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 in October, marking the first war of the 21st century, pitting the world’s strongest, richest, most technologically advanced country against one of 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 contradictions probably contains many more dichotomies – making the Huntingtonians applaud the seeming fulfillment 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 war on terror and horticulture of these frequent battles with the West, specifically the US? And why do the Middle Eastern antagonists keep losing the battles, and with 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. These include military humiliation, colonial occupation, pillage, exploitation, apartheid, racial discrimination, cultural subjugation, and territorial fragmentation of the Homeland. Half a century ago, the US was the British to peoples and cultures – Malaysians, Bengalis, Urdu, Afghans, Persians, Musulmains, Afghans, and Egyptians. More recently the US has been owned and conditioned by America.

Ironically the US was never a colonial power in the 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. By the time this piece is published, the long incapacitated terrorist factions in Afghanistan will have been open wound with the most sensi- tive spot at nearly the exact midpoint. The pain that we have been feeling 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 observer to the other, but each country. The list would include diverse and even contradictory items – such as re- strictive migration measures against Turks and other Central Asians, to satellite communications displaying the private lives of Java and Agadir. How else could any fair observer account for the post-September 11 demonstrations witnessed in all of these countries – albeit to the embarrass- ment of their own official leadership, which dutifully paid homage to the victims of the American tragedy. For sizeable segments, America is perceived to be the permanent supporter of the Zionist state, while keeping the Arab-Islamic world ‘divided, shaved, suppressed, weak, domi- nated, exploited and humiliated’. Some may add that all of this is really about genuine 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 September 11 are horticultural of the WTC and the Pentagon may have been sympathetically listened to between September 11 and Oc- tober 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 Ameri- can weapons either directly or at the hands of their Israeli clients’. After October 7, the American bombing of targets in Afghan-istan continued. It was labelled by the leading main- stream Al-Ahram-Al Arab weekly (3 Novem- ber 2001) as outright barbarism. In this view, no excuse or pretext justifies American air raids, which could never avoid victimizing innocent Afghan civilians. By each bloody slaughter of Afghans – ‘Afghan flavoured’ and ‘Palestinian flavoured’ re- spectively — with a big sign advertising dis- count prices for Muslim meat. Combat statistics, in view of images and cartoons like these, lose their relevance over time. Thus to say that Americans fought for three times more than the combined losses of Palestinians in one year (700) and Afgha- nistan in one month (2,000) seems irrelevant to American citizens drawn to the war in applying their ‘immediacy effect’ – American victims were killed two months earlier, but Afghans and Palestinians are ‘being slaughtered right now, as we speak, do something about it!’ It is this immediate 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 favor of Taliban Afghanistan in fulfilling similar demonstrations in other countries far beyond the Arab-Muslim world – e.g. Korea, Japan and several Latin American countries. Among these regions sees a David vs. Goliath syndrome (Bin Laden vs. Bush), or the Taliban as a ‘Cinderella hero’. There is no doubt of the presence of Al-Qaeda –starving children in refugee camps on the border with Pakistan – or the mutilated bod- ies in the aftermath of American bombs, some of which invariably fall on civilian tar- get. These media images compete with similar images from Palestine which 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 all of these countries – albeit to the embarrass- ment of their own official leadership, which dutifully paid homage to the victims of the American tragedy. For sizeable segments, America is perceived to be the permanent supporter of the Zionist state, while keeping the Arab-Islamic world ‘divided, shaved, suppressed, weak, domi- nated, exploited and humiliated’. Some may add that all of this is really about genuine oil interests in the Gulf, and now in the Caspian Sea.

Continued on page 38

A Note from Prison

Legitimate Accounts. Wrong

Bin Laden is a chain in a chain of Arab-Muslim lead- ers 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 Sad- dam, and now Saudi Afghan Bin Laden. The initial battle cry of each one of these chal- lengers resonated deeply and widely with the Arab-Muslim masses. Some cried out under the banner of Arab Nationalism, oth- ers under the banner of Islam. All of them provoked the cause of Palestine and specifically the liberation of Jerusalem. These two caus- es have tremendous emotive power. How- ever, each of the above challengers tagged Palestine and Jerusalem on to his or her own personal ambitions for power and his ideological- ical success in overpowering local foes or bleeding external enemies, using zealous true believers, whooping up the onlookers – all are tempting, and always de- ceiving. Sheer grand vision and scores of zealots have never alone been sufficient, in size alone or elsewhere in the world, in sus- taining a credible challenge, much less in achieving ultimate victory. History is a vast story in the 1981 Gulf of Bin Laden and his pan-Islamic Al-Qirad network, the Taliban movement and millions of distant admiring but powerless masses. All we need to antici- pate the unfolding of events in this particu- lar drama is to look back to Egypt’s Nasser in the 1960s. As then, Bin Laden made a thun- derous entrance onto the world stage. He may very well end the same – i.e. withering away after a resounding defeat, or getting...
killed in battle and going down as a martyr Che Guevara 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 Mshamed 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.

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Continued from page 11: A Note From Prison / by Saad Eddin Ibrahim