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Autocracy and the Decline of the Arabs

The Arab world is plagued by despots. But don't expect the U.N. to give President Bush any credit for challenging this order.

By **FOUAD AJAMI**

'It made me feel so jealous,' said Abdulmonem Ibrahim, a young Egyptian political activist, of the recent upheaval in Iran. "We are amazed at the organization and speed with which the Iranian movement has been functioning. In Egypt you can count the number of activists on your hand." This degree of "Iran envy" is a telling statement on the stagnation of Arab politics. It is not pretty, Iran's upheaval, but grant the Iranians their due: They have gone out into the streets to contest the writ of the theocrats.

In contrast, little has stirred in Arab politics of late. The Arabs, by their own testimony, have become spectators to their history. A struggle rages between the Iranian theocracy and the Pax Americana for primacy in the Persian Gulf and the Levant. The Arabs have the demography—360 million people by latest count—and the wealth to balance Iran's power. But they have taken a pass in the hope that America—or Israel, for that matter—would shatter the Iranian bid for hegemony.

We are now in the midst of one of those periodic autopsies of the Arab condition. The trigger is the publication last month of the Arab Human Development Report 2009, the fifth of a series of reports by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) on the state of the contemporary Arab world.

The first of these reports, published in 2002, was treated with deference. A group of Arab truth-tellers, it was believed, had broken with the evasions and the apologetics to tell of the sordid condition of Arab society—the autocratic political culture, the economic stagnation, the cultural decay. So all Arabs combined had a smaller manufacturing capacity than Finland with its five million people, and a vast Arabic-speaking world translated into Arabic a fifth of the foreign books that Greece with its 11 million people translates. With all the oil in the region, tens of millions of Arabs were living below the poverty line.

Little has altered in the years separating the first of these reports from the most recent. A huge oil windfall came into the region, and it was better handled, it has to be conceded, than earlier oil windfalls. But on balance the grief of the Arabs has deepened, and the autocracies are yet to be brought to account. They remain unloved, but they remain in the saddle.

In a clever turn of phrase, The Economist recently wrote of an Arab Rip Abu Winkle awakening from a slumber into which he had fallen in the early 1980s to marvel at how little has changed. He would find Hosni Mubarak still at the helm in Cairo, the policeman Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, and Moammar Gadhafi in Libya. He would miss Hafez Assad in Damascus, but he would be reassured that his son Bashar had inherited his father's dominion. He would of course find the same dynasties in Jordan and in the Arab states of the Peninsula and the Gulf.

Wily rulers, the men at the helm may have failed their peoples. They may have denied them decent educational systems. They may not have figured out a way into the modern world economy. But they have mastered the art of political survival. "He who eats the sultan's bread, fights with the sultan's sword," goes an Arabic maxim. The economic dominance of the rulers, the absence of the countervailing power of property and the private sector, has increased the awesome power of the governments and their security establishments.

It is no mystery, this sorrowful decline of the Arabs. They have invested their hopes in states, and the states have failed. According to the UNDP's report, government revenues as percentage of GDP are 13% in Third World Countries, but they are 25% in the Middle East and North Africa. The oil states are a world apart in that regard: the comparable figures are 68% in Libya, 45% in Saudi Arabia, and 40% in Algeria, Kuwait and Qatar. Oil is no panacea for these lands. The unemployment rates for the Arab world as a whole are the highest in the world, and no prophecy could foresee these societies providing the 51 million jobs the UNDP report says are needed by 2020 to "absorb young entrants to the labor force who would otherwise face an empty future."

The simple truth is that the Arab world has terrible rulers and worse oppositionists. There are autocrats on one side and theocrats on the other. A timid and fragile middle class is caught in the middle between regimes it abhors and Islamists it fears.

Indeed, the technocrats and intellectuals associated with these development reports are themselves no angels. On the whole, they are unreconstructed Arab nationalists. The patrons of these reports are the likes of the Algerian diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi and the Palestinian leader Hanan Ashrawi, intellectuals and public figures whose stock-in-trade is presumed Western (read American) guilt for the ills that afflict the Arabs. Anti-Americanism suffuses this report, as it did the earlier ones.

There is cruelty and plunder aplenty in the Arab world, but these writers are particularly exercised about Iraq. "This intervention polarized the country," they say of Iraq. This is a myth of the Arabs who are yet to grant the Iraqis the right to their own history: There had been a secular culture under the Baath, they insist, but the American war begot the sectarianism. To go by this report, Iraq is a place of mayhem and plunder, a land where militias rule uncontested.

For decades, it was the standard argument of the Arabs that America had cast its power in the region on the side of the autocrats. In Iraq in 2003, and then in Lebanon, an American president bet on the freedom of the Arabs. George W. Bush's freedom agenda broke with a long history and insisted that the Arabs did not have tyranny in their DNA. A despotism in Baghdad was toppled, a Syrian regime that had all but erased its border with Lebanon was pushed out of its smaller neighbor, bringing an end to three decades of brutal occupation. The "Cedar Revolution" that erupted in the streets of Beirut was but a child of Bush's diplomacy of freedom.

Arabs know this history even as they say otherwise, even as they tell the pollsters the obligatory things about America the pollsters expect them to say. True, Mr. Bush's wager on elections in the Palestinian territories rebounded to the benefit of Hamas. But the ballot is not infallible, and the verdict of that election was a statement on the malignancies of Palestinian politics. It was no fault of American diplomacy that the Palestinians, who needed to break with a history of maximalist demands, gave in yet again to radical temptations.

Now the Arabs are face to face with their own history. Instead of George W. Bush there is Barack Hussein Obama, an American leader pledged to a foreign policy of "realism." The Arabs express fondness for the new American president. In his fashion (and in the fashion of their world and their leaders, it has to be said) President Obama gave the Arabs a speech in Cairo two months ago. It was a moment of theater and therapy. The speech delivered, the foreign visitor was gone. He had put another marker on the globe, another place to which he had taken his astounding belief in his biography and his conviction that another foreign population had been wooed by his oratory and weaned away from anti-Americanism.

The crowd could tell itself that the new standard-bearer of the Pax Americana was a man who understood its

concerns, but the embattled modernists and the critics of autocracy knew better. There is no mistaking the animating drive of the new American policy in that Greater Middle East: realism and benign neglect, the safety of the status quo rather than the risks of liberty. (If in doubt, the Arabs could check with their Iranian neighbors. The Persians would tell them of the new mood in Washington.)

One day an Arab chronicle could yet be written, and like all Arab chronicles, it would tell of woes and missed opportunities. It would acknowledge that brief interlude when American power gave Arab autocracies a scare, and when a despotism in Baghdad and a brutal “brotherly” occupation in Beirut were laid to waste. The chroniclers would have to be an honest lot. They would speak the language of daily life, and the truths that Arabs have seen and endured in recent years. On that day, the “human development reports” would be discarded, their writers seen for the purveyors of double-speak and half-truths they were.

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