

Just back from a tour of South-East Asia, the American Enterprise Resident Scholar Joshua Muravchik and author of [\*The Future of the United Nations: Understanding the Past to Chart a Way Forward\*](#), [\*Covering the Intifada\*](#) and [\*Heaven on Earth\*](#) (among others) sat down with the International Affairs Forum for an extensive and refreshingly candid interview. The interview opened asking him about the experiences he brought back from his trip. By Jens F. Laurson. (4/20/2006)



**International Affairs Forum:** Is there anything in particular that struck you on your recent trip to Asia?

**Dr. Joshua Muravchik:** I went to several conferences mostly with Middle Easterners – finishing in Europe. On my way to Europe, I stopped in Japan for a couple days. Everywhere I went I gave a lecture at the US Embassy as part of the public activities sponsored by the State Department. The most interesting part was the Malaysia leg of the trip where I was part of a conference on West-Islam dialogue sponsored by a NYU program and an organization that is an arm of the Malaysian government which the Government played up as a large event – which came all at the heart of the Danish cartoon incident. The Malaysian government, which is currently the chair of the Islamic conference and also is a large trading partner with the US sees itself as a kind of bridge – or it would like to be seen as this kind of bridge – and so took great interest in promoting this conference and spoke about making it an annual conference in Kuala Lumpur.

what I found striking about the Southeast Asian Muslims was how much more hostile and difficult they tend to be than Arab interlocutors at similar conferences in the Middle East. That surprised me because we have this notion that the Muslims of

Southeast Asia are more ‘gentle’ or more moderate than Middle Eastern Muslims. At least that is what I experienced it at this conference. Of course this may be an unrepresentative sample but I also made a trip to the University of Malaysia and I found that the students in the audience there, too, were much more bitter and angry than at a similar lecture I made at the University of Cairo. The Cairo students wanted to argue – they disagreed with what I had to say – but they wanted to argue in an open way. They could agree to disagree but keep talking and see if we can narrow the differences between us or try to understand each other better. Whereas the Malaysian students were, for the most part, just angry and hostile.

**IAF:** Is it a matter of class and elites? Perhaps that those among the Arab educated class tend to be a more elitist? Certainly less democratic. Perhaps the less hostile youngsters in Egypt wouldn't be found at the Cairo University.

**JM:** I think they would be. They might not deign to come to the lecture by an American speaker. But Cairo university is not an elite circle – it has a huge number of students.

**IAF:** Who was the representative from the West at the conference?

**JM:** The other Americans were Max Boot and Ron Leyman who is the head of the Livermore lab –

**IAF:** And non-American Westerners?

**JM:** Boot, Leyman, and I were sort of the bad guys – the more conservative attendees. There were some Europeans – Timothy Garton Ash for example; a correspondent from *Le Monde* who was perhaps the most outspoken on freedom of the press in regards to the cartoon issue.

**IAF:** What's your opinion on the bounds between freedom of the press and respect for religious or cultural sensitivities?

**JM:** A couple points – publication of the cartoons is protected by any reasonable notion of freedom of the press and those who say that government should stop this don't understand anything about freedom of the press. Secondly, the cartoons were in bad taste and while the papers who published them had a perfect right to publish them, I'm not sure they should've been published.

**IAF:** It wasn't necessary to assert that right at that point?

**JM:** I think the American press– although it is very zealous about its freedom – is very careful not to publish things that may be taken as ethnic insults. There have, in the last five years, an increasing number of anti-Semitic cartoons in European press that would never appear in the American press. Nothing in America is illegal – we don't have a rule against Holocaust denial – but something to be taken as insulting to an ethnic group is taken as not a proper thing to do. I think the standards here may be a little different.

Whether they are or not, I agree with the American norm that **a)** you have a complete right to do this but **b)** you shouldn't do something that's insulting to an ethnic group. But **c)**, I don't think all these demonstrations had anything to do with the

cartoons. I think it was an underlying and deep-seeded emotion of rage against the West that seizes on every and any pretext it can to express itself. Last time it was the allegation that someone had put a Koran in one of the toilets at the Guantanamo. Under careful examination it turned out that in the only incident where there was some real evidence it had been done by an inmate.

This past week in Iraq there was a very important Shiite shrine destroyed. Then a number of Sunni mosques were destroyed in retaliation. Have there been a number of mass, angry protests – violent or peaceful – by Sunnis or Shia any place outside of Iraq about these desecrations? As far as I know there have been none. Presumably, blowing up this important Shiite shrine is a bigger offense, at least against Shiite Islam, than these cartoons – so why, even just in Shiite countries or population centers, haven't there been huge, angry demonstrations against the latter...not to mention violence?

And if you look at the cartoons, they were very insipid. They didn't really stick the needle in, in the way the anti-Semitic cartoons in the Muslim press do every week in Europe. So there's obviously something else going on there.

**IAF:** For one, there were those three cartoons that were not actually published but still taken on a tour of the Middle East by a Danish Imam – and these were considerably more offensive...insinuating pedophilia, bestiality. Meanwhile, from the outside the reaction to the cartoons made it difficult to remain tolerant toward the protesters. But the reason why they remain quiet on internal issues but went nuts in this case must also have to do with the fact that these people have no outlet for political discontent other than if it's against the West. If, for a lot of people in the region, that is the only time they can protest, and protest violently – are these protests not in part caused by the lack

opportunities of the discontented to express themselves?

**JM:** I don't know – but I'm not satisfied with that explanation. We know that a number of the regimes tried to encourage and stoke this rage and demonstrations for their own purposes. We know the governments of Iran and Syria did that and even (thanks to the exposé by the New York Times) the government of Egypt.

**IAF:** If it's not just the lack of freedom, is there a lost generation involved in drowning in their own hatred of anything West?

**JM:** They *are* involved in drowning in their hatred of anything West. I don't understand exactly why – I understand that they feel they're weak and we're strong, anger at the existence of Israel and American support of Israel, American troops in Iraq etc. – but I don't think these are first causes. There was a tremendous rage against American before the invasion of Iraq. There was tremendous rage at the US over our action against Afghanistan. That was not necessarily very reasonable. You could make a case against the US going against Iraq, but into Afghanistan, it was pretty cut and dried. There was an attack on us that came out of Afghanistan. So we struck back. It's hard to see why they'd be justified being angry at us about that.

When I was in Malaysia, there were pictures of protestors in Indonesia...one of them carrying a sign that read "Freedom of the Press + War Against Terrorism = War Against Islam". We hear this a lot, not this exact equation, but that we are in some kind of war against Islam. Even if you understand people not liking us invading Iraq or even if it was wrong to invade Iraq, what we did was oust a militantly secular dictator and replace him with an elected government that is religiously devout. So how does that add up to a war against Islam? In a way, this is a war *for* Islam.

**IAF:** Something must have gone wrong between the first Gulf War and sometime before the invasion of Afghanistan. Not that the first Gulf War was a hit with the populace in the Middle East, but it wasn't opposed in any way that the local governments felt unsafe to support it.

**JM:** Maybe... in varying degrees... although we heard a lot back then about how the Arab Street would be enraged about an American invasion of their area. There was an Arab League meeting and they told us to keep out – and when we pushed ahead, one by one, a lot of governments decided to work with us. I think the Saudi government, because it was directly threatened, supported us. But I am only saying that I think you're painting the picture too starkly. But there was certainly a big difference in the degree of opposition. And it's much more severe now than then.

**IAF:** Was it the presence of our troops in Saudi Arabia that continuously fuelled the flames for those who had hatred on their minds?

**JM:** No, I think the hostility was there beforehand, that you have to read it the other way around. This ongoing problem was moderated, eased at that time because of the fact of the destruction of another Arab country –there were several who felt threatened by Saddam. I think that there was pretty widespread view against Iraq's actions in the Arab world, although not unanimous by any means. The Palestinians were very supportive of Hussein, as was Jordan. I don't know about the public opinion of the Jordanians; I think the Palestinian public was very supportive of Saddam. In a sense irrationally: why would they support Iraq against Kuwait when thousand of Palestinians were employed in Kuwait who would send money back home. Just because Saddam was beating his chest and postured as a rejectionist?

**IAF:** Have we been the catalyst, the focus for their hatred to unite against us? and is there any way out other than... wiggle?

**JM:** I don't know. I do believe that, in the long run, the policy of trying to promote democracy is our best hope. Democracy can make people more reasonable – that is, this rage against the west is completely unreasonable, very visceral. “Freedom of the press plus the war on terror equals war against Islam”? – What the fuck are you talking about? – ? Do you *think*? What in the world can someone who says this be thinking? I mean, this is completely cockamamie.

**IAF:** The question then is: Do we actually want a democracy in a country like that? Where people often... under-appreciate logic? Can we afford the transition time between these kinds of people gaining a say in their countries' affairs and the time it takes to make them more reasonable?

**JM:** It's a chicken and egg question. The question is if it's possible for them to learn to think more reasonably. At least in the context of experiencing freedom and democracy where they are **a)** exposed to a free press and **b)** where there will be a greater experience for having responsibility for your own life and life situations. If you're miserable because you're government is stealing everything from you and you elected that government then maybe you learn something about “Why did you vote for that guy?” You get another chance to try to think hard about who you vote for next time.

**IAF:** There's a glimmer of hope for places like Kenya where, after 25-some years, people come to the realization that they shouldn't elect corrupt officials. But that takes a long time – can we afford that time? Especially as Muslims are currently hot-headed, perhaps somewhat irrational, electing a government that we really don't like; yet that being the only way of them eventually maturing into a state where we

can deal with them, we can argue with them, we can disagree, civilly...

Certainly Hamas got elected in the Palestinian territories. mostly, perhaps, because Fatah was just disgustingly corrupt and Hamas does, apparently, reasonably respected work at the local level. But that's not to say that people who voted for them didn't also like that fact that they are a terrorist organization.

**JM:** I think that's true. I think the outcome of that election was overdetermined. There are always differences – we listened to this debate: did they vote for Hamas for this reason or for that reason: I think they voted for the package.

I think the idea of trying to push for more freedom and democracy is a risky strategy. I'm in favor of taking the risk. It might come out badly. But certainly it's likely to take some time in which you may have some 'funny' people elected. But I don't know any other way to do it.

There is this literature that says, like Fareed Zakaria, 'ideally, you don't want democracy right away, you want rule of law and economic liberalization first. Great...well, how are you going to get that? It's like your sitting in global politics with your own monopoly set...

**IAF:** ...installing your own dictator?

**JM:** Yes, right... Let's take the generic General/Dictator: You can't rely on him to do what you want. There have been many more disastrous ones than benign ones. A few times in history, we supported or promoted dictators (although we haven't done it nearly as often as we've been accused of doing it), but when we've done it, it has again and again come out badly. I suppose the most successful one was when we installed the Shah of Iran. Which worked very nicely for a period of time. But then we've been paying the price for it ever since. So we had about 26 good years with him in power but he's been out for 27 years



– which haven't been that good. And that was the best we could do!. The other case is where the US installed a dictator is Guatemala. That country's history has been hellish for decades ever since.

**IAF:** If you put 'installed' in quotes, you could perhaps look south to Chile and Pinochet...

**JM:** We didn't really install him. There was some help in overthrowing Allende. I suppose you could argue that Pinochet worked out well, but there was a considerable amount of brutality.

**IAF:** Better than Iran certainly...both for most Chilean people and the U.S.?

**JM:** I don't think we installed Pinochet. Probably a more instructive example is Nicaragua where we *were* trying to install a dictator. Nicaragua was a mess after years of civil war, we got into it to clean things up, called by the various combatants asking us to come in to get leverage of their respective opponents. We, in really a pretty decent-spirited way, we did send the Marines in. We said 'we're going to find a really clean guy to run this place'. All the armed forces there were aligned with different political parties so we said 'this is no good'. We need to have an objective national guardian who is only interested in defending the nation. We thought the most upstanding, righteous guy was Somoza – so we put him in. And he made the country his private property for forty years. So I don't think there's any way you can predict what happens, much less plan out in advance political change and development, economic liberalization and then rule of law and civil society and then democracy. There simply is no method for getting there and carrying this out.

If you take a country like Egypt, they've been talking about economic liberalization for years but it goes nowhere. And it is a

big question of whether you will get there *unless* you have some big political change.

**IAF:** Either through accountability, at least a minimum of corruption – neither of which is present in Egypt...

**JM:** No. Neither are. And the government, to the highest level, is so enmeshed of corruption. As I was told when I was there recently at the embassy, that one of the reasons Mubarak would not give up power is that he didn't want to have any investigations their conduct.

There are he, his son Gamal, and his other son Alaa, who's a businessman. Now there's a law that any foreigner that registers and automobile – for safety purposes, must have, in that automobile, *two* fire extinguishers in the car. Not one, but two! Have you been there? Road safety isn't an idea that has gotten very far in Egypt, mind you. Egyptians must have one fire extinguisher. Fire extinguishers are imported and done so by one company that has a monopoly on the importation of fire extinguishers. And is owned by Mubarak's son. Who, doubtlessly, counsels with legislators who pass the laws.

**IAF:** Corruption seems to be - in Africa, the Middle East – every developing country, actually, the biggest problem to any development, civil or economic...

**JM:** And how do you get civil society? They insist any NGO must be licensed by the government, so how do you get rule of law? So if Zakaria has Mr. X, and our plan is, somehow we're going to maneuver to put him in power in Egypt, and we have assurances that he is then going to end corruption, create economic liberalization etc. etc.. Well, there's no way we can orchestrate that.

**IAF:** We can't guarantee the person, we can't easily get them in position, and if so, can almost guarantee that any person that gets in power... Well, power corrupts...

Prussian bureaucracy ca. 1890 might actually do serve some countries really well, although that's an unpalatable solution.

**JM:** I think that's absolutely right. But you have to bring back Prussia. Americans may be going around the world, dropping bombs but we have no avocation for "Empire".

**IAF:** In the traditional sense of "Empire"...

**JM:** That's right – without getting into semantic quibble about what we do today is empire. But what you are talking about, rule of place and installing good government is simply not feasible. The point to me is that democratization is very risky and could lead to some bad things. But it seems more a plausible, a more meaningful strategy than saying 'let's have good dictators'. That's not a strategy.

**IAF:** That reminds of Churchill's "Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms"

**JM:** If people say it's very hard for us to install, impose, inspire democracy someplace else: Okay, it's hard but we've actually done it a lot – with mostly, although not always, good result.

**IAF:** Some say inspire, not impose –

**JM:** Yes. Although there's something in between where you don't use military force but use a lot of points of influence to make it happen. We do have some sense of how to do that even though we don't always succeed. But the idea of installing a good dictator who will lead a country down the path of South Korea – we don't know how to do that. For the reasons you mentioned before: How do you pick the person, how to get him into power, how to assure yourself that he stays the way he was, once he takes power...

**IAF:** Moving on to Iran –**IAF:** Some people argue that nuclear weapons give governments more of a sense of responsibility –

**JM:** I've never heard of that. I think the opposite is probably true. Did the Soviet Union have a sense of responsibility – well, it didn't launch WWII but that wasn't because *they* had nuclear weapons it was because we had nuclear weapons. It certainly fermented wars all over the world. It did lots of destructive things. They were more irresponsible. If the situation had remained where the US had a monopoly I think the Soviets across the board would have been more cautious about fermenting conflict.

I would like someone to name for me one single government that became observably more responsible because they had nuclear weapons –

**IAF:** Without another power also having nuclear weapons? Perhaps not. But in Pakistan and India there seems to have been a slight increase in reason and rationality – and certainly international attention – whenever they get to discussing Kashmir than there used to be. Now, with the 'doomsday machine' in the back of their minds. But back to Iran, you think they shouldn't have nuclear weapons?

**JM:** Sure.

**IAF:** Do you think we can prevent them from doing so?

**JM:** We can at least delay it.

**IAF:** Do you think it's in Iran's self interest not to have nuclear weapons?

**JM:** Yes.

**IAF:** Can you sell that to the Iranians?

**JM:** No, not to the Iranian government.

**IAF:** If you could sell it to the people, it might be enough...

**JM:** I don't think there's any way *we* can do that. If there were a change in government, a different kind of government, a civilized Iranian government could sell it to the people. In fact, quite easily. We've seen other countries who have given up nuclear arms and ambitions – South Africa for example.

**IAF:** It seems to me that the nuclear issue is 'hot' with Iranians now – a symbol of asserting themselves, of confidence, self-esteem; something for them to rally around.

**JM:** If you had a more civilized type of government that said we don't want nuclear weapons because we have no need for them and get us in a conflict with our neighbors, I don't think there'd be any resistance to it on the part of the Iranian public. The Ukraine did it...

Yes, the Iranian people are behind their government on this but their government is constantly lying about it. "It is our right to be a nuclear power"

**IAF:** Well, they're not lying about *that*, they're lying about their true motives...

**JM:** No, they're lying about their activities.

**IAF:** Are there any advantages to any country having nuclear arms?

**JM:** Sure. But for Iran, they're not valid because this regime is very likely to do something reckless. If it does, it will not only do terrible harm to others but terrible harm to themselves as well.

**IAF:** You don't think that the regime calculates that risk and decides it's better to survive rather than be annihilated for actually using nuclear weapons?

**JM:** I don't know. They're rather crazy and very unreasonable. They have this great

mystique of blood and death and martyrdom. I don't know what they would or wouldn't do at this point. And they have this terrible history of relentless support for terrorist groups – not just support but creating terrorist groups using their own diplomatic facilities to carry out terrorist actions. They do have this unreasoning hatred of Jews – they carried out the bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires – not a military installation, not an Israeli installation... So this is the kind of Hitleresque terrorism – so you can't expect any reasonableness with them

**IAF:** I suppose you can't easily, from a regime that outlaws Beethoven. But are they more irrational and unreasonable than Pakistan is these days...

**JM:** In the government? Yes! When I look at some of the demonstrations in Pakistan, that's pretty weird to me. But the Pakistan government? Sure.

**IAF:** So we better hope the Pakistan government stays in power and the street doesn't get a hold of it.

**JM:** Yes.

**IAF:** That's not a very democratic sentiment?!

**JM:** I'd like to see a transition back to democracy in Pakistan but that's not the same as these people in the street taking power.

**IAF:** (Let's hope the Pakistanis know that, too.) Thank you kindly for your time

