

The Enemy in the Middle East Is Boredom

By Bijan Khezri

The horrific car-bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta yesterday will once again bring home to companies the dangers of operating overseas, especially in Muslim countries. But though it may seem a paradox, the outrage should further convince the private sector that it must increase its engagement in the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East.

The long-term stability of the region is threatened by a twin set of evils. One is rampant unemployment and the other the absence of opportunities for Arab youths to translate knowledge and talent into productive activities. Without prospects of a future, Arab youths remain trapped in despair. Fear of the modern world will reinforce resistance to engaging with the West.

The good news is that young Arabs have a desire for change. The bad is that, so far, the West has failed to embrace it. The private sector can help. Corporate initiatives targeting Arab youth's future prospects through training and employment opportunities must play a more important role in U.S. efforts to rebuild the Middle East. Without this dimension, regime change attempting to install democracy is likely to lead to nothing but chaos.

In their recent book "Driven," Professors Paul Lawrence and Nitin Nohria of Harvard Business School devise an incisive analytical framework based on four instinctive human drives—to acquire, bond, learn and defend—from which any other need can be then derived. Peace, success and prosperity are highly dependent upon a balanced satisfaction of all four drives. In the context of the Middle East, Arabs have consistently failed to satisfy the basic drive to acquire—in terms of translating ability and knowledge into prosperity.

As a result, the Arab mind remains shaped by "this fear of finding nothing, of being useless, the sense of living in a void for purposes only of dying, which crops up nihilistically time and again", as David Pryce-Jones concludes "The Closed Circle." Neither Arab governments nor

the Bush administration alone can fill this void. The world's business communities must assume a bigger role in creating opportunities in training and entrepreneurship.

But what's in it for private-sector companies? Corporate America has not only the most to lose but the most to gain as well as to give. It must play an active role in conveying America's truly great strengths, or soft powers—optimism in the future, commitment to research and training as a platform for prosperity, and an entrepreneur-

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ial risk-taking culture that celebrates success and does not stigmatize failure.

So far, however, U.S. companies, as well as those in Europe and Asia, have kept a conspicuously low profile in the Middle East. Combined with the increasingly tightened U.S. immigration policy, especially to nationals from Muslim countries, the result of the low corporate profile is likely to leave America misunderstood.

Terrorist attacks on U.S. soil and abroad have put U.S. vulnerability into new perspective. Understandably, mistrust and fear—very much to the regret of Americans themselves—increasingly shapes U.S. attitude towards the outside world. Attacks, such as the Jakarta bombing will naturally reinforce U.S. corporates' reluctance to invest in Muslim countries. This, however, would not only play right into the hands of terrorists, but could possibly compromise the West's long-term competitiveness in some of the world's most promising consumer markets.

We at Baltimore Technologies definitely don't see engagement in the Middle East as a philanthropic gesture. In March we were selected by Saudi Arabia's central bank to provide the security infrastructure for payments and clearing. It is one of the region's most demanding IT

projects and continues to give us unique insight into some of the region's groundbreaking trends.

Are Arabs sufficiently educated and skilled to be trained and hired by Western firms? Overall, basic educational infrastructures are relatively well developed throughout the region. During the past two years, enrollment at American universities in the Middle East is at record levels. In addition, a large number of private organizations continue to sponsor candidates for higher education abroad.

But university teaching has its limits in any case. It is training on the job that determines the individual's value. Governments and nongovernmental organizations are heavily investing in IT education throughout the region. However, unless students can believe in the prospect of productively developing and applying their knowledge, there is little enthusiasm and hope.

Opportunities for job training are most needed. If America's and Europe's banking and technology sectors, for example, were to start integrating Arab students for temporary traineeships, an important foundation for their future engagement in the region could be laid. Successful interns could become employees at the companies' branches in the Middle East.

Most importantly, however, direct exposure to American business structures should enable Arabs to experience that it is neither America's military machine nor control of Middle Eastern oil, but its very soft powers, which have made the U.S. the world's most successful engine of prosperity. Unless Arabs can appreciate the true forces driving America and envision the U.S. other than a dispirited consumers' republic, any U.S. initiative in the Middle East will meet resistance.

Clearly, the U.S. government must take a more pragmatic stance on immigration policy to bring to fruition any such initiatives. The danger is that of failing to build a platform for peace and prosperity as another generation of Arabs gets wasted. The world would then be deprived of the strengths of one of its most talented and entrepreneurial people.

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