

LOS ANGELES NATIONAL JEWISH NEWS

June 2003

"A Ripple or an Earthquake?"

By Kenneth W. Stein

After the war with Iraq, a sharpened public debate has opened in the Middle East on how Arab states should operate in general. Why has citizen participation not flourished in Middle Eastern Arab states? Why did Arab leaders stand by and allow Saddam Hussein to Butcher his own people? With a regime change in Iraq, could traditional authoritarian styles of Arab rule give way, in even a small fashion, to institutions that practice democracy?

In the years after World War I, when modern Arab states were established, constitutions, parties, and parliaments were tried, but failed to overcome local authoritarian rule from the Ottoman Empire period. New states were created, but old sectarian, ethnic, family, personality, and tribal politics prevailed. Solidified in their new nationalist robes, earlier ruling elites, while tossing out the British and French presence, kept upward mobility to a minimum. Their new regimes were predicated upon strong armies and pervasive security services. The vast majority of Arab populations possessed no independent voice. When Arab rulers proclaimed the need to sacrifice for the Palestinian cause, they suspended local dissent yet again.

Civil society did not emerge in the Arab Middle East because citizens were timid to talk politics. After an animated conversation at curb-side about politics recently at an Arab airport, my host reminded me only to speak about family matters during the ride into town. Most recently, public anti-regime discourse in many Arab states has become the sole purview of the semi-untouchable mosque network. As we learned from the al-Qaeda network, opposition voices went abroad to spew their anger against favorite autocratic regimes because they could not openly voice their anger at home or from within.

In the early 1990s, after the Berlin Wall fell, a new debate emerged about how Arab states should be run. Eastern European communism dissipated, the technology revolution exploded, and globalization reached into every corner of the world. This debate picked up speed over the last three years. The failure of the Palestinian *intifadah* to liberate land from Israel occasioned another round of introspective discussion. Questions included: Why are Arab regimes weak and unable to help the Palestinians? Why was there no Arab solution to Saddam's invasion of

Kuwait in 1990? Why were Arabs the culprits of the September 11, 2001, attack on America? The June 2002, release of the Arab *Human Development Report* criticized Arab countries for their failure to provide human rights, create a civil society, and provide greater freedoms for Arab women. Saddam's demise has hastened debates about how his peer Arab leaders could sit by and let such a brutal dictator murder his own people while he effortlessly squandered state resources.

What is being said? In January 2002, the prestigious Arabic paper *al Hayat* (London) commented that "[Arab] regimes are capable of quashing any attempt to protest against their policies. [They deny] the most fundamental rights of their citizens." Amplifying that thought in January 2003, a write in *al Quds al Arabi* (London) noted that "Ordinary Arabs do not feel secure because the social systems they live under do not guarantee their rights. Social rights are seen as gifts from the rulers, who can deprive people of them at any time. In fact, Arab rulers see freedom itself as a gift that can be taken away. The culture that prevails in the Arab world is one in which people have no rights, only duties which they have to fulfill."

In April 2003, a former high ranking Jordanian government official told me candidly, "In the Arab world, we are citizens but lack citizenship." In the aftermath of the April 2003 terrorist bombing in Saudi Arabia, a writer in the Lebanese daily *al Nahar* noted that, while the Palestinian issue and American presence in Saudi Arabia are partially to blame, what is needed is internal reform that leads to "greater political participation, more freedom of expression, and finds solutions for unemployment, corruption, the unfair distribution of wealth, waste, and other issues." Recently, Mohammad al Basha wrote in Egypt's *al Ahram Weekly*, "The Arab nation is badly in need of honest and rational self criticism in order for it to be able to overcome its serious political, economic, and social deficiencies."

For Middle Eastern regimes to be proactive in changing the way they do business, leaders and elites will have to share wealth and power in different portions. Politicians rarely create the conditions for their own reduction of power. However, what if over the next several years, a federal decentralized decision-making system emerges and even works in Iraq? And what if a Palestinian state with a constitution and a measure of self determination does emerge by 2005? Too far-fetched? When Arab regimes can no longer deflect domestic attention toward disliking Israel, the internal debate already joined will get hotter, with unforeseen and most likely uneven consequences.

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