

## **An Arab Awakening, at Last?**

**Author:** [Rana el-Khatib](#)

The Iraq and Palestine conflicts are converging, and the Arab street is stirring.

"If it bleeds, it leads," the old saying goes. But if it bleeds too long, many move on and look elsewhere for new blood. The world's attention, understandably, is now on Iraq, and old wounds like Palestine are left festering and unhealed.

Images of British and American bombs in the first week of war have produced incandescent patterns against the night skies of Iraq. Viewing the barrage of lights on television, over the voices of commentators talking of a targeted war to "free Iraq", it is difficult to comprehend the real "impact" the illuminations are having on those experiencing them at first hand. The American media have succeeded in convincing most Americans that bludgeoning Iraq is somehow a good thing, that anything Iraq does to defend itself, on its own soil, is in breach of the "rules of war".

Myopia has set in. America focuses solely on its war against Iraq and ignores its own flouting of international agreements. The rest of the world will just have to wait until it is done. But it is not that simple - especially in the Middle East.

The news in Palestine remains much the same as it always is: miserable. A 15-year-old boy was shot in the head and killed in another day of curfew on Jenin. Three men from the Aida refugee camp were extrajudicially executed by Israeli soldiers. A school teacher, his wife and their two daughters were fired on by Israeli soldiers as they drove along a main road. All four sustained bullet wounds, and the youngest child died.

Israel's chokehold on the Palestinians tightens, yet still there is almost no word in America of its brutality against Palestinian civilians. Who has the time when America is fighting the good fight? But America has never given the Palestinians' plight much airtime. What little there has been has been fragmented and distorted. This war has buried the Palestinian cause further down the pipeline of "bleed" stories to report.

But something is starting to change. And, as Iraq endures round after round of inhumanity that the West calls "humane", it all connects back to Palestine.

This war to democratise Iraq by bombing it back into the 12th century has ignited a spark that will not easily be extinguished. What is different about Iraq? The Arab world has lived with puppet governments before. It has endured countless wars fought on its soil for indefensible reasons. It has put up with a century of decline and neglect. And every time it gets a twinkle of "No more!" in its eyes, it is beaten back into submission.

Not this time. What this war appears to have done, miraculously, is to resuscitate the Arab streets. It really does appear that the Arab world is stirring from its numb state. Perhaps the Arabs have finally had enough. Perhaps this is the last straw that will break the camel's back. Perhaps the beast is no longer willing to carry the burden.

The Palestinian and Iraqi conflicts are converging. They are interconnected like a fault line, and over the years the plates have shifted enough times that the tremors are felt all the way down the line and everywhere in between. Within days of the US-led onslaught, the Arab street could be heard clearing its throat and contemplating its voice. Stifling one protest seems to encourage others.

The world has turned a blind eye to the glaring favouritism that guides US policy in the Middle East, perhaps because that favouritism undermined the sleeping, stultified Arab states. The US uses many reasons to justify dominating the region's wealth and maintaining hegemony - prime among them today, democratic change. But the Arab world is no longer buying it.

What America, like Israel, does not seem to comprehend is one of the basic laws of physics: for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. When countries like the United States aggress routinely, either indirectly by funding an oppressive government or directly by declaring war against countries unable to defend themselves, a reaction must be expected. Pull an elastic band long and hard enough and it will snap. The Middle East appears to have reached its threshold.

Though the Palestinian diaspora and its ripple effects are often overlooked by the West, the persistence of occupation and humiliation has taken its toll on the entire region. Add the atrocities in Iraq, and a decade of sanctions, and you have the makings of social unrest never before seen in the region.

As far as Mr. Bush is concerned, this war is just one more slap on the insignificant face of the Arab world that the Arab world will get over. But this slap appears to have resonated deep into the tissue of the collective Arab face and, this time, has left an impression. The Arab world is stirring. If America does not heed the grumbling on the street along the fault line, something will have to give. Stay tuned for years and years of backlash.

Rana El-Khatib is a Palestinian writer living in Phoenix, Arizona.

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