

Arabs need to wage a secular Jihad

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Dr. Ahmed Zewail, the only Arab to win the Noble Prize in science, published a thought-provoking article under the title: "We Arabs Must wage a new form of Jihad." In this article, published September 17, 2011, by the Independent,¹ Zewail challenged Arab leaders and intellectuals to make a big leap forward to bridge the gap that separates Arabs from the advanced nations of the world. He asked 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 arrest the Arab decline, change the direction of the present, and build a new future capable of restoring the Arab glory of the past. Zewail identifies what he calls, the "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 suggested by 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 pillar 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."

This paper is a comment on Dr. Zewail's proposal that tries to examine its feasibility in light of the current socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and sociocultural conditions prevalent in the Arab world today. However, since I do not believe that Zewail's proposal has a chance to be even considered despite its rationality, I shall outline a counter proposal based on a similar experience that proved its practicality about 40 years ago.

There is no doubt that the steps proposed by Dr. Zewail are good ones to initiate a process of societal change and therefore, deserve serious consideration. And while I support each one of them, I do not believe that they are clear enough to be understood, or good enough to accomplish what is expected of them. 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 and reform that have the potential of curtailing their powers, and no change is possible while Arab states are run as fiefdoms owned by families and ruled by despotic landlords. An honest examination of the state of Arab political and economic affairs is likely to conclude that most Arab countries today are not states ruled by elected leaders or even 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 unless the sociocultural and socioeconomic frameworks within which all the "pillars of change" must struggle to fulfill their promises are fundamentally changed and updated.

Selecting a delegation of "honorable intellectuals, respected political personalities, and thoughtful religious scholars" to debate national issues of great importance and draft a new 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 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. 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 pan-Arab constitution. Consequently, no honorable intellectual, respected political personality, thoughtful religious scholar, or Arab government responded positively to Dr. Zewil's call.

In the current Arab environment of renewed tribalism, deepened sectarianism, heightened religious extremism, anti-intellectualism, individualism, and increased dependency on the outside world neither social justice nor productivity nor unity stands a real chance. There is a need to acknowledge that the major lines dividing societies today are sociocultural, not socioeconomic; socioeconomic classes have become subgroups of the sociocultural ones that characterize most societies in the world. In such an environment, socioeconomic gaps tend to widen, sociocultural divides deepen, and discrimination increases, causing more poverty and injustice and less unity and equality; they also cause the marginalization of science, logic, rationality, and intellectualism. Discrimination anywhere in the world is unhealthy and unjust; it causes poverty, exclusion, and depressed productivity. In fact, every socially and politically unjust system lacks economic efficiency, because it wastes human and natural resources and rare opportunities. And every inefficient economic system is socially and politically unjust, because it misallocates the human and natural resources and valuable assets at hand, and thus undermines the potential of citizens.

This sociocultural and socioeconomic transformation has distorted all traditional cultures, causing them to lose the values of honesty, integrity, and commitment to common causes. In the meanwhile, the education system was transformed from being dedicated to the teaching and upbringing of male and female pupils and students to become a business enterprise dedicated to making money for its rich owners, most of whom have little education and do not care about the product they produce. Unfortunately, many parents with little education but with some money to boost their egos were happy with this development. Commercial education created a new relationship between teacher and student where the teacher serves the student and seeks his satisfaction to keep his job. So, the commercialization of education empowered the kids at the expense of their teachers, while undermining the student upbringing process. This system covers today a good portion of elementary and secondary schools and a large and growing number of Arab universities.

Two major things resulted from this process; first, education was separated from guidance and character, which means it left out of its programs all activities related to training students how to think, read, behave in public, be aware of their duties toward others, including their peoples, nations, the environment, and humanity. And second, the student has become the ultimate client for the educational establishment to please and appease, not a humble person to educate and teach how to succeed in life and be a good citizen. Schools and universities, consequently, have become specialty shops owned by largely ignorant capitalists belonging to the 'Robber Barons' era, in which the professor is assigned the role of a dispensable salesperson, and the student the role of the most valued customer. Everyone familiar with customer service knows that "the customer is always right." Consequently, the student has become the one who ultimately pays the salaries of teachers and professors and enables the barons to make unjustified, largely unethical profits in exchange for low-quality education that rarely meets international standards.

In a research paper entitled "The Future of Education in the Arab World," I argued back in 1976 that Arab states consider human resources liabilities, not assets; consequently, the system was largely designed to get rid of people, not to train them and harness their potentialities. The paper was presented at a conference at Georgetown University: "The Arab Future; Critical Issues;" the proceedings of which were subsequently published in a book in 1979². Since human resources were considered liabilities, emigration was encouraged because it provides unearned incomes for states, denies the masses the opportunity to have a trusted, educated, and conscious leadership, and vastly weakens political dissent at home. No Arab state encourages the formation of institutions where people are required to work in teams and share whatever knowledge they learn or experience they gain. Individualism continues to undermine collective efforts to produce

anything meaningful. This is why no political party in an Arab state has been able to attract 5% of the population. In Jordan, for example, there are 34 political parties, none of which is strong enough to cause a social or political change in Jordan³; they also represent about 3% of the total population of Jordan only.

The media is of tremendous importance to societal transformation, especially to societies and peoples that do not consider reading a virtue like most Arabs. But the media that Arabs have today is committed to falsifying the conscience of the masses, not to educating them, and to mislead them, not to inform and guide them. Therefore, a new media is needed to promote teamwork, democratic values, and public awareness; a media committed to freedom of speech and rationalism, not anti-intellectualism and dogmatism, to promoting national unity, not sectarianism, to fighting socially bad and mentally damaging habits like cigarettes and argileh smoking, and to defending human rights, freedom of speech and the environment. The commercialization and privatization of the Arab media have made it part of the problem, not the solution. Throughout history, facts and the truth have had difficult times proving themselves and defending their rationale, particularly in societies that believe in faith and fate and perceive myths, miracles, rumors, and conspiracy theories as facts. People tend to resist attempts to tarnish the image of a myth, undermine a rumor, or stop an exciting factious story from spreading. The Arab media in general is good at promoting myths and conspiracy theories and spreading rumors, which makes it bad at telling the truth and good at misleading the public.

The prevailing Arab culture is a mixture of customs, traditions, values, norms, and ways of thinking inherited from the tribal and agricultural times. Therefore it is not fit for either the industrial age or the knowledge age. It is also a culture that was distorted by the culture of consumerism that Arabs imported from America and a few other countries. As a result, the Arab culture has become unfit for any age. Arab workers, for example, cannot compete with Asian or European industrial workers. This means that the Arab culture needs to be transformed, which only homes and schools, and places of worship working as one team can do. Nevertheless, these institutions need to be re-educated and re-organized. 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 culture itself and the future of Arabs in general.

Ideologically-based and inspired cultures have always been hostile to freedom of speech and new ideas and creative thinking and scientific facts because science and faith do not mix. All

religious and non-religious people need to understand that there is **no science in religion and no religion in science**; all claims to the contrary are false and mentally damaging. Ideological systems of governance are good only at criminalizing dissent, doubting rationality, and suppressing critical thinking; they are also intolerant of criticism and disagreements. Since all ideologies claim to be based on eternal facts and truths, they lack the capacity to adapt to changing circumstances and recognize that they may make mistakes. No old or new ideology rooted in sociocultural or socioeconomic or sociopolitical grounds encourages debate, engages its adversaries in constructive dialogue, or believes in democratic principles.

While the poor in the West are fighting hard to get out of the old ghettos and rid themselves of the ghetto mentality, Muslim conservatives are fighting harder to create new ghettos and wed themselves to the ghetto mentality. However, the ghettos Muslims are creating and glorifying are different; they are cultural ghettos that undermine the capacity of younger minds to think rationally and critically and recognize the imperatives of the times in which they live. It is hard for me to understand why the overwhelming majority of Arab intellectuals are still unable to realize the extent of the cultural impediment and fail to find the courage to acknowledge it and face it.

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, not even in 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 democracy every time they had a chance to do so. Every Arab institution, even those that function in the West today, function as "*dokkans*," or corner grocery stores in small villages or slums; and when the owner of a dokkan goes away to attend a wedding or a funeral, he usually closes the dokkan until he returns, leaving all customers waiting patiently and sometimes praying for his safe return. Though the Arab state is a huge dokkan with tremendous responsibilities, it is subject to less accountability than a corner grocery store. Just imagine how an Arab government, facing a survival challenge, could decide to face the challenge while its ruler is being treated for illness abroad or vacationing overseas.

Where to go from here?

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. In the end, it was determined that we should call for a meeting of several distinguished Arab thinkers and activists, and select the participants ourselves after

consultation with a few like-minded individuals living in the US, Europe, and the Arab World. And while the other three members of the committee favored holding the meeting in the US, I insisted that it must be held in an Arab state to challenge the Arab political system, and in order not to be accused of being foreign agents and lose our credibility. We also decided not to call our gathering a conference or seek a specific objective or develop a set of proposals. And since it was not possible to ask any Arab state for permission to meet on its soil, we decided to smuggle ourselves into Tunisia 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 defense of human rights, and about 25 Arab intellectuals, most of them had foreign passports, mainly American and European, and therefore they needed no visas to enter Tunisia. As a result, several well-known Arab intellectuals who would have enriched the debate 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 permission to meet, but that he would host everyone 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 Mohamed El-Sharikh, a well-known Kuwaiti businessman had facilitated the convening of the meeting.

The major recommendations produced by our gathering were very modest; first, we asked all Arab governments to honor their own constitutions and apply the law equally to citizens and non-citizens; and second, we decided to form what came to be known as, "The Arab Organization for Human Rights." But when it was time to pursue the goal of establishing this organization later in the year, all Arab states that were approached to permit us to hold a pan-Arab conference to debate the state of human rights in the Arab world, refused to do so. Consequently, the organizers were forced to go to Cyprus to meet and form the organization. And though most Arab states today have official offices for human rights and allow human rights organizations to function, no state guarantees the right to free speech on its soil. Nevertheless, no one familiar with the state of human rights in the Arab world in the 1980s compared to what exists today can deny that it has improved and become less oppressive than before. The lesson learned from that historic experience is that any concerned group of individuals with a clear vision can take the initiative and accomplish something meaningful that could evolve in the long run and achieve some of its basic objectives.

Based on the above, I suggest that a few of the already organized groups concerned with the Arab renaissance should take the initiative and call for a conference to be held in a suitable place to debate the Arab situation and formulate a long-term strategy that has several plans and

programs to transform all Arab systems and aspects of life. The sponsoring institutions should raise the funds needed to finance such a conference while giving every Arab state the opportunity to host the conference with one condition: to allow all participants to speak their minds, debate all relevant issues freely, and draft the necessary documents. Thereafter, the conferees should elect a pan-Arab council of five to seven persons 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 that deal with the cultural, economic, and educational aspects of the Arab dilemma.

Since no Arab state is likely to allow the Arab masses to vote on anything of this nature, 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 the 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 its activities. Even if nothing gets implemented in due time, the conferees would have produced a blueprint for Arab political change and societal transformation. They should also encourage existing Arab political parties to adopt the blueprint and call on the masses to form new political parties based on the proposed blueprint.

If we look today at the political map of the world, we will notice that every society living in the industrial and knowledge ages is a democracy; in contrast, every society that still lives in pre-industrial times is either a dictatorship, a theocracy, or a hodgepodge of tribes and ethnic groups struggling to build a viable system of governance, or just a failing state. 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 traditional cultures of the past has witnessed similar transformations; and therefore, has developed the capacity to understand the promise of democracy or how to tolerate its menace. Most Third World states that have chosen contested elections, like Algeria, Colombia, Egypt, Kenya, Pakistan, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zimbabwe have ended up with the menaces of democracy and none of its promises. The major reason for this development is the unsuitability of western democracy to the prevailing conditions in societies living in pre-industrial times.

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, "Global Economic and Cultural Transformation; The Making of History," (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) I believe that 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 the 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 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, tolerance, and progress.

Since my motto is, "Knowledge not shared is Knowledge wasted, and the more we share, the more we gain knowledgeable people" I ask all readers to recommend every article and book they like because it will help inform others. We all share the responsibility to make our world more hospitable to peace, social justice, and freedom; a lofty goal we cannot reach without spreading knowledge and awareness in every corner of our mother earth.

Prof. Rabie is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 52 books in addition to over 100 scholarly papers and 1,500 newspaper articles. Books are 15 in English, one in Albanian, and 36 in Arabic. English Books include four published by Palgrave Macmillan between 2013 and 2017: *Saving Capitalism and Democracy*; *Global Economic and Cultural Transformation*; *A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development*; *The Global Debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications*. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington, DC, a member of the Arab Thought Forum, and a fellow of the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation since 1992. Grants and scholarships financed his education from high school to receiving his Ph.D. in 1970; grants covered studies in Jordan, Egypt, Germany, and America. He is the winner of the State of Palestine Lifetime Achievement Award for scholarly publications and several other awards. His writings and positions reflect a strong commitment to peace, social justice, freedom, and social, cultural, economic, and environmental sustainability.

¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/ahmed-zewail-we-arabs-must-wage-a-new-form-of-jihad-5330294.html>

² Michael Hudson, *The Arab Future; Critical Issues*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1979

³ Parliament of Jordan, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parliament_of_Jordan

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