

Ahmed Zewail: We Arabs must wage a new form of jihad

We must not be distracted by old ideologies and conspiracy theories

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The cataclysmic wars in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq have uncovered the reality of Arab unity and plight, and the collective conscience of international society. It is abundantly clear that the Arab people must themselves build a new system for a new future. The current state, as judged by a low GDP, high level of illiteracy, and deteriorating performance in education and science, is neither in consonance with their hearts and minds nor does it provide for their political, economic, and educational aspirations.

Yet this is the same Arab world that produced leading civilisations, world-class universities, and renowned scholars and scientists. Clearly, something has gone seriously astray.

As someone from, and directly involved with, this part of the world, I am convinced Arabs are qualified to regain their glorious past. Arabs have two-thirds of "proved oil reserves", and copious sunlight for possible alternative energy. They have their own market, the potential for an Arab Union, and many Arab countries are strategically positioned, geographically and politically. The people have a unique culture of community and family values, and their faith is inclusive and pluralistic. Above all, the Arab world has people with talent and creativity, with nearly half of the population in its youth. These are forces for progress, but without nurturing intrinsic talent and establishing a cogent system of governance the status quo will prevail.

In my view, there are four "pillars of change" that would support an imperative historic renaissance for transforming the current state of affairs. First, a new political system must be established with, at its core, a constitution defining the democratic principles of human rights, freedom of speech, and governance through contested elections. A select delegation of honorable intellectuals, respected political personalities, and thoughtful religious scholars, perhaps under the patronage of supreme-court judges, should form a council to debate and chart a new constitution for a final referendum involving the people. The co-existence of religious values in the lives of individuals and secular rules in the governance of the state should be clearly defined. There is no need to fear conflict, as reason and faith are driving forces in western democratic societies and in some Muslim countries such as Turkey and Malaysia.

Second, the rule of law must in practice be applied to every individual, independent of caste, faith, or background. Currently, some rules of law are either unenforced or selectively enforced, resulting in demoralising practices. Besides being a prime cause of poor economic growth, poor governance breeds corruption which cripples investment, wastes resources, and diminishes confidence. If rules are applied fairly, people acquire security and faith in their system.

Third, the methods used in education, cultural practices, and scientific research must be revisited, reviewed, and revitalised. The goal should be to promote critical thinking and a value system of

reasoning, discipline, and teamwork. The government should remain responsible for the primary education of all. Higher education should be based on quality not quantity, receive merit-based funding, and be free of unnecessary bureaucracy. Not the least of the benefits of educational reform is to foster the pride of achievement at national and international levels.

Fourth, an overhauling of the Arab media is necessary. Currently, there are numerous satellite TV channels and several so-called media cities generously financed, perhaps much more than research institutions. Yet people are inundated with mind-numbing and propaganda programmes. The conceptually new al-Jazeera has become a very effective news media among millions of Arabs; similar media outlets concerned with cultural, social, and educational events should be established.

The primary objective is to stimulate minds and encourage critical thinking for civilised debates and dialogues. Governments should control neither the news nor appointment of editors; quality and appropriateness should be controlled by the judgement of professionals and the wisdom of society in accordance with the rule of law.

We Arabs can accomplish the transition to the world of the 21st century, but the people and leaders must embark on a new course. Incremental changes - so-called gradual reforms - are inappropriate for a system that has been ineffective for decades. We should have confidence in ourselves and in global participation, and not blame others for current calamities or use religion for political gains. The responsibility of the individual for self and societal improvement is clearly stated in The Koran: "Indeed! God will not change the good condition of the people as long as they do not change their state of goodness themselves."

I appeal to the Arab people to participate in this process of historic change and not to be distracted by the ideologies of the past and conspiracy theories of the future. Being passive creates a state of apathy and legitimises the status quo. I call on intellectuals to focus on the greater good, not just for personal gain. Conscience and integrity are national responsibilities in this critical period of history. I urge the leaders of the Arab world to implement these historical changes and, in so doing, become makers of history. A genuine and peaceful transition to democracy is both legitimate and timely.

Before too long the oil will run out and human talent will migrate, but if we commit to "pillars of change", with jihad for modernity and enlightenment, we will realise our rightful place in the future.

The writer is the only Arab to receive the Nobel Prize in Science, 1999

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