound in the heart of almost every Arab regardless of religion. It is begging to be closed.

The classical vision of history to which the Taliban’s Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden subscribe is one that focuses on understanding the causes of an event, pinpointing and passing judgment upon those responsible for it, and acting resolutely to exact justice. This vision rejects the pragmatic path taken by, for example, Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization. It also condemns much of the Arab world’s collusion with America in its aggression against Iraq, starting with Saudi Arabia, whose corrupt rulers Osama despises for allowing American troops to be stationed in the very birthplace of Islam.

It would be a mistake to think that these cataclysmic “wrongs” in Arab history must first be grounded in some deeply personal experience for them to serve as a motive force for the suicidal terrorism that destroyed the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. One of the hijackers, Mohamad Atta, came from an affluent Egyptian family and was educated in Germany. He was not bred in the stone-throwing slums of Palestinian communities. Osama bin Laden himself had a privileged childhood, attending a modern school in Saudi Arabia,
where some of his first teachers were British. That sheltered childhood did not prevent him from enlisting in the Afghan war of independence against the Soviet Union.

The commitment of these individuals to a vision of an Arab springtime in some mythological future is both intellectual, religious, and emotional, no matter that we might call it archaic and ultimately self-destructive. A book found in the luggage of Mohamad Atta is supposed to contain the following words of consolation for the warrior who has chosen the path of the suicide terrorist: “When the time of truth comes and zero hour arrives, then straighten out your clothes, open your chest and welcome death for the sake of Allah. Seconds before the target, your last words should be ‘There is no God but Allah. Mohammed is his messenger.’”

Again it would be a mistake to take these clues as suggesting that Islam is the driving force for these tragic missions. Certainly their faith strengthened the hijackers’ resolve and gave them confidence in what they set out to do. But the decision itself to attack America could not have been an inspiration from Islam, but the direct consequence of a view that saw, and still sees, America as the incarnation of all that is evil in the world.

Perhaps, unlike other terrorist groups, the September 11 hijackers were not so much concerned to trigger a change in American policy, as they wanted to expose the vulnerability and violent nature of America. From their point of view, America will be brought down ultimately by its own actions, just as the USSR’s collapse was precipitated by the invasion of Afghanistan. This is a theme that recurs in the public pronouncements of Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden.

Of course, America is far from crashing down as a nation. But whether it will emerge from this vicious attack on its system a great country or a severely weakened one is going to depend upon the quality of its response in the coming days. The easy path is for the U.S. to deploy its fabulous military might and to focus this upon the targets it identifies – today Afghanistan, tomorrow Iraq. That is exactly where Osama bin Laden wants to find America.
The difficult path is for America to champion a new global solidarity founded on social justice, tolerance and restraint in the face of this monumental tragedy. Such a course of action must at the same time assuage the anger of its citizens and reassure a panic-stricken nation at home, while morally and politically isolating the terrorists wherever they are. America cannot achieve this by military action. Unlike the terrorists who have chosen redemption by death, America is not a desperate country. It must choose life. It cannot allow itself to be drawn into a cycle of violence and counter-terror without eroding the foundation of trust on which its way of life is built.

In the final analysis, only the modernization and democratization of Arab society and culture can cut the oxygen supply that gives life to the Osama bin Ladens of this world. Indeed, a number of Arab intellectuals have long been critical of their own culture, mindset, and tradition. One of them, Abdallah Laroui, author of “The crisis of the Arab intellectual,” speaks of the need to go beyond the “legitimate pride” that Arabs take in “the wealth, permanent vitality, and universally applicable value of a culture that is so little supported by socio-economic structures.”

Time and the world wait for no one; for Laroui, the urgent task of the Arab intellectual is to bring to a close “the long winter of the Arabs.”

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