

THE FUTURE THROUGH FRENCH EYES

Amir Taheri reviews *The War For Muslim Minds* by Gilles Kepel.

by Amir Taheri Telegraph October 24, 2004

Ever since George W. Bush launched his "war on terror", many in Europe have accused him of failing to understand the nature of the Islamist threat, or using the 9/11 tragedy as a pretext for extending "American hegemony".

In this book Gilles Kepel - a leading French Islamologist who is often consulted by senior government figures including President Chirac - makes both charges against an administration that he believes is controlled by "neo-conservatives" linked to Israel's Likud Party. He backs this with a number of claims made by Michael Moore in his Fahrenheit 9/11 attack on Bush.

Kepel blames the "neo-cons" for events before Bush files became president. For example, he says that Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980 "with Reagan's blessings" prompted by the "neo-cons". Reagan, however, became president five months after Saddam had invaded Iran.

The "neo-cons" were also responsible for "creating the monster of Al Qa'eda" by supporting the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan. That support, however, started with a "finding" - an order to authorise specific action - signed by President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat. The "neo-conservative ideology" was also the "underlying cause" of the Palestinian Intifada in 2000, six months before George W. entered the White House. Later, Kepel says that the Intifada was provoked by Ariel Sharon's visit to Temple Mount in Jerusalem. But that visit came four months after Yasser Arafat had launched the Intifada.

Kepel insists that one reason for the 9/11 attacks was "the political influence of the neo-conservative ideology on US foreign policy". Again, he forgets that the attacks, which took more than two years to plan, occurred only seven months after Bush files had entered the White House.

According to Kepel, the Bush administration's Middle East policy has only two goals: supporting Israel and ensuring the flow of oil. He says the US invaded Afghanistan to gain "a foothold in the former Soviet Central Asia" which is "rich in oil and gas". But Afghanistan was never part of Soviet Central Asia, and has no oil and very little gas. Also, Europe, Japan and China are more dependent on Middle East oil than is the United States. (Last year China was the biggest market for Saudi oil.)

Kepel claims that the toppling of Saddam was an Israeli plan, worked out by Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, as "a means of foiling Syria's regional ambitions". It is hard to seize the logic of such a plan, if it ever existed, because Iraq under Saddam was Syria's number one rival in the Arab world.

Is it not possible that the US intervened in Afghanistan and Iraq in defence of its own national interest, rather than those of Israel and the oil companies? Should we dismiss Bush's analysis that guiding the Middle East towards democratisation is vital for American national security because democracies do not breed terrorism? Is it anti-Islamic to point out that while all Muslims are certainly not terrorists, almost all terrorists at the moment happen to be Muslims?

Apart from Bush-bashing, the book is a mixed bag of travel diaries, visits to Islamic Internet chat rooms, reportages, a dinner with a Syrian Islamist in London, running into Iraqi mullahs in Paul Wolfowitz's office, watching baboons play in an abandoned town in Arabia, excerpts from a pamphlet by an al-Qa'eda leader serialised in an Arabic daily, and brief histories of Israel-Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia among others.

Kepel claims that "Washington's strategic planners [are] culturally incapable of grasping an actor that is not, in the final analysis, a state". But is it untrue that the terrorists cannot function without at least tacit support from some governments? Terrorists do not live in outer space but in real countries where they have real homes, training camps, hide-outs and bank accounts. The satellite-television channels that beam their messages are owned not by ghosts but by Arab rulers.

Kepel denounces "war on terror" as "a phrase engineered to heighten fear" among Americans. He writes: "Stigmatising the enemy by calling them 'terrorists' is of little help in defining the nature of the new threat." He prefers the term "Jihadist" which the terrorists use to describe themselves.

Less than 10 per cent of the book is devoted to its title *The War For Muslim Minds*. Having dismissed Iraq as "a quagmire", Afghanistan as "a pyrrhic victory", and Israel's creation as "a catastrophe" (nakba), Kepel, echoing Jacques Chirac, offers an alternative to the failed American strategy.

This French alternative goes "beyond bin Laden and Bush" - who are, by implication, in positions of moral equivalence - and aims to create the "New Andalusia", a 21st-century version of what Kepel imagines Spain to have been under Muslim rule, this time in the whole of the European Union. Kepel does not say who will rule but waxes lyrical about his Islamo-Christian Utopia.

"Andalusia must come to symbolise a place where the hybridisation and flowering of two distinct cultures can produce an extraordinary progress in civilisation. The advent of the New Andalusia is the only way out of the passions and impediments [sic] that Osama bin Laden's Jihad and George W. Bush's war on terror have produced." Any takers?

Amir Taheri is an Iranian author and journalist.