

Democracy in Iraq and Palestine

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The Palestinians and the Iraqis are in a similar political situation. Both are trying to recover from a shake-up of the existing order, to rebuild a ruined economy and to achieve normalization and dignity.

And in both there is a paradox: The new regime, which is supposed to bring about independence and prosperity, is coming to power by virtue of the mediation, or at least the consent, of a despised foreign occupier. In both Iraq and the territories, the nascent new political era is being presented, in Western terminology, as "serving the will of the people." The Palestinians are being promised reforms instead of corruption, and the Iraqis are being promised democracy in place of tyranny.

The question of whether democracy sponsored by a hegemonic foreign power is at all possible takes on special meaning in the Arab states, where there has been an ongoing debate about democracy and governmental legitimacy since the early 20th century.

The Western public and its leaders have been unaware of the existence of this debate. The Bush administration views the Middle East as Lego, which can be taken apart and put together at will, and is contemptuous of and uninterested in its history and culture. At the Pentagon, Whitehall and Kiryat Hamemshala in Jerusalem, they're not very interested in the basic tenets that spawned Arab civilization's philosophies about what constitutes a people, a state, government and power. Instead, there is a blind faith that whatever works in the West should be reproduced everywhere. After all, the World Bank and the Monetary Fund have been carrying out "reforms" and "rebuilding" throughout the Third World for 40 years now.

The ignorance demonstrated by the Bush administration is obscuring a critical, fundamental fact. The method of government practiced in the West is the product of a certain belief about the essence of the human being and the meaning of society. This is a belief

that was born during the Enlightenment and consolidated by European modernism, which views man first and foremost as an autonomous individual who conducts himself according to independent and private choice, in keeping with the values and information that he absorbs from his environment. The individual's personality and roles mediate between him and the world, but the person is more important than the institutions to which he is subject. These institutions, including the state, do not determine his identity: They are just tools, necessary evils, whose purpose is to ensure an orderly life for as many individuals in a collective at once as possible. Authority is not something decreed by fate, but more akin to a game that has rules and different rounds. It's nice to win and to have influence for a limited time over the shaping of the rules. But losing does not threaten the loser's fundamental human essence.

Arab culture takes a different view of the person, as someone whose human essence is established by society. The person is the sum of his connections, of the power relations to which he is subject, of his duties and commitments. Social and political arrangements are not a game or a necessary evil. They are the locus where everything is determined and, as such, are a matter of life and death. This is one reason why Arab leaders, especially heads of state, often have cult-like status. This is not due only to the awe of authority: The leader represents the supreme collective identity as determined in the public sphere.

Anyone who wants to determine new political rules of the game in the Middle East must first recognize the basic philosophies about authority and the state and the individual that prevail here. Once he grasps this, he may be freed of the notion that the method used in the West is the only possible answer, or a better embodiment of justice, equality and the ability to govern.