

Jean-Louis Roy gives his thoughts on the Mideast crisis

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When the dust settles in Lebanon, it will be necessary to rethink the future of the Middle East, deepen our understanding of the beleaguered region and outline lucid policy options. Nonetheless, the ongoing tensions in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine should not themselves overshadow future relations and challenges between the West and the Middle East.

Surrounded by such powers as India, China and Russia and bordered on the other side by Mediterranean Europe and Africa, the Middle East is caught in a frightening and acute array of antipodes: Islam and the West, democracy and autocracy, outrageous opulence and appalling poverty, war, terror and a torturous path to durable peace.

What does the future hold for the Middle East?

To begin, let's assess the current situation and examine its possible evolution:

Wars and other armed conflicts have affected more than half of the 15 Middle Eastern countries, about 100 million people. These confrontations stem from recurrent and unresolved disputes resulting in a spiral of destruction, hate and fanatical death cults.

Autocratic regimes and disturbing alliances breeding terrible violence dominate the region. A majority of the 275 million inhabitants of the Middle East are denied the benefits of the rule of law, an independent judiciary, free elections, respect and protection of human rights and the recognition of a civil society;

Degrading social-economic conditions are notably characterized by:

An average growth rate below seven per cent, the minimal figure needed to effectively reduce poverty;

An average investment level among the lowest in the world. Quite bewildering for an oil-rich region which, alone, invests \$290 billion (2005-2006) elsewhere in the world;

A labour market unable to integrating new employees, whose numbers are forecasted to double by the end of 2010 in a region with a soaring unemployment rate: These rates fluctuate 15-60 per cent, despite a low proportion of women in

the work force;

Extreme poverty in one of the biggest wealth-producing areas in the world. More than 30 per cent of the population in the Middle East lives with less than \$2 a day.

The Middle East in 2025

On top of these explosive and quite dismaying facts, changing global demographics indicate population growth to pass the 550-million mark in the next two decades.

Also it should be noted, that Egypt and Iran could well have nearly 100 million citizens each; Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Afghanistan are expected to close on 50 million; Syria will experience a sharp hike up to 30 million.

As the populations of these countries continue to develop, millions of youths will be left disenfranchised with sub-standard living conditions and deprived of any hope.

For instance, in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran, respectively 65.3, 62.7, 61.7 and 59.3 per cent of the population is under 24. This age group represents between 50 and 65 per cent of the population in the Middle East and will only increase in the coming years.

Undoubtedly, the Middle East needs peace, democracy and development, with a discourse on human rights serving as the cornerstone for that agenda to thrive and resonate widely in the Islamic world.

How do we define the Middle East's future?

Choosing the status quo is short-sighted, nothing less than a choice for war and for continuing underdevelopment without a plausible prospect for peace.

Despite the many complexities and the torments of the current conflict, choosing to be neutral is capitulating in the face of state terrorism and armed factions' genocidal intentions. It amounts to perpetuating regional insecurity and instability, appeasing terrorists and repressive regimes and can be seen as an implicit consent to the eradication of civil society. The recourse to force, when used in conformity with international law, can never be excluded.

Siding with democracy is the only road worth taking in the Middle East, the only one able, in due course, to uphold peace, freedom and development. Countries that engage themselves on that path must receive unequivocal support.

Ultimately, encouraging democracy must be based on three goals: a deep-seated understanding of what entails democracy, the desire for democracy and the action needed to obtain it. At diverse degrees, these core values are present in almost all countries in the region. Emerging democrats standing up for those ideals must not

be abandoned, deprived of resources or persecuted, but rather helped to bring about those changes.

Human rights address basic and universal questions related to the relation between citizens and States must be at the heart of any compelling and viable Western policy initiative toward the Middle East. As a matter of fact, in Europe, these deeply held democratic values prevailed at the Helsinki conference in 1975. Two decades later, they provoked the collapse of the Soviet Union in the battle between freedom and totalitarianism that arose many years ago and which now has spread to the Middle East.

But how to bring the Middle East population to believe in the wisdom of these choices, in the ability to embrace a culture of human rights with their identities and values to bridge the security and development gap?

With today's exception of Afghanistan, using armed conflict as an instrument of democratization should be abandoned at all costs. The Iraqi quagmire is a painful and telling example.

The practice of continuing to support repressive regimes cannot be sustained anymore. Egypt's growing restlessness and civil unrest is a cautionary example. The greater threat lies in propping up ruthless autocrats. Recognizing legitimate democratic choices even if they pose significant challenges, as in Palestine, is indispensable in order to promote a durable peace in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, any serious initiatives urgently need to encapsulate the following objectives: the construction of a zone of security, development and mutual recognition enclosing Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, with a particular emphasis on rebuilding both Lebanon and Palestine; the emergence of a new negotiation platform with Iran, UN sanctions being by themselves gravely inadequate in dealing with the alpha and omega of our relationship with the primary regional, economic and military power of the Middle East; ending the Iraqi adventure and planning its gravely needed country-wide reconstruction.

Lastly, democrats from the Atlantic regions and their partners have the means of offering unprecedented co-operation and development aid for the Middle East. The occasion must be seized.

This enterprise of democratization will be long and arduous. The democratic ideal is a clarion call needed to overcome the components of obscurantism: violence, terrorism and underdevelopment. One way or another, the Middle East's destiny is inseparable from ours.

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