

A Bleak Political Forecast for the Middle East as a Region

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Consensus among Arab political writers is that the Arab state is unhinged. Arab states, in general, seem unable to cast off inaction or ineptitude, while distance between the ruler and the governed is increasing. Leaders remain terrified of any political or economic liberalization that would take power from their hands. Meanwhile, non-state actors like Hizballah and al-Qaeda; smaller groups like Islamic Jihad, al-Aqsa Martyr's Brigades, and others in Palestinian areas; and state-specific Islamic political groupings like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas increase their popularity. Islamism remains a safe forum for venting frustrations; liberal newspapers will be closed, but not mosques. Increasingly over the last ten years, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and other states have suffered from terrorist attacks. In writing about the current state of affairs in the region, Arab writers recognize the rise of local militias, sectarian and domestic unrest that borders on anarchy or civil war, uncontrolled kidnappings, and unrestrained hooliganism. Add to this the noticeable upsurge in verbal chiding of regimes by the media, the unfinished Arab-Israel conflict/negotiation, and an Iranian resurgence that causes anxiety, if not fear, among Arab Gulf states and others in the region. Where will this all lead?

This summer's 2006 Hizballah-Israel War in Lebanon reflected, in great measure, the problematic issues that confront Arab national agendas: the internal weakness of the state and its political institutions, a cultural permissiveness that fails to punish lawlessness, political fragmentation, historic sectarianism, divinely-inspired political action, geographic neighbors (Syria and Iran) meddling, if not intruding, across porous borders, and non-state actors like Hizballah, evading accountability for instigating violence, death, and destruction. When driven by divine guidance, ideology has no constraints; it only has room for pragmatic adjustments to reach the next stage. It exploits media opportunities and uses elections to gain power.

In great measure, the 2006 Hizballah-Israel War did not have a definitive outcome ie. No distinct winners or losers can be declared. Results from this war are like the third-quarter score of an NBA game, or the half-time result of a closely contested football match. We do not yet know who will foul out, who will be given a yellow or red card, and who will go on a scoring spree. Smart folks avoid thinking in terms of winners and losers and think in terms of historical context and while preparing for more regional instability.

You cannot use numbers to make a determination. Was it the number of Lebanese/Israelis killed or civilians displaced that gives the tangible answers? Was it the number of Hizballah missile launchers or missiles destroyed, the amount of Israeli machinery disabled, the dollar amount inflicted on economies and infrastructures, or the loss of fighting capacity? The political fallout in Israel remains to be determined, the UNIFIL effectiveness to interdict Hizballah weapons is uncertain, Nasrallah's political future remains open-ended, and how Syria and Iran will play with their Hizballah client remains unclear. What kinds of cash outlays are proportional for the Sunni oil-producing states, as they seek to contend with Iran, Hizballah's paymasters in southern Lebanon?

What lessons will Europe, Israel and Middle Eastern states learn about the potential for katyusha rockets to be placed in the back of pick-up trucks and fired within a 20-km radius of major urban areas? Has the EU, in choosing to work under the UN flag, lost a wonderful opportunity to create and operate a rapid deployment force? And if so, what does it say about the EU collaborative undertakings of tomorrow that go beyond 'constructive dialogue'?

Rather than regarding the war this summer as a turning point, it must be interpreted as an example of issues unfinished or unresolved. Regionally, the war left questions open-ended but also focused others. We do not yet know how this war will influence the virulence of Palestinian resistance to the Israeli presence in the West Bank. We do know that the war will most likely slow down the intention of the Olmert government to withdraw from additional portions of the West Bank. What about Israeli deterrence? Did Israel require a clear-cut victory to communicate its intention to protect its borders and citizens? Tehran and Damascus would have to be naive and blind not to see the message Israel conveyed quite emphatically: if missiles are launched against the Jewish state, the response will be swift, immediate, and debilitating. But does the concept of deterrence matter to Hizballah, if it believes Israel has no right to exist? How will the war deepen or redefine the growing Syrian-Iranian alliance, which will be affected, additionally, by events in Iraq? Will the Lebanese state remain an appendage to its powerful Syrian neighbor?

With greater definition, this summer's war showed the ongoing erosion of the Arab state, the end of exclusive Sunni Arab control over the region, the spring of a new regional cold war between Iran, its allies and proxies on the one hand, and Sunni-dominated states on the other. Most troublesome of all, if the Arab state cracks more, and domestic unrest becomes chaos, the non-state actors will exploit this political terrain to undermine additional states in the region. All you have to do is connect the dots that cause frustration: coercive state actions, burgeoning numbers of the disinherited lower classes, rulers clinging to power without legitimacy, institutional corruption, nepotism, constant gurgling of anti-regime, anti-western, anti-American, or anti-Zionist outlooks, and many non-state actors, with access to oil revenue, pushing their destabilizing agendas. Ali Ibrahim wrote in *al-Sharq al-Awsat* in April 2006, that there is an "erosion of the state's role to the benefit of the leaders of sects or militias subservient or affiliated with religious institutions and sheikhs – and even clan leaders, in some cases. It is as if the modern [Arab] state has failed and the region is in danger of returning to the era of tribes, clans, and sectarian groups." If the Arab state does not crumble immediately, it will be due to two major forces: the common fear that Iran is rising to be an unpredictable regional power, and the support of local regimes by foreign powers seeking continued access to oil at a reasonable price.

If the Arab state hangs on, we cannot become unfocused while non-state and divinely-inspired actors buy time. Europeans already know that the Arab state has failed to create economies that will employ all of its citizens; this is a cautionary signal of the troubles that lie ahead for the region. Not recognizing the consequences of these realities is similar to having advance information about a coming tsunami, but doing nothing about it. There is no ready template or pill that will solve the problems for Arab countries. While we need a Marshall Plan for certain Arab states, the Europeans and the United States can only offer suggestions. Either secular Arab leaders step up, or history will pass the torch to the divinely-inspired, non-state actors, with all the negative - perhaps horrendous - implications for the world order over the next two decades.

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