

Is Democracy Islamic?

'The last al-Qaeda militant I met gave me a big smile, said "Peace be upon you", then took out a pistol and shot me, leaving me for dead on the streets of Riyadh.'

Thus Frank Gardner, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph* (7 August 2005). He was referring to the incident on 6 June 2005 when he was severely injured in Saudi Arabia. Gardner, a fluent Arabic speaker, has made a good recovery and returned to his work as a BBC journalist. The article from which the above extract is taken should be read by everyone concerned with the threat posed by al-Qaeda. [<http://www.francisbennion.com/pdfs/non-fb/2005/2005-002-nfb-gardiner-article.pdf>] Gardner knows what he is talking about. The BBC's Vin Ray says of him on the BBC website: 'He is an expert on the Middle East, al-Qaeda and the underlying causes of the War on Terror and, because of his deep expertise, his work always reflects the true complexities of the stories he reports'.

For this piece I will pick out Gardner's opinion that what al-Qaeda is mainly concerned with is the presence of western troops in Muslim lands such as Saudi Arabia. His theory is that much current Muslim unrest springs from the idea that there are Muslim lands in which the west has no business to be, and from which it is a Muslim's religious duty to eject them.

This led me to do some research, and I dug up the following choice extract from an article in my *Encyclopedia Britannica* (11th edition, 1911) about the Moors of Morocco-

'They are fanatical Mahommedans, regarding their places of worship as so sacred that the mere approach of a Jew or a Christian is forbidden.'

That confirms Gardner's theory.

There are arguments about which are the so-called Muslim lands. A large part of Spain was once occupied by the Moors. Is that one of the Muslim lands, to be recaptured by the faithful? Perhaps that is beside the point.

The point is I think that to the devout Muslim many parts of the world, including Afghanistan and Iraq, undoubtedly are Muslim lands in which the west has no business to be. The same goes for parts (or perhaps the whole) of what is now Israel. That is why al-Qaeda will not easily be defeated.

It is possible it will never be defeated, and that the west should change its policies and cease to meddle in Islamic countries. The philosophy of Islam is that it provides not just religious principles but binding rules for the entire conduct of human life. That may leave no room for democracy, which President George W. Bush is so keen to impose on Iraq.

There are ominous signs that those planning the new constitution for Iraq are determined that it shall be an Islamic state. When I drafted the first constitution for Pakistan after it became independent I was instructed to the same effect. My constitution accordingly began: 'Pakistan shall be a Federal Republic to be known as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan . . .' The same may apply in Iraq.

My brief research into the history of Islam left me with the feeling that, as Sherlock Holmes used to say, 'These are deep waters, Watson'. I fear we are in what President Reagan used to call deep doo-doo because those responsible for our affairs, from Bush and Blair downwards, are ignorant of what is a tangled and complex history going back over a thousand years and affecting large areas of the globe.

Of three things we can be sure. The United Kingdom is *not* part of the Muslim lands. The west cannot ignore the fact that a large proportion of the world's vital oil supplies are located in Muslim areas. Muslim countries like Iran must not be allowed to possess nuclear weapons.

So it seems that the west must to some extent meddle in Muslim lands. But it is doubtful if that goes so far as seeking to introduce the non-Islamic concept of democracy.