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The Middle East and North Africa: Cauldron of Conflict

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Synopsis

The Middle East and North Africa is a cauldron of conflicts driven by sectarian and ethnic animosities. Winning the existential battle requires acknowledgement that the region's states are multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-tribal entities. It demands a shift in mindset to overcome deep-seated fears and seek solutions to which all are parties.

Commentary

TO THE outside world, the Middle East and North Africa is a cauldron of intractable conflicts within intractable conflicts, much like sets of Russian matryoshka dolls of decreasing size placed one inside the other. The list of animosities is endless: Palestinians and Jews hate each other; Arabs detest Persians; Turks distrust Kurds as agents of colonialism; Sunnis despise Shiites; Israelis see black African refugees as a mortal threat; Gulf citizens envision hordes of Asian and Arab workers claiming title to their family-run states; and Muslims eye non-Muslims as impure encroachments.

Yet as disparate as the concerns of Arabs, Iranians, Israelis, Turks, Sunnis, Shiites, Christians and Kurds seem, they all are rooted in often existential fears that are frequently exploited for elites' political expediency.

Exploiting fears

In a region in which perceptions of history dictate modern-day attitudes, those fears call into question the sustainability of anchoring a country's national identity on the common ethnic, religious or tribal roots of one group that has the power to impose itself.

The sustainability of the model is further threatened by globalisation, enhanced mass transportation and ever greater mobility. As a result, national boundaries seem increasingly fragile as groups like the Kurds in Syria and Iraq carve out entities of their own and religious groups in Iraq find themselves caught between a sectarian government they do not trust and a jihadist force they fundamentally dislike.

To some in the Middle East and North Africa, the fears are truly-felt existential concerns. For others they are the product of historic trauma. Yet others, cynically and opportunistically exploit them to whip up national emotion in a bid to retain or enhance power. Often, these various drivers overlap to deepen the region's vicious circle from which there seems no way out.

Pressures from trade unions and human rights groups on energy-rich Gulf states like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to adhere to international labour standards are putting on the agenda what for many of the smaller states is the elephant in the room: the survivability of countries whose vast majority of the population have no rights and no prospect of acquiring rights over generations and whose presence is solely to enhance the wellbeing of a small minority of nationals.

It is a model that seems increasingly unviable. Yet, acknowledging this reality can be traumatic. For Qataris and Emiratis it raises the spectre of an uncertain world with none of the familiar crutches. Loss of control of their state and society shaped by their national, cultural, religious and tribal identities would set them adrift without an anchor.

They would be defenceless against the shenanigans of their bigger brothers Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. Keeping those fears alive has helped ruling families run their states as family-owned enterprises.

The threat of pluralism

Fears in the Gulf are not dissimilar to those of Israelis who want to see the majority in their state to dictate its identity and culture. Maintaining that majority against whatever legitimate non-Jewish demands – Palestinian national rights alongside Israel and equal rights within the boundaries of the Jewish state, or the right to asylum of refugees from the horrors of the Horn of Africa - is written into Israel's DNA even if Jews no longer face the existential, genocidal threats of the past. Yet, like in the Gulf demographics could be Israel's undoing. Pluralism and inclusiveness is a double-edged sword.

Israel shares perceptions of the downside of pluralism and inclusiveness with states across the region. Those principles pose an existential threat to the staunchly Sunni Al Sauds who established and maintain control of their kingdom on the basis of a sectarian, inward-looking exclusive interpretation of Islam. They also threaten the grip on power of the minority Sunni Al Khalifas in majority Shiite Bahrain.

Deep-seated Saudi animosity towards Iran and the kingdom's fuelling of the Sunni-Shiite divide that is ripping the Middle East apart is rooted in the challenge posed by Islamist governments like that of Iran or that of deposed Muslim Brother Mohammed Morsi in Egypt that have or had some degree of democratic legitimacy.

A true embrace of pluralism and inclusiveness would by the same token undercut efforts by the Egyptian military to preserve its perks and privileges as well as embattled Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's struggle to hang on to power.

Breaking the vicious circle

As the Middle East and North Africa enters its fourth year of what is likely to be a long drawn out, tortuous process of change, it is becoming increasingly clear that the hopes in 2011 of a new dawn sparked by the toppling of autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were little more than pie in the sky. Nevertheless, the genie of inevitable change has been let out of the bottle.

What we are witnessing is the Middle East and North Africa's most existential battle to date, shrouded by vicious sectarianism across the region, a temporary revival of autocracy and repression in Egypt, motion without movement in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, senseless slaughter in Syria and horrendous killings in Iraq. It is the battle of inclusiveness versus exclusiveness and for the acknowledgement that the region's states are multi ethnic, multi-religious and multi-tribal entities.

Winning that battle is no mean feat. It means a dramatic shift in mindset that overcomes deep-seated fears - the most irrational of emotions - and seeking solutions to which all, not just a few, are parties. Surveying today's Middle Eastern and North African landscape offers few straws of hope. But without that dramatic shift that is likely to emerge only when the alternative becomes too costly, the Middle East and North Africa is doomed to remain a cauldron of ever-more bloody conflict.

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