

In defense of moderation in US policy

by Chibli Mallat

Defending Richard Murphy for US policy in the Middle East or otherwise is not in order. The man does not need it, and he had in any case many more elements upon which to base his move, or his margin for maneuver, than self-appointed policy pundits like the present author. This contribution means solely to expose, in a few recollections over the last decade, a certain Murphyan spirit, a *pro domo* example of moderation and commitment.

I met the former Assistant Secretary of State for the first time when he was out of office, in 1989. He spent that year at Chatham House in London, and lectured at various academic institutions in Britain.

The first encounter was at his maiden lecture at Saint Anthony's college, Oxford, and he probably does not remember the annoying, long question put to him about the hesitations of the

Shultz administration regarding the Middle East peace conference (still known then as the "Geneva conference"); he did explain, though, that the administration had tried to support it, as did Shimon Peres, but that a leader cannot be too far ahead of his people.

This might sound Delphic, but the subtlety of Murphy's remark should be appreciated in the light of what transpired later on how much he and Shultz had worked hard to support a Geneva-style conference, the one in Madrid which took another four years to convene, and the one the region still longs to see continued and completed.

Another strong moment of that lecture was his opening sentence, in Arabic, "*ma fi shi khalf al-sitar*" - there is nothing hidden behind the curtain. This, one should remember, came a few months after Irangate, when high-ranking US officials, led by former National Security Council chief Robert McFarlane, had gone to Tehran with a cake in the shape of a key.

Murphy was obviously not part of the great conspiracy masterminded by Oliver North, a plan that ended in disarray. That he would consider nonetheless that "what you see is what you get" in diplomacy heralds a more correct position on how things truly work. To better appreciate the future of the Middle East, we must fight against our natural tendency to look at all US activities as a mischievous cloak-and-dagger conspir-

acy. There is no master manipulator, we are victims (or, more rarely) beneficiaries of history as much as others, within the State Department or elsewhere.

One did not need to agree with Murphy's positions to catch his interest. After the lecture at Saint Anthony's, I approached him with a choice of two formats to address the Middle East Forum in London, which I used to organize at London University: a full, open lecture, or a closed seminar. My guess was that it was more alluring to ask a busy person to choose between two formats, rather than to merely ask whether he would speak or not. But the request was also, tongue-in-cheek, by way of reproach over the choice "between chaos and Michael Daher" as president, a

(non-) choice which he so bluntly put to the Lebanese a year earlier. How different history would have been if another candidate had been suggested rather than Mr. Chaos, or indeed whether it was not much wiser to choose against chaos.

Along with his sense of humor, one dimension strikes in Murphy's style: his readiness to listen even when proposals are at profound variance with the US government's position in the area and, more creatively, Murphy's willingness to entertain proposals which he does not necessarily share, and to support them simply because he feels they are worth further probing.

Here are a few instances: back in the height of the last stages of the civil war in Lebanon, we tried, through Kenneth Stein at the Carter Center in Atlanta, to underline the case of the country by involving the former US president. Murphy supported the initiative; he even chaired, together with Lakhdar Ibrahim and Jimmy Carter, the conference of November 1990 in Atlanta which was dedicated to Lebanon.

One was hoping to take advantage of the attachment to the region by Carter, who would have been ready to monitor forthcoming elections, and Murphy was always ready to support such democratic openings. It would have been good for the country to have monitors of the Carter caliber for its general elections. The monitoring of the electoral process by international personali-

ties with recognized human rights credentials is still in order 10 years after the civil war, if only to show that Lebanon is capable of organizing decent elections.

Also at the time of his stay at Chatham House, Richard Murphy had participated in a seminar entitled Iraq in the 1990s, to which I was asked to contribute as specialist of "Shi'ism." The occasion was quite extraordinary, as it was the brief moment between the first and the second Gulf wars which betrayed the hopes of those in the West who thought the Iraqi government could be assuaged to the peaceful ways of the modern world.

One remark which rings true to date is Murphy's subtle acquiescence that, sooner

or later, a government in Iraq must take account of the large, neglected, portion of his Arab Shi'ite population. Coming from a policymaker who was generally perceived as "pro-Iraqi" (i.e. against the Iranian revolution, and Shi'ism at large) and pro-Arab (i.e. for Syria and the Gulf monarchies against Israel), two gross misnomers, this readiness to enlarge the policymaking consideration by democratic means says much about the man's profound statesmanship.

The Iraqi tragedy was the occasion of many meetings with Murphy, including a Council on Foreign Relations seminar which he convened in October 1996, 18 months before the State Department budged on the issue, to

bring together the bickering leaders in the Iraqi opposition. That it was possible, nay necessary, to give occasions for a coming together of Iraqi alternative voices, if not the Iraqi opposition, was something Murphy always believed in.

For reasons that are understandable considering the fissiparous and inefficient inclinations among many leaders of the Iraqi opposition, he has always been cautious toward them.

Still, it was Murphy (together with Roy Mottahedeh at Harvard) who opened up to them a prestigious venue at the Council on Foreign Relations, in which he was and remains a senior associate for the Middle East. This was in February 1991, at a time when the Bush administration refused to point

blank to receive them at any level. This support to the Iraqi opposition's cause was repeated time and again, despite the misgivings Murphy had toward an American forward position which, as in his Oxford remark about leaders who find themselves ahead of their constituency, he did not think the administration would be capable of earnestly supporting Iraqi democrats against the reticence of the regional powers.

There have been many occasions for Murphy's mark in the Middle East. He loves the countries where he worked - Syria when he was consul in Aleppo, Lebanon as top mediator in 1988, Saudi Arabia where he was an ambassador, Iraq where he supported his assistant, Jim Prince, in monitoring the 1992

Kurdish elections against the stormy disapproval of the State Department.

Through my all-too-brief encounters with Murphy, one matter is certain: the Lebanese and the Iraqis have missed much by not engaging

the man at the level he deserves. By failing to rise to the occasions he offered them, they paid, and continue to pay, a price of sometimes ill-placed hubris.

Since Murphy is in the region, maybe he could conjure up a magic formula for the Syrian-Israeli conundrum. One way forward, perhaps, is to encourage them to acknowledge and ratify the agreement produced in the wake of the last meeting in Shepherdstown, while leaving to international arbitration the one central issue which is still pending, the northeastern shore of Tiberias.

For the Syrians, it would be a way to modulate an honorable and lasting settlement, which does not hurry them into a rhythm of normalization which their people may not be ready for. For the Israelis, it would bring peace on the last significant front and stabilize all the borders of the century-old conflict. For the Lebanese, it would be some guarantee that the South does not end up again as the battleground of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In the maelstrom of Syrian-Israeli backchannels, maybe Murphy could offer a breakthrough for the renunciation of violence. After all, *ma fi shi khalf al-sitar*.

Chibli Mallat, a lawyer and professor of law at Saint Joseph's university, wrote this commentary for The Daily Star

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