

## We Arabs must wage a new form of Jihad?

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Dr. Ahmed Zewail, the only Arab to win the Noble Prize in science, had published a thought-provoking article in which he challenges Arab leaders and intellectuals to make a big leap forward toward bridging the gap that separates Arabs from the advanced nations of the world. He asks political leaders, intellectuals and religious men "to move away from the ideologies of the past and the conspiracy theories of the future" and make a commitment to doing what it takes to stop the Arab decline, change the direction of the present, and build a new future capable of restoring the Arab glory of the past. Dr. Zewail identifies what he calls, "four pillars of change that would support an imperative historic renaissance for transforming the current state of affairs" in the Arab world."

The pillars of change identified by Dr. Zewail could be summarized as follows: First, the establishment of "a new political system with, at its core, a constitution defining the democratic principles of human rights, freedom of speech, and governance through contested elections." A council should be formed of "a select delegation of honorable intellectuals, respected political personalities, and thoughtful religious scholars... to debate and chart a constitution for a final referendum," Second, "the rule of law must in practice be applied to every individual, independent of cast, faith, or background." The third states that "the methods used in education, cultural practices, and scientific research must be revisited, reviewed, and revitalized." The goal should be to promote critical thinking and a value system of reasoning, discipline and teamwork." And fourth, there must be an "overhauling of the Arab media."

There is no doubt that these are good steps that could initiate a process of societal change and therefore, deserve serious consideration. And while I support each one of them wholeheartedly, I do not believe that they are enough. In fact, each step had been tried before in one way or another, but not in conjunction with the other three ones, and had failed. Arab rulers are not ready to respond positively to calls for change or reform that has the potential of curtailing their powers; and no change is possible while Arab states are run as little farms that are family owned. Most Arab countries today are not states ruled by families, but estates owned by families. Even if all steps were to be applied at once and given the chance to influence the institutions they are meant to transform, they would fail as long as the sociocultural framework within which all "pillars of change" must struggle to fulfill their promises remains unchanged.

For example, selecting a delegation, as Dr. Zewail says, of "honorable intellectuals, respected political personalities, and thoughtful religious scholars" to debate issues and draft a constitution is a good way to start the process of change. But the most important question regarding the selection process remains unanswered; who would do the selection, and who has the political or moral authority to sanction the final outcome of the council's work?. Modern history tells us that only in America delegates were selected and thus had the popular backing and moral authority to do their job and right the American Constitution. Moreover, the words "honorable, respected and thoughtful" are vague and largely meaningless unless placed within an acceptable sociocultural context or frame of reference. In addition, no Arab government would allow free elections to select delegates to convene and debate unconventional ideas and draft a binding state or pan-Arab constitution.

In 1983, I was one of a self-appointed committee of four persons to consider doing something about the then deteriorating situation in the Arab world. All members of that committee were at the time living in Washington, DC and teaching at Georgetown University, and thus had plenty of time to debate the idea at length. At the end, it was determined that we should do the selection ourselves after consultation with a few like minded individuals. We also determined that the meeting should be held in an Arab state, not in a western state; and that the gathering should not be called a meeting and should not seek a specific objective or a set of objectives. And since it was not possible to ask any Arab state for permission to meet on its soil, we decided to smuggle ourselves into Tunis where we convened in the city of al Hammamat. This process forced us to limit the number of invitees to few political activists known for their integrity and about 25 Arab intellectuals, most of them had American or European passports and therefore needed no visas to enter Tunis. As a result, several Arab intellectuals who would have enriched the debate were either overlooked or could not get the necessary visas to join us. Our host, Dr. Eltahir Labib, had told us beforehand that it was not possible to get us a permission to meet, but that he would welcome anyone who could get there, and he did. But our gracious host was, unfortunately, the first casualty of an unauthorized meeting; he lost his job soon after we departed Tunis. A \$30,000 grant from a Kuwaiti businessman had facilitated the convening of the meeting.

The major recommendations produced by the conferees were; first, to ask Arab governments to honor their own constitutions and apply the law; and second, to form what came to be known, "The Arab Organization for Human Rights." But when it was time to pursue the goal of establishing the organization later in the year, all Arab states that were approached to give permission to holding a pan-Arab conference to debate the state of human rights in the Arab world, refused to do so. The organizers, as a result, were forced to go to Cyprus where the meeting was held and the objectives of the organization were outlined.

Based on the above, Dr. Zewail, in cooperation and coordination with a few like minded intellectuals and concerned Arab personalities, should take the initiative, secure funding, and select a group to meet in a European state, not in an Arab state, where invitees would be able to speak their minds, debate all relevant issues freely, and draft the necessary documents. Thereafter, the conferees should elect a pan-Arab council to represent them and try to convince Arab leaders, one at a time, to consider their recommendations and to press them to implement recommended steps, at least the non-political ones. As for the proposed referendum, no Arab state would allow the Arab masses to vote on anything of this nature; therefore, the council should seek some legitimacy through the Internet by asking the masses to vote on whatever documents drafted and action recommended. The conferees should also try to use whatever moral power and influence they may have to promote their ideas through the media and invoke the masses to join the movement for change. Genuine sociocultural and sociopolitical change cannot succeed unless the masses believe in it and get involved in it. Even if nothing gets implemented in due time, the conferees would have produced a blueprint for future Arab political change and societal transformation.

Discrimination in Arab and non-Arab states is unhealthy and unjust; it causes poverty, exclusion and depressed productivity. In fact, every socially and politically unjust system is economically unproductive; it wastes human and natural resources and rare opportunities; and every system that is economically unproductive is socially and politically unjust; it misallocates rare resources and valuable assets and undermines the potential of all citizens. In the current Arab environment of renewed tribalism, deepened sectarianism, heightened extremism, increased dependency, and anti-intellectualism neither justice nor productivity nor unity stands a real chance. There is a need to acknowledge that the main lines dividing societies today are sociocultural, not socioeconomic; socioeconomic classes have become subgroups of the sociocultural ones. In such an environment,

socioeconomic gaps tend to widen and the sociocultural divides to deepen, causing more poverty and injustice, and leading to the marginalization of rationalism and intellectualism.

The only transformation that Arab education has experienced during the last two decades is the commercialization of many universities and schools. Two major things resulted from this process; first, education was separated from guidance (*tarbeyeh*); and second, the student has become the ultimate client to please, not to educate or teach how to succeed in life and be a good citizen. Schools and universities, as a consequence, have become specialty shops catering to the half educated social groups and the half motivated students. Most universities have become institutions owned by largely ignorant capitalists belonging to the 'Robber Barons' era, in which the professor is assigned the role of a dispensable salesperson, while the student is assigned the role of the most valued customer. And as everyone familiar with sales and customer service knows, "the customer is always right;" he is the one who ultimately pays the salaries of professors and enables the barons to make unjustified and largely unethical profits in exchange for low quality goods. Back in 1976, I argued in a paper on "The Future of Education in the Arab World" that Arab states consider human resources liabilities, not assets; and therefore the educational and political systems were designed to get rid of them, not to harness their potentialities. Emigration of talent as a consequence has continued to be encouraged, not discouraged; it provides unearned incomes for states, deny the masses the opportunity to have a trusted and conscious leadership, and vastly weakens political dissent at home and thus helps keep the masses submissive.

The media is of tremendous importance to societal transformation, especially to societies and peoples that do not consider reading a virtue. But the media that Arabs have today is committed to falsifying the conscience of the masses, not to educating them. Therefore, a new media is needed; one that is committed to freedom of speech and rationalism, not to anti-intellectualism and dogmatism, to promoting unity, not to heightening sectarianism, to fighting socially bad and mentally damaging habits like cigarettes and argieleh smoking, and to defending human rights and protecting the environment. The current Arab media is part of the problem, not of the solution. Throughout history, Facts and the truth have had difficult times proving themselves and defending their rationale, particularly in conservative societies that believe in faith and fate, and perceive miracles and myths and rumors and conspiracy theories as facts. People, all people, tend to resist attempts to tarnish the image of a myth, kill a rumor, or stop an exciting factious story from being told and retold. The Arab media in general is good at promoting myths and spreading rumors and promoting conspiracy theories, and bad at telling the truth and counting the facts.

The prevailing Arab culture is out of date and therefore no longer competitive; it needs a genuine transformation. There is no doubt that Arab culture used to be good, even superior in older times, but as the times changed and Arabs got exposed to the culture of consumerism and became addicted to consumption, the traditional culture was distorted and lost its relevancy. What sounds good in Arab culture today is mostly bad for the health of the Arab culture itself and for the future of Arabs in general. Ideologically-based and inspired cultures have always been hostile to freedom of speech and fearful of new ideas and creative thinking; they are good only at criminalizing dissent and doubting rationality; they are also intolerant. In fact, no ideology, old or new, being rooted in sociocultural or socioeconomic or sociopolitical grounds, has ever encouraged debate, engaged its adversaries in constructive dialogue, or believed in the democratic principles.

While the poor in the West are fighting their way out of the ghettos of the past, and working hard to rid themselves of the ghetto mentality; Muslim conservatives everywhere and Arab ideologues in general are fighting their way into new ghettos, and working harder to wed themselves to the ghetto mentality. However, the ghettos that Muslims and Arabs are creating and glorifying are different; they are **cultural ghettos** that undermine the capacity of younger minds to think

rationally and to view the heritage of the past critically and recognize the imperatives of the times in which they live. I must admit that it is hard for me, if not puzzling, to understand why the overwhelming majority of Arab intellectuals still lack the capacity to realize the extent of the cultural impediment, and cannot find the courage to acknowledge its dangers and face it with honesty.

Even Arab intellectuals who have spent a good deal of their lives and most of their time talking about democracy do not believe in democracy deep in their hearts, not even in the democratic principles. They believe only in what serves their interests, and are committed to the "principles" that foster their social statuses. And while they continue to criticize Arab rulers for lack of respect for human rights and democracy, they have failed to institute or even promote democracy every time they had a chance to do so. Every Arab institution, even those that function in the West today, functions as a "*dokkan*," or a corner grocery store in a small village or in a slum; and when the owner of the *dokkan* (*dokkanji*) goes away to attend a wedding or a funeral or takes a trip, he closes the *dokkan*, leaving all customers waiting patiently and sometimes praying for his safe return. The Arab state, however, while being a larger *dokkan* with more responsibilities, is subject to less accountability than a corner grocery store. Just imagine how an Arab government, facing a survival problem, could take a decision to face the challenge while its ruler is being treated abroad or vacationing overseas.

If we look today at the political map of the world, we will notice that every industrialized and knowledge society is a democracy; in contrast, every society that still lives in pre-industrial times is either a dictatorship, a theocracy, or a hodgepodge of feuding tribes and competing ethnic groups struggling to build a viable system of governance, or just a failing state. We must realize that democracy as a political system was a byproduct of the great scientific revolutions, geographical discoveries and societal transformations, including the religious reformation that swept the European continent during the renaissance, enlightenment and the industrial ages. No Arab or Islamic or Third world state living in the agricultural or tribal times and adhering to the traditional cultural values of the past has witnessed similar transformations; and therefore, has developed the capacity to understand the promise and tolerate the menace of democracy. In fact, most Third World states that have chosen contested elections, like Algeria, Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, Pakistan, Venezuela, Yemen and Zimbabwe have ended up with all the menaces of democracy and none of its promises.

What is needed at this stage in Arab history is, as Dr. Zewail succinctly put it, "to promote a commitment to the democratic principles of human rights, freedom of speech, and governance through contested elections." However, as I argued in my book, "The Making of History," the greatest accomplishment of democracy was not realized by instituting regular elections, but by transforming itself from a mere political system of governance and into a sociocultural value that recognizes equality of rights and responsibilities, respects others' opinions and tolerates dissent. If democracy succeeds as a sociocultural value, it will succeed as a political system; if democracy fails as a sociocultural value, it will certainly fail as a political system. Listening one day to the BBC radio discussing abortion in England, a young woman said: I believe that abortion is wrong but I have no right to pass judgment on others' beliefs. When the average Muslim and Arab man and woman adopt this basic attitude, then, and only then, we could start dreaming of democracy.

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This is the link to Dr. Zewail's article

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/ahmed-zewail-we-arabs-must-wage-a-new-form-of-jihad-413101.html>