

Why Tyrants Rule Arabs

For 60 years, the West has propped up Arab despots, creating poverty and illiteracy where education once thrived.

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Toronto Star
July 20, 2004

It was just a random statistic, but a telling one: Only 300 books were translated into Arabic last year. That is about one foreign title per million Arabs. For comparison's sake, Greece translated 1,500 foreign-language books, or about 150 titles per million Greeks. Why is the Arab world so far behind, not only in this but in practically all the arts and sciences?

The first-order answer is poverty and lack of education: Almost half of Arabic-speaking women are illiterate.

But the Arab world used to be the most literate part of the planet; what went wrong? Tyranny and economic failure, obviously. But why is tyranny such a problem in the Arab world? That brings us to the nub of the matter.

In a speech in November, 2003, President George W. Bush revisited his familiar refrain about how the West has to remake the Arab world in its own image in order to stop the terrorism: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe ... because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty" — as if the Arab world had wilfully chosen to be ruled by these corrupt and incompetent tyrannies.

But the West didn't just "excuse and accommodate" these regimes. It created them, in order to protect its own interests — and it spent the latter half of the 20th century keeping them in power for the same reason.

It was Britain that carved the kingdom of Jordan out of the old Ottoman province of Syria after World War I and put the Hashemite ruling family on the throne that it still occupies.

France similarly carved Lebanon out of Syria in order to create a loyal Christian-majority state that controlled most of the Syrian coastline — and when time and a higher Muslim birth rate eventually led to a revolt against the Maronite Christian stranglehold on power in Lebanon in 1958, U.S. troops were sent in to restore it. The Lebanese civil war of 1975-'90, tangled though it was, was basically a continuation of that struggle.

Britain also imposed a Hashemite monarchy on Iraq after 1918, and deliberately perpetuated the political monopoly of the Sunni minority that it had inherited from Turkish rule.

When the Iraqi monarchy was finally overthrown in 1958 and the Baath party won the struggle that followed, the CIA gave the Iraqi Baathists the names of all

the senior members of the Iraqi Communist party (then the main political vehicle of the Shias) so they could be liquidated.

It was Britain that turned the traditional sheikhdoms in the Gulf into separate little sovereign states and absolute monarchies, carving Kuwait out of Iraq in the process. Saudi Arabia, however, was a joint Anglo-U.S. project.

The British Foreign Office welcomed the Egyptian generals' overthrow of King Farouk and the destruction of the country's old nationalist political parties, failing to foresee that Gamal Abdul Nasser would eventually take over the Suez Canal. When he did, the foreign office conspired with France and Israel to attack Egypt in a failed attempt to overthrow him.

Once Nasser died and was succeeded by generals more willing to play along with the West — Anwar Sadat, and now Hosni Mubarak — Egypt became Washington's favourite Arab state. To help these thinly disguised dictators to hang on to power, Egypt has ranked among the top three recipients of U.S. foreign aid almost every year for the past quarter-century. And so it goes.

Britain welcomed the coup by Col. Moammar Gadhafi in Libya in 1969, mistakenly seeing him as a malleable young man who could serve the West's purposes.

The United States and France both supported the old dictator Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, and still back his successor Ben Ali today. They always backed the Moroccan monarchy no matter how repressive it became, and they both gave unquestioning support to the Algerian generals who cancelled the elections of 1991. They did not ever waver in their support through the savage insurgency unleashed by the suppression of the elections that killed an estimated 120,000 Algerians over the next 10 years.

"Excuse and accommodate"? The West created the modern Middle East, from its rotten regimes down to its ridiculous borders, and it did so with contemptuous disregard for the wishes of the local people.

It is indeed a problem that most Arab governments are corrupt autocracies that breed hatred and despair in their own people, which then fuels terrorism against the West, but it was the West that created the problem — and invading Iraq won't solve it.

If the U.S. really wants to foster Arab democracy, it might try making all that aid to Egypt conditional on prompt democratic reforms. But I wouldn't hold my breath.