

WINDS OF CHANGE

From the Youth Bulge to Globalization, Arab States Face Big Challenges.
But There Are Also Big Opportunities

By Nabil Fahmy

Over the last half-century, the Middle East has seen profound changes and immense challenges. Heads of state have been swept from power in nearly every Arab nation—often by natural death, but in many instances through political uprisings or violent overthrow.

An exploding youth bulge and regimes that reject inevitable change have interrupted natural transitions of power. People throughout the Arab World are questioning their identities and trying to reconcile between national, ethnic, sectarian, and religious affiliations. All this sits amid polarization between progressive and repressive fundamentalist visions for the region. Meanwhile, the strong winds of globalization are also unsettling the Middle East. And the changing global political landscape—the reemergence of Russia, rise of China, election of a non-conformist American president, the spread of populism, particularly in Europe—requires the Arab World’s urgent attention.

The United Nations 2016 Arab Human Development Report reveals that Arab youth between the ages of 15 and 29 constitute nearly a third of the region’s population. Another third are below the age of 15. Even though the younger generations are increasingly better educated, youth unemployment rates in the Arab World have risen to almost 30 percent, twice the global average of 16 percent. Sclerotic economies are unable to accommodate and make use of the vast amounts of human capital atrophying in the Arab World.

It is noteworthy, as the 2016 Arab Youth Survey reveals, that there seems to be little appeal for extremist groups and their twisted interpretation of Islam among the youth. Nevertheless, many young people believe that without job opportunities and space for political expression, marginalization and frustration may increasingly be a source of tension and instability and might be an important factor in recruitment for terrorists and extremists.

▷ Leaders pose for group photo at Arab League summit, Dead Sea, Jordan, March 29, 2017. Raad Adayleh/Associated Press



Mismanagement of change in the Arab Middle East has weakened the social contract between governments and their constituencies, occasionally leading to the breakdown of authority and sowing the seeds for instability. The traditional Arab leading countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria have been facing their own challenges and transformations, albeit of a differing form and nature. This has resulted in very significant geopolitical change in the region, exacerbated by the imbalanced, even catastrophic American policy, especially in Iraq, which has expanded the influence of non-Arab Middle Eastern states such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

Globalization offers vast opportunities for the strong and capable, but poses difficult challenges for the weaker states and marginalized peoples. Given the Arab region's demographic composition, globalization is dividing the population. Some reach for modernity at an unrealistic pace, others dream of recreating history by generating fundamentalist and extremist intolerant trends resisting change by all means possible.

These persistent domestic and international challenges prompt many to question whether the Middle East has a future. However, despite the ominous challenges, I believe there is much reason for hope.

Today's Arab youth are more energized, are generally better educated, and provide tremendous opportunities. The Arab World is still a wealthy region, investing across the globe even as it attempts to attract local investment. Governance practices, while still centralized and authoritarian, are much more transparent and accountable in many countries than in the past.

The fight against terrorism and extremism appears to be progressing with the liberation of territories previously under control of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). This is reason for cautious optimism. Although, in the short term at least it will lead to the dispersion of terrorist groups and to a rise in violent acts across the region as is evidenced by the heinous attacks against Egyptian Copts in Alexandria and Tanta on Palm Sunday 2017.

The antiterrorism successes also coincide with important steps toward domestic stability. As Transparency International points out, Tunisia recently undertook steps toward a national anticorruption strategy that included passage of an Access to Information Law. Between 2011 and 2013 Egypt went through two revolutions and faced serious societal challenges with a rapidly increasing population, slow economic growth, and terrorism in the northern Sinai Peninsula. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's government is, however, tackling difficult economic decisions head on, such as reducing subsidies, floating the exchange rate, and investing in infrastructure. Terrorist bases have not yet been eradicated in Sinai, but the security situation in the rest of the country has been enhanced significantly. Much remains to be achieved, particularly with respect to civil liberties, but slow progress is visible.

Saudi Arabia is witnessing a generational transition with the rising influence of Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Bin Abdelaziz. As resources diminish and technological advancements challenge the historical relevance of oil, Prince Mohammed has proposed an ambitious economic transformation by 2030, which aims not only to diversify the economy but also to start a process of change in the social contract in Saudi Arabia featuring taxation, accountability, and transparency. Saudi Arabia publicly announced in 2017 that it is giving priority to the fight against corruption within its governmental bodies.

Obstacles to Progress

While the challenges posed by globalization and management are seen throughout the world, in the Middle East they are exacerbated by two basic Arab deficiencies.

The first deficit is the absence of efficient governance and a failure to efficiently provide public goods and services as expected by the people. It also means the failure to evolve pluralistic political systems promoting economic competitiveness, transparency, and accountability in today's connected world. Citizens are increasingly engaged stakeholders, even in more conservative and authoritarian systems, and Arab governments need to recognize this.

The second deficit is an Arab overreliance on foreign powers with respect to national security. Historically, this has been a tradition with a revolving door of foreign players from North Africa to the Levant and down to the Arab Gulf. This has led to a severe weakening of national security capacity of individual Arab states, particularly in dealing with neighboring non-Arab states in nonexistential crises. The evidence is the fact that the efforts to resolve the crises in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, and the efforts to address terrorism in Iraq, are all being led or driven by non-Arab parties. The dependence on foreigners has often superimposed an international and/or regional geopolitical agenda, complicating subregional or domestic concerns and thus making conflict resolution ever more tedious and fueling discontent.

Understandably, but regrettably, the Arab World is repeating its past mistakes by looking for answers to its challenges outside the region. In fact, the essential first step toward effectively responding to its challenges is for Arab countries to frankly address their domestic problems and push for more effective regional cooperation to take better charge of their own futures. Furthermore, Arabs should reflect as a group on relations with their non-Arab neighbors because the Arab identity, while not the exclusive factor in defending them, enhances their national security capacities.

Turkey and Iran, for example, have expanded their regional influence over the past two decades. Serious questions include Turkey's aspirations in Syria, its claims to parts of Mosul in Iraq, and its active support for Islamists in Libya, Egypt, and even

in Somalia. Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Bashar Al-Assad regime in Syria are clear expressions of geopolitical aspirations in the Levant. Its influence in Iraq and aggressive approaches toward Bahrain and Yemen under the cloak of supporting the Shiite constituency are additional bids for geopolitical gain.

Israel is led by an extremely intransigent right wing government. Its policies have eroded any serious opportunity for achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace in light of the failure to establish a Palestinian state.

Beyond the region, the Arab World must undoubtedly look at the emerging role of China as a leading economic power with increasing energy interests within the Middle East and Africa and thus an expected greater political role in the world at large. Arab leaders must also keep an eye on other global players with evolving domestic and foreign policies, such as Japan, India, and the European countries. Of course, Donald Trump's America and Vladimir Putin's Russia are of tremendous interest to the Arab World. Arabs will be engaging both the old and the new in Russia, the United States, and around the world.

Russia in Putin's present term in office has regained its assertiveness and self-confidence. This is evident in Russia's interventions in Ukraine and Crimea as well as in its recent military involvement in the Middle East, particularly in Syria. When I met President Putin as Egypt's foreign minister in 2014, he was concerned about extremism and was already fuming about his country having been treated disrespectfully by the West. It was crystal clear that he would respond. It was no surprise then that he would take the opportunity to fill every vacuum and gradually regain Russia's global role and political position through well-calibrated assertiveness.

In the United States, President Trump did a marvelous job in responding to the silent masses: those who felt marginalized by Washington's politics. His mandate is more concerned with day-to-day domestic issues than foreign policy. Many of his positions are neither traditionally Democratic nor Republican. In fact, several months into his term of office his detailed foreign policy positions remained unclear. His intervention in Syria in many ways contradicts the isolationist tendencies espoused by many in his constituency. Nor can one say how much support his eventual policies will find among the American body politic, or in the national security agencies and departments. Several of his cabinet appointees hold opinions that are not identical to Trump's own expressed views.

We should be cautious about jumping to conclusions, but it is fair to assume, based on Trump's campaign rhetoric and various steps as president, that there will be changes in style and substance. The American president is a non-politician with an overarching desire to be seen as the achiever or closer, and a penchant for sharing information and making grand pronouncements through social media. He is an American leader with very little interest in traditional alliances such as NATO, historic relations with

the Arab Gulf states, or even in shared values (open societies, democracies, international norms). Here is a realist pragmatist in the extreme, one who places American material interests at the forefront and will assess and make decisions with the same mindset of a corporate leader looking at a balance sheet on a quarterly basis. American governance will be a case study in political cost-benefit analysis with a loudspeaker. It will also be a litmus test for the balance of power between the institution of American presidency and the other governmental institutions.

Superpowers and Others

How should Arabs deal with Trump's America? First, they should understand that like any negotiator Trump's main calculation is whether the Arab World can influence the issues that are on the table. He will only include those who can influence events and make decisions. This fact reinforces my argument that Arabs must take greater charge of their interests in the ongoing regional and subregional conflicts in the Middle East. That to me is the paramount point of departure.

In concrete terms, for example, it will be important for Arabs generally, and Egypt and Jordan in particular, to share with Trump a multidisciplinary vision of how to deal with terrorism and extremism in the Middle East that encompasses military and nonmilitary actions and steps. In calling for American support, these two countries as well as the rest of the Arab World will have to concretely define what they can put on the table in national assets such as military or security services and voices like Al-Azhar to address the hearts and minds of the overwhelming majority of centrist, moderate, peaceful, and progressive Sunni Muslims. Other countries in the Arab Gulf will probably be asked to pitch in militarily, through their religious services, and with significant financial resources.

Libya is a theater of conflict where Trump will expect Egypt, a border state, to play a leading role. The breakdown of the Libyan nation-state has fueled the exponential growth of extremist and terrorist activities emanating from the country. And, there have already been some preliminary reports stating that at least two Islamic State cells crossed over from Libya before the church attack. While the United States may provide special forces every now and then, as well as training, logistical support, and some resources, I don't expect to see American boots on the ground in Libya in any substantive fashion. In spite of the recent failed attempt by Egypt to organize a face-to-face meeting between Libyan National Army General Khalifa Haftar and the head of the Government of National Accord Fayez Al-Sarraj, this is the right approach. Libyan authority cannot be exercised if these two parties are at loggerheads. Only extremists gain from the continued divergences. The subsequent Tunisian, Egyptian, and Algerian joint declaration in spirit is also helpful.

As the Libyan political discourse is being set in motion, I would suggest two further steps: establishing an international border control force, drawn from the United Nations, Arab League, and African Union, to prevent cross-border smuggling of weapons, money, and terrorists; and revoking the arms embargo to the legitimate Libyan army to enable the exercise of legitimate authority over Libyan territory.

Most of the world seems to have forgotten the Arab-Israeli conflict. No serious effort is being made to pursue a sovereign contiguous Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. Given his statements during the campaign and afterwards, Trump's commitment to a two-state solution is flimsy, to say the least. Trump's pronouncements have opened the door for rampant Israeli settlement expansion and complicated the issue of Jerusalem. Arabs should convey to Trump that the two-state solution is the only peace option on the table. They should underline that when this is achieved, and not before, a comprehensive regional peace is possible in accordance with the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Arabs must strongly argue that expanding Israeli settlements erodes the prospects for peace, and that such activities and the confiscation of Palestinian land cannot be condoned or left without consequences.

Exaggerated expectations about American-Russian cooperation on Syria have quickly come to naught as traditionalists in both countries' defense systems reasserted their postures that in fact the United States and Russia were each other's greatest adversaries. Nevertheless, I expect and envision room for U.S.-Russian political understanding on Syria. This would if not resolve at least manage the crisis and prevent it from exploding into a more dangerous confrontation between the two parties. It will not be easy, given the number of other stakeholders on the battlefield. There is also the fact that parties aligned with Washington or Moscow don't necessarily accept direction.

It is imperative for Arabs to emphasize that while they all want a new Syria, they are equally committed to the sanctity of Syria's territorial integrity. Respecting the different Syrian constituencies is important but should not result in dividing Syria along ethnic, sectarian, or religious lines. This would be a quick yet dangerous fix, with domino-effect implications for Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Gulf states, Turkey, and Iran.

The war in Yemen began as a domestic conflict. Yet it has morphed into a regional battle, especially given Saudi Arabia's apprehensions about Iran's rising geopolitical influence. The conflict has broader security implications, especially related to maritime transit in the Arabian Sea off East Africa, an area already plagued by piracy. As frustrating as it may seem, the United Nations effort led by Mauritanian diplomat Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed remains the approach with the most potential.

Nearly all of the regional issues facing Arab countries raise the question of addressing Iran's increasingly assertive geopolitical aspirations, which many feel were enhanced by the Iran nuclear deal led by the Barack Obama administration. I believe

that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was not ambitious enough: it should have been part and parcel of creating a nuclear-free zone in the Middle East, or at least a structured step in a larger framework including Israel to ensure the sustainability of nonproliferation in the region.

The deal would also have been improved if it included parallel diplomatic understandings on Iranian activities in the region, including not meddling in the internal affairs of other states. It is generally believed that Trump's America will rigorously enforce rather than abrogate the Iran deal given that it involves a number of other international stakeholders. Arab states will raise their concerns about Iran expecting open ears and serious consideration by the Trump administration. It is important they put forward concrete ideas and suggest confidence-building measures to create an environment conducive to useful, albeit difficult, direct discussions—bilateral or subregional—between some Arab countries and Iran.

Vision for the Future

With the fluidity of the situation, and with no one party able to impose or resolve issues alone, this is a moment to be seized. While there are many scenarios and possibly efforts to disenfranchise and divide the Arab World, this is a chance for Arabs to lay down parameters for a cooperative future.

The Middle East is going through a sociopolitical revolution. After initiating nation building, and in this case region building, Arabs must undertake the challenging and important task of presenting their vision for the future. They need to address questions about national governance, especially in states with complex ethnic compositions. They should establish the basis for neighborly relations, and develop solid foundations for national security capacity domestically and regionally. In doing so, they must be aware of the regional geopolitical realities, and adhere to the acceptable norms and practices in the international community. In essence, Arabs must actively participate and take initiative in determining their own future.