



## Thanks or Angst?

**T**HE RECENT MUSLIM HOLIDAY ID AL-ADHA, THE Feast of the Sacrifice, and the American holiday of Thanksgiving are generally joyous familial occasions. But this year's celebrations were tempered by anxiety and trepidation. In the Arab world, the picture across the region is, at best, fraught with uncertainty, and marked by a number of potential flash points. And America's continuing economic doldrums and foreign wars make the euphoria of President Barack Obama's election two years ago seem like ancient history.

First, the more "usual" fare. Leadership succession issues in Egypt and Saudi Arabia preoccupy the country's elites. The Egyptian authorities' heavy-handedness towards all political opposition shows no sign of abating, leaving the populace cynical and alienated. The main question is whether or not 82-year-old President Hosni Mubarak will run again for another term next year. If not, will he seek to anoint his son Gamal? What will be the position of the military-bureaucratic establishment, and particularly of 74-year-old Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman?

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's 87-year-old King Abdallah has been hospitalized in the US for what is being called a herniated disc, while his stand-in, Prince Sultan, age 82, has been treated for cancer. It is only a matter of time before the "grandsons generation" (descendants of the kingdom's founder, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Saud) ascend to power, and the often obscure maneuvering with the Saudi royal family of 3,000 princes has already begun. Jordan, for its part, smoothly managed its succession a decade ago. But recent parliamentary elections were marred by poor voter turnout, the boycott by the Islamic Action Front, and a number of violent episodes. In the Gulf, the bursting of Dubai's economic bubble and the long shadow of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran is especially sobering.

By contrast, Maghreb states are marked by political stability and relative economic progress. However, regional economic integration remains beyond reach, owing to Algerian-Moroccan differences over the unsolved 35-year dispute over the Western Sahara region. The emergence of the shadowy al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) also poses a challenge to state security forces.

More problematic still are the Arab League's "failed states": Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Sudan, each of which possesses the potential to trigger a major regional crisis. Post-Saddam Iraq has emerged as Lebanon writ large: a country whose fractious elites have only now, after nine months of haggling, agreed to fragile power-sharing arrangements, where political loyalties are primarily sectarian, and where regional powers – Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – seek to influence events and gain relative advantage, while the US tries to salvage something of its own.

Yemen, once remote and largely removed from wider regional currents, has become "the Wild South": the base for al-Qaeda of the Arabian peninsula; a Houthi Shi'ite rebellion in the north, adjacent to Saudi Arabia, raising concerns over alleged Iranian penetration; and a rebellion in the southern region, which was independent between 1967-1990 and fought a bitter, unsuccessful war of secession in 1994.

Sudan, the scene of the greatest and longest continuous human suffering of any Arab League state since achieving independence in 1956, is on the verge of a breakup. Soon, on January 9, its southern region, encompassing 640,000 sq. kilometers (250,000 sq. miles, or just over 25



percent of the country's total land mass), and approximately 20-22 percent of the population (anywhere between 7.5 and 10 million persons), will by all accounts vote to secede from the country and establish an independent state, a right conferred upon them by a 2005 agreement, which ended Sudan's long-running civil war. Most observers believe that the potential for widespread bloodshed in the aftermath of the referendum is high, within the southern region, between north and south (particularly over the control of oil fields), and even possibly drawing in neighboring African states. The Nile Valley has always been Egypt's strategic lifeline, and Egypt only reluctantly gave up its claim to Sudan in 1954. Cairo would prefer the referendum to be postponed, and will be watching the unfolding events anxiously.

As for Lebanon, reports that the special international tribunal investigating the 2005 murder of prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri will accuse a number of Hizballah operatives of having committed the crime has placed the Lebanese political system in crisis mode. Hizballah's leaders have made it clear that any attempt to hold the organization responsible for the murder will be resisted, raising the specter that the country will again be plunged into civil war. These fears, and the possible spillover of conflict into the Arab-Israeli sphere, have sent Arab, Turkish and Iranian leaders scurrying to try to limit the fallout (the tribunal's findings are expected to be made public in early 2011). Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, for his part, used the occasion of his recent visit to Lebanon to warn Israel against any possible meddling in Lebanese affairs.

All this does not mean that Arab-Israeli affairs have dropped off the agenda. In fact, given the scope of problems and flashpoints around the region, Arab governments are keener than ever for a diplomatic breakthrough, and look to Washington and the EU for support. The fact that Jerusalem itself is increasingly becoming a potential flashpoint for violence between Jews and Arabs makes their desire that much more acute.

Given this level of uncertainty, as well as the difficult employment prospects for young Arabs and the overall sclerotic political systems in which they live, it is not surprising that the latest Silatech Index (www.silatech.com), a comprehensive Gallup Poll of 15-29 year-olds in Arab League states, shows that 30 percent of them would like to emigrate in search of a better life, half to oil-rich Arab Gulf states and half to the EU or North America. ●

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