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Iraq, Lebanon and Gaza: Middle Eastern Trends

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The first anniversary of Israel's Second Lebanon War occasioned much Israeli introspection. But it also calls for scrutiny of the wider Middle East, especially as last summer's war marked a tangible expression of important shifts that have taken place in the regional architecture. First and foremost, the war was not just another round in the perennial, seemingly intractable Arab-Israeli conflict. In fact, it was not, in the main, an Arab-Israeli war at all, but rather the first encounter between two non-Arab regional powers -- Israel and Iran. The Arab states, apart from Syria, were mere bystanders. Indeed, some of them were actually rooting for Israel to trounce Hizballah, Iran's Lebanese proxy, far more decisively than Israel actually did. Israel's failure to rebuff, or even seriously damage the Iranian-Shi'ite thrust that had penetrated the very core of the Arab East (*Mashriq*) was thus a setback for Sunni Arab regimes as well.

The "Arab world" is an evermore watery concept, in political terms, the Arab state system is in disarray and a confident and ambitious Shi'ite Iran is intent on filling the resulting vacuum. Secular nationalism, Arab and territorial, is increasingly on the defensive, if not on the wane. Two centuries and more of Western-style secularization has not resulted in a meaningful separation between religion and politics, or a secularization of the broad swathe of society. The formation of the League of Arab States at the close of the Second World War was a compromise between the unionist doctrine of Arab nationalism and the preservation of the new state order that had come into being at the end of the First World War. At the same time, it clearly represented Sunni Arab dominance in the Middle East, and marked a continuity with the older, Sunni Ottoman-dominated social and political order. Much of this is now in tatters: Arab nationalism is a spent force, and the existing state order and Sunni supremacy are both under serious threat.

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Western-style reform dominated the political and intellectual discourse in the region. However, in recent decades, this has been replaced by an almost obsessive emphasis on the need for "cultural authenticity". At present, Islamic fundamentalism excites the popular imagination far more than Western ideas. As recently noted by an Arab commentator, "most secular, liberal and

leftist parties...suffer from intellectual and organizational stagnation and have lost touch with the public as well as their own following.” The frailty of secularism and the infirmity of the Arab state have set the stage for the reassertion with a vengeance of religious and other primordial identities of family, tribe and sect.

In Iraq, Arabs and Kurds are going their separate ways and Sunnis and Shi‘is are engaged in a seemingly endless mutual slaughter; Lebanon is constantly tottering on the edge of civil war between Sunnis, Shi‘is, Maronite Christians and Druze; and the Palestinians, who do not yet have a state, already have two governments, in the wake of internecine warfare that finally ended with the Hamas takeover of Gaza. In their utter despair, Arab observers have noted that “all across the Arab homeland one reality seems to be imposing itself: civil war.” Thus, “the most urgent task is to keep the existing states from shattering into even smaller entities founded upon narrow sectarian, ethnic or tribal affiliations...[and] to steer the Arab world out of its present era of darkness.”

The Palestinian national movement under the PLO had three articles of faith that were to be preserved at all costs, based on the lessons learned from the defeat of 1948: national unity (*al-wahda al-wataniyya*); the uniformity of representation (*wahdaniyyat al-tamthil*); and the independence of Palestinian decision-making (*al-qarar al-Filastini al-mustaqill*). Hardly anything of these lofty ideals remains intact today, as the movement has sunk to one of its all-time lows, racked by internal dissension and general disorder. It is not just the personal weakness of Mahmud Abbas that explains the Palestinian predicament. The Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections of January 2006 and Hamas takeover of Gaza in June 2007 were not merely coincidental. They were the consequences of the historical process of secular nationalist decline and concomitant enhancement of Islamic identity in the popular consciousness of the Palestinian people.

The Palestinians are not unique in this regard. Islamic identity is central to all other Arab societies, as well. But in some, such as Egypt and Jordan, the modern state has sufficiently developed the institutions of social and political control, buttressed by state-of-the-art modern technology. And it is they who maintain the existing political and socio-economic order, warding off its Islamist opponents, or at least keeping them in effective check. The Palestinians always looked down their noses at their Jordanian neighbors, whom they tended to regard as primitive cousins from the desert. But the Jordanians have been monumentally more successful than the Palestinians in the craft of state-building. The Hashemites, starting from scratch, have created one of the more stable Middle Eastern states. In contrast, when Yasir Arafat had the opportunity, after the signing of the Oslo Accords and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, to make the great historical shift towards statehood rather than preferring a continuation of the “revolution,” he hemmed and hawed and finally opted for the latter. Thus, the Palestinian state-in-the-making never came into being and the essential machinery to contain Hamas was therefore not in place when it was really needed. The results are plain for all to see.

Iran, an expansionist aspiring hegemon at the heart of the so-called “Shi‘ite Crescent,” is now filling the void left behind by the Sunni Arab elites and their fatally compromised secular nationalist project. The Sunni Arab quartet - Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf States - has tentatively coalesced to block the Iranian

thrust. However, it is an alliance of the weak, the demoralized and the insecure, in sharp contrast to an Iranian Shi'ite sense of self-assuredness and belief that it is now "Shi'ite time." In this new regional order, primordial identities play decisive roles not only in domestic politics but in inter-state relations as well. The dominant fault line between Middle Eastern states is no longer monarchies versus republics or pro-American governments versus pro-Soviet ones, but the Sunni-Shi'i divide. Likewise, fears of domestic subversion among Sunni Muslim ruling elites are no longer focused on threatening ideological currents -- communist, socialist, nationalist or otherwise - but rather on Iran's support of its fellow Shi'ite communities, which constitute significant and problematic minorities in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia (and in the case of Bahrain, they are a majority; in fractured Lebanon, they constitute the largest single confessional group).

Iranian aspirations should nonetheless be viewed in proper proportion. Iran is not the Soviet Union, nor is it about to become an international superpower. Tehran has its own serious vulnerabilities, domestic, economic and military. The Iranians, and others too, would be wise not to overstate the real impact of "Shi'ite time."

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