

COOPERATION AS A WAY OUT OF TURMOIL FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

In discussing the turmoil that has recently engulfed the Middle East, the author considers a parallel with Europe in the 17th century and the beginning of the Westphalian order. The author lays out his vision for the future of the region, which is predicated upon four main parameters: mutual acceptance among all the peoples of the Middle East, embracing the spirit of moderation and modernization, the quest for political stability, and economic cooperation. According to the author, regional dialogue is the first step towards building political consensus and realizing this vision.

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Today, the Middle East is in turmoil, where very harsh, sadistic, vicious, and destructive wars are killing hundreds of thousands of innocents, displacing millions of people from their homes, and wiping out the achievements and monuments of the region's civilization. Thus, turmoil is also killing the dreams and aspirations of the region's nations toward regaining the long-lost status of living in peace and harmony, and being once more among the proud nations contributing to world progress and prosperity.



If we try to remember the beginning of the uprisings in the Middle East in December 2010 – which are known as the “Arab Spring,” but which I prefer to call “Autumn: the Fall of Despots” – we will remember that the protests had started as very decent demands: to find a job, to live in dignity, and to have a happy family, mostly for socio-economic reasons, and to ensure freedoms.

This was mainly because those countries that went through upheavals were facing socio-economic problems, with essentially underdeveloped and undiversified production and export structures; illiteracy; poor or insufficient access to proper health care and education; and wide-spread poverty and unemployment, especially youth unemployment. Peoples of countries of better economic status were less enthusiastic about taking to the streets. The absence of revolutionary enthusiasm in a good number of wealthy Arab countries puzzled political scientists. In his 2013 book *The Second Arab Awakening*, Adeed Dawisha notes:

Another puzzle was the absence of revolutionary fervor in other Arab countries. After all, when commentators and analysts talked about the “Arab revolution” and (rather loosely about the “Arab Spring”), they were in fact referring to revolutionary activity in a mere one third of the Arab world. The rest of Arab lands experienced either no real convulsions to speak of or a few demonstrations that quickly petered out.¹

Considered within the framework of the past, present, and future, if we try to understand the way of thinking in different countries and nations in this respect, we

¹ Adeed Dawisha, *The Second Arab Awakening* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 39.

find out that people in Middle Eastern countries share a common outlook and attitude. People in the Middle East are proud of their common history, and they are gratified by various stages of the 14 century-long Islamic history. Some are proud of the Ottoman Empire, which vanished about a century ago, or of its predecessor, the Seljuk Empire, or some, of the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid, or Mamluks. They also identify with the ancient cultures and civilizations of this geography which is known as the “Cradle of Civilization,” and includes ancient Egypt, Sumer, Babylonia, Assyria, Phoenicia, and Persia.

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While the people of the region share values and attitudes, they currently also share a deep state of despair, misery, and pessimism. A large majority of them suffers from severe economic shortages, famine, poverty, destitution, and social unrest, civil strife and war, violence, radicalism, terror, and death. They try to survive within a vicious circle of political and economic instability.

But, for the future, what are the thoughts and expectations of the people of this region? Why don't they think of a common future while they are praising their common history? Why can we not struggle to establish a common future for all of us, to eliminate all these sufferings? This article suggests that if the people of this region desire to live in peace and prosperity, a goal to which nobody would presumably object, then they should think and work towards establishing such an environment. Otherwise, all these human sufferings of fear, death, and destruction will continue uninterrupted, and the people of the region will not be able to see the way out of this extreme crisis. The entire region will be drowned in this whirlpool.

In order to be able to plan the future of the region, we should believe in the idea that a common future for all nations of the region will surely bring peace and prosperity to everybody. Before dwelling on how this would be realized, I would like to recall a maxim, which was mentioned by a wise statesman 50 years ago, and still retains its universality. US President John F. Kennedy, alluding to necessary long-term change, wisely said:

Let us focus on a more practical, more attainable peace, based not on a sudden revolution in human nature but on a gradual evolution in human institutions – on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned. World peace, like community peace, does not require that each man love his neighbor. It requires only that they live together in mutual tolerance, submitting their disputes to a just and peaceful settlement.²

In this vein, firstly, everybody living in this region, without any distinction as to race, ethnicity, religion, sect, or political views, should aim to establish a secure and stable future based on the principle of living together in shared tolerance and the spirit of co-habitation. Intellectuals and think-tanks of the region should begin developing this vision and then at a later stage it should be adopted at the political level. Now, I will discuss the fundamental components of such a vision.

How to Build Peace?

In his recent book, Henry Kissinger traces the origin of what he called “world order” back to the famous peace treaty concluded in German city of Westphalia in 1648.³ This agreement came into force after a century of sectarian conflicts and political upheavals, and 30 and 80 years of religious wars in Central and Western Europe, respectively. The “Westphalian Peace” reflected a practical accommodation to reality, not a unique moral insight. It relied on a system of sovereign states refraining from interference in each other’s domestic affairs and checking each other’s ambitions through a general balance of power. No single claim to truth as universal rule had prevailed in Europe’s contests. Instead, each state was assigned the attributes of sovereign power over its territory.

Now let us reflect on the genesis of the Middle East countries from a balance of power perspective. Pax Ottomana, which prevailed in the region until the beginning of the First World War was replaced by a balance of power that divided the region into areas of influence of European powers. The mandate system, which was ratified by the League of Nations, put this division into effect. Each of the entities created included multiple sectarian and ethnic groups. The mandating powers ruled by manipulating tensions thus laid the foundation for later wars and civil wars. In reality, these newly established countries were an extension of the balance of power among the winners of World War I. It was in a way an extension of the European Westphalian order in the Middle East.

² John F. Kennedy, “Commencement Address at American University in Washington,” 10 June 1963.

³ Henry Kissinger, “World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History (New York: Allen Lane, 2014) p. 11-31.

Due to developments following World War II and the creation of the state of Israel, the balance of power in the region was not a reflection of the genuine pursuit of common interest and shared peace among the nations of this region. On the contrary, it was always affected by non-congenial and selfish reasons produced by non-democratic regimes and dictatorial leaderships. The Middle East states born in the aftermath of the World War I had lived the past century hanging between the imperatives of the former European Westphalian order and the subsequent Cold War order, and the whims and caprices of selfish leaders. Subsequently, the region was engulfed by the Arab Cold War, which characterized Arab politics for decades.⁴ The ideological dissimilarities among regimes during the 1960s of the past century – such as nationalism versus Islamism – were also reflected in the form of differences between masses due to playing them out in a “genuinely transnational media space.”⁵

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Today this region is going through an unprecedented state of chaos, instability, and unpredictable future; no order, no law. Brutality and savageness prevail in the name of a religion that draws its name from peace, the prophet of which was sent as the messenger of peace to the whole world.

So, how should the people of the region build peace? Do they need to wait for 30 years of wars to have their own Westphalia agreements? Is what is happening in the Middle East equal to what happened in Europe in the 17th century? Or is it really the end of the Sykes-Picot map, with the present sufferings manifestations of the labor pains of the new map?

This article does not mean to prescribe a solution to the ongoing fighting in the region, but is rather an attempt towards developing a new vision for the future. Therefore, I will allude to the key parameters of this vision. The first parameter is the aspiration to secure a better future that is built on two pillars: mutual acceptance and a firm commitment to the imperative that we all are bound to live together in this region. Sectarian differences and ethnic distinctions are just important components

⁴ See: Malcolm H. Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: Gamel Abd al-Nasr and His Rivals, 1958-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd ed., 1971).

⁵ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013) p. 34.

of the unique fabric of the region's mosaic character. Attempts to tamper with these components will lead only to increased instability in the region.

“The second parameter [of my vision] is embracing the spirit of moderation and modernization: the panacea against extremism, radicalism, and the misuse of Islam for evil ends.”

The second parameter is embracing the spirit of moderation and modernization: the *panacea* against extremism, radicalism, and the misuse of Islam for evil ends.⁶ I have to clearly acknowledge that these two notions were the guiding principles of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) Ten-Year Program of Action (TYPOA) adopted by the extraordinary OIC Summit of 2005.⁷ It is obvious that the Middle East and the larger Muslim world will not succeed

in overcoming the hurdles and perils they are facing nowadays without being successful in modernizing their societies. This can only be done by instilling in these societies moderate thoughts, and hence bringing marginal and radical groups to the middle ground by speeding up social mobility, economic prosperity, and political participation. We should remember that when “moderation and modernization in thought and action are combined with sustainable development, the Muslim world will once again be a land of prosperity, progress, peace and security.”⁸ Without ensuring human rights and fundamental freedoms, good governance, and the rule of law, Middle East societies will never have a secure future.

For the realization of these abovementioned parameters, it is a must that intellectuals, think-tanks, NGOs, and the media cooperate, and active segments of the society join hands towards this goal. In addition, a strong political will among governments is necessary for attaining the political and economic dimensions of this vision.

The vision's third parameter, which relates to political stability, contains two important factors that reinforce each other. The first is the strong rejection of state-disintegration in the region. Disintegration should not be accepted, whatever justification or reasoning is made for the fragmentation or division of countries into smaller units or states. Just the opposite, policies towards integration should be

⁶ These two fundamental notions were elaborated in İhsanoğlu, *The Islamic World and the New Century* (London: Hurst & Company, 2010).

⁷ The 2005 Summit was a turning point in the history of the OIC when universal values of human rights, good governance and transparency were adopted. The Secretary General of OIC was entrusted to revise the Charter, establish the independent Human Rights Commission, the Women Development Organization, and conduct many reforms.

⁸ İhsanoğlu (2010), p. 79.

developed, remembering the brutal, bloody, and destructive wars that occurred in the 1990s during the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which caused 140,000 deaths and resulted in four million people being displaced. Sadly, these bloody wars were in vain, since all countries formed out of the disintegration of Yugoslavia are now trying to integrate under the EU umbrella.

We need to elaborate on this dimension further. This region should be able to establish its own peace after experiencing a century of disorder and trouble. All countries of the region without any distinction or exclusion should come together to establish peace and security. In doing so, it is not the Westphalia agreements of the 17th century, but rather the agreements concluded after the end of World War II among the western European countries and extended to include eastern European countries after the end of the Cold War that should be considered.

It is significant in this context to recall an important peace accord that the OIC successfully negotiated during the Iraqi sectarian fights between the Sunni and Shiite religious leaders in the month of Ramadan in 2006. It can be clearly said that this historical agreement would furnish a good starting point for developing the infrastructure of peace and security in the region and certainly help restrain sectarianism.

Today, the objective is not to redraw the borders in the region, which have lost their main function of securing the countries against external dangers of radicalism, violence, and terrorism. Rather, the objective is to transform these borders from being sources of problems into meeting points and convergence zones through securing peace and stability, and promoting economic cooperation in the region. We should convert the bor-

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ders to economic and commercial cooperation zones instead of being the virtual shields of territorial sovereignties of states. This is where the fourth parameter, i.e. the economic dimension of the vision, comes into play.

It is a known fact that trade and economic relations rarely stop, even during the most severe wars. Increased economic and commercial relations among countries surely limit the factors causing conflict and violence, and at a later stage, pave the way for building peace. Increasing economic and commercial ties among Muslim and Arab countries, starting with those most severely affected, has the potential of

breaking the vicious circle of violence and political instability. Once this is achieved, socio-economic and political factors will start functioning in the right direction so as to bring peace and prosperity to the whole region.

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As mentioned earlier, lengthy religious wars in Europe in the 17th century were brought to an end by the Westphalia agreements. Again, after World War I and World War II took place within 20 years of each other and ruined most of Europe, prominent thinkers raised the idea of economic integration to prevent such deadly and devastating wars in Europe. The first move in this direction was the creation of the European Coal

and Steel Community in 1952, which was declared as the initial step towards the federation of Europe. Its creation aimed at eliminating the possibility of war by pooling these industries. After years of development, Europe has now reached its current stage of economic and political union.

While it should be recorded that the European cooperation/integration process has provided a success story of economic development and the creation of a prosperous European society, it also must be noted that the most successful outcome of this process was the prevention of wars among member countries. In a nutshell, we can state that regional economic cooperation/integration groupings not only provide strong growth and development *within* community members, but also prevent political competition and crises *among* members. Because of such vital benefits and the success story of the European Union, a trend developed towards establishing various regional economic groupings, like ASEAN, NAFTA, ECO, etc.

It is significant to recall another successful example from the Muslim world. OIC member countries made various efforts to increase economic and commercial cooperation. In this context, the OIC’s TYPOA was targeted at increasing intra-OIC trade to 20 percent of the overall trade volume during the program’s period. As of end of 2013, intra-OIC trade reached 18.5 percent of total trade; in absolute terms, it increased from 271.5 billion dollars to 767.6 billion dollars.⁹ This shows a significant increase, about 2.83 times, despite all political problems and crises. Actually, the figures cover 57 member countries of the OIC. If only Middle Eastern countries were considered, we might have different figures, but I believe that the case for the

⁹ See: “COMCEC Trade Outlook 2014,” *COMCEC Coordination Office*, Ankara, January 2014.

Middle Eastern countries would be much better. This is also a good example, which shows the benefits of the regional cooperation.

As compared to other regions, the Middle East is geographically more connected and historically shares a common past. It also has enormous economic potential on the supply side, with gigantic sources of energy, crude petroleum and natural gas, other main commodities and raw materials, and labor and capital. In addition, we should include to this list water and rivers, due especially to the ever-increasing strategic importance and role of water in daily life. On the demand side, the region has the youngest population in the world, which implies a massive need for almost all consumer goods.

A better future for the region hinges upon developing an effective regional strategy that also takes into consideration inter-regional and international cooperation linkages, and which is not hostile to any party within or outside the region. This can also assuage the societal nostalgia for the power and glory of the past and help the region's people come to terms with today's sufferings.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate the call that I made in October 2010 in my capacity as the Secretary General of the OIC, at the international forum on Nuclear Security and Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, co-organized by Amman Security Colloquium. I called on participants to collectively work hard to declare the Middle East a nuclear-free zone in parallel to Central Asian countries' successful example.¹⁰

In conclusion, the process of developing this vision should start immediately through regional dialogue, which is the only way to build a political consensus.

¹⁰ Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *Moderation and Modernization: Vision for the Muslim World* (Jeddah: OIC, 2013), p. 681-85.