

Arab world at the crossroads of democracy, nationalism

Middle East

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BEIRUT: Ever since the US and Britain went to war on Iraq, the Arabs have been wondering whether this conquest will be a success or the most catastrophic of failures. They wonder, in other words, whether the US really can make Iraq into a platform for a strategic, economic and cultural reshaping of the entire Arab world (as well as Iran) — or whether this neo-conservative ambition will provoke what amounts to a second Arab struggle for independence. So the signs that the US occupation of Iraq is running into armed resistance have resonated round the region.

With their hopelessly ineffectual response to the US-British invasion, the Arabs reached what all saw as the lowest point yet in a process of political and institutional decay. Yet it also showed just how strong their sense of common destiny and identity remains. Whatever now happens in Iraq will, for better or worse, have region-wide repercussions.

Among the Arab political classes, the shockwaves of the Iraqi earthquake have thrown into sharp relief two broad currents competing for public favour: a relatively new "democratic" one versus the older, more traditional pan-Arab nationalist or fundamentalist ones that have dominated Arab politics since independence.

Both sides see Iraq, in the words of Egyptian journalist Kamel Labidi, as "a humiliation of the Arabs unparalleled since their crippling defeat by Israel in the 1967 war". Both are deeply sceptical of the United States

ostensibly reformist mission, considering that even if it were genuine about its professed desire to spread democracy, it has self-serving, neo-imperial objectives. These range from the promotion of its oil and corporate interests to exploiting its enhanced regional dominance to impose a Middle East peace settlement that would kill pan-Arab nationalism, planning Israel firmly at the heart of a new regional order. Both camps want to expel the "new colonialism", but envisage different routes to that end.

"The basic question," says Lebanese columnist Abdul Karim About-Nasr, "is whether Iraq should give priority to liberation or to building Iraq on all levels." The "democrats" favour the second course. For them, it was the lack of democracy which brought the Arabs to their present abysmal condition, and for that they blame the nationalists, holders of power since independence, as much as the Americans.

"National liberation regimes," says Reda Helal, deputy editor of Cairo's *Al-Ahram*, "have trampled the freedoms of their peoples for so long under the

pretext of ending colonialism that they ultimately helped colonialism return under the pretext of liberating their peoples."

Emotionally it may go against the grain, but they want America, in its official, democratizing aims at least, to succeed. "I never imagined," says Tella Qadi, a Lebanese researcher and disbanded nationalist, "that I'd be looking to those neo-conservative, pro-Israeli extremists and rightwing Christians to improve our lot, but the fact is that as a result of this adventure there is a chance for change."

Saddam's ignominious collapse is seen to exemplify the rottenness not just of the nationalist or pro-religious regimes, such as Syria and Iran — like best candidates for further US-engineered regime change — but of those pro-American ones, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, whose turn might come later. Not that the "democrats" want the US to do to them what it did to Saddam.

"The change must be internal, not US-imposed," says Hanaan Hassan, a professor at Damascus University. "The moment the Americans turn on the regime we'll support it." But everywhere they are exploiting the US threat to reinforce long-standing demands. That was the basic argument of the latest petition from Iran's

reformist deputies, demanding that the country's unelected institutions, stronghold of religious dictatorship, end their systematic blocking of legislation introduced by its elected institutions.

The only way, said Syrian commentator Ali Atassi, the Syrian regime can now defend itself is to "give the people their freedom."

The nationalist/religious camp, by contrast, believes that the "liberation" of Iraq should take precedence over "building", despite evidence that it was essentially this self-same choice or rather the type of demagogic parties and repressive regimes that implemented it — which first led the Arabs astray.

Nationalists and religious elements may often advocate democracy too, though the kind the fundamentalists have in mind is very different from that of the liberal, secular modernists. Still, their priority remains what it always was: national or religious self-assertion, cultural authenticity, confronting US imperialism and Zionism. They want Iraq to be the crucible for a new anti-colonial struggle.

Mary Arab "democrats" consider that presumptuous. "The most peculiar thing," says Kuwaiti commentator Raja Fahh, "is that some Arabs are more Iraqi than the Iraqis, urging them

to launch a popular liberation war — this after they suffered in three abortive wars." Besides, they argue, even if the "democratic" route to regaining Arab independence is slower, it will be much less costly, and ultimately just as effective as the nationalist/religious one.

Let the Americans bring us democracy, they say, because in so doing they will, by their own hand, defeat their other, neo-imperial agenda. For by its nature, a democratic Arab order would embody national aspirations in a way which the current despotisms have long ceased to do.

"America's requirements," said the Saudi daily *al-Watan*, "can't be fulfilled by the free choice of any Arab people. What would happen if a freely-elected Iraqi parliament wanted China, for example, to participate in reconstruction, or refused to become an oil milch cow, or to normalise with Israel?"

But if, under a nationalist/religious banner, the Iraqis chose "liberation" above "building", and armed resistance really took hold, that would have a catalysing effect throughout the region, stimulating all those popular forces against what they see as an intolerable, US-supported order. The effect would be most dramatic in Palestine, that Arab land "occupied"

in an earlier era of Western colonialism and touchstone of Arab nationalism ever since. Militants there would welcome an Iraqi resistance as an invaluable accessory to their own. And it would face the most pro-US regimes, such as Egypt, with an even more invidious choice than they faced during the Iraqi war itself, between siding with Arab "freedom fighters" and "imperial aggressors".

Which way Iraq — and with it the Arab world — will go remains to be seen. Much depends on the Americans themselves. After 35 years of Ba'athism, the Iraqis are weary of conflict, and, despite the portents of resistance, the overall balance of forces favours the democratic camp. But the more inept and oppressive their rule, the more their neo-imperial, or Israel-serving agenda takes precedence over their reformist one, the more liable they are to tip the balance in favour of the nationalist/religious camp. Few Arabs dispute that, so far, the Americans have done badly — so badly that in the view of Abdul Bari Arwan, editor of the pan-Arab newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabi*, they risk provoking a "national awakening and war of attrition that make Vietnam seem like a picnic in comparison." — *Dawn/The Guardian* News Service.