

A Middle East democracy?

COMMENTARY

By ARISTOTLE TZIAMPIS *

A nascent democratic movement is emerging in the Middle East that could constitute an historic turning point for the region and so deserves the full support of the international community and of the European Union in particular.

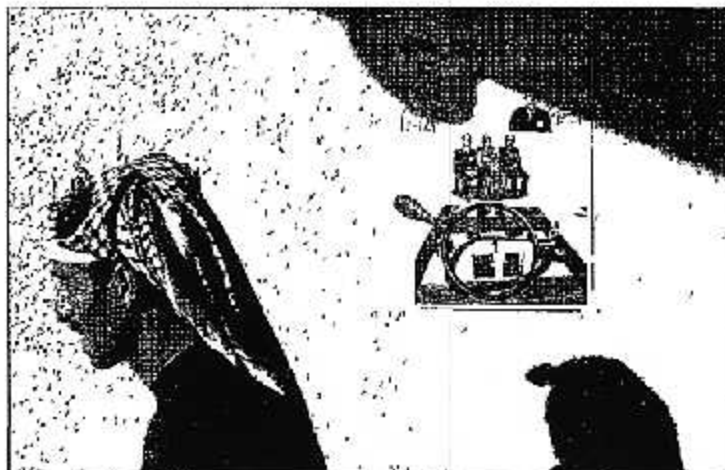
Iraq's recent elections are an example. Although marred by violence and the overwhelming non-participation of the country's Sunni population, the polls were an unprecedented and largely positive development.

In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak unexpectedly announced proposals to amend the country's constitution and allow multiparty presidential elections. If Parliament endorses and implements such reforms, it will mark the end of a decades-old governing system based on uncontested elections.

Following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, mass demonstrations led to the resignation of Lebanon's government. This civil society intervention may prove similar to ones in Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine that boosted democratic accountability and ties with the West. In the Palestinian Authority, free elections were held for the succession of Yasser Arafat, producing a landslide victory for Mahmoud Abbas and renewed hopes for peace.

Even Saudi Arabia held municipal polls for the first time. Although women were excluded from the process, it still represents a sea-change, given the kingdom's past governing structures.

In assessing these developments, caution is required. Democratic reforms are competing against a long history of authoritarian regimes, sectarian disputes and national conflicts. The process of democratization, if not reversed, will doubtless be long and arduous. After all, periodic polls do not a liberal democracy make. Rule of law, freedom of the press, freedom of association and respect for human and minority rights are all necessary complements to voting procedures. There is also the danger that democratic forces may be seen as collaborating with the West to such an extent that they will be delegitimized in the eyes of a significant segment of their constituents. Finally, the US public might decide



An Iraqi man passes a poster explaining how to cast a ballot at a polling station in the village of Al-Tawzeh, north of Basra, on January 27, a few days before elections in Iraq.

at some point that the goal of democratizing the Middle East is simply not worth the cost in human lives and funds.

Despite, or perhaps due to, these potential problems and pitfalls, democratic efforts must have the maximum possible international aid and encouragement.

Given the Middle East's political and geostrategic importance, the USA and EU should act on the basis of the principle of complementarity, aiming at constant democratic reforms, economic development and political stability.

If the EU is a "moral superpower," then at the very least it has the moral obligation to actively support these goals by focusing primarily on its "soft power" capabilities. Valuable institutional experience does exist and could be utilized in the Middle East. After all, the Union successfully managed to guide toward Western democratic standards the 10 states involved in its recent enlargement. This was partially accomplished through the administration of a multitude of technical, relatively well-funded and possibly transferable programs, such as PHARE, Democracy, etc (CARDIS has been utilized for the Western Balkans).

EU-US cooperation and complementarity must also focus on the Israeli-Palestinian con-

flict, a key to any regional progress.

A concerted effort, centering on different sets of allies and incorporating considerable funding and diplomatic attention, would certainly be of assistance and could perhaps be extended to institutions such as NATO.

It could be worth exploring, not only using NATO training options or sending NATO troops to police a future agreement, but also eventually bringing both Israel and a Palestinian state within NATO simultaneously. Such a move would create new regional political and military realities presupposing the signing of a comprehensive peace agreement.

The Middle East will most likely be at the forefront of international relations in the 21st century. Democratization efforts ought to be shaped and assisted by both the EU and the USA from the outset. Otherwise, historians might refer in the future not to the beginning of the transformation of the Middle East, but to another missed opportunity.

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