

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

The Middle East: Things to Watch in 2005 ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

I watched quietly from my window as 2004 turned to 2005. Fireworks sprouted from the horizon in four or five places – some of them large parties or hotel celebrations, others private revelry. The explosions and firecrackers continued for the better part of half an hour (with the left-overs being set off throughout the day today).

With dawn, and the first day of a New Year, there is a sense of a clean slate. OK, true, none of last week's problems have suddenly vanished. But one can hope. Here, then, are some notes on the coming 12 months. A few things to watch for, and some questions to ponder as 2005 unfolds.

Elections – Not just the ones in the Palestinian territories (January 9) and, Iraq (January 30, if all goes according to plan). The spring is also scheduled to see unprecedented municipal polls in Saudi Arabia and a presidential vote in Iran. In Palestine the question over the coming ten days will be whether Moustafa Barghouti can make a real race out of his campaign against Mahmoud Abbas, whether the Israelis will let the vote go forward with a reasonable degree of openness, and whether Abbas' near-inevitable victory will be seen as something he earned or as a coronation. Where will that leave Abbas when it comes to restarting talks with Israel and reigning in Palestinian militants who object to such talks on principle? Iraq poses the question of whether enough voting can take place in enough places to give whatever government emerges some of the legitimacy Iyad Allawi's regime conspicuously lacks. Saudi Arabia's polls are fascinating simply because they are taking place in a country whose current king once dismissed voting in general as unislamic. Iran's election (no exact date set, but it will take place sometime in May or June) is shaping up as a contest between ascendant hard-liners and a disillusioned, much-battered opposition.

Israel and the Palestinians – Will Ariel Sharon go ahead with his plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip and a handful of West Bank settlements? If he does, what does this say about his long-term intentions? Is it the potential start of a broader process (as he sometimes claims) or a maneuver designed to guarantee that territorial concessions stop right there (as many, including one of Sharon's top aides, have suggested)? Will the Labour Party's presence in Israel's new coalition government be a moderating force, making Gaza a prelude to a broader, more serious peace process? Or are Labour's leaders just hungry for political office (in this regard the record of Labour leader Shimon Peres does not inspire confidence)? Will the United States push Israel to use the Gaza pull-out as a starting-point, or will it continue to endorse whatever Sharon comes up with (the record of George W. Bush does not inspire confidence)?

Sudan – With the world's attention shifting to the ever-widening disaster in Asia will Darfur simply drop off of the wider world's radar screen?

Egypt – Will President Mubarak stubbornly continue to groom his son to succeed him? Will the US begin to use its extensive aid to Egypt as a lever promoting real democratic reform?

Libya – Will the strange rehabilitation of Colonel Qaddafi continue or will Libya's ever-unpredictable leader do something to derail his long-sought return to the West's good graces?

Iraq – Civil war? Partition? Perhaps some sort of real improvement under a government with some real popular legitimacy? An army that begins to come together? An American administration that puts solving Iraq's real problems ahead of containing their political fall-out back in Washington?

Like so many other things in this part of the world it may seem like too much to ask. But the beauty of New Year's Day is that, for a few hours, anything can seem possible.

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