



THE MIDDLE EAST

Arab citizens or only Arab Christians?

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Living in a recession-hit but comparatively well-heeled Europe today, I look at the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region with one overriding thought. Simply put, ordinary men and women are at long last seeking to assert their identity and retrieve their dignity after decades of corruption, deprivation and subjugation. Tunisia was somehow the unwitting springboard, but it seems to have awakened at long last a visceral and almost liberating instinct in the political imagination of many Arabs that gives ample meaning to the late Tunisian poet, Abul Qasim al-Shabi, who wrote in *The Will of Life*, “If the people will to live, providence is destined to favourably respond; and night is destined to fold, and the chains are certain to be broken; and he who has not embraced by the love of life, will evaporate in its atmosphere and disappear.”

If managed prudently, this moment could well become epic for much of the Arab world where the status quo ante of dictators and despots is being challenged collectively by older and younger generations alike without even the certainty of a final destination or of political parties muscling in [yet] with their own agendas. In my estimation, this uprising is more meaningful than the Palestinian Intifada of 1987 (certainly more than the ill-advised armed Al-Aqsa Intifada of 2000) and hopefully more resilient than that of the Lebanese Cedar Revolution of 2005. But suddenly, after decades of political torpor and moral lassitude, many Arabs are standing up to be counted and ventilating their pent-up frustrations on the streets. The regimes - and their erstwhile allies - find themselves caught on the back foot as they scramble to come up with in-coherent standpoints that neither alienate the masses nor abandon those defining their geo-strategic interests. Moreover, I find it a remarkable lesson in sociology that Al-Jazeera satellite channels have joined hands with the new Facebook and Twitter blogospheres to choreograph much of this tidal wave starting to sweep the region.

Granted, those somewhat spontaneous and ostensibly ‘leaderless’ uprisings are seeking to correct the successive colonial legacies that were foisted upon an Arab World in the early decades of the 20th century let alone to implement those fundamental freedoms and citizenship rights inherent in democracy and good governance. However, in the midst of this groundswell, it also behoves well to remember that the woes facing many parts of this region are not merely political or socio-economic. They are also ethno-religious as much as sectarian or confessional in nature, particularly when it comes to the woes of indigenous Arab Christians who have incidentally been at the forefront of progressive movements in the past but who for far too long have also faced their own uncertainties, paradoxes, quandaries, fears and persecutions.

Am I being a tad unfair by injecting an almost parochial note of caution into an exhilarating moment of hope? Not necessarily, because a rule of thumb states that an equitable society is one where its total represents the sum of its different components - and Arab Christians remain one throbbing historical component of this larger Arab whole. Interestingly, this reality was validated only last month when ordinary Egyptian Muslims showed up at Christmas masses or candlelit vigils outside Egyptian churches and formed human shields against any

terrorism that might target Egyptian Coptic Christians. Anba Morcos of Alexandria commented in his sermon that he had never seen such a degree of solidarity between Muslims and Christians and added - with some overplay - that the bombing of the Coptic Al-Qidisein Church was like an aqua regia solution that would assay the metal of the Egyptian people and reveal their golden nature.

Pious thoughts, perhaps, but not shared by Romel Hawal from Habbaniya in Al-Anbar province of Iraq, who lamented the empty Mary Queen of Peace Church in his hometown earlier this month and added, "When I come here, I feel pain. I don't think it will ever be back again like it was, when we had a beautiful garden."

Yet, despite the myriad concerns over the future of Arab Christians, I remain convinced that the majority of ordinary Arab men and women - whether Christians, Sunnis, Shi'is, Kurds, Druze - are inherently decent and pacific people who are willing to co-exist with their neighbours. From where I sit in Europe, the Arab mind has in past decades appeared captive to the psychological cost of political or religious repression and has often succumbed to the immobilising fear of acting or thinking for itself. A sense of victimhood has often arrested any forward movement within societies that have instead resorted to identifying scapegoats to explain away their own ills or failures or even to justify the sheer brutality of their regimes. And one side-effect of Bismarck's divide et impera - divide and rule - has been to scapegoat indigenous Christians as fifth columns.

Yet, the challenges of today could be converted into the opportunities of tomorrow. Victimhood can turn into empowerment - as we witness on some Arab streets today. So hand in hand with this dismantling of antiquated precepts, there should also be a concerted plan by local religious leaders to educate their grassroots toward acceptance of the other - as the Iraqi Ulema Council did recently by issuing a joint fatwa forbidding attacks against Christians. But parallel with such a proactive attitude, the West should also realise that supporting oppressive secular Arab systems that feed on slogans, or siding unflinchingly with an increasingly racist Israel that eats up other peoples' rights, do not in themselves guarantee western interests either. Rather, it is the lack of fundamental freedoms and socio-economic justice that go hand-in-hand with all forms of discrimination and totalitarianism which eventually become the surrogate wombs procreating radicalism and terror.

The topography of the region has shifted and with it come a whole host of questions. Will a domino effect ensue from the events in Tunisia or Egypt that could well engulf Yemen, Sudan, Algeria or Jordan let alone Iran, the Gulf States, Syria or Lebanon that all have their own fault-lines? Time will tell, but one weathervane for the success or failure of this long-awaited Arab renaissance - as Professor Eugene Rogan, author of *The Arabs*, described it on BBC4 - will depend on whether an enlightened and shackles-free Arab world will eventually rise again to reclaim its rightful nahda - and whether the Christian communities would also play their role as fully-fledged Arab citizens rather than solely as Arab Christians.

Surely the proof of this pudding will be in its eating.