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The Birth of Democracy in the Middle East

A revealing series of interviews is making the rounds on YouTube. The questioner stops intelligent enough looking people on the street and asks them whether there is any democratic nation in the Middle East. To some of the poor victims of the interview, the man with the microphone even gives a choice. What is unsettling and somewhat shocking is that the answers tend to be Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, or even Syria. These nations are the most despotic, totalitarian and brutal regimes in the world. Almost never does anyone mention Israel, even when given that choice. Can people really be that lacking in knowledge, or is there something else at work going on here?

The only country in which 25% of the population is Arab and gets to vote is in the State of Israel. Those Arabs have felt a sense of freedom and participatory democracy that they have never known in any Arab country in all the history of Islam. Those Israelis, Jewish, Arab and Christian, act as apostles throughout the Arab world showing their co-religionists that a better lifestyle can exist. The Arab world understands that the thorn which Israel represents in the Middle East is in sharp contradistinction to the abysmal lifestyle of Arab men, and particularly women, throughout the Arab/Muslim world.

Israel has so many political parties, political points of view, and is so robust in its debate that even the United States could learn a few lessons from this ancient biblical democracy evolved into a vibrant modern state. From the Bible, and the prophets, we learn that no king could rule without the consent of the people. Deborah, the prophetess, was sought out by the populous because of foreign attacks on the nation state. Evil rulers were condemned by towering figures such as Isaiah and Jeremiah.

In the Greek and Roman period, the Jews of Palestine waged four wars against oppression. When the insulting Roman epithet quote “King of Jews” was placed on the cross where Jesus was crucified, this was intended as a political statement to stamp out any future Jewish opposition to the tyranny brought by the Imperial juggernaut.

On the Liberty Bell, at United Nations Plaza and throughout the world, biblical phrases about liberty and justice abound. Rabbinical interpreters of the Bible say that all positive precepts, including to love your neighbor as yourself found in Leviticus 19:18, flows from God’s requirement that man do justice.

Has the Arab world suddenly discovered democracy as a result of the United States’ invasion of Iraq, our experiment in nation building in Afghanistan or in the riotous streets of Egypt and Tunisia? The answer is a resounding “No.” There is no history of democracy in Arab or Muslim culture or nationhood. That is not to say that individual Arabs do not appreciate the republican form of government or that they cannot live in a democratic regime not governed by autocratic leadership. What we do know is that the same history that has motivated the Judaeo-Christian ethic to respect individual rights and liberties is simply non-existent as a cultural motif in the Arab-Muslim world.

The people in the streets of Egypt are not rioting for a democratic form of government. The riots are about getting rid of a dictator who has been in power for 30 years and has not delivered.

I was talking to a doctor once at a party who runs clinics in Vietnam with his Vietnamese wife. He said that people are generally happy and satisfied in Vietnam because the country is a well-run corporation. He said the same is essentially true of China, although there now may be a restive middle class growing in that nation.

Most people in the world, lectured the physician, do not care a wit about elections so long as they have food on the table and the trains run on time.

Unfortunately, our own nation risks falling into the abyss of disinterest in our most sacred historic roots. Many people in this country care only about their economic well-being, an important enough virtue, without paying any attention to the need to safeguard and protect our free institutions. Respect for one another's point of view seems to be near an all-time low in this country while we celebrate what we believe to be the democratic aspirations of people in other nations.

What we need to understand is that our own example of fairness, decency and democracy must be a priority. To the extent that we can nurture, realistically and honestly, freedoms in other nations without undue interference, we will be promoting our own self-interest. As Americans, we walk on a tightrope between encouraging democracy in other nations and becoming an officious intermeddler. We need to be aware of that tightrope and to walk it carefully as the administration currently seems to be doing in the Middle East. At the same time, we should strengthen our friends and allies who are true beacons of democracy in the Middle East, such as the nation of Israel. Our own heritage and that of Israel are inexorably intertwined, and we must never forget that crucial bond.

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