

# Islam is the Solution

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FIRST, AN apology: I am not going to write about the Wikileaks.

I like gossip as much as the next (wo)man. The leaks provide a lot of it, interspersed with some real information.

But there is nothing really new there. The information only confirms what any intelligent person could have worked out already. If there is anything new, it's exactly this confirmation: the world is really managed the way we thought it was. How depressing.

Four hundred years ago, Sir Henry Wotton, a British diplomat, observed that "An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country." Since then, nothing has changed except that the ambassador has been joined by the ambassadress. So it is quite refreshing to listen to what they say in secret messages home, when they don't have to lie.

That said, let's move on to more important things.

THIS WEEK'S ELECTIONS in Egypt, for example.

Years ago, the story goes that a Soviet citizen went to the polling station on election-day and was handed a sealed envelope to put into the ballot box.

"Aren't I allowed to see who I am voting for?" he asked.

"Of course not!" the stern-faced official retorted indignantly, "In our Soviet Union, the elections are secret!"

This could not happen in Egypt. First of all, because Egyptians are a very humorous people. If told that their elections were secret, they would burst out laughing.

Second, because they so obviously are not.

On one of my visits to Anwar Sadat's Cairo, I had the chance to witness an election day. It was a jolly occasion, more a medieval carnival than a solemn fulfillment of democratic duty. Everybody was happy.

Visiting a polling station in a village near the Giza pyramids, I was struck by this atmosphere of jolly cynicism. No one even pretended that it was serious. Good-humored soldiers guarding the locale volunteered to help old women in choosing the right ballot and putting it in the envelope.

I am not sure whether this good humor has been retained under the Mubarak regime, but the results are the same. Media editors, all appointed by the government, prevent any criticism of the government. Opposition activists are arrested well before election day (if they are not in prison already). The government party is a sorry joke. No one seriously pretends that the country is anything but a dictatorship. The upper classes like it that way, not only out of fondness for their privileges but also out of a genuine fear that under democracy, their country would elect a fundamentalist religious regime, with burqas and all.

ALL OVER the Arab world, this is a real dilemma. Free elections would bring fundamentalists to power.

During the last century, secular nationalism was in vogue. In many Arab countries, nationalist movements sprang up. Their model was the great Ataturk – a revolutionary renovator as no other. He suppressed Islam, forbade the fez for men and the hijab for women, replaced the Arabic with the Latin script, fostered Turkish nationalism instead of the Ottoman Islamism.

This, by the way, was a model for many of us, who aspired to replace the Jewish religion and Zionist pseudo-nationalism with a healthy Hebrew territorial secular nationalism. The son of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the renovator of the modern Hebrew language, also proposed replacing the Hebrew script with a Latin one.

In Turkey, the Ataturk revolution is now threatened by the upsurge of a rejuvenated Islam. In Israel, the new Hebrew nation is under siege by a fundamentalist, aggressive Judaism. All over the Arab world, the situation is worse.

To put it bluntly: secular nationalism has not delivered. It has brought no real independence, no freedom, no economic and technological breakthrough.

In the economic sphere, no Arab country has succeeded in doing what has been done by Japan, South Korea and even Malaysia, and what is being done now by China and India. The successful Israeli example is near at hand and increases the frustration.

The dream of a secular pan-Arab union, as envisioned by Gamal Abd-al-Nasser and the original Ba'athists, is in tatters. So is the dream of Arab independence. Almost all Arab countries are backward American clients and dance to the American tune. A whole generation of Arab leaders has spectacularly failed.

The most recent example was Yasser Arafat. He created a Palestinian national movement that was proud of its non-sectarianism. Christian Arabs played a significant role in the Palestine Liberation Organization. George Habash was a Christian physician from Ramallah, the Christian Hanan Ashrawi is one of the most articulate Palestinian spokespersons.

Arafat himself was a practicing Muslim. Often, even in private conversations, he would excuse himself, disappear for a few minutes and return unobtrusively, while his assistants would whisper to us that the Ra'is was praying. Yet he never tired of assuring everyone that the future State of Palestine would be free of any religious domination.

As long as he was alive, political Islam remained a minor influence, and not because of any repressive measures.

ALL THIS is history. The Sunni Hamas (“Islamic Resistance Movement”) and the Shiite Hezbollah (“Party of God”) are becoming the models for masses of young people all over the Arab world.

One of the major reasons for this is Palestine.

If Arafat had succeeded in founding the free and sovereign State of Palestine, the texture of Arab politics would have changed, not only in Palestine itself but in all Arab countries.

The rise of Hamas in Palestine is a direct result of this failure. Secular Palestinian nationalism has been given a try, and has failed. The Islamic revolutionaries are appealing to a people deprived of all national and human rights, with no alternative in sight.

As the Wikileaks show (here I go, mentioning them after all) not one single Arab regime gives a damn about the Palestinians. That is nothing new – indeed, Arafat created his movement, Fatah (“Palestinian Liberation Movement”), in order to liberate the Palestinians, first of all, from the cynical Arab regimes, all of which exploited the “Palestinian Cause” for their own ends.

But the depth of cynicism revealed in these conversations between Arab potentates and their American masters borders on outright betrayal. This will increase the already massive frustration not only in Palestine, but in all Arab countries. Any young Egyptian, Jordanian, Saudi or Bahraini (to mention only a few) must be acutely aware that his country is led by a small group for whom the preservation of their personal power and privileges is vastly more important than the holy cause of Palestine.

This is a deeply humiliating insight. It may not produce immediate results, but when hundreds of millions of people feel humiliated, the effects are foreseeable. The older generation may be used to this situation. But for young people, especially proud Arabs, it is intolerable.

I am very sensitive to this kind of feeling, because at the age of 15 I felt the same and joined the “terrorist” Irgun (“National Military Organization”). I just could not stand the sight of my leaders kowtowing before the British rulers of my country. Putting myself in the shoes of a young Arab of similar age now in Jeddah, Alexandria or Aleppo, I can just imagine what he feels. Even Ehud Barak, that veteran Arab-fighter, once said that if he were a young Palestinian, he would join a terrorist organization.

Sooner or later, the situation will explode – first in

one country, then in many. The fate of the Shah of Iran should be remembered by those who speak – in secret documents – about the “Iranian Hitler” who is on the verge of obtaining a nuclear bomb.

THE FRUSTRATION about Palestine is the immediate cause of this humiliation, being manifest for all to see, but the feeling itself goes beyond one single cause.

Secular nationalism has signally failed the Arabs. Communism has never taken root in the Islamic world, being by its very nature inimical to the basic tenets of Islam. Capitalism, while attractive to some, has also failed to solve any of the basic problems of the Arab world.

The Islamic revolutionary movement in its many forms promises a viable alternative. It is no fluke that the Egyptian dictatorship forbids the use of the slogan “Islam is the Solution” – the simple and effective slogan that unites the Islamic opposition in all the countries. There is a gaping vacuum in the Arab world, with no one there to fill it – except Islamism.

FOR THE US, this is a huge challenge. Obama seemed to have perceived it, before he was swallowed – head and body – by the American political routine.

Everybody seems to be talking about the Decline of the American Empire. It’s all the rage. What’s happening in the Arab world may accelerate or slow this process. The creation of a sovereign, free and viable State of Palestine – with the electrifying effect this would have throughout the Arab region, indeed the entire Islamic world – would slow it considerably.

Judging from these leaks, this seems very far from the minds of American statesmen and stateswomen, such as they are.

For Israel, the outlook is even grimmer. The prospect of a fundamentalist Arab world, with a completely new and popular set of leaders, surrounding us on all sides, with the power of America (and its Jewish lobby) declining ever more, is a frightening prospect indeed.

If I were responsible for Israel at this moment, I would worry about this much more than about the Iranian bomb.

Fortunately, this is not an inescapable danger. Israeli policy can do a lot to avert it. Unfortunately, we are doing the exact opposite.

To those who chant “Islam is the Solution”, our answer should be: “A just Peace is the Solution”.