

## NARROW IS THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The lesson may be hard to learn but nobody can deny that what happened in Al Khobar two weeks ago was the price being paid by the Saudi authorities for the lack of political vision. Growing unrest in Saudi Arabia, as seen in these past months, may become a threat and is surely not helpful for the stability of the region. The picture, however, may not be that dark; oil rigs do not burn, pipe lines are buried deep beneath the desert and oil transportation is handled through computerised control rooms hidden in concrete bunkers. A terrorist attack is not a regime change and Al Qaeda alone will not be able to overthrow the Saudi government –at least as long as it is not supported by a large chunk of the population. The sensational headlines in the European press expressing concerns about a destabilised Saudi Arabia may thus be just another example of over-reaction every time oil is concerned.

But in the dramatic events in Al-Khobar there is something much more grave that has already occurred in Yanbu a few weeks earlier but which nearly went unnoticed. This should deserve attention from all democracy lovers: terrorists involved in the attack did not shoot at Americans or Britons; they shot at ‘westerners’, at ‘non-Muslims’. As some witnesses in Al-Khobar put it, *“they shot the non-Muslims and tend to spare the other ones”*. It is no longer important who supports Ariel Sharon’s policies in Occupied Palestine or the American handling of Iraq and who does not; it is the good versus the bad, ‘Muslims against Crusaders’ and the willingness *“to cleanse the Arabian Peninsula of all infidels, to beat off Crusaders and arrogant forces in order to free the Muslim land and enforce the Sharia”*. This is the politics of fanatic groups; it is the ‘clash of civilisations’ which may only lead to other deeper conflicts- if it is not addressed efficiently.

Assuming that democracy is the right of the people to decide what they want, it should be protected and promoted. But if the word itself has a universal content, it also has many forms. Basically, it is a right granted to any individual human being to benefit by a choice, and not an obligation, to think on his own, to join a group and be protected by it, still leaving a minority with the right to express peacefully any other choice. But if democracy is a set of techniques – freedom of speech, free elections-, it is historically a result of an internal process and therefore, there are many types of democracy in the world. None can consider they alone represent the whole concept as ‘popular’ democracies any more than ‘liberal’ democracies were the solutions to diversified situations.

This is especially true when a democracy is attacked, usually in two ways. First, through the willingness of some people to forbid anyone else to think differently from them. This brutal opposition normally emanates from fanatic groups, be they politically or religiously minded. Once they attain power, they install a kind of dictatorship until they are wiped out by local resistance or external factors -in the long run, history shows, such situations never last. The second way is more subtle. It comes to give the word a definition that is so much marked by a specific environment that whoever lives in a different environment cannot reconcile himself with that definition. How could for instance an Iraqi be ‘democrat’ if the only representation of democracy he has seen is the way American troops behave in Iraq? When the Bush administration does everything in the Middle East ‘in the name of democracy’, there should be no surprise that this is rejected completely. In doing so, America is simply killing the idea of implementing democracy in the Middle East. It should be held responsible for that because it puts at risk any other attempt to implement reforms on a step by step basis. Democracy indeed cannot be implemented from abroad or with guns.

This is where the link with the necessary fight against terrorism gains substance, for the definition of terrorism is not simple. “*I call the deliberate assault of unarmed populations ‘terrorism’. I call the armed resistance that opposes repressive forces while sparing civilians ‘antiterrorism’*” wrote French essayist André Glucksmann in a recent article in the Wall Street Journal. However, he limited his words to the Chechen resistance –we would love to see him write similarly about the Palestinians struggle. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish between national resistance fighters and fanatics, especially when their means look similar. But, surely, some ‘external factors’ explain terrorism and even surely, feed it. It is for instance a widely held view that Osama Binladen cares little about the struggle of the Palestinian people; still, Ariel Sharon’s policy in Occupied Palestine lends Al-Qaeda strong support. In other words, Bush feeds Binladen, and vice versa. This is further confirmed when the US approach towards terrorism proves to be twice wrong: firstly because the analysis of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> was mistaken –the refusal to acknowledge any link between the terrorist attacks and America’s blind support to Israel; secondly because once they identified the ‘failed states’, the neo-conservatives thought democracy could be imposed through military force.

This is why some past behaviour must be corrected and the necessary action aimed at undercutting elements supportive of terror be taken. The latest gathering of Arab Heads of State in Tunis on May 23<sup>rd</sup> did not say anything when some basic principles were stated: the need for a good governance and political reforms (*deepening the base of democracy, respecting human rights, allowing freedom of speech and independence of justice, promoting women’s role in public life*), and a condemnation of any attacks aimed indiscriminately at civilians. It is time the Saudi authorities stopped being complacent about extremist groups. A lot is being said these days of D-Day celebrations and about the definition of a new transatlantic alliance. To make it concrete, which means to include an Arab component into it, couldn’t we start getting rid of the kind of unilateralism which has prevailed for the past year and accept such basic concepts as the one of a full sovereignty for Iraq and a fair peace in Occupied Palestine?

Luc Debievre, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2004