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"The End Could be Horrendous or Not So Bad"

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So much is happening in the Middle East. Economic, political, social, and intellectual changes abound. The rapidity, frequency, and magnitude is the most I have witnessed in three decades of reading, observing, and analyzing events in the region.

Besides Iraq and in the Palestinian areas, bonds to the past are fading, yet not quite disappearing. Traditional moorings are under duress. Each country is at a different stage of transition. There is no longer an Arab world; there are Arab states. The end could be horrendous or not so bad. Uncertainty prevails. We are in the midst of an Iraqi revolution which is in the midst of broader regional changes.

More than any other time in the 19th or 20th centuries, Middle Eastern politics and political systems find themselves somewhere between strict continuity and formidable change. Neither the geographic creation of Arab states after World War I, nor the Cold War in the region from 1945 to the 1990s had as much impact on the region's values, mores, habits, and behaviors as the last six years. Who would have believed a decade ago that an American-led coalition would topple an Arab dictator and occupy an Arab capital? Where does it all lead?

A key Middle Eastern leader used to die every fifteen or twenty years; since 1999, more than half-a-dozen have died or left office. Charisma is swiftly on the wane. Those who rule are 'interim,' but interim to what? Leaders who remain from yesterday are aging or being challenged. There used to be strict state control over the media. Now satellite networks and the internet make information control impossible. With few exceptions, open electoral politics was unheard of in the 1990s or earlier. The international war on terrorism has spotlighted the Middle East. In 2005 alone, Iraq had three elections; the Palestinians had dozens of municipal, primary, and national elections; and Egypt underwent the most contested elections in its history. The U.S. used to worry about Arab states aligning against it and with the Soviet Union; now American policy focuses on how a country is ruled, not whether it is receiving weapons from Moscow.

These are more than transitional times. The role and influence of Islam in day-to-day affairs remains unclear. Secular and secularizing women, once free of religious coercion under Saddam's regime, now see rising conservative trends in a free and post-authoritarian Iraq. As Islamizing politicians are elected to the new Iraqi parliament, chances increase for outspoken secular women to leave Iraq for the long term.

Doing so leaves the 'women in Iraqi democracy' debate to those who would control women's rights. Will it be said in five years that a post-Saddam Iraq was worse for women's freedom than during his brutal reign?

There are three phases to a revolution. The first is characterized by euphoria when the old and hated regime is tossed aside. In the second phase, reconstructing a new or different political system is necessary. Here, varying interests seek to be reconciled. And finally, in the third phase, those who gain power usually engage in retribution to their opponents who lost, or a civil war ensues.

Will Iraq in 2006-09 become like Iran in 1979-1982? Most likely not. Iran then was in the midst of deciding its direction. Most cheered the Shah's departure. In the absence of independent judicial and parliamentary political institutions, one autocracy replaced another. Slowly, clerics and the mosque network took over. They removed civil society advocates and helped themselves to the country's oil revenue. Perhaps Iraq's strong ethnic, sectarian, and regional identities will keep clerical power in check or at least balanced through daily political tension. Unlike Iran, the army in Iraq can not play the role of power broker. Barely existent, for the time being at least, it will have to leave politics to the secular politicians and the clerics.

In the second phase of the political upheaval, various groups that united against the autocrat elbow each other for influence and power in the vacated space. Unlike Iran where the clerics led the charge that forced the Shah from office, the clerics in Iraq can neither take credit for regime change, nor do they have a head-start on shaping a different political system. In Iraq, the constitution writing process of 2005, though not perfect, forced compromises. However imperfect, the December 15 elections saw 11 million Iraqis vote; a 70 per cent electoral turn out is the envy of any democracy. For Iraq to be a success, a measure of economic security, political stability, and social justice must emerge. Elections alone do not make democracies work, only democrats can do that.

As we start 2006, Iraq is in the third revolutionary phase where it "eats its own," but it has not yet finished the second phase. In other words, the insurgency and terrorism coincide with political institution building; Iraq enjoys a luxury of domestic and foreign security forces helping it through its childhood. Elimination of Iraqi insurgents today gives the Iraqi experience a chance at success tomorrow. Through the constitution and elections, power sharing already exists. Like smoldering embers ready for kindling, ethnic and sectarian tensions lie ready to be a full fire.

What we have learned from Saddam's demise and Arafat's death is that remnants of the previous regime do not give up power easily. They fight to hang on. In the Palestinian case, the old guard of the dominant al-Fatah party does not want to give way to younger, equally nationalist zealots. We learn that Palestinian Authority President Abbas and those

who will rule Iraq for the coming period will be interim leaders, if they fail to exhibit will and courage. After the loss of the autocrat, inclusion not retribution is required. We know the Palestinians have too many security entities, the Iraqis not enough. In both cases, a strong and centralized security service can control lawlessness and buttress but not interfere with a fledgling democracy.

What happens in Iraq and in the Palestinian areas can be influential for hastening change elsewhere in the region. It could show that pluralism or democracy Iraqi/Palestinian style could work, or a violent civil war could tear (Iraqi/Palestinian) society apart, affect (negatively or positively) its neighbors and (in)directly influence oil and gas prices, world wide inflation rates, and the speed or slowness of national economic development.

Each state could finish differently, at different times, or not at all. The end result could be horrendous or not so bad. Success will be achieved and sustained if leaders give way to institutions, if inhabitants become citizens, and if foreigners do not meddle in Iraqi affairs.

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