

Grim Prospects for the Middle East in 2013

By Patrick Seale

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The coming year is unlikely to be a happy one for the tormented Middle East. Although some dictators have fallen and many Arabs are now demanding their rights, there is no escaping the fact that the balance sheet of the past two years remains profoundly negative. In no country of the Arab Spring is there as yet any convincing sign of peace and reconciliation, of good governance, of a better standard of living for ordinary people, of an enhanced sense of citizenship, let alone of genuine democracy.

Some countries have suffered more than others. In Syria, the cries and tears of the martyred population – the tens of thousands killed, the hundreds of thousands wounded, maimed, starving and displaced – weigh heavily on the conscience of the world. Yet there is no end to the agony. To quote UN envoy Lakhdar al-Brahimi, Syria is in danger of descending into hell, if it is not there already.

Individual Arab countries are not the only casualties. The Arab political order has been dealt massive blows, and remains in great disarray. What does this mean? It means that the ability of Arab states to work effectively together has been greatly reduced. They find it difficult to affirm their independence from predatory foreign powers or defend Arab causes in the international arena. The Arab voice today carries little weight.

Some Arab countries have acquired great wealth, but it is no exaggeration to say that the Arabs as a whole – seen as a block of like-minded people sharing a language, a history and a system of beliefs -- are not in much better shape than they were more than sixty years ago when Arab Palestine was lost to the Zionists in 1947-48, and when the Arab world was comprehensively defeated by Israel in 1967.

Why do I hold these pessimistic views? Look at the evidence.

** Two major Arab countries, Syria and Iraq – each of whom once had a critical role in defending Arab interests -- today face fragmentation and dismemberment, even the possible loss of their national identity. We are witnessing nothing less than the redrawing of the map which created these states out of Ottoman provinces after the First World War.

** Another curse from which the Arabs are suffering is the flare up of hate between Sunnis and Shi'is. These brothers in Islam -- worshipping the same God and honouring the same Prophet -- behave today like irreconcilable opponents. Nothing has weakened the Arabs more than this fraternal feud, and nothing has brought greater joy to their enemies.

When, in 2003, the United States disbanded the Iraqi army and outlawed the Ba'ath party -- the two key institutions of the Iraqi state -- it brought down the state itself, triggering a Sunni-Shi'i civil war in which hundreds of thousands died and millions were displaced. Two results of the conflict were particularly disastrous: first, the poison of sectarian conflict spread throughout the Arab region. Secondly, Iraq, under Shi'a leadership, lost its traditional role of serving as a counterweight to Iran. The resulting upset in the balance of power aroused fears among some Gulf Arabs of Iranian domination.

For independent observers, such as myself, these fears were greatly exaggerated, but they have had the unfortunate consequence of causing many Gulf Arabs to view Iran as an enemy rather than a partner -- and to turn to the U.S. for protection. No doubt, American and Israeli propaganda against Iran have played their part.

** Egypt, the traditional leader and most populous of all Arab countries, lives under the shadow of bankruptcy. Its economy is on its knees. Tourism and foreign investment have dried up. Fertility rates, which should have been controlled from the 1950s onwards, were allowed to soar. Over-population has robbed much of the population of any reasonable prospect of a better life. Dependence on American aid, and on American-controlled institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, has greatly restricted Egypt's ability to pursue an independent foreign policy in the Arab interest.

** The Palestine cause, central to Arab pride and identity, is all but lost. The two-state solution is virtually extinct. The Arabs face the prospect of a devastating defeat, completing that of 1948. Rich Arab states have failed to use their leverage with the U.S. and Europe to demand justice for the Palestinians. Another reason is Palestinian disunity. A third is the rise in Israel of fanatical religious-nationalists determined to create a Greater Israel in which Palestinians would either be corralled like serfs into isolated *bantustans* or driven off the land altogether.

Israel has been able to steal Palestinian land, spurn peace, prevent any expression of Palestinian statehood, dominate the region militarily and strike its neighbours at will, for one principal reason: it has enjoyed the limitless support of the United States. Although elected for a second term, President Barack Obama still seems reluctant to confront pro-Israeli forces which have achieved great influence in the United States, not least in the U.S. Congress. Yet the paradox is that many Arabs still turn for protection to the United States! This is folly. The Arabs must break loose from American apron strings and learn to defend themselves.

What New Year resolutions would I dare to recommend to Arab leaders?

*First, do everything possible to heal the crippling Sunni-Shi‘i rift, which gravely weakens the Arab world. An early move would be to summon a grand conference in Mecca of *ulema* of all sects and tendencies – and keep them there until they hammer out their differences.

*Secondly, protect what is left of Syria – and its central role in containing Israel. Stop the killing by bringing the regime and its opponents to the negotiating table, whether they like it or not. There is no military solution to the crisis. The only way to end the orgy of destruction is to impose a ceasefire on both sides, halt the delivery of funds and weapons to the regime and the rebels, isolate murderous extremists in both camps, and mobilise the United States and Russia, as well as the European Union, Egypt, Turkey and Iran, in support of a political transition. The key issue is not whether President Bashar al-Asad stays or quits. At stake is the preservation of a unitary Syrian state. This must be done to protect Syria’s unique historical heritage, its state institutions, its ancient minorities, and its vital regional role in defence of Arab independence.

*Thirdly, demand justice for the Palestinians even if it means threatening a breach with the United States and the expulsion of American bases from the Gulf.

*Fourthly, start a strategic dialogue with Tehran. Enmity between Arabs and Iranians is a profound mistake. Only an Arab-Iranian partnership – a partnership between equals based on mutual trust and mutual interests -- can protect the vital Gulf region from the dangers of war and from the ambitions of external powers.

It is probable that only a radical rethink of current policies, attitudes and alliances will rescue the Arab world from the dark pit in which it finds itself. But which Arab leader will dare undertake such a task?

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