



Alien But Inevitable

GEORGE BAGHDADI

'Globalization insights' is a series of feature stories told by journalists from Africa, Asia and Latin America – stories that give an insight into the perceptions and experiences of people as globalization unfolds in their environs. This project is jointly organized by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and IPS EUROPA.

A young man, very thin, very tall, leans against a public Café in Damascus. Smoking water-pipe tobacco, Jamal Barakat peers into a half empty mid-afternoon tea and smiles. "Globalization ... I've heard a lot about this word but never understood it properly.

It had something to do with open borders and free trade, I guess, but I cannot follow the whole subject," the 26 year-old employee at a private trade company replies.

Barakat, wearing a faded T-shirt; what might have once been a blue background has since been obliterated, by repeating washing into a pale purple, paused for a while and said "I only know that the world has turned into a little village."

Globalization - the growing integration of economies and societies around the world - has been one of the most hotly-debated topics in international economics over the past few years. But in Syria, globalization is to many still

an alien concept.

"Globalization is the domination of the computer over the world with no restrictions. There are no boundaries, no more secrets ... there are scandals," says a 40-year-old art engineer Samia Bandar.

With the collapse of the eastern bloc and the end of the Cold War, only one superpower remained on the world stage. It was a development that opened new vistas before "capitalist producers", who saw the opportunity to conquer markets previously inaccessible to them.

Many in Syria believe globalization impoverishes developing countries while undercutting middle-class living standards.

The reduction of trade barriers encourages the exploitation of child labour, fosters a race to the bottom in environmental standards, tears women in Third-World countries away from their families, homogenizes disparate indigenous cultures and strips the gears of democracy in favour of rapacious multinational corporations.

It also causes cancer in puppies.

To be fair, no one makes the last claim.

Like many post World War II era, Third World governments that originally won power on nationalist and socialist tracks, the Ba'ath-led Syrian regime became entrenched. Under Hafez Assad, President Bashar's father, who died in 2000, the government delivered health care and education.

But a Syrian engineer insists that the systems cry out for reform. Compare the private clinics with the public ones, he says. "If you have money, you don't go to the public medical facilities."

Given the constant Israeli threat – perceived as a real one -- Syria maintains a large and very costly military, which in turn, becomes a serious obstacle to change.

Non-regime connected Syrian intellectuals had high hopes for Hafez's young son when the man who ruled from 1971 died four years ago. Bashar studied ophthalmology in England, married a British woman and understood the West and the Internet.

He freed political prisoners, opened the country to the Internet and reformed the banking system to help modernize Syrian trade and commerce.

The Bush administration's Greater Middle East Initiative calls for democratic reforms and larger public freedom in Arab countries. Syrian officials and political observers, however, see Washington's insistence of speedy reforms as a kind of U.S. pressure that contradicts Arab values.

Most Syrian officials are aware globalization of Western countries and the existence of economic blocs in Europe, the U.S. and Asia can cause more problems and crises for the developing countries, if they are not able to compete or cooperate with developed countries.

Bouthaina Shaaban, Syrian Minister of Expatriate, insists: "We are open to modernization, the Internet, globalization in the sense of using what the human mind has reached. But what we have seen in Iraq during and after the war is really the attempt to eliminate an indigenous culture and install a different culture instead that has nothing to do with Iraqi people or Arab people. "

Voices were raised by many in Damascus against the globalization process and the danger it represents for specific cultural identities, which are at risk of being altogether lost or, at best, greatly diluted, in the context of globalization. "Although essentially an economic phenomenon, globalization could only be envisaged in the context of wider interaction between different cultures,

and it is this aspect of globalization, its cultural over-spill, as it were, that many see as a greater threat than its purely economic aspect," says Fathi Zahra, a prominent journalist who has been working for the Syrian Arab News Agency SANA for 25 years.

A "global" sort of entity throughout history

Syrians are unquestionably Arab - but not in absolute terms. Syria has, actually, been a "global" sort of entity throughout history, one of those much-celebrated "gateways" between the East and the West.

People, ideas and diverse cultures passed through the ancient lands as much as merchants' cargoes bound for one faraway market or the other. The Phoenicians were legendary sea-faring traders who inhabited this land and much remains today testifying to their glory.

There came various invaders who imposed their cultural influence, at least initially, through the force of arms.

There were the ancient Assyrians, who practiced mass population transfers within an empire extending from Mesopotamia to the Levant.

Major waves of invaders came in the form of the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Crusaders and the Ottoman Turks.

After World War One, the French were in charge through a League of Nations mandate, another latter-day cultural influence that is still very extant today. Then there was the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967.

In other words, the Syrian identity is a compound one, a multi-layered tapestry woven of a rich diversity of strands that are rooted in history and geography.

"Because the Syrian identity is not the product of transient factors but has distant roots in the time and space dimensions, its specificity cannot be obliterated by new phenomena that are characteristic of the times," says Dr. Fayeze Sayegh, head of state-run Al-Thawra newspaper.

"A number of questions need to be put to those who dread the loss of our cultural identity: Is American culture really capable of uprooting our cultural specificity and replacing it with its own? And, if American culture can obliterate the Syrian identity, why couldn't British culture-- which is deeper and richer than the American-- obliterate India's cultural specificity over four centuries of British occupation?" he wonders.

It is materially impossible for any society to lock itself into total or even partial isolation. The globalization of science and technology and the information and communication revolution are not only a bar to economic protectionism, but render dreams of isolation both impracticable and unattainable, Dr. Sayegh adds.

Globalization is a reality, and its effects are already upon the country. Indeed, the world has moved on, and is continuing to race ahead at an ever increasing pace. It is unrealistic to expect a country such as Syria to hold back against the tide.

Now, more people are paying attention to globalization - though still vague to many-- because at first it was just "them" now, it's a whole lot of us.

On the author:

George Baghdadi is a Syrian journalist based in Damascus. He is a correspondent of the UAE's WAM news agency and contributes regularly to Spanish, Japanese and U.S. media.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Hiroshimastrasse 17
10785 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: ++49-30-26-935-914
Fax: ++49-30-26-935-959
Roswitha.Kiewitt@fes.de
www.fes.de/globalization

IPS EUROPA
Stresemannstraße 76/1424
10963 Berlin
Germany
Tel.: ++49-30-26949912
rjaura@ipseuropa.org
www.ipseuropa.org
www.ipseurope.org