

# Billionaires and Bombers

Europeans and Americans continue to associate the Arab world with some of their greatest fears: Terrorism, dictatorship, weapons of mass destruction. When Pakistan confirmed its nuclear capability last year, the Western media sought to sensationalize the event with the label, "Islamic Bomb" - with marked comparisons to the nuclear arsenals of other countries, there has never been a reference to a "Hindu" or a "Christian" bomb.

To many, both in the Arab world and among the Arabs' Western friends, there is a sense of injustice, of double standards in the West's dealings with Islamic and Arab states. Bombing Iraq, applying sanctions to Libya, cold-shouldering Algeria, and offering tacit approval of Israeli occupation of Arab lands are all seen as examples of the West's equivocal conduct in the Middle East. Sabers rattle that much more menacingly when they are heard from Baghdad rather than Belgrade.

Most unnerving is the suspicion that especially U.S. foreign policy is dictated by a Western public that has a low opinion of the average Arab, rather than by any bona fide pursuit of international justice.

Preconceptions and prejudices have done more harm to the Arabs than all the "desert dogs" of the world.

Jack Shaheen, an eminent researcher into the Arab image in popular American culture, has drawn up a list of what he calls the "b" factor. Arabs are portrayed as "billionaires (including "sheiks" kidnapping Western women and dragging them off to their harems); bombers (these were usually Palestinian but are now Muslim in general); bedouin bandits; buffoons; and bargainers (shady merchants in the souk)."

"The Arab Image in the West" by Susannah Tarbush is an account of a symposium for leading Arab and Western analysts that held from June 7-9, 1998 in Oxford, England. The conversation was designed as a brainstorming session to "examine the nature of these preconceptions and prejudices, the reasons for their formation and the ways in which they can be combated and replaced with more positive images". The report is divided into three sections: The West's perception of the Arabs, the Arabs' contribution to their image in the West and, finally, the steps that should be taken to improve that image.

First, the participants were invited to tackle such thorny issues as history's role in shaping the negative image and the Arab-Israeli factor, wherein Arabs were considered the clear losers both on the battlefield and in the political lobby. Tarbush reports, "'Might' is often seen as 'right.' Israel's overwhelming success in the 1967 war was an important contribution to its popularity, while for the Arabs, the defeat in that war destroyed their image in the U.S. Every act of resistance came to be seen as an act of terror."

The speakers at the conversation believe that in the last few years, Israel's image has become less positive to the Western public as a result of such events as the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Israeli role in the Sabra and Shatila massacres, and the hard-line

stance of Benyamin Netanyahu. This tarnished image has created an opportunity for Arabs to appear friendly to the Western psyche, as victims to Israeli intransigence.

However, as with most stereotypes, the negative Western images of the Arabs contain some elements of truth.

The Arab world suffers from such ills as dictatorship, poverty, and denial of human rights. Tarbush writes, “for Europe, the perceived lack of human rights in the Arab world is an embarrassment in the Euro-Mediterranean process, just as Turkey’s lack of full Western-style democracy is a major stumbling block in its efforts to join the European Union.”

Tarbush’s report is most informative. Unlike other such discussion groups, there is a strong sense of balance, both in the topics raised and in the speakers who were invited.

The participants at the symposium included such figureheads in the academic and media world as Mustafa Badawi, Kamal Salibi and Ian Black, as well as former ambassadors Sir Roger Tomkys and Sir James Craig, and political analysts Abdel Bari Atwan and Roger Hardy.

However, it needs to be pointed out that this book is a report and that the contents are essentially little more than detailed minutes of a meeting. Other than a short preface that serves purely as an introduction to the symposium, there are neither authorial analyses nor footnote references to strengthen the text.

Tarbush has written this book coherently and with clear understanding of her subject - but as a journalist, not as a writer.

Those who are keen to learn why Europeans and Americans distrust Arabs could do a lot worse than read this book. Those hoping to delve more deeply into the subject may have to look elsewhere.

As for the Arab image, a worthy aim may be for it to evolve from a “b” factor to a “d,” that is for the West to perceive Arabs as demure, democratic and decent.

\*\*\*