

Nile Blues

Britain and the US claim the support of most Middle Eastern governments in the war against terrorism, but what do ordinary Arabs think? Do they see it as the west versus Islam? And what do they make of Tony Blair? Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif visited Cairo to find out

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Right there, at my feet, the Nile spreads out in a shimmering, flowing mass. The water reflects the lights of small boats, of floating restaurants, of the bridges flung across the river. From the centre rises Gezira island, on it the lit-up dome of the Opera House and the tall, slim lotus of the Cairo Tower. The scene is spectacularly beautiful, and over it all hangs the thick pall that Cairenes call "the black cloud". No one seems certain where it comes from. They say it's the farmers burning husks of rice in Sharqiyya province. They say it's Cairo rubbish burning in several places - two of the fires out of control. They say it's a component in the new unleaded petrol. It hangs over everything, but Cairenes live with it, because - so far - they can still breathe.

"I don't know who I feel more alienated from, the Americans or the Taliban," says Nadra. She hitches her heel to the seat of her chair, hugs her knee to her chest. "The Americans' language is so sleazily self-laudatory." Nadra and her American husband are photographers. He has been in San Diego for three months. She was supposed to join him on September 15 and they had planned to come back together in January. But now she can't bring herself to go. "Do you watch CNN?" she asks. "Should journalists collude with government? Or do the media have an agenda of their own? They're trying to frighten us all so we each stay in our little hole and don't talk to each other." She tells me that on September 12 she received international calls from seven agencies, all working for clients in the American media. "Go out," they said, "and photograph the people rejoicing in the streets." "But nobody's rejoicing in the streets," she said. "In the coffee shops then. Photograph the people laughing and celebrating in the coffee shops." "People are glued to their TVs," she told them. "Everybody's in shock." Still they pressed her. Eventually, she said if they wanted her photographs they could send her to Jenin (on the West Bank) and she'd photograph Israeli tanks entering the city.

That was my first night in Cairo. The city is, as usual, humming with energy. The Cairo film festival awards its special jury prize to the Iranian director Tahmina, who is in trouble in Iran for including a shot of two chador-clad women handing out communist leaflets in her film *The Hidden Half*. The Hanager theatre

workshop is showing an Egyptian Phaedre. The feast of Lady Zainab, granddaughter of the Prophet and one of the most popular members of his household, is reaching its climax, with thousands of people from all over the country converging on al-Sayyida, the district which contains her mosque and bears her name. The walls of downtown Cairo are chaotic with posters for the trade union elections due to take place in a few days. The demonstrations that have so far been contained within the campuses of Cairo's five universities ebb and flow with news of Afghan civilian casualties and new Israeli incursions into Palestinian towns.

Over the next two weeks I sense a mood that is not explosive but tense, expectant. There is also puzzlement, a deep exhaustion and a cold, amused cynicism. Nobody even bothers to discuss the "clash of civilisations" theory except to marvel that the west wastes any time on it at all. Can't they see, people ask, how much of their culture we've adopted? Practically every major work of western literature or thought is translated into Arabic. The Cairo Opera House is home to the Cairo Symphony Orchestra and the Egyptian Ballet as well as the Arab Music Ensemble. English is taught in every school and the British Council in Cairo is the largest of their operations worldwide because of its English language courses. Yes, there are aspects of western society that we don't like, they say, but they are the aspects that the west itself regards as problematic: widespread drug abuse, violent crime, the disintegration of the family, teenage pregnancies, lack of sense of community, rampant consumerism. What's wrong with not wanting those for ourselves?

The "Islam versus the west" theory is dismissed by both Muslim and Christian clerics. In an interview with al-Jazeera, Sheikh Qaradawi echoes what Nadra has been saying: "It is unfair to lump people together in one basket," he says, "The American people are the prisoners of their media. They're ordinary people, concerned with their daily lives, with earning a living. We must try to reach them through debate, not through hostility." Sayed Hasan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hizbullah warns: "We should not deal with this war [in Afghanistan] as if it is a Christian war against Islam."

A columnist in al-Ahram, the major national newspaper of Egypt, reminds readers that in 1977, when Anwar Sadat made his peace visit to Israel, the Coptic Pope, Shenuda III, insisted that no Arab Christian would visit Jerusalem until they could visit alongside the Muslims.

We are 14 people sitting down to dinner at the Arabesque: Egyptian, Palestinian, American and Iraqi. On the table is a choice of wine, water and guava juice:

"It's sheer ignorance, this equation of the east with Islam."

"Where did Christianity come from in the first place?"

"Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Beit Jala, all essentially Christian Palestinian towns, bombarded by the Israelis every day."

"And where do they think we are, the 12m Egyptian Christians, in all this?"

"And the Jews would have still been here if it hadn't been for the creation of Israel."

One of the gravest fears in Egypt is of the threat that Islamic extremism poses to the 14 centuries of national unity between Egyptian Copts and Egyptian Muslims. The "clash of civilisations" rhetoric coming out of the west, the transformation of Osama bin Laden from a fringe figure into a hero, the shoehorning of what people see as a political and economic conflict into a religious mould, are all appallingly dangerous for the very fabric of Egyptian society, where the two communities are so intertwined that they share all the rituals of both joy and sorrow; where Christian women visit the mosque of Sayyida Zainab to ask for help and Muslims visit the Church of Santa Teresa, the Rose of Lisieux, to plead for her aid.

Bush and Blair's repeated affirmations of the essential goodness of Islam are seen as so much hot air designed to appease the uneducated masses, who, naturally, will never believe them. People smile as they remind you of the German propaganda asserting that "Hajji Muhammad Hitler" was a true friend of Islam, or the rumour put about by the French 150 years earlier that Bonaparte had converted to the "true faith". Religion, people believe, is being used both as a smoke-screen and a mobilisation device. When, people ask, has Bin Laden ever spoken of Iraq or Palestine? Only after the bombings started. His mission, essentially, was to get the Americans out of Saudi Arabia; now he is playing the west at its own game, and the millions of aggrieved, desperate young Muslims across the world are likely to listen to him.

"And what does your chap think he's up to? What's his name?" I'm asked.

"Blair?" I venture.

"Yes. Is he outbidding the Americans? He comes over here with a list of names he wants handed over and six of them are in the Sudanese cabinet."

There is general incredulity at Tony Blair's gung-ho stance and Britain's seeming eagerness to be part of the conflict. Someone asks me what public opinion in the UK is really like. We talk about the anti-war demonstrations, reminiscent of the Suez crisis.

Returning from the Middle East after his first whirlwind visit last month, the prime minister seemed to think that his problem was one of communication. He has suggested that Britain needs to do more PR in the Arab world. His personal

efforts seem to have been a resounding failure. Why, people ask, is he rushing around with such zeal? Why does he look so pleased with himself? A cartoon in a newspaper has a flunky saying to a government minister: "But of course there's nothing wrong with your excellency taking a second job to augment your income. Look at the British prime minister - he's got an extra job as PR manager for America's campaign in Afghanistan." Blair might save the Downing Street spin doctors' efforts for internal affairs. Spin will get nowhere with people who have for a long time not trusted their governments - far less the governments of the west.

Nobody condones what is happening in Afghanistan. The anger is given more edge, yes, by the fact that it is a Muslim country, but more by the perception that the Afghan people have been used and abused for more than 20 years. Everyone is aware of the responsibility of the US in creating the circumstances for the appearance of the Taliban, who are then pointed at as proof of the backwardness of Islam in general. Yet Afghanistan, before the Russian invasion, was finding its own way towards modernity; otherwise, how come there are so many Afghan women professionals in the opposition camped up north?

An article in the Egyptian press maps the relationship between oil, arms and key members of the American administration. Not a conspiracy theory, rather a practical acknowledgment that "oil, defence and politics ... are not mutually exclusive interests".

Nobody is surprised by any of this. After all, a democracy where you need millions of dollars to get into the White House is hardly likely to be free of corporate influence. But a journalist asks why America needs a pretext at all. Why paint itself into a corner with all the "Bin Laden, dead or alive" rhetoric? Maybe we understand why it needs Russia and Europe on board, but why the pressure on the Arab countries? Is it necessary? Several letters in al-Ahram Weekly suggest that not everyone thinks so. In the past five weeks the paper has received hundreds of hostile letters from westerners - many of them taking that classical orientalist image of a penetrative relationship between west and east to contemporary levels of openness and violence.

Why does America assume conflict and confrontation with the Arab world? My aunt reminds me of the crowds that welcomed Richard Nixon, then the US president, to Egypt in 1974: "Remember all the talk of USAID and the democratising process and how the coops were full of American chickens? America was synonymous then with plenty, with progress and liberalisation. But none of it came through." My aunt is a doctor, but right now she's lying in bed with a drip attached to her arm. Her left hand is swollen with a bad infection and a powerful antibiotic is blasting its way through her veins. Her son has had to scour Cairo and pay over the odds because the public-sector lab that produces the drug has just burned down. Next the lab will be sold at a rock-bottom price to a well-connected private investor, many of its workforce will be laid off, and the medicine, when production is resumed, will be more expensive than before. This

is part of the privatisation process, the economic "reforms" the country is being pushed into. "None of it came through." In fact, I remember wondering, when I first came in touch with USAID in 1980, why - if it was such a benevolent operation - did its officials seem so jittery? Why did they drive around in black-windowed limos? And why had their embassy been turned into a marine-guarded fortress?

Over turkish coffee in the Café Riche, Ahmad Hamad, who works for Legal Aid (a non-governmental organisation funded by a sister NGO in Holland) reminds me of the US-encouraged domestic policies of President Anwar Sadat. People were ready to give them a try. America was democratic and free and more fun than the dour, totalitarian Russians. But what "democratisation" amounted to was a clampdown on all leftwing, Nasserist and pan-Arab views and organisations, and eventually on all opposition. "They nurtured the Islamists as a way of hitting the left. They created and funded Islamist organisations. They manipulated elections so that Islamists took control of the student unions and the professional syndicates. What they didn't understand was that the Islamists took themselves seriously and eventually, of course, they assassinated Sadat himself." It is the same game that the US played in Afghanistan: to fund and aid an "Islamist" opposition to the Russians and fail to recognise the consequences.

Since the three attacks by armed Islamist extremists on tourists in Egypt in the mid-90s, the tourist industry has become extremely sensitive. Last week some 50% of its employed workers were forced to take indefinite unpaid leave. For the self-employed there is hardly any work. Entire resorts in Sinai are closed down. Around 2m Egyptians rely directly on tourism for their livelihoods, and the worry in the country is palpable.

Practically every American or American-influenced intervention in Egypt has been bad for every one of the 65m Egyptians - except the few thousand who have become fabulously wealthy in the new economy. Debt-ridden farmers, disfranchised workers, the decimated middle class, the silenced intellectuals and students - all of them will tell you that they have America's influence to thank for their problems. Yes, Egyptians have internal problems with their government and inter-Arab problems with their neighbours, but these problems are made ever more intractable by American intervention. And then there's the question of Palestine.

Egyptian official media, on the whole, play down what is happening in the Palestinian territories. Egyptian television, for example, does not show the images of brutality, destruction and grief coming out of the West Bank and Gaza. Yet half of Cairo is tuned in to the al-Jazeera satellite channel. On top of every building you can see the dishes facing up towards ArabSat. And every taxi driver you talk to says: "Isn't that terrorism what they're doing to the Palestinians?"

The Egyptian Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (ECSPI) formed itself in October 2000 to provide humanitarian aid to the people of the West Bank and Gaza. It now has volunteers in every city across Egypt. When I meet four of its members in a coffee shop they are shadowed by a chap from the State Security Service, who sits down at the next table. Their phones are bugged and their every move is monitored. The people I meet are two men and two women. One of the women, May, is Christian, the other, Nadia, is a Muslim in a complete veil. She tells me she used to be my student, and it turns into a joke since there's no way that I can recognise her. The ECSPI volunteers go into the towns and villages to collect donations for the Palestinians. "There isn't a house that doesn't give us something," May tells me, "and people have so little. We collected three tons of sugar, half-kilo by half-kilo."

On September 10 a long-planned petition on behalf of the Palestinian people was due to be handed in to the American embassy in Cairo. As the delegation met in Tahrir Square it grew to some 300 people. The police surrounded it and refused to let it proceed. A group of 10 were chosen and headed for the embassy, where the ambassador refused to meet them and the embassy refused to take delivery of the petition.

America's support for Israel is a dominant issue in Egyptian-American relations. I have not had a conversation in Cairo where it has not come up. When American officials talk about the lives lost in New York and Washington, about New Yorkers' inalienable right to freedom of movement, about US citizens' right to safety, a voice inside the head of every Arab will echo: "True. And what about the Palestinians?" President Bush has spoken for the first time about a "Palestinian state", but he has not used the word "viable". People remember that when the west was drumming up the coalition against Iraq it made noises about Palestine and set up the Madrid conference, resulting in the Oslo agreements, which have been disastrous for peace. They suspect a similar agenda now. Yet the hope is that if one good thing can come out of the current horrors it would be that America recognises that a truly workable formula for a reasonably just peace has to be imposed on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

A few days after the failed attempt to deliver the petition, Farid Zahran, the vice-chair of the organisation, was abducted by State Security and vanished for three weeks. He was released only after 250 members of ECSPI and Legal Aid insisted on turning themselves in to the public attorney, signing an affidavit against themselves that they were complicit with Zahran in whatever he was accused of. "It was a warning," Nadia says. "We'll let you carry on collecting medicines and stuff, but any attempt to mobilise the street and we'll come down on you hard." This is made possible by the emergency laws operating since the assassination of Sadat in 1981 and further strengthened by anti-terrorism laws formulated in the mid-90s - essentially the same type of laws that are under discussion now both in the US and here in the UK.

People I speak to are alarmed at the prospect of Americans giving up their civil liberties. "It's one of the organising principles of their society," someone says. "How will their society hold without it?"

An article in the Egyptian press reports that Americans, apparently, are "cocooning". They're staying at home, hiring videos, talking to each other, visiting family and friends nearby, and buying only what they need. It seems, to the Egyptian reader, like a good way to live. But the report is alarmed: two-thirds of the American economy is consumer spending; if people don't get out there to the malls, the economy will collapse. People feel sorry for them. The poor Americans, they say, they're whipped out to work more and earn more, then they're whipped out to spend it; is that the freedom they're so proud of?

I walk down Sheikh Rihan with a young American graduate student who tells me that he had been approached to be interviewed on NBC. They called him for a pre-interview, he says. He kept his answers neutral, but truthful. In the end they said they'd call him back - they never did.

There is general agreement among people who have access to western media that Americans are being kept ignorant. "They're under media siege," was how one journalist put it.

"Our only hope," Nadra says, "is to talk to them. Sensible people everywhere should make themselves heard so that we don't personally witness the end of the world."

A young, slim, professional woman in casual trousers and a loose shirt, the canvas bag slung over her shoulder bulging with lenses, tapes, papers and somewhere, I suppose, a comb and some lip salve. I watch her walk away from me down the avenue of flame-trees. Is the road tightening round her? Narrowing down? Or is it just my perspective?