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Beyond Anger and Counterterrorism: A New Grand Strategy for US and Arab Relations

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Nearly one thousand years ago, at the time of the Crusades, a Syrian Arab poet warned that most people thought that the world was divided into three parts: Christian, Jew, and Muslim. He stated that the truth was very different; the world was divided into two parts--those who believe and those who think.

It is time for governments to take the side of those who think. In practice, this means we need a new approach to grand strategy; and one that openly addresses the need to create common bonds between what the Koran calls the "peoples of the book." We need action to create what Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia has called a Judeo-Christian-Islamic ethic.

The Need for a New Approach to Grand Strategy

The actions of Osama Bin Laden and other Islamic extremists have exposed a fundamental failure to bridge the ideological and cultural gaps between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

The end result is a common threat in forms of Islamic extremism that cannot tolerate other interpretations of Islam, much less Judaism and Christianity.

It is a threat in forms of Christianity that see all non-Christians as damned, and Jews simply as a convenient mechanism to trigger the second coming.

It is a threat in Israeli extremist statements that effectively dehumanize Palestinians and reject the legitimacy of Islam. It is a threat in the form of statements in the Arab world that go from anger against Israel's political and military actions to attacks on all Jews and Judaism.

Most tangibly and dangerously, the practical result is growing terrorism and violence; endless conspiracy theories, vicious stereotypes; and growing barriers to travel and immigration.

We are seeing a breakdown of long-standing alliances, and growing bitterness that is becoming underlying hatred in the Arab-Israeli conflict. We see religiously inspired insurgency and asymmetric war in Afghanistan and Iraq. We see efforts to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction against those with different cultures and religions.

The Underlying Forces at Work

So far, governments have reacted largely by treating the symptoms and not the disease. Counterterrorism *is* essential to deal with the most obvious and damaging symptoms, but it cannot deal with the underlying causes.

Military force is sometimes necessary. However, it is now all too clear in Iraq that it can create as many -- or more -- problems than it solves.

The practical results are all too clear from an August survey by the Pew Research Center, and one that clearly shows how the divisions between the West and Middle East affect moderate and traditionally friendly states.

The Pew group reported, "In the predominantly Muslim countries surveyed, anger toward the United States remains pervasive... Osama bin Laden is viewed favorably by large percentages in Pakistan (65%), Jordan (55%) and Morocco (45%). Even in Turkey, where bin Laden is highly unpopular, as many as 31% say that suicide attacks against Americans and other Westerners" are justifiable.

There are many other surveys that deliver the same message, just as there are many surveys of US and Western opinion that reflect anger against terrorism, and hostility towards Islam and the Arab world.

The events of 9/11, the rise of Islamic extremism and the faltering Western reaction, the broad regional backlash to the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Iraq War, and the growing clash between religions and cultures, have all led to a crisis in relations that governments cannot address in such conventional terms.

US and Arab relations are where they are today for many reasons, but one of them is that the Western and Islamic worlds have previously defined "tolerance" in terms of mutual ignorance, and in terms of governmental indifference at the ideological, political, and cultural level.

Empty US calls for instant, region-wide democracy and political reform are producing a dangerous counterreaction in much of the Arab world. A Western focus on counterterrorism -- without a balancing focus on creating bridges between the West and Middle East -- is often breeding extremism rather than defeating it.

At the same time, token pledges and efforts at reform within the Arab world fall far short of the needs of Arab peoples, and are weak and ineffective counters to extremism. Neither Middle Eastern governments nor Middle Eastern intellectuals have yet shown they can honestly address the scale of the region's problems or act decisively at the speed and depth required.

These problems are also generational. They are not the product of one temporary series of conflicts and tensions, or of the threat posed by today's groups of terrorists and extremists. Weak regimes, population growth, demographic, hyperurbanization, and a failure to develop and diversify regional economies all act to create pressures on the Middle East that will outlive Bin Laden and Al Qaida by decades.

Most of the nations of the Arab and Islamic world face far broader and more disturbing changes:¹

- Failed secular regimes and political parties have pushed the peoples of the region back towards Islam and made them seek to redefine the role of religion in their lives.
- Massive population increases: The Middle East and North Africa had a population of 112 million in 1950. The population is well over 415 million today, and approaching a fourfold increase. It will more than double again, to at least 833 million, by 2050.
- A “youth explosion,” where age 20-24s -- the key age group entering the job market and political society -- has grown steadily from 10 million in 1950 to 36 million today, and will grow steadily to at least 56 million by 2050.
- Some 36% of the total MENA population is under 15 years of age versus 21% in the US and 16% in the EU. The ratio of dependents to each working age man and woman is three times that in a developed region like the EU.
- A failure to achieve global competitiveness, diversify economies, and create jobs that is only partially disguised by the present boom in oil revenues. Direct and disguised unemployment range from 12-20% in many countries, and the World Bank projects the labor force as growing by at least 3% per year for the next decade.
- A region-wide average per capita income of around \$2,200 versus \$26,000 in the high-income countries in the West.
- A steady decline in non-petroleum exports as a percentage of world trade over a period of nearly half a century, and an equal pattern of decline in regional GDP as a share of global GDP.
- Hyperurbanization and a half-century decline in agricultural and traditional trades impose high levels of stress on traditional social safety nets and extended families. The urban population seems to have been under 15 million in 1950. It has since more than doubled from 84 million in 1980 to 173 million today, and some 25% of the population will soon live in cities of one million or more.
- Broad problems in integrating women effectively and productively into the work force. Female employment in the MENA region has grown from 24% of the labor in 1980 to 28% today, but that total is 15% lower than in a high growth area like East Asia.
- Growing pressures on young men and women in the Middle East and North Africa to immigrate to Europe and the US to find jobs and economic opportunities that inevitably create new tensions and adjustment problems.

- Almost all nations in the region have nations outside the region as their major trading partners, and increased intraregional trade offers little or no comparative advantage.
- Much of the region cannot afford to provide more water for agriculture at market prices, and in the face of human demand; much has become a “permanent” food importer. Regional manufacturers and light industry have grown steadily in volume, but not in global competitiveness.
- Global and regional satellite communications, the Internet, and other media, have shattered censorship and extremists readily exploit these tools.
- A failed or inadequate growth in every aspect of infrastructure, and in key areas like housing and education.
- Growing internal security problems that often are far more serious than the external threat that terrorism and extremism pose to the West.
- A failure to modernize conventional military forces and to recapitalize them. This failure is forcing regional states to radically reshape their security structures, and is pushing some toward proliferation.
- Strong pressures for young men and women to immigrate to Europe and the US to find jobs and economic opportunities that inevitably create new tensions and adjustment problems.

Unlike today’s crises and conflicts, these forces will play out over decades. They cannot be dealt with simply by attacking today’s terrorists and extremists; they cannot be dealt with by pretending religion is not an issue, and that tolerance can be based on indifference or ignorance.

The “Opportunity Cost” of Business as Usual

History has shown the cost if governments do not act or are passive in dealing with challenges this severe: Two thousand years of mindless anti-Semitism in the West culminated in the Holocaust. A heritage of racism in the United States only began to be openly and frankly addressed once the Supreme Court took judicial action nearly a century after the civil war. Conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo took the form of ethnic cleansing based on age-old and half-forgotten divisions between Christians and Muslims.

Today, we see a common threat in forms of Islamic extremism that cannot tolerate other interpretations of Islam, much less Judaism and Christianity. We see such a threat in forms of Christianity that see all non-Christians as damned, and Jews simply as a convenient mechanism to trigger the second coming. We see it in Israeli extremist statements that effectively dehumanize Palestinians and reject the legitimacy of Islam.

We see it in statements in the Arab world that go from anger against Israel to attacks on all Jews and Judaism.

We see it in a flood of mutually hostile press reports, television coverage filled with conscious and unconscious bias, and in movie villains that exploit, rather than counter, prejudice. We see it in a series of public opinion polls that reflect a growing polarization between broad sectors of the public, and again, particularly in the US and Arab world.

Most tangibly and dangerously, the practical result is terrorism and violence; endless conspiracy theories, vicious stereotypes; detentions; and growing barriers to travel and immigration. We see it in the breakdown of long-standing alliances, in the growing bitterness and underlying hatred in the Arab-Israeli conflict. We see it in Afghanistan and Iraq in the form of religiously inspired insurgency and asymmetric war. We see it in threats to acquire and use weapons of mass destruction against those with different cultures and religions.

We also can see all too clearly that a “war on terrorism” is simply not enough, any more than the use of military force, efforts at non-proliferation, or calls for sudden and revolutionary reform. The fact is that the situation has gotten worse since 9/11, not better, precisely because governments on both sides of this divide have been dealing with only half the problem.

The US has focused on counterterrorism and has been trying to rebuild countries in its own image. It has created growing barriers between it in the Arab world, undermined past alliances, and focused on short-term expedience. Many Arab regimes have acted in terms of denial, taken half measures, and failed to address extremism. The end result of both approaches is that the problem is growing, not diminishing. The problem is also that extremist movements are developing new linkages and finding new ways to exploit popular anger, emotion, and religious prejudice.

Taking a New Approach to Public Policy

For all these reasons, we need a new approach to public policy that goes beyond the traditional approach to strategy, and one that must have the active support of both Western and Islamic governments. Governments -- and particularly the US government and the moderate governments of the Arab world -- need to make a concerted effort to make religious and cultural tolerance a matter of public policy. They need to support this effort in the ways they structure education, diplomacy, law enforcement, immigration, and all of the other tools available to the state.

What are some of the practical actions that governments need to employ to bring balance and depth to their actions, and to implement such a grand strategy? The answers must be empirical, and many must be found on a nation-by-nation and case-by-case basis. The best approach should be the subject of an intense debate in both the West and at appropriate points along the continuum of the Arab countries, the Middle East, and the Islamic world.

We have, however, already made enough mistakes on all sides to suggest what some of the answers must be:

- Western and Islamic governments must make enduring efforts to bridge the gap between cultures and religions, and create a common effort to move towards development and reform.
- Governments need to fund dialogue and mutual exchanges at the levels only governments can mount, and do so through a mix of grants, public information campaigns, and governmental use of all the tools available to influence domestic and foreign public opinion.
- The leaders of governments need to encourage the highest-ranking religious leaders of the West and Islamic world to deal as firmly with the divisions between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the Vatican finally dealt with the divisions between Judaism and Christianity.
- Comprehensive educational reform is needed in both the Middle East and the West to teach tolerance based on understanding at every level from the earliest levels of education through graduate education, and a systematic purging of education material with prejudice, hate, or stereotypes.
- Use should be made of all the legitimate tools of law to put an end to extremist and hate-oriented literature and use of the media.
- Governments need to carry out a comprehensive review of visa policies based on the understanding that encouraging legitimate study abroad, media presence and visits, academic exchanges, visits for dialogue and cultural familiarization, and international business are as much a critical element in the war on terrorism as defeating or interdicting terrorists.
- An equally comprehensive review is needed of counterterrorism policies that looks beyond a narrow focus on defeating terrorists and seeks to ensure that necessary action to defeat terrorism does not create unnecessary anger and hostility, detain or arrest the innocent, or fail to compensate those who are unfairly arrested.
- Western policies towards immigration must emphasize tolerance and equality for Arab and Islamic immigrants, not just economic need and security.
- Governments need to act to set common ground rules for handling deportations and detainments that fully consider the human rights and political aspects of such actions, and their “backlash”.

- A common effort to develop efficient means for reviewing charitable and other fund transfers and activities so that legitimate activity is not blocked by the effort to reduce the funding of extremism and terrorism.
- Creation of new mechanisms for security dialog between groups like NATO and the GCC, and on a national basis, to ease the pressure for arms sales, strengthen mutual security efforts to deal with threats like proliferation and asymmetric warfare, and create true security and arms control partnerships in regions like the Gulf.

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations

Such a strategy cannot succeed by reliance on governments alone. Dialog and action by every element of civil society, organized religious groups, and non-government organizations are all essential partners in the effort that is now needed to create effective bridges between the US and the Arab world, the West and the Middle East, and Jew, Christian, and Muslim. Many such groups are already doing a great deal.

Non-governmental organizations in the West and Middle East cannot, however, do enough without the active support of governments. They cannot hope to succeed without the full support of heads of state, and a level of effort that only states can mount. There is now too much ignorance, anger, intolerance -- and sometimes hatred. There are too many charges and counter charges in the West and Arab world, and too many governments, analysts, and journalists engaged in making things worse in strident, one-sided "dialogs of the deaf."

Creating the Climate for Such Common Action

It is going to take time and a great deal of debate to change this situation. It may well be that things must grow worse for governments to accept the true nature of the risks involved and the depth of action they must take. Certainly, it is going to require both leadership and courage.

It also is going to require concerted efforts to address three other issues that now divide the US and the Arab world and the West and the Middle East:

- The Arab-Israeli conflict;
- Iraq, and;
- Political, economic, demographic, and social reform.

I do not want to belabor the obvious point that any strategy to bridge the gap between the West and Islam cannot succeed without addressing these individual issues as well. There is no time to address all three of these issues in depth, but there are some quick points that do need to be made.

The Arab-Israeli Conflict

There is nothing to be gained from waiting for two inadequate governments to try to bludgeon each other into peace. A common solution cannot be imposed by force, and the US and Arab world will never agree on all the details of a final settlement. The time has come, however, for an open and continuing effort by both the Quartet and Arab world to define a final settlement, and to build on the lessons of Camp David and Taba.

The time has come for both sides to take every possible measure to persuade the Palestinians to reject terrorism and the Israelis to roll back settlements in both the Gaza and the West Bank. At the same time, 35 years of facts on the ground are facts on the ground. The worlds of 1949 and 1967 are gone forever, and peace must be based upon this reality.

The challenge is to persuade Israel to make as many compromises as possible, and to find ways to compensate the Palestinians. The time has come to look beyond the narrow terms of a settlement and see what a massive aid program could do to guarantee a future Palestinian state's economic and political success, and give the Palestinians living standards that could underpin a peace. More ambitiously, it is to look at how Jordan, Israel, and a Palestinian state could cooperate to live in peace.

Boundaries are the past. With the exception of the holy places, the focus should be economics, demographics, living standards, and security in the broadest sense. This may well require a Western and Arab economic aid program totaling billions of dollars over a period of years. It will certainly require a continuing US aid program to Israel as well.

Moreover, it requires Palestinians and Arab governments to look honestly at the demographics of Gaza and the West Bank, and to understand that it is going to be an incredible challenge to deal with the inherent population growth in both areas.

Gaza only had less than 245,000 people in 1949, and around 330,000 in 1967. The CIA estimates it now has more than 1.3 million, a growth rate of more than 3.8%, and 49% of its population is 14 years of age or younger. The US Census Bureau estimates that it will grow to 1.7 million by 2010, and 4.2 million by 2050.

The West Bank had 775,000 people in 1949, and around 680,000 at the end of the 1967 war. The CIA estimates it now has more than 2.3 million, a population growth rate of more than 3.2%, and 44% of its population is 14 years of age or younger. The US Census Bureau estimates that it will grow to 2.8 million by 2010, and 5.6 million by 2050.

Far too many generations of young Palestinians have already been wasted in conflict. If the generation that now exists and the generations to come are to have hope, then the Palestinian refugees outside Gaza and West Bank – nearly 90% of whom have never seen what will be “Palestine,” must be made full citizens of the countries where they now reside as refugees.

Iraq

It is all too clear that there is no simple end to the insurgencies in Iraq. It is equally clear that the goal is no longer for the Coalition to win in Iraq, but rather to keep the Iraqi people from losing. Three things are necessary to ease the tensions between the US-led coalition and the Arab world:

- Build up the Iraqi security forces as quickly as possible, and create a sound path for Coalition withdrawal;
- Put the current economic aid effort under Iraqi, not US or Coalition control, and plan for an aid effort that will last at least half a decade beyond 2004, and;
- Internationalize the outside political and economic aid effort as much as possible.

This does not mean, however, that the Coalition can cut and run, or transfer responsibility to international institutions that cannot do the job. It rather means that a far more constructive and active role is needed on the part of the Arab world. The only thing worse than today's reality in Iraq is a future power vacuum, insecurity and massive unemployment, and ethnic and sectarian civil conflict.

Political, Economic, Demographic, and Social Reform

More generally, the West and the Middle East, and particularly the US and Arab world, need to take a more honest approach to reform. Today, both sides take a dysfunctional approach. The Arab world tends to live in a state of denial about both the scale of its need for reform, and the ineffectiveness of most of its present efforts. Arab governments and Arab intellectuals have generally failed their peoples. They promise, plan, and talk but falter in taking meaningful action. The end result is that the failure of evolution breeds revolution, and the failure of moderates breeds extremists.

Far too many of these failures also transcend culture and religion. A failed state sector is a failed state sector. Policies that block economic growth block economic growth. Bad education is bad education, and rote learning is rote learning. A development plan that is never really implemented cannot lead to development. Slow progress in the rule of law and basic human rights is simply too slow to be acceptable. A virtual conspiracy of silence on the subject of population growth and demographics amounts to intellectual cowardice.

There is no question that much in the US and the West also deserves criticism. The answer, however, is not to stifle criticism, but rather to encourage mutual criticism and common pressure for reform and change. Moreover, the problems involved are relative; the Arab world and Middle East simply are moving too slowly, making far too many excuses, and exporting a great deal of the problems that can only be solved though action at home.

Blaming the West, “globalism,” the US, and a colonial heritage, are all further forms of moral and intellectual cowardice. At least 90% of the problems of Arab states and Middle Eastern governments are self-inflicted wounds. They will only be solved when individual Arab countries have the courage and will to solve them on their own.

The other side of this coin, however, is that US calls for instant progress towards region-wide “democracy” and “elections” -- the kind of vague generalities that called for the initial drafts of the US “Greater Middle East Initiative” -- only make things worse. They treat all countries as the same, ignore the need for political parties, experience with elections, and moderate opposition movements. They also ignore the human rights, rule of law, economic, demographic, educational, and social reforms that often have a higher priority and are the precursors to meaningful pluralism. Far too often, the US has adopted a “one man, one vote, one time” approach to change in the Middle East; and has ignored the need for evolution by its friends in the search for a revolution that would bring extremists and its enemies to power.

The vague generalities of the G8 communiqué that took the place of the “Greater Middle East Initiative” were far less damaging, but also provide no basis for real progress. They do not offer incentives in terms of economic aid, accession to the WTO, better trade, or foreign investment. They talk in meaningless terms about regional solutions and intra-regional cooperation.

A broad debate, indeed dialectic, is needed on reform in the Arab world and Middle East. The primary force for this debate must come from within, but it must be provoked, challenged, and aided from without. At the same time, the US, EU, and all of the members of the G8 need to move beyond both political mirror imaging and vacuous good intentions.

Calls for reform need to be evaluated, planned, and prioritized on a country-by-country basis. They need to build on what countries, and their reformers, are doing wherever possible. They need to find out the best evolutionary path to human rights, rule of law, economic, demographic, educational, and social reforms in a given country; and provide real incentives and not just criticism. They need to understand that democracy without stability, and the proper checks and balances, is simply a different form of extremism.

One other thing is clear. All three of these issues must be addressed simultaneously; and with far more realism, and far more cooperation between the US, Arab world, and Israel than has been the case to date.

The Cost of Not Acting

In closing, it would be unfair not to acknowledge that governments and NGOs are already making some efforts in these areas.

President Bush has repeatedly recognized that Islam is one of the world's great religions and that Islamic extremism and terrorism are the aberrations of a small minority, and not norms.

Nations like Saudi Arabia have seen the need for dialog and have attempted to create it. The G8 and Arab League have both called for progress in dialog and reform.

It would, however, be equally unrealistic to say that the governments of the US and the West, or the Arab and Islamic worlds have begun to do enough.

I began this speech by paraphrasing an Arab poet, and I apologize if I did so by taking his words out of context and expanding upon them. Let me close, however, by quoting several lines from another poet – a Western one – writing after the horrors of World War I:ⁱⁱ

“Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned.
The best lack all convictions; while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

...Twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour comes at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

Counterterrorism and military force are not an effective strategy for either the West or Middle East. Anger, conspiracy theories, and paralysis are even less effective.

A successful strategy requires a concerted effort to create bridges between nations and cultures, and between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.

Furthermore, we must recognize that this struggle is *not* a clash between civilizations. It is rather a struggle *for* civilization – a struggle for a common future that is not imprisoned in the hatreds and fears of the past.

ⁱⁱ William Butler Yeats, "The Second Coming."