

The Future of the Middle East

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2007

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The Middle East has had no political stability or a clear sense of direction for almost a hundred years due to many factors; noted among them; the division of the Arab World into spheres of foreign influence without regard to ethnicity or tribal ties or even natural barriers and endowments of natural resource; European colonialism; the creation of the state of Israel and the Palestinian problem it caused; and the haphazard formation of the nation state. Yet, speculating about the future of the Middle East cannot escape thinking about the present and the past as well as about the peoples of the region, their cultures, interests, and grievances.

In this paper, I shall try to concentrate on the major political issues the region is facing today because politics is the major force affecting every national and regional issue, collective values and individual attitudes. Due to the history of the region and its nation state structure neither the political borders of the state nor its rights nor its claims have been settled on mutually accepted basis. As a consequence, suspicion rather cooperation dominates state and elite relations, causing political and security issues to dominate all other issues.

However, before discussing issues of importance to the people of the Middle East and to others who care about the region and its future, I wish to make the following general remarks;

1. Change is the only fact in life that is not subject to change; everything else is changing by day and night. Change dominates our personal and communal lives and causes our ties to each other and to our environment and to the world at large to be transformed continuously; change in fact refuses to stop making our world more complex and dynamic. With every day that passes, change makes national and international, political as well as security and economic relations more complex and intertwined. As individuals and organizations and communities and nations and transnational entities, we are experiencing change and participating in it, sometimes consciously, but oftentimes unconsciously. Therefore, we cannot stop change even if we

wanted to; because through our actions and reactions and inactions we have made our world a “world in transition” that continues to change with no end in sight.

2. Fate that most people tend to believe in is something more shaped by us than designed for us by mysterious forces. There is no doubt that most global and societal change is beyond our ability to control; yet, it is often within our ability to foresee and manage. In fact, no present can be changed or future shaped without our active participation. But to shape our future in ways that meet our needs and fulfill our aspirations and make our world more peaceful and stable and predictable, we have to have a clear vision of where we want to go, and how to get from where we are to where we want to be.
3. Problems we face in our lives and difficulties we encounter in dealing with others are caused by actions and reactions of countless national and regional and global forces; some of which are human, like political and religious leaders, thinkers, journalists and terrorists; others are natural and institutional, like the environment, the nation state, and the multinational corporation. Any attempt to solve a problem or overcome an obstacle cannot succeed without dealing with the forces causing the problem and creating the obstacle in the first place. Therefore, all forces causing change and instigating conflict must be considered a part of the problem as well as a part of the solution.

Dilemma of the Present

The Middle East seems like a strange puzzle, hard to understand and harder to solve, or even to decide where and how to start working on solving it. This makes the most certain thing about the Middle East is that its future is uncertain. The most active internal and external forces seem to have agreed to pull the region and its peoples and states in different, opposing directions. However, as the radical forces become more active internally, the need for the help of external forces becomes more pressing; but as foreign forces increase their involvement in the national and regional affairs, they cause the internal forces to feel threatened and motivate them to become

more radical. Consequently, the clash between the national and foreign forces leads to increased political instability and state confusion, making change uncontrollable and the future most uncertain.

One of the main reasons for the uncertainty of the Middle East future is the multiplicity of forces that are competing to dominate the region and affect the course of its sociopolitical and sociocultural direction. Some of these forces like Europe and China are trying to maintain old cultural ties and protect economic interests they have had for a long time; others like the Iranians and, to a lesser degree, the Russians are trying to expand their political influence; and still others like the Americans and the British are trying to correct mistakes they committed but refuse to acknowledge by committing more serious ones. And while these forces are actively involved in attempts to affect the course of change in the region, the region's inhabitants who have more to gain from positive change and most to lose from lack thereof are doing very little to protect their interests or articulate a vision for the future of their region.

Arab states and leaders in general are in no position to participate actively in protecting their national interests; in fact, no Arab state has an official document stating its national interests. And without knowing their interests, states cannot develop plans to defend or promote their national interests. The only interest that Arab leaders know with certainty and are committed to protect at all cost is to remain in power and use it to their advantage; in fact, most Arab leaders are using political power to gain more economic power, and use economic power to tighten their grip over political power, and employ both powers to appease, suppress and corrupt potential leaders. Intelligence that some Arab leaders may at times demonstrate is purely tactical intelligence, not a strategic one; Arab leaders are survivors; they are often able to manage regime problems, but lack the ability and vision to develop strategies regarding the future of their nations or region.

Problems facing Arab states today are many; some are economic in nature like high unemployment rates and low labor productivity; others are sociocultural like high illiteracy and population growth rates and widespread poverty and corruption; and more are political and security related like lack of political legitimacy and civil

war. For example, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen are experiencing different levels of civil war; and most other states like Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria face growing domestic unrest. Yet, the most serious political and security problems facing the Middle East region today are due to a persistent misguided American policy, Israeli colonialist policies in occupied Palestine, international terrorism, globalization, and increased Iranian assertiveness and determination to acquire nuclear technology.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has had a catastrophic impact on the region, causing international terrorism to spread, anti-Americanism in Arab and Muslim states to deepen, and all issues related to economic development and the transformation of cultures, including the political culture, to be neglected and forgotten. Arab rulers are concentrating their efforts on maintaining political stability rather than initiating sociocultural change. In fact, without the sudden influx of trillions of dollars during the last few years due to the tremendous increase in the price of oil, the situation would have gotten much worse than what it is today; it would most likely have drowned the entire region into chaos and conflict.

The Israeli government, after having succeeded in cooperation of the Bush administration to freeze the Arab-Israeli peace process, turned its attention to the Palestinians, attacking and killing more people, erecting new and harsher barriers to make life for people unbearable and intolerable, and arresting more innocent men and women and children. Israel holds today more than 11,000 Palestinian prisoners, the majority of whom are held without charges, and refuses to release them, not even the children or sick women. And to weaken the chances for reviving the peace process, the Israeli government has been doing its best to undermine the credibility of the Palestinian president who is probably the last capable and willing Palestinian leader to negotiate peace with Israel. Israeli professor Uri Avnery thinks that the Israeli government and the Bush administration are conducting an experiment “to force a whole people to submit to foreign occupation by starving it... the laboratory for the experiment is the Gaza Strip and the guinea pigs are the million and quarter Palestinians living there.”

As Arab states enter a new phase of aimless sociocultural transformation, deepened political instability and heightened security threats, the Israelis are fast losing their sense of direction, self confidence and sense of mission. Israeli leaders are unable to see the dangers and challenges facing them, and seem incapacitated to take action to save themselves and their society from corruption, self-deception and self destruction. And despite the defeat that Israel suffered in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, Israeli leaders seem unwilling to recognize the limits of military power and acknowledge the need for a mutually acceptable peace treaty with their Arab neighbors; a treaty capable of guaranteeing mutual security, insuring political stability, and encouraging regional cooperation. Israeli leaders, just like their American counterparts, have become delusional; they continue to expand settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, defy international law and UN resolutions, and refuse to negotiate honestly with either the Palestinians or Syrians; they in fact, continue to hide their heads in the Middle East sand, while the process of hatred and enmity towards them and their American backers continues to spread and deepen unabated.

The Iraqi Crisis

While most American people and politicians say today that attacking Iraq was a strategic and tragic mistake, President Bush, Dick Cheney and Tony Blair and their neoconservative cohorts continue to claim that Iraq's invasion was the right thing to do. In 2003, the US government invaded Iraq under a pretext that was lately proven a fabrication of facts and the result of political miscalculation. The Bush administration had hoped that the military campaign, which started by destroying the Iraqi state and the country's infrastructure, will lead to securing Iraqi oil, modernizing Iraq in general, transforming its value system, and introducing democracy. However, the arrogance and ignorance, which characterized the behavior of the war's managers in the Pentagon and the White House, have led to the destruction of the Iraqi state structure and the disintegration of the fabric of the Iraqi society.

Some tend to think that Iraq has entered a period of civil war that dictates that the US forces be withdrawn because they cause violence to increase and the number of

victims to rise. But what Iraq has actually entered is a vicious cycle of self destruction that promises to leave no one in control at the end of the game to talk to. Action needed to arrest deterioration and give the Iraqi people a new chance to regroup and rebuild their state is yet to be seriously considered. But instead of articulation a political plan to deal with the deepening sectarian crisis, the Bush administration decided to increase the size of the US forces in Iraq by some 30,000 soldiers and to employ an army of mercenaries whose size is estimated at 30,000-50,000 to help in controlling the security problem. Such a policy can only compound the mistakes made over the past five years; it is a good recipe for committing new massacres and causing more anti-Americanism to spread and deepen. Political problems need political solutions, not military ones. You cannot build trust by mistrusting others; and you cannot save lives by destroying more lives.

The Bush administration has not only refused to admit the grave mistake it committed by invading Iraq in 2003, but seems inching toward committing another serious mistake by attacking Iran, which can only lead to destabilizing the Middle East further and endangering the oil rich Gulf region. An attack on Iran by US or Israeli forces would further complicate all regional problems and give added ammunition to supporters of Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism; it could also lead to the destruction of the oil industry in the region for years to come, and cause the devastation of the regional economies and huge damage to the world economy. In addition, such an American-Israeli campaign has no chances of success; the war on Iraq and Afghanistan has already proved that the United States is ill-prepared to fight an insurgency. Believing that America can fight wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran at the same time, while attempting to lead Middle East peace, is just irrational, if not lunatic. The Bush administration must understand that mistakes could not be corrected by committing more mistakes, and long ignored issues can only get worse as time passes.

Few years ago, Iran was the only fundamentalist state in the Middle East struggling to protect itself from foreign encroachment; and its regime had adopted a rather moderate stand vis-à-vis Israel. Former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami proclaimed that Iran would accept any settlement to the Palestinian problem that

Palestinians accept. Religious fundamentalism, meanwhile, seemed to have peaked, and terrorism to have become largely national rather than international; its primary aim had become the undermining of the corrupt Arab regimes, not the killing of foreigners. However, the situation changed drastically in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on New York and Washington and the US reaction to it. While the terrorist attack had generated a flood of condemnation and a worldwide sympathy with the American people, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq instigated the formation of many new terrorist cells around the world, and subsequently transformed the Iraqi territory into a terrorist beehive that does not differentiate between American occupation soldiers and Iraqi innocent men and women and children.

While Americans are losing their lives fighting a war of choice in Iraq, and Iraqis are dying by the thousands every day, the Iranians have emerged as the sole winners of the American war in Iraq. The Iranian president has gained unprecedented self-confidence to challenge his American, Arab and European antagonists. In Iraq, the Iranian regime is gaining more political and religious influence despite American and Arab and European objections; and gaining in Lebanon a strong ally in Hezbollah, providing it with the military arsenal and financial resources to face and defeat the Israeli army and challenge the pro-West Lebanese government; and in Palestine, it is providing financial assistance to Hamas to thwart American and European and Arab efforts to isolate it; while winning the hearts and minds of many people in most Arab and Islamic states. And on the international arena, the Iranians are continuing their nuclear development program despite UN Security Council resolution, international objections and American sanctions.

Nevertheless, the “war on terrorism” since September 2001 has caused terrorists to become more active but less effective. For example, the average number of innocent people getting killed daily by terrorists worldwide is less than those killed by car accidents in the United States, estimated at about a hundred a day; they are even less than those murdered by criminals in American cities, estimated at about fifty a day. International cooperation to fight terrorism and contain the influence of Islamic radical clerics has substantially reduced the threat of terrorism worldwide; and

consequently, it reduced the need to wage an expensive and inflammatory war against an exhausted enemy on the run. The Bush and Blair rhetoric and Israeli claims concerning international terrorism are inflaming the passions of Muslims everywhere and leading many of them to view the 'war on terrorism' as a war on Islam and Muslims, not on terrorists. Therefore, there is an urgent need to change the rhetoric regarding the 'war on terror' to make Muslims, particularly those living in the West, feel that they are part of the war on terrorism, not its major target.

Today, Iran is ruled by a radical president who considers both Israel and the United States enemies of Iran and Islam, seeks nuclear technology, and supports other fundamentalist groups in the region, particularly in Lebanon and Palestine. Radical Muslims who oppose Israeli and US policies and disdain American culture and refuse to recognize the state of Israel have more than doubled in numbers and strength during the last five years. In Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Somalia and Sudan radicals are either in control of political power or the most powerful force in society. In Afghanistan, Taliban has made a strong comeback and seems to have regained the initiative. And if free elections were to be held today in all Arab states, fundamentalists would win and seize power in at least half of such states, making the Iranian system of governance and philosophical orientation the norm rather than the exception in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Pakistan is moving gradually but systemically toward becoming the first nuclear fundamentalist state in the world.

I believe that the count down for the demise of the Israeli state has already begun; no power is able to stop it except decisive and swift action on three fronts; making peace a reality between the Israelis and their Palestinian and Syrian neighbors; concluding the war in Iraq quickly and withdrawing American force from the Gulf region; and giving hope to the hopeless, powerless poor Arabs. History tells us that no injustice is ever forgotten until justice is attained, and that deep wounds get progressively worse when left unattended to. President Bashar al Assad of Syria said recently, "every Arab generation hates Israel more than the previous one." The cost of political and economic inaction promises to be severe; it is expected to include the destruction of the economies of the region, increased enmity toward the West in general and United States in particular, the undermining of American interests in most

Arab and Muslim states, and the possible destruction of the oil wells in the Gulf. Since Israel will not just fade away, the American inaction is likely to lead to the killing of millions of people due to the probable use of nuclear weapons by a desperate Jewish state.

The War of Ideas

After having lost all political and security justifications for invading Iraq, President Bush and Tony Blair began to claim that the fight in the Middle East is a moral one; and that the West is in a war to protect its way of life and promote universal values of justice, human rights and democracy. But the way the Iraqi war was justified, and how it is being conducted and regional problems managed can only expose the hypocrisy and bad intentions of both the American and British heads of states. Despite their rhetoric, both leaders have failed to do anything positive since 2003 on either the Arab-Israeli front or the domestic front to calm the fears of the masses and alleviate their deteriorating economic or political or security conditions; they have also failed to restore peace and stability to Iraq. And as the war records show, the more mistakes and crimes are committed by the occupation forces, the more legitimacy and sympathy the forces of religious fundamentalism and radicalism gain. And as the American and Israeli forces suffer military and moral setbacks, the forces of international terrorism gain more self-confidence and become more aggressive. President Bush claimed that he is “fighting the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century.” But in so claiming, Bush has chosen to ignore the fact that the ideological forces that America is fighting were created in reaction to America’s and Israel’s military operations and misguided policies in the region.

It is always easier to define objectives than to chart the road that leads to achieving them, as well as to recruit the right partners who could help navigate the road’s difficult terrain. Tourists and adventurers, for example, need knowledgeable guides they can trust and count on their advice. But the United State, even when it is able to define its objectives and recruit knowledgeable partners, tends to treat its partners as agents, not allies. Feeling insulted and at times betrayed, US partners are more likely to give their American masters the kind of advice that serves their own

interests, not the US interests. Partners treated as agents tend to mislead rather than lead, acting as opportunists, not friends. Friendly Arab regimes and politicians that support US efforts in Iraq and its policy toward Iran are doing so not because they trust America, or because they are convinced that America is doing the right thing in the region, but because they depend on American protection for their survival.

It is true that the fight in the Middle East is over values, ideas and ideals, but the West is losing that war; and, in the process, it is causing substantial harm to the indigenous forces of change and modernization. By claiming that the war is for the sake of justice, human rights and democracy, while acting as if the Arab people deserve no justice and have no political or economic or human rights, the West in general and the United States in particular, is undermining its own credibility and weakening its allies and friends in the region. In fact, most of the so-called moderate Arab leaders are in no position to help the West. They are largely corrupt autocrats who do not believe in democracy; and therefore, are unwilling to respect the human rights of their peoples or work for social justice in their countries. And due to the new Arab media outlets and satellite TV stations, most Arab leaders have lost whatever credibility and legitimacy they may have had in the past in the eyes of the masses. Arab leaders enjoy neither the trust nor the respect of the majority of the Arab people; they are feared but not respected. And fear can neither build trust nor can it facilitate the articulation of social contracts to tie people together and create communities of shared interests and common values. Globalization, meanwhile, is being allowed to aggravate poverty and social injustice, nurture suspicion and conspiracy theories, and cause socioeconomic gaps to widen and sociocultural divides to deepen.

The Middle East region, as so many Americans and Europeans claim, needs a value revolution; in fact, nothing less than a genuine sociocultural revolution to transform the entire region will do to give people a chance to catch up with the rest of the world. However, sociocultural transformations cannot and should not be attempted from the outside, or be initiated by foreigners because they tend to replace impressions for facts. Cultures encompass values and traditions and convictions and attitudes that are most resistant to change; they are also very difficult to understand and analyze without placing them in their proper historical and civilizational contexts.

Cultures should be left to indigenous intellectuals, educators and non-traditional leaders to transform; otherwise, the masses will view outside intervention as cultural imperialism and treat it as political and economic hegemony.

No matter how hard western states and the American media may try to do to undermine the influence and rationale of political Islam, they cannot defeat people willing to die for a holy cause they believe in. Radical Muslims opposing US policies are convinced that they are fighting God's war and, therefore, they believe that God is on their side. And since no power is capable of defeating God, they are convinced that they will ultimately win their fight against all enemies. They further believe that if they die fighting the enemies of God they will go to heaven, the ultimate destination sought by every believer. Therefore, believers are winners in this life if they defeat their enemies, and winners in the afterlife if they die fighting their enemies. "Islam is the solution" is a slogan that no other slogan can outmaneuver at this time.

Democracy, most enlightened people tend to think, could be presented as the right solution to the societal dilemma facing Arab and non-Arab Third World states. While this might be true in an economically advanced and socially developed and culturally homogeneous society like Taiwan or South Korea, democracy is not a solution to multiethnic states and to the politically and economically and socially underdeveloped societies. When former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami was asked in 1999 about the reasons for lack of economic development in his country, he said, "It is impossible to have economic development in a socially and politically underdeveloped society." Promoters of democracy in Third World states need to be reminded that western democracy was a major byproduct of the socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations, including the Reformation, that swept Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries; no Arab or Islamic society has experienced such a thing.

Political scientists tell us that for democracy to succeed it has to have certain conditions; noted among them: the existence of a fairly large and conscious and confident middle class, political plurality, regular elections to manage the peaceful transfer of power in society, and a free press. Based on my studies and observations, there is another major condition; a culture of tolerance. But history seems to indicate

that all ideologically committed leaders and ethnic groups and racial states do not believe in or practice tolerance. In fact, I argued in “The Making of History” that the greatest success of democracy in the West was not realized by establishing itself as a political system of governance, but by transforming itself into a social value and a cultural tradition. If democracy succeeds a sociocultural value, it will succeed as a political system; and if democracy fails as a sociocultural value, it will certainly fail as a political system.

While some western apologists for certain Arab regimes may claim that some Arab states are on their way to democracy, the facts on the ground and the historical trends do not support such claims. None of the conditions of democracy mentioned above exists today in any of the Arab or Islamic countries or any other largely agricultural and mostly underdeveloped society in the world. Democracy in fact has no future in all states and societies that still live under socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions resembling those of pre-industrial times.

Conclusion

The only way to win the fight against radical Islam is to pull the rug from underneath its feet by giving younger generations a better education and, in the process, transform their cultures and worldviews. Improving the economic and social conditions of the poor and transforming political systems to be based on social contracts that regulate relations between the rulers and the ruled are two strategic tasks that cry for attention. Radicals throughout history were able to define with clarity what they stand against, but have failed to define with coherence what they stand for; they are better at knowing their enemies than knowing their friends. As a consequence, radical forces have always lacked a program for reform geared toward helping the people they claim to be fighting for. This means that if radicals win the war of ideas and manage to control the state system, they will lead the peoples of the region into a wilderness of chaos and conflict that nurtures more war and enmity than tolerance and love.

I believe that the proper way to deal with the major issues and problems plaguing the Middle East today, while working to transform the cultures of the region, should be based on the following:

1. Solving the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of recognized UN resolutions and internationally accepted and sanctioned land-for-peace formula. This is probably the last chance to make peace in the Middle East; all concerned parties need to stop talking about the so-called peace process that has unfortunately become a boring, time wasting, fruitless, hopeless and aimless game; and start implementing UN resolutions, not creating new peace processes that have no future under the pretext of negotiation.
2. Pressuring the Iraqi government to understand that political problems need political solutions, and that reconciliation and forgiveness in a must to restructure the Iraqi state and rebuild the fabric of the Iraqi society.
3. Hasten the withdrawal of American occupation forces from Iraq;
4. Open a dialogue with all parties to the conflict, including Syria and Iran and Hezbollah and Hamas, because they are not only part of the problem; they are and should be considered part of the solution as well; and
5. Support the ongoing war of ideas in the Arab world by siding with the culturally enlightened and politically moderate and socially liberal forces that call for the transformation of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical and sociocultural aspects of societal life; such support could come in the form of:
 - Applying more pressure on Arab governments to return the long confiscated political rights to the people, respect individual and group human rights, and protect the rights of individuals to be different;
 - Establishing new media outlets with the power of the BBC and Al Jazeera to promote liberal views and rational thinking; and
 - Finance civil society organizations that promote human rights and tolerance, environmental preservation, and women empowerment.

No sociopolitical ideology like nationalism, or socioeconomic ideology like communism, or sociocultural ideology like religion can be tolerant of dissent or accept cultural and religious and racial equality, and thus respect the democratic

principles. It can, however, establish a democracy of the masters like the one practiced today in Iran and Israel. While in Iran only those who uphold the world of God's and obey the orders of his earthly representatives are granted the right to govern and given the honor to serve state ideology; and in Israel, only Jews are considered full citizens and have the right to rule over the land's indigenous people and the states' occupied subjects. If radical Islam wins its cultural and political fight, it will establish its own justice that recognizes no authority except that of its mysterious God, whose commandments are interpreted and conveyed to believers by unelected self-appointed representatives.

If current socioeconomic and sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions and trends in Arab states were to continue unchanged for another decade or two, the religiously conservative forces will more likely win a decisive victory. And if this were to happen, any further talk about genuine sociocultural or sociopolitical transformation in Arab countries would become an exercise in futility. Iran represents the best image of the future Arabs can hope for if nothing fundamental and daring is done soon to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, free Iraq from foreign occupation, free the Arab people from the chains of poverty and political oppression, and liberate the Arab mind from cultural repression. Iran, after nearly three decades of religious rule and the transfer of power through peaceful means, has made little progress; neither human rights are protected nor economic or political development has taken place. Time is no longer on the Israeli side, or on the American side, or on the moderate Arabs side, or the on side of peace loving and human rights advocates in the world.

Note: For further information on this and other related issues, consult our website: www.yazour.com ; it has four more studies and three books that deal with different aspects of the politics or the Middle East.

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