

Toppling the Arab Berlin wall

16.11.03
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Daily

OP-ED

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TENS OF MILLIONS OF ARABS WITNESSED the toppling of Saddam Hussein last spring, and saw in his fall reflections of their own situation. Rightly so, for Iraq's transition can mark the start of the fall of the 'Arab Wall' — the invisible barrier of authoritarianism and rigidity that isolates the region as surely as the Berlin Wall once cut Europe in two.

Given the Middle East's deep malaise, today's Arab status quo cannot long endure. But what will replace it? Three dark possibilities exist: anarchy of the type that allowed Osama bin Laden to flourish in Afghanistan, civil wars of the sort that ravaged Algeria

and Sudan, or a new Saddam-style authoritarianism.

To realise any of these scenarios, the world need do nothing but wait and watch the present status quo rot and sink into chaos. But there is a positive alternative: a reformist path leading to the establishment of the rule of law, individual rights, a more robust civil society, and democratisation across the Arab world.

Despite the violence now plaguing Iraq, finding that path is possible. The Arab world has been relatively stable for the past decade or two. The assassinations, coups, and social disorder that dominated the region between 1945 and 1990 have virtually disappeared, the two big exceptions being the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

But relative stability has not improved matters, delivering only failed governments, negative growth, the rise of radical Islam, and ever more repression. Such inertia breeds hopelessness, and a nihilist yearning for violence. As one young Arab told me when describing his homeland: "The country never invests in the young, we have no place, we are not wanted. I could easily burn this place and move on with no regrets."

How can the Middle East halt this downward spiral of despair and rage? Muslims have experimented with most of modernity's political faiths: socialism (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen), communism (South Yemen), state capitalism fused with monarchy (the Gulf states, Jordan, and Morocco). They have even experimented with home-grown ideologies — Nasserism, Ba'athism, and Khomeneism. Just about the only untested ideology in the region is liberal capitalist democracy.

The Kuwaitis, along with the region's other royal states — Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE — may be the best bet to pursue a liberal approach, given the already tolerant nature of their kings and emirs. The call for Saddam Hussein's resignation by Shawkh Zayed bin

Sultan Al Nahayan of the UAE before the US invasion suggests that at least some Arab leaders are prepared to welcome far-reaching change in their region.

By contrast, viable reform in Saudi Arabia faces much greater challenges. The al-Saud royal family failed to back the US effort in Iraq because of domestic concerns. The country's religious laws and character — central to the regime's legitimacy — undermine liberal forces, and many Saudis fear that the pressures surrounding religious and political reform will lead to an explosion. But the Saudi establishment's serious response to the May 2003 attack on a civilian compound in Riyadh at least gives a glimmer of hope that the al-Saud may see reform as "our only hope of survival."

In Jordan, reform "will require rebalancing the country's social fabric, with Palestinian Jordanians given greater freedom to contribute politically in meaningful ways. But they will first have to make a conscious decision to accept Jordan as their home."

The Middle East's secular states confront different problems. Egypt's once pre-eminent leadership role in the Arab world has eroded as influence shifted to Qatar, the UAE, even Syria — and now potentially to a democratic Iraq. Egypt can reclaim Arab leadership only if it guides the region in the quest for cultural renaissance, liberalism, democracy, educational reform, and economic development.

Egypt's history could support this role. The monarchy was overthrown in 1952 without violence, and for 250 years Egypt has shown itself capable of producing both radical and reformist political trends. Indeed, the fate of reform in Egypt will in some ways mean either the death or the renewal of the Arab world.

Syria's situation is similar, but different. Syria profited directly from trade with Iraq and from oil transport fees, while Saddam's fall turned the spotlight on subjects that the regime prefers to keep in the dark.

Syria's role in Lebanon, its support for Hezbollah and some Palestinian organisations, one-party rule, and human rights violations.

Above all, Syria wants to bypass Washington's reform agenda and preserve the domestic status quo. So the regime hopes that Iraq becomes a quagmire, forcing the US to ask Syria for help. But if Bashar Assad wants Syria to avoid sinking deeper into poverty and irrelevance, he must undertake political, cultural, and economic liberalisation. Assad has the capacity to take bold steps, but he is constrained by the establishment that he inherited (and of which he is a product).

For the Middle East's monarchical regimes, and secular ones like Assad's, reform does not necessarily mean self-destruction. As Mexico and post-communist Europe demonstrated, nimble elites can re-invent themselves as they change their political system. Iran, however, does not have this luxury.

Iranians yearn for reform, reflected in President Khatami's two landslide electoral victories. But the ruling mullahs' stiff resistance to even modest changes suggests that they understand that serious reforms will put their rule at stake. Even so, the possibility of reform has never been closer because Iran's huge and young population demands it. No Arab country has yet produced such powerful social and cultural movements demanding change.

But indigenous reform in the Middle East is only half the battle. The other half is bringing peace to Palestinians and Israelis. Reform cannot succeed in the midst of a conflict that fosters extremists and hatred. All the walls that separate the region from integration into the modern and global community must be brought down. —PT-PS

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