

# The birth of a new Middle East

COMMENTARY

By Aristotle Tziannidis \*

During the recent armed confrontation in Lebanon, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice declared from her unprejudiced vantage point that the international community was witnessing "the birth pangs of a new Middle East."

A kind of pre-revolutionary situation is indeed almost palpable, although the conclusions of this apparent new chapter in the region's history are far from certain.

At this point, the following trends and realities appear to be primarily driving important developments in the new Middle East:

- The unpredictable, unimaginary but brutal and dangerously opportunistic regime of Saddam Hussein has ceased to be a factor in regional politics. This positive change is often not so fully appreciated, overlooked as it is by the talk of "find weapons of mass destruction" and the violent turn of events now threatening our war.

- Democratic elections and primaries have assumed greater regional significance. Successful elections took place in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, while democratic measures were witnessed in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt. At the same time, however, it is an irony via their actual procedures that Hamas became a ruling party and Hezbollah increased its political influence.

Elections are but an (admittedly crucial) component of a liberal democratic regime, which also requires many more freedoms and well functioning institutions including the judiciary, the press and the military.

If all politics is local, then ethnic and sectarian considerations, as well as issues of social services and good governance, will greatly influence voting patterns in the region. There is no guarantee that electorates will be preferable to the West in the final



An elderly Lebanese woman takes a rest after collecting some of her belongings from the rubble of a building in the southern Lebanese town of Jezz el Batah yesterday. Meanwhile, a relieved Lebanon prepared for the imminent lifting of an almost two-month air and sea blockade imposed by Israel, but the Israeli government was blasted by critics at home that such a move would endanger security.

analysis. The dilemma to expect the Middle East to become a patchwork of liberal democracies overnight. Nevertheless, efforts in this direction deserve to be supported, especially if conducive to regional stability.

As the ascendancy can clearly be observed in Muslim rule Iran, constitute the largest and most significant group in Iran, are a fate to be reckoned with in Lebanon, represent the overwhelming majority of Bahrain's population, recently re-secured full rights in Afghanistan and more recognition in Saudi Arabia (where they constitute a minority that resides in the country's oil-rich region). Shia Islam is not marginal but it is certainly becoming more assertive in defining and protecting its religious and political rights. At the same time, a Sunni revival to this sense cannot be precluded. Thus the

Shia-Sunni sectarian dynamics will certainly influence the future of Iraq, as well as the pattern of regional alliances and stability.

- Iran is making a serious bid for regional hegemony. The country's ambitions are partly fueled and reinforced by the aforementioned Shia ascendancy. Crucial in this effort is its attempt to attain a nuclear weapon capability—a development that would redefine the Middle East's balance of power overnight. Iran would become "safe" from invasion, constitute an existential threat to Israel, solidify the rise of Shia Islam, negate (at least in theory) possibilities for nuclear terrorism, and quite possibly "pull" Sunni regional states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps even Turkey, into an arms race in which the size of their nuclear weapons. Whether Iran acquires nuclear

weapons, and whether it will act as a revolutionary or a rather status quo actor remains to be seen. That it is not and is already enjoying a more significant regional role is not in doubt.

- A comprehensive, long-lasting peace agreement, otherwise the Palestinians and the Israelis, which will defuse regional hatreds and conflicts, is not likely in the near future. The rise of Hamas, complicated ties with Israel's disengagement policy and the fact that the US will not be easily accepted as an honest broker suggest a more pessimistic outlook on this crucial issue.

- International involvement in the region will in all likelihood take place on the basis of multilateral organizations and frameworks as witnessed on the Iran nuclear issue, as well as with the diplomatic efforts that re-

cently produced an international force for Lebanon. All the conditions listed were that successfully involved Iraq, took adequate long time on the ground level, in fact that greatly complicates efforts as a military confrontation is over. It is just reasonable to expect a similar and common arena (if not exclusively) of the "Lebanon mode" of international intervention, as opposed to that of Iraq. Throughout the Middle East, military identity is still alive. Hamas, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda, al-Qaida-Mossad, and others are the manifestations of a very same trend for the West. The Middle East has failed to sufficiently modernize by supporting various ideologies such as socialism, Arab nationalism and Islamism. Militant Islamists, both Shia and Sunni, now want their chance to govern, a development that if unbridled would probably produce predictably disastrous results. The new Middle East that is thus emerging will be potentially even more dangerous and unstable. But it is too early to be essentially impossible to predict with accuracy what will ensue. A lot of crucial issues remain unresolved. Will Iraq slide into a full-scale civil war? Will Iran acquire nuclear weapons? How will the Shia-Sunni dynamics play out in a regional level? How strong will the forces of liberal democracy prove to be? Will terrorist jihadist groups continue to increase in influence and deadliness? Given this situation, Greece ought to update its membership in international organizations and its various military, political and economic capabilities to support, in the fullest, all legitimate international efforts aiming at regional stability and democracy.

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