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The West in the Middle East

A Realistic Analysis and Policy Priorities for a Region With Structurally Irresolvable Problems

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Since Napoleon Western powers recognized the importance of the Middle East and became involved in the region. Why is it that the best they could achieve were short periods of stagnant and superficial stability? Why have indigenous Arab societies, even when they were heavily supported by powers that had great hopes for the region, consistently failed in meeting the challenges of the modern age? Why is the deficit of modernity today graver than ever? What is it that Westerners keep misunderstanding and misjudging about the realities of this part of the world? What are the impediments in Western culture and ideology that explain these analytical shortcomings? When and why did Western involvement fail? What worked? What grand designs should be abandoned? What important objectives can be secured?

If you are looking for solutions, don't go to the Middle East. The region suffers from very severe problems. Sometimes important social reforms or political settlements can prevent or postpone dangerous eruptions. But most of the underlying structural predicaments are not just of a political, social and economic nature, like those confronting functioning nation states elsewhere. The magnitude of the disruption in the whole region, with imploding societies and disintegrating established states, suggest something much more fundamental is malfunctioning. It's not only the obvious examples of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Other political and social structures are only barely holding up, fearing they could be next. Worst of all tens of millions of young people are struggling to find a future, frustrated with an ever darkening horizon and millions are giving up altogether, leaving the region and in search of a better life outside their cultural homeland. This bleak portrait reflects the ever-strengthening recognition in the internal Middle Eastern discourse since the monumental failure of the "Arab Spring" to mend the already desperate state of most Arab societies in the beginning of the new millennium.

The affected societies and states deeply diverge. Some are oil-rich (like Iraq, Libya and Algeria) or poor (like Yemen or South Sudan); others post-colonial (like Syria or Lebanon) or never under colonial rule (like Saudi Arabia); some occupied (like the Palestinians or Iraq) or independent for generations (most of the Arab states); several were erupting in the Arab Spring (Syria, Egypt, Yemen Libya and others) or not (Algeria, Jordan). Some are better off, with a relatively good chance to endure the present crisis (Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Gulf countries) while others are in catastrophic state (Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen). Some can survive by pouring oil-money on social and political troubled water (Saudi Arabia, Gulf) and/or thanks to a traditionally-legitimized monarchic regime (Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Gulf).

The only common denominator of all these failing or barely-holding-on structures is Arab political culture. Arab societies find it excruciatingly difficult, if not altogether impossible, to meet the challenges of the 21st (often even of the 20th) century. Even Tunisia, the only possible exception to the failure of the Arab Spring, is having major difficulties in this regard.

The Prospect of Change

This profound predicament can only be affectively addressed with a major transformation of Arab political culture. That transformation can only be initiated and sustained by indigenous Arab forces. It could happen one day. It is very broadly perceived in the region as desirable if not indispensable. It is, however, hardly forthcoming. Whereas the mainstream in Arab societies wants the **product** of the modern era namely the Western style of a good life, it is unwilling to pay the **price**: the adoption of a pluralistic culture.

Political cultures can, of course, change in Muslim societies as well as in others. In the course of seventy years it happened in Turkey twice: once with the modernization of Ataturk and then with the attempted counter revolution of Erdogan. There is, however no guarantee that the change will be in the desirable direction. The most outstanding changes in the Middle East in the last century were towards military dictatorships in the 1950s and the 1960s and towards Islamism since the 1980s. The social and political product manifested itself in the dismantlement and implosions that most recently followed the Arab Spring. With some minor exceptions (notably Tunisia) there are not even buds of sustainable change in the region towards pluralism and democracy. If and when they emerge, assuming they will survive, it will take decades to bear meaningful fruits and generations for the new structures to become institutionalized.

Even in the best case analysis of positive and sustainable change, the misery and frustration of the young will not wait decades, certainly not generations, for workable solutions. Their response can hardly be expected to allow these processes to ripen. Part of the existing culture involves an extremely high level of domestic social violence. That threatens to undermine in the short term the processes of “pluralization” that offer the only hope for the region in the medium and long term. Failed societies and states are not necessarily an interim phase. Some major Arab states have already established themselves as members in good faith of this disreputable club.

The Pitfalls of Western Involvement - Four American Presidents

Under these circumstances, Western involvement in regional affairs rarely helped in improving the desperate conditions in the region. The reasons are primarily two. First, it is impossible to help societies that are unwilling to take the indispensable medicine for helping themselves. Second, it is extremely difficult to effectively help, when the Western power is incapable or unwilling to understand the region’s realistic choices and political mechanisms. Behind the failure of most interventions lies a Western cultural impediment: it is analytically almost incomprehensible and politically illegitimate and reprehensible to entertain the idea that the political culture that dominates the Arab Middle East is profoundly different from the Western one. It is even more difficult to accept that this political culture may not be evolving, *mutatis-mutandis*, in the Western (so-called “universal”) direction. To entertain this, is mostly considered not only a hopeless pessimism, but usually also a racist.

Western interventions in the region have mostly been a failure in terms of their anticipated objectives, both in enhancing the position of the Western powers in the region and in improving the lot of the regional population. Sometimes, after recognizing the misguided nature of the Western policy, corrective measures in the opposite direction partially redeemed the failure of the initial steps.

President Eisenhower wanted to strike a new alliance with the upcoming dynamic leadership of the post-colonial Middle East. To prove to Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser that an American-sponsored regional alliance against Soviet ambitions was not a neo-colonial plot to dominate the Middle East, Eisenhower in 1956 broke the back of his closest and most important NATO allies that came to fight Nasser’s

radicalism in the Suez Canal. As a result of this major mistake, Nasser demonstrated that his stature in world politics is such that the US must assist him in his war against America's allies, even as he was demolishing the most important Western strategic interests in the Middle East and bringing the Soviet Union into the heart of the region. He consequently became the ultimate all-Arab messianic leader, the most prominent "non-alienated" enemy of American policy and the greatest asset, in this regard, for Soviet policy. This haunted the US and threatened pro-American regimes for a decade and a half. It was only when the most important pro-American Arab regime collapsed in Iraq, that Eisenhower applied his doctrine and saved the pro-Western regimes in Lebanon and Jordan.

After a uniquely successful Nixon-Kissinger campaign to oust the Soviets and lay the ground for American hegemony in the Middle East, President Jimmy Carter came up with an infinitely grander vision of bringing a "comprehensive" peace to the whole region. Unlike the circumspect Kissinger approach that focused on the most important Arab country, realizing that Egypt was ripe for a separate deal, Carter brought the Soviets back in. He also was about to restore the veto-power of the radicals, by including Syria and the PLO. Were it not for Sadat's courage, this would have demolished the American-Israeli-Egyptian win-win-win deal at the end of the 1973 war, at the expense of Russia and the Arab radicals. Sadat saved the deal by offering Israel a de-facto separate peace agreement, knowing that even a misguided occupant of the White House cannot reject the huge bird in hand for the imaginary multitude in the bush. It was only after his initial strategy reached a dead end that Carter energetically engaged and made an important contribution in concluding the bilateral Egyptian-Israeli peace accord.

After the trauma of 9/11/2001 President George W. Bush was determined not only to destroy Saddam Hussein's regime and power, but to bring democracy to Iraq. With the military objective secured, American forces endlessly lingered in Iraq to establish a freely elected political system dominated by the Shiite majority that would inspire the region. The inevitable failure contributed to the dismantlement of Iraq, to the rise of ISIS, to an incredibly bloody civil war and to a process potentially leading to an Iranian takeover. On another partly related front (WMD) Bush only somewhat redeemed himself by backing up an Israeli raid that obliterated the Syrian military nuclear program.

When it comes to Western misunderstanding of Middle Eastern realities and pursuing counterproductive policies, President Barack Obama effortlessly takes the prize. The radical enemies and the adversaries of the United States - from Iran, through the Assad regime to Russia - are benefitting from his regional policy, while America's allies - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and the Kurds - are all deeply concerned with its America's misperceptions and weakness. The worst, most important and potentially catastrophic misjudgment concerned Egypt. When Hosni Mubarak came under domestic fire, Obama did not even try to stand by him. Regardless if it would have helped the ailing and discredited president, in the Middle East regime, preservation is the ultimate test of alliance credibility.

But the worst blunder was the legitimization of the Muslim Brothers regime that was initially elected and the cold shoulder towards the Sisi seizure of power with the massive support of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood elites and public. Egypt is the most important Arab state and the linchpin of relative regional stability. After four decades of Egyptian-facilitated *Pax Americana*, that also prevented war with Israel, acquiescing with a takeover of radical movement that could have plunged the region into all-embracing chaos is reminiscent of Eisenhower's hopes to align the US with what he wrongly considered "the wave of the future." This choice becomes less surprising considering Obama's fascination with the Muslim Brothers regime of Erdogan. Obama named Erdogan one of the five world leaders, alongside those of Britain and Germany, as his partners of "friendship of bond and trust" and considered the AKP (Justice and development Party) dominated Turkey as a model for moderate Islam. Even when Obama sobered up, after Erdogan showed clear signs of megalomania and authoritarianism, he nevertheless supported Erdogan's incursion into Syria, even when it was evident that it is directed almost exclusively against the Kurds.

The recent European record of intervention in the Arab world does not reflect better judgment or a more effective action. Most of the time since the European powers lost their outposts in the Middle East they could play only second fiddle to the US and on the major issues were mostly disregarded. With the political and economic consolidation of the European Union, before the financial crisis, the eruption of homegrown terrorism and the massive refugee influx turned the attention inward, Britain and France engaged in the most high profile military involvement in decades: the operation in Libya. The operation did indeed get rid of Muammar Gadhafi and his regime and prevented the prospective massacre in Benghazi, but brought about much worse dismantlement, chaos and widespread factional slaughter.

Three Unpalatable Regional Realities

All these blunders have this in common: a profound inability and/or unwillingness to fully recognize three regional realities that are unpalatable to Westerners.

The first is that the real choice in the Middle East is not between dysfunctional, often repulsive, authoritarian regimes on the one hand, and a sustainable process of democratization on the other. It is rather between some version of the former and a host of much worse catastrophic outcomes. These catastrophes are demonstrated today in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and south Sudan. Such calamities could very well erupt again in Lebanon, Jordan and Algeria where they have flared up in past civil wars. In Bahrain a civil war and Iranian takeover were probably prevented only by the Saudi intervention. Had an independent Palestinian state existed, it would have most likely erupted between the PLO and Hamas. The brutality of Presidents Bashar Assad, Muammar Gadhafi and Saddam Hussein prevented this for decades. This is not to say that Arabs cannot come up with considerably better regimes - Jordan and Morocco, for instance, prove that they can - but even those regimes are authoritarian and the jury is still out on Tunisia.

The second is that radicalism is real. Radicals usually are not just wronged people who turned to violence having been frustrated from getting their rights by legitimate means. When they say they want to kill their enemies and obliterate their peoples and states, they mean it. While they may accept temporarily partial satisfaction, they are serious about what they consider absolute historic justice and will not be appeased, at the end of the day, by historic compromise. They may seek for their people what they call “a good life,” but this does not even remotely resemble the Western concept. It involves domination and revenge. It addresses their psychological, often psychopathological needs, rather than just economic, political or security interests. They will not be domesticated, and will skillfully manipulate naïve Westerners who try to “engage” them in “constructive dialogue”. Of course, not all Arabs are radicals. Not even the majority. But the radicals often set the agenda far beyond the circle of true believers. It is only when they are defeated, humiliated and deterred, that the others can accept a sustainable compromise.

The third is that conflicts in the Middle East are tribal, with very deep historical and psychological roots, firmly embedded in fundamental issues of identity. A Western inspired “peace process” seeking to settle feuds that go back centuries, sometimes millennia, is often irrelevant. It is particularly extraneous when it assumes, without real supportive evidence, that when the parties are attritioned, they will necessarily be willing to settle for much less than they demanded, because they “naturally” yearn to end the conflict, live in peace and make do with what they were left with. Some regional conflicts can indeed be settled by a balanced political, economic and security package, but many cannot. The essential requirement is that the parties are ripe for compromise. External insistence when they are not, however well-intentioned, only makes at least one of the parties more stubborn and resentful. Even the settlements that are reached often have no supporting legitimacy and erupt again.

Does all that mean that no one in the West can understand the realities of the Middle East, and Western involvement in the region must fail and should be altogether avoided? Certainly not! First, the region cannot and should not be ignored and second, informed and careful involvement can and did make major posi-

tive contributions. The Middle East may be less important than in the past, but it is still strategically located and still affects the energy scene as well as captivates people all over the world.

What Worked

Some Western leaders, Henry Kissinger more than others, understood its complex realities very well. The American contribution to the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty positively changed the history of the region. The Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty helped to consolidate it. The decisive American role (alongside Israel and Britain) in securing the survival of the Hashemite kingdom in Jordan as a crucially important buffer state helped stabilize the region. The wreckage of the political and physical assets of the most prominent Arab radicals - Nasser's messianism, Saddam's huge army, Assad's and Gadhafi's nuclear projects - could not have been achieved without American leadership and backing. America's dependable assistance not only helped Israel defend itself, but also made it a very effective instrument in fighting the radicals in the Middle East and consequently bolstering the moderates in the region (particularly Jordan). It also restrained Israel from hitting those moderates too hard, even when radical non-state entities (PLO and Hezbollah) attacked Israel from Arab states' territory.

Looking Good or Doing Good

The choice facing the West is very clear: will the leaders prefer to **look good** to their constituents and elites or to **do good** to the suffering people and the desperately-needing nations in the Middle East. If they insist on merely looking good, they will convince themselves that they can dramatically improve the situation in the region to the extent that will convince millions not to seek a better life in Europe, solve the Palestinian problem and save Syria. If they are willing to make do with doing good, they will concentrate on assistance to Egypt, Jordan the Kurds and Tunisia, help fight terrorism and re-establish their strategic credibility and respect in the Middle East.

As already highlighted, the regional malfunctions are too deep and structural to be cured by external forces to a degree and in a time frame that will significantly affect the outflow of desperate refugees who lost their hope and confidence in their own societies. A promise to do so may help deny for a while the essential need to take distasteful measures in Europe against the influx of refugees, but will only lead to huge waste of resources and inevitable disappointment. Another futile attempt to solve the Palestinian problem may demonstrate European consensus in criticism of Israel and yield a short-lived illusion of a major European role in world affairs, but it cannot possibly succeed where PM Ehud Olmert's proposals failed in 2008 and Secretary of State John Kerry failed in 2014. In 2008 President Abbas walked away from Olmert proposal of a Palestinian state with land swaps over virtually the full territorial extent of the West Bank and even a token element of Palestinian "return" into Israel. In 2014 Kerry spent nine tireless months in a crusade for an Israeli Palestinian peace and could not even get the parties to sign a document of principles for continued negotiations. The question why this conflict is not ripe for "solution" is beside the point.

Syria is beyond repair. First, none of the rebels has enough support and power to establish a functioning state. Second, Putin is determined and able to keep the Assad regime in power in "Alawistan" in western Syria, with or without Damascus and Aleppo. The West is understandably unwilling to forcefully prevent it. "Boots on the ground" are politically out of the question and no one needs to seriously consider American deterrence. Third, Assad and the rebels have no commitment to a "Syrian" identity that can bring them together. Assad is perfectly willing to massively butcher and starve those who try to oust the Alawites and their allies from power and they, in turn, mostly do not behave very differently when they get the chance.

The struggle against terrorism is important, but its contribution should be measured primarily with a strategic-regional, rather than an operational-local yardstick. ISIS is indeed a menace, but presents a lesser danger compared to that of the major regional enemies and adversaries. ISIS is strong only against the very weak: disintegrating and dysfunctional regimes like those of Syria and Iraq. Jordan, on the other hand, with a loyal and competent security establishment (and American and Israeli backing), is threaten much

more by the Muslim Brothers domestically than by the Islamic State. Egypt has a serious problem in Sinai, but is much more concerned with the Muslim brotherhood in Cairo and the regional menace of Iran. In search of operational allies in fighting ISIS the US-led coalition facilitated an Iranian takeover of Iraq, emboldened the Erdogan Muslim Brotherhood regime in its war against the Syrian Kurds and legitimized the Russian involvement that kept the Assad regime in power.

What Can Be Done?

The West can and should play a major role, both to protect and enhance its own strategic interests in the region and constructively help keep it from falling apart. By far the most important is to help the economic sustainability of Egypt. Egypt cannot, under prevailing circumstances, be extricated from her economic misery and put on a path of growth. Whereas the external assistance will not lead to recovery, it is a political tax worth paying for delaying the economic implosion for another year, and then another, for as long as possible. This is strategically justified in spite of the fact that Egypt is spending billions on a big and modern army that it does not need and lets the army wastefully control a large portion of the economy. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which poured billions into Egypt, are frustratingly aware of all that, but realize the army is the Sisi regime and the regime is the anchor of relative regional stability. The costs of Muslim Brotherhood takeover or of chaos are immeasurably higher for everybody.

The second priority is Jordan. In terms of cost-effectiveness it's the best deal in the Middle East. For a few hundred million dollars and security assurances from the US and Israel against external aggression, Jordan will continue to function as a responsible pro-Western buffer state. As long as the Muslim Brothers are persecuted in Egypt and kept at bay in Turkey, the Hashemite regime can deal effectively with its major domestic challenge. The third is the Kurds. This is an emerging force in the region that has demonstrated much more propensity than most Arab societies for nation building and responsible behavior. They also consider Arab and Muslim radicalism their enemy and are willing to fight alongside Western forces against both. Arming and training the Peshmerga, as Germany has done, and backing the Kurds politically, even against Erdogan, combines all three: immediate benefits, an investment in the strategic future of the region and the right thing to do. Tunisia is the fourth. Tunisia has a history of responsible social behavior. It is small and the resources required to help are not great. Even though that experiment may end up like other promising buds of political pluralism, the West is not at liberty to neglect giving it a chance. These priorities are not to say that other entities (e.g. Morocco) are undeserving of Western help, but that their survival and success will benefit the region the most at this hour of supreme need.

One last point concerns humanitarian help and basic reconstruction. Tens of millions in this region are in a desperate state. Whereas Western assistance cannot and will not prevent millions from seeking a better life in Europe (and elsewhere) it can dramatically alleviate the suffering with relatively modest means. To give only two examples: providing clean water and basic medical care. Providing food for the impoverished and often starved population is the immediate priority. Large scale agricultural projects can make a huge difference, not only in food production but also in society and politics. Draught and water mismanagement is driving millions to towns and cities that can offer no alternative employment. Social structures no longer function and almost inevitable political radicalization that follows further exacerbates an already distressed situation. Rebuilding and modestly improving the agricultural backbone of these societies alongside emergency food supply is not beyond the means and proven organizational skills of the West. It will not stop Islamic radicalization or profoundly modernize the region, but alongside better health it can significantly improve the lives of many millions who need it badly.

The West can help a great deal provided it learns from past mistakes, sets modest and realistic objectives and abandons romantic illusions of saving the world. *The best is the worst enemy of the good.*

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