

Grano Series – America in the Middle East

The 2nd annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the potential and limits of the use of American power in the Middle East and the prospects of democratization for the region.

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Trading Stability for Progress in the Mideast

Christopher Hitchens

The following is an edited transcript of the talk journalist Christopher Hitchens gave (without notes) at the Grano lecture series.

I was once asked why I wanted to become a journalist, and I replied, "So that I wouldn't have to rely on the press for information." And to know people like Howar Ziad (Iraq's ambassador to Canada); or to go recently to Blair House in Washington to meet Jalal Talabani, the first elected president of Iraq; or to have recently had a large number of Iraqi and Kurdish democrats in my home, including the man who led the guerrilla warfare in the southern marshes against Saddam Hussein for years. To be with these people is to feel very humble and also, in my case, very angry. Because when I read *The New York Times* the following day, or the *Washington Post*, it's as if these meetings were never taking place. It's like watching a fire burning under water to go to Iraq and see these passionate engagements and differences and disagreements and talks about the future, and to remember that three years ago it would have been death to possess a satellite dish.

And to remember that at that time the marshes, the largest wetlands in the region, were dried out and then burned out by Saddam to destroy a people he didn't like.

And the people of Kurdistan were living in villages and towns that had been ethnically cleansed to the tune of, perhaps, three-quarters of a million people dead and poisoned with chemical weapons, the injuries of which are still burning.

To see this transition is an absolutely remarkable and essential thing. Is this just the end of a terrible period when the United States and the international community couldn't make up their minds on how to resolve 20, 30 years of failed statecraft in the region? Or is it the beginning of a new epoch? Or possibly it could be both?

You will all have been following the state of affairs in Syria where the Baath party regime appears to be in the process of implosion because of its policy of death squad and mobster rule in Lebanon.

This is precipitated by a mass movement among Lebanese of all confessions — Sunni, Shi'ite, Maronite Christian, Greek Orthodox and Druze — to recover the sovereignty of their country after many years of ignominious occupation. And to do so, really, without a shot being fired. We have on the one side an extraordinary affirmation among the Lebanese, which we think may soon be emulated among the Syrians. And on the other, the threat of disorder, of revenge, of further confessional dislikes and rivalries which could be not just deleterious in themselves, but to the region as a whole. Is this positive or is this negatively charged?

Kamal Jumblatt, the leader of the Lebanese Socialist Party and the great leader of the Lebanese Druze community, says openly, as a frequent critic of American foreign policy, that he doesn't believe this moment could ever have arrived in Lebanon if the keystone state of autocracy and tyranny in the region, the Baathist state of Saddam Hussein, had not been kicked out by coalition intervention.

And Dr. Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the heroic Egyptian academic, told me at a conference of Arab democrats in Qatar a few months ago, "Look, without the intervention in Iraq, the logjam would never have been broken. The tundra would never have unfrozen. The wall would never have come down."

He was completely persuaded, obviously.

Here's another interesting aspect of what is happening: The people I mentioned — Ambassador Ziad, President Talabani of Iraq, Wally Jumblatt of the Lebanese Socialist Party, Saad Eddin Ibrahim — all used to be fairly red in complexion politically. What used to be the Middle Eastern Marxist left has moved now to taking a civil society stand that is not just subjectively, but objectively, as it were, pro-American. The Iraqi Communist Party joined the provisional government in Iraq on the first day. It replicates what was happening in Eastern Europe about two decades ago, when a large proportion of the old left intelligentsia began to realize that the system of Soviet domination could not go on; that they needed to reapply themselves to the ideas of pluralism, free trade and the free movement of people and ideas.

At the time people thought, "It will never happen. The Russian glacier will never melt. The Berlin Wall may never fall. There may be changes. There

may be rebellions, but it's a permanent geographical fact." That's what the realists believed. These same realists look at the heartening and inspiring developments in the Middle East, and they don't see progress. They see only one thing. They see instability. *We were used to President Assad. You knew where you were with him. We understood Syria then. Now what? What's going to happen if he goes?*

The apotheosis of this mentality was found in a recent essay in *The New Yorker* by Jeffrey Goldberg, profiling Gen. Brent Scowcroft who, with George Bush Sr., wrote the book on why to leave Saddam Hussein alone, and who has ever since hewed to the view that Iraq was better off with than without Saddam. Gen. Scowcroft also regards the developments in Syria with a very jaundiced eye, and Lebanon, too, and says that he's already beginning to feel nervous because, he said, it might be "the end of years of peace."

Peace? The ignition of the Kuwaiti oil fields by Saddam Hussein, the deaths of a million and a half people in the Iran-Iraq War, the genocide in Kurdistan, the planned destruction of an entire people and the erasure of its culture taking place in our full view in northern Iraq — these don't deserve to be called episodes in a period of peace.

That's why I must indict the realist mentality, first for its cynicism, and second for its naiveté. The two things go very well together. My friend Martin Amis once said of somebody that he had no sense of humour. He added, "And by saying that, I really mean to impugn his seriousness." Often the most naive are the most cynical. They believe themselves to be hardboiled. In fact, they're very soggy. They make very unreliable moral and political guides.

I've taken my side with these comrades in Iraq and in Kurdistan and in Egypt and in Lebanon and in Syria, and I'm going to be with them win or lose, or whether they're mired in a long struggle. I've picked my turf.

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