

“Sects, Lies and Viral Networks,” San Diego Union-Tribune 2011
by Doris Bittar

At present, our friends and family in Cairo, and Alexandria are becoming familiar with the smell of teargas and learning to distinguish live ammunition from teargas canister launches. Those friends in Tunis are in a more hopeful situation. We pray for their safety. We also hope for the kinds of changes that the people of the Arab world have hungered for. Longstanding and widely held beliefs among Arabs and scholars of the Middle East include this truism: When Arab countries become more democratic, more inclusive, not bought off by the West, the more they can bring to bear diplomatic and economic pressure towards lasting peace in the hot spots from Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon to the West Bank, Gaza and the Sudan.

The 1989 movie “Sex, Lies and Videotapes” was not really about sex or videotapes, but it was about lies and how individuals measure integrity in a world with competing motivations. Likewise, the current “velvet” or “violent” revolutions in the Middle East are not really about sects and viral networking, but they do expose lies. Recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, coupled with the WikiLeaks exposé, are a mirror for Americans to hold up. In this mirror we may see our complicity in erecting roadblocks – not road maps – toward meaningful reforms for the peoples of the Middle East.

Can America continue to ignore the golden rule of “do unto others as you would have them do unto you?” Unfortunately, our policies have been the inverse of the golden rule. This rule, embraced by all humans, forms the core of religious, philosophical, social and political doctrine around the world. The United States must embrace in deed, and not just word, the universal and moral principles that our democracy is actually based on.

US policies are a dangerous folly intent on controlling resources through puppet regimes that don’t care a whit about their people. It is a structure of deceit, dependent on a view that we are different from them. We don’t use words like “colonies,” but we buy off the leaders (i.e. Aid) and hope that they remain in power indefinitely to serve our desire to control geo-political regions for resources such as oil.

American international theatrics depend on the belief that a “clash of civilizations” exists, one that will continue into perpetuity. Our policies insure that there is a constant sense of danger determined to destroy our way of life. The WikiLeaks exposé has embarrassed our foreign diplomatic missions. More importantly they reveal the American *modus operandi*, show that our policies are well suited to endless wars and control of resources, having nothing to do with solving real problems. Rather than quell extremism, our policies create a self-perpetuating system that insures and even cultivates global extremism.

The Tunisian, Egyptian & Yemeni people's recent protests show that people of the Arab world desire freedom and justice, like all human beings. The state of "the Arab mind" that politicians and analysts endlessly puzzle over in the West, does not support a dark vision of the world. Even the Lebanese, whose seemingly insane dissolution of their parliament points to a rejection of lies fed by the United States.

Future analysis may prove that the chaos in Lebanon, no matter who you support is moving toward an anchored recognition that being pro-America did not prevent the 2006 Israel assaults and near complete destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure, not to mention over 1200 souls lost. It has not translated into Lebanon's security. It is perceived that Israel lost that war, but went on to an intensification of its war against the people of Gaza who live in a huge open-air prison.

It's all connected. Egyptian complicity with how its border with Gaza is controlled is untenable for the average Egyptian. Every Arab shares in the humiliation that their great nations – individually and collectively do not bring to bear the diplomatic and economic pressure on the United States, European Union and Israel to negotiate in good faith. The Arab street knows this, and it is an open wound in their body politic. Their government's weakened complicity with the charade is acid poured into that wound.

Complicity with the geopolitical agenda of the United States and Israel, coupled with lack of freedom for self-expression, corruption, and limitations of participation of governmental representation has created movements that challenge all of the above. These perceptions are widely popular and flow in the direction of changes seen in Turkey where democracy has broadened to include religious sects and negotiating with the Kurds.

In these recent changes the angst of a "clash between civilizations" is absent from the conversation. "The Arabs," like all people want term limits, a constitution that guarantees freedom of expression. Read the American constitution. That's basically what they want. Thus far, these governments that are failing are the states that the US financially and politically supports. What country is next?

As Americans we must look intently into this fractured but lucid mirror and wonder why Arabs aspire to be like Americans, even as the United States has undermined their dreams and aspirations. It is time to cut off the feeding tubes of the bullies in every country where they exist, not just the Middle East. It is time to befriend the forces of integrity, and be on the side of justice. That is the route that may bring peace.