

"IDÉES REÇUES SUR LE MONDE ARABE"

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Pierre Vermeren, is an expert in the affairs of the Arab world and North Africa, attempts in his book *"Inherited Ideas on the Arab world"* published by Le Cavalier Bleu Editions (Blue Knight) to portray the image of the Arab world in the Western mentality. The book exudes an aura of history and culture. It addresses current issues, with a range of ideas and inherited ready-made stereotypes, which fuelled the contemporary confrontation, to produce a growing anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiment in the ranks of the elite and the broad masses alike.

In the midst of these perceptions that at times result from neglect, and opposing political and civilizational ideologies at other times, room is made for those limited number of fair-minded researchers attempting to critically examine superficial ideas, and dissect their references and historical roots while strictly maintaining fidelity to scientific principles. This effort paves the way for a difference in the collective mind-set that allows the building of bridges and constructive relationships free from false presumptions of the Arab-Islamic world, which remains largely "unknown" outside its borders.

In this context, Pierre Vermean's pioneering scientific project falls under *"Inherited Ideas on the Arab world"* which brought together the contributions of a number of French writers in an attempt to begin reforming the mechanisms used to interact with the Arab-Islamic. This is necessary in light of its involvement in major world events during the last two years (revolutions, elections, tensions...). The Arab-Islamic world has become part of the daily meal of the international media that reflects the combined state of shock and concern about the geographical and civilizational fate of this region.

The book addresses these issues over a range of "thematic" discourses that cover multiple sectors and seek to identify Western stereotypical readings of these themes that re not subject to adequate scrutiny and objective criticism. This is approached through models of arguments focused sometimes on the evident axioms that are distorted in the Western public opinion. Another approach is to advocate a "scientific" approach that is not without its ideological motives or simplistic analyses that fail to comprehend the profound realities of the Arab-Muslim world.

The book's critique of the perceptions resulting from Western stereotypes

does not in fact seek to defend the Arab-Muslim world. In numerous places it analyses certain 'inherited' statements to the extent that it is attributable or disproves other 'inherited' statements. Rather, the book seeks to expose the structural shortcomings in the Western view as evidence of its "excitement" and "violence" in a broad field of culture and geography that consecrate its rigid and narrow folkloristic view.

The book is divided into six themes that include "History," "Peoples and Nations," "Religion and Society," "Petroleum and Development," "France and the Arabs," and the "Arab Spring." In what follows, are examples of typical Western statements that were subjected to scrutiny and commentary.

Pierre Vermeran and the authors analyses a number of prominent themes on the subject beginning with the defeat of the Byzantines the conquest of Andalusia, which fell under Muslim control for eight centuries, the Battle of Poitiers, which pertains to the Arabs invasion of Europe, the liberation of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, the failure of the siege of Vienna by the Ottomans, the wave of colonization, the Islamic revolution in Iran, the rising power of Islamic movements, and the al-Qaeda attacks. These are major events that form the "belligerent" attitude adopted by many Westerners when recalling the history of the relationship between the Christian West and the Muslim world.

French researcher Paul Balta writes that since the seventh century the collective memory of Europe was occupied with Muslim control of Jerusalem, through the leadership of Saladin. The first ready-made ideas were focused on the "Knights of Allah" with swords shaped like the crescent, as opposed to the swords shaped as crosses. From that time, the public image of Islam in the West was as the prime enemy. On the other hand, Balta notes that, till today, the Arab-Muslim imagination retains the memory of eight waves of the Crusades, as the embodiment of the aggressive face of the West, along with the expulsion of Muslims from Andalusia during the Reconquista wars.

With the advent of colonialism from the 19th century onwards, the Arabs considered colonialism as an appeal of the Crusades. This is interesting given that relations between the two worlds, for long periods, enjoyed various important and fruitful exchanges, to the extent that strong political alliances were concluded such as that between Suleiman the Magnificent and King Francois I, for the purpose of encouraging other European rulers such as the House of Habsburg in the reign of Charles V for Francois and the Czar of Russia.

The religious factor is present in the formation of stereotypes on both sides, but Balta points out that direct physical factors, along with the recurrent nature of political behaviours exercised greater impact on the general provisions towards the other.

In this context, the researcher discussed the "positive" results of Bin Laden's attacks on America in some sectors of Arab-Muslim public opinion, but were a shock to the Western public opinion. He attributes it to the public frustration

of the continuing tragedy in Palestine and the destruction of Iraq, noting that Arab and Muslim elites denounced the al-Qaeda attacks, including prominent Islamic leaders in Hezbollah and Al-Azhar. However, these positions have not yet attained their share of media proliferation. It seems that the West only listens to what it wants to hear.

Pierre Vermeren refers to the position of Andalusia in the Islamic imagination, which according to him, constituted the peak power of the Islamic world, which imposed its will on Christian Europe. It is a vision that contrasts against the deterioration of the Muslim world since the 19th century, and its subsequent fall into the clutches of colonialism. For its part, the European memory tends to glorify the Andalusian era as a means to reducing the burden of guilt towards the genocide of the Jews and the horrors of the war in Algeria. Andalusia constitutes a reference to the possibility of tolerance and creative coexistence among believers of the three monotheistic religions. The author considers that the setbacks and the wars that the world has known in the late twentieth century led many to evoke fond memories of Andalusia. Pierre Vermeren considers this position to be more ideology than historically because the history of Andalusia is not as well-known, as it should be.

On the other hand, although many nations have known the illumination of science and philosophy, the emergence of great intellectuals such as Maimonides and Ibn Rushd, whose illuminating knowledge transferred to Medieval Europe, the flip side of the history of "Paradise" is the burning of the books of the philosopher Ibn Rushd by King James Mansour and harassment of religions other than Islam.

The French researcher notes that Muslims consider victory in the battle for control of Jerusalem a divine victory. In contrast, the loss of Andalusia is considered divine punishment. Such is the reading contributed to by the Salafi fathers since the end of the 19th century. The gist of their claims is the deterioration of the Arab-Muslim world in the colonial period imposes a return to the origins of Islam, to those of the founding fathers who opened the ancient world through strict adherence to the teachings of Islam. From here, Andalusia, according to the French scholar, is idealized not because it was a land of tolerance between the three religions, but because it was the embodiment of the divine force that bestowed on Muslims this generous land. He concludes from this context that "Andalusia is a book read by every intellectual current according to its peculiar ideological views."

Paul Balta refers to the issue of Arab expansion and the global changes associated with it. At a time when the barbarians invaded Rome signifying its fall into darkness for 1000 years, Islam progressed after the initial stages of combat, based on the strength of its belief in the Muhammadan message of absolute monotheism embodied in the declaration "no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God." In addition, for Balta, Muslim rulers did not seek the

conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, because that would mean “the loss of tribute money.” Such a reading separate us from our current era. This French researcher envisaged with some degree of objectivity, that many Egyptian Christians and Amazigh Arabs in North Africa considered the Arabs of having released them from the control of Constantinople; providing them with the opportunity to preserve their faith .

In this context, the researcher was assisted by the writings of researchers specialized in Islamic-Christian relations such as Alan Bresso in his book *“Islam and Christianity 13 centuries of Coexistence”* (1991) which claimed, “While the role sword played an important role in conquest, the role of the Qur’an was the most important in winning souls.” André Michel wrote in *“Islam and Civilization”* (2003) that Islam “built its position and the strength of its appeal through its ability to integrate and adapt to local traditions of the peoples.” Muslim expansion between the 11th and 17th century was achieved peacefully through merchants and preachers “who encouraged the faith of princes and leaders, followed by the people.” This happened in South India, the Maldives, Sumatra, Malaysia and southern China, Indonesia and East Africa, Ethiopia and Sudan.

As noted earlier, the book provides varied commentary on stereotypes that is not limited to the history of the relationship between the Arab and Islamic worlds, nor is it limited to aspects of controversial ideologies and behaviours, but also covers the perceptions of modern facts, like the Arab-Israeli conflict. In this context, the researcher Aude Signoles discusses the image widely advocated by Western media that the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat was responsible for the collapse of the final negotiations between Israel and Palestine. With objectivity, the researcher highlights that the Palestinian state proposed by the Israelis at Camp David, was a state with limited sovereignty; lacking any authority to control the border, without any means of economic advancement, a region of dust fragmented into the three pieces, and penetrated by highways. In addition, Israel required the Palestinian authority to lease to them the West Bank for an indefinite period.

As for Jerusalem, Israel stressed the political sovereignty of the central districts of the city, which according to the researcher, is very far from resolutions 242 and 338. The authors believe that Arafat would have been a traitor by his people if he accepted these prohibitive conditions. After that, Ariel Sharon demonized Arafat and accused him of every sin, and at the forefront of sponsoring terrorism. He began to dismantle the Palestinian authority and beat civilians to provoke the armed movements to implicate Arafat as a prelude to get rid of him. The researcher says that Israel succeeded physically, but the attitude of Arafat won him a lot of popularity that was lost during the course of the settlement.

In the last chapter of the book, Pierre Vermeran deals with subject of the Arab Spring. He noted that in January 2011, the “Arab Revolt” headlined in an issue of the French magazine “L’Express” which highlighted the hopes of

Arab democratization of Arab societies and the Maghreb after half a century of deferred promises. It identified and discussed the breadth of preconceptions about the unwillingness of Arabs to enter democracy among large segments of Westerners. Within a few months and when it seemed that Islamic factions will benefit most from the revolution and the democratic process, L'Express headlined the "Islamic Winter."

Such was the Western voice with its bleak views and naive criticisms of those that propagated the victory of democracy. It quickly returned to its practice of disseminating bleak ideas dark about the future of the Arab world under the banner of political Islam. The problem of volatility in the Arab world, according to Pierre Vermeren, is attributed to ignorance of the deep dynamics these communities. The fact is that over thirty years, the region was undergoing silent revolutions, urbanization, and fragmentation of the tribal structure and the education of girls, and a demographic transition.

The researcher notes that the phenomenon of Islamic awakening has become dominant in the southern Mediterranean countries, which led to the development of a bourgeoisie and middle classes that politically adopted Islam's political position against several phenomena: The first is the failure of the political and economic ideologies as experienced by the Arab countries between liberal and nationalist, socialist and communist, the third world and others. Second, the social and cultural transformations that threatened the stability of the terms of reference of the masses, which prompted the preservation of traditional frames of reference. Add to this the increasing sense of humiliation among large segments of Arab public opinion towards the continuation of the tragedy of the Palestinian cause and the guardianship of the West over Arab oil. As a result of these concerted factors, all the elections that took place in the region since 2000 gave victory for the Islamists, not to mention a similar path in Turkey. It happened in Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. From here, the author concludes that the proportion of political Islam's victory during the Arab Spring is a false argument. The struggle of political Islam in the region is a long story. The Arab Spring did not cement its success, rather, it reversed it.

Overall, the book is a refreshing and relatively comprehensive analysis of the issue. Although it overlooked some sensitive topics that have contributed in shaping the relationship between the West and the Arab world, including the issue of immigration and the role of the Arab minority in shaping the image of the Arab world in the Western mind.

Nizar Farawi¹

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1 Aljazeera Center for Studies, Qatar. E-Mail: fanizar@aljazeera.net