

White Arabism

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In the past two years, the "Iraqi earthquake" (a phrase coined by Jihad Zein, a leading Lebanese columnist) occasioned by the collapse of the most dictatorial system in the Arab world is slowly confirming a new era in the region, where the forces of democracy are emerging as the dominant ideological appeal in each and every Arab country. With fits and starts the system is shaking, within Iraq itself, then in Palestine, now in Lebanon and Egypt.

The stakes following Rafiq Hariri's assassination go far beyond Lebanon and Syria, where they are bound to change the political scene. As underlined in Lebanon by such diverse writers as Samir Kassir, a strong voice against the Syrian leadership, and Talal Salman, the respected editor of the pan-Arab daily al-Safir, and echoed in a column by Thomas Friedman in the New York Times, it is the whole Arab political system that is shaking to the core. The absence of a single Arab president or king at the funeral of a man whom every Arab leader knew personally is telling. While it may be superficially explained by the estrangement of Hariri from his nemesis, President Emile Lahoud, Arab leaders were mostly apprehensive about the question of their legitimacy: would they risk going down with the Lebanese government and president if they showed up, like French President Jacques Chirac, on the side of an angry family?

For the past 20 years, so-called Arab civil society has been slowly denting the status quo. Initially, questions were defensive and focused on human rights, while participants in human rights gatherings were incapable of mustering the courage needed to name those leaders responsible for all kinds of violations, even the more egregious ones like Saddam Hussein. In part this was understandable, and the level of repression meted out against dissidents was uniquely high: scores of dissenters were brutally assassinated, thrown in jail and tortured, while the usual "higher national interest" was put forward and was reinforced by the brutality of Israeli repression of Palestinian dissent and the inexorable shrinking of Palestinian land over half a century.

As time passed, however, the connection between brutality at home and the inability to stand up to anti-Israel rhetoric became increasingly apparent: from the condemnation of the Arab record in general, typified in the UNDP reports since 2002, particulars of repression were getting linked to people responsible at the helm in every single Arab country. Local Arab democrats are still hesitant to accuse the emirs and kings in the Gulf, but the taboos have fallen in the Levant and North Africa: Zein al-Abidin, Mubarak, Lahoud and Asad are being openly challenged to leave the presidency, and the perceived weakness of the hardliners in Israel, leading to the withdrawal from settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, will accelerate the trend of decoupling Arab domestic reform from the Israel "higher interest" fig leaf.

The Arab nationalism that has prevailed since the Nasser revolution is increasingly being dubbed "black Arabism" by those of us who do not want to abandon their yearning for closer integration between societies separated by arguably artificial colonial borders. Black Arabism, in this perception, is characteristically fascist, and is epitomized by the Baath systems in Iraq and Syria. Against it is put forward the need for "White Arabism", which harks back to such figures as Saad Zaghlul in Egypt, Kamel Chadirchi in Iraq, and Kamal Jumblatt in Lebanon. At the core of the message is democratic, non-violent change at the top in these countries, with Arabism read as a liberal call that unifies people irrespective of their religion or sect: in Egypt, Copts and Muslims; in Lebanon, the various communities that form the country; in Iraq, Shi'ites and Sunnis.

The example of Iraq, where Arabism is not capable of giving Kurds their due of equal citizenship, is particularly telling of the more advanced thought needed to accommodate every citizen, hence the surge of the concept of federalism as a further trait of White Arabism. Only federalism can allow forms of Arab identity to be preserved while Kurds are treated as equal both on the individual level and as a collective community.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of White Arabism will be a review of the Palestine-Israel crisis

in the light of new parameters, guided mostly by visions of federalism and where human rights are no longer acting passively, but as an offshoot of democracy. While the establishment of a Palestinian state appears inevitable in the short to medium future, White Arabism may have far more to offer to both Jews and Arabs in Palestine-Israel.- *Published 3/3/2005 (c) bitterlemons-international.org*

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