

PETRO-DEMOCRACY ? *

We respect others' thought as a matter of principle. I believe that if I have the freedom to disagree with others then others have the freedom to disagree with me, and that dialogue will resolve the issue.

* An interview with Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Fadlallah, conducted by Professor John Keane in Beirut, December 2003. Translated by Yusra Ghannouchi and published in the *Daily Star*.

Biographical Note : With irony and affection, many observers describe Sayyed Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah as the Pope of the Muslim world. Born in the Iraqi city of Nadjaf in 1935, Fadlallah has since the mid-1960s resided in Beirut, where he established within the Shi'a community networks of schools, religious colleges, a radio station, orphanages and other charitable organizations. Formerly known as the spiritual guide of the armed Hizballah, he has published many works, including a 25-volume *Inspirations of the Holy Qu'ran*. A strong critic of current American foreign policy, he has described the September 11th attacks as 'barbaric crimes' and 'forbidden by Islam'.

***JK* Early next month in London, Prime Minister Blair is hosting a conference to help the Palestinians reshape themselves into a viable state. What are its chances of success?**

Britain and the rest of the European Union have very limited political space in which to tackle the Palestinian problem. The overall rules of the game are set by the United States, which in effect has appointed itself chair of the diplomatic 'quartet' of the European Union, the Russian Federation, the United Nations and the United States. President Bush and other American officials now say that the version of the roadmap agreed in Washington on December 20th isn't complete, that new ideas can be added, which means that the whole plan can be changed in conformity with Israeli strategy. We fear that America has tamed the European Union's otherwise strong support for the Palestinians. The proposed London conference reinforces this fear : it aims to freeze progress towards a solution of the Palestinian problem so that war can be launched against Iraq.

***JK* If you had an audience with President George W. Bush what advice would you then offer him?**

President Bush is trapped within his own intellectual confusions. He claims to know the absolute truth of things. When considering the Palestinian question, he believes that Israel is always right, and that Palestinian people have no rights except to comply dutifully with Israel's wishes. On the issue of terrorism, he similarly insists that his supporters have right on their side, whereas those who oppose him are proponents of terrorism. We Muslims do not think that that is necessarily true, and I would therefore say to President Bush : we are neither with you nor do we favour terrorism. I encourage him to let others discuss the definition and meaning of terrorism. When individuals - Muslim and non-Muslim - commit such acts their motives must be taken into account. Sociologists do this in America. When a young man kills his friends or teachers in school, as has happened many times, every effort is made to explain objectively why they did it. President Bush needs to be more objective – less bound to negative influences - when analysing America's relations with other countries, especially in the Third World, where people feel threatened economically and militarily by the major powers, and especially by America. Just as President Bush

practices democracy at home, so he should practice it abroad. I would say to him : power is not the way to win the respect and affection of other countries.

***JK* Isn't it possible that the United States is now performing the role once played by Napoleonic France, on a global scale? Might it be a military superpower that has little or no interest in listening to others, for instance in the Middle East, exactly because it wants to transform the status quo in its own image?**

The current American administration may well be like that. The so-called 'hawks' in America are indeed pressuring all states, including those of the European Union and the Russia Federation. They use diplomacy and, in cases of disagreement, threats against their interests. That is what happened when the current German government expressed its opposition to a war on Iraq. But note that in matters of peace and war not only the Arab and Islamic peoples reject American policy. There are also people in the West, including American and European – especially British – citizens who have demonstrated their opposition to the American logic of war.

***JK* There are many Muslims worldwide who presently say they feel squeezed between two fundamentalisms : the fundamentalism of the Bush administration, displayed for instance in its policies towards Iraq, and the fundamentalism of Al-Qaida. Do you sympathise with this feeling?**

Yes. We Muslims believe that if Bush reduced or abandoned his hostility there would be no role for the fundamentalism of Al-Qaida. We disagree with Al-Qaida on many philosophical and cultural issues, as well as with its ways of handling such matters as the Palestinian issue, military bases in the Gulf region, and America's hegemony over the Muslim world. If America's policies were more balanced, then Al-Qaida would be unable to call upon the Muslim world to rise up against America. Consider the role of the European Union, particularly Britain and France : although they were among the colonizing states, today's reaction within the Arab and Muslim lands towards them is more balanced, exactly because their policies are rather more balanced than America's. These lands are not defined by some anti-Western complex.

***JK* There is surely more to Al-Qaida than this. Its shadowy, showman leader Osama bin Laden has for some years set the pace, beginning with his widely-quoted piece in *al-Quds al-Arabi* : he has called for armed *jihad* against the United States, which he says is weaker than the Soviet Union; criticized existing authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world; and issued a challenge to you and other members of the *ulama* for collaborating in all this by leading believers astray from the proper path of Islam...**

Such discourse is misleading. It is dominated by emotion instead of objective Islamic thinking about war and peace. We don't believe that violence is a good means of achieving our ends. As for the view that America is weaker than the Soviet Union, that too is inaccurate. Power and weakness must always be analysed in a balanced way. Every powerful body has points of weakness; every weak body usually has strengths that the powerful cannot overcome. The institutions of the Soviet Union were not well-rooted in its people. Its dominant group prevented popular participation in political affairs. By contrast, American power is based upon more than arms. It rests upon the power of strong institutions that are deeply rooted in American reality as a whole. We know of the undue influence of big companies, or of Jewish and Protestant Evangelical lobbies in support of Israeli policy, but even such trends operate through these democratic institutions. As for the critique of our regimes : it may well be true. In the eyes of the Arab and Muslim peoples, the majority of our regimes are subordinate to American policies. A wide gulf exists between power and the people. There are no democratic means through which people can express themselves and define their interests and policies.

***JK* The word democracy often gets bad press in this part of the world. Consider the harsh or cynical reactions to the speech by Ambassador Richard Haas, who announced a month ago that democratization of the Muslim world would from hereon be a key priority of the Bush administration. Within Islamic circles, democracy is sometimes dismissed as a dirty word. The title of a well-known essay by Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissy sums it up : 'Democracy is a religion, and whoever has a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of Him'. How do you react to such talk?**

More thoughtful analysis is required. Whereas democracy is based solely on the notion that legitimacy stems from the will of the majority, Islam distinguishes between two spheres. Religious thought and jurisprudence is the first of these. Like Christianity, Islam supposes that there are general concepts that represent the Word of God and so can't be changed by humans. Truth comes from God; humans, who are God's creation, are required to accept it. In Islam, however, the door leading to different interpretations (*ijtihadat*) by scholars of the Islamic sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah, is open. Understanding is a process accessible to all who possess the tools of knowledge and *ijtihad*. Scholars don't see differences as a problem. Sunni Muslims disagree with each other. So do Shia Muslims, and both agree and disagree about various matters of *ijtihad*. Interpretation thus involves cultural freedom. Islam is dynamic, though the process is not merely random, but based on objective rules, as with any other form of knowledge.

***JK* Where does politics fit in this process?**

Many scholars believe that nothing in Islam prohibits consultation with the people. In Iran, Imam Khomeini, who sparked the Islamic Revolution by promoting the principle of the authority of jurists (*wilayat al-faqih*) in matters of politics and government, acknowledged from the outset the Iranian people's right to express their opinion on all matters. He even called on the Iranian people to vote for or against the new constitution. To this day, Iran may be the only state in the whole region where direct, popular referenda are invoked in most matters. Even the appointment of the ruler-jurist (*waliyy al-faqih*) from among the most prominent jurists is based on elections, at least partly. The jurist in power is obliged to consult other experts in all matters, and must not only follow his own opinion. If he does so unjustifiably then he would be deposed.

***JK* That may well happen. In Iran today there are many, supporters of President Khatami included, who complain that there is little or no democracy in that country...**

Their criticisms are on a practical level - of actions and reactions - while we are talking about democracy theoretically. In the West, where belief in democracy runs

deep, don't we find gaps between principles and practice, as when money favours certain candidates or corporate monopolies marginalise popular voices?

***JK* Are you worried that war against Iraq will worsen the prospects for democracy throughout the region?**

The régime of Saddam Hussein is utterly illegitimate. It is a creation of American strategy. When America wanted to pressure Arab nationalism led by Jamal Abd an-Nasser, it used Saddam's party in Iraq. Later he was used by the United States - and perhaps the West as a whole - to besiege and weaken the Islamic revolution in Iran. When Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons and committed atrocities against his people, and against the region, there was silence. The current criticisms of human rights violations in Iraq by the American administration and the British Prime Minister lead me to believe that the issue of war against Iraq is not linked to America's wish to 'democratise' the region. America just wants a democracy that serves its interests. It wants democracy on the surface - a petro-democracy - not deep democracy where people have the freedom to oppose American policies in the region. During the past century and until this day, it has aimed to control the world's petroleum supplies, in order to put pressure on Europe, Japan and China, and especially on the Russian Federation, by controlling oil prices so it cannot benefit from the oil in its territories. America wants democracy in order to serve its own interests, not those of other nations.

***JK* Double standards, yes, but what should be done about the Iraqi régime? Isn't violence necessary for its downfall?**

The Iraqi opposition must unite. We Muslims support its efforts to depose the current régime. America meanwhile talks about weapons of mass destruction, but Israel also has weapons of mass destruction. Why doesn't America allow anyone to talk about them? America says that weapons of mass destruction are a threat to Iraq's neighbours, and to Iran, but the Arab peoples believe that Israel's weapons of mass destruction threaten the whole region. America prevents the Security Council from talking about the savage massacres heaped by Israel upon Palestinian civilians. Why does America - if it claims to support human rights - not call on Israel to withdraw

from the occupied territories, especially given that all Palestinians, even *Islamic Jihad* and *Hamas*, have announced that if Israel withdrew from the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem then there would be no more operations?

JK But is there a case for using violence to repel violence?

Violence cannot be an alternative. If it resolves one problem, it creates many others. American violence - and Israeli violence against the Palestinians - may have solved some of Israel's difficulties, but it has confronted it with a thousand other problems. We do not believe in violence as a means of political opposition. However, when an entire people is occupied and besieged by violence, how can it cope? I ask myself : why did Western countries, particularly in France, deal with Nazism through war? Was it because they saw that the Nazi occupation of France could be ended only through violence, because Hitler did not accept dialogue?

JK If you had an audience with Prime Minister Tony Blair, what would you say to him?

I would tell Mr Blair that Britain is among the greatest states in history, that it is the mother of democracy, and that it still enjoys considerable power. We are grateful to the British (and other European governments as well) for granting asylum to many Muslims and Arabs who were denied freedom by their politically oppressive regimes. We Muslims appreciate the cultural, intellectual and human richness of Britain, even though we - like British citizens - may disagree with its government in political matters. Mr. Blair's problem is that he has become subordinated politically and militarily to the American administration. The British people deserve a better leader - just as Americans deserve a better leader than Bush. We meanwhile seek the friendship of the British people - a friendship based on common interests and mutual respect. That is why I have recommended - as a *fatwa* - that Muslims everywhere, including those living in the West, must not be involved in terrorist acts against the countries in which they live, even when they disagree with its policies. They are not allowed to harm the security - military, economic or social - of their countries. The *Qur'an* has taught us our motto : behave in such a way that we turn our enemies into friends.

