MERIA

ANTI-AMERICANISM IN THE ARABIC LANGUAGE MEDIA

By Adel Darwish*

Anti-Americanism in the Arabic language media has grown rapidly over the past couple of decades. Utilized for its own ends by the totalitarian Arab states and their government controlled media, anti-American news stories and analysis are common from North Africa to the Gulf. While not an indigenous phenomenon, anti-Americanism in the Middle East is a more virulent form of European anti-Americanism where lighthearted ridicule has been given a darker, more sinister tone. The future is not totally bleak, as recently, new media outlets have attempted to combat in some small way the long legacy of anti-Americanism in the Arabic language media.

During a dinner in London with British and Gulf Arab officials in early 2003, our conversation touched on what is commonly known as "the usual blunders in American foreign policy." But two senior Gulf diplomats stressed another side of America, how U.S. doctors treated patients at American mission hospitals in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia long before oil was found and money lured Western professionals to the region.

"We were a de-facto part of the British Empire and ruled by London; yet it was American mission hospitals to which we turned when we were sick and needed medicine," said one of the Gulf diplomats. A diplomat from another Gulf country added that many of his fellow countrymen received their primary school education at American mission schools.

That these diplomats raised the issue in genuine gratitude to the United States-- and perhaps to remind their old colonial masters how much they valued America's positive contribution to their lives--was striking since not a single American was present around the dinner table that evening. Such views greatly contrast with the editorial line taken by the majority of Arabic language media both in and out of

the Middle East. From these newspapers, television and radio, one would hardly believe that a whole generation in Arabia, the Gulf, the Levant and North Africa still feel any gratitude to the Americans for the help they provided.

The shape and forms of Anti-Americanism in the Arabic language media is all-encompassing:

--Selective showing of negative images about America in drama, films, literature, and news items.

--Selective use of phraseology and headlines. This tactic has traditionally been employed to inflate the ego of constituency readership or to highlight a certain cultural or ideological bias while undermining opposition to that line. For example, the Arabic press whose owners come from various countries call world-renowned heart surgeon Sir Magdi Yaccob--who is ethnically a non-Arab, Egyptian Copt(1) --an "Arabic surgeon," while a taxi driver caught fiddling the fare or a shoplifter is referred to as an Egyptian. In such a context, Arabic subeditors deliver a subliminal message to influence readers and listeners. Such is the case when the Arabic press highlights that "an American priest is sentenced to 10 years in jail for sexually assaulting

children," without mentioning that the victims too were Americans and Christian churchgoers.

--Exaggerating or sexing up of headlines without facts to back them up. For instance, on August 29, 2003 the leading headline in al-Quds al-Arabi, a London Arabic paper, was "Sharon Coordinating with America to Attack Gaza," even though there were no direct quotes or any information backing up the headline.

--Selective reporting and highlighting negative news about murder, rape, high crime rates in the United States, while ignoring or deemphasizing positive news.

--Use of cartoons carrying powerful images and conveying effective messages. Most cartoons show Uncle Sam or American marines supporting Sharon, or Uncle Sam tilting the scales of justice, undermining the UN, or preventing it from doing its job. In one cartoon, Uncle Sam is a doctor stepping on the oxygen tube that helps a Palestinian patient to breath while the latter has his wallet stolen by Sharon. In a similar cartoon, Sharon, blessed by Uncle Sam, is sucking the blood of a Palestinian.

--Editorial writers, columnists and television commentators who are obviously not reporters that could be challenged to produce evidence or mention facts, spin anti-Americanism in their columns unchallenged. Some of them write long analytical pieces that pass as news based entirely on rumors or conspiracy theories, such as America is occupying Iraq to secure oil wealth, to remove a possible threat to Israel and to subject Arab nations to its dominance. An editorial in al-Quds al-Arabi on August 29, 2003 claimed that electric power lines, water supplies and utilities were destroyed in Iraq by fire from American invading forces, which came to colonize Iraq. A columnist on August 14, 2003 claimed that America is plotting to make

McDonald's hamburgers the most popular Iraqi dish instead of the Masgouf fish.

--Selective edited translation of analysis, columns and reporting from American, British, European and Israeli press of negative writings about America. At the same time, other, more positive foreign articles about America are ignored by Arabic editors. This ploy gives more credibility to anti-American pieces since they are written by Americans or Europeans.

Citing the above list makes one wonder, why and when exactly did Americans become a target for hatred? Ironically, during the past two decades that have witnessed the dramatic rise of anti-Americanism, Americans continued missionary traditions throughout the region. The hostages kidnapped in Beirut in the 1980s or shot at in Yemen in 2002 were aid and medical workers and teachers. They were all engaged in humanitarian work, belonging to organizations that can hardly be described as an instrument of American foreign policy, and most of them, on a personal level, are quite fond of Arabs.

It is also noticeable how the rise of anti-Americanism in the past two decades coincided with a massive increase in media outlets, such as satellite television services like al-Jazira, al-Arabiyya, and Abu Dhabi television,(2) as well as the internet. In May 2003, Egyptian commentator Nabil Sharf el Dine asked on the Elaph.com Arabic website: "Who has brainwashed North African students who wear American jeans, consume American products and communicate with each other via American computers and American websites to organize demonstrations to burn the stars and stripes, or pelt American embassies with eggs day after day, when common sense indicates that they should have been demonstrating to improve their meager lot in the first place?"

Few would dispute that there are some obvious blunders in American foreign policy but there are also other, generally more powerful and long-term reasons for anti-Americanism in the Middle East.

The loathing or fear of democracy by the region's dictatorships is a major factor. Equally important is European influence, both colonial and post-colonial, in fostering anti-Americanism. Since there is no true free contest for power that tests the popularity of policy in elections, autocratic rulers keep an eye on public opinion and public mood, which in turn has a great impact on their foreign policy, leading to a catch-22 situation. On the one hand, Middle Eastern leaders use anti-American public sentiment as an excuse to both distance themselves from American foreign policy activities which would genuinely help their peoples, and to manipulate that public mood to their own advantage, like delaying reform or blackmailing Washington into giving more aid. On the other hand, those governments do little to persuade the media, which they often control, to soften or reduce the strong message of anti-Americanism. There are even occasions when those governments encourage the trend of anti-Americanism, sometimes to deflect domestic criticism of their policy away from them.

Most of the regional media is on automatic pilot, cruising on a course set by the editorial hierarchy during the heyday of pan-Arab nationalism and alliance with the Soviet bloc. Those editorial teams are part of mini-media empires where the editorial line is left over from the days when they were aspiring to positions of power in the ruling establishment. Press clippings, diaries of intellectuals, and literature in the 1960s show how left-wing Marxist trends, beginning with the Egyptian government-directed media during Gamal Abdel Nasser's time, controlled large sectors of the media. Using all possible ways to shape public opinion these campaigns terrorized liberal intellectuals and writers of different views into either silence or submission.

In a series of articles printed in Al-Hayat, a London based daily, in August 2003, about development of literature and literary criticism trends, Egyptian writer and media historian Husayn Amine identified Egyptian philosopher, Mahmoud Abbas al-Aqad as the only writer/philosopher in the late 1950s and 1960s who stood up to the "left-wing Mafia of Marxists and Nasserites in the field of media and art who managed within a decade to create an unprecedented reign of terror in Egyptian intellectual life." Amine continued:

> They established their own school of literary criticism and art built on Marxist fundamentalism. Their writing style and expressions were harsh in their onslaught on liberals not following their Marxist line. They terrorized artists and writers into confining expression to what they called socialist realism. No one dared to compose a poem or write a short story or paint a picture that didn't conform to Colonel Nasser's brand of nationalism and socialism.

This literary oligarchy was selective in translating American literature during the so-called "thousand book project" to translate into Arabic that many books every year. The project was dominated by Russian, Soviet bloc, French and Latin American books. Those American books that were translated were written by left-wing authors who were victims of McCarthyism and who painted American life in a negative light, omitting the fact that American liberal democracy tolerated such criticism in the first place.

When President Anwar Sadat started his liberal political and economic reforms by ending the one-party "Socialist Union"

dominance over all aspects of Egyptian life and making peace with Israel, he could not win the state-controlled media to his side. Ironically, the tyranny of the left pushed Sadat into a paradox. Although genuine in his reforms to restore the multi-party liberal system which existed around an elected parliament before the 1952 Nasser coup, Sadat was so frustrated by Nasserites' and Marxists' control of the media that he resorted to undemocratic measures such as purging the media of some prominent figures and rounding up others for several weeks just to be able to mobilize enough public support to implement the final stage of the peace treaty with Israel. Still, despite the obvious long-term national benefits to be gained from liberal reforms, Egypt's media oligarchy were so entrenched in their position that Sadat could not influence a permanent change in the editorial line that was institutionally anti-American, anti-peace and anti-Israel.

Anti-Americanism in the Middle East today is part of an ongoing policy of targeting an outside enemy, with the United States replacing the old colonial power in this role. It has always been a convenient tool, or excuse to delay fulfilling the promises given to the masses for embarking on much needed programs of political and constitutional reform, as well as liberalizing the economy and political life. Media in most of those nations is far from free, and often under direct state orders or pressure to whip up anti-American feelings.

State-controlled media exaggerate external threats which are often more imaginary than real. Unfortunately for America, most of the threats are associated in one form or another with the United States and its dominance over world politics, trade and technology. Thus, the main Arabic media line on the war in Iraq is to suggest that America's intervention is purely to control oil

resources, blackmail or threaten Saudi Arabia, set up military bases as a launch pad for attack on other Muslim nations, and blackmail regimes into toeing the American line.

Some other "threats" presented by the media are: globalization; Zionism; right-wing Christian conservatism and evangelism condemned as modern crusaders; secularism or atheism; the internet and its degrading influence on the young and moral fabric of society and pushing Arabic and Islamic societies to embrace the infidels' culture; Hollywood and its harmful influence and the stereotyping of the "Arab" or the "Muslim" in negative roles (which is often interpreted as part of a "Zionist" or "Jewish" conspiracy); and the corrupting influence of Western fashion, children's television, or toys like Barbie dolls and Pokemon, to name but a few. The most popular subject is America's support for Israel.

But anti-Americanism also dominates non-state controlled media or independent media operating commercially, including scores of newspapers and television channels owned by businesses in Egypt, Lebanon, the Gulf and several owned by a consortia made up of Middle Easterners and Europeans in the West. Some are mouthpieces of political parties which are fundamentally anti-American in their ideology, either Marxist, Arab nationalist, or Islamist.(3) Others are financed by autocratic regimes to promote their message, or simply are threatened into taking an ideological line which includes anti-Americanism.

In places where the press is almost free--especially in reporting foreign issues--as in Egypt and Lebanon, or totally free like Arabic papers in Europe and North America, writers are subjected to the influence of the retainer. Islamic organizations or Arab regimes will pay a key editor of a newspaper in Egypt,

London or Lebanon a large retainer--double or triple his salary--to write a weekly or a monthly column in a Gulf or Lebanese publication. As a result, the writer censors or manipulates news and reports in the media organ in which he is employed in order to please those who pay him the retainer.

Even with media organs that are self-financed or financially independent one finds anti-Americanism played up to increase circulation or appeal to a wider audience. For example, the al-Arabiyya and al-Jazira stations began as free media but then used systematic anti-Americanism to boost the number of their viewers. Television channels that were launched to "balance" al-Jazira were soon emulating both its tactics and message. In the absence of an effective, practical, workable way to measure the number of viewers and assess their purchasing power in relation to television, advertisers rate a network's popularity by the volume of viewers' calls and emails during popular talk shows. The majority of those Arabic talk shows are shouting matches, something like Jerry Springer, which polarize viewers and encourage them to flood the show with calls, emails, faxes, and mobile phone text messages. Most of the shows are anti-American either directly or by exploring some conspiracy theory of imminent threat to Islamic and Arabic culture from "American and Zionist powers."

A token voice of reason is permitted to appear on the show but then drowned out by the shouts of slogans from high-profile Islamist or Arab nationalist participants chosen for their popularity and loud voices. The presenter usually sides with the sloganists against the voice of reason, who appears to break a taboo by using rational argument and facts to challenge common beliefs. The host's job is to uphold the popular values and repel any challenge to traditional slogans.

Most of the phone calls and emails, whether by coincidence or editorial design--since it is suspected they are filtered for this purpose--condemn the rational guest as a "negative defeatist." At best, he is portrayed as someone misled and brainwashed by Western propaganda. At worst, he is portrayed as an American or Zionist agent who might be threatened with death by callers. Thus, the "viewers' participation" reinforces the mood of anti-Americanism and conspiracy theory, upheld in the end by the host as the "democratic expression of the majority of viewers."

With such media displays coupled with public manifestation of anti-Americanism in other organs shaping and directing public opinion--alongside places of worship, political rallies and students demonstrations--leaders become more entrenched in their reluctance to cooperate with America or even to use their huge powers to urge editors to balance their presentations.

Ironically, such anti-Americanism both derives from and reinforces the prevailing totalitarian ideology which, in turn, threatens the very existence of those regimes who encouraged it in the first place. The sloganists, known to Egyptian and some Arab liberals by Egyptian sarcastic slang as "*Qawmagiyah Arabgiyah, Islamgiyagh, Harbagiyah and Awantagyieh*"(4) thrive on accusing those leaders of being American stooges. They may be branded conspirators with Zionism, traitors to some fantastic ideals like the "Arab nation" or heretical Muslims cooperating with infidels against the "Islamic Umma." Such entities exist in the media matrix that brainwash people into believing in their existence even though they have no presence in the real world.

It is within this media-created virtual reality that a North African or a Sudanese student who can hardly afford a bus-ride, doesn't demonstrate to improve his lot, but instead demonstrates in opposition to America and Israel in support of the Palestinians, and yet has never met a

Palestinian--let alone an American--in his life.

Is anti-Americanism an indigenous product of this region? My analysis indicates that in a majority of cases the actual content of it is actually a European import. For example, one often finds a variation on the social anti-Americanism that derives from the traditional snobbery of British and European conservative trends who are still bemused by the fact that the "colonies" have "suddenly" become the world's dominant superpower. Although this light-hearted, snobbish anti-Americanism is quite harmless, even entertaining as Europeans laugh at the Americans' gullibility and their shallow view of the world in an affectionate way, in its Middle Eastern version this takes on more dangerous overtones in which the history and nature of American society are portrayed as evil.

The other main source of anti-Americanism is the political variety which has long been the property of the left as developed during the Cold War. This fed on American policies which might either have been mistaken or were made to appear so. All positive motives and deeds by the United States were filtered out of the picture.

For example, a good case could be made that Egypt's regime has overwhelmingly benefited from American action. The United States supported Nasser when he seized control of Egypt in 1952 and saved his regime four years later when President Dwight Eisenhower intervened against close U.S. allies to stop their attack intending to overthrow him. There was 'point 4,' a U.S. aid program to Egypt in Nasser's early years, renewed in the late 1970s, when the United States also became Egypt's main supplier of weapons.

Nevertheless, Nasser's propaganda machine was strongly anti-American. While this was mainly the product of radical Arab nationalist politics, there

was also a cultural factor. In Egypt, as in other Arab countries, the well-educated intellectual elite that ran culture and the media were educated in France, where they learned anti-Americanism from both its French and leftist sources.(5) Given the influence of Egyptian cinema, news, and entertainment products on the rest of the region, these ideas soon spread.

Even at a time when Britain and France were still more important than the United States in the region, the target of Nasser's propaganda was America. This is especially striking given the Anglo-French involvement in the 1956 attempt to overthrow him and the French role as the colonial power fighting against Algerian independence. Later, as Soviet bloc training and influence increased, this anti-American tendency was reinforced. By the 1960s, whenever there were accidents or disasters in Egypt, often caused by the corruption or incompetence of officials, the media blamed them on CIA plots to overthrow the regime.

During this period, an individual's ability to travel to the West was much reduced due to government restrictions or a deteriorating economy. Only a handful--mainly from the newly emerging ruling elite and their cronies--had their passports renewed or was granted exit visas, instead of the thousands in the past who in earlier years managed to go on vacation in Europe or travel to America for vacation or education. National policy in Egypt, Syria and Iraq was to send students for higher education to the Soviet Bloc.(6) This combined with a noticeable drop in the number of Westerners and Americans living in the region thanks to the nationalization of property, an unfavorable investment climate, and other restrictions. Western culture and contacts were less accessible to most Middle Easterners living under those regimes.

Hollywood movies, television soap-operas and dramas became almost the

only window that remained open on American life for millions in the Middle East and fostered a generation whose cultural frame of reference included many negative images of America. Censorship on art, films and books nourished anti-Americanism, too, because it was the best works that were considered dangerous. Anything of a more sophisticated level might challenge the ruling ideology while superficial films, banal music, and trashy books were thought harmless.

By the same token, though, they reinforced the image of America as having a worthless culture and being merely a violent society full of criminals, perverts, and gangsters. Scenes which would have counter-balanced strong anti-American feelings, were censored out; while left-wing and Marxist critics filled acres of newspaper space and air-time with their "critical analysis" of the films proving their negative view of America.

The once free and independent press was turned into Soviet-style newspapers, influenced by the French socialist intellectuals' ideas about the role of the intellectual as a "witness of his age" and the Stalinist notion of the intellectual's historic commitment in building a socialist society. The result was that editorial, commentary and news were melted into one product. Reporting became a statement of ideology or repeating the rulers' slogans rather than informing with facts. As this style of journalism became dominant throughout the region, the media began relating most events to Zionist or CIA conspiracies. If the policies of the regimes failed, the finger was not pointed to those responsible or to the waste of the nations' resources, but rather to the fault of America for the latest defeats.

The new oil wealth in the Gulf and North Africa created media centers in the 1970s and 1980s with considerable budgets at editors' disposal, but there was a severe shortage of skilled editorial and production staff. Vacancies were opened for journalists from Egypt, Lebanon and later for many Palestinians. The mix was interesting, as the majority were left-wing Marxists, socialists, or secular Arab nationalists who now found themselves working for conservative and traditionally Islamic bosses. Thus, to get across their political positions, the journalists downplayed social radicalism and espoused instead positions which the owners could not reject--the need for unity, support for the Palestinians, and hostility to the United States.

This campaign had long-term effects. Anti-Americanism grew among the target audiences in the Gulf and North Africa. No matter how much the United States backed the regimes, the effort to discredit the United States continued. At a time when America was backing Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, convoying the oil tankers of Arab states, or saving Kuwait from Iraqi annexation, there was no change in the tone and intensity of the propaganda.

Clearly, there has been a lasting impact on the minds of Middle Easterners. Even American involvement in overthrowing Saddam did not repeal the decades of anti-American teaching for Iraqis. They are fully prepared to believe that the United States will return Saddam to power, turn Iraqi assets over to Israel, or created the September 11 attacks as an excuse for aggression.

One ironic result of the war in Iraq was the creation of what an Egyptian commentator called "Saddam's widows and orphans," referring to the hundreds of journalists throughout the Middle East who were formerly bribed or secretly employed by Saddam's regime. Angry with America for ending a lucrative source of income, they continue to poison readers' and viewers' minds by putting the worst possible face on American actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the region in general.

All of these problems, however, do not mean there are no positive forces in

the region. An interesting example has been the evolution of al-Sharq al-Awsat, which is one of the few media outlets actually generating enough income as an independent enterprise. It responded to the September 11 crisis by greatly expanding its use of articles and columnists from American newspapers through syndication deals. Its own reporters moved to a higher level of objective reporting, while liberal columnists were added to give the paper more balance. The result was that the newspaper's circulation expanded, especially in Iraq though its price there was much higher than other publications.

Growing numbers of journalists reporting in Arabic are genuine in wanting to do a better job and openly discuss the shortcomings of the media. At a May 2003 conference on the Arabic media in Kuwait, Saudi editor Othman al-Omeir presented a strong critique of the quality of news outlets which won support among many of those present. He was the creator of Elaph.com, a comprehensive and often updated news site which has gained a wide audience among liberal and democratic writers. It has also paid close attention to ethnic non-Arabs whose voice is rarely heard in the Arabic media.

Other Arabic language websites, like Nahdat Misr in Cairo or Hydpark 2000 in London, or Arabic News or Egypt online, are also emerging to present an alternative picture to what is generally published. Some television shows are also trying to present more balanced current affairs programs and have begun to invite Americans to present their case as well.

Such voices of reason are by no means enough in quantity to reverse the tide of anti-Americanism. But at least there is a growing minority of listeners, readers and viewers who are no longer prepared to accept the dominant version spread by totalitarian media as the only truth.

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NOTES
1. When Egyptians were forced to convert to Islam by a high poll tax on non-Muslims around 927, Copts who could afford it didn't convert and their bloodline remained purely Egyptian.
2. Two of the above were censored for two weeks in an extraordinary step taken by the Iraqi Governing Council on September 21, 2003 for "inciting violence and sectarian hatred as well as inaccurate reporting."
3. Examples include at least half a dozen daily papers in Cairo and a handful in Lebanon and Morocco that are platforms for Marxist, Arab Nationalist, Nasserite, and Islamist political parties. In Egypt, some of them are al-Ahali, Ashaab, al-Usbou'h el Arabi, and al- Mithaq
4. A tradesman is given the name of his profession followed by 'agie' and the plural is 'agiyah'. Therefore, a postman is postagie and postmen are postagiyah in Egyptian slang. So people laugh off Arab Nationalists as 'Qawmagiyah' making nationalism a trade. They use the same term for Islamists and for warmongers, who are called 'Harbagiyah', but they also add 'Awantagiyah' meaning con men.
5. Almost 75 percent of literature and philosophy translated in the 1000 books project were from the French language and the rest were from other parts of the world.
6. Before the pre-1952 coup, more than half the university staff and over 35

percent of secondary schoolteachers, as well as a large section of students and pupils on subsidized travel, would spend summer vacation in the West renewing their cultural contacts, and obtaining new cultural products like records and books that they shared with their students in the new term. After the 1956 Suez war, the number dropped to less than 15 percent and continued to decline over the years, while Nasser started deporting hundreds of thousands of Egyptian born of Western or Jewish origins.