The Future of the Middle East

Mohamed Rabie

The Middle East has had no political stability or a clear sense of direction for almost a hundred years due to many factors; noted among them; the division of the Arab world into spheres of foreign influence without regard to cultural diversity, tribal ties or even natural barriers and endowments of natural resource; European colonialism; the creation of the state of Israel and the Palestinian problem it caused; and the haphazard formation of the nation state. Yet, speculating about the future of the Middle East cannot escape thinking about the present and the past as well as about the peoples of the region, their cultures, interests, and grievances.

In this paper, I shall try to concentrate on the major political issues the region is facing today because politics is the major force affecting every national and regional issue, collective consciousness and individual attitudes. Due to the history of the region and its nation state structure neither the political borders of the state nor its rights or claims have been settled on mutually accepted basis. As a consequence, suspicion rather cooperation dominates state and elite relations, causing political and security issues to dominate all other issues.

However, before discussing issues of importance to the people of the Middle East and to others who care about the region and its future, I wish to make the following general remarks;

1. Change is the only fact in life that is not subject to change; everything else is changing by day and night. Change dominates our personal and communal lives; it causes our ties to each other and to our environment and to the world at large to be transformed continuously; change in fact refuses to stop making our world more complex and dynamic. With every day that passes, change makes national and international, political as well as security and economic relations more complex and intertwined. As individuals, organizations, communities, nations and transnational entities, we are experiencing profound change and participating in it,

1

sometimes consciously, but oftentimes unconsciously. Therefore, we cannot stop change even if we wanted to, because through our actions and reactions and inactions we have made our world a "world in transition" that continues to change with no end in sight.

2. Fate that most people tend to believe in is something more shaped by us than designed for us by mysterious forces. There is no doubt that most global and sociocultural change is beyond our ability to control; yet, it is often within our ability to foresee and manage. In fact, no present can be changed or future shaped without our active participation. But to shape our future in ways that meet our needs and fulfill our aspirations and make our world more peaceful and stable, we have to have a clear vision of where we want to go, and how to get from where we are to where we want to be.

3. Problems we face in our lives and difficulties we encounter in dealing with others are caused by actions and reactions of countless national and regional and global forces; some of which are human, like political and religious leaders, thinkers, journalists and terrorists; others are natural and institutional, like the environment, the nation state and the multinational corporation. Any attempt to solve a problem or overcome an obstacle cannot succeed without dealing with the forces causing the problem and creating the obstacle in the first place. Therefore, all forces causing change and instigating conflict must be considered a part of the problem as well as a part of the solution.

Dilemma of the Present

The Middle East seems like a strange puzzle, hard to understand and harder to solve, or even to decide where and how to start working on solving it. This makes the most certain thing about the Middle East is that its future is uncertain. The most active internal and external forces seem to have agreed to pull the region and its peoples and states in different, opposing directions. However, as the radical forces become more active internally, the need for the help of external forces becomes more pressing; but as foreign forces increase their involvement in the national and regional affairs, they cause the internal forces to feel threatened and motivate them to become more radical. Consequently, the clash between the national and foreign forces leads to

increased political instability and communal and state confusion, making change uncontrollable and the future most uncertain.

One of the main reasons for the uncertainty of the Middle East future is the multiplicity of forces that are competing to dominate the region and affect the course of its sociopolitical and sociocultural direction. Some of these forces like Europe and China are trying to maintain old cultural ties and protect economic interests they have had for a long time; others like the Iranians and, to a lesser degree, the Russians are trying to expand their political influence; and still others like the Americans and the British are trying to correct mistakes they committed but refuse to acknowledge, causing them to commit more serious ones. And while these forces are actively involved in attempts to affect the course of change in the region, the region's inhabitants who have more to gain form positive change and most to lose from lack thereof are doing very little to protect their interests or articulate a vision for the future or their region.

Arab states in general are in no position to participate actively in protecting their national interests; in fact, no Arab state has an official document stating its national interests. And without knowing their interests, states cannot develop plans to defend or promote their national interests. The only interest that Arab leaders know with certainty and are committed to protect at all cost is to remain in power and use it to their advantage; in fact, most Arab leaders are using political power to gain more economic power, and use economic power to tighten their grip on political power, and employ both powers to appease, suppress and corrupt potential leaders. Intelligence that some Arab leaders at times demonstrate is purely tactical, not strategic; Arab leaders are survivors; they are often able to manage regime problems, but lack the vision to develop strategies to shape the future of their nations or region.

Problems facing Arab states today are many; some are economic in nature like high unemployment rates and low labor productivity; others are sociocultural like high illiteracy and population growth rates and widespread poverty and corruption; and more are political and security related like lack of political legitimacy and civil wars. For example, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen are experiencing different levels of civil war; and most other states like Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia face growing domestic unrest. Yet, the most

serious political and security problems facing the Middle East region today are due to a persistent misguided American policy, Israeli colonialist policies in Palestine, international terrorism, globalization, and increased Iranian assertiveness and perceived regional ambitions.

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has had a catastrophic impact on the region, causing international terrorism to spread, anti-Americanism in Arab and Muslim states to deepen, and all issues related to economic development and the transformation of cultures, including the political culture, to be neglected and forgotten. Arab rulers are concentrating their efforts on maintaining political stability rather than initiating sociocultural change. In fact, without the sudden influx of trillions of dollars during the last few years due to the tremendous increase in the price of oil, the situation would have gotten much worse than what it is today; it would most likely have drowned the entire region into chaos and conflict.

The Israeli government, after having succeeded with the help of the Bush administration to freeze the Arab-Israeli peace process, turned its attention to the Palestinians, attacking and killing more people, erecting new and harsher barriers to make life for them unbearable and intolerable, and arresting more innocent men and women and children. Israel holds today more than 11,000 Palestinian prisoners, the majority of whom are held without charges; Israel refuses to release those prisoners, not even the children or sick women. And to weaken the chances for reviving the peace process, the Israeli government has been doing its best to undermine the credibility of the Palestinian president who is probably the last capable and willing Palestinian leader to negotiate peace with Israel. Israeli professor Uri Avnery considers the policies of Israeli government and the Bush administration as an experiment "to force a whole people to submit to foreign occupation by starving them… the laboratory for the experiment is the Gaza Strip and the guinea pigs are the Palestinians living there."

As Arab states enter a new phase of aimless sociocultural transformation, deepened political instability and heightened fear and security threats, the Israelis are fast losing their sense of direction, self confidence and sense of mission. Israeli leaders are unable to see the dangers and challenges facing them, and seem incapacitated to take action to save themselves and their society from corruption, self-deception and self destruction. And despite the defeat

that Israel suffered in Lebanon in the summer of 2006, and Gaza in 2008 and 2014 Israeli leaders seem unwilling to recognize the limits of military power and acknowledge the need for a mutually acceptable peace treaty with their Arab neighbors; a treaty capable of guaranteeing mutual security, insuring political stability, and encouraging regional cooperation. Israeli leaders, just like their American counterparts, have become delusional; they continue to expand settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, defy international law and UN resolutions, and refuse to negotiate honestly with the Palestinians; they in fact, continue to hide their heads in the Middle East sand, while the process of hatred and enmity towards them and their American backers continues to spread and deepen unabated.

The Iraqi Crisis

While most American people and politicians say today that attacking Iraq was a strategic and tragic mistake, President Bush, Dick Cheney and Tony Blair and their neoconservative cohorts continue to claim that Iraq's invasion was the right thing to do. In 2003, the US government invaded Iraq under a pretext that was lately proven a fabrication of facts and the result of political miscalculation. The Bush administration had hoped that the military campaign, which started by destroying the Iraqi state and the country's infrastructure, will lead to securing Iraqi oil, and installing in Baghdad a new government more willing to serve their interests. However, the arrogance and ignorance, which characterized the behavior of the war's managers in the Pentagon and the White House, have led to the destruction of the Iraqi state structure and the disintegration of the social and cultural fabric of the Iraqi society; it ultimately invited the 'Islamic State' forces to establish to occupy a substantial part of both Iraq and Syria and commit heinous crimes against several Iraqi and Syrian minorities.

Some tend to think that Iraq is engaged in a civil war that must take its course; but what Iraq is actually experiencing is a vicious cycle of self destruction that promises to leave no one in control at the end of the game to talk to. And this will ultimately embolden the Islamic State forces to take the fight to the heart of Europe and America. Action needed to arrest the deterioration and give the Iraqi people a new chance to regroup and rebuild their state is yet to

be seriously considered. But instead of articulating a political plan to deal with the deepening sectarian crisis and ISIL, the Obama administration decided to pull out the US forces from Iraq and to carry out air strikes that seem ineffective; in fact some analysts believe that the US government does not intend to destroy ISIL but to degraded it maintain a failed state in Iraq. Such a policy can only compound the mistakes made over the past twelve years; it is a good recipe for committing new massacres and more terrorism; political problems need political solutions, not military ones. No one can build trust by mistrusting others; and no one can save lives by destroying more lives.

By withdrawing it forces from Iraq and leaving the corrupt sectarian Iraqi government in control, the Obama administration has caused a bad situation to get extremely worse, and encourage the forces of Islamic radicalism and international terrorism to spread further; the US policy in fact has caused the destruction of Syria, the devastation of the regional economy, and the largest refugee problem in modern history. The Obama administration must understand that mistakes could not be corrected by committing more mistakes, and long ignored issues can only get worse as time passes. Now that Russia has entered the war in Syria, the controlled game of destruction that America and its Arab and European allies have been playing has change, and no one seems to know the rules of the new game.

A decade ago, Iran was the only fundamentalist state in the Middle East struggling to protect itself from foreign encroachment; and its regime had adopted a rather moderate stand vis-à-vis Israel. Former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami proclaimed that Iran would accept any settlement to the Palestinian problem that Palestinians accept. Religious fundamentalism, meanwhile, seemed to have peaked, and terrorism to have become largely national rather than international problem; its primary aim had become the undermining of the corrupt Arab regimes, not the killing of foreigners. However, the situation changed drastically in the wake of the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. While the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 had generated a flood of condemnation and a worldwide sympathy with the American people, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq instigated the formation of many new terrorist cells around the world, and subsequently transformed the Iraqi and Syrian territories into a

terrorist beehive that does not differentiate between American occupation soldiers and Iraqi and Syrian innocent men and women and children.

While Americans are losing time, money and credibility; and Iraqis and Syrians are loosing their lives and countries, the Iranians have emerged as the sole winners of the American misconceived adventures and misguided policies. In Iraq as well as in Syria, the Iranian regime is gaining more political, military and religious influence, despite American, Arab and European efforts to deny them such and influence; they are also gaining in Lebanon a strong ally in Hezbollah, providing it with the military arsenal and financial resources to face and defeat the Israeli army and challenge the pro-West Lebanese government; and in Palestine and Yemen, it is providing financial assistance to Hamas and the Houthis to thwart American, European and Arab efforts to isolate it. And by reaching a nuclear agreement with the United States, Iran has emerged as a regional power that is destined to foster its influence in the region.

Radical fundamental forces that oppose Israeli and US policies, disdain American culture and refuse to recognize the state of Israel have more than doubled in numbers and strength and effectiveness during the last five years. In Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, Syria and Yemen radicals are either in control of political power or the most powerful force in society. In Afghanistan, Taliban has made a strong comeback and seems to have regained the initiative. And if free elections were to be held today in all Arab states, fundamentalists would win and seize power in at least half of such states, making the Iranian system of governance and philosophical orientation the norm rather than the exception in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Pakistan is moving gradually but systemically toward becoming the first nuclear fundamentalist state in the world.

I believe that the count down for the end of the Israeli state has already begun; no power is able to stop the impending demise of Israel except decisive action on three fronts; making peace a reality between the Israelis and their Palestinian neighbors; ending the civil wars in Iraq and Syria by destroying the military power of the ideologically radical forces; and giving hope to the hopeless, powerless poor Arabs. History tells us that no injustice is ever forgotten until justice is attained, and that deep wounds get progressively worse when left unattended to. The

cost of political and economic inaction promises to be severe; it is expected to include the destruction of the economies of the region, increased enmity toward the West in general and United States in particular, the undermining of American interests in most Arab and Muslim states, and the possible destruction of the oil wells in the Gulf. Since Israel will not just fade away, the American inaction is likely to lead to the killing of millions of people due to the probable use of nuclear weapons by a desperate Jewish state.

The War of Ideas

After having lost all political and security justifications for invading Iraq, President Bush and Tony Blair began to claim that the fight in the Middle East is a moral one; and that the West is in a war to protect its way of life and promote universal values of justice, human rights and democracy. But the way the Iraqi war was justified, and how it was conducted; and how the regional problems are being managed today can only expose the hypocrisy and the devious intentions of the American, British and French policies. Despite their rhetoric, leaders of these states have failed to do anything positive in the Middle East since the creation of the Arab nation state; they have also failed to restore peace or stability to any state they undermined. And as the war records show, the more mistakes and crimes are committed by the West, the more legitimacy and sympathy the forces of radical Islam gain. And as the American and Israeli forces suffer military and moral setbacks, the forces of international terrorism gain more self-confidence. President Bush claimed that he is "fighting the decisive ideological struggle of the 21st century." But in so claiming, Bush has chosen to ignore the fact that the ideologically radical forces America is fighting today were originally created by the United State itself.

It is always easier to define objectives than to chart a road that leads to achieving them, as well as to recruit the right partners who could help navigate the road's difficult terrain. Tourists and adventurers, for example, need knowledgeable guides they can trust and count on their advice. But the United State, even when it is able to define its objectives and recruit partners, tends to treat its partners as agents, not allies. Feeling insulted and at times betrayed, US partners are unlikely to trust American leaders and more likely to give them the kind of advice

that serves their own interests, not the US interests. Partners treated as agents tend to mislead rather than lead, acting as opportunists, not friends. Friendly Arab regimes and politicians that support US efforts in Iraq and Syria are doing so not because they trust America, or because they are convinced that America is doing the right thing, but because they depend on American protection for their survival.

It is true that the fight in the Middle East is over values, ideas and ideals, but the West is losing that war; and, in the process, it is causing substantial harm to the indigenous forces of change and modernization. By claiming that the war is for the sake of justice, human rights and democracy, while acting as if the Arab people deserve no justice and have no political or human rights, the West in general and the United States in particular, is undermining its own credibility and weakening its allies and friends in the region. In fact, most of the so-called moderate Arab leaders are in no position to help the West; they are largely corrupt autocrats who do not believe in democracy; and therefore, are unwilling to respect the human rights of their peoples or work for social justice in their countries. And due to the new Arab media outlets and satellite TV stations, most Arab leaders have lost whatever credibility and legitimacy they may have had in the past in the eyes of the masses. Arab leaders enjoy neither the trust nor the respect of the majority of the Arab people; they are feared but not respected. And fear can neither build trust nor can it facilitate the articulation of social contracts to tie people together and create communities of shared interests and common values. Globalization, meanwhile, is being allowed to aggravate poverty and social injustice, nurture suspicion and conspiracy theories, and cause socioeconomic gaps to widen and sociocultural divides to deepen.

The Middle East region, as so many Americans and Europeans correctly claim, needs a value revolution; in fact, nothing less than a genuine sociocultural revolution to transform the entire region will do; the people cannot have a chance to catch up with the rest of the world without such a revolution. However, sociocultural transformations cannot and should not be attempted from the outside, or be initiated by foreigners because foreigners are unable to see the difference between impressions and facts. Cultures encompass values, traditions, attitudes and convictions that are most resistant to change; they are also very difficult to understand and

analyze without placing them in their proper historical and civilizational contexts. Cultures should be left to indigenous intellectuals, educators and non-traditional leaders to transform; otherwise, the masses will view outside intervention as cultural imperialism and treat as such.

No matter how hard Western states and the American media may try to do to undermine the influence and rationale of political Islam, they cannot defeat people willing to die for a holy cause they believe in. Radical Muslims opposing US policies are convinced that they are fighting God's war and, therefore, they believe that God is on their side. And since no power is capable of defeating God, they are convinced that they will ultimately win their fight against all enemies. They further believe that if they die fighting the enemies of God they will go to heaven, the ultimate destination sought by every believer. Therefore, believers are winners in this life if they defeat their enemies, and winners in the afterlife if they die fighting their enemies. "Islam is the solution" is a slogan that no other slogan can outmaneuver at this time.

Democracy, most enlightened people tend to think, is the only solution to the dilemma facing Arab and non-Arab Third World states. While this might be true in an economically advanced and socially developed and culturally homogeneous society like Taiwan or South Korea, democracy is not a solution to multicultural and multi-religious states, particularly the politically and economically and socially underdeveloped ones. When former Iranian president Mohammed Khatami was asked in 1999 about the reasons for lack of economic development in his country, he said, "It is impossible to have economic development in a socially and politically underdeveloped society." Promoters of democracy in Third World states need to be reminded that Western democracy was a major byproduct of the socioeconomic and sociocultural transformations, including the Reformation, that swept Europe between the middle of the 15th and 18th centuries; no Arab or Islamic society has experienced such a thing.

Political scientists tell us that for democracy to succeed it has to have certain conditions; noted among them: the existence of a fairly large and conscious and confident middle class, political plurality, regular elections to manage the peaceful transfer of power in society, and a free press. Based on my studies and observations, there is another major condition; a culture of tolerance. But history seems to indicate that all ideologically committed leaders and religious

groups and racial states do not believe in or practice tolerance. In fact, I argued in several books that the greatest success of democracy in the West was not realized by establishing itself as a political system of governance, but by transforming itself into a social value and a cultural tradition. If democracy succeeds as a sociocultural value, it will succeed as a political system; and if democracy fails as a sociocultural value, it will certainly fail as a political system.

While some Western apologists for certain Arab regimes may claim that some Arab states are on their way to democracy, the facts on the ground and the historical trends do not support such claims. None of the conditions of democracy mentioned above exists today in any of the Arab or Islamic countries or any other largely agricultural and mostly underdeveloped society in the world. Democracy in fact has no future in all states and societies that still live under socioeconomic and sociocultural conditions resembling those of pre-industrial times.

Conclusion

The only way to win the fight against radical Islam is to pull the rug from underneath its feet by giving younger generations a better education and, in the process, transform their cultures and worldviews. Improving the economic and social conditions of the poor and transforming political systems to be based on social contracts that regulate relations between the rulers and the ruled are two strategic tasks that cry for attention. Radicals throughout history were able to define with clarity what they stand against, but have failed to define with coherence what they stand for; they are better at knowing their enemies than knowing their friends. As a consequence, radical forces have always lacked a program for reform geared toward helping the people they claim to be fighting for. This means that if radicals win the war of ideas and manage to control the state system, they will lead the peoples of the region into a wilderness of chaos and conflict that nurtures more war and enmity than tolerance and love.

I believe that the proper way to deal with the major issues and problems plaguing the Middle East today, while working to transform peoples' cultures, should be based on the following:

1. Solving the Arab-Israeli conflict on the basis of recognized UN resolutions and internationally accepted and sanctioned land-for-peace formula. This is probably the last chance to make peace in the Middle East; all concerned parties need to stop talking about the so-called peace process that has unfortunately become a boring, time wasting, fruitless, hopeless and aimless game; and start implementing UN resolutions.

2. Cut all financial and military support for the radical forces fighting in Iraq and Syria, which requires the cooperation of American, Britain, France, Turkey and Arab Gulf states.

3. Hasten the withdrawal of American occupation forces from Iraq;

4. Start a serious political process to end the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen; this requires the cooperation of the above mentioned powers in addition to Iran. All regional actors are not only a part of the problem, but a part of the solution as well; and

5. Support the ongoing war of ideas in the Arab world by siding with the culturally enlightened and politically moderate and socially peaceful liberal forces that call for the transformation of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical and sociocultural aspects of life; such support could come in the form of:

   a. Applying more pressure on Arab governments to return the long confiscated political rights to the people, respect individual and group human rights, and protect the rights of individuals to be different;

   b. Establishing new media outlets with the power of the BBC and Al Gazeera to promote liberal views and rational thinking; and

   c. Finance civil society organizations that promote human rights and tolerance, environmental preservation, and women empowerment, and stop recruiting agents to foster divisiveness and instability.

No sociopolitical ideology like nationalism, or socioeconomic ideology like communism, or sociocultural ideology like religion can be tolerant of dissent or accept cultural and religious and racial diversity or equality, and thus respect the democratic principles. It can, however, establish a democracy of the masters like the one practiced today in Iran and Israel. While in

Iran only those who uphold the world of God's and obey the orders of his earthy representative are granted the right to govern and given the honor to serve state ideology; and in Israel, only Jews are considered full citizens and have the right to rule over the land's indigenous people and the states' occupied subjects. If radical Islam wins its cultural and political fight, it will establish its own justice that recognizes no authority except that of its mysterious God, whose commandments are interpreted, conveyed and executed by his self-appointed representatives.

If current socioeconomic and sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions and trends in Arab states were to continue unchanged for another decade, the religiously conservative forces will more likely win a decisive victory. And if this were to happen, any further talk about genuine sociocultural or sociopolitical transformation would become an exercise in futility. Iran represents the best image of the future Arabs can hope for if nothing fundamental is done soon to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, end the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, and free the Arab people from the chains of poverty and political oppression, and liberate the Arab mind from cultural repression. Iran, after nearly four decades of religious rule and the transfer of power through peaceful means, has made little progress; human rights are still being violated, and economic and political development is yet to take place. Time is no longer on the Israeli side, or the American side, or the moderate Arabs side, or the side of the peace loving and human rights advocates in the world.

Dr. Rabie is a professor of international political economy and a peace activist who conceived the idea of the US-PLO dialogue and wrote the document that guided secret negotiations that led the US to recognize the PLO and start a dialogue with it. He taught at several American and Arab and European universities, published 40 books and hundreds of articles, and participated in tens of seminars and meetings of dialogue groups. He is a member of the Arab Thought Forum and a fellow of the von Humboldt Stiftung.

professorrabie@yaoo.com

www.yazour.com