

When the Cure is the Problem

The notion that Western-style democracy could be imposed in Iraq was problematic to begin with; there is now a growing consensus that it was also seriously misguided. Of course, the errors committed in Iraq have already been committed elsewhere across the Arab world and at different times – from Algeria to Lebanon. But it is in Palestine where the West continues to relish in making a true dog's breakfast. It is purely wrong to think that the two-state solution will solve anything: the case for a federated Palestine – linking the disparate Muslim and Jewish communities in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza Strip – has never been stronger.

To see this clearly, one must look at past and current conflicts in the region not as isolated campaigns but as the extension of a century-long effort to bring the vast lands of the defunct Ottoman Empire in the Balkans and Middle East into the modern world and the Western orbit.

The Roman model, which provided a guiding blueprint for Western democracies and institutions, established a clear political platform whereby specific national goals were defined by a ruling majority. In such a model, a community that was at odds with this ruling political majority was labelled *communitas non grata* and was suppressed for the greater good of the majority and for the supposed benefits that would accrue from nation-building endeavours. Consequently, nations in the West could only gain their national identity by decimating the minorities that cohabited their land. Examples of such pogroms abound, including the Muslims and Jews in Spain, the Cathars in France and the Native Americans in North America. Additionally, ever since the Roman era, the West has been fundamentally anti-Semitic at a societal level. The Jewish Diaspora was generally perceived as being so openly at variance with the mainstream mores, culture and national objectives that it failed to become assimilated in the emerging nation states.

By stark contrast, the Ottoman model was more frayed in its design, operating as a muddled collection of cooperatives. While the political elite defined foreign policy and other matters of state, economic and social issues were left largely under the authority of individual communities. This decentralized, laissez-faire approach allowed the various communities to prosper for more than five centuries.

In a very real sense, the community construct was destroyed during World War I with the deliberate dismantling of the Ottoman Empire; and the victors, Western nationalist structures, were unleashed on the new territories. Inter-communal and inter-ethnic fault lines erupted almost spontaneously both in the Balkans and the Middle East as communities that had co-existed relatively harmoniously now vied to become the majority stakeholders in the new nation-building gold rush. Western powers provided technical assistance to delineate borders where none had existed and to proselytize the idea of national identity.

By the end of World War II, and still reeling from the Holocaust that far surpassed all other acts of anti-Semitism in Europe, Western nationalism formulated an enlightened policy that would, in one fell swoop, satisfy two historical urges: to promote the establishment of Israel, thereby creating a Western-style democracy in the heart of the Middle East and propagating the Roman model; and

to foster the Jewish identity of such a state, thereby encouraging individuals and communities to relocate to Israel, and removing the Jewish thorn from Western societies.

It is deeply ironic therefore that Arab states, which a priori had no track record of anti-Semitism in their institutions and communal make-ups, have been branded anti-Semitic since their adoption of the Western model of governance and nation-building.

This conflict between the Roman and Ottoman models is now being experienced on a daily basis in Iraq and Palestine – and simmers in other Arab countries. The one-state solution for historic Palestine is at odds with Western nationalism since it encapsulates a multi-communal, multiethnic national identity that does not recognize a demographic majority. Instead, the inheritors of the Roman structure, principally the Anglo-Saxon world and Israel itself, have pushed for the two-state solution. At face value, it is the easier course and the path of least resistance. However, given that the root causes of the conflict have not been adequately addressed, the two-state solution is not only the more problematic but indeed the one least likely to succeed.

If and when Palestine is established beside Israel, future historians will no doubt rationalize the spate of civil wars in terms of the obvious: there are considerably more than two communities in historic Palestine, both among Palestinians (Sunni, Shiite and Christian) and Israelis (orthodox, Ashkenazi and Sephardi in addition to a sizable Arab minority). Western-style democracy will always remain ill-equipped to address the needs of minorities, and the current fiasco that is the nation-building exercise in Iraq proves how disaffected communities can quickly turn on each other in a cycle of self-destructive chaos.

Elections

It is all too easy to confuse the process of elections with the principles of democracy. This confusion has its roots in the West where officials have frequently pointed to elections in the Arab region as a barometer of progress, but which – in truth – can contribute to tarnishing the concept of democracy.

Take, for example, Iraq. During the first post-Saddam-Hussein election, millions turned out to cast their ballots, dipping their fingers in ink to prevent double voting. Despite a freely elected government, which was voted in last January, the country continues to be paralysed by sectarian disputes. Elections that were supposed to strengthen Iraq's democracy, unite its ethnic and sectarian factions, and begin to improve sorely needed basic services – water, electricity and roads, among so many others – have instead exposed the fault lines that still threaten the country's stability.

Democracy itself has lost credibility as a way of government; if anything, there is more intrigue, backroom deal-making and political paralysis now than under Saddam Hussein. As litmus tests go, the purple finger has become associated with failure. Initially a symbol of pride for Iraq's nascent democracy, the purple finger has since become something of an insult.

For decades there have been less than democratic elections in the Middle East, where ruling parties have controlled access to the ballot of both candidates and voters. Countries like Egypt and Syria, where the presidential election constitutes a referendum on one candidate, allow a ruling class to hold a monopoly on power, limit freedom of speech and assembly, and deny their people due process.

The political system is rigged to bring to power people who are already in power. With the manipulation so evident and an outcome always certain, it is curious that the leaders bother to go through the whole rigmarole. The reason they do, of course, is that elections are easy to mould into a palatable shape that respects the status quo while giving the semblance of legitimacy. Across the region, elections help to bleed off some internal and external pressure for change without making any substantial alteration to the power structure.

Electing local councils in Saudi Arabia or a parliament in Bahrain, for example, helps to satisfy the growing public desire for more accountable government. Over time, though, it becomes clear that these bodies possess little real authority and that the greatest achievement is the election itself.

At the heart of all this, the trouble with genuine democracy and with truly free elections is that there is no guarantee of who will win. In the early 1990s, Algeria's military junta cancelled elections when an Islamic party appeared poised to take control of parliament. That decision ignited a civil war that lasted almost a decade and claimed at least 100,000 lives. The picture is depressingly similar in occupied Palestine, albeit on a smaller and more fragmented scale and with the absence of a local strongman to deprive Hamas of its influence gained at the ballot.

To be sure, promoters of democracy in the West are fully aware of the Islamist trend that can emerge through the democratic process. This explains Joe Biden's visit to Lebanon last week, the first by a US Vice-President since 1983, when George Bush Senior flew in following a suicide truck bomb attack that killed more than 240 US marines.

Then as now, US public enemy number 1 in the Lebanese arena is Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria; and Biden's visit in the run-up to polling day on 7 June is generally seen as a last-ditch attempt to sway undecided voters.

Indeed, this is a rare election in the Middle East where the results are not known ahead of time. Out of a total of 128 parliamentary seats, 18 are still up for grabs and will swing the election either in favour of Hezbollah and their local and regional allies or of the March 14 coalition, which is led by Saad Hariri and allied to the US and many Gulf countries.

The electoral battle in Lebanon has wider significance since it reflects the two dominant ideological confrontations that now define the Middle East. But more to the point, by choosing to resolve a deep ideological crisis at the ballot, Lebanese are showing the rest of the Arab world how democratic pluralism should be conducted.

Compare that with other Arab countries, which continue to emphasise process over substance that misses the whole point of democracy. The Lebanese electoral model is the exception that proves the rule; the region feels more secure in the purple-finger variety of democracy. Put another way,

if elections remain a technique for misleading people, the concepts and principles of democracy will be rejected. This, in turn, will herald another 1000 years of feudalism and despotism in the Middle East.

The New Communism

The Islamic world today is roughly where Europe was during its industrial age. Following the great rural exodus of the 18th and 19th centuries, millions of dislocated, impoverished European peasants began to turn to radical mass movements, such as fascism and communism.

Muslim societies have seen their own rural masses move to the burgeoning urban slums of Algiers, Beirut and Cairo, for example, leaving behind the variegated Islam of the countryside. This dislocation has left swathes of Arabs feeling resentful and frustrated over the weak economies, uneven distributions of wealth and the absence of political freedom across the region. This in turn has fed directly into a tsunami of religious fervour over the past 30 years; and many of those individuals have turned to the fringe groups in their societies, including al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist organizations.

As with communism in previous generations, Islam has its radical fringe and its pragmatic centre. Radical Islam is a real departure. In many ways, it is a reformist movement that challenges almost every aspect of traditional authority in Islamic societies, from social services to jurisprudence to the exclusion of women from public life. Radical, militant Islam sees its role as one of creative destruction, paving the way for a new, democratic order in the Arab region and beyond.

To be sure, there is the precedence set by fascism and communism, further sealing the analogy with these past movements. For all the untold damage they did, these mass movements did at least clear away some of the pre-modern underbrush that had hindered the growth of liberal democracy, such as the oppressive rules of the Russian Romanoffs and the Prussian Hohenzollerns in Germany.

But beyond the militant minority, many in the West, particularly in Europe, see the rise of mainstream Islam as a revenge of sorts: restoring the faith that was evicted from the continent five centuries ago following the surrender of Abu Abdullah Muhammad XII, the last Nasrid king of Granada. However, it is wrong to view this revival of traditional Islam as merely another chapter in a centuries-long struggle between Christendom and Islam.

Islam's appeal reaches beyond the Arab region and beyond even the growing communities of Arab immigrants in Europe. A recent survey by Reuters estimates that there are some 150,000 Muslim converts in Europe (out of a total Muslim population of roughly 13 million); and the first mosque to be built in Granada since Abu Abdullah's retreat was the work of European converts, not Arab immigrants. Many recent converts have taken up Islam as a way of defining themselves against traditional Western culture, whose values they reject for economic, political or spiritual reasons. Like communism, Islam represents a trans-national ideology to many of its adherents aimed at a utopian ideal – in this case, a vast, if not global, caliphate governed according to Shariah.

The rise of political Islam isn't entirely accidental either. The attacks on New York, Madrid and London and the war on terror have actually increased the global appeal of Islam. Against that background, the plethora of Islamic institutions both in the Arab region and in the West have largely succeeded in channelling the frustrations of Muslims, particularly the youth. In many respects, Islam has replaced communism as the ideology of contestation, and the militant fringes within this new communism mimic many of the tactics of the Red Brigade and the Baader-Meinhof Gang of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is of course those militant fringes that grab the headlines and paint the whole movement in the way young Muslims understand their faith and, equally, in the way the larger, global society sees and deals with Islam. But the main issue is whether Islam will follow the same path as communism, eventually shedding its revolutionary extremism and assimilating itself into mainstream democratic political life.

Indeed, the eventual dissolution of hard-line Marxism in Europe can offer clues as to how to end the current impasse in the war on terror. Disowned by the pragmatic left, Europe's militant Marxist fringe was isolated and repressed as governments pursued social policies that addressed the grievances of the poor and dispossessed, who had sustained the radicals.

Similarly, radical Islam as a beacon for the downtrodden both in the region and among immigrant communities in the West will continue to hold its allure as long as the masses are kept from improving their lives politically and economically. The political exploitation of Islam by radicals can be stopped in its tracks if – through a genuine democratic process – liberal, pan-Arab movements are allowed to heal the host of social iniquities and act as a bridge to the modern world. In addition to dulling the edge of radical Islam, such movements would be redirecting the aspirations of the people to the here and now, rather than the hereafter.
