

► Damascus, the next best hope

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Change is in the air in the Middle East. I suspect our forefathers in the Levant must have felt a similar atmosphere in 1917, when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, though the region has not known similar vibrations in half a century of living memory. And for once, the indicators are positive and numerous enough so that one does not quite know where to start.

In Iraq, the Governing Council is rising to the historic task of leading the country despite and against the thugs who seek to undermine progress by dispatching suicide bombers against all categories of Iraqi civilians.

In Saudi Arabia, women are again demonstrating against the driving ban, while journalists and even members of the royal family talk openly of the impossibility of maintaining the status quo. The petitions demanding a loosening up of the Saudi system have become legion.

In Iran, there is an ongoing legislative rebellion against the abuse of constitutional power by the Council of Guardians, which recently prevented decent, honest candidates from running for forthcoming elections to Parliament. Though the council has done this before, it is the first time its actions have been challenged so forcefully. Once the unacceptable abuse of power ends, it will usher in an Iran that is virtually a full-fledged democracy.

In Palestine and Israel, despite the ambient gloom, for the first time since the case in Belgium against Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was halted through direct American interference, Sharon finds himself on the defensive. The only humane solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – a binational, federal Israeli-Palestinian state – is finding its way into the American and Palestinian mainstream.

Change is also visible elsewhere. In Sudan there is serious talk, for the first time in 20 years, of an end to the devastating civil war, although the dictatorship in Khartoum seeks to undermine progress to remain in power. In Turkey, the ruling Justice and Development Party is accumulating kudos from both the US and the European Union on its democratic behavior, demonstrating the fallacy of the silly prejudice that Islam is somehow incompatible with democracy.

Here in Lebanon the taboo of the presidential election later this year has finally been broken thanks to the courage of MP Nayla Mouawad, who has announced her candidacy. By so doing, she scored a point in favor of a constitutional alternation of power and against a possible extension of the current presidential mandate.

And in the United States, the dominant talk of President George W. Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney is about democracy in the Middle East and of ensuring that Middle East democrats become the administration's privileged partners in the region. We should not get carried away, of course; the obstacles remain colossal. However, the question is not whether democratic yearnings can succeed, but how one can set priorities to remove these hurdles as quickly as possible. Now that American leaders have finally responded to the deafening call to put democracy and human rights at the center of their Middle East policies, where should one start?

Naturally, each society wishes to be the first on the road to stability through openness and democracy; but if a choice were to be made on the most promising place for change in governance after the collapse of Saddam Hussein, it would have to be Syria, for two reasons: First, what is happening in Damascus is astonishing, and the democracy petition signed last week by 1,000 people was remarkable.

Moreover, the authorities made no arrests in response to it. On the contrary, Amnesty International saluted the release last week of over 100 Syrian political prisoners. Riad Seif, Mamum Homsy and others remain in prison for a third year, and must surely be released, but there is no reason to think that the government will not do so if domestic and outside forces keep pushing for such an outcome.

Second, the Syrian government openly admitted some time ago that military parity, and therefore a military option, was no longer possible against Israel: The technological gap is too wide and the US will never let Israel down. This is a welcome conclusion, as any victory against Israeli oppression of Arab-Israelis and Palestinians will now be commanded by ethics and not by force much as in South Africa and Eastern Europe. And ethics in public life, which means democracy, human rights and the end of oppression, begins at home.

The logic of non-violent change is palpable in Damascus, where one can almost feel it physically. There is far less quietude in the streets, far less muttering whenever politics are discussed in public, far fewer suspicious looks. A few days ago, a lady at a hotel openly expressed annoyance with the security man checking all visitors' names. He, in turn, was unusually accommodating, as if acquiescing in the pointlessness of the three-decade-old exercise.

So let us closely watch Syria, where thanks to the dogged courage of many hundreds of prominent civilians fear has almost receded into oblivion. The next step expected from a president who, with his wife, has heightened expectations of progress is for the release of the last prisoners of conscience and the formation of a national unity government with leaders of the present peaceful revolt. Some are of international caliber, such as Riad Seif, Sadeq Jalal al-Azm and Riad Turk.

Peaceful national unity in Damascus is the next best hope for democracy in the region. Why not a "man of the year" award for the president who would successfully oversee such a process? The alternatives are grim, both for him and for the Middle East.

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