OCCASIONAL PAPER

No. 26   **Friday, 24 June 2011**

The Middle East:
Unbearable Status Quo versus Unpredictable Changes
P. R. Kumaraswamy

[**Note**: **The article was originally written in 2005 and was published in the Winter 2006 issue of** *Mediterranean Quarterly*. **In the light of the ongoing developments in the Middle East and their relevance, the article is reproduced here with permission**]

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Let us put aside the literary phrase "We are brothers but others are dividing us.". . . We in Iraq and elsewhere are not brothers — there are problems we inherited from our own history and social makeup, which were not helped by oppressive modern regimes. . . . Let's be frank: the Shiites today scare the Sunnis; the Sunnis and the Shiites together scare the Kurds; and the Kurds scare the other minorities. . . . All the ethnic groups of Iraq have the responsibility of putting nation building above their selfish and conflicting calculations.

— Arab writer Hazem Saghieh

Of late, the Middle East, a region of considerable historical, political, economic, religious, cultural, and above all strategic importance, draws international attention primarily for all the wrong reasons. The birthplace of the world's three most prominent and widely followed monotheistic religions is increasingly becoming the worm of all forces of instability, violence, and even evil. Once heralded as the home of human civilization, it is now seen as the host of political illegitimacy, social intolerance, and religious militancy. Even those who benefit from the region are no longer able to escape from the harsher downsides of their associations with the Middle East. Each passing event merely accentuates and sharpens the debates over the internal crisis facing the region.

The context of the relationship between this region and the outside world, however, is neither new nor unprecedented. Left behind by European modernization, the Middle East never recovered from the consequences of the defeat, disintegration, and disappearance of the Ottoman Empire. The defeat of one of the greatest Islamic empires resulted in the formation of numerous and often unviable political entities and marked the end of one of the cornerstones of the Islamic empire: the office of caliphate, which symbolized the unity of the *ummah*. Imperial interests and colonial calculations, with their short-sightedness, prevented the post-Ottoman leaders of the Middle East from modernizing their societies. Political repression, often backed by the West, and economic largesse vis-à-vis their own citizens were considered sufficient by states to maintain reasonable stability and survival. Even periodic violent upheavals and coups did not bring about any fundamental change in the Middle East.

The 11 September attacks in the United States and their aftermath, however, were a reminder that the Middle East could no longer afford to ignore the unbearable status quo, a status quo that symbolizes the absence of political accountability and the lack of transparency. They opened eyes to the need for internal reforms that would address prolonged repression, non-recognition of minorities and the denial of their basic needs, religion-inspired and -sanctioned political violence, and the growing internal tensions emanating from the disparities between public policies and popular expectations. Some of the features of globalization, such as technological achievements and growing population mobility, have significantly eroded the ability of most Middle Eastern rulers to present a sanitized version of internal peace, progress, and prosperity.

Similarly, the outside world could no longer afford to be indifferent toward the upheavals within the Middle East. Popular discontent that often transforms into violent protests not only undermines the region but also affects the peace and development of the rest of the world. Turmoil in the region has global resonance, and most of the outside world has been sucked into the Middle Eastern quagmire. As the Madrid bombings of 2004 and British elections of 2005 indicate, even domestic politics in Europe can be affected by the events in the Middle East. The erstwhile policy of maintaining "correct relations" with the government and ruling elites is no longer a safe strategy. The muted and carefully orchestrated American criticisms of President Hosni Mubarak should not be seen as an aberration or abandonment of erstwhile allies. The United States could not afford to repeat the mistake it made by backing the domestically unpopular shah in the late 1970s.

Likewise, Western imperialism, colonialism, or conspiracy theories are insufficient to explain the problems facing the Middle East. Most of the problems are internal and hence need internal solutions and remedies. Questioning the motives of critics or blaming the real or imaginary other might satisfy the illusionary but does not address the problems facing the region. What then are the major issues confronting the region? At the macro level, the problems are similar, but each state would have to remedy and navigate its course individually and hence in the ensuing analysis I do not seek to present any prescription or road map.

State before Nation

The concept of nation is relatively new to the Middle East and even alien to Islam, which believes in and is committed to the unity of believers, or *ummah*. In trying to emulate the European concept of nation, for long the post-Ottoman states lacked a cohesive national identity. Not only were the territorial boundaries of these states arbitrary and artificial, they also undermined regional homogeneity. Either different ethnic or national groups were clubbed together under one political entity (modern Iraq) or groups of people were dispersed into different states (Kurds). Under such circumstances, constructing a new territory-based national identity that would reflect and ensure the identity and loyalty of the entire population has been a daunting task that is yet to reach a critical state in the region.

As a result, not only do most Middle Eastern states lack ethnic/national cohesion, they also lack some of the significant attributes of a nation. The parcelling of erstwhile *ummah* into different small political units raises questions over the legitimacy of these states as well their rulers. Indeed, some of the new states were created explicitly to serve or further prevailing imperial interests (for example, Jordan and Lebanon). Hence the formation of these new political realities was often accompanied by imposed leadership from outside (Britain, for example, installed the son of Sharief Hussein of Mecca as the king of Iraq in 1921.)

Under such circumstances, the new states were forced to create a national identity that often became coterminous with the ruling family or dynasty. In striving for an artificial homogeneity, most states were forced to view any opposition to the ruling ideology, regime, or family as a divisive, counterproductive, unpatriotic act or an externally sponsored conspiracy.

Even states that rely on historical experience, such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Israel, are unable to resolve this problem and evolve a comprehensive national identity that would be shared by their diverse population. Israel's self-portrayal as the national home of the Jewish people is the culmination of the long process of Diaspora. But this identity also inhibits its Arab citizens from identifying themselves with the core Jewish-Israeli identity and explicitly Jewish symbols of Israel such as the national anthem, flag, and festivals. The same can be said about the Kurds in Turkey, the non-Shia population in Iran, and the Shias of Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

The popularity of transnational identities such as pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism are largely a reflection of the failure of the emergence of national identity. This is a reversal of the European experience. Pan-European identity emerged only after prolonged struggle for national identity and when it was painfully clear how costly nationalism was. By willingly abandoning their distinct but hard-earned national identities, the European states are now in the process of seeking a supranational or transnational common European identity. The countries of the Middle East, on the contrary, aspired for a transnational or transcending identity because they were unable to define their individual

national identities. While being an Arab and a Muslim might differentiate a Middle Eastern country from the outside world, it was insufficient to differentiate one Middle Eastern country from another.

Democracy

The absence of democracy is near universal in the Middle East, and with the exceptions of Israel and Turkey, the entire region suffers from the absence of popular and accountable regimes. Multiparty elections in Egypt and Jordan are still in their infancy. Until recently, denial of the franchise to women undermined the democratic experiments in places like Kuwait. While it is too early to pass any definitive judgment on the new Iraq, it is essential to recognize that under President Saddam Hussein Iraqi women were freer than their counterparts in Saudi Arabia. In trying to prevent the Islamist takeover of the country, the military intervention pushed back democracy in Algeria.

For long the republic regimes like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya had suppressed dissent and institutionalized one-party rule. In the case of Lebanon, the power distribution continues to be based on the 1932 census and hence does not reflect the will of the people. Periodic elections in various parts of the Middle East are nothing more than a farce, especially when the president secures 98 percent of the vote.

Lively domestic debate likewise would not make the Iranian situation any better. The veto power bestowed upon the unelected guardian council stifles the democratic process. The conservative clerics not only impeded the Mohamed Khatami– led reformists from pursuing their agenda but have also undermined the democratic transformation of their country. The Saudi *Majlis*, despite its diverse composition and membership, still is a nominated body and a poor substitute for elected popular assemblies. The long process of decolonization freed the Middle East from the colonial outsiders, but the people of the Middle East are yet to free themselves from the yoke of oppressive, undemocratic, and often unaccountable regimes. In the words of Larry Diamond:

> In every region of the world — except for one — at least a third of the states are democracies. Thirty of the thirty-three states in Latin America and the Caribbean are democracies, and about half of them are now fairly liberal in terms of their levels of freedom. Two-thirds of the former communist countries, half of the Asian states, and even about two-fifths of the African states are now democracies. Only in the Middle East is democracy virtually absent. In fact, among the sixteen Arab countries, there is not a single democracy and, with the exception of Lebanon, there never has been.[1]

As a result, any outside power would be extremely wary of identifying itself with the ruling regimes. Going by the examples of the shah of Iran and the Cold War warriors of

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[1] Larry Diamond, "Universal Democracy?" **Policy Review**, no. 119 (June–July 2003), www.policyreview.org/jun03/diamond.html

Eastern Europe such as Nicolai Ceausescu, proximity to autocratic regimes is often a strategic liability.

The absence of democracy at times leads to a misleading conclusion that democracy and Islam, the official religion in most of the countries of the Middle East, are inherently incompatible and contradictory. The fallacy of this argument is obvious if one looks at the examples of Turkey and Bangladesh. The Palestinians, despite being under occupation, have greater democracy than their nominally "free" Arab brethren. As Alfred Stepan candidly remarked, the absence of democracy appears more to be an Arab disease than an Islamic curse. [2]

It is often ignored that, in addition to providing accountability and ensuring transparency of governance, democracy is a guarantee and defence against undue external pressures and compulsions. The Turkish experience during the Anglo-American war against Iraq amplifies this point. Domestic opposition, especially in the parliament, inhibited Ankara from allowing the allied forces to operate from Turkish soil or open a second front against Iraq.[3] One could argue that the Turkish government was able to brandish domestic opposition to enhance its manoeuvrability vis-à-vis Washington. Israel used similar tactics to preclude more than one front in the peace process. This was in contrast to the behaviour of Riyadh; its public criticisms of the US-led invasion of Iraq were accompanied by its allowing bombing raids from the American bases in Saudi Arabia.

The two declared democracies, Israel and Turkey, have their own share of problems in defending their democratic credentials. More than half a century after its establishment, Israel is yet to resolve the fundamental contractions between its dual national identities: Israel is a Jewish and democratic state. Likewise, by periodically subverting the civilian authority and usurping powers, the military is hampering Turkey's progress toward democracy.

Legitimacy and Accountability

The issue of political legitimacy continues to haunt most of the Middle Eastern countries. The situations in Israel and Turkey, the two democracies in the region, are challenged by many on account on the marginalization of their minority populations, namely, Arabs and Kurds, respectively. Others face different kinds of challenges. The erstwhile notion of rulers combining spiritual and temporal powers is increasingly questioned. The legitimacy that the Moroccan and Jordanian monarchs enjoyed through their lineage to Prophet Mohammed is less available to the present rulers, namely Mohamed VI and Abdullah II, respectively. In the words of Abdeslam M. Maghraoui, Moroccans increasingly see their monarch as "a temporal leader rather than

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[2] For an interesting discussion, see Alfred Stepan and Graeme B. Robertson, "An 'Arab' More Than 'Muslim' Electoral Gap," *Journal of Democracy*, 14, no. 3 (2003): 30 – 44.

[3] Their disappointment over unfulfilled expectations during the 1991 Iraq war also was a contributing factor.

the embodiment of hereditary divine holiness or sacred kingship."[4] The same can be said about Jordan; the lineage of the Qureshi tribe as a means of legitimacy is increasingly losing its relevance and is no longer seen to embody a divine right to rule.[5] If looked at in the context of heredity, the House of Saud, which proclaims itself as the Custodian of the Two Holy Places, does not have the pedigree of the Qureshi tribe of the Prophet Mohammed.

The question of succession is becoming increasingly controversial and at times problematic. The arrival of the next generation of leaders in Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, and Syria in recent years was not without its share of controversies. Even though his eldest son Abdullah had succeeded King Hussein of Jordan in February 1999, the sudden and abrupt removal of Crown Prince Hassan from the line of succession days before the death of Hussein underscored the internal tensions between the siblings. Likewise, in November 2004, King Abdullah II removed his half-brother Hamzah who was designated as the crown prince by their father.[6] Similarly, in June 1995 Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani took over the reins of Qatar after deposing his father.

Republican regimes operate somewhat differently. Through careful purging of potential successors and challengers, they are also slowly inducing dynastic rulers. The smooth succession of Bashar al-Assad in Syria after the death of his father has ushered in a new phenomenon of "republican monarch." Until his deposition by the allied forces, Saddam Hussein's sons played a pivotal role in Iraqi politics and the same can be said about Gamal Mubarak, who has emerged as a major player in the ruling party and a possible successor to the aging Egyptian leader.[7] Libyan leader Qaddafi is not lagging behind either, and his son Saif al-Islam has been leading some of the important foreign policy negotiations with the outside world, especially with Europe.

The general change sweeping the region is, however, absent in Saudi Arabia. Crown Prince Abdullah, the de facto ruler, is a septuagenarian. Unless there are fundamental changes in the line of succession, the kingdom would continue to be ruled by the sons of the founder King Abdul Aziz al-Saud (1876 to 1952). The older generation, which appears to enjoy widespread support, is seen by others as inadequate to handle growing and complex problems facing the kingdom.[8] There are suggestions that following the death of ailing King Fahd, the succession could skip a generation and look for an able and competent prince among the great-grandsons of the founder. In providing a broad

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[4] Abdeslam M. Maghraoui, "Monarchy and Political Reform in Morocco," **Journal of Democracy**, 12, no. 1 (2001): 74.

[5] The Hashemite Kingdom still underscores the importance of this lineage. For the family tree of the Hashemites, see www.kinghussein.gov.jo/tree-english.html.

[6] Even though King Abdullah had not designated anyone as crown prince, there are suggestions that he was planning to name his son Hussein (born 1994) for this position and hence his successor. See "Jordan Crown Prince Loses Title," **BBC News**, 29 November 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4050231.stm.

[7] Jon B. Alterman, "Egypt: Stable, but for How Long?" **The Washington Quarterly,** 23, no. 4 (2000):107 – 18.

[8] For a recent discussion on the succession question, see Joseph A Kechichian, **Succession in Saudi Arabia**, (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

choice of candidates, such an expansion would also unleash intense rivalries among hundreds of young and potential contenders.

Moreover, some of the regimes represent only a section of the population, often a minority group, to the detriment of the majority. For example, the Alawites, who constitute about 16 percent of the population, control Syria, and the people of Palestinian origin, who constitute nearly half the population of Jordan, are largely excluded from the political process in Jordan. As a result, most of the regimes come under increasing pressures to establish their credentials. Wherever possible, such challenges are expressed through the democratic process. Such warnings compel the rulers to be accommodating toward the popular sentiment and expand their political power bases. The electoral victories of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan in June 2003 and the Islamists in Turkey in November 2002 should be seen in this context. The referendum in Bahrain in February 2001, the 2003 Kuwait elections, and the establishment of nominated legislative bodies in Saudi Arabia are also the result of pressures from below.

At the same time, given the limited space available for dissent, most of the protests against the ruling regimes normally come from underground movements or officially proscribed opposition groups. As witnessed in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, these protests often take violent forms and raise doubts about stability and governance. As highlighted by Osama bin Laden, deviation of the rulers from the Islamic path often becomes the rallying point for antigovernment sentiments in these countries.[9]

Minorities

Like the rest of the world, the Middle East is heterogeneous and comprises numerous ethnic, national, religious, and linguistic societies, groups, and sects. A number of tensions and conflict situations in the region could be attributed directly to the treatment or mistreatment of the minority population. The desire of most states to present an artificial homogenous national identity could not hide their multiethnic facets.

The question of minorities and their rights continues to be controversial in the region. Most of the states are still not prepared to accept and recognize the presence of minorities who differ from the majority population in terms of their religious, ethnic, cultural, or linguistic identities. Debates concerning Middle Eastern minorities have been highly politicized and at times are even poisoned. At the same time, none could ignore the plights of the Kurds, Copts, or minority Shias in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The absence of democracy is a major contributing factor to the situation. A far more serious drawback lies in the abandonment of the liberal tradition ushered in by the Ottoman Empire. Instead of progressing on the millet system that provided for internal autonomy to various religious groups, most of the post-Ottoman states have viewed minorities with suspicion

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[9] Most of the domestic criticisms in Saudi Arabia, for example, revolve around the "un-Islamic" character of the House of Saud. For a broader and detailed discussion, see Mamoun Fandy, *Saudi Arabia and the Politics of Dissent*, (London: Macmillan, 1999).

and systematically marginalized them politically, economically, and culturally.[10] Likewise, the traditional Islamic paradigm of *dhimmi* is both insufficient and inadequate to address the plight of minorities, especially the ethnic minorities and heterodox Islamic sects.[11]

The debate on minorities is often dismissed by Middle Easterners as an external conspiracy aimed at undermining the very existence of the state and diminishing its Arab-Islamic identity. It is obvious that substantial gaps exist between the official position vis-à-vis minorities and the objective reality. Even non-Arab states such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey could not claim unblemished records. The Islamic Republic of Iran does not recognize Baha'is as minorities and hence does not bestow upon them the limited privileges available to other recognized minorities, such as Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians. Likewise, both Israel and Turkey are a long way toward realizing multiculturalism and guaranteeing group rights to the minority communities.

Crisis within Islam

The prolonged crisis within Islam has worsened following the 11 September attacks. The century-old debate over modernization and Westernization was replaced by a new debate over the peaceful or violent nature of Islam. Religious violence is no stranger to humanity, and the sectarian violence in Southern Asia, Northern Ireland, Indonesia, and various other parts of the world is rooted in the pursuit of political agendas through violence by Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, and Jewish groups. In the Middle East, however, the propensity of various militant groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and al Qaeda to implore and justify the premeditated killing of non-combatant civilians in the name of Islam has become widespread. The ideological justification these groups seek in religious scriptures for the killing of the perceived enemies of Islam is not only unprecedented but has inspired many radical Islamic movements spread around the world.

If the hijackings in previous years by various Palestinian radical groups made the Middle East synonymous with international terrorism, the most recent violence perpetrated by these groups has resulted in Islam being portrayed by its adversaries as synonymous with terrorism. The need to distinguish between legitimate political grievance vis-à-vis the West and the wan-ton killing of civilians has become more necessary today than at any time in the past. Not every act of violence is an act of terrorism, and likewise not every act of terror is Islamic.

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[10] See, among others, Albert H. Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); Leonard Binder, ed. *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics in the Middle East*,(Gainesville, Fla: University Press of Florida, 1999); and Moshe Mao'z, *Middle Eastern Minorities: Between Integration and Conflict*,(Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1999).

[11] Under this arrangement traditionally, Islam grants recognition and protection to the Jews and Christians who have revealed sacred text.

The failure of monarchical as well as republican regimes to modernize their societies facilitated the resurgence of religious conservatism in different parts of the Middle East. Deprived of other avenues, people have turned to mosques and the pulpits as the sole avenues for dissent and Islamists as the vanguard of opposition. It is no coincidence that the main opposition in countries as diverse as Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, and Saudi Arabia comes from the Islamists. Given this trend, it would be safe to conclude that the Islamists would be the principal beneficiary of any free and fair election in any part of the Middle East today.

At the same time, as highlighted by the Iranian example, the slogan of Islam was insufficient to address the needs of a modern society. None of the principal movements have been able to identify a viable Islamic alternative to the current Middle East situation. Either they are too vague or too frightening for others who disagree with such a narrow worldview. There is not only limited place for dissent but very often no role for the nonbeliever.

Terrorism

The Middle East continues to suffer from various forms of political violence, including terrorism. Even if one disagrees with the political motives, it is difficult to ignore the culpability of some of the Middle Eastern states in international terrorism. Much of the terrorist activity in the region is directly or indirectly linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Individual groups as well as states have justified and sought to legitimize terrorism as a means of helping the Palestinian brethren. Terrorist attacks against Israel, American targets in the Persian Gulf, and in such places as Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey are often linked to the widespread discontent over the plight of the Palestinians. At the same time, it is often ignored that the Arab-Israeli conflict does not play any role in the terrorist activities in Algeria or Egypt. In these countries as well as in the Persian Gulf, terrorism has become an instrument for those individuals and groups opposed to the regime in power. The absence of political space for dissent is a contributing factor in internal violence, often spearheaded by radical groups.

At a larger level, a number of Middle East states have also contributed to the growth of terrorism. Israel, for example, could not escape from the consequence of its assassination policy whereby it killed suspected militant leaders in the occupied territories as well as in Cyprus, Jordan, and Lebanon. And despite prolonged denials, both Syria and Libya were eventually forced to admit their past links to international terrorism. Damascus was forced to expel PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) leader Abdullah Ocalan in April 1998, and Tripoli was forced to admit to its role in the Lockerbie bombing. Indeed, days after the allied capture of Baghdad, Syria closed down the offices of Hamas and other radical Palestinian groups. Following the 11 September attacks, the passive role played by the

ruling Saudi family in promoting extremist Islamic groups in different parts of the world has come under virulent American scrutiny and criticism.[12]

Renewed international debate on terrorism has forced a number of countries to re-evaluate the erstwhile practice of justifying terrorist activities as "liberation movements." Suicide terrorism, for example, no longer enjoys the universal endorsement it once had in the Islamic countries. Inaugurating the meeting of the foreign ministers of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) in April 2002, Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohammad was blunt: "Groups or governments which support attacks on civilians must be regarded as terrorists (emphasis added), irrespective of the justification of the operations carried out, irrespective of the nobility of the struggle."[13] Even though the countries of the Middle East prevented this being the formal position of the OIC, the message was loud and clear: in the post − 11 September world, suicide bombings lost their universal endorsement even in the Islamic world.

On moral as well as political considerations, a number of leading Palestinians have begun questioning suicide attacks against Israel.[14] Indeed, it was this shifting international as well as local opinion that eventually enabled President Mahmud Abbas to arrange a cease-fire vis-à-vis Israel following his January 2005 elections. The glorification of suicide bombers as martyrs has come under closer scrutiny, and the response of ordinary Turkish citizens to the Istanbul bombings in November 2003 illustrated the need to distinguish between actions and justifications. Safik Elaltuntas, the grieving father of one of the synagogue suicide bombers, told the Turkish media,

> We are a respectful family who love our nation, flag, and the Koran. . . . But we cannot understand why this child had done the thing he had done. . . . First, let us meet with the chief rabbi of our Jewish brothers. Let me hug him. Let me kiss his hands and flowing robe. Let me apologize in the name of my son and offer my condolences for the deaths. . . . We will be damned if we do not reconcile with them.[15]

In short, while the family members cannot disown the suicide bombers, they can disassociate themselves from their actions.

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[12] The kingdom's involvement in the 11 September attacks remains the major irritant in US-Saudi relations and is believed to be the subject of the classified portion of a joint congressional inquiry in the United States.

[13] The final declaration of the meeting can be found at www.oic-oci.org/english/fm/11_extraordinary/declaration.htm.

[14] For example, see Abu-Mazen (Mahmud Abbas), "Call for a Halt to Militarization of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in the November 2002 Meeting of Heads of Gaza Popular Committees," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32, no. 2 (2003): 74 – 8. In the light of growing international criticism and disapproval, on 20 June 2002 more than fifty Palestinian intellectuals came out with a public advertisement against suicide bombing.

[15] Quoted in Thomas Friedman, "War of Ideas, Part 2," *The New York Times*, 11 January 2004. I am grateful to D. Shyam Babu for guiding me to this subtle distinction.

Iraqi Quagmire

Having gone in without the semblance of an exit strategy, it is obvious that the United States will be haunted by the Iraqi quagmire for a long time. If the Israeli experience in Lebanon is an indication, the United States will not be able to get out of Iraq easily. The ethno-national composition of Iraq requires a strong, though not necessarily brutal, central leadership, but identifying a leader acceptable to the diverse population is extremely difficult.

At the same time, the Iraqi invasion underscored the irrelevance of regional players and the limited influence wielded by countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Their public disapproval and limited logistical support did not hamper the American strategic desire to remove Saddam Hussein. By establishing a visible hegemony in the region, the Bush administration seeks to intimidate not only its adversaries such as Iran, Syria, and Libya but also its traditional friends like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The Libyan willingness to abandon its erstwhile nuclear program, the Syrian desire to act against militant Palestinian groups based in Damascus, and Assad's desire to reactivate the peace process with Israel should be seen within the rubric of the American military presence in Iraq. Tehran's desire to resolve the dispute over its nuclear program could also be attributed to the American presence in its neighbourhood, namely, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

The American ability and determination to endorse a ruthless regime at one time and to remove the same at another for unconvincing reasons have far-reaching implications for the Middle East. Whether legal or politically sensible, the Bush administration demonstrated its determination and ability to remove an "unfriendly" regime. Even though Saddam's ruthlessness was not the reason for the move, it was a sufficient rationale for the domestic American population. But many would be wary of this or any future American administration pursuing a similar path vis-à-vis other "friends" in the Middle East.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict continues to elude any comprehensive resolution, and every new peace initiative invariably meets with the same fate: interesting and imaginative but unviable. The pragmatic Mahmud Abbas, who succeeded Palestine Liberation Organization chairman Yasser Arafat, has a daunting task before him. By focusing exclusively on terrorism, Israel has squandered the gains of the peace process and could be said to be moving away from the prospects of securing its legitimacy and acceptance by its neighbours. Even if it were implemented satisfactorily, it is far from certain whether Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Gaza withdrawal plan is the first step toward eventual and complete Israeli disengagement from Palestine. The Israeli Right is yet to reconcile itself to the prospect of a sovereign Palestinian entity west of the River Jordan and has contributed to growing Israeli isolation in Europe and impatience in the United States. Notwithstanding temporary diversions and the Iran-Iraq war, Kuwait

crisis, British-American invasion of Iraq, or Lebanese-Syrian crisis, the resolution of the Palestinian conflict will be the central component to peace in the Middle East.

The prolongation of the conflict and the failure of the Oslo process contributed immensely to the rise of Israeli-Palestinian violence. With each side expecting substantial and even fundamental concessions from the other, comprehensive settlement still remains a distant dream. The violence has also undermined the Palestinian leadership. By challenging the Palestinian National Authority, Hamas and its allies have eroded the political gains of the peace process. The suicide bombings not only instilled a sense of fear among ordinary Israelis but also destroyed the hard-won status of the Palestinian leaders, including Arafat. The unfulfilled Palestinian aspirations and the popular resonance of their plight among the Arab masses pose a threat to the unresponsive Arab leadership.

For its part, the Palestinian leadership continues to rely on outside support and is yet to come to terms with the diminishing usefulness of the Palestinian issue in inter-Arab and regional politics. The prolongation of the conflict is perhaps causing fatigue both in the Middle East and elsewhere. Its short-sighted policy during the Kuwait crisis enormously harmed the Palestinian cause. Within days after Arafat's death, Abbas sought to mitigate the situation by offering a public and unconditional apology to the Kuwaiti ruler over the stand taken by the Palestinian leadership in 1991.

In a way, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has proved to be disastrous for the Arab masses. It has given a false sense of unity insofar as Israel was concerned but distracted them from addressing more important issues such as their national identity, domestic unity, internal reforms, and so forth. If one excludes the conflict, the Arab states do not seem to have any common agenda that would bind them together. Through their excessive focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Arab rulers managed to divert attention from immediate domestic issues. Therefore, one could go to the extent of arguing that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a sine qua non for any forward movement within the Arab world.

Institutional Failures

Shared historical, ethnic, cultural, and to a less extent religious backgrounds have not brought about regional unity or cohesion among the Arab states. In the heyday of President Gamal Abdul Nasser the tussle was between conservative monarchs and revolutionary regimes. This soon deteriorated into a power struggle between pro-American and anti-American regimes. The same scenario is being played out today. Unlike in the past, however, the anti-American regimes are deprived of the patronage of countervailing Soviet sup-port. Even though regional cold war among the principal players has diminished considerably, the countries of the Middle East are unable to adopt a common position on vital issues that concern them.

This is more acutely exhibited by the diminishing importance and utility of regional organizations such as the Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council, or the much larger

Organization of the Islamic Conference. These organizations continue to falter in resolving disputes and conflicts among member states as well as with the outside region. The disunity and conflicting interests of the rulers have often prolonged conflict, thereby facilitating external intervention. Such institutional failures were primarily responsible for the prolongation of the Iran-Iraq war, the Kuwait crisis, and the British-American invasion of Iraq. Their inability to assess the international ramifications, especially the possible American response, largely contributed to the marginalization of these regional institutions. As a result, important Middle East developments, in both war and peace, often take place without any reference, let alone input from them. As with the Madrid Conference of 1991, the Arab League and the OIC are marginalized not only in the Iraqi war but also in the post-war reconstruction. Even the Palestinian issue no longer offers an occasion for Arab unity, and during the last three years of his life, Arafat was confined to his Ramallah compound by the Israeli army without any meaningful Arab effort to free him. Under such a situation, what is the prognosis?

Quo Vadis, Middle East

Though the movement is tentative, one can discern that the Middle East is moving away from the status quo. There are small and not highly visible movements; but they indicate a trend. It is, however, undeniable that the era of controlled political culture is truly over in the Middle East. Kuwaiti women eventually secured their long-denied franchise, and this is bound to influence the behaviour of the Saudis. In Egypt, after five successive "elections," Mubarak was forced to admit multiple candidates for the presidential elections. After nearly two decades, Lebanon went to the polls without the Syrian presence, and the Israeli occupation did not diminish the democratic spirit of the Palestinians. Even the Baathists in Syria have recognized that their survival rests on reforms.

Political violence is still alive but it is also becoming politically costlier. The assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik al-Hariri resulted in the inglorious Syrian pullout. Suicide attacks by Hamas merely undermined the Palestinian cause and exposed them to international criticisms. Partly due to European compulsions, Turkey is slowly recognizing the distinct Kurdish identity.

Such changes, however, may be painfully slow, inadequate, or even cosmetic. It might even appear to be too little too late. Yet it is essential to recognize the changes that are taking place in the Middle East. The rulers are beginning to recognize the need to secure legitimacy not just from the West but most importantly from their own constituencies. Some of their accommodative experiments might succeed and others may not.

In the final analysis, a democratic Middle East may result in the victory of the Islamists and might even prove to be dangerous for the United States. It is always easier to influence and control a single individual than to deal with a leader answerable to an unruly parliament with diverse viewpoints. Given recent history, the popularity of any leader in a democratic environment in the Middle East would be dependent on the extent of his or her anti-American rhetoric.

But each society in the Middle East will have to find its own direction. It is often forgotten that even after World War II the enfranchisement of women was still alien to some of the countries of the Western world. Democracy in France was preceded by a bloody revolution. The present American model of checks and balances was the result of prolonged experimentation with human as well as institutional imperfections. The Middle East should be no exception to the trend of regions and countries determining their own rates of change. The outside world could serve better by its non-interference. At times, even a friendly intervention might result in unwanted consequences. Silence, thus, can indeed be golden if the Middle East is to change its status quo.

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Prof. P R Kumaraswamy is the Honorary Director of MEI@ND

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