
POLICY FORUM

EFFECTS OF CONQUEST: A FANTASY AND A REALITY**ASAD ZAMAN**asadzaman@alum.mit.edu

Ibn-e-Khaldun wrote of the impact of conquest on the psychology of the conquered. This can be made much more vivid by thinking about a possible complete conquest of Iraq by the USA. This fantasy serves to illuminate the current reality of how our perceptions of the world have been shaped by our history of having been colonized. These distorted perceptions form a major obstacle towards progress in desired directions.

Iraq: A Fantasy

Imagine a future where Iraq has been conquered by the USA, and its oil wealth captured for the service of the richest country in the world. What will the textbooks that the Iraqi children read have to say about their country? It is not difficult to extrapolate the lines of propaganda currently in use in the USA to answer this question. Below we present the main lines of an imaginary text that these poor Iraqi children will read, and add as a subtext the reality that will not be accessible to these children.

Text: *The USA liberated us from the clutches of an evil dictator.*

Subtext: The real reason for the USA invasion was the desire to control Middle Eastern oil reserves, and benefit from the vast oil resources within Iraq. USA has no concern for welfare of Iraqi citizens, as amply demonstrated by the USA treatment of Iraqi civilians during and after the war. Public reasons given for Iraq war were the possession of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) by Iraq, and the War on Terrorism. Both of these reasons were later acknowledged to be lies, as Iraq had no WMD, and was not associated with Al-Qaeda in any way.

Text: *A despotic and dictatorial regime was replaced by well-designed and efficient governance structures installed by the USA.*

Subtext: The main objective of the USA installed government was to stabilize the country sufficiently to enable the extraction of Iraqi oil for the benefit of the conquerors. The government of the country was offered to those who would sign away the rights to the Iraqi oil to multinationals. Efficiency of government was judged solely in terms of how much oil money could be extracted for the benefit of the foreign exploiters.

Text: *The USA brought democracy and civilization to a barbaric and uncivilized country which was not capable of self-governance.*

Subtext: USA style democracy involves control of the media by two or three large and hugely profitable corporations. This media control allows shaping of public

opinion in ways favorable to the interests of the rich and powerful, and concealment of truth. This is far from any realistic conception of democracy. "Civilization" is the spread of popular USA culture, with emphasis on meaningless pursuit of trivial personal pleasures, at the expense of serious thought and engagement with understanding and ameliorating the human condition. Racist views that non-whites are not fully human are reflected in a debate about whether or not Muslims can self-govern at the highest levels in USA; see "Bush Cites Racism in Remarks On Iraq" in Washington Post, Saturday, May 1, 2004. Iraqi children under the influence of these views will doubt their own abilities, heritage, and grow up believing that whites are superior to them, intellectually and culturally.

Text: All existing Iraqi infrastructure (bridges, dams, roads, power stations, etc.) are advanced efficient models of Western technology. These were constructed by USA and are the pride of Iraq and the envy of its neighbors.

Subtext: Existing infrastructure of Iraq was destroyed by USA deliberately, so as to be able to provide lucrative contracts for "re-building," which were being shelled out to Bush's cronies even before the war started. Indeed, one of the major motives for the war was the anticipated profits to be made in contracts for rebuilding. The rebuilding process hired foreign experts and shut out domestic Iraqi firms, who could have built adequate structures at 1/100th of the cost. However, the cost was of no concern to the USA as it was all paid for by Iraqi oil. The infrastructure was not built for the benefit of the citizens of Iraq, but for the efficient operation of multinationals and international organizations which plan to control Iraq to safeguard USA and Western interests.

Text: Reactionary and Extremist forces who oppose advancement and modernity are the greatest threat to the progress of Iraq. Those who favor traditional Iraqi ways must be enlightened to see the benefits of modernity. Only by rejecting extremism and attachment to traditional ways can we make progress towards modernity which is so vital to survival, growth and development of Iraq. We must ruthlessly crush all those who oppose progress for Iraq and advance towards modernity.

Subtext: Heroes who fought to defend their country from exploitation of the West will be reviled as traitors in the text. Innocent Iraqi men, women and children who were ruthlessly massacred in Fallujah and elsewhere will be remembered as rebels and insurgents, somewhat mad people who fought against the liberators and well-wishers of Iraq. There will be no recognition given to the millions of innocent Iraqis who were killed by the occupiers. Traitors who sold their consciences and the freedom of Iraq in order to obtain benefits from the occupiers will be commemorated as heroes and praised in the official textbooks. Anyone supporting interests of the Iraqi people and opposing the financial interests of the exploiters (who are siphoning away oil wealth worth billions of US dollars yearly) will be reviled as an extremist who opposes modernization.

Interlude:

Why indulge in this dark fantasy, which is unlikely to come to pass? The Iraqi's are putting up such strong resistance to US occupation that most observers consider it unlikely that the USA will gain the complete control required to enforce the thought control which would be necessary to implement the curriculum envisioned above. Current discussion focuses on timing of the US withdrawal from Iraq rather than the time it will take for complete conquest.

No man can look upon his own face, except with the aid of a mirror. The trauma of over a century of defeats warps vision substantially. I would like to suggest that our own psychology and our understanding of history is very much like that of the imaginary Iraqi children of the hopefully never-to-be Iraqi future. This misunderstanding of our own colonial past robs us of many potential futures. To repair the damage, and to replace the ingrained inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West, we must develop and tell our own history according the 'subtext' cited above, rather than the 'text'. In bits and pieces this process has begun, as in the replacement of the term "Mutiny of 1857" by the War of Independence. The dramatic change of point of view required for this change of terminology is one that needs to be applied on a much larger scale. This essay is an attempt to continue this healing process. It would be impossible to do justice to this project in this short space. I intend only to outline and sketch the dimensions along which we need to reconstruct our history. The stories we tell about our past are extraordinarily important in shaping our identities and in determining the goals worth striving for.

India: The Reality

Prior to arrival of the British, India was a wealthy country. Tales of the fabulously wealthy India attracted explorers (like Columbus) from all over the world. India had well developed institutions for the provision of justice, education, health, and social security. Indian textiles and other industrial products were exported to many destinations all over the world. Taxation was not burdensome, and recognized by the citizens as necessary for peace and security. Both citizens and rulers had a clear understanding of their mutual responsibilities towards each other. Localized institutions functioned effectively without reference to central government, and kings were well aware that their wealth was tied to the prosperity of their citizens. As a result, the average citizen was not much concerned about the fortunes of the kings and empires. The populace failed to resist or unite against British invaders, under the mistaken impression that they would be essentially benevolent like other kings. Subsequently, many people from many walks of life wrote letters of appeal in vain to British Queens and Kings. Unfortunately, unlike previous kings who had supported the public against cruel and corrupt administration, the British were firmly on the side of the "Raj," and had no concern for the welfare of the public.

At the time of colonization, Europeans did not consider non-whites to be human beings. For example, Australian aborigines were hunted like animals, and the Dred Scott decision in the USA declared that blacks were "beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far inferior that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." Even now, there is debate at the highest levels in the USA as to whether or not Muslims can self-govern! Nobel Prize winner Watson has suggested that differences in development levels may be explained by genetic endowments. Harvard professor Bell maintains that non-white races have lower IQ than whites. This deeply embedded racism has had tremendous consequences in terms of ruthlessness with which non-whites have been treated by colonizing whites. By machinations, deceit, treachery, good luck, superior weaponry and related war technology, the British managed to acquire control of the entire country. Initial foothold in India was supported by production and sale of opium in India and China. European double standards continue to this day as sales of harmful drugs and chemicals are banned in the West and promoted in the East for profits. British consolidation of power following the conquest of Plassey was so rapacious that one third of the entire population of Bengal died of starvation and famine. Millions of pounds of yearly profits were sent to England with no regard to welfare of the beings of inferior order living in India.

There exist numerous testimonials to the excellence of educational systems of India prior to the colonial times. The literacy rate among the population has been estimated to be 85% to 95% by different sources. In *The Last Mughal*, Dalrymple writes about pre-colonial India that "He who holds an office worth twenty rupees a month commonly gives his sons an education equal to that of a prime minister. ... After seven years of study, the young Muhammadan ... (is the equal of) ... a young man raw from Oxford. " These educational systems were supported by a culture which valued learning and provided many forms of financial support to scholars so that all could obtain an education without any payment. Indians were specially skilled at mathematics, logic, and philosophy; the great mathematical genius of Ramanujan did not come from a void, but from indigenous intellectual traditions. A deliberate British policy of denigrating traditional learning, denying jobs to scholars, degrading the Ulema, and seizing financial resources meant for provision of education, led to the destruction of the educational institutions which served the country. This has led to widespread illiteracy and ignorance in a land once famous for its scholarship, and one which attracted many students from far away lands in search of wisdom.

Health care was provided via a number of systems of medical knowledge based on experience of local doctors. Precious medical knowledge based on centuries of experience was passed down via a system of apprenticeship. Health care was an honorable profession entered into for the service of mankind. The modern idea of using medical knowledge and medicines to make money was considered immoral as profiting from misery of others. Development of an inferiority complex and depreciation of all indigenous knowledge has led to the near extinction of many of

these schools of medicine. Destruction of local institutions for healthcare has led to lack of access to basic health care for vast portions of the population. The Chinese system of acupuncture has received a boost in its fortunes after its effectiveness was recognized by Western doctors. Similarly, some attention is now being paid to preservation of local knowledge systems in India and Pakistan.

Justice was provided by local panchayats, which were effective and efficient in settling disputes and allowed everyone, rich and poor, equal access to justice. The British destroyed these institutions and replaced them by our current system of courts and lawyers. Because of the typically lengthy and elaborate proceedings, and the expense and remoteness of these from the average citizen, justice became effectively inaccessible to the populace. There was no way to handle problems except by bribing local representatives of British imperial power. Forces of poverty created by huge tributes paid to the colonizers, desperation, and lack of access to legal means for resolving problems led to the spread of corruption of in land of honest and hospitable people with high levels of integrity.

Because of strong religious injunctions for charity, Muslims even today give away much more of their incomes to the poor than other comparable communities. There were a large number of Awqaf which provided for a huge variety of social needs of the community. Care of orphans, widows, travelers, as well as people in need, together with provisions for education and health, food and water, all were catered to by voluntary organizations funded by the Muslims in the form of perpetual trusts. These institutions formed the fabric of society, and gave concrete expression to the Islamic idea that the society as a whole must take care of its needy. Vast amounts of money locked into trusts for funding these activities were seized by the British, and led to a collapse of these social institutions. The resulting vacuum in provision of social services for the needy has never been filled. As a result, there were over fifty famines in the British colonial period, and vast numbers of people died of starvation and disease.

Many sources including *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* provide evidence for the strong industrial manufacturing sectors of India on the eve of colonization. In textiles, ship-building and steel industry, glass blowing, among others, India was second to none. Our manufacturing sector was creative and efficient, and many technologies flowed from our industries to the backwards England. However, adoption of power looms in India posed a threat to British textiles and were banned by the Colonial powers. When muslin weavers shifted to hand production, their thumbs were cut off to prevent production of competitive muslins. Similarly many attempts at development of industry, tanneries, etc. were prevented directly by British intervention, which saw the future of India as a supplier of raw materials to England, and not as a producer of industrial goods. This transformed India from an industrial country to an agricultural one, and lead to deaths in large numbers of those who had once earned comfortable livelihoods from industry. One Viceroy stated that " the bones of the cotton

weavers are bleaching the plains of India. The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce."

Countering Common Objections:

The story told above runs counter to the dominant views that the colonization was on the whole beneficial for India. It brought good governance to a land governed by despots. It brought industry, infrastructure, benefits of modern education, technology, etc. We have seen that all of these accounts can be disputed. The famous railroads, highways and telegraphs were all instruments meant to consolidate British rule, and permit efficient extraction of tribute and resources from India. The staggering magnitude of wealth transferred from India to Britain, at enormous cost to locals in terms of misery and starvation, makes it hard to imagine that colonial rule was beneficial. Nonetheless, it is possible to raise numerous objections to the views sketched briefly above. I must re-emphasize that it is impossible to do justice to the breadth of the topics discussed here. The brief outline with only traces of historical evidence provides a beginning which will require substantial work to detail.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said has discussed in great detail the impact of colonialism on the world view of Europeans. A coherent philosophy of superiority of whites, and their responsibility to spread the benefits of Western civilization to the rest of the world (The White Man's burden) permeates their literature and thinking. All of us trained in the Western traditions imbibe this poison through many channels without any conscious effort or thought. Anything which conflicts with this view grates on our sensibilities. In particular, fragments of the story told above, often repeated by traditionalists, are irritating to us – they are often termed 'romantic' or 'idealizing the past' or 'naïve and simplistic'. This is because coherent and integrated alternatives to conventional western Eurocentric worldviews encompassing recent world history have not yet been developed. Developing such a framework and worldview is a pressing need of the times. In absence of a fully developed coherent alternative, many questions and objections to the sketch outlined above arise.

One simple objection is that if India was prosperous and relatively well-governed, why did it succumb so easily to British invaders? History testifies to the frequency with which barbarian hordes have defeated, raped and pillaged more advanced civilizations. The Mongol conquest of Baghdad provides an important example from Islamic history. Conquest proves military superiority, but not philosophical, cultural or moral superiority. If thieves, pirates and bandits took over and pillaged and looted our country for over a century, it does not follow that we should seek to emulate them.

An important additional factor is the centuries of constant warfare in Europe, which led to development of military strategies and tactics. Relative peace prevailed in Islamic lands, so that techniques of warfare did not develop with equal speed. A thousand years of success led to confidence and pride, and under-estimation of Europeans, who were deemed to be barbarians and

incapable of development by our early historians like Ibn-e-Khaldun. Thus reports of European developments in warfare reached the Ottomans but were discounted by Muslims, who later paid a heavy price for this neglect.

The Way Forward:

This retelling of history is not for the purpose of romantic and idealistic glorification of our past. It is of vital importance in showing us the way to the future. The unpleasant and bitter reality of the present is that pirates, robbers, and thieves are firmly in control of the world, and dominate the stage. Those at the reins of power in the West have such low standards of morality that they cannot even honor their commitments to be faithful to their wives. They openly state in international public forums that the killing of half a million Iraqi children is a fair price to pay for control of oil. Deceit, torture, damage to environment, violation of treaties, use of assassinations and murder, and all manners of immoral behavior is justified in the name of profits. The law of the jungle prevails, and any country can be invaded and conquered on the flimsiest of pretexts if it suits the interests of the West. In this situation, it would be the greatest of folly to think that Western powers have (as they claim in Iraq) our own best interests at heart. Those in power who make such claims to justify compliance with Western dictates have either been purchased or are being incredibly naïve.

To compound the problem, the ruling elites all over the developing world are in the pockets of the West. Colonial administrative structures designed for efficient extraction of revenues are now utilized by local political parties for the same purpose. Foreign power and bribes prop up regimes which carry out policies favorable to Western interests and harmful to the public. Oppression and injustice, and extraction of revenues from a colonized public by alien powers, continues as in the colonial era. Western education systems teach the morality and ethics of pirates and thieves to our children. There is emphasis on luxurious lifestyles, greed, acquisitiveness, selfish pursuit of career goals, wealth etc. The concept that we should serve humanity, even if it takes sacrifice of personal interests, is not taught.

Current society bears a striking resemblance to the Jahiliyya of pre-Islamic Arabia. Loose morals, drugs, unbridled pursuit of pleasures, callous disregard for those not of your tribe (nation), and even the murder of babies by their own parents (see *Mothers who Kill Their Children*) has become commonplace. The message of Islam transformed this society into one which became exemplars of human behavior for all time to come. This message carries the same power today, but unfortunately at the present time we are looking to the West to solve our problems for us. We need to re-learn our own heritage, which provides solutions not on the menu of choices offered to us by the West. The Quran tells us that God does not change the conditions of a people unless they change themselves. If we strive for the inner transformation demanded by Islam at the individual level, that of surrendering our will to the will of Allah, then Allah will change the condition of the Ummah.

The transformation of the Ummah is a mammoth task, requiring enormous efforts by large numbers of people on many different fronts. The model for us is the work of our Prophet s.a.w. who started with the development of faith (Eeman) and action ('amaal saleha) in the companions. In a similar fashion, we need to develop faith and character in the Muslim Ummah. An inferiority complex and lack of confidence in our heritage has led us to adopt Western models of development which prioritize wealth and materials over human beings. We need to recognize that our greatest treasure are human beings and focusing on development of human beings is the surest and shortest path to success.