

The Return of Arabophobia

Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden are only the latest in a long line of Arab bogeymen

Neil Clark
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First, they tried to dismiss Iraqi resistance as the work of "Saddam loyalists". Then they sought to blame "outside forces". Now, as it becomes clear that Iraqis of all sects oppose the occupation, a third explanation has arisen. Terrorism, anarchy and criminality are prevalent in Iraq because ... er ... terrorism, anarchy and criminality are what Iraqis do.

Arabophobia has been part of western culture since the Crusades, with Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden only the latest in a long line of Arab bogeymen. For centuries the Arab has played the role of villain, seducer of our women, hustler and thief - the barbarian lurking at the gates of civilisation.

In the 20th century new images emerged: the fanatical terrorist, the stone-thrower, the suicide bomber. Now, as the Project for a New American Century suffers its first major setback in the back streets of Baghdad and Basra, Arabophobia has been given a new lease of life. "I read TE Lawrence before I came here," a British officer was quoted in the Mail on Sunday. "A century ago he recognised dishonesty was inherent in Arab society. Today is the same. They do nothing for love and nothing at all if they can help it."

The attitudes of the officer, shocking though they are, only mirror those of the people who sent him to war. Scratch a neo-con and you find an Arabophobe. Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser, has berated Arabs on the "need to change their behaviour". Douglas Feith, the undersecretary of defence for policy, has talked of Israel's "moral superiority" over its neighbours. And the veteran foreign policy hawk Richard Perle, when asked about the fears Egyptians had of the Iraq war provoking an Arab backlash, replied: "Egyptians can barely govern their own country, we don't need advice on how to govern ours."

For the first time, we have an American administration that talks of "de-Arabising" the Middle East - the ultimate Perleian dream of Arab nations governed by clones of Ahmed Chalabi, their bazaars buried under shopping malls and Arab hospitality (not good for business) replaced by western corporate ethics.

It is not hard to find evidence of the increased pervasiveness of neo-con-induced Arabophobia in our media, whether intentional or not. Contrast Jeremy Paxman's handling of Ruth Wedgewood, an American neo-conservative, and Imad Moustapha, Syria's deputy ambassador to the US, on Newsnight recently. Professor Wedgewood was treated with a deference you would expect Paxman to reserve for his great aunt, Dr Moustapha with a withering contempt and studied condescension (why should we believe you, "old chap"?). But with respect, Jeremy, why should we not believe Dr Moustapha? Wedgewood was speaking for a nation that launched an illegal war of

aggression on grounds which have proved to be false. Moustapha was the representative of a country which is in no breach of international law and has called for the removal of all WMD from the Middle East.

Issues of mendacity have, of course, been a major theme in international events this year. The British public had to decide who was telling the truth: Tony Blair, with his claim that Iraq posed "a very real threat to Britain", or Saddam, with his repeated denials. The neo-cons knew that their case for war was painfully thin. But they banked on Arabophobia - stoked by their allies in the media - to do the rest: Tony, the white, middle-class churchgoer, or Saddam, the swarthy Arab? For many, there was no contest. Of course, Saddam couldn't possibly be telling the truth about not possessing WMD. He's an Arab. Arabs lie. We know this from TE Lawrence.

Critical to the neo-con plan to obtain control of the resources of the Middle East is a need to portray Arabs not just as mendacious, but also as "barely capable" of running their own countries without benign outside interference. The neo-con notion that Arabs need "civilising" and "assistance" in shaping their future differs very little from the attitudes of the first British imperialists in Africa more than a century ago. The British and American officers who now talk of Iraqi "dishonesty", and seek to portray Iraq as a backward and savage land, would rather we forget that up until the imposition of sanctions by Britain and the US, independent Ba'athist Iraq, although a dictatorship, had the most developed infrastructure, the best healthcare and the best universities of any country in the Middle East.

"Iraqis are the world's best dodgers and thieves - they are descended from a direct line of Ali Babas," says Corporal Kevin Harnley of the Royal Engineers, bemoaning the black market in British-issue police uniforms. The irony, that he himself has been an accomplice to one of the most audacious smash-and-grab enterprises in the history of thievery, seems to have been lost on him.

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