



THE MIDDLE EAST

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Articles and reflections by Dr. Harry Hagopian

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There are some truly momentous events - whether positive or negative - that might occur anywhere in the world and still become indelibly imprinted on our minds. The assassination of President John F Kennedy in 1963 or those of Dr Martin Luther King in 1968 and President Anwar Sadat in 1981 are perhaps three such instances, as are the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the release of President Nelson Mandela in 1990.

For me, the simultaneous attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City served as one such macabre occasion. I remember exactly where I was moments after the attack: in a black cab next to Hyde Park in London when both the driver and I heard the radio programme being interrupted with the tentative news that a massive attack had taken place against the USA. Hence we witnessed the birth of the infamous neologism '9/11' and shortly thereafter the horrid and somewhat inaccurate phrase 'global war on terror'.

Some of what happened in those ten intervening years is now history. The West decided to take its eyes off the ball and invade Iraq because of the erroneous and - dare I add - puerile obsession of an American president and his inner circle who decided to invade this country. We in the United Kingdom are also painfully familiar with this chapter of history since our own Prime Minister Tony Blair supported the evangelical tirade against inexistent weapons of mass destruction. We invented reasons, created documents, imagined al-Qa'eda terrorists lurking in the alleyways of Baghdad and eventually managed to wheedle our way into attacking a country and wreaking havoc upon its human, economic and security structures. Yet, the murder of Ahmad Shah Massoud, a leader of the Afghan Northern Alliance (and dubbed the 'Lion of Panjshir') two short days before 9/11 should have sent enough messages to our policy-makers that we were out of focus. However, we did not seemingly make the link and what was initially an obsession turned eventually into criminal negligence and we still have not fully extirpated ourselves from this morass.

Mind you, I am glad a megalomaniacal and savage dictator - as much as his retinue - was removed from office, but it was neither the way nor even the time. If anything, I would suggest that the revolutions and popular revolts across the MENA region vindicate the standpoint that real changes should come from within and do not necessarily get imposed militarily upon a whole people anymore.

This week, we are commemorating the tenth anniversary of those vile attacks and remembering how a well-organised plan by 19 hijackers ransomed religion for political purposes. But those atrocious attacks did not happen in a vacuum, and much as I abhor them, I also believe that our subsequent analyses of those criminal acts were inchoate and unsophisticated and did not ask all the pertinent questions.

Indeed, a decade provides one with ample hindsight. So today, as I reflect on 9/11, two critical and equally damning sets of questions flow out. The first set is that we in the West - in the USA, the UK and countries of the so-called 'Coalition of the Willing' - have not yet held a proper and in-depth debate about the reasons

behind those terror attacks. We still need to understand them without condoning them, to give them some context in our thinking, and not simply frame them as a noxious mixture of religious and foreign policy issues that pitted the West against much of the Arab and Muslim Worlds - or even more crudely al-Qa'eda against the USA. So our adrenalin-fuelled war on Iraq - with all its deleterious consequences - only widened the gulf between two worlds, two cultures and two peoples and made it easier to interpret our realities in facile black or white shades. The second set asks whether the uncompromising Islamist elements that exist within the overall 'Arab Spring' movement erupting in the MENA region today will turn violent, foment further those polarities and attack our societies or whether they will be quelled as more freedoms enter the MENA region.

So given those two sets of questions, our world has indeed changed drastically in the past decade, where old enmities and rivalries inter partes have now been supplemented by a network of more invisible - therefore more fluid and ominous - threats. It is no longer the Cold War, or the NATO and WARSAW pacts vying for control of the world. It is a loose network here, a hybrid one there, all of them holding our lives hostage to spurious ideologies, vested interests, post-colonial gains or sheer economic greed. So we should definitively be watchful and even vigilant as we set out our priorities that help safeguard our security. But herein lurks another danger: our response should be robust, but it should not gnaw our civil liberties and fundamental freedoms nor should it upset the careful balance between risk and responsibility. Security does not trump citizens' rights, and if we lapse into the trap of turning our societies into Orwellian big-brothers or worse into police states, then we will simply be forfeiting our values and in the process handing those terrorists or radicals enough publicity to erode further our 'democratic' values.

Let me give an example. The thuggish and criminal riots that terrorised many cities in England only last month resulted in some knee-jerk reactions from Her Majesty's government. We even started mooted the idea of cutting off the social media networks and mobile phones like Twitter, Facebook and Blackberry! Now correct me if I am wrong, but is this not what Libya's Qadhafi and Syria's Assad and every other tinpot dictator are doing against their own citizens' freedoms? And are we not sanctioning the abuse of their human rights too? We should defend our values, not roll our security measures forward in an unhindered way or worse imitate those very people who are challenging us. Do extra-judicial renditions, illegal under International law, not come to mind - as alleged by the documents leaking out of Tripoli this week?

9/11 was a global wake-up call, and we in Britain suffered our share of attacks - not least with the deaths of 67 Britons on 9/11 and the subsequent 7/7 attack in London. So as we follow the MENA Arab Awakening, I hope that the stories and testimonies coming out this week will help us learn some lessons and ask the relevant questions so that we reduce the likelihood of similar future nightmares. After all, was it not Archbishop Desmond Tutu who reminded us that "the person hardest to wake up is the one pretending to sleep?"

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