

## OPINION

### Middle East, old and new<sup>1</sup>

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This article is the text of an address given by Ghassan Salamé at the ‘Oil and Money’ Conference convened in London, UK, on 21 October 2009. In it, the author deals with what the ambiguous, amorphous, elastic and politically expedient term ‘Middle East’ has connoted historically and what it may or may not denote in political formulations of a given moment. In particular, American, European, Turkish, Iranian, Israeli and Arab views – and the serious implications of these – are examined with superb economy of style. Whether as part of the US-delimited region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) or whether as affiliated to the European Union via a Mediterranean Union based on trade relations, the exclusion or inclusion in the Middle East is not a simple matter where regional players such as Iran and Turkey have historical extraterritorial ambitions which would, yet again, appear to be coming to the fore – even when such may threaten internal balances. The author argues that Israel’s position is increasingly problematic due not only to Palestinian demographics, but also to its recent experience against Hezbollah which has mastered asymmetrical warfare at a time when the ability of the United States to defend its primary ally in the region has been cast into doubt. The states of the Arab World have proved ineffectual and certain of them are looking to ‘escape’ from the Middle East into Africa (Libya) or looking to formulate a new regional constellation in which Turkey and Iran will play leading roles (Syria).

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Is there really something called ‘The Middle East’? I normally try to avoid using such an empty geographic designation of the area, drawn from days in the early 20th century when ships leaving the Port of London and moving east needed to stop for refuelling in the Near East (which meant Malta and Cyprus), the Middle East (understand Suez and Aden), and then the Far East (that is, Bombay and beyond). But London is no more the centre of the world, nor do navies need to stop at coal stations to cross the oceans, and the so-called ‘Middle East’ survived as a phrase designating an area with no agreed definition, no clear borders and, worse, no cultural or political content. The expression was inherited only *faute de mieux*.

Nothing can betray the emptiness of that expression as much as the chaotic multiplicity of the area’s definitions. Air France’s ‘Middle East’ is not exactly the same as used by British Airways. In the United States, The Secretary of State’s ‘Middle East’ is not the one known in the Pentagon’s corridors; and the Foreign Office definition does not fit that used by the Quai d’Orsay or by the Chinese Foreign Ministry. Some

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define it very narrowly as ‘Israel and its neighbourhood’; others, taking note of the Soviet Union’s collapse, include in it all the ‘-stans’ of Central Asia, and there has been an unending debate on whether Sudan, North Africa and, of course, Iran and Turkey are part of it. Once, asking an American official where the Middle East was, I got the perplexing, though rhyming, answer: ‘From Marrakech to Bangladesh’. While nicely put, such is hardly operational.

This unusual chaos on the very definition of a region, not endured – at least not with the same intensity – by Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa or the Indian Subcontinent, nor by Europe, is far from being accidental. There is indeed an open war on how to define the Middle East and, implicit in that war, are deep differences on the very parameters for definition. Naturally, each of the players tends to define it in a way that fits his interests. So, one has an infinity of accumulating, overlapping, competing Middle Easts vying for approval. Let me remind the reader of some of their latest incarnations.

One such incarnation was introduced by US State Secretary James Baker at the opening of the Madrid peace conference in 1991 when he said, ‘For over four decades the world waited for this week’. That was the time when, building upon the defeat of Iraq in Kuwait, the United States was trying to engineer a so-called Middle East and North Africa (MENA) area of peace. The concept, modestly and realistically proposed by the indefatigable Baker, was soon to become a fully fledged fantasy in Shimon Peres’s book on *The New Middle East* (1993), a dream in which all countries in the Middle East would accept Israel’s military supremacy over the area, open their oil riches before her entrepreneurs, and pressure the Palestinians into accepting a minimalist demilitarized Bantustan majestically called ‘the State of Palestine’. A peace-loving Middle Eastern new ‘*Homo economicus*’ was to replace the Middle Eastern *Homo sapiens* to whom we are accustomed. *Business* was to replace *war*. Regional integration was to put an end to disintegrating conflicts. Normality was to succeed exceptionalism.

Not to be outdone by the United States, Europe launched its own Euro-Med partnership around the same time. For Europeans, the politically neutral Mediterranean Sea was a more reassuring regional framework than the permanently turbulent Middle East. Europe was to replace the United States in the driver’s seat, but the objective was still the same: Israel in, Iran out, Turkey on the margin, and a prosperous, pacified Mediterranean as a result with – and this was a top European priority – as few illegal migrants as possible crossing the *Mare Nostrum* from South to North. That was the gist of the so-called Barcelona Process, recently, though unconvincingly, revived into a Union for the Mediterranean.

Both the US-inspired MENA and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership were closely linked to the ‘peace process’, but that process was to be suddenly halted after Yitzhak Rabin’s assassination in 1995. The two frames were equally inspired by the simple idea that not only is peace good for *business*, but also, in particular, *business* is good for peace. This irenic idea had undoubtedly demonstrated its validity in many other parts of the world, but it proved to be too simple in an area where General Charles De Gaulle, some seventy years ago, had astutely warned us about the dangers of going to the ‘*orient compliqué avec des idées simples*’. Hence, for these kinds of cooperation efforts, follow the quite meagre results in the past and probably the quite meagre prospects of success in the future.

While this disappointing outcome was becoming visible to everybody, the 9/11 terror attacks suddenly and forcefully pushed for the reinvention of the very area from

which the perpetrators had come. Looking for some kind of a geographical framework for his Global War on Terror, where he could group and categorize Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya or Sudan together as potential targets, President George W. Bush came up with a new trademark, the so-called 'Greater Middle East' in which most Muslim countries (and a few others) were to be squeezed. Military activism was henceforth to be systematically used in order to produce democracy – based on the idea that a pacified Middle East can only be reshaped through forcible regime change, by bringing down despots and tyrants. That was the time when the official 2002 National Strategy of the United States stated explicitly that free trade was not only an economic principle but also a *moral* one; that was precisely the time when the Pentagon was preparing for a war in Iraq while still fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan; that was also the time when the words 'liberty' and 'freedom' were used some fifty times in Bush's inaugural speech for his second term in office; that was the time when Nathan Sharansky's view of the Middle East strangely became the official vision of the President; that was the time when anything Arab and/or Islamic became suspect, when David Aikman was writing that 'the most striking contribution of recent Arab culture to modern global civilization is the airport body search' (Aikman 1991, p. 35) and Pryce-Jones was stating emphatically that 'an Arab democrat is not even an idealization but a contradiction in terms' (Pryce-Jones 1991, p. 69). Only a systematic use of military force applied to the Middle East was supposed to put an end to these abnormalities. That was the time when war was supposed to produce peace in the Middle East.

President Barack Obama explicitly put an end to this aberration. He buried the Global War on Terror as a mental construction and, to a certain extent, as a strategy. He went out of his way in Ankara and then in Cairo to express 'respect for Islam' and he offered the prospect of a dialogue with Iran, the declared next-stop station of the democratic crusade. This pause in the external attempts to reshape the Middle East was an implicit recognition that neither the rosy dreams of the 1990s nor the military activism of the present decade had produced the peaceful and prosperous Middle East that had been dreamt by leading external powers. Furthermore, this failure also led us to shift our attention to how the local powers in the Middle East have been trying to reshape their own region because, though far from being entirely successful in their endeavours, these regional forces have recently gained in drive and impact.

What kind of Middle East are Middle Easterners trying to invent? The least that can be said is that it is drastically different from one regional player to the next. If one takes Israel for a start, there will be immediately discovered a fortress mentality, a nation already hiding behind a nasty wall presumed to protect her from her neighbours while relying on an undisputed military supremacy to deter them. However, a fortress is hardly a secure place in an era of rapidly growing proliferation of missiles in Syria, South Lebanon, and Gaza or even in distant but feverishly ballistic Iran. Permanent deterrence is worth the effort against hostile states, but hardly efficient against groups who have perfected asymmetrical war tactics as seen in 2006 during the war with Hezbollah and again with the most recent Gaza war (December 2008–January 2009). If one adds to that the two worrying prospects of the demographic change taking place within mandatory Palestine to the Palestinians' advantage and of an Iran on its way to becoming a nuclear power, one can easily understand (and some might possibly empathize) with Israel's existential dilemma – a country that has turned her back on the rosy dreams of an Israel-led Middle East and has developed doubts about the effectiveness of US protection after the American quagmire in Iraq. The present Middle East is an

area Israelis are only *annoyed* to be part of. They know they cannot escape from it; they also know they have already lost the chance to reshape it according to their taste. Here is a player stuck in the Middle East rather than convincingly part of it.

While Israel's Middle East is a foregone conclusion, Iran's Middle East is an evolving one. In the past decade or so, partly thanks to American misjudgements, Tehran has been able substantially and deftly to increase her impact on her regional environment, deepening her 30-year-old alliance with Syria, increasing her strong support for non-state actors such as Hezbollah or Hamas, and of course gradually building up her influence over Iraqi factions. With all these assets, the marginalization of Iran in the Middle East is becoming something of a joke rather than a serious policy. Who would dare to question that Iran is part of the Middle East or deny the substantial role it plays in reshaping it? Who would think that a lasting civil peace in Iraq or in Afghanistan is possible without some Iranian contribution? Tehran wants to have its role with Islamist movements across the region only comparable with Moscow's role among communist parties during the heyday of the Bolshevik Revolution. The crossing of the nuclear threshold is intended to solidify that role and have the world recognize it.

The obvious risk though is to see Iran overplay her hand and be overtaken by that most dangerous of feelings, the *hubris* of Greek tragedy where one begins as being a champion but, through ignoring one's own limitations, ends up being the victim of one's own ambitions. Iranian leaders cannot indefinitely rely on the passivity of a particularly vibrant civil society nor can they ignore the sectarian rift their emergence has produced within the Muslim world, pitting a substantial chunk of the Sunni public opinion against their overtly hegemonic drive as a visitor to Riyadh, Amman or Cairo can hear from whoever he meets with. That is why the now open negotiations with the West can serve as an opportunity for Iran either to consolidate the huge gains registered during the past decade or, contrarily, to squander those gains in an insatiable quest for more influence.

Iran needs to understand that her regional emergence has also been substantially helped by Turkey's inward-looking politics and Ankara's anchoring in the West thanks to her accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1952 and her quest for membership in the European Union, which has been Ankara's policy since the mid-1960s. However, all this is changing now and at a very rapid pace. In the past six or seven years, under the AK (Justice and Development Party) leadership, Turkey has been rapidly liberating her politics from the armed forces' heavy-handed control, dealing in a more open-minded way with her Kurdish problem, reconciling herself with her traditional, historical cultural identity, and developing what is now quite accurately called a 'neo-Ottomanist' regional policy through which Turkey intends to have her influence extended to all parts of the region that had once been provinces of the Ottoman Empire, from the Sandjak in modern-day Serbia to the West, to Iraq, and possibly beyond Basra to the South, to say nothing of all the Turkic '-stans' to the East. For that, reconciliation with Armenia is underway, and, more importantly, an active, multi-faceted rapprochement with Russia which provides Turkey with two-thirds of her needs in gas, a fact made abundantly clear during and after last year's war in Georgia.

Not everybody is happy with Turkey reinventing herself as a Middle Eastern regional power that has ceased to feel impeded by imperial legacy. Israel is worried about the future of her 1996 Security Treaty with Ankara and more generally about her past intimacy with Turkish leaders. The United States seems to be more intrigued than challenged by this new Turkish line and the opinion of this author is that the

present US administration is far from condemning it, as long as Turkey remains a faithful NATO member. Arab governments are, as expected, divided on the best way to assess it. The one player who has no right whatsoever to complain about this Turkish reinsertion into the Middle East is Europe. By closing the doors before Ankara's accession to the European Union, a number of European leaders have inadvertently helped Turkey find herself. The long-range view of some is naturally helped by the short-sightedness of others.

Enough said of Israel, Iran and Turkey, what about the Arabs? The easiest answer is to depict them as passive witnesses and eventually as virtual victims of this self-propelled regionalization. Calls for Arab solidarity sound terribly empty and talk of Arab unity is *archaeology*. The truth is that Arab governments are adjusting egoistically to this new turn in regional politics. Some are in a determined isolationist mood such as Morocco and Tunisia. Others are fantasizing about an escape into Africa as a refuge from the region's headaches such as Libya and, to a lesser extent, Sudan. Some others, in the Arabian Peninsula or on the banks of the River Nile, are so obsessed with their succession dilemmas that they can hardly find the time to devise a consistent regional strategy. Iraq and Yemen are in the midst of serious domestic troubles, enough for them to be busy for years to come. Ironically, Syria, emphatically self-appointed the 'beating heart of Arabism' during the past century, is now taking the lead in helping to reshape a new Middle East in which Iran and Turkey play a pre-eminent role. One may call it long-range strategy or typical state opportunism; my own guess is that it is a mixture of the two. Lebanon, of course, is a textbook example of an indefinitely explosive mixture of 21st-century entrepreneurship and 19th-century sectarian politics.

The truth is that present-day Arab politics betray a situation in which most Arab countries are in the midst of a rather sterile combination of three factors: an acute, and quite childish, attachment to state sovereignty; a neo-patrimonial appropriation of power and resources by ruling monarchical as well as republican families; and an intense rivalry among dynasties and governments. The three traits are symptoms of an organic state weakness that leads them to be consistently inward-looking and leaves them with little or no impact on regional politics. It is no accident as a result that the Arab League of States is a faithful mirror of this self-imposed impotence rather than an efficient remedy to it.

But then again, one should not discount societies, not even the Arab ones. If one looks carefully underneath Arab disunity an incredible amount of cultural integration can be seen. Best-sellers in Beirut are often written by Moroccans, while Lebanese singers are popular in Cairo and Algiers. Arabs access the same 500 satellite television networks and are often fond of the same religious preachers. On the other hand, al-Qā'idah is a *regional* phenomenon as much as are most of the anti-Qā'idah tactics. Arab politics have never divided Arabs as much as they do today, but Arab culture, propelled and popularized by the new media, has also never *integrated* them so deeply. One can even say that the Arab political market is utterly disintegrated, the economic market partly integrated, and the cultural and ideological market highly integrated – indeed, much more integrated than the European Union cultural market.

Many Middle Easts are concurrently being built and though it is hard to say which of these is going ultimately to have the upper hand, two conclusions can hardly be disputed. The first is that one cannot build a *new* Middle East if one has no concept of the old one; and the second is that in order to reshape that part of the world one needs to do it with and for Middle Easterners, neither against them nor in lieu of them and

their place. Though quite banal, these two basic rules have been largely ignored by the West in the recent past, opening the way for non-Western powers to gain a rapidly growing foothold in the region and, more importantly, giving regional players in the Middle East the chance to try and reshape it *by* and *for* themselves. One certainly can question these regional players' ultimate intentions or present methods in reshaping their own part of the world, but one can hardly deny them the right to try and do so.

### Note

1. This paper was originally submitted and delivered as a speech at the 'Oil and Money' Conference held in London, UK, on 21 October 2009. It has been modified very slightly from its original form as an address and references have been added. The author is Professor of International Relations at the Institut d'études politiques, Paris (1988–); senior adviser to The United Nations Secretary General (June 2003–); a board member of the International Crisis Group (ICG) (2004–); and a member of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (2005–); The Arab Anti Corruption Organization (2005); The Bassel Fuleyhan Foundation (2006); The High Level Experts Group for the Community of Democracies (2006–); and Le Haut Conseil de la Francophonie (2003–) [Editor].

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