New Features of an Old Middle East

In pursuit of regional stability, give the nation state a chance

By Volker Perthes

In the Middle East today, the existence and credibility of functioning nation states provides a prerequisite framework for brokering a lasting, multilateral peace deal in the region. Despite the rise of religious sentiment and non-state transnational actors across the region, many of the secular Arab leaderships understand this reality well. Internationally organized, multilateral negotiations can also function at the subregional level, detaching the bigger issues around the Israeli-Arab conflict, for example, from the problems of security in the Gulf region.

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The renewed military conflict between Israel and the Palestinians and the Israeli-Lebanese war have reminded us that a "new" Middle East will not emerge until there is a comprehensive settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Western policymakers would therefore be well-advised to come up with new plans for an internationally sponsored, multilateral process that involves all of the parties with an immediate stake in the conflict—primarily Israel, the PLO and the Palestinian Authority (PA), Lebanon and Syria. Western negotiators must also pay more attention to recent political and ideological developments that will influence efforts to stabilize the region. Most importantly, these developments include a shift toward unilateralism in the Arab-Israeli context, a surge of confessionalism that weakens the nation state in the wider Middle East, and a preparedness to think about security in subregional frameworks.

The Unilateral Mode

To start with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is remarkable to what extent unilateralism has emerged as the prevalent modus operandi since the breakdown of negotiations in 2000. "Having no partner" has become a convenient alibi. With Yassir Arafat in charge, so the argument went, there was no partner for Israel on the Palestinian side;

the nice guy Abu Mazin is much too weak to be a partner; Hamas cannot be one until it recognizes Israel. The attitude is convenient for both sides: Israelis need not ask whether their own policies have weakened potential partners and Hamas radicals can argue that Israel will not talk to them anyway. So why should they change?

Academics may find it worth examining whether a series of constructive unilateral steps, such as Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza strip in 2005 or the equally unilateral ceasefire that Hamas maintained for about a year, could lead to a sustainable situation or even allow a de facto two-state solution. In other words, one state and a quasi-state living side by side, not as peacefully as the international community would like, but at least without waging war. At the moment, these are mere hopes. With Israel and Palestine, we are witnessing two democracies—or at least one established democracy and a democratically elected government—at war. We may well see the total disintegration of the PA. Another possible scenario is the occurrence of the first Arab military coup under the auspices of the Western democracy agenda for the "broader Middle East." If Palestinian security officers were to remove the elected Hamas-led government, arguing that this was the only way to prevent fur-

ther chaos, they would likely claim they were acting in agreement with Europe and the United States.

Western and particularly European policy toward the Palestinian entity and the Hamas government has been counterproductive—in terms of Europe's and the entire Quartet's goals of institution building in the Palestinian entity, restarting a political process between Israelis and Palestinians, and strengthening democratic tendencies in the region at large. Policymakers have to ask about the long-term consequences of the Western approach to the Hamas government, not least for Europe's legitimacy in the region. Arab public opinion perceives European policies toward Hamas, the cutting of the PA's budgetary support and the decision to suspend talks with representatives of the PA, and EU policy toward Iran (even though it is very different from that of the United States) as all being part of one package. These policies are seen as a generally unfriendly attempt by Western states to deny Muslims and Muslim states their legitimate interests. In this context, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has been able to gain popularity in the Arab world exactly because he is perceived as standing up to the West. Only Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has been able to attract more mass appeal in the region.

Pluralistic Authoritarianism

Etatist pan-Arab nationalism has been fatally wounded with the fall of the Baathist regime in Baghdad and the forced withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon. At the same time, virtually all of the regimes in the Arab world have discovered that they have to open up to their citizens. A form of liberalized autocracy or pluralistic authoritarianism could prove to be a sustainable mode of governance in many coun-

tries of the region. Elections, even if sometimes manipulated, have become a common feature across the region—an element of governance that even the most authoritarian regimes no longer want to do without. There is a paradox, though, which should not be overlooked: most of these elections are staged in order to prevent substantive change. In the rare cases in which elections bring about political change, it is generally in favor of some variant of political Islam, with the winners—witness Iran and Palestine—risking isolation at the hands of the Western powers. This does not, needless to say, lend credibility to the Western "democracy campaign." Liberals and even liberal Islamists who may be close to the heart of Western observers are often, in their own countries, denounced as agents of the West.

While Islamist victories can be explained, partly at least, by the failures of the so-called "secular" Arab regimes, one should be cautious in claiming that Arab states have generally lost their legitimacy. Rather, some regimes have lost out, but not all of them. Few Emiratis, Kuwaitis, Lebanese or Moroccans, and only a minority of Egyptians or Saudis, would call their respective regime illegitimate. The problem is rather that most states are ineffective; they are weak and fail to provide basic goods to their citizens, such as security and welfare. One question for Western policymakers, therefore, is whether and how the West could refocus its policies toward these states. Arguably, external actors can do more for the peoples of the region and for regional stability by concentrating on building effective institutions, the rule of law and guaranteeing human rights, rather than with exalted calls for freedom and quick elections. Better governance and stable institutions, after all, will help to cre-

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ate an environment in which middle classes, a necessary ingredient for liberal democracy, can emerge and grow.

Such state-building support may also be necessary both to help states reclaim a monopoly of legitimate power and to bring regional politics back into the hands of nation states. Non-state actors have always played a role in the Middle East, for the very reason that they lacked a state of their own. The prime example is the PLO. Hezbollah, in contrast, does not seek to establish a state. Rather it claims that, as a Lebanese party, it can speak for Lebanon's Shiites, "Muslims" at large, and for all Lebanese. It claims that it has a religious mandate, not just an electoral one, and that it can even declare war on another state. This brought about a rather odd, tripartite confrontation in which Hezbollah waged war on Israel, Israel waged war on Lebanon, and the democratically elected Lebanese government called for international help to end the fighting and reestablish its sovereignty.

Other states in the region could soon face similar challenges. Ethnonationalistic or confessionalist narratives are gaining in regional discourses. Policymakers who speak of a "Shiite axis," "Sunni resistance" or "Shiite oil" are fueling sectarian animosities and thus undermining the institutional bases of their own power. They do so in an atmosphere that is rife with confessionalist tensions. In discussions with intellectuals and policymakers in Damascus and Amman, Riyadh and Tehran, confessionalist stereotypes have considerable currency. It is no longer unusual to hear well-educated Jordanians, Syrians or Kuwaiti Sunnis talk about the "Shiite-US" alliance or even an "American-Israeli-Shiite" conspiracy against Lebanon, Iraq and the Arab world at

large. The climate is one of a regional civil war between Sunnis and Shiites. "One can smell it," a liberal Syrian observer told me. "And one cannot do anything about it," added another, "It's too strong."

Western policymakers will have to think hard about how their naturally state-centred foreign policies will confront such transnational phenomena, without themselves actually contributing to the destabilization of the regional state system. It would be unwise to play on ethnic differences or encourage ethno-nationalistic and confessionalist tensions to punish or weaken unfriendly regimes. On the contrary, we may need serious efforts to rescue the nation state in the Middle East. Europe and the United States have a vital interest that the nation state remains the main frame of reference for politics in the Middle East. Ethnic and confessionalist tensions cannot be controlled, as so many Lebanese, Iraqis, or Sudanese have experienced in the past or at present. They will likely weaken states more than put regimes under pressure to change. And one cannot establish reliable economic or political partnerships, agree upon common measures in the fight against terror, human trafficking or illegal drugs trade, let alone build regional security structures with weak and fragmented states. Israel can make peace with nation states, but it will not be able to do so with transnational religious or sectarian movements. A diminishing role of the nation state may seem like an appealing option to Europeans or others who ponder the benefits of post-Westphalian, supranational integration and sovereignty. In the current Middle Eastern context, however, any decline of the nation state as the main framework of politics will not lead to regional integration, but rather to pre-Westphalian modes of organization and conflict.

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Iraq, Iran and Subregional Security

So far, the main stage for regional confessionalist conflict is Iraq, where all of the forces of sectarianism and ethno-nationalism are at work. Some regional observers speak of an Iranian-Saudi/Shiite-Sunni war of proxies. Paradoxically, again, Iraqis seem to embrace democracy, at least in terms of elections and voting, but the result is the emergence of sectarian democracy and a low-intensity civil war.

Arguably, only the announcement of a deadline for US troop withdrawal will make the Iraqis aware of the fact that they will eventually have to sort out things with one another—in a way that either preserves their state or destroys it. At the same time, it seems necessary to involve the neighboring states—all of Iraq's neighbors—in a multilateral attempt to develop a regional security framework. Such a framework would give those neighbors guarantees for their own national security, as well as against attempts at regime change from abroad, thus increasing their interest in cooperation. What happens in Iraq has enormous regional repercussions. Iraq is becoming an issue of national security and domestic politics in various neighboring countries. In Turkey, fears of Kurdish separatism are on the rise again. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Jordan have to cope with the growing chasm between their political alliance with the United States and radical anti-Americanism, not only among their youth but in substantial parts of society, including among the administrative elites. Syria has to fear the return of its own nationals now pursuing jihad in Iraq. None of the neighboring states have recipes to offer for Iraq. Even the leadership in Iran wants the Americans to leave, but it does not want them to leave too early. All countries fear destabiliza-

tion and therefore wish that the United States would fix what it broke, but many of the elites in these countries also want the United States to be punished for its attempt to remodel Iraq and the region according to its own blueprint without consultation with regional leaders. While many fear a total collapse and disintegration of Iraq, parts of the regional elites seem to fear its reconstruction under Shiite leadership even more. The "construction" of Iraq, or of its major parts, as a Shiite state would only exacerbate an already very dangerous regional polarization.

Regional security definitely has to be put at the top of the agenda. External actors are well placed to initiate movement in that direction, as has been done with the EU-3-led negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear program. While there is broad agreement in the West and among the other major international powers that an unrestricted development of the Iranian nuclear program would be highly dangerous even if Tehran was never to build a bomb, Western analysts and policymakers do not have a clear, common understanding of Tehran's interests, goals and strategic calculations. This mirrors reality in so far as "Tehran" is not a unitary actor: different groups within the Iranian political elite want different things, even with regard to the country's nuclear program. Security—which here means national as well as regime security—is certainly a common concern within this elite. It is therefore only reasonable that Washington has agreed, in principle at least, to talk to Tehran and to support a European offer to Tehran that includes suggestions for a regional security forum.

The appropriate format, participants and issue areas of such a forum will have to be explored both at political and think tank levels. Importantly, a

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subregional approach to security—one that concentrates on security questions in the Persian Gulf region—seems possible now. This was not the case in the 1990's, after the first and second Gulf wars, when almost all parties in the region insisted that Middle Eastern security was indivisible, and any attempt to separate Gulf security issues from the Arab-Israeli conflict would fail. This is still the position of the Arab Leagues. The geopolitical perception that local actors have of regional security issues, however, has changed. Iran is thinking of Israel as an adversary and a threat, but it also thinks more specifically about issues of security in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf Arab monarchies see Iran and Iranian influence over Iraq as the main challenge and, therefore, do not want to have all of the Arab-Israeli issues on the agenda. Proof of that was a recent proposal by the Saudi foreign minister to establish a weapons-of-mass-destruction-free zone for the Gulf. This implicitly means that the search for détente in this part of the Middle East need not be linked to the Arab-Israeli conflict or the question of Israel's nuclear weapons. A subregional approach could benefit from lessons learned in other parts of the world, such as the Asean Regional Forum or the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. And while the road to a WMD-free zone may be long, such a forum would probably be better suited to decide on a series of confidence building measures than a format involving all of the actors in the Mashreq and the Persian Gulf region.

At the same time, a subregional national-interest based approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict may also turn out to be more promising than the hope that another cease-fire or international forces deployment will lead to lasting stability. We may have to return to a conflict-resolution model that seemed to offer success in the 1990's: a Madrid-like internationally sponsored conference that would bring together all legitimate stake-holders, namely Israel, the PLO/PA, Syria and Lebanon, to address unresolved issues. Although the issues at stake for each of these actors may differ, they are not mutually exclusive. In a nutshell: Israel wants security; the Palestinians want a state; Lebanon wants sovereignty; and Syria wants to regain the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

It is interesting to note that subregional conflict resolution has found friends among the parties that are directly involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Palestinians are not the only ones who do not want Iran to hijack their cause and meddle in their dealings with Israel. Neither does Syria want Iran to determine its agenda with regard to Israel and an Arab-Israeli settlement. Syria would not necessarily give up its bilateral relationship with Iran if it had a real perspective to regain the Israeli-occupied Golan through a renewed peace process, but it would certainly not want Iran to participate in a regional conference. "We want a deal; they have a different agenda" is roughly the response that Syrian officials give.

A regional peace conference would naturally have to address the rational national interests of the states and wish-to-be states that participate in it. It would thereby refocus regional discourses on matters that states can deal with and that can be resolved in a treaty: matters of land and peace, of sovereignty and security. Peacemaking, in that sense, would strengthen and give a new chance to the Middle Eastern nation state and help to reduce the virulence of the more disruptive trends.

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