



A CALL FOR ARAB DIPLOMACY

Alongside Domestic Reform, Active Statecraft Is Needed
for True Middle East Stability

By Nabil Fahmy

The Arab World is rife with regional, bilateral, and domestic conflicts, from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf. Moroccan-Algerian tensions concerning the dispute over Western Sahara and the role of the Polisario Front remain unresolved. Libya has become a failed state, a fertile ground for extremists and terrorism, with sub-regional ramifications. Syria is a bloody battlefield, in spite of intensive diplomatic efforts sponsored by the United Nations. Iraq is still unsettled, with terrorists able to operate across the border between Iraq and Syria. Civil conflict continues to consume Yemen; as with the war in Syria, the fighting there is exacerbating tensions between regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Arab-Israeli conflict, nearly seven decades old, continues to make life unbearable for the Palestinians living under occupation. Egypt and Tunisia, the countries that ignited the Arab awakenings, are going through fundamental domestic transformations.

In the midst of all this turmoil, Arab diplomacy has been strangely absent. Some Arab countries have been providing military support for different protagonists in different conflicts, notably in Libya, Yemen, and in the war against terrorism in Syria and Iraq. Where, however, is Arab diplomacy? What diplomatic efforts are being made in every one of these cases are being led by non-Arabs or non-Arab organizations.

Throughout the second half of the last century, Arab leaders such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat of Egypt, Faisal and Fahd of Saudi Arabia, and Houari Boumediene of Algeria led conflict resolution efforts in various inter-Arab and regional problems, such as the Arab-Israeli dispute, the civil war in Lebanon, and the Iran hostage crisis. Today, Arab leaders are preoccupied with military conflicts in which they are directly engaged, and/or with their own domestic upheavals. True, but there are other deeply rooted reasons that explain the absence of urgently needed Arab

◁ Leaders at the 26th Arab League Summit, Sharm El-Sheikh, March 28, 2015. *Middle East News Agency/Xinhua/ZUMA Wire*

diplomacy: The Arab World is suffering from what I call a National Security Capability Deficit and a Managing Change Deficit. Together, these deficits have severely curtailed the capability of Arab states to pursue serious institution-led diplomacy. A revival of active Arab diplomacy is critical to the future stability of the Middle East.

Five years have passed since the beginning of the Arab awakenings, the drivers of which had been percolating for some time. It is imperative that we ask ourselves: Why did they happen? What are the outcomes? Where are we going from here? Will the next few years see more chaos in the Middle East, or a new order? And, given the intensive linkage between the domestic, regional, and global levels that have defined the dynamics of the Middle East over the last few years, it is also relevant to address the larger question of what place the region will occupy in world politics as well as regional diplomacy in the future.

Dreams and Disappointments

The Arab awakenings were in fact inevitable. The writing was on the wall. This should have been obvious to everyone, even in a region with a very high illiteracy rate. The fundamental reason behind the awakenings was the breakdown of the social contract between Arab governments and the constituencies they were governing.

“Freedom” and “social justice” are among the most prominent demands of these awakened Arab constituencies, irrespective of whether we are talking about North Africa, the Levant, or the Arab Gulf region. Two other important factors served as further catalysts for the awakenings. One is the extremely large proportion of Arab youth, well over 30 percent of the population, an age bracket that by its very nature calls for change and is impatient. Another important factor was the rapid evolution of communication technology, in particular satellite television, Internet, and social media. This weakened governmental control of information and provided knowledge access to the layman in diverse communities throughout the region, thus fueling aspirations and frustrations as people became more enlightened with respect to the fate and options of others around the world.

However, while change was inevitable, I argue that the turmoil was not. The deadly upheavals were a result of the Managing Change Deficit in the Arab World. While this crosses many domains, it is noteworthy that at the pinnacle of political power, the leaders of Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen had been in office between thirty and forty years (albeit in Syria the continuous power was passed from father to son). Ironically, these personal tenures were longer than those of individual monarchs in the region. This stagnation created rigid modes of governance, lack of vision, and an inability to manage or even recognize the need for change, conditions that ultimately contributed to the diminishment of Arab diplomacy.

External factors have contributed to the turmoil. In the upheavals of the Arab awakenings a significant number of regional players—here I refer to Turkey, Israel, and Iran—have attempted to take advantage of the instability. As a result, these three countries have seen a rise in their political weight in the region as well as in their diplomatic influence.

Another important and alarming factor to take into account is the emergence of dangerous non-state actors, particularly terrorist groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al-Nusra Front. These groups are essentially home-grown; terrorism in the Middle East is a direct derivative of the breakdown of the social contract and the absence of effective state institutions. But these non-state actors, in different forms and with different identities, have managed to transcend borders with terrorist operations on different continents.

Across the Arab World, there is great frustration with the results of the Arab awakenings. Some reminisce about the past; others agonize about their failed dreams. Neither sentiment is based on considered dispassionate thinking. Equally disappointing is that the Arab political center seems to be falling back into a state of apathy, rejecting incremental nation-building, especially in its political sense where it is most needed. Needless to say, mistakes were made by all. Reform has been delayed, if not derailed. The dreamers never really understood the magnitude of their success, and consequently the enormity and complexity of the nation-building effort ahead of them. I admit to a degree of naïveté myself.

After all the disappointments, I do not underestimate the challenges, and understand that even more frustration may lie ahead of us. Things may get better or worse, yet there will be no return to the past even if dreams of a democratic future are not realized. There are many indications, particularly in the public discourse in Arab media, that the Arab awakenings are alive, and that rampant poor governance will no longer be accepted or condoned. The power of technology and effects of information exchange have in fact already put limits to the centralization of authority. Even in the concept of partial transformation of society, which we witness today in the streets, syndicates, and parliaments, there is a new assumption of personal rights that are inconsistent with sustained arbitrary centralized authority only in government hands.

I am confident about my conclusions for why we had revolution rather than evolution, but I believe that it is premature to declare the Arab awakenings a failure. The region's transition is still ongoing. And that is an important reason for a revival of active Arab diplomacy.

Some legitimately ask why change in the Arab World is so difficult and chaotic. One answer is the absence of an Arab model for change in the twenty-first century. This is not eastern Europe of the post-Cold War era, wanting to join its western neighbors.

But another fundamental reason is that Arabs have been excessively dependent on external parties in their security needs, in their economic engagement, in the evolution of their societies, and, needless to say, in the resolution of their regional conflicts.

In essence, Arabs suffer from a National Security Capability Deficit. Historically, the overwhelming majority of Arab countries have been or are in security arrangements with international players or import an extremely substantial amount of their security and military hardware from abroad. This has been true throughout the Arab World, almost without exception, with foreign partners such as the Soviet Union/Russia, the United States, and European countries. The figures on economic investment and trade similarly weigh very heavily toward international rather than domestic markets and inter-Arab cooperation. As a result, international players are excessively drawn into regional developments to safeguard their interests or assist their allies. Consequently, international politics and priorities weigh heavily and often complicate regional developments.

In formulating new Arab diplomatic responses and strategies, one must caution against gross generalizations in making judgments and not draw conclusions that would seriously distort assessments and weaken potential policy proposals for how to move forward. The Arab awakenings have much in common; however, they are not identical. Developments in Egypt and Tunisia were and remain essentially home-grown, and bringing them to fruition will be determined most of all on the successes of domestic forces. The root cause of the situation in Libya was also domestic frustration. The ensuing chaos resulted from Muammar Gadhafi's systematic annihilation of government structures during his forty years in office. The chaos was exacerbated by the way the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervened after Libya's uprising began: NATO exceeded the scope of the humanitarian mandate provided by United Nations Security Council resolutions, and then provided little crisis management nation-building support after Gadhafi's collapse. The Arab League decision that provided political cover for NATO, while morally correct, was nevertheless diplomatically shortsighted in failing to insist a priori on clear plans for the aftermath of military operations. The uprisings in Syria and Yemen were likewise driven by domestic frustration and inept or excessively ruthless government responses; however, in contrast with the situation in North Africa, they are today fueled by regional and international geopolitics as much as, if not more than, local dynamics.

Basic Tenets of Managing Change

Any attempt to project the future amid the prevailing volatility of today's Middle East is risky, if not foolhardy. Nevertheless, strategic planning based on considered assumptions is a necessity for policy makers. Personally, I expect the next five years

will witness more good and more bad. Domestic pressures will force governments to open up their systems, yet often cause them initially to overreact with restrictive measures. Hopefully, overreactions will end once things stabilize. In Egypt and Tunisia, the balance between successes and failures will mostly be determined by domestic and economic factors; they will need regional and international support to redress the costs of instability since 2010–11. Additionally in Egypt as well as in Tunisia, legitimate domestic security concerns, influenced particularly by cross-border threats such as from neighboring Libya, will be a constraining factor but should not derail the reform process in the long term.

In the Levant, global and regional geopolitics, revolving around the U.S.–Russian and Saudi–Iranian rivalries in particular, seem to be the predominant factor. In Syria, these international and regional rivalries even supersede inter-Syrian rivalries at this point. The Vienna meetings, Geneva process, the Russian announcement of withdrawal of its military intervention forces, and American acceptance of an eighteen-month Syrian transition phase are welcome indications that Russia and the United States have concluded that diplomacy or at least crisis management is imperative.

The severe turmoil in the Middle East has raised questions about the borders mapped in the Levant according to the Sykes-Picot agreement after World War I. In conjunction with this, we have witnessed an increasingly polarizing and potentially catastrophic debate about ethnicity and sectarianism, raising questions about the very identity of citizens in the Arab World. Discussions about Syria, Libya, and Yemen have brought forth numerous proposals about decentralization, self-government, and federalism. At face value, these are worthy proposals if they are based on geography and topography. However, at closer look they appear to be defined by ethnic and sectarian considerations. This is a highly volatile prescription and in fact could have further destabilizing effects with cross-border ramifications throughout the Levant and Arab Gulf region.

Given that the Middle East cannot and should not live in isolation from the world community, the path forward should be navigated by upholding international norms and practicing rational regional realpolitik in crisis management and conflict resolution. Arab and Middle Eastern states will not find stability unless they see and respect international norms, not as an imposition from foreign powers but as a response to the demand of their own people.

At the same time, sober crisis management and conflict resolution should drive the international community to preserve existing government institutions and respect the sanctity of international borders. Stability through the respect of sovereignty and application of good governance are in the strategic interest of all of the conflicting state parties, even if shortsighted tactical gains may appear attractive and drive

opportunistic policies. Changes where they occur should be in the realm of practices and when called for personalities in response to the demands of national constituencies.

However, no changes should be countenanced with respect to borders, irrespective of how they were originally drawn. Nor should changes involve dismantling institutions at the expense of a country's security and stability. These are roads we cannot afford to travel in the present volatility. If we are to see the light at the end of the tunnel, these basic tenets must be respected by domestic, regional, and international players.

Arabs must become more engaged in determining the future of the region. If reshaping the region is once again left to foreign powers, the Arabs will only have themselves to blame for their complacency. Arab over-dependency on external forces has led to complacency in raising their national security capabilities, politically and militarily, particularly in comparison to non-Arab Middle Eastern states in the region, whether we're speaking of Turkey, Israel, or Iran. These three states have become overly influential, aggressive, and present in the regional conflicts associated with the Arab awakenings.

I find it difficult to envision stability in the Middle East with four of its major players at loggerheads. To move forward there must be a reorientation of relations between Turkey and Egypt as well as between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Such shifts will prove challenging if not impossible in the short term. Turkish sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is outlawed in Egypt, makes immediate rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo impossible. Saudi Arabia's concerns about Iran's overzealous engagement in the Arab Gulf countries, Iraq, and the Levant are deeply rooted and highly sensitive. A series of preliminary but substantial and concrete confidence-building measures by Turkey and Iran are necessary just to start a serious Arab dialogue with these countries. Turkey and Iran, using Sunni and Shiite Islam as a springboard for influence, must make clear commitments not to interfere in the internal affairs of neighboring states. Egypt and Saudi Arabia can reciprocate with actions acknowledging greater openness toward both countries.

The Arab World as a whole needs a diplomatic awakening and a renewed commitment to take charge of its own issues before calling on others to help. Arabs must reinvigorate its moribund regional organization, the Arab League. Strengthening its preventive diplomacy and crisis management capacities are paramount. As we enter a new era the Arab League should also lead a constructive, comprehensive dialogue not only with Turkey, Iran, and Israel, but with all neighboring states from sub-Saharan Africa to southern Europe and Asia.

Despite impressions to the contrary, Arab states continue to have more in common than ways in which they differ. Their historic legacy and shared cultural values should

not be underestimated. A common path forward is paramount if truly sustainable progress in the Arab World is to be achieved. Arab states must individually and jointly become more proactive diplomatically. The alternative, further diminution of Arab political weight, will prove disastrous to the region in this time of transition. It is imperative that the Arab states approach the changing world in wide-ranging agreement with the intention to continue building pluralistic, inclusive governments and reorienting their foreign policy away from excessive international dependency.

Ensuring true stability in the Middle East will require domestic political reforms in Arab countries. But it will also require a more robust Arab diplomacy. Arabs must look at the security paradigm in the Middle East from within nation-state boundaries, and also with respect to their immediate regional neighbors and beyond to sub-Saharan Africa and to Europe. Like the world itself, the Middle East is changing geopolitically and this needs to be addressed. The challenges ahead for a better future and regional stability are daunting, and this will require rational, proactive, and wise steps by strong and proud Arab states. Active Arab diplomacy will be a determining factor in whether the Arab awakenings are a success or failure. This new approach will also be among the factors in determining the place Arabs will have in the future world order, and in determining whether the Middle East will remain a cauldron of violence or proceed toward a more stable future.