

Whither the Middle East?

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It was an ironic moment on 19 November 2006: George W Bush was visiting Vietnam; former US secretary of state Henry Kissinger was telling the BBC a military victory of America in Iraq was no longer possible.

Kissinger portrays a bleak picture. It is now impossible to establish an Iraqi government that can have its writ run across the whole country bringing the civil war or sectarian violence under control in a time period that the political processes of democracy will support. Kissinger says in effect Iraq is falling apart.

Six hundred years ago, in January 1401, Tamerlane had laid siege to the city of Damascus. Iconoclast Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun was summoned to the military camp before 'this king Timur — one of the greatest and mightiest of kings.' The invitee feared for his life but in the event won Timur's confidence.

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was a litterateur by nature, jurist by profession, historian by event. His magnum opus, *The Muqaddimah* (1377), was cited by Arnold Toynbee as: 'Undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever been created by any mind in any time or place. The most comprehensive and illuminating analysis of how human affairs work that has been made anywhere.' Acclaimed as 'the classic Islamic history of the world', this book anticipates the Marxian paradigm and belongs by current parlance to the class of so-called Total History.

How would have Ibn Khaldun viewed the current predicament of the Middle East? Would it spill into a global jihad, or a sort of World War III?

1. *Civilization*: Ibn Khaldun saw in the Central Asian world conqueror Timur a Turco-Mongol vindication of his own thesis that civilization is always and everywhere marked by the fundamental difference between urban and primitive, desert and city, orality and literacy. In a similar vein, Marx would say over five centuries later: 'the whole economic history of society is summed in the movement of this antithesis', namely 'the separation between town and country' (*Capital*, I, p 352). In the present context America is the 'town', Middle East the 'country' — respectively the centre and the periphery of world system.

By natural disposition and the power of logical reasoning man is more inclined toward good qualities than bad ones. Under economic and political compulsion men form society which in turn entails a royal authority to maintain peace and tranquility. There must be some factor, some incitement, for the desire of social cooperation to exist. Ibn Khaldun calls it 'group feeling' and stresses its cardinal importance.

The founding of a dynasty or state involves large numbers of people and requires big cities and towns. For its own glory the state indulges in pomp and splendor of huge construction, spectacular monuments, ceremonies and gifts to courtiers. Wealth concentrates in a few hands. Inevitably the rich tend towards luxury. The bias toward leisure and pleasure, however, carries with it the seeds of dynasty's eventual disintegration.

The desire of the ruling group to gain exclusive control over all resources of power and wealth brings about a conflict between the dynasty and the people whose group feeling sustains it. Among the things that corrupt the regime is the disposition toward pleasure and conspicuous luxury. Expenditure of the inhabitants of a city mounts. Prices rise. To meet its budget the state levies new taxes, setting off a spiral of inflation. Common people suffer the most. Group feeling sags. The dynasty declines and falls. Another dynasty would rise on its rubbles, or come from outside to pick up the pieces.

Human beings make progress through ups and downs of dynasties. The less civilized groups have a strong propensity to imitate the customs of more civilized rulers. Through continuous practice an individual can master a craft or science, thus making it his 'habit'; and since the acquisition of habits is a matter of education and training, habits can be passed on to others willing and fit to learn them. Ibn Khaldun is therefore optimistic about the prospects of progress by human civilization.

2. *The Triangle*: In the world system, if America is the town, then Middle East is the village. Now within the Middle East a comparable partition is visible, the two parts being Saudi Arabia and Iran. All in all, we have got a three-dynasty triangle to analyze: America, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

One of the early conflicts between Arabia and Persia (today's Iran), known as *shuubiyya*, appeared around the eighth century when the advance of Arabic literature slowed in the face of Persia which boasted an ancient civilization with refined culture while Arabia was a barren desert of nomad Bedouins. The scene changed. Today, spiritually and materialistically, Saudi Arabia is at the head of the global sunni community; Iran leads the shias who are outnumbered in the world by sunnis as 1:4 ratio. Tension between the two neighbours has intensified.

In the wake of the 1979 shia revolution in Iran, Saudi Arabia had embarked upon a mission of propagating worldwide its state religion, *Wahhabism*, an austere sunni version of Islam. Its fabulous oil money has been squandered by a few royals in lavish luxury. Group feeling in the country has shrunk. Vindicating Ibn Khaldun's theory, the Saudi dynasty feels shaken.

Following the emergence of shia-majority Iraq, Iran is emboldened. Its oil money enables the regime to placate the people at least for the time being.

The Middle East, stretching from Egypt to Iran, sits on two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves. Addicted to oil, America, beset as it is with the Khaldunian luxury and dwindling group feeling at home, cannot yet afford to leave the Middle East. As for Saudi Arabia, it survives under the protective

umbrella of American military. And Iran does not mind America's presence at its doorstep which in effect works as its security guard as it were.

To al-Qaeda, all three — Saudi Arabia, Iran, America — are its enemies, because the first two are apostate and the third is a Satan as characterized by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Fiery ideologue Sayyid Qutb was not worried about the American military muscle, but anxious about the risk of corrupting Muslim society by the renegade culture of America, in particular by the liberal American attitude to let women go out of kitchen and maternity ward. America is a Satan which does not so much openly threaten you as it whispers to you, seduces you, soils your character. The holy Koran warns that Satan is 'the slinking prompter who whispers in the ears of men' (114:6). Women's freedom would overturn an age-old tradition of Muslim society by weakening the grip of men over the women.

3. *Remark:* If the world has one country named after a family, it is Saudi Arabia. Its agenda is overburdened with two contrary aims, namely, the one to hold on to the vast treasure of oil (a nationalist posture), and the other to trigger a worldwide sunni revolution in the name of Islamic caliphate (a globalist position).

Apprehending the danger of playing with such a double-edged sword, Riyadh has begun a course correction. Since May 2003, Saudi security forces have foiled more than 25 major terrorist attacks; they have captured or killed 264 al-Qaeda operatives and arrested 845 other people with links to al-Qaeda. Of the 26 terrorists on the Saudi most-wanted list, all but one have been captured or killed. The Saudi Interior Ministry, once a covert source of support for its jihadists, now oversees an 'ideological reeducation programme' supervised by moderate ulema and university professors. More than 400 have gone through this novel mill of brain rewashing. These are the actions taken in the direction of the royal nationalist aim.

The external ambition of the kingdom seems disproportionate if not counter-productive, as it seeks to convert all under the flag of a Wahhabi Caliphate. Arabs constitute one-fifth of the total Muslim population of the world. Even in non-Arab lands the call to prayer in mosque and the prayers are recited in Arabic which few understand.

The Koran enjoins that it should be clearly understood by believers, and to that end the text should be expressed in people's language. 'Had We revealed the Koran in a foreign tongue they would have said: "If only its verses were expounded! Why in foreign tongue, and he be an Arabian?"' (41:43). We have revealed the Koran in the Arabic language so that you may grow in understanding' (12:1). Each apostle ... has spoken only in the language of his own people, so that he might make his precepts clearer to them' (14:4). Orthodox ulema of Saudi Arabia, however, are against the use of peoples' languages for liturgy.

Ibn Khaldun reckons four basic sources of evidence in jurisprudence, namely the Koran, the Sunnah (words and deeds of the Prophet), ijma (consensus), and qiyas (analogy). Ijma means consensus, that is, 'collective

will', which involves in the first place common understanding of the scripture by the people. It requires that the content of the text is clearly and equally accessible to all. Therefore, insisting upon one particular language for everyone falls short of the principle of ijma.

A poll of British Muslims conducted by the BBC shows a substantial majority of them calling for imams and clerics in the UK to preach in the English language. Saudi Arabia had distributed Koran in the Arabic version. Should Riyadh authorize translation of the holy book into vernacular languages 'group-feeling' among the believers may be strengthened.

The cycle of sectarian violence and retaliation in the Middle East is likely to prolong for an unpredictable length of time. Such conflicts between groups claiming faith in one religion have sometimes ended with reconciliation. Here are two episodes. Early in the Christian era three sects — Trinitarians, Sabellians, Arianians — got engaged in complicated theological questions especially on the contemplation of Jesus. The Trinitarian formula became the accepted doctrine of all Christianity after argument, violence and war. Another instance occurred during the Reformation. Wars between Catholicism and Protestantism lasted 150 years taking the toll of no less than one-third of the population of Central Europe.

There is no reason why sooner or later shia and sunni communities cannot reach an amicable solution. As always, indeed, the division of land and other resources are complicating factors. However, the fact remains that the wealth of a nation is not a fixed or constant amount: wealth can be produced with capital and labour. Conflict over wealth is not necessarily a zero-sum game; all parties can gain in the long run through mutual toleration and cooperation.

'Differences of conditions among people are,' wrote Ibn Khaldun, 'the result of the different ways in which they make their living.' Thus he had anticipated Marx and Engles who five centuries later observed: 'Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process.' In other words, it is the 'actual life-process', i.e. the 'ways in which they make their living', that determines people's consciousness, hence their faith, not inversely. For durable peace material conditions are necessary, though not sufficient.

The internecine quarrel in the Middle East is unlikely to cease unless the region changes over to an appropriate mode of production. Here is a message for India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, too. ❧❧❧