

A Wave of Disobedience

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the wake of the ouster of the Lebanese government, the rulers of Syria and Egypt are under pressure to allow reforms. America is feeling triumphant as US President George W. Bush's call for democratization of the Middle East appears to be coming to fruition.

Three women, as worldly as Beirut's boulevards, stand at the gravestone of Rafik Hariri. One of the women, wearing a white silk scarf that barely covers her head, folds her hands and softly says a prayer for the murdered former prime minister. The two others, both wearing black, cross themselves before moving on to the graves of Hariri's bodyguards.

Two students from Kuwait lean against the fence surrounding the small, roofed cemetery watching the scene. Behind their backs, on Martyr's Square, yet another night of peaceful protest is just getting underway. The entire area is lit up by floodlights and the air is vibrant with patriotic hymns blaring from loudspeakers, as hundreds of young Lebanese dance and wave the country's red-and-white flag depicting a cedar tree. Television crews from Al-Jazeera to Fox News are getting into position for their live broadcasts.

But the young Kuwaitis, clearly fascinated by the three Lebanese women, are ignoring the spectacle taking place behind them on the square. Rafik Hariri was a Sunni Muslim. He was buried in the shadow of a mosque that was built during his administration, a building that dominates the Beirut skyline -- so much so, in fact, that it was at the center of a bitter dispute among religious confessions only a few weeks ago. "Why," asks one of the two Kuwaitis, "are three Christian women praying at his grave?"

Many Lebanese are still adjusting to new realities in their country. Lebanon, a small country that has garnered sympathy from the Maghreb to the Persian Gulf, but is consistently pitied as an ungovernable multiethnic state, has set an example. Without bloodshed, demonstrators managed to topple the country's Syrian-controlled government, overcoming internal differences previously considered insurmountable. The Lebanese example, says a European diplomat in Beirut, is indicative of a "paradigm shift in the Middle East."

The euphoria in Beirut is matched by the sense of satisfaction in Washington. Just two years after President George W. Bush triumphantly announced the end of combat operations in Iraq from the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, America is once again claiming closure. Today the world speaks with one voice, Bush said last Wednesday, "when it comes to giving democracy a chance to flourish in Lebanon and in the Middle East."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice praised the Beirut demonstrators, saying that the Lebanese are in the process of asserting their right to democracy, "and that's something we support in no uncertain terms."

The forces of democratization

The concept of democratizing the "greater Middle East," essentially abandoned last spring in the face of the horrific news coming out of Iraq, is back. Also back in favor

is the domino theory that holds that the fall of the first Middle Eastern dictatorship will ultimately result in the fall of all Middle Eastern dictatorships. Indeed, the US government has managed to achieve an impressive series of foreign policy successes in recent months, from Libyan revolutionary leader Moammar Gadhafi's about-turn, through presidential elections in Afghanistan and Palestine, to the Iraqi election and the first cautious stabs at democracy in Saudi Arabia. But the high point occurred two weekends ago. After days of what diplomats have described as massive American pressure on Cairo, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak surprised the world by announcing a change in his country's election law. For the first time in Egypt's history, Egyptian voters will see more than one candidate listed on their ballots in the upcoming September presidential election. Posters on display at the university in Mubarak's home town of Manufiya proclaimed: "Long live Mubarak, the champion of freedom and democracy." Two days later, in response to the "Cedar revolution," the Syrian-controlled puppet government in Beirut resigned. The global spirit of democracy residing in Washington appears to be marching forward inexorably. European and Arab skeptics, who had questioned the wisdom of US Middle East policy ever since the US invasion of Iraq, are now on the defensive. Will George W. Bush be right after all? Is America's domino theory truly correct?

At first, a devastating bombing in the Iraqi city of Hilla last Monday served as a grim reminder that the January elections did not stabilize the situation on the Tigris. More than 130 people were killed in the city south of Baghdad, in what was the worst terrorist attack since the end of the war.

But also last week, Syria extradited a group of about 30 members of the former Iraqi leadership to Baghdad. The group, which is accused of supporting the Iraqi insurgency, included Sabawi Ibrahim al-Hassan, Saddam's half-brother and the former chief of Iraqi intelligence. It was a gesture intended to appease America.

Like no other regime, the Syrian leadership is feeling the brunt of America's excessive self-confidence. Washington accuses Syria of supporting the insurgents in Iraq and continuing to interfere in the affairs of neighboring Lebanon. The evidence in a suicide attack in Tel Aviv, in which five Israelis were killed two weeks ago, also points toward Damascus. Syria, said Secretary of State Rice, must decide whether it wishes to continue being "a negative factor" in the Middle East.

Although there is still no evidence of Syria's involvement, President Bashar al-Assad has been in deep isolation since the murder of former Lebanese Prime Minister Hariri. "Bashar, go back to ophthalmology," demands a much-cited piece of graffiti at Martyr's Square in Beirut. The Syrian president, who has been in power for just under five years, is an ophthalmologist by profession.

Washington has been joined by Paris and the Lebanese opposition in demanding the withdrawal of the 14,000 Syrian troops currently stationed in Lebanon. Arab neighbors, themselves responding to American pressure, are also urging Assad to pull out his troops. Compromises are "non-negotiable," Bush said on Friday, following reports that Assad was about to announce the withdrawal of only a portion of his troops.

Nonetheless, observers doubt that driving the Damascus regime into a corner will truly improve the situation in the Middle East. Last week Flynt Leverett, a former Middle East expert in the US government's National Security Council, warned not to "rush things with Syria." Leverett believes that using the exuberance of Lebanon's democratic spring to achieve the "maximum goal" -- of deposing Bashar al-Assad -- would be dangerous. He believes that "the most likely outcome would be chaos in Syria, and the political order following this chaos would be of a heavily Islamist nature." An overly hasty withdrawal by the Syrians would also leave behind an unwanted vacuum in southern Lebanon -- namely a leaderless Shiite Hezbollah party. Hezbollah, well-integrated politically and supported by Syria until now, could then turn to an increasingly radical Iran for support -- an outcome even Israel's national security advisor, Giora Eiland, has warned against.

But Lebanese attorney and democrat Chibli Mallat disagrees, saying that it is precisely this type of realpolitik, this excessively cautious approach to dealing with dictators in the Middle East, that is no longer effective. His Beirut office is filled with files relating to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, against whom Mallat litigated a spectacular war crimes case before the court in Brussels in 2001.

Mallat's Arab patriotism seems to rise above all doubts. Nevertheless, Mallat, like many Arab intellectuals, concedes that the current US administration has at least managed to resolve a political stalemate. "However, George W. Bush arrived 12 years too late," says Mallat. "If his father had brought down Saddam in 1991, we would be much further along today."

Mallat believes that decades of appeasement of Middle Eastern regimes has weakened these countries' populations. "Just imagine the political authority with which Egypt, Lebanon or Syria will be able to oppose Israel's occupation policies once we have democratic governments here!"

Saddam's ouster and the American course against Syria have certainly facilitated radical change in Lebanon, says Walid Jumblat, who has turned himself into the Lebanese opposition's leadership figure since Rafik Hariri's death. Last Wednesday, Mallat and at least three dozen other opposition politicians convened at the dazzling Druze leader's mountain retreat near Beirut. They demanded the resignation of leading security officers, a neutral government and a timetable for an "honorable withdrawal" by the Syrians.

A burgeoning movement

They are also weaving a network of contacts to democratic opposition movements in other Arab countries. A few weeks ago, says Mallat, Georges Ishak visited Beirut. Ishak is the founder of the Egyptian Kifaya movement. The movement's name sums up its political leanings. "Kifaya" means "enough" in Arabic -- a reference to the petrified and aging regime of President Hosni Mubarak, who has been in power for the past 24 years.

Since December, Ishak's group has been drawing attention to itself with its pinpointed protest demonstrations, during which demonstrators symbolically cover their mouths with thick bandages displaying the name of their movement. The brief demonstrations

in front of Cairo University or the Palace of Justice, usually quickly disbanded by the police, seem insignificant in comparison to the Lebanese popular uprising. But Egypt, with its 70 million people, has huge political significance in the region and the demonstrations may be the first sign of a much larger and more dramatic wave of civil disobedience.

After months of relative laxity, Egypt's security apparatus tightened the reins again in late January. At the Cairo Book Fair, three activists distributing flyers for an anti-Mubarak rally were arrested. The next day, the police stormed the private apartment and office of Ayman Nur, who had established Al-Ghad ("The Morning"), a liberal party critical of the regime, in October.

Ayman Nur, accused of document forgery, has been under arrest for the past five weeks. "What happened to my husband," says his wife, Gamila Ismail, "was a clear message to anyone seriously quarreling with this government."

In fact, Egypt's government is also seriously at odds with Washington. Condoleezza Rice cancelled a trip to the Middle East two weeks ago, and when asked for an explanation, her spokesman explicitly referred to the Ayman Nur case. Washington's displeasure, say diplomats, has decisively contributed to Mubarak's surprising proposal to relax the rules for presidential elections.

Hardly anyone doubts that Hosni Mubarak -- or his son Gamal -- would win a relatively open election, especially since no one can match the political and media resources of the president's dominant National Democratic Party.

But the opposition has taken up the fight -- with weapons against which the government machine has been helpless to date. For the past few weeks, Ayman Nur's wife has been using her mobile phone to send SMS text messages such as the following to a steadily growing community: "We will meet tomorrow at eleven for a demonstration in front of the Palace of Justice. Does hope have a future?"

Meanwhile, the Lebanese opposition movement lacks a convincing candidate for the parliamentary elections in May. Jumblat, the political figurehead of the Druze religious group in Lebanon, is said to be interested in the office of interior minister so that he can purge legions of Syrian intelligence agents from the country's security apparatus.

In Beirut, everything was geared toward Hariri. After he was forced by Damascus to resign, his comeback was only a matter of time. What the celebrators and mourners on Martyr's Square in Beirut lack is a figure of national unity, someone who could solidify the historic alliance among the diverse religious factions into a political force. They need someone who is "indispensable," a word written, in a woman's handwriting, on one of the dozens of images of Hariri lying at his grave.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan