

Why Muslims Hate the US

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Anger against the US within the Muslim Ummah has risen above the level breached by the USSR after its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, so that Washington seems on course to overtake Israel as the primary hate object of the Muslim world. This is happening despite a well-funded campaign that seeks to convince Muslims that Uncle Sam loves them, and is eager for reciprocation. However, apart (presumably) from Muslims resident in the country itself, followers of Islam across the globe see the US as determined to emasculate and finally eliminate them. Such views within the Ummah have been present at least since the 1950s, so it would be inaccurate to give the entire credit to George W Bush to the present situation, great though his contribution has been. Since 1945, the US, a power that was isolationist for most of its previous history, has metamorphosed into the most interventionist nation since the inhabitants of Britain decided in droves during the 18th century to leave their insipid food and miserable climate behind and in the process, wrest control of much of the globe. Sadly for the US, this attempt at emulating the UK's example has simply reinforced Karl Marx's dictum that history the second time around converts itself from tragedy to farce. A historical evaluation of the strands that fuse into Muslim hatred for the US would be too ambitious for this column, which will therefore confine itself to some of the reasons behind the current loathing of Muslims for the US, a country that otherwise has so many positive features about it, including a wonderful people

George W Bush and other US policymakers often speak of their desire to "bring democracy to the Middle East", by "empowering the people" and backing "voices of moderation" within the Islamic world. They apparently see no irony in the use of such language when the two King Abdullahs, Pervez Musharraf, Hosni Mubarak and the Turkish General Staff - to name a few - are given US official favour and cover. Despite its oft-proclaimed partiality towards elected governments, the US seems entirely comfortable with the fact that the militaries of the two top (republican) Muslim allies of the West refuse to accept civilian supremacy, as do other militaries in the republican corner of the Muslim world, such as in Algeria. In the case of Pakistan (a "major non-NATO ally" that has been given tens of billions of US dollars in assistance), the military openly dominates the government, jailing or deposing elected civilian leaders at whim. In Turkey, the army's role is more recessed, although even here it is evident just who has control over the trigger (and is willing to use it, especially domestically). In the case of the Palestinian Authority and Iran, the elected governments in both are reviled, ignored and humiliated by the US in favour of factions and individuals within both that enjoy scant or negative domestic popularity. In Lebanon, a similar situation is developing. Throughout North Africa and the Middle East, authoritarian regimes are buttressed by US policies and assistance, despite protestations from Washington, London, Berlin, Paris and other western capitals that they are engaged in "building democracy in the Muslim world", most notably in Iraq

After US, British and other European militaries invaded Iraq in 2003, George W Bush and Tony Blair—with the "legal" cover provided by an astonishing League of Nations-style UN Security Council resolution (which in effect gave the US and the UK the power of life and death over Iraq and its people for an indefinite period) immediately appointed a US administrator, with a few token Iraqi-origin individuals as "advisers", although having zero power. Till date, those with Iraqi, as distinct from other, citizenship, have in practice been denied control over the administration of Iraq, with even the local police force having to defer to usually clueless US military officers over the specifics of raids conducted or broader issues relating to methods of administering law and order. Such remote control over the Iraqi component of the local government has led to demoralisation and inertia within local staff, including even its "Non-Resident Iraqi" component. Whether it is core economic decisions such as the exploitation of the oil wealth or the prioritisation of expenditure for social amenities, the final word rests with the occupying powers, including on projects funded exclusively from domestically-generated resources. The new Oil Law that the "free" Iraq has passed hands over control of 85% of the

country's vast oil reserves to western oil companies in a way that is reminiscent of the unequal treaties forced on Saudi Arabia and Iran in the first half of the last century

It does not need Al Jazeera to expose the patent absurdity of the Bush-Blair claim that Iraq is now a "liberated" country, a disconnect that is feeding resentment of the US in Iraq that is steadily approaching the levels of Arab anger at the lack of control of Palestinians within the West Bank and Gaza over their own lives. Indeed, a case can be made that the British in India devolved more freedom to the locals during the Raj than their descendants have in latter-day Iraq. Similarly, the patent and obtrusive US backing to a large cluster of despots in Muslim-majority countries brings forth an angry sneer from Arabs each time Bush or Rice talk of "promoting democracy" in the Muslim world, comments usually uttered in the company of such supporters of democracy as King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia or President Mubarak of Egypt. As for the UK, while it frowns on the racist despot Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, a red carpet gets laid out at British Commonwealth meetings for Pakistan's military usurper Pervez Musharraf. Indeed, one reason why China enjoys a better image in the region is the absence of such cant from Beijing's rulers, who are open about their preference for convenience over principle.

What is telling is the fact that it is precisely in those countries where the direct influence of the US is relatively low that local recruitment to "Al Qaeda" is negligible or non-existent, and the image of the US good, locations such as Malaysia and India, the second of which has 156 million Muslims as citizens. Even including the Wahabbi jihadists in Kashmir, there are far fewer Islamic extremists in India than in countries such as the US, the UK, the Netherlands or France, despite their much lower Muslim populations. In 2002, this columnist wrote about an "Asian NATO" (North America-Asia Treaty Organisation, or NAATO) that would link the two continents together in a security pact, the way NATO fuses North America with Europe. The need for an Asian version of NATO is grounded in the reality of continuing resentment within Asia at the colonial past of Europe, a factor that creates a negative atmosphere whenever troops from that continent get inserted, the way they have been in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, especially during the past two years, the Bush White House has followed a policy of relying exclusively on Europe to provide additional firepower for its operations in Asia, a policy that has created the very fires that it was meant to extinguish, especially in the Muslim world. This anger looks for its sustenance, on the current occupation of two Muslim-majority countries by NATO since 9/11 and the backseat driving by the US in most other such countries, especially those ruled by military or hereditary dictatorships. Oddly, even academics in the US gloss over such an obvious dichotomy between precept and practice, a chasm that is the subject of much attention in the Muslim world, especially in the "street" (as distinct from what this columnist would call the "supermarket", or the elite segment)

While President Bush may believe it possible to be half-pregnant, those with less evolved intellects would see that the continued backing for military and hereditary authoritarians in the Muslim world is incompatible with a better image within the Ummah. Unlike the perception in the West, the fact is that kingship and arbitrary rule are seen by most Muslims in a negative way. It is not coincidental that visitors from India nowadays get a much warmer welcome in Pakistan than those from China or the US, countries that back a military dictatorship detested by the local population. In contrast, India has always supported civilian supremacy over *khaki*. If the image of the US, and to a lesser extent the EU, is sliding within the Muslim world, the reason may lie less in the "civilisational hostility" of Muslims towards the West than in a longstanding policy towards the Muslim world that appears to many to be based on hypocrisy and opportunism, a policy made all the more conspicuous by the repeated verbal expressions of support for "moderation" and "democracy" within Muslim countries. As do Jews, Christians, Buddhists or Hindus, Muslims too prefer democracy to despotism, but are aware that the primary international backers of domestic authoritarians is often the same group of countries that speak often of Human Rights while in the profitable company of those with a very different view of what constitutes acceptable behaviour. This chasm between words and deeds is particularly visible in US dealings with the Muslim world. In a world where the US is the biggest engine of innovation and growth, it is sad that the policies of successive US administrations is creating anger across a powerful spectrum of international opinion that already impacts negatively on the security of that country. □□□