

## **Problems and Opportunities in the Changing Middle East**

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I am asked to speak about Problems and Opportunities in the Changing Middle East. Problems in the region are very long list; and opportunities are as ever elusive. Change, said Leo Strauss, is the essence of politics. The question is whether the change takes us forward or backward. However, predictions and speculations are the nightmare of scholars and analysts alike. The case is doubly horrifying when events are in motion and nothing seems to stand still for a snapshot. The Middle East is currently going through such a dynamic and there is no indication that the situation will stabilize any time soon. The summation of what is happening in the Middle East is that prevailed notion of the "Arab Exception" is finally over. In the West the Arabs were considered a very peculiar people untouched with waves of Globalization, Democratization, and the sense of longing for freedom that other "normal" people in the universe are feeling. Among Arabs themselves, rulers and a good part of the elite, the Arabs were "particular" people with a culture that should not be messed with by Western corrupting ideas, or tainted by charting history for them by others. Now, the Arabs are back in full force to join others in the Globe in an endeavor that is never was considered to be easy or linear. The story so far has been colorful, even romantic sometimes; but as all gone exceptions blood was spelled, martyrs fallen, and history has never been certain.

Revolutions in the region so far are either have already toppled regimes while still defining what they want or they are still in the process of struggle and bloody confrontation with a regime. Whether the revolution is over as in Tunisia and Egypt, underway as in Yemen, Syria or Libya, still budding as in Algeria, Morocco or Bahrain, or even yet to commence, as in Oman, Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia--uncertainty remains high. The only obvious conclusions are that the Arab Middle East will never be the same again. The regional environment has changed once and for all, and with it the regional balance and modes of state behavior.

The future of the state systems in the Middle East depends largely on the direction the revolutions take: Islamic or democratic. There may of course be variations: Islamic political parties and movements will have a considerable voice in a democratic country, while democratic practices cannot be avoided in a country powered by the Sharia. If Turkey and Iran can be positioned in two opposing poles, the Arab countries of the Middle East will fall somewhere in between.

However, the new political regimes will continue to face many of the same challenges that posed themselves on the outgoing regimes; adding to that the challenge of democracy where demands on the system is far exceeding its own human and physical resources. The early challenges of how to harmonize State law and order with the revolution's sense of freedom that might at the hands of populists and demagogues approach chaos, are critical additions. Harmonizing State and religion in a civic state will remain a daunting task from writing constitutions to implementing them when tensions grow between the realm of legislation and the reign of Fatwa. Other major questions such as the role of the state in the economy, the relationship between state and society, and morality and freedom, all have to be revisited in the new light of the slogan made by the Egyptian revolution: Freedom, Dignity, and Justice. The new addition to the lexicon of revolutions, Dignity, will require conceptualization, and operationalization. Development, the almost absent concept from the revolutionary dictionary in the

Arab Spring will haunt the new regimes with a constant promise of sand storms to deal with the rich and the poor.

Whatever the direction taken, the politics of the Middle East will be much more complicated than before. Not only will the actors increase in number and orientation and will the media be even more extensive than its current wild character, but we shall also see changes in the definition of major issues like war, peace, development, intra-Arab relations, relations with neighboring countries like Turkey and Iran, and above all Arab-Israel interactions. Relationships with the rest of the world are bound to be different from those prevailing now, particularly with the West and especially with the United States.

Indeed, the biggest loser will be Israel. In many ways Israel, which missed its greatest opportunity for peace in recent years, will only find the next opportunity in the much more distant future, if at all. What has been achieved in peace treaties will be respected. After all, the countries that signed them understand the price of war, and democracies are usually busy with internal affairs. But peace will be colder than ever before, indeed freezing. Conflict will take new and different shapes. Democracies, Islamic or not, are capable of innovating and improvising on how to make Israeli occupation costly and miserable.

The recent reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh offers a clue to the future. Revolutionary Egypt has succeeded in completing a deal that could not be accomplished under the toppled Mubarak regime. New-found Palestinian unity could not have happened without the revolutions in Egypt, which made the deal, and in Syria, which could not prevent it. The deal and everything surrounding it set the stage for the coming United Nations General Assembly meeting in September, when Arab delegations will seek international recognition for a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders. After that, without agreement or negotiations, all Israeli settlements within those borders will be null and void.

None of this will be accepted by Israel. But the international system and its moral values will be put to the test. The new democratic Arab regimes will seek to deprive Israel of its exclusive status as the only democracy in the region. Although this was already brought into question by the Turkish presence in Middle East politics, it will now be compromised further by a number of Arab countries that are democratic.

On the ground, the “liberation of Palestine” can take on a different meaning than it has had in the last six decades of Palestinian struggle for statehood. Although intifada has been practiced before as a form of resistance, peaceful or violent, this time it will ignite new forms of pressure on the Israeli government and probably on Israeli politics in general. Dignity will not go hand in hand with occupation and the violations of Palestinian right of self determination in a state that holds the most sacred and divine.

While all the changes in Arab countries are welcomed in Turkey, where a model of Islam and democracy has developed, Iran faces a difficult dilemma in attaching itself to the revolutions while at the same time fearing their democratic possibilities. For all actors, there will be risks to encounter and opportunities to take. The US and European Union and other western countries have their work cut out for them in evaluating the authenticity of democracy in Arab countries while wondering what to do if one democracy--Israel--is occupying the land of other democratic countries. For the first time in the Arab-Israel saga, the conflict will be judged on the basis of democratic principles. That is paradigmatic shift in the politics of the region; and with modesty in the politics of the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen

Fasten your belt; the plane is about to disembark, and the story is unfolding. Blessed those who make the necessary adjustments; and sorrow for those who are going to be left behind wondering why they did not make the right decisions in the right time?

Thank you.