

Opening the doors

Ahdaf Soueif hopes that this time around, it will be not about winning but about winning over

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Open House is a two-day event when private buildings across Europe open their doors to the public. It is a celebration of civic architecture which lets people wander at will through rooms and halls normally forbidden to them. The dates for this year's event were scheduled many months ago for 22/23 September and some 500 buildings in London were taking part, among them the Islamic cultural foundation where I work.

On 12 September a pleasant young Special Branch detective knocked on our door, asked if we were alright and gave us an emergency phone number to use if we felt threatened.

As the days passed reports of harassment of Muslims across the UK started coming in. Politicians and commentators elbowed their way onto television to warn that there should be no reprisals against Britain's Arab or Muslim community. Members of said community (which numbers around two million) were filmed against "Islamic" backgrounds and encouraged to denounce "terror." They did, but many of them spoke also of the "terror" of the US's foreign policy and pointed particularly at that policy in Palestine. Notable among them were a group of young people on BBC TV's Question Time, who spoke of how much America was "despised" across the "developing" (or even stunted) world. The ex-American ambassador to the UK (who was on the panel and seemed a perfectly nice man) felt impelled to share with the viewers his feelings of deep hurt at being so attacked at a time when he was so vulnerable. This prompted the head of the BBC next day to issue a public apology for the programme, while this apology in turn led to a row in the newspapers about democracy and free speech. Two of the most impassioned and articulate speakers on Question Time were young women: one in a hijab which accentuated her round south Asian face, the other a pretty Anglo-Arab with a great mane of curly, golden hair.

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the US's reaction to date have highlighted the fault lines in British society and no doubt in other Western societies including that of America. But increasingly, at least in the UK, voices are heard rejecting all forms of extremism, arguing for understanding and attempting to bridge the terrifying gaps that threaten our world. They condemn the act which killed 6,000 in New York and Washington and they condemn the Western and Israeli policies which have killed tens, even hundreds of thousands all over the world and which led to it. Nowhere has this been more touching than

in the statements of the families who lost a brother, a sister or a child in the attacks on the Trade Towers.

But of course neither the US nor the British government (apart from some lone voices such as that of Clare Short, minister for overseas development) accept the linkage between their policies and the events of 11 September. As far as officialdom is concerned "Islamic terrorists" have one simple motive: hatred of the US because it is "free," it practises "democracy" and its women are "full and active citizens." We could be next, cry the British tabloids, already shivering deliciously in anticipation. The Daily Star has a dream front page, equitably shared between Sex and Violence, Beauty and the Beast: the top half of the page announces the return of the Page 3 girls (topless lovelies who had been screened off for a few days to show respect) and celebrates with a photo of "Nicola," whom (male?) readers are invited to "phone today." Underneath Nicola there's the now-familiar photograph of Osama Bin Laden, looking like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth -- even if he closed it -- and the heading "Bin's Murder Manual," which apparently teaches would-be terrorists how to slit throats with box-cutters. The underlying, ongoing joke of course is Bin Laden = bin liner, i.e. rubbish bag. Another paper has a full frontal of a chap in what appears to be a space suit. Everybody will have to rush out and buy these, it seems, to protect themselves against Anthrax, small-pox et al. And yet another front page screams "THEY'RE HERE!" with news of arrests of three Arabs in Birmingham. This "they" of course is what's at the heart of the matter. Sikhs have been beaten up for wearing turbans, adding injury to the insult of being taken for Muslims. My friends on the Guardian and the Independent newspapers (who have been arguing ceaselessly for America to face up to the responsibility of its actions in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Colombia, Nicaragua, etc.) shrug off the tabloids and their readership. But even the Times, normally sober if disagreeable, employs a graphologist to interpret Bin Laden's signature and draws comfort from the expert's pronouncement that he is "not a happy man" and that he feels he has "bitten off more than he can chew."

Meanwhile an array of weaponry to delight every arms-dealer's bank manager is being assembled in Asia.

I suppose this is the warming-up phase of the war, the Battle of the Images. In one corner, George W Bush, flailing for the first few days, then getting it together for his Address to the Nation on Capitol Hill. Reassuringly surrounded by symbols of the might of the United States of America he delivered sound bite after sound bite with authority and with appropriate pauses for his audience to be levered to its feet by its own applause. Up and down and up and down they went. I lost count of the times. At the end you expected a curtain-call. We got the next best thing: a slow triumphal exit full of resolute bonhomie with senators, congressmen, ministers, army commanders pressing forward to shake his hand, pat him on the back, and if they were too far to touch him, contenting themselves with a cheery thumbs-up.

In the opposite corner, Osama Bin Laden, always alone in close-up in the frame. The only thing you see other than the man himself is his machine-gun propped up against the wall. The beard, the turban, the unvarying voice and serene expression of a man at peace with himself. From time to time we get a shot of turbanned fighters scrambling along mountain paths.

This is the encouraged reading of the conflict: a backward fanatical oppressive Islam confronting a liberal inclusive democratic West. But when we look at the two champions in their corners they don't seem too dissimilar: both seek to impose their views on others and so to bi-polarise the world, both seek solutions in wholesale killing and both firmly believe that God is on their side.

Well, let's hope most of the world knows that this is a con. That the conflict, far from starting on 11 September, has been raging for decades. And that it's President Bush and Mr Bin Laden in one corner and in the other the billions of us who simply want decent and human lives, for others as well as for ourselves. For us this coming time should not be about winning, but about winning over.

At the Foundation we opened our doors last weekend to some 600 visitors. People came to see the house and were met by a staff that included Algerians, British, Egyptians, Lebanese and Sudanese, Christian as well as Muslim. We showed them how we had restored a historic English mansion, gave them complimentary tea and biscuits and banded on about Ibn Al-Haytham and Ibn Rushd, about music and architecture and design. Some people expressed their horror at the thought that we might be endangered in the weeks or months to come. Others politely skipped the subject. But these 600 people might just think again the next time Arabs or Muslims are cast as terrorists in their hearing. Some might even speak up.