

SEPTEMBER 11, A YEAR LATER

Anti-Americanism unites the Arab world

Bush's support for Israel and the war he is preparing against Iraq dispel the shame and piety that the collapse of the Twin Towers provokes among moderates and progressives. By Javier Valenzuela

A decade ago, as the wars in Lebanon came to a close, Karim Sabbag began to study architecture in Paris. He spent his childhood and teenage years in Beirut, living life amid street battles, air bombings, car bombs, gunshots and kidnappings. Happy to see the conflict in his war-torn country come to an end, Sabbag returned to Beirut once his studies ended, ready to embark on a successful professional course during the second half of the 1990s. The country was thriving as it rebuilt itself and there was plenty of work for a graduate of architecture. So he made money; bought an apartment in the Corniche; decorated it with oriental furniture and a *avant-garde* French paintings and the latest developments in computing and technology; and he married a lawyer. A few weeks ago I had dinner in Sabbag's apartment overlooking the Mediterranean. To the right stood the rock known as Grotte Aux Piegons and to the left danced the lights of the Moviempick, a luxurious holiday resort that a Saudi prince recently opened. Beirut was full of tourists from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab

emirates and from other Gulf countries. "This is one of the positive effects of September 11 for Lebanon," says Sabbag. "Arabs are not comfortable in Europe or the United States anymore, there they are viewed with suspicion or branded as bin Laden's accomplices. That is why they choose to come here."

While King Fahd from Saudi Arabia returned this summer to Marbella, thousands of his patriots and neighbors instead chose the comfort and familiarity of nearby Beirut, with its decadent charm and five star hotels, its belly dancing shows, its prostitutes and its casinos. The rumor of a withdrawal of Saudi funds from the United States might not have been officially confirmed but it is clear that one of consequences of the brutal attacks on New York has been to chill the previously warm relationship between Washington and Riyadh. The corruption and despotism of the Saudi regime and its financing of a fundamentalist vision of Islam seems to have dawned on the United States, as if

the fact that bin Laden and many of the suicide terrorists were Saudi brought it all home to them.

Son to a Sunni Muslim and a Greek-orthodox Christian Karim, Sabbag comes from an upper middle-class family. The Paris graduate admired New York's Twin Towers at the end of the 1990s. He speaks Arab, French and English and he feels as comfortable in the West as in Lebanon. Sabbag is not

religious and he shirks when he hears about the radical practices and ideas of Islam. And yet, the night we met he had very harsh words against the United States in general and toward George W. Bush in particular. This calm young man would fly off the handle when started on Washington's support of Ariel Sharon's fierce policies: "What Sharon is doing to the Palestine people is the closest

thing to a genocide in a country that considers itself civilized and democratic." And his reaction was similar when talking about US war preparations against Iraq: "Saddam is a monster, but he has nothing to do with September 11, he's no threat for anyone". "This is not about the Arabs being paranoid, it's about Bush giving us enough reasons to feel humiliated, discriminated

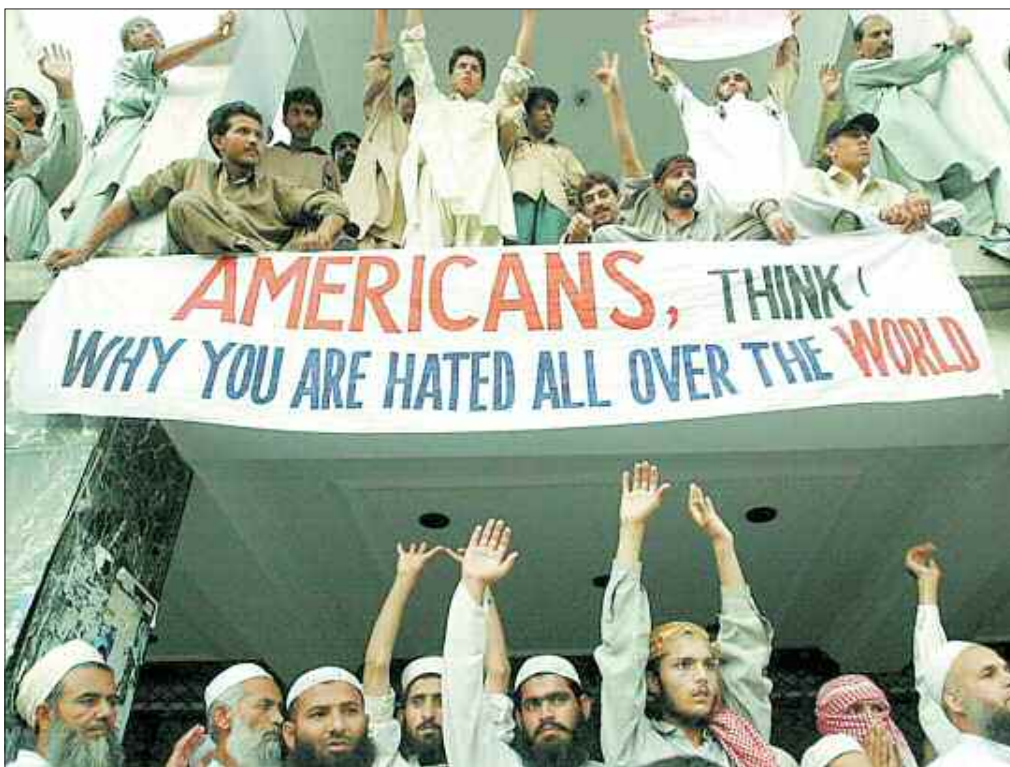
and threatened," argued Sabbag.

At the other tip of the Arab world, where the Mediterranean meets the Atlantic, Ali Lmbaret directs *Demain*, a weekly publication critical of Mohamed VI's slowness in promoting democratic and social change. Among other things this veteran journalist prides himself in having been the first Arab journalist to interview Benjamin Netanyahu when he was still Israel's prime minister. An interview for which he was branded as "a traitor and a Mossad spy" by many sectors of the Moroccan press. Based in Rabat, Lmbaret talked to *EL PAÍS* a few days ago. "I never thought one day I would agree with Abdelaziz Rantisi — leading member of Hamas — when he told a journalist that his organization would put a stop to suicide attacks once the Palestinian people have F16 planes, Apache helicopters and Merkava tanks. In the meantime Palestines defend themselves against an invader with one of the world's most powerful armies through the only means to hand," says Lmbaret in Spanish, a language he speaks as fluently as French and Arab.

Like so many Arabs who sat horrified before the broadcasts of the attack against the World Trade Center, the Moroccan journalist has a clear answer to what he feels are the consequences of September 11. "I'm more radical than ever before. The US response lacks focus and is excessive and its support to Sharon is unbearable. I realized I didn't stand alone when a few days ago I was watching a debate on Al Yazira between a Palestinian intellectual and a Hamas leader abroad. The intellectual had signed the letter asking for the halting of suicide attacks against Israel, and when viewers called in all they did was express their disagreement with him. Nobody backed him up."

In his house in Beirut's Corniche Karim Sabbag also watches Al Yazira, the Arab satellite TV channel. As we dined, Sabbag asked me about Spanish-Moroccan relations after the conflict of Perejil, an issue he followed closely through Al Yazira. The consolidation of this TV channel as the most reliable source of information in the Arab world in place of

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Pro-Taliban demonstration in Islamabad against the US. / AP

► **Morocco.** The situation is characterized by the fragmentation of power, the weakness of Yusufi's Socialist government and King Mohammed VI's indecisiveness over reform. Muslim moderates have emerged as a political force. The Moroccan regime has been benefited by September 11 through support from the United States and France over the future of Western Sahara, which excludes a referendum and guarantees Rabat's sovereignty while granting territorial autonomy for local peoples.

► **Algeria.** In addition to the decade-old civil war, there are tensions in the Berber region of Cabilia. September 11 benefited President

The Arab pulse, state by state

Buteflika. Algeria is now a Washington ally in the war against terrorism, and has provided ample information to the CIA and FBI.

► **Lybia.** Gadafy has maintained his prudent stance of recent years, but demands that the United States act according to UN rules.

► **Egypt.** Militant Islamic terrorist attacks in the Nile Valley have ceased. But Mubarak is in an uncomfortable position domestically, on account of Washington's support for Sharon, and possible mili-

tary action against Iraq. The country warns that the war on terrorism cannot be won without a Palestinian homeland.

► **Syria.** The strengthening of ties between Washington and Damascus continues. But Syria demands that a distinction be made between terrorism, and the fight against occupation, in which Palestinian movements and Hezbollah are involved.

► **Lebanon.** Continues to be in the eye of the storm. The Hairiri gov-

ernment rejects US demands to ban Hezbollah, which still counts on broad support.

► **Saudi Arabia.** With King Fahd ill and the economy less buoyant, the Saudis have been universally slammed for their integrationist vision of Islam. Their relation with Washington has deteriorated. Along with the majority of Arabs, they refuse to back an attack on Iraq.

► **Iraq.** Saddam is trying to forestall a US attack with gestures such as the elimination of the terrorist Abu Nidal, and its willingness to negotiate the return of UN weapons inspectors. Bush has not proved links between Saddam and September 11.

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The war in Afghanistan has forced hundreds of thousands of children into the workforce

Only 3 million of the 4.5 million children of school age are registered in the current school year

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 CNN or the often biased local news programs is another clear consequence of September 11. "Here we call CNN PNN, Pentagon News Network," said Sabbag. "At least Al Yazira reports in Arabic and from an Arab point of view."

Is there an Arab point of view? There was one in the decade of the 1960s, when the Egyptian *rais* under Nasser spread its ideas of a lay, left-leaning Pan-Arabism through a Cairo radio station, millions from Casablanca to Baghdad, tuned in. But Nasser's defeat to Israel in the Six Day War meant the death of Pan-Arabism. Islamism took its place in the following decades. The latter replaced the dream of the Arab *umma*, or community with that of the Muslim *umma*.

If there is anything remotely similar to a supranational Arab community today that is Al Yazira. Post-September 11 Morocco, Egypt and Lebanon saw TV sets tuned to Al Jazira. And the message was clear, Bush's response to September 11 only made US double standards starker: Everything for Israel, nothing for the Arabs.

"The Arab world has made no significant advances toward democracy, economic progress or social justice since September 11," says Diaa Rachwan, a political analyst in Cairo. This is partly because of US refusal to seriously analyze the causes behind Islamic terrorism and its failure to include in its reaction to the attacks a long-term policy to bolster political and socio-economic progress in the Arab and Muslim universe. "In this way the only changes we have witnessed is a growing anti-Americanism among people while governments made the most of the situation to strengthen their authoritarianism and repressive mechanisms," says the Egyptian analyst.

The good news is bin Laden has not made the jump from being viewed as a market leader — the clever man who escapes the mightiest power of all times — to an all-embracing leader. "Although bin Laden uses popular arguments like US military presence in Saudi Arabia; the embargo against Iraq and the suffering of the Palestinian people, his methods are too brutal for most to defend them openly," says Rachwan.

After the shame and slew of conspiracy theories — like that which stipulates wrongly there were no Jews in the Twin Towers — that followed September 11, Arabs are united in their resentment toward Bush.

ANGELES ESPINOSA, Madrid
 Amanullah doesn't know how hold he is. "Around 12," he says. As if it mattered. He has been an adult for years, almost since he stopped crawling and began to

rely on the streets to find a bite to eat and help his family. He is indifferent about his future: "I don't know," he shrugs. His elders live life like him: Beg, even if its for a job or seeking help from a humanitari-

an relief agency. And in any case, his mire is much more limited than barely seeing beyond his immediate task of coaxing a few afganis from the drivers traveling from Mazar to the Uzbek border.

To make a living, Amanullah and many more like him dredge sand out of the roads to prevent the encroaching dunes from swallowing it up. Barefoot and undernourished, Amanullah doesn't go to school. There's no time for that. He gets up at the break of dawn, he needs the time to make sure he will make 10,000 to 15,000 afganis — from 25 to 40 euro cents — before returning home in the evening. Home is a mud hut in the Sakhi camp for displaced people inside Afghanistan. Lying North of Mazar-i-Shariff, his family arrived here years ago, ousted by hunger and fear from the hamlet of Faizaband, close to Shibargan.

These are children who haven't had the chance to be young and act like minors. While most statistics say more than 50 percent of those in Afghan refugee camps are under the age of 18, these numbers do not take into account the fact that most Afghans are adults long before that. Out of necessity, of course. And the war has made necessity more piercing than ever before. In a poor country like this, all hands are working hands in rural areas, where 80 percent of the population lived before the war.

"Even if many of these children had never had the chance to go to school, before they could at least play under their families' care," says a Unicef report on the situation of minors in Afghanistan throughout the past decade. "As the conflict began to linger, children progressively moved into a different working environment in and outside of the family home," reads the report.

And you don't know how. Children are now apprentices, peddlers, shoe cleaners or newspaper vendors. And they are getting younger at the same pace as war and drought pushes toward the cities a whole destitute sector of the population. Most of them are from eight- to 14-years-old, but it is not unusual to find five-year-old boys working in the streets.



A US soldier searches a Pakistani Taliban prisoner in Afghanistan before repatriating him back to his home country. / REUTERS

There are others you never see. Girls, for instance, at that age go into domestic service or are taught to knit rugs at home.

There are no labor regulations in Afghanistan so there are no rules protecting minors from exploitation. Prior to the arrival of the Taliban in 1996, says Unicef, around 28,000 children worked in the streets of Kabul. Some 80 percent belonged to families of internal refugees. In Jalalabad numbers hovered around 5,500 and in Mazar-i-Sharif around 1,500.

The number of displaced children in the capital is around 50,000 today. No one knows for sure. "It shot up when the Taliban banned women from working.

Among families headed by widows, young boys became family heads," says Elke Wisch, a Unicef worker in Kabul. Now, the return of the refugees has inflated the troops of young workers. Wisch points out, however, that these children don't live in the streets. "In this country family ties are very strong and most of them have a home, however bismal."

"Many families have no choice but to put their children to work to meet the family's basic needs," says Erin More from Save the Children offices in Mazar-i-Sharif. "Many tell us they have been forced into the situation after the death of a parent or during the war," says Mone. The NGO

estimates the number of children working in the streets of Mazar today at 5,000, but the numbers could be considerably larger if we add those who work as servants.

Despite huge efforts on the part of the new administration and international agencies, only three million of Afghanistan's 4.5 million school-age children have registered in a school this year.

And most of those who do attend classes do so in precarious conditions. Most schools don't have chairs, books or any other teaching materials to engage in their battle against widespread illiteracy, which affects 53 percent of Afghan men and 85 percent of Afghan women.

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