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9 February 2011, Correio da Manhã

Us Arabs

Just as at one time we were all Berliners, it's time now to let our Arab heart beat.

Since the year 711, when Ibn-al-Tarik crossed the strait to which he would lend his name, our history has been marked by an Arab presence and influence. They bequeathed to us thousands of words, remarkable technological advances and centuries of cultural openness and religious tolerance. Granada and Silves were centres from which radiated a flowering which left its mark both on the peoples of Iberia and on the Roman presence, that other great Mediterranean civilization.

Centuries of religious intolerance marked by the Inquisition's outpourings of hatred and those of Islamic fundamentalism have created a gulf between us and our southern neighbours in the Al-Gharb (Algarve) Beyond the Sea. In these amazing times of Arab resurgence, with the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, it is important to remember that we have more in common with these people whose blood, memory and southern outlook run in our veins than with Finland or other Baltic peoples. We forget that in few other places is the heritage of Portuguese origin as present as it is in the Maghreb, or that the nearest capital to Lisbon is Rabat, or that it was Algeria where Teixeira Gomes went into exile and from where came the ardent voice of Manuel Alegre in our dark night...

The outcome of the changes under way in the Arab countries is uncertain, but their potential to transform Europe's geostrategy is comparable only with the fall of the dictatorships of southern Europe in the 70s or the implosion of the Soviet bloc. What is surprising about these times is the emergence in the Arab world of an educated urban youth, aggrieved and often unemployed (like the subjects of the famous song by the Portuguese band Deolinda) and which it is not possible to reduce to the clichés of religious populism. What they are demanding in the streets is freedom, an end to corrupt kleptocracy, jobs and the freedom to use social networks. Has anyone noticed that not a single American or Israeli flag was burnt and how the religious movements had difficulty in keeping up with the train of change? Just as we gave the lie to those who said that rural, backward Portugal was not ready for democracy or would fall into the communist orbit, it is the duty of the Europe of tolerance, the social model and freedom to give our neighbours the space to prove that there is an alternative other than military dictatorships and Islamic fundamentalism. There is a tolerant and plural Arab world - that of Naguib Mahfouz, Edward Said or Amin Maalouf - that deserves an opportunity to say no to the Middle Ages and absolutism. Just as at one time we were all Berliners, it's time now to let our Arab heart beat. God willing!

Eduardo Cabrita

