Stranger in the Arab-Muslim World

by Fouad Ajami

That wily, flamboyant Egyptian ruler Anwar al-Sadat contracted an affection for things and people American when he dominated his land in the 1970s. In the distant, powerful United States, which had ventured into Egypt, he saw salvation for his country—a way out of the pan-Arab captivity, the wars with Israel, and the drab austerity of a command economy. But Sadat was struck down in October 1981. The following year Sherif Hetata, a distinguished Egyptian man of letters, published a novel called *al-Shabaka* (The net), into which he poured the heartbreak and unease of his political breed (the secular Left) at America's new role in Egypt.

It is not a brilliant novel. The fiction is merely a vehicle for Hetata's radical politics. A net (an American net) is cast over Egypt and drags the old, burdened land into a bewildering new world. The protagonist of the novel, Khalil Mansour Khalil, is an educated Egyptian who works for the public sector in the pharmaceutical industry and has known the setbacks and the accomplishments of the Nasser years. The Six-Day War shattered the peace and promise of his world in 1967, but vindication came six years later, in October 1973, when Egyptian armor crossed the Suez Canal. "We lived through a period of great enthusiasm, but it did not last." American diplomacy changed things, "weaned" Egypt away from its old commitments.

Khalil feels the new world's temptations when Ruth Harrison, a mysterious American woman with some command of Arabic, enters his life. Glamorous and alluring, Harrison offers him a contract with an American multinational, and Khalil's drab world and marriage to Amina Tewfic, a woman with "roots deep in the ground," are set against the dazzle of Harrison's world: "Amina always faced me with the facts, laid bare the contradictions in my life; perhaps that is why I kept running away from her. But Ruth was different. She exercised an attraction I found difficult to resist. Was it just the fascination of the unknown, of visiting another world where everything is there for the asking?"

Khalil throws over his life and is doomed. Harrison is a spy come to this new American sphere of influence to decimate the Egyptian Left. Predictably, the affair ends in disaster. Harrison is murdered, and Khalil, insisting on his innocence, is put to death. American spies and tricksters and the Egyptians who fall under their sway dismantle the old world and erect in its place a world of betrayal. Egypt wades beyond its depth and barters time-honored truths for glitter, grief, and ruin.

The chroniclers of Arab-Islamic history since the mid-1970s must come to terms with two especially puzzling developments: the spread of American pop culture through vast stretches of the Arab world, and the concomitant spread of a furious anti-Americanism. Thus, even as Egypt was incorporated into the American imperium, a relentless anti-Americanism animated Egyptian Islamists and secularists alike. It flowed freely through Egyptian letters and cinema and seemed to be the daily staple of the official and semiofficial organs of the regime. A similar situation now prevails throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf, where an addiction to things American coexists with an obligatory hostility to the power whose shadow lies across the landscape.

Historians who take note of these developments will not explain them adequately if they believe that the anti-Americanism at play in the Muslim world merely reflects the anti-Americanism now visible in France or Russia or India, or among a certain segment of the Latin American intelligentsia. America's primacy in the world since the defeat of communism has whipped up a powerful strain of resentment. Envy was the predictable response of many societies to the astonishing American economic performance in the 1990s—the unprecedented bull run, the "New Economy," the wild valuations in American equities, the triumphant claims that America had discovered a new economic world, free of the market's discipline and of the business cycle itself.

This global resentment inevitably made its way to Arab and Muslim shores. But the Muslim world was a case apart for Pax Americana and sui generis in the kind of anti-Americanism it nurtured. José Bové, the provocateur attacking the spread of McDonald's outlets in France, is not to be compared with Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born financier suspected of bankrolling a deadly campaign of terror against American embassies and military barracks. The essayists of *Le Monde Diplomatique* may rail against *mondialisation* American-style (the business schools, the bad food, the unsenti-

A Teheran scene. During the 1990s, some 100,000 Iranians legally immigrated to the United States.

mental capitalism of a Wall Street–U.S. Treasury alliance). But a wholly different wind blows through Arab lands, where a young boy drove a Mercedes truck loaded with TNT into an American military compound in Beirut in October 1983; where terrorists targeted a housing complex for the American military in Saudi Arabia in June 1996; where two men in a skiff crippled an American destroyer on a re-fueling stop in Aden, Yemen. Grim, defining episodes of that sort, and many others like them, mark the American presence in Arab-Muslim domains.

In the aftermath of the October 1973 war, the Arab and Iranian heartland slipped under American sway, and America acquired a kind of Muslim imperium. The development gained momentum from the needs of both the rulers and the social elites who had taken to American ways. The poorer states (read Egypt) needed sustenance; the wealthier states (read the states of the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf), protection against the covetous poorer states. A monarch in Iran, at once imperious and possessed of a neurotic sense of dependency on American judgment, effectively brought down his own regime. The order he had put together became inseparable in the popular psyche from the American presence in Iran. And they were torched together. The tribune of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, was particularly skilled at turning the foreign power into the demon he needed. Iran alternated between falling for the foreigner's ways and loathing itself for surrendering to the foreigner's seduction. It swung wildly, from the embrace of the foreigner into a faith in the authority of the ancients and the reign of a clerical redeemer.

In the years to come, there would be no respite for America. Khomeini had shown the way. There would be tributaries of his revolution and emulators aplenty. A world had flung wide its own floodgates. It let the foreigner in and lost broad segments of its young to the hip, freewheeling culture of America. By violent reaction the seduction could be covered up, or undone.

Consider Osama bin Laden's description of America, as reported by a young Sudanese follower of bin Laden who defected and turned witness for American authorities: "The snake is America, and we have to stop them. We have to cut off the head of the snake. We cannot let the American army in our area. We have to do something. We have to fight them."

The American military force that troubles Osama bin Laden, that hovers over his Saudi homeland and reaches the ports of his ancestral land in Yemen, is there because the rulers of those lands acquiesced in its presence, even sought it. Bin Laden and his followers cannot overturn the ruling order in the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf—entrenched dynasties that have mastered the art of governing and struck workable social contracts with the governed. But the rebels cannot concede that harsh truth. Better to hack at the foreign power. More flattering to the cause to say that the political orders in the region would fall of their own weight were it not for the armadas of the Americans and the military installations and weapons they have stored in the ports of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula. Pax Americana may insist on its innocence, but,

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inevitably, it is caught in the crossfire between the powers that be and the insurgents who have taken up arms against them and who seek nothing less than the extirpation of America's presence from Muslim lands.

In fact, as Muslim societies become involved in a global economy they can neither master nor ignore, both rulers and insurgents have no choice but to confront the American presence. America has become part of the uneven, painful "modernity" of the Islamic world. Even American embassies have acquired an ambivalent symbolic character: they are targeted by terrorists and besieged by visa seekers—professionals who have given up on failed economies and a restricted way of life; the half-educated and the urban poor, who in earlier times would never have sought opportunity and a new life in a distant land.

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Denial is at the heart of the relationship between the Arab and Muslim worlds and America. There can be no written praise of America, no acknowledgment of its tolerance or hospitality, or of the yearnings America has stirred in Karachi and Teheran, Cairo and Beirut, and in the streets of Ramallah. In November 2000, America extended a special gift to Jordan: a free-trade agreement between the two nations. Jordan was only the fourth country to be so favored, after Canada, Mexico, and Israel. The agreement was an investment in peace, a tribute to the late Jordanian ruler, King Hussein, and an admission of America's stake in the reign of his young heir, Abdullah II. But it did not dampen the anti-Americanism among professionals and intellectuals in Jordan.

There, as elsewhere, no intellectual can speak kindly of America. The attraction has to be hidden, or never fully owned up to. From Afghanistan to the Mediterranean, from Karachi to Cairo, human traffic moves toward America while anti-American demonstrations supply the familiar spectacle of American flags set to the torch. I know of no serious work of commentary in Arab lands in recent years that has spoken of the American political experience or the American cultural landscape with any appreciation. The anti-Americanism is automatic, unexamined, innate. To self-styled "liberals," America is the upholder of reaction; to Islamists, a defiling presence; to pan-Arabists, the backer of a Zionist project to dominate the region.

In the pan-Arab imagination, there would be a measure of Arab unity had America not aborted it. There would be a "balance" of wealth and some harmony between the sparsely populated Arab oil states and the poorer, more populous Arab lands of the Levant had America not driven a wedge between them. There would be wealth for things that matter had those oil states not been tricked into weapons deals and joint military exercises they neither need nor can afford. "I hate America," a young Palestinian boy in the streets of Gaza said late last year to Michael Finkel, an American reporter who had come to cover the "Second Intifada" for the *New York Times Magazine*. But the matter is hardly that simple. Like the larger world to which he belongs, the boy hates America and is

drawn to it. His world wants American things without having to partake of American ways. It has beckoned America, and then bloodied America.

America entered Arab lands on particular terms. The lands were, in the main, authoritarian societies, and such middle classes as existed in them were excluded from meaningful political power. Monarchs and rulers of national states claimed the political world, and it was precisely through their good graces that America came on the scene. Pax Americana took to this transaction. It neither knew nor trusted the civil associations, the professional classes, the opposition. America had good reasons to suspect that the ground was not fertile for democratic undertakings. It was satisfied that Egypt's military rulers kept the peace. Why bother engaging those who opposed the regime, even the fragile bourgeois opposition that emerged in the late 1970s? Similarly, the only traffic to be had with Morocco was through its autocratic ruler, Hassan II. The man was harsh and merciless (his son, and successor, Mohammad VI, has all but admitted that), but he kept order, was "our man" in North Africa, and could be relied on to support America's larger purposes.

America extended the same indulgence to Yasir Arafat, the latest, and most dubious, ruler to be incorporated into its designs. In the Palestinian world, the security arrangements and the political arrangements had been struck with Arafat. His American handlers ignored such opposition as had arisen to him. With no real access to the Palestinian world, and precious little knowledge of Arafat's opponents, America seemed to have to choose between the Islamic movement Hamas and Arafat's Palestinian National Authority. An easy call. The Palestinian strongman, in turn, accepted America's patronage but frustrated America's wishes.

The middle classes in the Arab world were mired in the politics of nationalism, whereas the rulers always seemed supple and ready to wink at reality. There was precious little economic life outside the state-dominated oil sectors, and little business to be done without recourse to the custodians of the command economies. It was the prudent and, really, inevitable solution to negotiate American presence and American interests with those who, as the Arabic expression has it, have eaten the green and the dry and monopolized the life of the land.

The populations shut out of power fell back on their imaginations and their bitterness. They resented the rulers but could not overthrow them. It was easier to lash out at American power and question American purposes. And they have been permitted the political space to do so. They can burn American flags at will, so long as they remember that the rulers and their prerogatives are beyond scrutiny. The rulers have been particularly sly in monitoring the political safety valves in their domains. They know when to indulge the periodic outbursts at American power. Not a pretty spectacle, but such are the politics in this sphere of American influence.

America's primacy will endure in Arab and Muslim lands, but the foreign power will have to tread carefully. "England is of Europe, and I am a friend of the Ingliz, their ally," Ibn Saud, the legendary founder of the Saudi state, once said of his relationship with the British. "But I will walk with them only as far as my religion and honor will permit." In Arab and Muslim domains, it is the stranger's fate to walk alone. ❑