

One-note summits are a waste

We Arabs deserve to take a place in the world to better ourselves, says PRINCE HASSAN BIN TALAL. Instead, our youth are offered poverty with guns

By PRINCE HASSAN BIN TALAL

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If we were honest in the Arab world, we would stand up and admit that some in Europe and America are more Muslim than we are.

Muslim middle classes are emigrating to non-Islamic societies that are deeply flawed but comparatively better at expressing Muslim ideals: freedom, rights, equal justice, private ownership and the opportunity to choose a future.

I would hope that one can remain a friend of the United States while still expressing one's own deeply held convictions. When we Muslims express our views, let us be neither against nor for the U.S., but, instead, argue on the basis of a shared humanitarian conscience, human rights and freedom of speech.

But poverty at home corrodes belief -- whether belief in God, the state or yourself. Poverty of resources, education and opportunity diminishes humanity. I maintain, with Muslim scholars, that violence is a wrong choice; but I would ask what alternatives are on offer? The truly desperate haven't even the power of violence. We see the partially educated and partially enabled using the dispossessed to justify their own angry political agenda. This is a disaster. And answering chaos with further chaos will eventually make us all into disoriented victims.

It takes exceptional human beings -- the Walter Sisulus and Sadruddin Aga Khans of this world -- to push the human agenda forward against political inertia, economic rigidities and private apathy. These great men, often unacknowledged, devoted themselves to our better lives. They made a difference.

Remembering them, we must reconnect individual responsibility with social solutions.

With interest, I noted U.S. deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage's intermediation between India and Pakistan, not least on weapons-of-mass-destruction limitations. We must realize the anomaly whereby per capita poor countries develop nuclear capability alongside a stolid refusal by the U.S. to address the issue of a regional WMD-free zone from North Africa to India and Pakistan.

Below a headline announcing President George W. Bush's appeal for a free-trade zone between the Middle East and America in a decade, I saw a picture of a Gazan child rummaging through the rubble of his own and neighbours' houses. What does that child have to trade? Yet we continue with single-theme summits -- sustainable development, human rights, international security issues, anti-terror. I think we need holistic thinking to include basic standards of humanity across the board.

And so I ask again, as I did with Walter Sisulu, as I did with Sadruddin Aga Khan for the Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues in 1981: Rather than working against our mounting problems in an ad hoc manner, when we know that adhococracy doesn't work, would it not be more elegant to work for inclusive, regional codes of compliance?

I have called on various occasions for a Middle Eastern code of conduct, a "partnership of peace" or an Eastern Mediterranean Treaty Organization. A break-down of the relevant agenda would include:

The need for a WMD-free zone;

A clear definition of terror (both state and non-state);

Concrete steps, adequately funded, to redress both manifestations and causes of terror;

A humanitarian Marshall Plan;

Transparency guaranteed by government with a focus on poverty alleviation -- to move our policies from "refugee mode," as it were;

Education, encompassing two themes: balanced and representative material for media broadcast, and an organization such as a Centre of Mediterranean Humanities to educate for shared values;

Interactive citizens' media -- whereby we are not talked down to by the elites but can promote our own dialogue, whether through formal or further education;

Transnational thinking on a Community of Energy and Water, recognizing that state frontiers do not limit a region's potential.

We have witnessed corruption among Western multinationals on a scale to make the Third World pale. We know that maternity rights were recognized in several developing countries a decade before they appeared in the U.S. In Pakistan, I admire the katchi abadi housing schemes and Grameen Bank -- but 9/11 meant that textile imports from Pakistan were banned and Islamic financing fell under suspicion. We deserve to take a place in the world to better ourselves. Instead, our unemployed are offered poverty with guns.

A humanitarian Versailles conference would call for policy to centre on people's aspirations, not to serve unrecognizable "pre-packaged meals" with no more than artificial flavours of democracy, anti-corruption and women's rights. Security against terror means real human security and inclusion, not realpolitik and petropolitics.

Postwar reconstruction and development in Iraq should be a model of psychological, social, attitudinal and material development through empowerment of the impoverished. But if we just return to the concept of the "enlightened despot" -- republican, monarchic or even anarchic -- then all the blood, ruin and trouble will have been in vain.

Would it not, after all, still be more elegant to call for a regional code of compliance?

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