

An honest effort by Arabs willing to speak out

Editorial

Petitions and other unofficial political undertakings are no substitute for professional diplomacy at the service of clear-headed leadership. Only where the latter is the rule does the former, no matter how symbolic, become necessary. The recent open letter by Arab intellectuals, civil society activists and scholars urging George W. Bush to shun Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is a case in point. Since Arab regimes have found so many different ways to fail, Arab individuals have been left with no option but to lift their voices in the faint hope that some small part of the message will resonate in the right places, or that others in the Arab world also will be moved to act. Some governments in the region have rolled over unabashedly in the face of America's increasingly pro-Zionist foreign policies, while others established similarly cowardly credentials years ago. There are some whose reflexive opposition to all things American runs the foolhardy risk of provoking an unnecessary clash with the world's most powerful country. Then there are those whose outward truculence toward US policy masks a craven habit of abject surrender on the issues that really count. All are covered by media outlets whose most determined efforts to feign objectivity succeed only in confirming the worst suspicions of their listeners, readers or viewers.

With so many failed strategies and transparent subterfuges at work, no one should be surprised that some Arab intellectuals and activists want to speak out on their own behalf. Many Arabs remain silent in the face of poor performance by their leaders. Most lack ready platforms from which to espouse their views, others lack the ability to articulate their criticisms, and all have to consider the possibility of state-sponsored retribution. For the 22 people who signed the letter to Bush, though, the appalling spectacle of official impotence and duplicity became too much to bear. Speaking out may carry some unforeseen cost, but the price of silence was already more than they could afford.

It is hard to know if Bush or any of his senior aides will ever read the letter in question, let alone consider its recommendations. These, though, should not be the measures of success or failure in such an initiative. Instead, the move should be viewed and welcomed as a wakeup call to Arab regimes, a sign that their respective acts are fooling no one. Aggressive indolence will no longer suffice as a governing philosophy, not when domestic conditions continue to deteriorate on multiple levels and when the Arab voice is regarded abroad with nothing so much as derision. A few poets and professors cannot single-handedly restore Arab civilization to its rightful place, but at least some prove themselves willing to make an honest effort. That is far more than most of their governments can say.