

EDITORIAL

The West must build genuine ties with the Arab Islamists

The recommendations forwarded by the Human Rights Watch (HRW) organisation in its recently published report that the West respect the "Islamists" rise to power and deal with them amicably is much needed.

The "Islamist dilemma" has paralysed the United States policy towards the Middle East.

The question that has plagued them is how they can promote democracy in the region without risking bringing Islamists to power?

That question no longer matters – their worst nightmare has come true.

The only sensible, responsible and mature thing to do now is for them and the West in general to negotiate and come to common grounds.

The irony of course is that the popular 'Arab Spring' revolutions that have swept the region has only occurred because of the inequality felt by the people that arose because of the U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes not giving their people their proper rights

Whether the US likes it or not, they will now have to learn to live with what has colloquially come to be phrased: political Islam, or Islamism.

There is nothing unnatural about Islam the religion being either incorporated or being the basis for body politics.

Given that Islam is considered a "complete way of life", politics is, thus, a natural corollary contrary to what some apolitical and politically-gagged Muslim voices might suggest.

Washington tends to question whether Islamists' religious commitments can coexist with respect to democracy, pluralism, and women's rights.

Of course, the question that invariably arises is what exactly is meant by the understanding and implementation of democracy.

There is a phrase known as Forced Democracy where western powers have been accused of forcing democracy by ignoring the socio-cultural sensibilities and norms of a particular people.

The reality, however, is that the United States and the West fears those kinds of foreign policies which some so-called Islamist groups might pursue.

But given that all Western governments have a policy that is known as Empire Building, where their foreign policy projects its influence beyond its borders, why then should objections be raised for Islamically-oriented governments who also pursue such endeavours?

The whole thing smacks of double standards.

The Islamist governments in the region will have a distinctive, albeit vague, conception of an Arab world that is confident and independent and will have visions of empire expansionism.

There is no question that democracy will make the region more unpredictable and some governments there less amenable to US security interests.

At their core, however, mainstream Islamist organisations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan and al Nahda in Tunisia, have strong pragmatic tendencies.

When their survival has required it, they have proved willing to compromise their ideology and make difficult choices often in the best interest of the people; something that is in strong contrast to the dictatorial regimes they have replaced.

To guide the new, rapidly evolving Middle East in a favourable direction, the United States should play to these instincts by entering into a strategic dialogue with the region's Islamist groups and parties.

The United States can, through engagement, encourage these Islamists to respect key Western interests, including advancing the Arab-Israeli peace process and combating terrorism.

It will be better to develop such ties with opposition groups now, while the United States still has leverage, rather than later when other powers jostle into position.

A Roadmap for Brave UN Reforms

By Ramzy Baroud

Theodore MacDonald was too ill to attend the launch of his book, *Preserving the United Nations; Our Best Hope for Mediating Human Rights*. Less than three weeks later, on March 7, 2011, the longtime champion of human rights and social justice passed away.

Professor MacDonald's last book was in many ways the intellectual zenith of a vision gleaned from lifelong experiences. He was a kindly, humble and ever-positive individual, with whom I had exchanged many letters in previous months. Palestine occupied much space in his thinking and writing, and was a major component in his vision aimed at achieving global peace and justice.

It is very telling that MacDonald's last book was concerned with the arduous task of reforming the UN. "My main concern is international development and equity. The growing inequity between the First and Third World nations ... is a matter of immense worry and cannot be sustained," he wrote.

MacDonald's impressive field experience in areas of health and education was garnered by his involvement in various NGOs, World Health Organisation (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco). Making a difference as part of the UN at a micro level led him to the state that "the UN has done many wonderful things". However, since its inception in 1945, the self-seeking agendas of powerful countries made the organisation "increasingly ineffective in acting to eradicate ... global inequalities".

Politics, military ambitions and the utilisation of the UN as a stage to serve the policies of so-called first world nations is at the heart of the UN ailment. For more than 65 years, powerful forces — the US and European countries, the IMF, the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation — organised several attempts to undermine the UN's ability to end conflicts, eradicate poverty, and further equality in the world.

US Dominance

In his book, MacDonald challenged the thrust of a major criticism of the UN — that the organisation served as a mere conduit for US and western policies. Although it's true that the UN has been exploited to serve the policies of those



wielding greater power, the relationship — at least at the foundational level — is that of conflict, not harmony.

"The UN's pivotal Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents a serious impediment to the rule of worldwide market forces, controlled, of course, by major corporate interests in the US and the EU," he wrote.

MacDonald's assessment is demonstrated through the US' love-hate relationship with the organisation. When successfully co-opted to accommodate US military designs, the UN suddenly becomes true to its mission — per Washington's account. However, when US pressures failed to yield a unified front against Iraq in late 2002, former president George W. Bush asked in his first address to the UN on September 12, 2002: "Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?"

By March 2003, the UN was officially made 'irrelevant' as Iraq fell victim to those who promised to recognise that "the inherent dignity and ... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

MacDonald didn't live to witness the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, but one would deduce that his response to the 'withdrawal' would be cautious. Wars often end when the overriding motives behind them cease to exist. Discussing the war on Iraq in his book, MacDonald wrote: "[W]ar and free market go hand in hand. War physically destroys whatever has not been dismantled through deregulation ... war and financial globalisation should not be seen as separate issues."

Tragic History

The use of violence derails the chances of attaining human rights. MacDonald knows well from his experiences in some of the poorest countries in Africa. In Chapter 3, *The Sad Tale of the Congo*, he presents a most tragic history of a country that

courageously wrestled its independence from colonialism only to be torn apart by violence orchestrated by foreign powers. In fact, not only Congo, but the whole of "Africa was betrayed" as the UN continued to teeter between inefficiency and willingly being used as an instrument by powerful parties.

MacDonald's candid appraisal of the UN role in Africa was recently reiterated by South African President Jacob Zuma, who chastised the UN Security Council on January 12 for "completely ignor[ing]" the African Union, as it allowed Nato to bomb Libya, and to enact a regime change (contrary to its mandate) at the expense of thousands of innocent people. "It is important that an international organisation like the United Nations take into account the realities on the local level when it takes a decision," he said.

Alas, that is unlikely to happen if the UN's "foundational defects" — as described by MacDonald — are not mended. "The issue of permanent membership and the use of the veto" must be urgently addressed, MacDonald counselled, jointly with granting greater power to the General Assembly and eliminating the "imposed use of the US dollar" in mediating UN transitional affairs. MacDonald's guidelines for reforms are comprehensive, and rely on the concept of equality, guided by humanitarian and moral urgencies.

MacDonald passed away, achieving his own mission in life. His efforts at championing human rights were guided by an ever-prescient quest for justice and a hope that his work would "make a difference". The kindly professor touched the lives of many people, imparted much wisdom and left us with ideas to ponder, and challenges to overcome. Even as he coped with illness in his final days, he couldn't help but think of others. All proceeds from the book sales at his launch were donated to Gaza relief.

Thank you, Theo, for all the difference you continue to make.

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