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## Middle Easts, old and new

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Is there really something called THE Middle East? I normally try to avoid using such an empty geographic designation of the area, drawn from days in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when ships leaving London harbor and moving East needed to stop for refueling in the Near East (which meant Malta and Cyprus), the Middle East (understand: Suez and Aden) and then the Far East, (that is Bombay and beyond). But London harbor is no more the center of the world, nor do navies need to stop at coal stations to cross the oceans, and the so-called “Middle East” survived as phrase designating an area with no agreed definition, no clear borders and, worse, no cultural and political content. We inherited the expression only *faute de mieux*.

Nothing can betray the emptiness of that expression as much as the chaotic multiplicity of the area’s definitions. Air France’s “Middle East” is not exactly the one used by British Airways; In the US, The Secretary of State’s “Middle East” is not the one known in the Pentagon’s corridors; and the Foreign Office definition does not fit the one used by the Quai d’Orsay or by the Chinese foreign ministry. Some define it very narrowly as “Israel and its neighborhood”; others, taking note of the Soviet Union’s collapse, include in it all the “Stans” of central Asia and there has been an unending debate on whether Sudan, North Africa and, of course, Iran and Turkey are part of it. Once, asking an American official where the Middle East was, I got this perplexing, though riming, answer: “From Marrakech to Bangladesh”. Nicely put, hardly operational.

This unusual chaos on the very definition of a region, not endured, at least not with the same intensity, by Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa or the Indian subcontinent nor by Europe, is far from being accidental. There is indeed an open war on how to define the Middle East and, implicit in that war, are deep differences on the very parameters for definition. Naturally, each of the players tends to define it in a way that fits his interests. So you have infinity of accumulating, overlapping, competing, Middle Easts vying for your approval. Let me remind you of some of their latest incarnations.

One was introduced by US State Secretary Jim Baker at the opening of the Madrid peace conference in 1991 when he said: “For over four decades the world waited for this week”. That was the time when, building up on the defeat of Iraq in Kuwait, the US was trying to engineer a so called MENA (Middle East and North Africa) area of peace. The concept, modestly and realistically proposed by the indefatigable Baker, was soon to become a full-fledged fantasy in Shimon Peres’ 1993 book on the “new Middle East”, a dream in which all countries in the Middle East would accept Israel’s military supremacy over the area, open their oil riches before her entrepreneurs and pressure the Palestinians to accept a minimalist

demilitarized Bantustan majestically called “the State of Palestine”. A peace loving Middle Eastern new “Homo economicus” was to replace the Middle Eastern Homo sapiens we are used to. Business was to replace war. Regional integration was to put an end to disintegrating conflicts. Normality was to succeed exceptionalism.

Not to be outdone by Uncle Sam, Europe launched its own Euro Med partnership around the same time. For Europeans, The politically neutral Mediterranean Sea was a more reassuring regional framework than the permanently turbulent Middle East. Europe was to replace the US in the driver seat but the objective was still the same: Israel in, Iran out, Turkey on the margin, and a prosperous, pacified Mediterranean Sea as a result with, and this was a top European priority, as few illegal migrants as possible crossing the *Mare Nostrum* from South to North. That was the gist of the so called Barcelona Process, recently, though unconvincingly, revived into a Union for the Mediterranean.

Both the US inspired MENA and the Euro Mediterranean Partnership were closely linked to the ‘peace process’ but that process was to be suddenly halted after Rabin’s assassination in 1996. The two frames were equally inspired by the simple idea that not only is peace good for business but that, in particular, business is good for peace. This irenic idea had undoubtedly demonstrated its validity in many other parts of the world, but it proved to be too simple in an area where general De Gaulle, some 70 years ago, had astutely warned us about the dangers of going to the “*orient compliqué avec des idées simples*”. Hence, for these kinds of cooperation efforts, the quite meager results in the past and probably the quite meager prospects of success in the future.

While this disappointing outcome was becoming visible to everybody, 9/11 terror attacks suddenly and forcefully pushed for the reinvention of the very area from which the perpetrators had come. Looking for some kind of a geographical framing for his Global war on terror (GWOT), where he could put in the same basket Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya or Sudan as potential targets, George W. Bush came with a new trademark, the so-called “Greater Middle East” where most Muslim countries (and a few others) were to be squeezed. Military activism was henceforth to be systematically used in order to produce democracy, based on the idea that a pacified Middle East can only be reshaped through forcible regime change, by bringing down despots and tyrants. That was the time when the official 2002 National Strategy of the US , stated explicitly that free trade was not only an economic principle but a moral one as well, that was the time when the Pentagon was preparing for a war in Iraq while still fighting the Talibans in Afghanistan; that was the time when the words “liberty” and “freedom” were used some fifty times in George W. Bush’s inaugural speech for his second term in office; that was the time when Nathan Sharansky’s view of the Middle East strangely became the official vision of the President of the United States; that was the time when anything Arab and/or Islamic became suspect, when David Aikman was writing that : “the most striking contribution of recent Arab culture to modern global civilization is the airport body search” and Pryce-Jones stating emphatically that “an

Arab democrat is not even an idealization but a contradiction in terms". Only a systematic use of military force applied to the Middle East was supposed to put an end to these abnormalities. That was the time when war was supposed to produce peace in the Middle East.

President Obama explicitly put an end to this aberration. He buried the GWOT as a mental construction and, to a certain extent, as a strategy. He went out of his way in Ankara and then in Cairo to express "respect for Islam" and he offered a dialogue to Iran, the declared next stop station of the democratic crusade. This pause in the external attempts to reshape the Middle East was an implicit recognition that neither the rosy dreams of the 1990's nor the military activism of the present decade had produced the peaceful and prosperous Middle East that had been dreamt by leading external powers. And this failure also led us to shift our attention to how the local powers in the Middle East have been trying to reshape their own region because, though far from being entirely successful in their endeavors, these regional forces have recently gained in drive and impact.

What kind of Middle East are Middle Easterners trying to invent? The least than can be said is that it is so different from one regional player to the next. Take Israel for a start and you will immediately discover a fortress mentality, a nation already hiding behind a nasty wall presumed to protect her from her neighbors while relying on an undisputed military supremacy to deter them. But a fortress is hardly a secure place in an era of rapidly growing proliferation of missiles in Syria, South Lebanon and Gaza or even in distant but feverishly ballistic Iran. Permanent deterrence is worth the effort against hostile states but hardly efficient against groups who have perfected asymmetrical war tactics as we have seen in 2006 during the war with Hizbollah and again at the beginning of this year during the Gaza war. If you add to that the two worrying prospects of the demographic change taking place within mandatory Palestine to the Palestinians' advantage and of an Iran on its way to become a nuclear power, you will easily understand (and some would possibly empathize) with Israel's existential dilemma, a country that has turned her back to the rosy dreams of an Israel-led Middle East and has developed doubts on the US effective protection after the American quagmire in Iraq. The present Middle East is an area Israelis are only annoyed to be part of. They know they cannot escape from it; they also know they have already lost the chance to reshape it to their taste. Here is a player stuck in the Middle East rather than convincingly part of it.

While Israel's Middle East is a foregone story, Iran's Middle East is an evolving one. In the past decade or so, partly thanks to American misjudgments, Tehran has been able to substantially and deftly increase her impact on her regional environment, deepening her 30 year old alliance with Syria, increasing her strong support for non state actors such as Hizbollah or Hamas and of course gradually building up her influence over Iraqi factions. With all these assets, the marginalization of Iran in the Middle East is becoming a joke rather than a serious policy. Who would dare to question that Iran is part of the Middle East or

deny the large role it plays in reshaping it? Who would think that a lasting civil peace in Iraq or in Afghanistan is possible without some Iranian contribution? Tehran wants to have her role with Islamist movements across the region only compared to Moscow's role with communist parties during the heyday of the Bolshevik revolution. The crossing of the nuclear threshold is intended to solidify that role and have the world recognize it.

The obvious risk though is to see Iran overplay her hand and be overtaken by that most dangerous of feelings, the Greek tragedy hubris where you start being a champion and, ignoring your own limitations, you end up being the victim of your own ambitions. Iranian leaders cannot indefinitely rely on the passivity of a particularly vibrant civil society nor can they ignore the sectarian rift their emergence has produced within the Muslim world, pitting a substantial chunk of the Sunni public opinion against their overtly hegemonic drive as a visitor to Riyadh, Amman or Cairo can hear from whoever he meets with. That is why the now open negotiations with the West can be an opportunity for Iran either to consolidate the huge gains registered during the past decade or, on the contrary, to squander those gains in an unsaturated quest for more influence.

Iran needs to understand that her regional emergence has also been substantially helped by Turkey's inward looking politics and Ankara's anchoring in the West thanks to her accession to NATO since 1952 and her quest of membership in the EU, which has been Ankara's policy since the mid sixties. But all this is changing now and at a very rapid tempo. In the past six or seven years, under the AK leadership, Turkey has been rapidly liberating her politics from the armed forces' heavy-handed control, dealing in a more open-minded way with her Kurdish problem, reconciling herself with her traditional, historical cultural identity and developing what is now quite accurately called a "neo-ottomanist" regional policy through which Turkey intends to have her influence extended to all parts of the region that had been once provinces of the Ottoman empire, from the Sandjak in modern-day Serbia to the West, to Iraq, and possibly beyond Basra to the South, let alone all the Turkic "Stans" to the East. For that, reconciliation with Armenia is underway, and, more importantly, an active, multifaceted rapprochement with Russia who provides Turkey with two thirds of her needs in gas, so clear during and after last year war in Georgia.

Not everybody is happy with Turkey reinventing herself as a Middle Eastern regional power that has ceased to feel impeded by imperial legacy. Israel is worried about the future of her 1996 security treaty with Ankara and more generally about her past intimacy with Turkish leaders. The US seems to be more intrigued than challenged by this Turkish new line and my take is that the present US administration is far from condemning it, as long as Turkey remains a faithful NATO member. Arab governments are, as expected, divided on the best way to assess it. The one player who has no right whatsoever to complain about this Turkish reinsertion in the Middle East is Europe. By closing the doors before Ankara's accession to the EU, a number of European leaders have inadvertently helped Turkey find herself. The long view of some is naturally helped by the shortsightedness of others.

Enough for Israel, Iran and Turkey, what about the Arabs? The easiest answer is to depict them as passive witnesses and eventually as virtual victims of this self propelled regionalization. Calls for Arab solidarity sound terribly empty and talk of Arab unity is archeology. The truth is that Arab governments are adjusting egoistically to this new turn in regional politics. Some are in a determined isolationist mood such as Morocco and Tunisia. Others are fantasizing about an escape into Africa as a refuge from the region's headaches such as Libya and to a lesser extent Sudan. Some others, in the Arabian Peninsula or on the Nile river banks, are so obsessed with their succession dilemmas that they can hardly find the time to devise a consistent regional strategy. Iraq and Yemen are in the midst of serious domestic troubles, enough for them to be busy for years to come. Ironically, Syria, emphatically self appointed "beating heart of Arabism" during the past century, is now taking the lead in helping reshape a new Middle East in which Iran and Turkey play a preeminent role. You make call it long view strategy or typical state opportunism; my own guess is that it is a mixture of the two. Lebanon of course is a textbook example of an indefinitely explosive mixture of 21<sup>st</sup> century entrepreneurship and 19<sup>th</sup> century sectarian politics.

The truth is that present day Arab politics betray a situation in which most Arab countries are in the midst of a rather sterile combination of three factors: an acute, quite childish, attachment to state sovereignty, a neo-patrimonial appropriation of power and resources by ruling monarchical as well as republican families and, third, an intense rivalry among dynasties and governments. The three traits are symptoms of an organic state weakness that leads them to be consistently inward looking and leaves them with little or no impact on regional politics. It is no accident as a result, that the Arab League of States is a faithful mirror of this self imposed impotence rather than an efficient remedy to it.

But again, don't discount societies, not even the Arab ones. If you look carefully you will see underneath Arab disunity an incredible amount of cultural integration. Bestsellers in Beirut are often written by Moroccans while Lebanese singers are popular in Cairo and Algiers. Arabs zap among the same 500 satellite TV networks and are often fond of the same religious preachers. On the other hand, Al Qaida is a regional phenomenon as much as most of the anti Qaida tactics. Arab politics has never divided Arabs as much as it does today, but Arab culture, propelled and popularized by the new media, has never integrated them so deeply. One can even say that the Arab political market is utterly disintegrated, the economic market partly integrated and the cultural and ideological market highly integrated, indeed much more integrated than the EU cultural market.

Many Middle Easts are concurrently being built and though it is hard to say which of those is going to ultimately have the upper hand, two conclusions can hardly be disputed. The first is that you cannot build a new Middle East if you have no idea of the old one; and the second is that in order to reshape that part of the world you need to do it with and for Middle Easterners, neither against them nor in their lieu and place. Though quite banal, these two

basic rules have been largely ignored by the West in the recent past, opening the way for non Western powers to get a rapidly growing foothold in the region and, more importantly, giving regional players in the Middle East the chance to try and reshape it by and for themselves.

You certainly can question these regional players' ultimate intentions or present methods in reshaping their own part of the world, but, ladies and gentlemen, you can hardly deny them the right to try and do so.