Middle-Easterners Left To Die Because “Local Knowledge” Is Not Profitable for Westerners

So they’ve finally woken up! The media who have told us for decades that the Middle East is full of Arabs in striped headscarves riding camels through the desert are beginning to realise that there might be a water crisis in the Middle East!

This is the latest revelation from the people who took ten years to discover that if you take everyone’s crops to make biofuel the countries which grow them will be left with not enough to eat. The same people who took the same amount of time to work out how those countries can’t meet carbon emission targets without reactivating nuclear power plants, which were supposed to be the great enemy before climate change was used to control the small and less powerful.

One wonders why it took so long to work this out. Perhaps the culprit is the Perrier Company. In France, Perrier is one brand of mineral water amongst many. In many other Western countries the brand has become the definition of mineral water - if you are anybody, you drink Perrier. As there is always a supply of Perrier, why should anyone think there is a water shortage?

Many reasons are given for the latest water crisis of an on-going, centuries-old drama. Middle East equals conflict, so that must be behind it. Agriculture uses most of the water, so Middle Eastern agriculture must be inefficient. The
cost of producing fresh water from sea water, which is there in greater quantity, drives up prices without preserving freshwater sources, thus making desalinated water too expensive for the consumer or to begin producing.

Lost in this narrative is the very fact that the Middle East has been addressing these issues for hundreds of years whilst other countries have taken no notice. No Western engineer would accept someone who had only just heard of engineering telling them what to do - the person who has done the job for years has the knowledge and experience, something that the newcomer doesn’t.

But Westerners now assume they are suddenly the experts in the issues the Middle East has far greater experience in dealing with. Any problem afflicting the Middle East is held to be genetic defect of the people who live there, a sort of intellectual alcoholism. Westerners think they must know better because they come from richer countries - which by definition have not had to deal with these problems to the same degree.

The Middle East water crisis is “man-made” only in so far that men do not want other men to resolve it. Technical assistance and financial resources can always be made available to help any sort of struggling country, as we saw when Japan, which no one wants to upset, suffered the 2011 tsunami which left great ships lying in the middle of suburban streets well inland. The countries which are good at producing these machines, and playing the markets to generate wealth, are the best placed to make such contributions, and the recipient countries know it.

But Western countries do not want to help others without demanding intellectual subservience. People who’ve only just discovered the problem insist that they are the experts.

The more crises exist, the more Westerners can pretend they are the experts and everyone else is defective. If you think Middle Eastern methods don’t work, it means your understanding has not developed enough to understand them. But Westerners are incapable of doing their best, contributing genuine expertise, without rendering it worthless because they are afraid of their own shadows.

**Tried and Found Wanton**

Sweden is a country which plays by the standard Western rules, though with a larger state sector than you would expect. Hence it is a country, one which is called on to export expertise rather than to receive it - unless it wants to export its neo-socialist state structure, a model no state is currently allowed to adopt from new.

One feature of Sweden is that all the towns look pretty much the same. There is a standard urban development model, in which housing, commercial centres and factories are often interchangeable – it is only by looking at the name of the railway station that you discover where you are.

This being so, there should be little local variation in social and economic conditions. It is often difficult to tell by looking at a district whether it is regarded as a prosperous or deprived area, or what sort of revenues the local shops generate.

Yet Sweden has as much economic and social diversity as any other country. Why? Because one size fits all solutions don’t produce the same results. What works a certain way in one place doesn’t work the same way in another, due to a variety of underlying factors which will always be there – as successive regeneration projects in Western cities, which change the appearance and opportunities of areas but not their fundamental character, have demonstrated.

Despite this, when countries get into trouble they still go running to the IMF and the World Bank for bailouts, having no other short term choice. They then have solutions imposed upon them by others in a very deliberate way – these never come from local economists or businesspersons who have different ideas to the government of the day, and experience of applying them locally, but from supposedly better people in ivory towers, who no one is allowed to throw stones at.

There is abundant literature on IMF bailouts, written from different standpoints. Pick any one you take a liking; you will see a picture of both success and failure. But the one bright spot is when the failures are analysed, the IMF itself is sometimes able to admit that its own ideas haven’t worked due to its own miscalculations.

The ignorant locals may have caused the problem, but there comes a point where those locals have done all the outsiders have asked, but the results haven’t come because the IMF was ignorant of reality, not those who’ve lived in that reality all their lives. Some Africans conduct commercial fishing on Lake Victoria in rickety boats using bamboo poles. It is a very inefficient way of catching fish.

Africans know that, and they ask for upgrades to their operations. Instead of that, they get new fish species
introduced which somebody else thinks are better, but which destroy the other species, which the locals know how to catch but would like to catch in a more efficient way. Or in Georgia, where villages with natural springs gets a EU paid piped water system that does not work for the leaks, and no to low pressure most of the time. Good thing that the springs are still there.

All the African experience and “local knowledge” is ignored because the locals have identified a problem, but can’t manufacture the solution without the help of Western experts and money. Nobody wins except the outsiders who supply the fish and bribe officials to keep the policy and gravy train running. If fishermen and their customers starve along the way, that is sufficient price to pay to maintain the concept that these people are defective human beings, whose views a democracy doesn’t have to take seriously.

**You Talkin’ to Me?**

If anyone has the expertise to resolve this crisis, it is the locals who use this water daily, not outside observers who bring other skills, but not in-depth knowledge.

If we were talking about a part of the world with traditionally low levels of education and literacy, which had never adopted practices which work in equivalent conditions in neighbouring areas, outsiders might have an argument. But try as they might - and they do on a daily basis - no one can claim that the venerable Arab and Hebraic cultures of the region have not been fundamental to the development of culture as a whole, of global importance and of a globally high standard, regardless of politics.

The US, and its USAID, is very fond of telling everyone that because it thinks it has a functioning democracy at home, everything elsewhere which contradicts US practice must have something wrong with it. This is also a British attitude, and increasingly that of the EU, though expressed in the concept that the EU knows it isn’t perfect, but it is still what everyone wants at the end of the day.

**No Walden Pond**

However, it is the same US that does not like to be reminded of its attempts to “reform” its own agriculture in the early twentieth century. This is because it made the same mistake then - urban dwellers who didn’t know much about farming, but came from richer and more politically powerful areas, worked everything out on paper and told the poorer farmers in the south and west of the country, where they had just migrated, how to do it.

These urbanites, concocting pseudo-science to back up their theories to make them sound better than “native knowledge”, saw no reason why you shouldn’t destroy acres of grassland, which the locals had cultivated their own way, to grow wheat and other quick win cash crops, like you would if you played the stock market. Only later did they discover that the grass was holding the soil together in usual weather patterns, which is why the farmers hadn’t ploughed it up before.

The result was the notorious Dust Bowl – in which millions of acres of once productive land were rendered useless, and swirling dust storms forced thousands of farmers to flee to urban areas, including those who had not adopted the new practices. In many cases, the affected land remains unproductive even today, and the emigrants have not been replaced by enough people to get anything else meaningful going.

But Americans are hardly likely to listen to what Middle Easterners know about their own land and water systems, when they were happy to inflict this tragedy on their own still-supposedly-superior countrymen. Any more than the UK wants to be reminded of the Groundnut Scandal of the 1940s, in which it squandered a billion pounds on trying to force the East African soil to grow peanuts, which hadn’t been grown there before because the locals knew you couldn’t do it.

The EU does know from its own experience that one size doesn’t fit all. Notorious for creating butter mountains and wine lakes through its subsidy policies, and then resolving that problem – temporarily, as it turned out – by diverting the subsidies to the pockets of the least savoury figures in Eastern Europe, it has also ruined a number of agricultural economies through the same interventions which generated all this.

But it won’t give up, because it is the EU, it has to take an increasing global lead, and justify its position by pretending it knows more than anyone else about their own countries. Its association agreements come at the cost of local production and one way trade, making sure that countries that can export are never given the opportunity to move its products into the EU market.
Two centuries ago industry began to supplant agriculture as a wealth generator. So, agricultural countries must therefore be ignorant, even about their own agriculture. One only needs to remember starving Irish, and how that was based more on British polices than the potato blight.

Now services have replaced industry, there is another level of not yet post-industrial ignorance in the middle. This has to redeem itself by being even more condescending to countries it regards as agricultural, regardless of what their economies actually look like.

There has always been a Middle East water crisis because everyone else wants there to be one. It gives others the chance to justify their own failings by lumping Middle Eastern countries together as “underdeveloped” and, therefore, intellectually, scientifically, morally and politically underdeveloped too.

Anything which supports that notion serves a higher purpose than enabling the real experts, who know the land and water and how to use them, to resolve the crisis. If you want Middle East peace, making everyone a stakeholder in resolving a common problem is the way to do it. No Middle Eastern state can prosper without some co-ordination of land and water policies with their enemies, as all are affected by practices in individual countries, and as Brexiteers looking at empty shelves will soon find out, practicality hits harder than rhetoric the worse things get.

But who wants to believe that all men are created equal, when the best and brightest can kill each other off to favour the more fortunate? The Middle East has to have crises because the West doesn’t like the fact that it imported its religion and numbers, and many other things.

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