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MIDDLE EAST STATES AND THE APPROACHING 21st CENTURY

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Although the Gregorian calendar and its coming year 2000 carries no special resonance for the Middle East's Muslims and Jews, the peoples of the region do see a significance in this date. It really does mark a useful milestone to measure the area's progress, problems, and current status.

Earlier in the century, many in the region adopted the Eurocentric term «Middle East» to describe the area where they lived. Doing so marked an undeclared acknowledgement of Western superiority. That imbalance remains in force today, despite their achievements—the attainment of independence, withdrawal of imperial powers, and consolidation of national identities. Engaging in discussions regarding their place in the world entering the 21st century is another tacit acknowledgement that they live in a West-centered universe. At the same time, though, the region's countries and peoples do happen to be at a crossroads, facing multiple challenges and difficult choices at the same time that old views and ideological systems have eroded.

One can begin to analyze these choices by examining developments in three overlapping, but nonetheless distinct, spheres: the state framework; the international environment; and the socio-cultural sphere.

The State Framework is extremely important given the division of the world into national states. Originally one of Europe's gifts (perhaps a dubious one) to the world, it was implanted in the Middle East, by and large, at the end of World War I with varying degrees of success, more so in Turkey, less so in the Arab world. Now, at the end of the century, one can state confidently that the territorial state has won out in the Middle East over all other competing political frameworks and ideologies—pan-Arabism, pan-Islam, and pan-Turanism.

Pan-Arabism posed special problems for Arab regimes, often delegitimizing their very existence and rendering it difficult to openly articulate particularist «state interests» (*raison d'état*). Although Arabism survives, both in the cultural and political spheres, it is no longer the primary reference point by which leaders must articulate their policies. Interestingly, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was initially carried out in the name of «territorial nationalism» (returning the so-called 19th province» to the homeland (Iraq)); pan-Arab justifications for the move came only afterwards and were in any event rejected by Saddam's Arab opponents, who preferred the existing Arab state system framework.

Similarly, Kuwait's restoration to existence by the international coalition was done, among many other reasons, to reaffirm basic principles enshrined in the UN Charter regarding the community of independent states and their right to exist. The

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international system has a heavy bias in favor of existing states: look at how difficult it's been for the Kurds, and how nervous the thought of Iraq's fragmentation makes its neighbors, and the United States, too, for that matter. The current, tortured process by which a Palestinian state is emerging, accompanied by gradual Arab acceptance of the Israeli state, is an exception proving the rule.

Pan-Islam was never a viable program, although it was, and remains, a strong sentiment. Current Islamist opposition movements in the region may feel solidarity and even help each other. They operate, however, within the framework of their particular states. Even the Islamic revolution in Iran was never divorced from an Iranian national identity and acted on behalf of Iranian national interests, a trend which has steadily increased under Khomeini's heirs. As for pan-Turanism, it never had much of a chance either, given Atatürk's resolute renunciation of claims beyond Turkey's new borders.

The emergence of independent Central Asian republics on the ruins of the Soviet Union—but following Soviet-determined boundaries—further indicate the primacy of the sovereign state framework based on local nationalism, over larger, more diffuse frameworks for political loyalty.

Middle East states over the past half-century have steadily accumulated a preponderance of power vis-a-vis societal actors. However, the power to survive and dominate their societies has not been accompanied by the kinds of social and economic modernization which would allow Middle East states to compete with the world's more advanced economies. Indeed, it is perhaps ironic that the triumph of the state as a legitimate entity and focus of practical, pragmatic loyalty has now called attention to the shortcomings of regime performances.

Ruling elites have managed to survive and prosper against formerly powerful transnational ideologies. They have done a far poorer job in providing for the needs of their own populations. Autocratic rule and the absence of political-civil rights, cumbersome bureaucracies, low incomes among the non-oil producing states in the face of high population growth rates, corruption, and failure to properly deliver basic services (such as education, health care and suitable housing) to their youthful and increasingly urban populations are all recognizable features of most Middle East states.

The international environment has been crucial to shaping political, social and economic dynamics in the Middle East for over two centuries. We are all aware of the radical alterations which have taken place in recent years. The end of the Cold War and the results of the Gulf War have left the United States as the single great power in the region, and guarantor of the regional status quo. Managing this unipolar reality does not always suit the United States well, nor can we expect Russia to remain aloof from the areas adjacent to its southern frontiers indefinitely. The European Community, for its part, is acutely sensitive to developments on the south side of the Mediterranean, fearing the possibility of sudden waves of large-scale immigration. Nonetheless, it is the United States which provides the military might to deter any would-be revisionists in the region. Upheaval in any of its main regional allies—Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey—would pose difficult dilemmas for Washington. So would a collapse of the Arab-Israeli peace process, or Iraq's fragmentation.

Accompanying this unipolar strategic environment is the ubiquitous process of what is commonly known as «globalization» or, in Prof. Benjamin Barber's pithier term, «McWorld.» On the macro-economic level, this refers to the new orthodoxy of the

International Monetary Fund and the World Bank: restructuring and financial packages, subsidy-slashing, privatization and attracting foreign capital. Politically, this necessitates close ties between Middle East regimes and the West. No less profound are the socio-cultural aspects of McWorld—MTV, the NBA, Planet Reebok, Pizza Hut, and McDonald's—brought to us by satellite dishes, the whirring of fax machines, cellular phones and the Internet. But this global leveling comes at a high price to local cultures and values. How does a tea-drinking society like Indonesia cope with Coca Cola? How does Israel address the problem of the establishment of a McDonald's outlet on the site of a sacred war memorial? What happens when a pious Muslim can move from a televised Koran reading to gyrating, half-naked dancers at the press of a remote control button?

The combination of globalization, the failure of the various «pan» ideologies to overturn the territorial state system, and the very real failures of Middle East states to provide either material or spiritual/emotional satisfaction for their populations has created enormous uncertainty throughout the Middle East. Arab scholars and commentators refer to this as the «azma» (crisis). The endless conferences and discussions debating and analyzing the phenomenon have been termed by one Moroccan sociologist as «azmatology.» In many ways, we can speak of Middle East politics in terms of a «politics of identity,» a search for meaning, comfort, and transcendence against the confusion and uncertainty of an extremely complex, often unfamiliar materialist world.

Nationalisms—Jewish, Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Iranian; religiosity; tribal and ethnic ties—all are seen as providing the appropriate shelter from the storm. Both «McWorld» and its rival offspring—Barber calls it «jihad,» referring not just to Islamist currents and movements but all forms of reactive ethnicity and tribalism—pose grave challenges to those who seek to create and maintain civic-based, pluralist societies governed by the rule of law, able to creatively interact and compete with the modern world.

So where does the Middle East region stand as the century draws to a close, in the face of the socio-cultural, political and economic «azma»? Prof. Samuel Huntington has caused a great stir in academic circles by postulating a coming «clash of civilizations,» between Western, Confucian, Islamic, Japanese and perhaps African and Latin American units. But this broad-brush stroke of Huntington's creative pen has little relevance to the Middle East. Here the relevant factor for analysis are state-society relations within each state. It is the domestic political arena where the most crucial developments are taking place, the struggle for power and ultimately for the «soul» of Arab countries and between their ruling elites and Islamic opposition movements.

Iran, Turkey and Israel are each in their own category with regard to these issues but there, too, the «politics of identity» weigh heavily on the public discourse. Speculating on the likely outcome of this domestic struggle and the relations between domestic and regional developments is, of course, difficult and likely to include inaccurate projections. But only by trying to do so can we gain a better picture of the present and its potential futures.

Let me begin with the Arab world, a problematic term in and of itself, given the wide geographic, social, economic and political diversity within Arabic-speaking lands. The ideological vacuum left by the withering of pan-Arabism has provided fertile ground

for opposition Islamic fundamentalist movements carrying a populist message: they are able to claim authenticity in the face of alien cultural and imperialist challenges and to castigate unjust regimes and corrupt ruling elites. However, while Islamist movements are genuine, and durable parts of the social and political landscape in the Arab world, their appeal has not proved to be unlimited. Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan, for example, have witnessed the growth of a more educated, technocratic middle class, sensitive to its own cultural and religious heritage but refusing to be put into neat social and political dichotomies such as «tradition versus modernity,» «religion versus secularism,» and «authenticity versus alien cultures.»

Ruling Arab elites, for their part—acutely aware of the breakdown of order in Algeria following the sudden explosion of democracy there—are committed to a go-slow approach toward political and economic reform. Their caution is understandable, particularly given the absence of deep-rooted democratic political traditions as well as their primary concern with retaining power. However, they need to promote the expansion of the middle classes in order to buy the time and legitimacy that would allow for the evolution toward an authentic civil society, while avoiding excessive upheaval. «National pacts» between various societal forces and groups can perhaps serve as a basis for controlled incremental change and the slow expansion of democratic space. Both Jordan and Tunisia have experimented with this concept.

If we think for a moment about the ruling regimes in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, we find that their leaders have been at or near the top for at least a generation. This raises questions regarding the possibility of instability during the succession processes. Ironically, Arab monarchies—once thought to be destined for the dustbin of history—may possess legitimacy resources unavailable to Arab republics, and thus may be in better shape to manage the inevitable, nearly imminent transition of power to a younger generation than other Arab regimes.

Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have all experimented with political pluralism and economic restructuring, with varying degrees of success. To be sure, there are problems, even regarding the inevitable transfer of power. Mubarak has steadfastly refused to name a vice-president. Morocco's crown prince is frequently viewed as not up to the task of governing such a complex society. Jordan is much more than a one-person state but filling King Husayn's shoes will not be an easy task.

Some positive indicators in recent years include: the partial cooptation of Islamist movements in Morocco and Jordan and the repression of violent Islamists in Egypt (although the recent terror in Luxor and Cairo shows that total success may be unachievable); macro-economic figures pointing to at least modest growth; the expansion of a more autonomous banking sector, particularly in Morocco; the implementation of restructuring polices and signing of new agreements with the European Community; and even the appearance of local, non-governmental human rights groups and other signs of «civil society.» Most importantly, for the longer term, population growth rates have finally started to come down in Egypt and Morocco, and governments throughout the region have finally woken up to the dangers of such unchecked growth and implemented family planning policies. In general, progress by one state in managing contradictory socio-economic and political pressures and problems will have a beneficial, reinforcing effect in others.

To be sure, there are «failed states» in the Arab world, which have many of the same shortcomings and fewer of the redeeming virtues than the countries just discussed.

Algeria and Sudan come to mind immediately when speaking of «failed states;» Lebanon is still trying to recover from 15 years of civil war; Yemen's unity is fragile, and maintained by force. Syria is far more stable than it was in the 1950s and 1960s but remains a «Mukhabarat» («national security») state, ill-prepared for the next century. Saddam Husayn's Iraq is both a menace and a tragedy.

How Turkey and Iran manage the competing pressures of «McWorld» and «Jihad,» of the quest for meaning and identity («recognition», in Francis Fukuyama's terms) alongside the requirements of participating and competing in the modern world will surely be crucial to the region's future. Ataturk's heirs both feel threatened by the Islamist trend and are determined to assert Turkey's role as a regional power. The interaction of these two factors, the domestic and regional, has led the Turkish authorities and particularly the military to forge a new alliance with Israel. The perception of common strategic and political-cultural interests and willingness to act on the basis of those interests, marks one of the most significant regional developments of recent years and points to how domestic and foreign policy exigencies interact.

Iran, for its part, is far from being a monolithic, mono-cultural society. Its new President Khatemi may soften somewhat the hard edges of the Islamic revolution in the years ahead. At the same time, Iran's interest in being a regional hegemon and its striving to develop weapons of mass destruction are likely to continue.

Israel has always been the outsider in the Middle East, culturally, economically, and politically. But identity issues are central to Israel's daily discourse as well, intensified by its lively, competitive free press. The struggle over Israel's identity, 50 years after achieving independence, played an important part in the assassination of its prime minister in 1995. Here too, internal fissures—religious-secular; Western and Eastern Jewry; Jewish-Arab, liberal Zionism and more nationalist, muscular Zionism—and developments beyond its borders interact in complex, and mutually influential ways. As a result, portions of Israeli society are exhibiting greater religiosity and ethnic militancy, while one can also point to the evolution toward a more liberal, civic-minded and genuinely pluralist order. On some level, Israel will have to «reimagine» itself both as a state and a society, in order to maintain what can be termed the «rational Zionist center» which in turn will ensure lasting social and political stability. In my view, a rapid conclusion of contractual Arab-Israeli peace is crucial if Israel is to address these issues in creative and productive ways.

How might developments in the domestic sphere affect various states' regional politics and vice-versa? Domestic upheaval, along the lines of Algeria, or revolution, as in Iran, does not seem to be on the immediate horizon. Here again, I emphasize the importance of the state as a legitimate structure in the eyes of substantial portions of its populations. Ruling regimes possess at least some of that legitimacy; and, no less important, hold a near-monopoly on the instruments of force, giving them the ability to defend their interests, in the name of the state, against centrifugal forces.

In Turkey, the military-secular alliance appears strong enough to counteract the Islamic trend. In Egypt, the power of the state --epitomized by the bureaucracy, the military, and the economic elite—appears not to be mortally threatened by the Islamist opposition for the time being at least. The regimes of both countries, to be sure, cannot be complacent and will have to accelerate their policies promoting economic development. Whether or not this has to entail a postponement of greater political liberalization until a later stage—along the East Asian model—is an open question.

Morocco, on the other hand, is inching towards greater political liberalization and opposition parties might even conceivably assume the reins of government for the first time since 1960. Such policies are also vital in order to maintain Western economic and political support.

Regionally, one can speak of three areas of concern: the Arab-Israeli sphere, the Gulf, and historic Mesopotamia. At one level, Israel is only an interested spectator, watching as Arab domestic political and cultural struggles take their course. Even a quick conclusion of a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace cannot have the deciding influence on the future course of Arab politics. At the same time, Israel is not a passive bystander. Its policies, pronouncements and actions contribute to Arab-Israeli dynamics no less than those of any other country, and indirectly, but significantly, to inter-Arab and domestic Arab politics. The failure to conclude the peace process or a renewed slide toward war would narrow the abilities of Arab regimes to address underlying domestic problems while emboldening their opposition movements. It will also lead Arab governments to strengthen their domestic legitimacy by reviving the traditional slogans of Arabism and forging anti-Israeli alliances with one another (which, inevitably, will also result in the intensification of inter-Arab divisions).

As we have already seen, beginning with the terror attacks after the Oslo accords, a slide toward renewed Arab-Israeli hostilities reinforces the political strength of the Israel's right wing. Ironically, the renewal of hostilities would allow both Arabs and Israelis to ignore for a while longer the cultural challenges which «peace» and «normalization» pose to both sides. In the long run, though, the likelihood of achieving a formal, contractual end to the Arab-Israeli conflict is higher than the possibility of a meltdown. The price paid for reaching that point, however, may turn out to be significantly higher than had been anticipated just a few years ago.

In the meantime, the confluence of Turkish and Israeli interests pose new challenges to the Arab world, particularly Syria. Syria, Egypt, Iraq (and Iran) are palpably nervous regarding a return to the 1950s atmosphere of regional blocs, with Israel replacing Iraq in a potentially powerful Baghdad-Pact type alliance. Whether such an alliance will ultimately moderate or exacerbate regional tensions remains to be seen.

As for the Gulf, for the time being, American power serves to preserve the status quo, against Iraqi or Iranian ambitions. It may be less valuable for stemming domestic unrest within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) principalities. Bahrain faces a serious challenge from its Shi'i population; Saudi Arabian Islamists have shown that they can carry out terror bombings; Kuwaitis of all shades have expressed their unhappiness with the ruling family's excesses and failures. Differences between the GCC states, especially in recent years, highlight their inherent weakness and vulnerability, individually and collectively. To be sure, the regimes have taken steps to shore themselves up, e.g., promoting development, experimenting with new consultative institutions, and seeking ways to lessen their dependence on foreign labor. The fact that they possess a greater degree of «stateness» than a generation ago, in both governmental and societal terms, will help them cope with future challenges. However, to expect a trouble-free domestic and regional environment in the years ahead would be over-optimistic.

One of the great regional uncertainties is Iraq. Will Saddam remain in power and return to being a force in the region? How will a post-Saddam Iraq behave, both domestically and regionally? Northern Iraq is a potential flashpoint for regional

conflict; so are the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border and even the Shi'i south. Instability in other areas of the Middle East, whether in the Arab-Israeli arena, the Gulf, or inter-Arab tensions, such as between Syria and Jordan, or in Lebanon, will surely attract a reassertive Iraq to intervene in some fashion.

In sum, the Middle East region is likely to remain a zone of conflict and tension: lacking the capacity of achieving an East Asian-type economic miracle; its regimes broadly like-minded on major core issues and challenges, and bent on pursuing incrementalist policies to partially ameliorate their situation and buy time; its peoples seeking to find some kind of balance between cultural authenticity and dignity, on the one hand, and the need and desire to participate in the modern world, on the other.

Determinists would conclude that the deck is irreversibly stacked against the Middle East states: Robert Kaplan, for example, speaks ominously of «the coming Mideast meltdown,» in which secular elites will give way to people from below, «less sophisticated, less tolerant, less fatalistic and, in many cases more crudely ambitious.»

Such a gloomy and determinist prognosis, however, must be tempered by recognition that the lives of large numbers of Middle Easterners have improved significantly in recent decades, for example, in terms of life expectancy, literacy levels, sanitation; and water supplies; that the alternatives posed by opposition movements—Islamist, nationalist, or a combination—offer little in the way of concrete solutions to real problems; and that existing states, and regimes, have resources available to combat the political challenges from below. As in all human endeavors, the actions taken, and the choices made by political leaders and political and economic elites will decisively contribute to shaping the ways their states and societies enter into the next century.

So will the actions of external actors. For the Middle East, geography is indeed destiny. The region has not had the luxury, or ability, during the last two hundred years to isolate itself from the militarily and economically superior Western states. To be sure, as Prof. Bernard Lewis has pointed out, Middle Eastern peoples and entities now possess a much greater degree of control over their own destinies than at any time since the beginning of the 19th century. Nonetheless, the strategic, political and economic calculations of the «First World» will continue to play crucial roles. Here, the prognosis is mixed.

The latest, recent crisis over Iraq highlighted the inherent differences and growing tensions between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. France, too, has never been comfortable with U.S. policy in the Gulf. Nor are the European Union countries happy about playing second-fiddle and check disburser in the Arab-Israeli arena, without political influence. The United States, for its part, has always had difficulty maintaining consistent, and clear policies toward the region. «Dual containment» of Iraq and Iran is a neat slogan but not a substitute for dealing with the two countries, and especially Iran, in all of their complexities.

How «activist» the United States should be in the Arab-Israeli sphere is always an American dilemma. On the positive side, the traditional American tendency to swing between poles of excessive moralistic involvement in foreign affairs and isolationism appears to have been broken. Remaining engaged in the Middle East appears now to be a durable «given» in American policy, despite all of the difficulties it entails. Belatedly, the Western allies appear broadly like-minded regarding the need to adopt policies which will strengthen the gradualist political, economic and socio-cultural

trends in Middle Eastern societies, and contain those states or movements whose world views are inimical to these trends and to Western interests. More generally, barring a complete reversal in Russia and the return of a neo-Cold War, it seems unlikely that the «post-historical» states (again, in Fukuyama's terms), will engage in the kind of destructive competitiveness which characterized Great Power politics in the Middle East in previous eras. Surely, this provides an additional cause for optimism.