

Sending a Message to the Barber's Wife

May 5, 2004



Articles & Testimony

April 25, 2004, was a great day for American foreign policy in the Middle East. A sea of protesters converged upon the nation's capital to support women's rights in one of the largest demonstrations for social justice and equality in the history of the United States. As Washington struggles to promote democracy and women's rights in the Greater Middle East and seeks to win the "hearts and minds" of the Arab world, the "March for Women's Lives" was a powerful statement about American democracy to the Muslim world.

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, the Bush administration has attempted to counter the rolling wave of anti-Americanism in the Arab world by funding Arabic language websites, speaker programmes, and an Arabic language TV station. Given that Al Jazeera and Al Hayat both covered the rally, that day's remarkable protest could ironically have a deeper impact in the public diplomacy campaign than the government's combined previous efforts.

The human quilt that stretched from the Lincoln Memorial to the Capitol's steps was impressive not just for its worthy message or the diversity it represented, but for its very being. In an expression of citizenship and opposition to the administration's perceived misuse of power, roughly a million Americans of different ages, ethnicities and religions joined together. I watched a young bearded black man with "Allah" written in Arabic on his maroon baseball cap march alongside two hand-holding white middle-aged lesbians. In the best American fashion, there were also protesters protesting the demonstration.

The rally was a display of two of a democracy's fundamental principles: the freedom of expression and to assemble. Such freedoms resonate with the silent majorities of the Middle East whom Washington courts.

The protest led me to recall a conversation with my barber's wife in Amman last year. When I was a graduate student at Jordan University, I learned of the distinction that most in the Arab world make between Americans and the American government. Because many Arabs feel unrepresented by their governments, they project the same predicament upon the American people. I found that while many of the people I met believe that the American government pursues unjust policies, they consider the American people well intentioned and straightforward.

Thus, despite my government's policies, my barber invited me one day to his home for lunch. His mid-20s wife from Zarqa, the 10th of 11 children, wore her hair covered in my presence. She prepared some delicious maqlubeh for her husband and I, but only joined us for coffee after we ate.

After some initial small talk (they did not speak English and I was the first American to visit their home), my barber's wife launched into an unsolicited explanation as to why she liked America. She said that she liked Americans because they were free to express themselves and they exercised that freedom. She had marvelled at Al Jazeera coverage of the anti-war protests in New York and San Francisco.

In most Arab countries, a protest like the April 25 rally is not possible as citizens must obtain advanced permission to assemble from their respective interior ministries. With the exception of the rally against terrorism that was held in Amman last week, such sanctioned protests are typically against Israel and American policies; not for the basic freedoms that characterise democracies. The state of women and minorities in the Arab world is bleak. For instance,

in some countries, women do not have the right to vote; in Saudi Arabia, women are not even allowed to drive. In Egypt, Christian Copts must receive presidential permission to repair existing churches and to construct new ones. A widespread demonstration by Saudi men on behalf of women's rights, or Egyptian Muslims for minorities' rights, is implausible.

Days like April 25, 2004, and Aug. 28, 1963 -- when Dr Martin Luther King Jr. led a 250,000-person-strong march on Washington to peacefully demand racial equality -- are what make America a great nation and a democracy worthy of emulation. Certainly American society has its flaws, as evidenced most recently by the reprehensible images that have emerged from Abu Ghraib prison. Yet, the multicultural activism -- within the democratic system -- that Americans came forward to demonstrate is what provides depth to US military might and gives America the credibility to call for change at an international level.

Washington seeks to win the hearts and minds of a Muslim world that views America as a dictating and occupying power. In fact, a March 2004 Pew Research Centre poll found that 93 per cent of Jordanians have an unfavourable view of the United States. Thinking about my barber's wife, it is very possible that one of the best ways to win appeal in the Muslim world and to promote democracy is to exercise democracy and to serve as a credible example.

The writer is a visiting research fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He contributed this article to The Jordan Times. ❖

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