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‘There isn’t a target in Afghanistan worth a \$1m missile’

Mohamed Heikal

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Mohamed Heikal, the Arab world’s foremost political commentator, talks to Stephen Moss

It feels surreal to be talking to Mohamed Heikal, the Arab world’s most respected political commentator and the former foreign minister of Egypt, in the lounge of Claridge’s, one of London’s swishest hotels. As the missiles rain down on Afghanistan, Heikal unveils his vision of the possible chaos ahead to the accompaniment of a tinkling piano and a lilting clarinet. Rarely has the gulf between west and east, first world and third, seemed so great.

Heikal, an effortlessly urbane 78-year-old, spans those worlds and unpicks the hypocrisies of each. He has been a journalist for almost 60 years, was editor and chairman of the influential Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* for almost 20, and has written a dozen highly regarded books on Egypt and Iran. From the first days of the revolution, he was close to President Nasser, and was briefly -- and reluctantly -- his minister of information and foreign affairs in 1970. He enjoyed an equally close but rather more volatile relationship with President Sadat, who imprisoned him in 1981 for opposing the Camp David negotiations.

Heikal can see no logic in the attack on Afghanistan. For a start, he says, there is nothing there worth attacking. "I have seen Afghanistan, and there is not one target deserving the \$1m that a cruise missile costs, not even the royal palace. If I took it at face value, I would think this is madness, so I assume they have a plan and this is only the first stage."

He also questions whether Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network were solely responsible for the September 11 attacks, arguing that the limited evidence so far presented is far from convincing. "Bin Laden does not have the capabilities for an operation of this magnitude. When I hear Bush talking about al-Qaida as if it was Nazi Germany or the communist party of the Soviet Union, I laugh because I know what is there. Bin Laden has been under surveillance for years: every telephone call was monitored and al-Qaida has been penetrated by American intelligence, Pakistani intelligence, Saudi intelligence, Egyptian intelligence. They could not have kept secret an operation that required such a degree of organisation and sophistication."

Heikal gives little credence to suggestions that a more central planning role may have been played by Bin Laden's nominal deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. "He is dangerous and was involved in the assassination of Sadat, but he is not a great thinker or a great planner. He played a peripheral role in the assassination, which itself was marked by superficial planning and only succeeded because of luck. As their interviews with *al-Jazeera* showed, Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri rely on nothing but their instincts. This is not Hamas or the Muslim Brotherhood, this is an isolated minority who reflect neither Islam nor our times. They are the historic residue of oppression; they don't represent the future."

There may, Heikal believes, be some as yet undiscovered element in the atrocity of September 11. Whatever the truth, he says that the explanations so far have been hasty, inconclusive and remarkably convenient. "I understand that the American administration wanted an enemy right away to hit, to absorb the anger of the American people," he says, "but I wish they had produced some real evidence. I read what Mr Blair said in the House of Commons carefully: they had prepared the atmosphere for that statement by saying he is going to reveal some of the proof, but there is no proof, nothing; it is all deductions. Colin Powell was more honest than anybody: he said if not this, it doesn't matter, he has committed so many other crimes that necessitate taking action against him. But that is like the Chinese proverb: 'Hit your wife every day; if you don't know the reason, she does.' You can't do it this way."

It is important, Heikal says, to differentiate between the powerful anti-American feeling throughout the Middle East and the response to the attack on the World Trade Centre. "I know there were some demonstrations by people who expressed happiness," he says, "but they are not representative. People in the Middle East know what terrorism means. When tourists were shot at Luxor, there was indignation in Egypt. On the other hand, there is an unbelievable degree of anti-American feeling all over the area."

The reasons for that loathing of the US are, he says, easy to pinpoint -- the Americans' "blind" support for Israel and their backing for illegitimate, discredited regimes across the Middle East. He castigates every government in the region, including his own, and blames the US for propping them up. "The people did not choose these governments and in any free election none of them would succeed. They are not legitimate governments; they do not represent anything other than power."

This is bad enough, but the fact that the US -- the shining city on the hill -- colludes with them is even worse. "The US supports the status quo whatever it is. They talk about democracy and then ignore it; they talk about the UN and ignore it; in every way you can accuse them of double standards. It is revolting to see them talking about democracy and then supporting undemocratic regimes. They talk about international legitimacy and then support what the Israelis are doing." All this is said with an analyst's precision, rather than an orator's passion.

So will Islam now rally to the cause of Afghanistan? Heikal says there is little direct sympathy for the Taliban, who he describes as being "out of this world". He relates the story of Mullah Omar Mohammed, the Taliban leader, attending a meeting of Islamic leaders in Pakistan and refusing to sit down until a picture was removed from the room. "But that is Jinnah," [Mohammed Ali Jinnah led Pakistan to independence in 1947] protested his

Pakistani hosts. "Who is Jinnah?" he replied. He also failed to recognise Yasser Arafat. Heikal tells the story to demonstrate that just as the problems of the Middle East fail to register on Mullah Omar's radar, so the Taliban is not the key issue for the rest of the region.

Nevertheless, as a symbol of American imperialism, the attack on Afghanistan is potent, and there are likely to be far-reaching repercussions, especially if Iraq and other countries in the region are added to the target list. Inevitably, says Heikal, when there is a vacuum, Islam -- a ready-made cultural unifier and the answer to the region's multiple identity crises -- is there to fill it. He identifies Pakistan as the country most likely to be destabilised. "There is a danger that the action will bring down the Pakistani regime," he says. "It could create a split in the army, where many of the officers are pro-Islamic. The worst-case scenario is chaos with no one strong enough to take over, and that chaos could easily spread into the Middle East." He also says that Turkey is vulnerable, despite the army's self-proclaimed role as the bastion of secularism.

Standing behind everything is the issue of Palestine -- unresolved and apparently unresolvable. "The current crisis in Afghanistan can spill over into other countries," says Heikal, "but the chronic crisis is the Palestinian issue." He is pessimistic about any compromise, recalling the telegram sent to the Zionist leader, Theodor Herzl, by the two rabbis he dispatched to Palestine to look at the land that might form the state of Israel: "The bride is beautiful but she is married."

His solution is a Palestinian state and "an Israel for all its citizens", where the million Arabs are not second-class citizens. "The most important thing is to get religion out," he says. "You are talking to me about a Muslim state, yet you are not discussing a Jewish state -- a state built on religion. That cannot be. Religion can be no basis for a state."

He has no faith in the current softening of the American line towards the Palestinians, which he says is a replica of their approach during the Gulf war. "Whenever the US needs the Arabs, they are ready to offer a carrot," he says. "In 1991 the Arab world was lured into the Gulf war against Iraq because they were promised that they would be compensated by a just solution of the Palestinian problem. The Americans sent letters of reassurance to all the parties and the Arab states went to Madrid to negotiate on the basis of those assurances. It is 10 years since Madrid and nothing has happened. Now the same scenario is being repeated. Strangely enough, it is even the same people -- Cheney, Powell, a Bush. It is as if nothing has changed. People in the Arab world will see that our leaders are deceived again. Those who repeat their lessons are very bad pupils, and we are very bad pupils. We don't learn from our mistakes, so we are doomed to repeat them."

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