

Do Arabs Hate the West?

Crossing Arab Roads, Trying and Dying!

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Arab hatred for Westerners has nothing to do with ordinary people, but with their political representatives who, on the pretext of establishing a democratic system, meddle in the internal affairs of their countries, sometimes dangerously. Somewhat like the tourist who, ignorant of the unwritten codes of conduct between drivers and pedestrians, dares to cross the streets of Cairo. This code is precisely what Western politicians who seek to “sort out” the region lack. Thus, the list of injustices is long, starting with the fragmentation of the Arab countries. The result of these wrongs can be the creation of a climate receptive to radicalism.

“It’s suicidal, isn’t it?” Terrified, Monica, my colleague from London, clung to my arm; she did not smile but nodded her head without even looking at me. We were crossing the bustling streets of the noisy and crowded al-Tahrir Square (*Maydan al-Tahrir*) in downtown Cairo. I was manoeuvring our way through the middle of the street, slithering through the slim gaps between fast cars and other pedestrians, trying to cut a way through, trying to get to the other side of the road. As I was thinking that my silly comment had been inconsiderate, Monica said it was almost impossible for her to figure out how to cross the square safely without me. I was arrogantly flattered! But the truth is things in Cairo are different from what she is used to in London. There are no pedestrian crossings, no traffic lights; no slow-down by drivers to let her set foot on the street.

To cross streets in Cairo and many other Arab cities safely there is a whole code of un-

written rules between drivers and pedestrians, and even indifferent policemen. You have to master certain gestures of body language and eye contact, leaning forward or backward, moving or stopping, heading out fast or slowing down all at the right time. If you don’t know the code, don’t cross the road – or you risk your life, and other lives.

A code is exactly what Americans and British soldiers are missing as they are facing death everyday, road-crossing a muddy uncharted terrain. With no road code everybody dies. But the frightening reality is that the West believes in its miraculous capacity for quick “fixing”. A messy situation such as the Iraqi one, which they have actively contributed to creating over decades, could be fixed through a holiday-like excursion! Under this agenda of fixing Iraq and “bringing democracy and freedom” to its people, everybody is disgusted by the many other added interests!



Do Arabs hate the West? Egyptian schoolgirls smiling at a tourist camera.

Monica was wise enough not to suggest suddenly starting to erect traffic lights or imposing pedestrian crossings overnight at al-Tahrir Square believing that she, the foreigner, can “fix it”. “We don’t want you, Brits and Americans, to surge into our country to fix it.” This is the message that almost everyone here, in Cairo, gives me. Nada, the panting bosomed belly dancer who’s just

finished a dazzling round of performances, tells me that she loves seeing Western people cheering her when she performs at al-Haram Street night club. But she hates it when they kill “my brothers and sisters in Palestine and Iraq, saying that they are doing good things to them.”

In Egypt, where I travelled to investigate “Why do Arabs Hate the West” and collect

my findings for a British TV documentary, the road-crossing code analogy hit me on the very first day. It stayed with me over the ten days that I spent there. I interviewed all sorts of people: men and women passing by, drivers, belly dancers, intellectuals, shoppers, politicians, academics, artists, pop stars and many others. I spoke with highly politicised leftists, Islamists (moderates and fanatics), liberals and others, and discussed the Iraq war and the question of Palestine over smoking *shisha* (hubbly bubbly) with completely apolitical Muslims and Christians.

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The first reply that I got to my question, "Why do Arabs hate the West?" almost invariably was a vehement denial! Everyone I interviewed responded with an almost standard line: we don't hate the West or Western people, we hate Western politicians. More sophisticated people would even avoid the word "hate" altogether. People were very anxious to draw a clear distinction between bad Westerners (Bush and Blair and their circles) and ordinary Westerners. I put it to them that Western leaders are elected by ordinary people and even re-elected by them, so why should not ordinary people share the blame too? They replied that these people are fooled by their own politicians and guilty more of ignorance than of crimes. The criminals are the guys at the top. Monica commented that she wished that "we" in Britain had the same sanity and ability to distinguish between good Arabs and bad ones, too.

Without a doubt, Western politicians are fervently resented by Arabs. After objecting

to and qualifying the wording of my initial question, the hate just starts pouring from almost everyone. And the list of injustices that the West has done to the region builds up into a long rant. Dr Fadil, a prominent economist at Cairo University, talks about the continuous plundering of the wealth of the region. Ahmad, the young owner of a perfume shop in Kasr el-Neel Street, passionately condemns the continuous Western support of Israel against Palestinian rights and the hypocrisy of the West in focusing, for example, on Iran's nuclear power and turning a blind eye to Israel's. He wraps gifts for my London colleagues with a big smile and says we want Westerners like you to come here, not soldiers, not like Bush and Blair.

Rock star Muhamad Munir, denounced by many conservatives for his songs, complains about the Western media (especially movies) stereotyping Arabs as criminals and terrorists. Mansour, who is called by some of his friends the "sweetie fundy" (the sweet fundamentalist) for his good looks, shrewd mind and politeness, points at how Western governments swallow all their talk about human rights and democracy when it comes to so-called "friendly" regimes, the ones from which they can get oil.

Historians as well as ordinary Arabs hold the West responsible for the past fragmentation of the region and the foreseeable fragmentation of Iraq too. And everybody ridicules Bush and Blair's claims that they are bringing democracy and freedom to Iraq, and then to the region as a whole. Ahmad Fuad Nagm, the most popular poet in Egypt, who spent 17 years in jail, looks me in the eye and sharply asks "you think of it, if you are the master, the colonial power in the West, and you have proxy rulers in the region who are sincerely serving your interests, would you change them because they are dictators and do nasty things to their own people? You'd say f**ck their people."

The concluding message is the most dangerous one, as put forward by Dr Heba Izzat,

a remarkably insightful intellectual whose *hijab* does not prevent her from being the Middle East's anchor of an LSE project on global civil society. She is worried that the natural result of the combination of all the grievances caused by the West is the creation of a climate that is receptive to fanaticism and all sorts of radicalism. Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, Al-Zarkawi and all terrorist groups are the natural outcome not only of internal failures of Arab societies, but also of decades-long Western foreign policies.

I flew back to London convinced more than ever that the war in Iraq has increased terrorism

in the region and beyond. The price will be paid by Arabs and Westerners alike. When I asked my friend Hashem, a controversial publisher who defies both the government and the conservatives in Egypt by targeting the three taboos of politics, sex and religion, "What is your message to the West?" he said: "Get off our backs, pleaaaaaaaaaaaaaaase! Before it's too late. Get your troops out of the region and leave. We hate to see you killing us and killing yourselves in our streets under the claim of 'fixing' us. I'm worried," he added, "that feelings against Western politicians may have started moving in the direction against Western people themselves."