

The War on “Democratization”

Aug 2, 2006 Álvaro de Vasconcelos

The wars in Lebanon and Gaza constitute a grave threat to democratic reform in the southern Mediterranean. These wars are inflicting heavy punishment on precisely those peoples who have held fully free and fair elections in the region, while eroding the legitimacy of Israel’s democracy.

At the time of its “Cedar Revolution” last year, Lebanon was held up as the best example so far of democratization in the Arab world. The enthusiasm with which the international community welcomed those changes now seems all but forgotten, which is also true of recent elections in Palestine – another longstanding international demand.

The signal being sent is clear: it is preferable that Israel, the only state in the region that abides by the rule of law, be surrounded by authoritarian regimes where political outcomes are predictable than by democratic states where Islamists may well rise to power. It happened in Palestine, and it could well happen in Egypt if free and fair free elections were held. As a result, Arab nationalist governments feel justified in resisting serious political reform and vindicated in repressing all domestic opposition, particularly the swelling Islamist movements.

But it should now be clear to everyone that democratization in the southern Mediterranean cannot bypass Islamist movements, and that the success of that process largely depends on the degree to which their full participation in the political arena is ensured.

Of course, this requires their renouncing violence as a means of achieving power. Repressing political Islam, or attempting to “erase” Islamists militarily with total disregard for national political processes (not to mention human life), is not the answer, because it won’t persuade electorates to turn away from Islamist movements. The efforts of reformist governments in the region to integrate such movements into the public sphere have been dealt a severe blow.

Democracies have long known that extreme and indiscriminate punishment – which by definition affects friend and foe, combatant and civilian alike – is a grave violation of international law, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, has pointed out. They also know that such action fuels radicalism, leading to the kind of tragic consequences that are all too familiar nowadays.

Hezbollah is, after all, a creature of Lebanon’s resistance to Israel’s 1982 invasion, now trying to reassert its influence at home and in the wider region by portraying itself as a champion of the Arab-Islamic cause, namely in Palestine. Any reinforcement of its power will necessarily weaken Lebanon and the region’s democratic forces.

The prolonged absence of the United States from truly active engagement in the Middle East peace process is partly to blame for the current situation. For almost six years, there has been no significant US diplomatic initiative to resolve the Palestinian question or to pursue the Syrian track (Israel still occupies the Golan Heights).

Moreover, just when we were beginning to think that the Iraqi tragedy had made the limits of unilateralism and preemptive military strategies clear to all, the Bush administration encourages Israel's military action – this time against a country that has painfully been attempting to consolidate democratic reform and to reaffirm its sovereignty in relation to Syria .

Bush's most promising initiative, promoting democracy across the Middle East, was already dealt a crippling blow by US intervention in Iraq and the ensuing civil war there. Now the project is buried under the weight of America's inability to protect Lebanon's fragile democracy and Palestine's democratic experiment.

The European Union's feeble response to the warfare in Gaza and Lebanon has oscillated between understanding and condemnation of the disproportionate use of force by Israel (described as "ten eyes for one" by the Finnish presidency), thereby betraying its dependence on the US to end the violence. Europeans will have learned nothing from the damaging disunity, and thus weakness, that they displayed during the Iraq war if this conflict does not compel them to speak with one voice.

What is needed is a European initiative that is backed by a credible military deterrent, consisting of forces from the EU, Turkey, and Arab countries, to be dispatched under a UN mandate to Lebanon and Gaza. Europe must not only put forward a clear demand for an immediate cease-fire and the end to Syrian and Iranian meddling in Lebanon, it must also provide the means to enforce it as well as massive support for Lebanon's reconstruction. The EU should decisively back the end of the embargo on Palestine and the urgent creation of a Palestinian state.

A common European front could persuade the US to give Lebanon and Palestine enough time to consolidate their national democratic processes, thus isolating the radical elements of Hamas and steering Hezbollah to dissolution of its private army. With the US project in ruins, a credible European policy to delegitimize war and support democratization in its neighborhood has become essential.