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After Desert Storm...Desert Dilemmas?

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The "desert storm" has passed, but the Middle East remains suspended in the vortex of turbulent changes engendered by global and regional pressures. Stemming from the region's historical geopolitical significance, global pressures in the form of Western involvement have stimulated rapid economic development, irreversible social changes and unstable political modernization, transforming the Middle East in uneven and unpredictable ways. Even while attempting to advance the prosperity of their peoples, Middle Eastern nations have sought to preserve their individual cultural identities in the face of relentless external pressures and the fundamental changes they have wrought. In the process, their social fabric and body politic have been riven with deep-seated tensions.

The headline-grabbing crises sparked by Iraq's reckless invasion and annexation of Kuwait sharply underscored the explosive volatility of these deeper tensions in contemporary Middle East. The riveting "Nintendo" pyrotechnics of the ensuing Gulf War and the astonishing incompetence of the huge Iraqi military, armed to the teeth with some of today's most sophisticated weaponry, sharply illustrated the dangers and paradoxes inherent in the clash between modern technology and archaic cultures. Although not unique to the Middle East, but grossly misunderstood in the West, the deeper tensions in the region result from the encounter of societies organized around traditional religious beliefs with the relentless encroachment of a secular global culture, from the class, religious, and ethnic divisions that typically emerge in societies undergoing economic development and political modernization, and from the dynamism of mass political participation and the rigidity of authoritarian political institutions. Like all historical transformations, the profound social, economic, and political changes and the tensions they produce offer both challenges and opportunities to the region's leaders and peoples.

By international standards, the level of social and economic development in the Middle East is modest. Relative to the region's low socioeconomic level in 1960, however, economic growth and social development (especially health and education) have been impressive in the three decades since. According to the World Bank, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for the region averaged an annual growth rate of about 5%. In the 1970s, the rate of GDP growth for Saudi Arabia and Iraq averaged an astounding 10% and 11%, respectively. More significantly, economic prosperity fueled popular expectations of increased job opportunities and improved living standards, to which all governments in the region responded by substantially expanding the service sector. Overall, the brisk pace of economic development doubled per capita incomes since 1960.

Economic success in the Middle East has not been without its problems, however. Coinciding with the onset of world-wide recession in the early 1980s, economic growth began to slow measurably due to a combination of factors. Inflationary pressures created by the rapid development of the previous decade shrank national and individual earnings in real terms. For non-oil producers, debt-service ratio increased as their demands for imports continued unabated. For OPEC countries, oil revenues shrank in real terms because of the reduced value of the dollar, the currency in which oil payments were made. Energy conservation measures in industrialized countries reduced demand for OPEC oil, while the entry of Britain, Norway, Mexico, and the Soviet Union into the world oil market further cut into OPEC oil revenues. Finally, conflict within OPEC over pricing and cheating by members on production quotas undermined the cartel's monopoly over the world oil market. In 1986, the market crashed, as world oil prices plummeted from $35-a-barrel in 1981 to $20-a-barrel in 1986. This was most dramatically evident in the precipitous drop in Saudi Arabia's oil revenues from $113 billion in 1981 to $19 billion in 1986.

Economic prosperity also created deep social divisions and explosive political tensions which were now intensified by the economic slowdown. Across the
region, economic slowdown not only dashed expectations of continued good fortune raised by the prosperity, but also exposed the uneven benefits it bestowed. The oil-rich Gulf states, for instance, enjoy one of the world’s highest living standards which cannot be matched anywhere in the region. This has become a special source of seething discontent in the region’s less fortunate countries, where the rich conservative rulers of the Gulf states are viewed as violating the Koranic injunction concerning the responsibility of the rich to share their wealth. Additionally, these countries have not only been directly hit by the recession, but have also witnessed a sharp drop in valuable foreign remittances from their citizens working in the Gulf states, because these states have retreated the large expatriate labor force in response to the same region-wide recession. Saddam Hussein readily exploited this discontent, as he sought to give his invasion of Kuwait an aura of populist Pan-Arab legitimacy.

Within individual countries, economic prosperity improved health care, increasing life expectancy. But the limited success of family planning programs in Egypt, Tunisia, Turkey, and Morocco and their total failure in other countries of the region have contributed to rapid population growth, vitiating any sustained benefits of economic prosperity for the people. Moreover, the shift from agriculture to manufacturing and industry encouraged massive rural-to-urban migration, swelling the population of cities. More dangerously, the teeming urban populations, hurt by the recession-induced cutbacks in government consumer subsidies, have become readily susceptible to violent political mobilization by the growing numbers of both religious and secular extremist groups. One such group assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in October of 1981. Others, financially backed by Libya, Syria, Iran, or Iraq, and even by local merchants hurt by the cut-backs in consumer subsidies and channeling money to them through the tightly-knit informal networks of the bazaars, have constructed elaborate infrastructures, providing social services and economic support to the alienated urban masses. In Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, for example, extremist groups have established secular and religious schools for children, literacy classes for adults, vocational training for unemployed youth, as well as extensive but informal financial networks which channel credit and capital for business enterprises. Popular political support for extremist groups in the Middle East is thus rooted neither in the supposed fanaticism of these groups nor in the ostensible irrationality of those who support them. Instead, it stems logically and rationally from the precarious material conditions and harsh realities of daily existence fostered by the abject failure of Western-supported authoritarian regimes in the region to even recognize the need for, much less secure, a semblance of distributive justice in the face of impressive macroeconomic development and overall prosperity.

Reinforcing the social inequities that spawn political extremism are the class divisions fostered by state-led strategies of economic development. As elsewhere, these strategies have been the key to economic prosperity in the Middle East. But also as elsewhere, they have proven to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, state-led growth policies created new social classes — an urban working-class dependent exclusively on wage labor, a sizable lower-middle class of traders, shopkeepers, and other self-employed entrepreneurs engaged in low capital-intensive enterprises with small profit margins, and a rapidly growing educated middle class comprised of government bureaucrats, professionals, and big businessmen and industrialists often closely allied to Western multinational corporations — who perceive their long-term prosperity tied to the continuation of these policies. On the other hand, the structural imbalances inherent in economic development undermined the legitimacy of state-led growth policies. In particular, the private sector and allied middle-class groups now saw their futures threatened by the continuation of these policies under regimes becoming increasingly authoritarian in the face of growing discontent among the lower- and lower-middle classes. These political pressures, combined with the 1980s’ recession and the demands by Western donors (e.g. the United States) and lending agencies (e.g. the International Monetary Fund) for structural adjustment, have forced Middle Eastern states to institute infitah (economic liberation). Entailing a general move from planned to a market economy, shift of investment resources from the urban to the rural sector and from the public to the private sector, increased foreign investments and production for exports instead of domestic consumption, infitah hurts all groups, but those in the lower socioeconomic ladder more than others. This unequal impact of economic liberalization has accentuated sharp income and lifestyle differences and intensified class antagonisms.

Religion and ethnicity also fragment Middle Eastern societies. However, religious and ethnic conflicts in the region, as anywhere, are not immutable rooted in visible differences in language, behavior, and lifestyles. These characteristics define the social boundaries separating groups engaged in competition and identify the political criteria on which status and resources are to be allocated. For instance, Palestinians are Arabs, and there are Christian as well as Muslim Palestinians. But the consolidation of a separate Palestinian ethnic identity...
occurred as a result of their inferior social, economic, and political status in communities with which they came into contact throughout the Middle East. Also, religion and ethnicity interact with each other, and with class divisions, to create multiple identities. Which identity is invoked will depend on the social context of political conflict. For instance, Israeli law guarantees the rights of all citizens, but the law is applied differently for Arab and Jewish citizens. In the context of Arab-Jewish conflict, then, socially constructed ethnicity becomes the basis for applying the same law differently. In the context of Israeli politics, however, social bases of support for the major parties show the political relevance of the historical distinction between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews. The former, traditionally dominating Israeli social, economic, and political life, tend to vote for the liberal Labor Party. The latter, traditionally predominating in lower-middle classes, tend to vote for the conservative Likud Party. Sephardims, moreover, had more in common culturally with Palestinians who remained in Israel after 1948 than with the Ashkenazims with whom they shared little except their Jewish identity. Over the years, however, forced by the Ashkenazims' negative stereotyping of all Arabs, Sephardims have made a concerted effort to differentiate themselves from the Palestinians. They have also moved up the socioeconomic ladder as Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza have taken over the lowest of menial jobs in Israel. Finally, there is growing evidence that the recent influx of large numbers of Russian Jews, many of whom are middle-class professionals, may exacerbate class and ethnic divisions in Israel.

In the Middle East, as anywhere, class, ethnicity, and religion combine in complex and mutable ways to produce highly volatile social conditions in which multiple identities can propel political conflicts in unpredictable directions. And because most states in the region are run by authoritarian regimes (Turkey and Israel are the only liberal democracies, although Turkey has also experienced military rule), peaceful channels of political expressions are virtually nonexistent. Social conflicts legitimized in the idiom of religion and ethnicity inevitably explode into political violence, increasingly pushing the coping abilities of these regimes to the limit. In Iran in 1979, they exploded in a revolutionary upheaval which overthrew the Shah, bringing Ayatollah Khomeini's Muslim fundamentalist regime to power. The Iranian revolution posed a dangerous challenge to both the politically and socially conservative regimes of the Persian Gulf and the politically conservative but socially progressive regimes elsewhere in the region. The former responded by repressing political dissent, especially after 1987 when Iranian pilgrims visiting Mecca for the hajj instigated violent demonstrations, and by creating the Gulf Cooperation Council to coordinate mutual security arrangements against revolutionary threats from Iran. Other regimes have responded by a combination of intensified repression (Syria and Iraq) and limited reform (Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan). The success of these strategies remains uncertain.

In general, the tension between social turmoil engendered by dashed expectations of continued prosperity and rigid political institutions unable to move things forward again makes all Middle Eastern governments vulnerable to popular disaffection. Some form of political liberalization to accompany the current wave of economic liberalization in the region seems almost certain. Labelling them as democratization is risky. Successful democratization requires sustained economic prosperity to satisfy the demands of newly-enfranchised groups. With a reported global shortage of investment capital, it is uncertain if Middle Eastern economies can grow fast enough to meet increased popular demands. Moreover, democracy requires a culture which tolerates diversity of views, including distasteful ones. No Middle Eastern country, not even Israel with its much-vaunted commitment to democratic values, comes even close to fostering such a culture, protestations from the region to the contrary notwithstanding. Further yet, democracy ultimately rests on the sanctity of individual rights, including the right of one individual to discriminate against another. Neither government nor people will tolerate such rights in a region where group identities supersede individual autonomy and political animosities run deep. The plight of the Kurds is tragically symptomatic of this. Absolutely no one in the region has come to their support. Finally, the push for liberalization in the Middle East, ostensibly being spearheaded by the historical carriers of liberal values, the secular Westernized middle-class, may yet turn out to be the most ironic of twists in Middle Eastern political development. Tentative steps toward political pluralism in Algeria, Egypt, and Jordan indicate that Muslim religious fundamentalists, for whom anything Western is anathema, will readily capitalize on the popular disaffection with infitah and insensitive Western-supported rulers to emerge victorious in the great game of democratic elections.

It may, therefore, behoove any would-be peacemakers, especially outsiders who scarcely understand the nuanced complexities of Middle Eastern societies, to heed carefully Princeton historian Charles Issawi's apposite aphorism: "God sent Moses, and he couldn't fix it; He sent Jesus, and he couldn't fix it; He sent Muhammad, and he couldn't fix it."