



THE MIDDLE EAST

What is the MENA region today?

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"The idea of safety doesn't exist anymore in Baba Amr. Scary is all that exists"

Omar Shakir, a Syrian activist in a Homs neighbourhood under fierce bombardment

Overall Observations

I have suggested it many times already, but I'll suggest it again today: I believe the Arab awakening or *sahwa* that was initially dubbed an Arab spring began with an idea (*fikra*) that morphed into a movement (*haraka*) across a wide region and is now in painful search of clear and coherent policies (*siyasa*) that deliver a future vision. The Lebanese poet Shawki Bzai' put it well recently when he described how the twin senses of indignity and humiliation felt by the masses came together and produced this awakening that enveloped men and women, young and old, in what became known as the MENA region - the Middle East & North Africa. So much so that a broad swathe of geography that has always had its own outstanding characteristics or particularities blended into a single frame not because the region became uniform but simply because the uprisings that initially overran many of those countries shared a common and peaceable purpose. All they wanted to do is to articulate an aspiration for liberty and to take a stand against oppression and corruption.

Mind you, this awakening also started as a spontaneous movement led by the young generations of those different countries - well-intentioned albeit frustrated young men and women who are tweeting to have a voice in the making of their own future choices - employment, marriage, expression, livelihoods - that their governments had denied them in order to control them. As Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Youssef, the editors of *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East* pointed out, those youths make up a significant tranche of society today as there are roughly 100 million individuals between the ages of 15 and 29 across the whole MENA region.

Fourteen months into the start of this re-awakening in Tunisia - since the region had in fact witnessed other awakenings over the past century such as in 1919, in 1952 and even later in 2005 - the dynamics of this movement have changed gradually from country to country. For one, the overarching - and in some sense cohesive - acronym 'MENA' has been split and it is now more accurately a ME:NA region since events in the Middle East - the Levant for some readers - have taken a different trajectory from those in North Africa. Tunisia, Libya and Egypt are not Yemen and Syria or for that matter Bahrain and other countries of the Gulf Cooperative Council that are now viewed by some Arabists as being part of both the problem and the solution to the violence that has wedded itself to those initially irenic mass protests.

Moreover, the young generations who started up the uprisings in quest of their dignity, citizenship rights as well as social and economic justice, and who are spilling so much blood for it, are being marginalised, co-opted or replaced by the more institutional cadres of their countries - be they political or religious. In one sense, the promise of the *fikra* that led to the disarming ambitions of a regional *haraka* is now being hijacked by those who wish to define and control its *siyasa* - be they those who fight tooth and nail against the relinquishment of their power, as if such power is granted divinely, or by those who came in from the cold and are trying to impose their own politicised agendas on an embattled populace.

Tunisia

In some instances, the transition - for it is not yet a real reform - from one form of power-wielding to another is not too violent in terms of lives and appears almost reasonably sanguine. Tunisia immediately springs to mind here. Despite the fact that the political hiccups and practical stumbling blocks are manifold, alongside tensions and structural discrimination, the future holds out hope for Tunisians. Mind you, this new sense of openness, democracy and transparency cannot become a Western write-up but will inevitably have to share common ground with the cultural - some would add puritanical - realities that make up the overall anthropology and identity of the region.

Hence, despite all the speeches about openness, we still face cases such as when a Nessma TV director is tried on a charge of libelling religion and broadcasting information that could "harm public order or good morals" simply because he aired the French animated movie *Persepolis* that contains a brief scene depicting God which some Tunisians deemed blasphemous. Whilst this is unfathomable by our 'Clapham omnibus' standards, it does not detract from the fact that considerable progress has still been made in Tunisia - not least with the appointment of a human rights activist and former inmate as president - although there remain gaps between freedom of expression and religious sensitivity.

Libya

Other countries are experiencing less peaceful awakenings. In Libya, a country where the rebels won the war against Muammar Qadhafi and his henchmen largely through the military and logistical assistance extended by NATO, the legitimacy of the Libyan National Transitional Council is somewhat floundering in the face of its weaknesses and occasional misrule of the country let alone the fact that disparate tribes from different areas (Bani Walid, Zintan, Sirte, Zawiya or Misrata) are applying their own versions of summary justice across this vast country. So critical has it become that a government official recently acknowledged that 'freedom is a problem' and Abdul Raheem Al-Keeb, the Libyan prime minister since October 2011, pleaded only this week with the different militias to rein in their impulses for the good of the whole country. Moreover, an Amnesty International report referred to torture and expulsion by uncontrolled militias from Misrata that "drove out the entire population of Tawargha, some 30,000 people, and looted and burnt down their homes in revenge for crimes some Tawargha are accused of having committed during the conflict." It added that thousands of members of the Mashashya tribe were similarly forced out of their village by militias from Zintan, in the Nafusa Mountains. These and other communities remain displaced in makeshift camps country-wide.

In fact, many of the rebels who fought in the Nafusa Mountains were not fighting [only] for democracy and fundamental freedoms but equally for their rights as indigenous Berbers or 'Amazigh' (a literal translation for a "Free Man"). Perhaps like the Kurds in Iraq, indigenous Berbers have begun to experience a cultural revival - the teaching of Tamazight, the Amazigh language, previously banned, is now embraced in newly-available language courses whilst the airing of radio broadcasts and other cultural initiatives such as the restoration of old Amazigh houses have begun too.

Such polarities bring me back to the Libyan author Hisham Matar who in his first novel *In the Country of Men*, evoked that "nationalism is as thin as a thread, perhaps that is why many feel that it needs to be anxiously guarded."

Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen

In Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen alongside many other eerily semi-quiescent countries, the future also remains largely incomplete. In Bahrain, for instance, a largely Shi'i group called Witness Bahrain is leading the protests and calling for democratic reforms, and if one travels westward away from the capital Manama and the former Pearl Roundabout, one comes across villages such as Sanabis, al-Daih and Jidhafs whose levels of poverty and squalor define in part the reason for the unrest in some parts of an island that is a strategic asset for the West since it hosts the 5th Fleet of the US. Whereas in Kuwait, it seems that much of the society has retreated to its most primal identity groupings. Tensions between urban constituencies and more rural tribesmen boiled over into vandalism only recently when the election tent of Mohammed Al-Juwaihel - a candidate who repeatedly

suggested that Bedouin tribesmen from the large Mutairi clan were fundamentally disloyal - was burnt to the ground. Moreover, a piece by Hussein Ibish in Now Lebanon suggests that there are an estimated 120,000 people "without citizenship" (bidoun jinsiya) in Kuwait amongst its 1.6 million citizens, who are themselves divided into a hierarchy of classifications, rights and responsibilities. And in Yemen, a state that has been described as 'failed' many times over, there is both anticipation and tension as different tribes campaign for the presidential elections due next week that will usher in Vice President Abed-Rabbou Mansour Hadi to replace the veteran strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh who eventually - and reluctantly - stood down under an Arab Gulf-brokered deal.

Egypt

In Egypt, the past year has made it increasingly clear that the essential tug-of-war is now at its strongest between the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on the one hand and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other who won the largest number of seats in both the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament. This tug-of-war manifests itself through competition in some cases when the interests between both sides are divergent, or alternatively an alliance in some other instances when there is a convergence of interests that seeks to limit the margin of manoeuvre of other parties, institutions or citizens. This was made quite evident when the Egypt Revolutionaries' Alliance - which brings under its umbrella over fifty political groups including prominent revolutionary movements such as the April 6 Movement (the Democratic Front) - called for a campaign of civil disobedience but was thwarted by both SCAF and the Brotherhood.

It is my prediction that an uneasy consensus will be found at this stage between those two power bases in the country whereby the other elements of society might well be marginalised again. This is another classic example of the voice of the people being muffled, perhaps even muzzled, to some extent by big interests - whether political, military or financial. However, one preponderating worry remains the health of the Egyptian economy: only this week, unemployment rose by another 0.5% (in Q4 / 2011) and reached 19% in cities and 8% in rural areas.

In the midst of those shifts in Egyptian society - a creeping sense of xenophobia and traditionalism as well as a proclivity to make deals over the heads of those who were at the vanguard of the 25th January [2011] revolution - the Copts who constitute roughly 10% of the Egyptian population are also facing some painful but inevitable reality checks.

This unease was manifested time and again over the past year. Last March, a church in the governorate of Helwan was set ablaze and eventually demolished as a result of sectarian tensions. This was followed shortly afterward by an attack on a church in Cairo's Imbaba district and another on the Merinab Church in the Upper Egyptian city of Aswan. Then, in October, a protest march by Coptic activists was violently dispersed in Cairo's Maspero district by military forces and resulted in scores of deaths. More recently, eight Coptic families in Alexandria's Amerya district were asked to leave their homes after an informal hearing held by a local sheikh. The crisis erupted in late January when obscene footage of a Muslim woman was sent from the cell phone of a young Christian man. Brawls quickly ensued between local Muslim and Coptic youths, which escalated after several Coptic homes were set on fire.

As far back as 16 September 2010, Dr Salim Al-Awa, a constitutional lawyer and Muslim scholar, who is now one of the presidential candidates, revealed a particular mindset when he reportedly said on Al-Jazeera TV that "Many people say that the monasteries are full of weapons ... while Muslims are arrested every day for extremism and the possession of arms ... The weapons that the Copts bring and store in a church can have no purpose other than to be used in the future against the Muslims ... The Church and some of the clergy are preparing for war against the Muslims."

Iraq

As for an Iraq that we in the West claimed to lead into democracy by an ill-advised occupation, it has become a radically different country today than in 2003. In fact, we no longer talk today in terms of a 'war on terror' or even 'democracy-building' as much as refer to our 'strategic interests' and our 'challenges' in Iraq and Afghanistan. And over the past few years, Iraq has become the epicentre of an American-Iranian confrontation. Such a bipolar

confrontation has also sucked in the ongoing conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran for regional supremacy as well as Turkish attempts to be seen as the new patron of the Muslim Sunni populations - particularly given its close relations with the Iraqiyya parliamentary bloc headed by Dr Ayad Allawi as well as Turkish massive investment in the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

Despite the many problems affecting this country, not least large-scale cronyism and corruption, as well as the uncertain status of its oil laws or the status of Kirkuk, I would suggest that Iraqi Kurdistan is thriving, and will most likely drift toward some form of de facto autonomy that is not dissimilar from its status prior to the removal of Saddam Hussein. The spectacle of Iraq's fugitive vice president, Tariq al-Hashimi, holed up in Kurdistan beyond the reach of Baghdad, indicates that the Kurdish areas pose a major challenge to the historically centralised [and militarised] Iraqi state.

Israel-Palestine

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains bogged down in Israeli political intransigence as well as the illegal but rampant and unchecked colonialism exercised by settlers. But it is also mired in intra-Palestinian divisions and squabbles. The Palestinian Authority remains as powerless today as it ever were, and the recent agreement between it and Hamas has also created tensions between Khaled Masha'al, head of the political bureau (until now resident in Damascus) and the Gaza politicians who are unhappy with the outcome of those lengthy discussions and tenuous agreements.

The 'Change and Reform' bloc in Gaza, which includes Mahmoud Zahhar and the de facto prime minister, Isma'il Haniyyeh, have already reacted negatively to the latest Palestinian factional agreement in Doha, Qatar, and issued their blistering 'legal memorandum'. However, both the PA and Hamas are in much weaker positions now than ever before due to the uprisings in the ME:NA region and so this mousalaha(reconciliation) is not a political breakthrough, nor a real re-unification of Palestinian political resolve or even a piacular gesture by either party. Rather, it is more a marriage of convenience ahead of possible presidential and legislative elections. As Houriya Ahmed, Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society and co-author of *Regional Actors and the Fatah-Hamas Unity Deal: Shifting Dynamics in the Middle East?* of May 2011 suggests, "The shifting dynamics of the regime make the outcome of this unity deal far from certain, and it may well prove to be a Potemkin arrangement to buy both groups time to recalibrate their individual positions. Yet in the interim, we could be witnessing a dangerous descent back into Arafat-era political stagnation."

Interestingly enough, this might well explain why Hamas is considering the possibility of shedding its 'terrorist' image by ditching its name and replacing it with the Muslim Brotherhood - the Palestinian Chapter. This tactic would allow Hamas to rebrand itself in line with its ideological affiliates in the regional Brotherhood, which has gained popular legitimacy in a way that Hamas has not through elections in the last year. However, one major regional power that is unhappy with those recalibrations - other than Israel clearly - is Iran who is now reportedly throwing its weight behind Hamas' militant rival in Gaza, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, whose members are allegedly converting to Shi'ism and who are increasingly threatening Hamas' power in its home base.

Syria

However, nothing across the MENA (or ME:NA) region compares with the bloodletting that is occurring in Syria today, a country that is almost a Bahrain in reverse in that a minority Shi'i politician is ruling over a majority Sunni country.

Despite strenuous efforts by parts of the international community to re-model the Assad regime in Damascus, it is clear to me that what also seems to help hold the regime together is that the opposition, the Arab League and the international community all still remain divided and uncertain over the future of this country. Angry promises or even self-righteous statements are not enough at this stage, and whilst many people - Syrians, Arabs and much of the international community - may dislike the regime, and may not support it, they are not convinced the moment has come that the regime is going to fall apart. This excludes those whose clear interests lie with the continuation of the regime - not least the Russian Federation, China as well as Iran that enjoys a political beachhead into the Arab World through Syria.

In fact, Russia is now viewed as the big political spoiler and the country that gave the regime the green light to attack different cities and towns with such impunity. However, let us not overlook the fact that Russian ties to Syria are old and deep dating back to the Soviet era. With a Russian naval station at Tartus, in northern Syria, as its only military installation outside of former Soviet territories, Syria is viewed by the Kremlin - and particularly by its [next] president Vladimir Putin - as the counterweight to what is perceived as an increasing Western influence in the region. There are also numerous economic and cultural bonds, including the presence of Russian companies working in oil and natural gas, as well as a proposal for the state-owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom, to build a power plant there. Other Russian companies have interests in agriculture, irrigation and telecommunications in Syria, not forgetting of course Rosoboronexport, the Russian state-owned weapons trading company, which continues to date its military with Syria.

Moreover, there must be good reason why some Syrians - in Damascus, Aleppo and some other parts of the country - still prefer President Assad, a veritable political pachyderm, to remain in power. Much as they are quite familiar with the brutal and frankly inhumane treatment meted out by the instruments of the regime against all opponents, let alone the distant but undeleted memories of the massacres in Hama in April 1982 when 20,000 Syrians were killed by the president's father, some of them somehow still prefer his flawed promise of security and stability to the untested offer by the opposition of a democracy enveloped in blood. Assad's appeal is not that he offers freedom, but rather security, and by killing mercilessly he illustrates that, not unlike his father, he will use an iron fist to try and control Syria.

So it is impossible at this stage to tell whether - or how fast - President Assad's time is running out. Many Syrians who oppose him on political grounds and seek reform could well support him or remain mum today because they fear the prospect of an all-out civil war between tribes, cities, Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites, Druze, Kurds, Ismailis and Christians. While Syria's uprising started as a non-sectarian, non-violent expression of the desire by Syrians to be treated equally as decent and lawful citizens with rights and responsibilities, the Assad regime turned it deftly into a bloody one in order to fan the sectarian fears on all sides. Now it is hard to tell where the democratic aspirations of the rebellion stop and the sectarian aspirations - the raw desire by Syria's Sunni majority to oust the Alawite minority - begin at this stage.

This sad fact has coupled itself with another equally sad fact in that the Syrian opposition still remains fractious and has not managed to find a way to meld its objectives or even reach out to the Alawites, as well as to the Christian and Sunni merchants, in order to guarantee that their interests will be secure in a new Syria once they give up on Assad. In this respect, it would be interesting to watch whether the newly-formed but largely unnoticed National Current for Change (NCC) party that presents itself as a liberal, democratic and secular political party and aims at participating in democratic elections in the event of the downfall of the current regime will succeed in making any significant dent in the political configuration of this bloody struggle. But it is those dissensions and fears that this regime is also counting on - whereby the international, regional and national conflicts of interest - in order for it to execute the classic Roman principle of divide et impera and stay in power long enough to crush the rebellions everywhere in the country.

This thinking by the 15-person inner circle explains why the regime has unleashed its firepower with such barbarous and bloody force. Following the UNSC double veto, it decided to "go all out" in its war with protestors and the Free Syrian Army - despite the determination and resilience of the latter and some covert (and increasing) financial, logistical and even military support. As Jim Muir from the BBC put it, the crackdown launched by Syrian forces after the unveiling of the new Arab League plan is aimed at bringing key population centres back under government control, eliminating the armed opposition, and securing borders to stop the flow of weapons and money. No wonder that many editorialists such as Anthony Tucker-Jones from Intersec (The Journal for International Security) refer to the much-beleaguered and heterogeneous Homs as the Stalingrad of Syria in that this pluralist city could well be the 'make or break' for the Free Syrian Army. No wonder also that absent any international support or substantial defections by the army, Syria might become the first instance when the people really succeed in toppling a regime with their own sheer willpower, sacrifices and energy minus any external assistance. Given the ferocity of the regime, that would be a mammoth achievement.

Meanwhile, and whilst the international community is trying to mobilise its arsenal of resolutions and sanctions, whilst the likes of Ban Ki-moon and Navanethem Pally (UN Secretary-General and High Commissioner for

Human Rights respectively) condemn the Syrian regime of crimes against humanity (and therefore technically indictable to the International Criminal Court in The Hague) and whilst even the UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie calls for some form of intervention during her interview with Al-Jazeera (Balkans), the Syrian army is driving armed rebels out of the suburbs of Damascus and putting severe pressure on them in other places where they had taken root - notably Homs, Hama, Idlib, Dera'a and Der El-Zor. Homs and Hama are both strategically vital since they control the highway between Damascus and Aleppo, the two big cities which have yet to be fully caught up in the revolt, whilst Homs is close to the Lebanese border and Idlib and its province in the north-west are important because they are adjacent to Turkey, with bases of the rebel Free Syrian Army, whilst Der El-Zor skirts Iraq.

Parallel with those military tactics, and responding to the non-binding vote in the UN General Assembly that adopted the Arab League plan (sponsored by Egypt and calling for President Assad to relinquish power to a vice president, for negotiations among the antagonists and for the formation of a new government) with an overwhelming majority of 137 votes, the Syrian president proposed a new draft constitution that would be put to a referendum on 26th February. The said document, with its 157 articles, reportedly drops Article 8, which declared the ruling Ba'ath Party as the 'leader of the state and society' and allows for a multi-party system. The draft constitution also stipulates that the president must be a Muslim man and may serve a maximum of two seven-year terms (although it is unclear if this would apply to the incumbent who is already in his second term). Regardless, this proposed charter rules out most of the opposition as it bans religious parties and dual nationals, and thereby prevents most of the leadership of the SNC, which includes the Muslim Brotherhood, from running for office. The key question now is whether President Assad would succeed to have a referendum let alone deliver a new constitution and national elections by the summer - given that the SNC has categorically dismissed his moves. Or is this another way to gain all the space he needs in order to confound his critics?

Lebanon

Given the high stakes in Syria, its neighbour Lebanon is also being increasingly affected by the consequences of all the flux. As always, Lebanon is divided into those who support the current regime and those who oppose it. In a video-link from Paris on the 7th anniversary of the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, his son Sheikh Sa'ad Hariri criticised in a video titled 'Onwards, Lions of Syria' the Syrian regime for crimes against its citizens, and then praised those rising up against the government. But there are already signs of the tensions in this tiny country. In Tripoli, in northern Lebanon, there were recent clashes between the communities of Bab el Tabbaneh (largely Sunni) and Jebel Mohsen (largely Alawite) that are separated from each other by an appropriately-named Syria Road.

Those fearful signs that one can feel across many parts of Lebanon - after all, the fate of the Syrian regime will roll many political dice in Lebanon too - are also supplemented by the concern not so much of the Islamisation of Syria but of its infiltration by al-Qa'eda. Indeed, according to the SITE Intelligence Group which monitors jihadist communications, Ayman al-Zawahri, who succeeded Bin Laden as the leader of al-Qa'eda worldwide, issued a statement last week urging Muslims in the region - specifically Iraqis - to support the uprising. Moreover, some intelligence officials and diplomats in Washington, Baghdad and Beirut suggest that the al-Qa'eda franchise was responsible for the deadly bombings in Aleppo over a week ago and in Damascus, the capital, on 23rd December and 6th January, which resulted in scores of deaths. But they acknowledged that they did not have the forensic or electronic intercept evidence.

However, so concerned are the Lebanese officials that the terrorism of al-Qa'eda - with its Manichaeen view of the world - might further contaminate the situation in their own country let alone in the region that one of the most adept weathervanes of the political scene in the region - Walid Jumblat, Lebanese Member of Parliament and leader of the Progressive Socialist Party - questioned al-Qa'eda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri's call for supporting the Syrian revolt, saying that he is seeking to tarnish the opposition's peaceful movement. He further added in a statement, "The timing of the call indicates that the development was orchestrated by the Syrian intelligence."

Pending Issues

Given that almost 7000 people have died in the past eleven months in Syria, some of them with indescribable savagery, and the fact that the country is teetering on the brink of a civil war, a number of observers have commented on the reasons for a non-intervention to date by the West - along the lines of a Libyan scenario. I would suggest that there are multiple reasons for this reluctance, not least the fact that the Syrian military (which has remained largely loyal to the regime) is much stronger than that of Libya. It is 325,000-strong, with more formidable air defences, and so the price for intervention would be much steeper than in Libya or even Iraq. However, even if one assumes that the army is not as united as first meets the eye, one must realise that any full-scale explosion of Syria could possibly entail devastating repercussions of different forms and intensities across the whole region - from Iran and Iraq to Turkey, Israel and Lebanon let alone the militias constituting Hizbullah or Hamas and the different components of Syrian society such as the Kurds or the Druze. I believe that the West - even if the Russian Federation and China were somehow to drop their double vetoes - will not afford the military or financial wherewithal for such an attack. However, given that the idea of safety corridors and other punitive or sanctioning measures are still on the table, I would suggest nonetheless that things might still shift in the future. I also believe that Israel remains undecided on whether it wishes to let go of the Syrian regime that has granted it almost four decades of 'peace' and stability on the Golan Heights. Another question that often gets asked this day is why many Christian hierarchs in Syria and Lebanon are supportive of an ostensibly oppressive regime and why do they decline to endorse instead the huge protests that are clamouring for change. As one atheist asked me drily a few days ago, is this the way that [your] Jesus will have acted in his time?

Dr Tarek Mitri, a Lebanese Christian academic and leading ecumenist as well as former government minister, went some way in a recent interview with Mona Naggarr to explain the position of the Christian hierarchs. He suggested "that Christians have become the victims of systematic, considered, politicised scaremongering at the hands of the regime in some parts of the MENA region but most clearly in Syria." He added that "the Assad regime is frightening the Christians, and then calming them again. It makes them afraid of their Muslim compatriots, and tries to convince them that this is an Islamic revolution. Then it reassures them that the regime will protect them." In a nutshell, the Christians are concerned that they might lose some of their freedoms or small privileges if an Islamic groundswell takes over in the region and imposes different norms on their communities. As such, those who are indecisive or undecided of the future through fear, sheer expediency or even thoughtful conviction would prefer to remain tolerant of the existing regime.

This attitude correlates well with an article by Ayaan Hirsi Ali entitled *The Global War on Christians in the Muslim World* in the *Newsweek* weekly magazine. An excerpt in that article lends itself to interesting reading when Ms Ali writes, "As Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, pointed out, Christian minorities in many majority-Muslim nations have "lost the protection of their societies." She continues that this is especially so in countries with growing radical Islamist (Salafist) movements. In those nations, vigilantes often feel they can act with impunity - and government inaction often proves them right. The old idea of the Ottoman Turks - that non-Muslims in Muslim societies deserve protection (albeit as second-class citizens) - has all but vanished from wide swaths of the Islamic world, and increasingly the result is bloodshed and oppression.

I personally am not unreceptive to the growing Islamisation across the whole MENA region. However, I would make a distinction between 'Islamic' and 'Islamist' since the former is borne out of one's faith whereas the latter uses an interpretation of faith for political agendas that are exclusivist and inimical with the broader public good.. As such, I would suggest that it is the fundamental right of the citizens of this region to elect their representatives as they deem fit so long as those elections and choices are free and fair, and so long as all citizens in any one country are allowed to exercise co-equally the same rights and responsibilities that are afforded them by the Constitution. However, to side with oppression and violence on the one hand, or to solicit 'protection' in an Ottoman-style dhimmitude, is not only objectionable but shows a sorry lack of genuine leadership and faithful stewardship. The Christian faith should not make such choices, even if it results in those Christians ending up carrying their crosses. Besides, and as Dr Tarek Mitri also lucidly pointed out, there are many grassroots Arab Christians who actually support those movements for change despite their understanding that they might witness [in] more conservative, traditionalist and less Christian-friendly societies.

In fact, an attempt was made on 2 November 2011 to address those fears when Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the highest Sunni institution, published a bill of rights on basic liberties in conjunction with other intellectuals. This document is not truly a bill of rights, or a panacea for all inter-communal or interreligious tensions. However, it strives to counter those introverted currents and represents a genuine step toward reform since it is the first document by a Muslim authority that stands up for civil liberties albeit with Koranic principles. And much as some Muslims have not subscribed to this document, nor will they do so since they have their rapacious agendas too, it represents nonetheless an overture toward those who do not subscribe to a religiously oppressive Islam and as such must be taken seriously and openly.

Random Challenges

If we agree that the ME:NA region has been 'awakening' over the past year, we must also agree that there is a serious flaw in their makeup of this region since the time when the borders of constituent countries were drawn up by foreign powers with colonial zeal and exceeding arrogance. The peoples of the region who have been trapped within them for decades are now trying to find a shared set of ideas to live by let alone trust each other as co-equal citizens. The Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 is a classic example par excellence: a secret agreement between the UK and France, with the assent of Imperial Russia, defining their respective spheres of influence and control in Western Asia (as HRH Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan often prefers to refer to this region) after the expected downfall of the Ottoman Empire during WWI. Such a colonial partitioning of the region does not usually take into consideration the collective interests of the indigenous locals. It is inevitably fragile and bound to shake and rattle at some stage.

I would like here to quote also Anthony Shadid, the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning NYT foreign correspondent who died tragically from an asthma attack whilst in Syria a few days ago. In a front-page article from Tunisia last year that displayed his singular combination of authority, acumen and style, Shadid wrote, "The idealism of the revolts, where the power of the street revealed the frailty of authority, revived an Arab world anticipating change."

However, the frailty of authority that Shadid referred to in some countries such as Tunisia and perhaps even Egypt differs from those in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. It also underlines the fact that most countries undergoing change are also faced with systemic problems where some politicians are 'removed from office', but there are no institutional changes and no state-building efforts to follow on those changes. Or to put it in the words of Professor Volker Perthes, director since 2005 of the Berlin-based German Institute for International and Security Affairs, what one seeks are 'sustainable and self-sustaining democracies'. However, we are far from reaching that zenith point since those protests - much as they are at times violent, unpredictable and inhabit our TV screens every single day - are also very young and have not yet had the time to shift from the phase of fikra and haraka toward a coherent and conjoined siyasa.

Turkey has also been a key player in the unfolding of events in the ME:NA region and especially in the crisis gripping Damascus and Ankara that seems to have all but iced over the warming relations of recent years. However, Fadi Hakura, a Turkey expert and associate fellow at Chatham House, a leading foreign policy think-tank in London, questions whether Turkey is really ready to play up to the large neo-ottoman ambitions attributed to it. In an article in the Majalla current affairs magazine, he focuses on three internal factors that preclude Turkey from fulfilling its regional ambitions. First, the Kurdish issue that continues to drive an ethnic wedge through Turkish society, in the community at large and even constitutionally. Second, the separation of religion from matters of state is a long way from ensuring the rights of various religious and ethnic minorities in Turkey, despite the popular myth that it is a broadly secular country. And third, the demonstrably fragile democracy is an ongoing project, unable to guarantee political freedoms and rights.

We in the West have been outraged by the Russian-Chinese double veto at the UN Security Council - and rightly so, given the unbridled violence by the regime against its people. However, as Rami Houry, director of the Issam Fares Institute in Beirut, wrote, we should not forget that the USA has used its own veto power 42 times in the past to kill off those Resolutions affecting International law - the latest being on 18 February 2011 condemning Israeli settlements on Palestinian land as illegal. As such, when we think of our own Western history and involvement in this region, perhaps we should be more careful with our words. After all, the USA contributed in turning the UN into a road to nowhere!

Besides, what seems to escape the political imagination of some analysts is that the almost exclusive focus on the Syrian situation by many members of the League of Arab States and the West - perhaps even at the expense of other developments in the region - is not solely because of the levels of attrition and violence. Rather, there is a concerted effort to disconnect Syria from Iran and thereby weaken Iran in the whole region. As such, one major axis for the support to the Syrian rebels is that they will cut the umbilical cord between Syria and Iran and cow the latter into submission. This is why I also would suggest that one of the ongoing agendas focuses on the perilous rivalry between Sunni and Shi'i Islam for regional dominance. The Arab countries are involved in this struggle, as are we in the West. Sadly though, I fear that our own positions and tactics could have unintended consequences that are inimical with our own long-term interests.

Those unintended consequences might even come sooner rather than later if Israel were to turn its bluff into truth and attack Iranian nuclear installations. I too am seriously wary of Iranian intentions, and would suggest that part of what is happening today is a struggle within the Iranian Mullahcracy let alone between the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But the different forms of sanctions imposed by the West are biting in Iran and an attack now by Israel, which unavoidably drags in the USA (during an election year), would not only re-unite the Iranian people but also ignite incalculable damage on the whole region. And whilst it is true that Iran is developing more centrifuges and transferring some of its facilities from Natanz to the heavily fortified site of Fordo near the holy city of Qom, we in the West should continue to exercise caution (as the P5+1 group has been doing to date) not to cut our noses simply in order to spite our faces. Iran is willy-nilly a regional power and a dangerous and unpredictable foe: the last thing one would wish to see happen is us walking into a trap just when the measures we have been adopting are seemingly yielding fruit. But we must not slacken our resolve with those sanctions whilst also keeping the door open for negotiations with Iran in such a way that our efforts also respect Iranian history and sense of sovereignty.

Finally, we should also start thinking today of the future in all those ME:NA countries - and perhaps most notably so in Syria. What will happen if / when President Bashar Al-Assad is no longer in power? Who will rule the country, and who will heal all the wounds inflicted upon a country that has become increasingly bitter, vindictive and sectarian? Should the opposition who spend time arguing with each other redouble their efforts to constitute a body that can truly assume power? I hear a lot of rhetoric from them, matched by the ever-changing assessments of pundits who say one thing today and think another tomorrow. But I do not yet discern any concrete vision reassuring me that anyone can manage countries such as Syria or Yemen or Libya or ..? Mind you, it is axiomatic that the West should clearly stay out, not least since we are now hopefully living in post-colonial societies. However, I also hope that the local politicians will learn to cast their differences aside and try to remember why those protests and revolutions started in the first place.

In this respect, I am reminded of a document that engendered a real breakthrough for Africa. The Arusha Declaration, as it became known, was drafted by Julius Nyerere for the Tanganyika African National Union and was signed in Dar As-Salaam on 5 February 1967. It promoted self-reliance and socialism in an African format and was viewed then as a charter for human rights and civil liberties. I would urge opposition leaders in the ME:NA region, with all their good intentions and legitimate aspirations, to read this charter in good faith and not to be thwarted by it.

In conclusion, I remain hopeful but uncertain of the future at a time when there is a paucity of leadership, a surfeit of subterfuge and political as well as financial opacity. But I can still soliloquise: where indeed is the MENA region today?

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