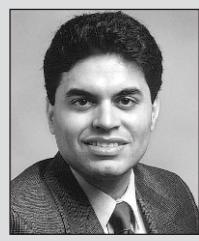


Hassle and humiliation



FAREED ZAKARIA

writes from Washington

T was a great idea -- a program to build bridges between young Arab modernizers and Americans.

The Arab and American Action Forum, launched last September at the Clinton Global Initiative meeting in New York, is an exercise in soft power, bringing together 100 young Arab leaders from all walks of life and introducing them to a similar group of Americans.

The goal was to begin a dialogue, build trust and create joint projects for both peoples. The group's Arab organizers are pro-business and pro-American, many with degrees from US colleges and fond memories of their time in America.

Aside from Bill Clinton, the forum is backed by the two leading modernizers in the Middle East, Dubai's ruler, Sheikh Mohammed Al

As the world has been opening up, the United States is closing itself off. Total international arrivals into the United States declined 10 percent between 2000 and 2004. One survey shows that business travel into the United States has declined by 10 percent in the last two years, at a time when places like London, Singapore and Dubai are showing strong increases. Once No. 1, the United States has dropped to third as a travel destination, behind France and Spain.

Maktoum and Jordan's King Abdullah.

As I said, it was a great idea, until these young Arab leaders landed at John F. Kennedy airport.

The first group of participants, mostly CEOs of large companies, were pulled out of the regular immigration lines and made to stand for two to five hours while Department of Homeland Security officials grilled them as to why they were coming to America, whether they had any experience using weapons, what they thought of the Iraq war and other such questions.

Half a day into their trip, before they had even left the airport, they were angry and humiliated. So much for improving America's image in the Arab world.

"We seem to have lost the ability to think rationally about security," says Stephen Flynn, among the foremost US experts on homeland security and the author of the new

book *The Edge of Disaster*. "We've created an incentive system for border checks in which all the emphasis is on stopping, screening, double-checking. There's little scope for common sense, discretion and judgment."

The result is an extremely expensive system that ties up Americans, wastes resources and is making the United States a place people try to avoid.

The State Department insists that things have improved, but incremental changes have not altered the basic picture.

The visa process is now so cumbersome that many foreigners have simply stopped trying. The Saudi chapter of the Young Arab Leaders passed up the meeting because it was being held in America.

"They refused to go through what has become an extremely demeaning process for visa applications,"

one of the conference organizers told me. And remember, these are Saudi liberals and moderates, whom we should be supporting, not insulting.

The next meeting of the Young Arab Leaders, to be held outside America, is expected to draw a much larger number of participants.

This is not simply an Arab problem. Conferences in several industries and academic specialties are being moved out of the United States because of the hassle and humiliation factor.

Discover America, a group set up by the tourism industry to encourage travel to America, polled 2,000 randomly selected international travelers this winter and asked them "which one location on the map is the worst" in terms of visa hassles and nasty immigration officials.

The United States topped the list by far. And this is not an anti-American bunch. When asked their

basic view of the United States, 72 percent replied "favorable."

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Over the last 14 years, global tourism has been thriving, having increased by 52 percent. But America's share has been declining, down 36 percent in that same time frame.

The Discover America group points out that travel and tourism is the third largest industry in the United States, employing 17 million people and generating \$105 billion in tax revenues.

The American Council on Education issued a report last fall that pointed to a similar phenomenon for foreign students. Even though the drop in student enrollment that began after 9/11 has been arrested, America is still losing ground to other countries.



The United States increased its foreign-student enrollment by 17 percent between 1999 and 2005. But during the same period, enrollment grew 28 percent in Britain, 42 percent in Australia, 46 percent in Germany and 81 percent in France.

International students contribute about \$13.5 billion in tuition and expenses to the American economy, not to mention the many other benefits they bring.

This is much more than a dollars-

and-cents issue. America as a place has often been the great antidote to US foreign policy.

When American actions across the world have seemed harsh, misguided or unfair, America itself has always been open, welcoming and tolerant.

I remember visiting the United States as a kid from India in the 1970s, at a time when as a country, India was officially anti-American.

The reality of the America that I

experienced was a powerful refutation of the propaganda and caricatures of its enemies.

But today, through inattention, stupidity and bureaucratic cowardice, the caricature is becoming reality.

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Our language and its future

For far too long we, along with other nations, have been mired in the language of conflict, division, despair, and duplicity. We must remind ourselves that the competitive pressures on our language are stiff and merciless. Left to its own devices, the price to be paid, down the line, may be devastating.

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB

and destruction.

LANGUAGE, that ubiquitous element, is fundamental to relationships, to building knowledge systems, to innovation, to economic and social progress, and to understanding deeper philosophical questions of life and beyond. In fact, it is fundamental to human existence and much more. Yet, generally, we pay very little attention to it. We speak it, we breathe it, and we live it. It is there for us and we accept it for "what it is" -- like fish in a tank.

But the enormity and profundity of language and its implications, especially in the global context, must be pondered. Touching all levels, from individuals to civilizations, it engenders awe and reverence. It is through language that people have built great societies, lifted mankind from despair, and breathed new life where there was little hope. Unfortunately, language has also unleashed its dark side over the ages and into the present, leading mankind to perpetrate unimaginable acts of cruelty, horror

dramatic fashion? What does it mean for us Bangalees as a people?

At an innocuous level, we see a heightened interest in Bangladesh in foreign languages. To serve such interests, a myriad language centers have opened shop selling some or other foreign language.

Clients stream to these places in droves and pay hefty prices to purchase this (language) product

that is packaged and promoted in innovative ways. How many of these shops package and promote the Bangla language? Where is its customer? Perhaps since the garden variety is available at home, why line up and pay?

But it is not the garden variety that interests me. Rather, I am interested in that variety that will do more than merely allow us to swim like fish in the tank. More to the point, I am interested in the transformational capacity of our language. I am interested in its value. Who would want to buy this (language) product? What is its market demand? Why does it not flourish? These questions must be pondered because the deeper

ramifications.

Take for example, the languages of the western world. Their demand is global and that demand is increasing. People from all over the world spend time and money to acquire them. The reverse is not true, at least not on a grand scale. And the more we devote our limited time to their language, the less time we have to build our own and make it a competitive entity. After all, time represents a zero-sum game: the more we spend on theirs, the less time we have for ours.

So what of it? Here's the twist. With knowledge of their languages and the ideas they spawn, people from other parts of the world, including Bangladesh, begin to partake in more in their ideas, offerings and creations. Thus, when thirsty, they are programmed to think of a carbonated beverage (say Coke or Pepsi) instead of the local lassi. When hungry, Pizza Hut seems more attractive than the kabab roll. And when thinking of entertainment, a foreign movie drifts into mind-space. The priorities shift and all the while the grip of the new language tightens as it steers its adopters toward bigger needs to be satisfied by its offerings, to the detriment of the local offering that was not well supported by its language.

Now, it's not that their products have not delivered any value. Who can complain of the cool refrigerated soft drink on a sultry summer day? Or the trip to Cox's Bazaar in a smooth SUV? Or the cell phone that provides immediate access? Or that entertaining movie or book? But the real gains and losses are never added up. Not only do we end up consuming more products from there; we also take up occupations that are carved out of their language to support and build their edifice further. Even our knowledge centres, the universities, instead of generating indigenous knowledge, use their knowledge products that in some way are connected to their way of life. Eventually, the graduates of these universities, our intellectual capital, will find their way into the western system that waits with open arms!

The foreign languages intrude in other ways as well. As their attractions draw away the younger generation to distant lands, they leave behind families, parents, associations, heritage, and history to help sustain and build new ones, to pursue a dream concocted by another language. Why has our language failed to concoct such dreams?

Over time, inexorably, we will have acquired not only their language and its products, but also their cultures, philosophies and ways of life. Extrapolate this thought and it may become apparent how we will have been entrapped in their language and gradually drawn into a system of thoughts and ideas that



will override ours ... slowly but surely. The aftermath is the extinction of some languages and their heritages while others gain ascendancy. In fact, many languages have actually become extinct today in the competitive

melee of other languages. Not surprisingly, their cultures have also changed and taken on new colors.

Don't get me wrong though: I do not ascribe any evil intent behind this inexorable trend and the imperceptible but steady

metamorphosis that is under way. But rest assured that, having adopted their language, we are changing and becoming more like them rather than the reverse. And with it we relinquish control! In Darwinian terms, the fittest will ultimately take it all.

So, where do we go from here? The easiest path is to let things be; let our language sink or swim -- come what may. The consequence of taking this path is quite predictable. The option is to find ways to harness and strengthen the creative potential of our language to take on the competition. The other alternative is to pursue a multilingual path to gain from foreign languages while preserving our own. But that will require vision, resources, a solid educational infrastructure, and an enlightened leadership that can make our language more vital and value-generating. For far too long we, along with other nations, have been mired in the language of conflict, division, despair, and duplicity. We must remind ourselves that the competitive pressures on our language are stiff and merciless. Left to its own devices, the price to be paid, down the line, may be devastating.

The author is Editor, Journal of Bangladesh Studies.

Putin lures the Middle East

IMRAN KHALID

RUSSIAN President Vladimir Putin is a shrewd strategist -- perhaps more astute than his American counterpart when it comes to the effective usage of diplomatic muscle to promote and safeguard the political, military and economic interests of his country.

His recent visit to the Middle East was a corroboration of his ability to play safe through diplomacy.

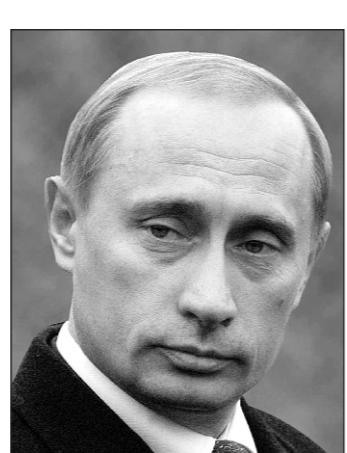
He went to the region with three clear and well-defined objectives; knitting together a gas cartel, exploring the business opportunities and the Middle East arms market for the Russian weapon industry, and projecting Russia as a potential ally of the Arabs.

Not surprisingly, to the utter disdain of Washington, he successfully managed to achieve these objectives with a relative ease.

There is a growing feeling in Europe that Moscow is consciously working towards the establishment of a "gas cartel," stretching from Algeria to Central Asia, to use as a political and economic weapon in its dealings with Europe.

Although the officials of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GEFC), which was created in May 2001, claim it to be a talking-shop only and not a cartel-in-the-making, the Europeans are quite wary of its proceedings.

In a recent report by Nato's economic committee, there is a detailed description of how Moscow has been trying to draw



unknown number of Mi 17 helicopters to Saudi Arabia.

During the three-day tour that took him to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan, Putin consciously worked in the direction of increasing cooperation among the major gas producers, and even openly broached the possibility of the so-called gas cartel.

"Who said that we rejected the idea of creating a gas cartel? We haven't rejected anything. I said that it was an interesting proposition. Are we going to create this cartel, do we need it, that's another discussion," he said while responding to media reports about Moscow's controversial role in concocting a gas cartel.

Putin's visit to Qatar, which has the world's third largest gas reserves after Russia and Iran, was indirectly focused on selling the cartel idea. Whereas, in Saudi Arabia, his main intent was to project Russia as a potential and reliable partner who could provide "cost-effective" military hardware, as well as technological support in the field of telecommunication.

Apart from offering to build the much-needed civilian nuclear-energy technology in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, Putin announced that Russia would launch six Saudi-made information satellites for Saudi Arabia this year.

At the same time, he discussed the possibility of selling 150 Russian T-90 battle tanks and an

anxiety among its close, traditional allies in the region.

In such a shaky scenario, where President Bush is finding it hard to assuage the genuine apprehensions of the regional leaders, Putin, being a shrewd player, has made a move to carve a role for Russia in the Middle East political arena.

To achieve this, Putin is even ready to swallow the involvement of some Arab countries' alleged supporters to the Chechen fighters.

In fact, during his Middle East yatra, he kept on chanting the unusual mantra of Russia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious complexion, and the role of Russian Muslims in the development of the country.

In its capacity as a member of the Quartet -- along with the US, the European Union and the United States -- Russia has been involved in the Middle East process, but its involvement has always been eclipsed by the belligerent attitude of Washington, which has close ties with both Tel Aviv and the Arab capitals.

President Bush's fiasco in Iraq, and his desperation to "show" some progress in the Palestinian issue, put Putin in the last half of his stint have certainly provided an opportunity to Vladimir Putin to jump into the fray and encroach upon the Americans' influence in the Middle East.

The apparent success of his recent Middle East visit indicates that Putin's strategy is working well.

Dr Imran Khalid is a freelance contributor to The Daily Star.

Pakistan's problems

The Pakistani state has become weak as its functionaries have expanded their role to include being the manipulators of domestic politics and dealers in urban real estate. Pakistan must become an effective state run under its constitution and the rule of law. Otherwise, it will continue to be a victim of terrorism as well as an alleged safe haven for terrorists.

HUSAIN HAQQANI

THE outgoing US ambassador to Pakistan, Ryan Crocker, has attempted to resolve the apparent contradiction between Washington's view of General Pervez Musharraf as a critical ally in the war against terrorism and intelligence about terrorists still operating out of Pakistan.

There has been fighting terrorists for several years and its commitment to counter-terrorism remains firm," Mr. Crocker told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee at the hearing on his nomination as US ambassador to Iraq. The challenge faced by Pakistan in coming to terms with Taliban fighters along its border with Afghanistan, he explained, lies in a lack of "capacity."

As suicide bombings and general lawlessness illustrate the insecurity of millions of Pakistanis, Pakistan's self-congratulating elite can now sit in the comfort of its drawing rooms and debate a new issue. What is worse, being doubted for lack of commitment as an American ally or being recognized as an incapable one?

Clearly, from the US point of view the task expected of Pakistan is not being accomplished. One implication of Mr. Crocker's assessment is that Pakistan must

now brace itself for pressure in improving its capacity. Alternatively, it would have to allow other US allies, possibly NATO, to complete the task to which General Musharraf is committed but which Pakistan's military and law enforcement machinery are unable to do.

There are arguments in Mr. Crocker's faint praise for Pakistan that must not go unheeded. Mr. Crocker is an old-school diplomat who wants to deal with the world as it exists. He opposed the Iraq war, rejecting the idea of some neo-conservatives that instability can somehow be constructive. Traditional, "realist" diplomacy hinges on preserving the status quo in the interest of the United States.

Finding friendly rulers and then bolstering their capacity to fulfill strategic objectives has been the mainstay of US foreign policy in the greater Middle East for years. For this policy to work, US diplomats must gloss over the flaws and weaknesses of allies and ensure a constant flow of military and economic assistance. The aid, and the dependence that results from it, is supposed to buy the US influence.

Concerns about democracy and human rights must be played down and critics must be assured that "slow but sure reform" is on its way. The economic growth that results from injection of large doses of aid,

Eventually the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed and the clever diplomacy of its many smart statesmen, including Prince Metternich, failed to save the day.

Ambassador Crocker has conducted himself successfully in Pakistan, retaining General Musharraf's confidence and helping the general preserve his lifeline to Washington. The only thing the realists in the United States seek from Pakistan is full cooperation in tracking down Al-Qaeda operatives and shutting down the Taliban who have become a serious threat to stability in Afghanistan.

As he leaves Pakistan to deal with the mess in Iraq, Ambassador Crocker has communicated a subtle message to the military regime in Islamabad, which he has done much to save from the wrath of America's "constructive instability" visionaries.

General Musharraf and his colleagues need to redefine their priorities and rebuild the capacity of the Pakistani state in the areas where it is lacking -- counter-terrorism, law enforcement, limiting non-state armed groups.