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FROM LEBANON AND EGYPT TO ISRAEL AND PALESTINE!

My title itself is an immediate challenge, if not also a contradiction of sorts, since each country echoes its different issues in a MENA jigsaw puzzle that is raddled with unholy alliances, rights' abuses, raw fears or bloody retributions!

But after three years of hopes created, chiselled, mislaid, abused, dismissed, shattered or else retrieved, the blogosphere is replete with words and images of the uprisings in the various countries of this troubled MENA region let alone of their impact upon neighbouring countries. So whilst it is hard to reduce a region into few sparse words and still sound coherent, I believe it is possible to articulate one key thought for each of my three geographical spaces of choice.

Lebanon

Over the past few days, the airwaves have teemed with news about the one millionth Syrian refugee - 18 year-old Yehya Chaker Charkiek - who registered with UNHCR in Lebanon. But what the airwaves have emphasised less is that this tiny country that has for the past three years been smarting from an overwhelming influx of refugees has also suffered a decline in trade, tourism and investment let alone a corresponding increase in public expenditures. In fact, public services are struggling to meet increased demand, with health, education electricity, water and sanitation particularly straining - albeit not yet buckling - under the sheer weight of those numbers at a time when public infrastructures remain fragile.

But let me be a tad more scientific with the data: the US-based World Bank now estimates that the three-year Syria crisis cost Lebanon US\$2.5 billion in lost economic activity in 2013 and threatens to push 170,000 Lebanese into poverty by end-year. With children making up half the Syrian refugee population, wages are plummeting and families are struggling to make ends meet whilst some 80,000 need health assistance and 650,000 receive monthly food aid.

Last year, for instance, the Lebanese government, alongside the UN and partner agencies, appealed for US\$1.89 billion to help the refugees and host communities. Only US\$242 million has been received so far. As the 10th UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, stated, "Support to Lebanon is not only a moral imperative, but it is also badly needed to stop the further erosion of peace and security in this fragile society, and indeed the whole region." A compelling Al-Jazeera blog from Tom Fletcher, UK Ambassador to Lebanon, underlines those unsettling realities.

Egypt

Whilst I was one of the millions who cheered the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, I also endorsed the counter-revolution of 30 June which the military pulled off with the support of a huge majority of Egyptians. Why? Because the presidency of Mohamed Morsi had become so partisan in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood and so incompetent in its governance that there was genuine concern about its long-term consequences upon a country still so young with its revolution.

However, the overthrow of a divisive president one year into his term should have also been the moment to re-boot the revolution and refresh its imperatives of human and economic dignity by drawing all Egyptians back together. However, it has become increasingly clear that the military establishment in Egypt are using their considerable military as well as financial clout in the person of Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to claw back power. And whilst most Egyptians minus the Muslim Brotherhood initially supported El-Sisi in re-imposing law and order (read security) in the country, the younger and secular generations who had been politically intuitive let alone proactive realised that their fundamental freedoms in Egypt were being eroded gradually. Anybody who is not with the military can now be deemed to be its foe.

Just consider some facts that Human Rights Watch (HRW) underlined recently. Since assuming power on 3 July 2013, the military-backed government in Egypt has killed well over 1,000 protesters and locked up more than 16,000 people, many solely on the basis of their peaceful exercise of their rights to free expression, association and peaceful assembly. Equally, the mass death sentences handed down by an Egyptian court to 529 alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood on 24th March in a trial lacking even the most sparse elements of due process is another example of an escalating climate of extreme political regression whereby the military-backed government has broadened its net to include secular activists, dissident academics and journalists. Moreover, the government has provided no meaningful accountability for the killings of protesters or the excessive use of force by security forces.

In a recent piece for NOW Lebanon entitled Field Marshal Pharaoh that would certainly prove a helpful read for political and religious hierarchs alike, Michael Young ably argued the pros and cons of the current phase in Egypt with his conclusion that “even the most hardened optimists must shake their heads at this, and wonder if their hopeful narrative can hold. Hope is not something that survives for long in the region.”

Israel-Palestine

For well over a decade, I have opined time and again that the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian is not beyond reach. I still believe that the Clinton Parameters, when coupled with the Saudi-proposed pan-Arab peace initiative adopted at the annual Arab League Summit in Beirut in 2002, could provide the fertile territory for resolving the core issues.

This is why I had hoped that US Secretary John Kerry might cajole both parties to move forward. However, and as Rami Khouri, director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, wrote in his Hints for a Workable Negotiating ‘Framework’, there is deep disappointment that both sides have failed to bite the bullet and take the difficult decisions over what the US diplomat Daniel Kurtzer identified as far back as 2012 as the twelve ‘parameters’ for negotiation. Namely, those are goal, territory and borders, security, state-to-state relations, relations with neighbours, Israeli settlements, refugees, West Bank and Gaza “safe passage”, places of historical and religious significance, Jerusalem, water, and implementation.

One major obstacle is a refusal by the incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and some of his ministers to undo the occupation by relinquishing an anachronistic ideology of a Greater Israel that still overrides any pragmatism and debars any necessary territorial concessions. This often translates into foot-dragging, excuses, procrastinations, blackmail and accusations where Israel - as the occupying power with the fuller deck of cards - shuns the inevitability of those hard decisions for peace. Perhaps some Israelis still think that their country does not need to show flexibility given its military and [relatively] IT-friendly economic strength today, but this is alas their biggest long-term strategic blunder.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas - who in turn is now being demonised by parts of the Israeli political establishment for his supposed failure to make the painful irenic compromises - cannot move forward without any quid pro quo from the Israeli negotiating counterparts. His questionable popularity, the sclerotic opposition by Hamas to any tentative step toward peace, and an American ingrained bias for Israel no matter the facts have meant that he cannot act more boldly on the core issues. How can he face down existential issues when Israel negates their very existence?

Let me highlight one example! On 1st April, the Palestinians signed accession instruments for 15 treaties that included the core treaties on human rights and the laws of war. What was the Israeli response to this political placebo? According to the Israeli civil society group Ir Amin, as well as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, it re-issued tenders for the construction of 708 settlement housing units in the settlement

of Gilo and demolished 32 Palestinian-owned homes and other structures in the occupied West Bank. As HRW emphasised, settlement construction and the deliberate or forcible transfer of civilians from their homes and communities in occupied territory are war crimes under the Geneva Conventions and the ICC statute.

Bluntly put, Israel must choose between peace and land. It can no longer maintain the status quo forever amid the uncertainties in the MENA region that make it even more imperative to find a resolution to a conflict touching the heartland of every Arab psyche - whether positively or negatively. Otherwise, both sides will remain locked in a war of attrition where one state exercises its version of apartheid on another people under occupation in the hope of controlling them or breaking down their proud spirits. But did the late Nelson Mandela not state in 1997, "We know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of Palestinians"?

Adjacent Thoughts

Beyond those three choices, it is clear to me that Jordan also faces its own serious challenges. The Za'atri sprawling camp, for instance, which houses some 106,000 refugees, has seen several protests over poor living conditions since it opened two years ago. Za'atri is located in the Jordanian desert, about 12 kilometres (just under 8 miles) from the Syrian border. It is also the second largest refugee camp worldwide - behind Dadaab in eastern Kenya with its half-million refugees - and has become the fourth largest city in Jordan. But so populous is the camp that a second overflow camp - Azraq - is under construction in the desert with a capacity to host up to another 130,000 people.

But there is more - a painful Syria and a pained Iraq with their high decibels of unapologetic violence. Sadly, the way in which ordinary human beings - men, women and children like you and me who are not different in their genome or aspirations - are behaving in the MENA region means that we have forfeited much pretence toward good will and have failed to appreciate that what often starts as a dry challenge morphs into a dyslexic contradiction if we do not confront and correct it but rather try to squelch it out of existence and therefore chase it out of our consciences or memories.

Perhaps I can sum up the struggles of the MENA region by drawing upon the learned wisdom of a great man such as Rumi who suggested once that "When someone beats a rug, the blows are not against the rug, but against the dust in it."