Middle East Insights

BACK TO THE FUTURE?
THE RISE OF A "STATELESS" MIDDLE EAST

By Mohamed-Ali Adraoui

If anyone interested in the politics of the Middle East and the Islamic World had the opportunity to travel back in time and compare the configurations of the socio-political landscape from the 1980s to the present time what on earth would they be able to say? Historians know too well that "what if" questions represent extremely relevant tools, especially when one attempts to understand the specific impact of key events and their long-term evolution.

However, yet another source of inspiration could be to compare several historical eras in order to assess upheavals and seemingly 'permanent' features from, for instance, the Middle East in the 1980s and nowadays. Undoubtedly, our time traveller would be amazed by what is happening on the ground today, but he or she would also be perplexed by certain similarities and continuities that have persisted from then to now.

More than 40 years ago, this part of the word was going through major conflicts which, to varying extents, are still relevant in 2015.

At a time when some discuss the pertinence of using the expression "third intifada" to describe the current violence between Israelis and Palestinians, we are given the impression that this issue has stagnated to the point where the infeasibility and unlikelihood of a 'two-state solution' based on UN resolutions has now become a widely held position for some of the most serious opinion and decision-makers.

Even the struggle that has set Sunni and Shiite Muslims on a collision course against each other, started right after the revolution instigated in Iran by Ruhollah Khomeiny in 1978-1979. Fearing the rise of a new power in the region, the neighbouring Gulf monarchies, supported by western states such as the US, France and Britain, engaged in a continuous counter-revolutionary policy, whose main aim was to preserve the secular Iraqi state ruled by Saddam Hussein and the Bath Party. Generating strong religious narratives on both sides so as to discredit the enemy, the Islamic religion has been triggering protracted confrontations that are said to be, nowadays, the *suma division* in the region, even more serious than the Israel-Palestine conflict.

From the 1970s onwards, several countries, because of geopolitical circumstances, were led to sublet their political spaces so that various regional powers can intervene with the goal of undermining their competitors' interests. Clashes between pro and anti-Palestinian resistance, secularists and Islamists, Sunnis and Shiites, Turks and Kurds, Arabs and

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Persians or Israelis and Arabs have indeed undoubtedly benefited from domestic crises that some of these societies were or are still going through. Lebanon between 1975 and 1990, Iraq in the 2000s and Syria today are the embodiment of intertwined struggles in which regional rivalries continue to play a huge role in domestic politics.

And, while the Cold War framework is said to be over, current reconfigurations resulting from the Syrian civil war seem to be bringing a revival of the confrontation between the US and Russia. Strategic and diplomatic ties that used to characterize the greatest ideological and political antagonism in the second part of the 20th century seem to have returned to the top of the Middle East agenda. Alliances were built around close cooperation between the US and the Gulf monarchies, some of which are engaged in military interventions in Yemen (as in the 1960s) to prevent the rising influence of a regional contender (Iran taking the place of Nasser's Egypt) such as Russia to Syria. On the other hand, they still represent one of the major observable rifts in the region. Motivated - according to Russian officials - by the need to get rid of terrorists starting with the Islamic State threat to the Assad camp in Syria, our traveller in time would find it natural to draw some comparison between the current situation and the USSR's fight against what was emerging as the al-Qaeda organization in Afghanistan, during the 1980s.

In this way, the assumption that the Middle East has remained relatively static and unchanging for numerous years has a certain logic, although by analysing the situation more strictly, it must be acknowledged that the different logics that we have just highlighted are in fact outdated.

If we wonder what our traveller could be struck by nowadays, it is more than likely that the weakness or near absence of many historically established states would grab his attention. In terms of leadership, several countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iraq or Syria have attempted to drag the Arab world up using Islam or Nationalism as an identity that will stir it and get rid of any alien influence. However, it was a time when these state actors wished to anticipate the possibility of dominating the region and uniting 'Arabs' or 'Muslims'. They were not first of all haunted by the likelihood of their own disintegration. The aim was not to get protected from the collapse of the neighbouring countries, but from their geopolitical ambition and aspiration to the regional leadership. Consequently, whereas several similarities appear to remain, in reality, we are witnessing in the present times is a profoundly overwhelmed region.

In other words, the Middle East seems no longer to be mainly regulated by Arab state actors. In this way, new sorts of players have been emerging in order to compete with 'wobbling' states (in the same time they have benefited from some of these states' mistakes). Their ultimate aim is clearly to get rid of the regional structures that have prevailed over non-state actors for decades.

On the side of the considerably weakened states, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are probably the ones whose influence has been the most devalued. Saudi Arabia is still admittedly capable of funding and arming movements such as the Islamic Front in Syria, although it fears the rise of the Islamic State, but its historical defensive stance against nationalist and secular regimes such as Nasser's Egypt or Saddam Hussein's Iraq has turned into a much more existential concern against Iran which is supposedly trying to surround the 'Land of the Two Sanctuaries'. Egypt, for its part, is no longer able or willing to influence the most emblematic conflict regarding the Arabs across the 20th Century, the Israel-Palestine issue. Those two countries, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are facing major social domestic protests and

are also extremely fragile in terms of their territorial sovereignty, as we can see in the Sinai with the rise of Islamic State proxies in this area.

The situation of Arab statehood in the Levant and Mesopotamia is even more problematic. In reality, it has become clear that both Syria and Iraq will not find their post-independence vigour again, at least for the next few years. The relevance of the state level, in regulating and managing interactions between different social groups (ethnic, religious, social classes, generations) has virtually failed. These rifts are all the more unsustainable, given that Syria and Iraq will still probably go through political and military struggles in the next years steering people towards actors claiming to be "protectors" whose vision is no longer compatible with the idea of inclusive States (even if ruled by dictators).

Therefore, it seems that the main disruption that is typical of the present Middle East has to do with its conscious heterogeneity. We can understand this in two ways. First, it is a political configuration. The Middle East has never been a region where only states used to dominate the landscape of activism. They have indeed been forced to deal with infra and supra national actors since they gained independence. For instance, transnational religious networks have always been extremely influential for instance, affecting local, national and regional politics on numerous occasions. However, for decades, and especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of independent Arab countries, states have remained the main players of the very game that they were to regulate. One example, among many others is that, during the Cold War, the two main super powers (the US and the USSR) used to target specific countries (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan) in order to defend their global interest in this part of the world. Another one comes from the study of wars in the Middle East over this period. Even though non-state actors were often visible, conflicts used to be first of all interactions bringing state actors into opposition (Egypt against Saudi Arabia in the 1960s, Iraq and Iran in the 1980s). Eventually, in terms of collective identity building, regimes have been relatively successful in offering a state-centred approach, as could be seen in Syria, for instance, before the uprising became armed when people in Dara'a focused on their 'Syrianness' while they were demonstrating.

Last but not least, this part of the world seems to be currently experiencing a major upheaval when it comes to founding narratives. Definite conclusions may certainly be relevant when one studies the Middle East, although judging by some new frameworks, both on micro and macro-sociological levels, this region offers new paradigms. Two generations ago, its habitants used to do politics and some of them were as violent as today's contenders anywhere there was a conflict. Nonetheless, parameters were extremely different and arguably more rigid. Nowadays, the main feature of this area deals with its obvious mixture of players and levels of interactions. It appears that dynamics that we have noticed for decades have reached a critical point. Borders, actors and narratives do reflect major upheavals, and among these, the contemporary crisis of the Arab state is probably the most compelling.

For our time traveller the Middle East appears to be going through fundamental turmoil. It may be relevant to underline that this part of the world, like Europe in the past, represents an area wherein some actors would die for another country's sake and bring war to their compatriots for the benefit of alien governments. As long as you are able to frame political issues by putting 'identity' on the top of the agenda, you may play the 'protector' card like we can see today in Syria (e.g. Iran with Shiites, IS with Sunnis). States that are likely to offer an inclusive deal will probably be in a much better situation than those no longer existing only for themselves. That would mean making sure that the state was born to

represent and defend everyone's interest. This would certainly be the key factor of success for any Arab society. Inclusiveness would entail understanding how deadly the threat represented by ethnic and religious divides may be. For all of those reasons, our time traveller, in the case of another journey across years, may not recognizes his home region in the future once and for all.

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