

The Region after Saddam

By

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What will be the effect of the fall of Saddam Hussein on the politics of the Middle East? The question provokes two great fears. One is that the attempt to establish a democracy in Iraq might fail, which causes great concern in many parts of the world. And the other, perhaps even greater fear, is that it might succeed, which causes immense concern in the greater part of the Middle East. I want to look at these two fears separately and look also at the different ways in which they are being considered, evaluated, and interpreted.

Broadly speaking, there are two points of view which predominate in the discussion of whether it is possible to establish a democratic regime worthy of the name in Iraq after the departure, by whatever method, of Saddam Hussein.

The first could be summed up like this: The Arabs are incapable of democratic government. Democracy is a purely Western phenomenon which works in a limited number of Western countries. Most of continental Europe is only just beginning to learn about it. And the idea of establishing a democratic system in a country like Iraq is, to say the very least, phantasmagoric. Arabs are different from us, and we must be more, shall we say, reasonable both in what we expect from them and in what they may expect from us. Whatever we do, these countries will be ruled by corrupt tyrants. The aim of foreign policy, therefore, should be to make sure that they are friendly tyrants rather than hostile tyrants.

That I think is a fair summary of what is usually known as the pro-Arab point of view.

The other point of view is somewhat different. It begins more or less from the same position—that Arab countries are not democracies and that establishing democracies within Arab societies will be difficult. Yet, Arabs are teachable and democratic governance ought to be possible for them, provided we proctor and gradually launch them on our way, or I should say on their way.

That point of view is known as imperialism. It was the method adopted in the British and French empires, in their mandated territories and in some of their colonies, creating governments in their own image. In Iraq, in Syria, and elsewhere, the British created constitutional monarchies and the French created unstable republics.

None of them worked very well. But hope still remains. The Indian example, I think, is the most encouraging of all and shows that democracy can work tolerably well provided that the circumstances are right.

Let us assess these somewhat discouraging alternatives, beginning with the more common hypothesis of failure. To wit: that democracy is bound to fail because of the factionalism of the people of Iraq, which could fracture the nation into its component parts (it is difficult,

however, to define these parts geographically with any precision). Such a break-up is no doubt a real danger. There are important differences within Iraq. Ethnically, it is mixed. Arabs are the largest group, Kurds are the second largest, and then there are other smaller minorities of whom the Turkomans are certainly the most important (the only one of the smaller ethnic groups that could have the ethnic-geographic basis for any sort of political claim). There are also the religious differences between the Sunni and Shi'ite. It must be admitted that an Iraqi break-up would have a disruptive effect on neighboring countries. The emergence of a Kurdish state in the north would certainly cause, shall we say, acute anxiety in Turkey, and also in Iran and other places where there are Kurdish minorities. This makes Iraq a danger spot for the whole region, east and west and north and south.

The other danger—as I said for most governments in the region the greater danger—is that there would emerge in Iraq a civilized, humane, decent, democratic government, elected by and answerable to the people, which would maintain the rule of law, civil liberties, and other things which we in the Western world take for granted, but which in the greater part of the rest of the world are either new or still unknown.

Here again the difficulties are obvious, inexperience being the most important of them. I would draw attention here to the experience of the Turkish Republic. It is true—no one, I think, can dispute it—that it is a difficult thing to establish democratic institutions in countries with ancient and immemorial traditions of command and obedience. But the experience of the Turkish Republic over the last half century has demonstrated two things. First, that it is extremely difficult to create a democracy in such a society, and second, that although hard, it is not impossible. I believe that the Turkish example in a broader Middle Eastern and Islamic context is a very encouraging one. We tend to speak of the Middle East's

immemorial traditions of command and obedience as if its governments had always been approximately as they are today. But that is not so. Many of the regimes of the past were, although not democratic in the modern sense, certainly less dictatorial or despotic than most of them are today. It is important to recognize that, if democracy is a modern Western idea, so is dictatorship. Dictatorship in the Middle East is a modern innovation—due largely to modernization either inspired by the West or imitating the West. We should have no illusions about that. Indeed, it is an important reason for the Arab and Muslim hostility toward the West, the tendency of Middle Easterners to blame us in the West for all of their troubles. And this tendency has some justification.

Westernization—or modernization, if you prefer—has had two powerful effects on government in the Middle East. First, modern technology has significantly reinforced sovereign power. Thanks to the modern apparatus of surveillance and repression, a ruler in the region today has far greater, far more pervasive, authority over his people than was ever achieved by the legendary autocrats of the past. Saddam Hussein, or even a petty dictator of a mini-state, has authority vastly beyond the imaginings of a Harun ar-Rashid or a Suleiman the Magnificent. Those were not purely arbitrary regimes—autocratic, yes, but under law and limited in their reach.

And the second thing that modernization has done is to strengthen further the autocracy by weakening or abrogating intermediate powers, those elements and orders in society that the ruler had to consider, if not give deference to. I think here of the late Ottoman term "*ayan*," usually translated as "the notables." They comprised both social and economic groups, and they were able to exercise a restrictive effect on the autocracy of the sultans and caliphs of old. Writing from Constantinople in 1786, the French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Count de Choiseul-Gouffier, reported back to his government,

. . . Here things are not as in France, where the King is sole master. He [the Sultan] has to persuade the ulema, the men of law, the holders of high offices, and those who no longer hold them.

The process of modernization enfeebled, often destroyed, this crucial check on despotism.

So the kind of dictatorship which exists in the Middle East today has to no small extent been the result of modernization. Westernization provided the only European model that really worked in the Middle East—the model of the one party state, either the Communist or the Nazi version, which have not differed greatly. The key instrument of government is the party, which controls surveillance, repression, and indoctrination. The Baath has a double ancestry, both Fascist and Communist, and still represents both trends very well.

Why then do I think there is hope? Primarily because there are these older traditions, not of democratic government but of government under law, government by consent, and government by contract in the Islamic world. The traditional Islamic perception of government is contractual and consensual. And this I think holds possibilities for the future.

Let me turn now to the question of the foreign relations of an Iraq that is rid of Saddam and to some degree liberal, consensual, and democratic in its internal political order. There are two main issues here.

The first is whether the policies of a post-Saddam Iraq will be pro-Western—will they be sympathetic and friendly toward the United States? I choose to say sympathetic and friendly rather than subservient because if it's the second we're hoping for, then we're defeated from the beginning. I see many reasons why they should be sympathetic and friendly, though I would not put it past the powers of our diplomatists to snatch defeat from the jaws of

victory.

The second is: would there be peace with Israel? Here, again, a difficult question to answer. Undoubtedly, the struggle against Israel is not very high on the list of priorities of those who look for greater freedom in their own countries. But we don't know where that freedom will lead after it is won. It may be that a democratic government, responsive to the wishes of its people, might become even more hostile to Israel rather than more inclined to making peace.

But I don't think so, and let me offer one simple, but I think effective, reason why that is not likely to be the case, if the governments are truly democratic. It has often been said that democracies do not start wars, although they usually finish them. It is true. Democracies do not start wars for a very simple reason. Democratic governments are answerable to their electors, and may be dismissed from office by their electors, and most electorates in most countries do not like wars, nor do they like governments which start them.

Dictatorships, on the other hand, don't make peace, because they need a state of war. They need an outside enemy against which to deflect the anger, the resentments, the pent-up grievances of their own people. They simply cannot afford to make peace, and we have seen several times in recent years to what desperate measures Middle Eastern dictators and would-be dictators have resorted when there was a real danger that peace might break out.

For that reason, it seems to me that a more democratic form of government in the greater part of the region would be more inclined to seek peaceable solutions to problems, the Palestine problem among others, than to perpetuate a state of conflict and war.

And there is another consideration, a more important and immediate regional one. There has been a tremendous change in the fundamental political situation in the Middle

East in recent years, the like of which we have not seen for centuries. The modern history of the Middle East, by common consent among historians, begins with the arrival of General Bonaparte in Egypt in 1798. His arrival in Egypt, and his ouster by the Royal Navy commanded by Admiral Nelson, established a pattern that was to prove durable: rival outside powers sought domination or at least predominance in the region, and Middle Eastern politicians played them off one against one another and took what advantage they could from the external rivalries.

There have been a succession of different actors in this scenario over the last two centuries, but the scenario basically remained the same. This situation suddenly changed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead of two, there was now only one outside power, and the old imperial games seemed to have stopped because no one was playing anymore. The Russians because they couldn't. The Americans because they wouldn't. In the Middle East, there were attempts to create or discover a substitute for the Third Reich or the Soviet Union in the leadership and patronage of the anti-Western forces. The European Union was offered the part. Some Europeans were willing to try, but for the most part they lacked both the will and certainly the capacity to play this role effectively.

So where do we go from here? Let me conclude by recalling a conversation I had not long ago in Amman, Jordan with some Jordanian and Palestinian friends. We were arguing all the different aspects of this question, and then one of them, as he thought, ended the conversation with a line of argument which I'm sure we've all heard before. He said we can wait. Time is on our side. We got rid of the Crusaders; we got rid of the Turks; we got rid of the British; we'll get rid of the Jews.

I said excuse me, but your history isn't right. He said, "What do you mean my history isn't right? That's how it happened!"

"No," I said. "The Turks got rid of the

Crusaders, the British got rid of the Turks, and the Jews got rid of the British. In this sequence, I wonder who is coming here next."

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