

Middle East: A Region in Flux

Considerations on a Regional Cooperation and Security Process/Organization for the Middle East

By Ömür Orhun



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“...What is needed is a comprehensive system of collective security. Today’s threats to our security are all interconnected. (Therefore) Our strategies must be comprehensive.”

Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the UN, from the Foreword to the Report of the High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (A More Secure World)

OUR PRESENT ENVIRONMENT

A most popular concept nowadays is “change”. Indeed, we are living in a world that is fundamentally different from that of last century. The international system and relations, together with our concepts, our attitudes and our expectations are constantly changing.

How the future unfolds will, to a great extent, depend on the choices we make and on the path we follow. A reappraisal of how best to pursue a common vision for mankind and its collective interests is now called for more than ever.

As we all remember, the last decade of the twentieth century was characterized by a sense of optimism. This optimism was fuelled by the spread of democracy and free markets, together with a strengthened emphasis on human rights and freedoms. However, we tended to forget that our world is a complex one and is vulnerable to unforeseen developments. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and subsequent events, and lately the

clamour in the Middle East for more freedoms and for a better life have demonstrated the extent of this complexity.

BACKDROP

Recent developments are radically reshaping the Middle Eastern landscape. Citizens of the region are justifiably clamouring for change and reform. The future of the region is likely to be more democratic, plural and integrated.

However, old instabilities and sources of conflict remain. An already complicated region has all the potential to become more volatile and unstable. Regional countries face old and new not only security but also social, economic and political challenges.

It is evident that international relations and related developments in this region will become more dynamic and interlinked in the near and medium future. New values and aspirations appeared in the Middle East, a region which already faces serious structural problems.

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There is no doubt that the Palestine question is the single most important source of mistrust and conflict in the Middle East. Expectations during the last three generations related to the resolution of this problem have moved from optimism to pessimism, and recently to a more realistic plane.

As we all know, at the outset the issue was an Arab-Israeli conflict. By time, however, and mainly due to the cold shoulder attitude of some Arab states, the conflict was divided into two. On the one hand, an Arab-Israeli conflict, and on the other hand a Palestinian-Israeli contention. Needless to say the borderline between the two is rather blurred.

The main characteristics of both problems are lack of mutual confidence, concerns about the intentions of the other, abundance of conspiracy theories and multitude of outside mediation efforts. That is why so many peace initiatives have failed. That is also why unilateral actions carry the day.

For me, however, the main issue is structural. That is to say, there is lack of a sustainable process to address all issues faced in a comprehensive manner.

If the backdrop so far depicted is to be analyzed, what is required seems to be to find a common normative framework, as well as common rules of behaviour. In other words, we have to address not only the main conflict, but also issues that indirectly aggravate conflicts, including political upheavals, democratic deficiencies, economic imbalances, poverty

and unemployment. On the other hand, we also have to devise a common dialogue forum and confidence building measures.

In this respect, I have to underline the potential that creative diplomacy brings about. We have to meet challenges the region faces, as well as challenges of globalization, through joint and comprehensive security and cooperation arrangements.

REFORM IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Middle Eastern nations and countries are no doubt in urgent need of mobilizing and stimulating change. They should themselves endeavour to find optimum ways and means to achieve this goal, if needed with some outside assistance. For that, the role to be played by civil society cannot be underestimated. I am confident that Middle Eastern societies lack neither competence nor ability in this regard.

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Therefore, programmes related to economic advancement and human security, combining people's aspirations for peace, stability, security, development, democracy, freedoms and a liveable environment have to be developed. What is also needed is building more confidence among different segments of individual societies, as well as amongst various regional nations. To put it in different words, setting up strategic partnerships, turning a democratic claim into a social claim and respecting the rights of all citizens come as priorities.

DEMOCRACY AS AN OBJECTIVE, NOT A PREREQUISITE

While the democratic transformation of the Middle Eastern states is clearly a goal, it cannot from a European perspective be considered a precondition for political engagement, especially not for a serious engagement in the Middle East peace process, as Dr. Völker Perthes had observed.

Occasionally, some Western commentators claim that only democratic states can make peace, and that it would be premature, therefore, to resume serious peace efforts in the Middle East unless major Arab states turn democratic. Practically, this claim serves as a pretext for those who do not want to resume serious peace talks. Moreover, it is certainly empirically wrong. The reverse, however, is true: peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours would enhance regional and external efforts to bring about a democratic transformation. Tying Western attempts to broker peace to the democratization of Arab countries, however, would merely exacerbate the lack of credibility of Western policies in the region and could even obstruct positive domestic developments.

HOW TO DEFINE THE MIDDLE EAST?

To develop policies for a particular region of the world, it is important to know which countries we are actually referring to. Different Western quarters associate the concept of the Middle East with very different geopolitical notions. Phrases like “from Morocco to Bangladesh” sound good, but they are not particularly clear. While some define Middle East as including the Arab states, Israel, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, others go further and include all of Central Asia and even the Caucasus. Yet, at the same time, other analysts often refer to the Arab countries

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alone when they start identifying specific regional problems.

To find a definition that is useful for foreign policy and security needs, the aforementioned factors – transnational relations as well as the reach of regional conflicts – will have to be taken into consideration. On this basis, as the Report of the Consortium of Research Institutes on “A Middle East Regional Cooperation and Security Process” also asserted, it makes sense to define the wider Middle East as including the Arab countries, Israel, Iran and Afghanistan, with some form of close association with Turkey, but not to extend it beyond these countries.

Of course, regions are never sharply delimited. Some political dynamics link the countries mentioned above with others, such as Pakistan, the Caucasus or Central Asia and of course Turkey. However, an excessively broad definition of the region would hinder the development of sound political strategies. On the other hand, relevant policy makers should not forget that Turkey is a NATO partner and potential EU member. Even a conceptional “Middle Easternization” of Turkey could have undesired political consequences, as again Dr. Perthes noted. Also, unlike Afghanistan, the Caucasian countries cannot be viewed within a Middle Eastern framework; they should rather be seen within a post-Soviet Union setting.

It may be wiser, therefore, to continue to speak of, and devise policies towards the Middle East region comprising the Arab states, Iran and Israel (and perhaps Afghanistan), with some

form of close association with Turkey. Even within this region, differences in socio-economic structures, economic resources and geopolitics have to be acknowledged.

THE RELEVANCE OF THE ARAB - ISRAELI CONFLICT

Many observers have quite rightly stressed the key importance that a peaceful settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict would have for the political evolution, security policy and economic development of the region. They have therefore defined the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as “a strategic priority for everybody.” Without such a resolution, they assert, there will be little chance of dealing with other problems in the Middle East, meaning such issues as democratization and liberalization, protection and further promotion of human rights, rule of law, regional economic cooperation, the establishment of a free-trade zone, and regional security cooperation. In other words, they imply that reforms in the Middle East should not or could not be pursued as long as the Arab-Israeli conflict continues.

Others, however, all too often ignore the relevance of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the peace process for developments in the wider region. On the other hand, the ongoing conflict legitimizes a continued misallocation of resources, with defence budgets taking precedence over such matters as health and educational reform.

Peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours, in contrast, would most likely help the spread of democratic values and strengthen civil society. A mutually acceptable settlement of the conflict would also reduce the appeal of religious and nationalist extremists. Furthermore, the unresolved conflict constitutes a barrier to many of the regional cooperation

projects that for a long time have been tried to be promoted.

For all these reasons, I think it would be wise to pursue a double-track approach: Regional countries (and their friends elsewhere) should not wait for a final resolution of the Arab-Israeli (or Palestinian-Israeli) conflict to work towards realization of other objectives in the political, social, economic and security fields. Of course this would not (and should not) imply a slackening in the peace process.

Finally, the repercussions of the recent political upheaval in some major Middle Eastern powers will have to be carefully studied once the dust settles and a more stable environment emerges.

MULTITUDE OF INITIATIVES

Reform and change in the Middle East has always been a high priority on the international agenda. However, the approach of the regional powers, Europe and the US differ (and differed in the past), at least in part. Despite these differences, I believe that a high capacity for coordination and even for fruitful cooperation still exists. Having said that, I should add that we must not ignore that key outside players has radically divergent views over a number of primary political assumptions about the region.

In the past we have witnessed a number of initiatives, some grandiose, some more modest, some inter-governmental, some civil society oriented, and still others academic or individual, aimed to bring about peace and security, democratization and economic prosperity to the region. A few can claim to have reached at least partially their objectives. But it would be an exaggeration to state that the overall aim has been reached.

It would be beyond the scope of this paper to

enumerate, let alone analyze, all of these initiatives. However, it might be useful to remember some of the prominent ones, without going into details.

In the not too distant past, the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative, which started as a US proposal named the “Greater Middle East Initiative” (GMEI), but turned to be a G.8 program, had occupied the international agenda for a long time. It did not produce the expected outcomes.

The EU had and still has quite a number of programs for the region: The Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership), the Common Strategy for the Mediterranean Region, Wider Europe Neighbourhood Programme as it also relates to the Middle East, and finally the still-born Union for the Mediterranean can be mentioned in this context. EU’s European Security Strategy is also relevant to the risks emanating from the region.

NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue, as well as its involvement in Afghanistan and lately in Libya should also be recalled. The Alliance of Civilizations (AoC), through its recent Regional Strategy for the Mediterranean, has also addressed issues related to building bridges and fostering understanding and mutual respect between the West and the Islamic World, which covers the entire Middle East as well. I will expand on the OSCE and whether OSCE experience can be utilized in the Middle East in the next section.

OSCE – BUILDING REGIONAL STRUCTURES VERSUS RE-ORDERING

Conditioned by past experiences, some policy makers, both inside and outside the region, tend to be somewhat hesitant about wide-ranging plans to bring a “new order” to the

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Middle East. They instead tend to favour the establishment of regional structures that can help to reduce the potential for interstate conflict and increase the prospects for change within the countries in question, rather than regime changes from outside.

Accordingly, they advocate the institutionalization of cooperative relations that would enhance security for all concerned and facilitate the processes of domestic transformation. In other words, a cross dimensional approach, addressing not only conflicts, but also democratization, advancing human rights and economic development is proposed.

Such thinking is largely influenced by the historical experience of the CSCE/OSCE – a multilateral, multidimensional negotiation and dialogue structure that served both to preserve stability in Europe and encourage the quest for change by the peoples in Eastern Europe. Lessons learned within the CSCE/OSCE process can indeed provide useful points of departure in the Middle East also.

According to academics familiar with the region, not only leaders of authoritarian regimes, but also important segments of the societal elites in the Middle East continue to consider the perspective of a “re-ordering” of the region from abroad a serious threat. At the same time, both groups have an interest in

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containing the potential for regional conflict and enhancing regional security.

Thus, the idea of a Conference for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East (CSCME) was first raised by regional actors, such as Jordan’s former crown prince, Hassan bin Talal. At that time, it was argued that it was too early to launch and implement such a comprehensive project that would include the entire region. The proponents of the latter contended that ultimately a CSCE/OSCE-type process for the entire Middle East region would only be crowned with success when the territorial conflict and other major contentions between Israel and its neighbours would be resolved, or when a solution would be in sight. It was argued, however, that this would not exclude the possibility of establishing sub-regional or even regional Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) or even CSCE/OSCE-type negotiations and institutions. In the next section, I would like to go a little bit more deep into this proposition.

OSCE as a Model

As I underlined at the outset, today we are living in an environment that is much different from the 20th Century. The risks, challenges and threats faced by humanity, the means of collective and individual response to counter them and the conception of intra-state relations have evolved considerably.

In that respect, we might observe that the co-dependence of might and right has come

back to the centre of world debate. As such, a shared commitment to embrace cooperative security seems to be the key for stability and progress. These observations are most relevant for the Middle East as well.

Applying the Lessons Learned from the CSCE/OSCE Experience to the Middle East

Almost a decade ago, in addition to regional actors, a number of Western non-governmental circles and even some official representatives had dwelled on the necessity of applying the lessons learned from the CSCE/OSCE experience to other areas. As a first step in this direction, Afghanistan was included among OSCE Partners for Cooperation to facilitate collaboration and cooperation with the OSCE member states and especially those bordering Afghanistan. It was thought that the OSCE experience in institution building could be usefully employed in this country, although delivery systems would be needed.

Others have suggested that a similar model could be employed in the Middle Eastern region, taking the Mediterranean Partnership for Cooperation as a starting point. In that respect, it is worth noting the proposition by Ambassador Max Kampelman (U.S.) to extend the Helsinki process to the Mediterranean, expanding OSCE’s membership to 78 to include all Middle Eastern countries and re-naming this organization “Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Mediterranean and the Middle East”. Most recently, U.S. Congressman Benjamin Cardin in an official statement in March this year proposed that the OSCE could serve as a model for the Middle East, in a “Helsinki like process”.

The OSCE Experience as a Source of Inspiration for the Middle East

Let me now try to expand on the idea of creating a model for the Middle East based on the OSCE experience. However, a word of caution might be in order. Conditions in Europe leading to the initiation of the Helsinki process were much different than the prevailing situation in the Middle East. Therefore a direct correlation might be misleading.

As I mentioned earlier, non-governmental and academic circles based in the West have undertaken some brainstorming exercises on this subject, in the aftermath of 9/11, as well as after the Iraqi operation and in view of searches for an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal.

Defenders of one school of thought advocated expansion of the OSCE to include the greater Middle Eastern region, possibly starting with the enlargement of the Mediterranean Partnership for Cooperation scheme. Others favoured preparation and adoption of a Middle East Regional Security Charter, more or less based on the OSCE model (Helsinki Final Act). In both cases, the norms and principles of the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, together with subsequent OSCE acquis, were proposed to be applied also in the Middle East, through appropriate mechanisms. I should add that these norms and principles pertain both to establishment of peace, security and stability, as well as to conduct of inter-state relations and to democratic governance and human rights. On the other hand, we also notice a growing number of authoritative statements underlining the need to look to the Middle East beyond the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, within the perspective of enhancement of democracy, human rights and rule of law and in response to the legitimate security requirements of the region.

Past Experience and Initiatives

At this stage, let me immediately recall that such initiatives based on the OSCE experience are not totally new. For example, during 1994-95 and within the Madrid Peace Process, the Arms Control and Regional Security Working Group (ACRS) had undertaken with the mentorship of Turkey and Canada positive discussions on prior notification of certain military activities and military information exchanges.

On the other hand, SIPRI's "Middle East Security and Arms Control Project" of 1995, as well as the Track-II work on the "Middle East Regional Cooperation and Security Process" led by the Consortium of Four Middle Eastern Institutions with the support of Danish and Canadian Governments during 2005-2006 are also worth mentioning.

Rather than going deeper into or analyzing these initiatives, I must stress that every region has its own particular conditions and that while it would be a good idea to benefit from the experience of others, the specific security requirements of different regions need to be fully taken into account to reach viable security and confidence building measures. This is all the more true for a region like the Middle East.

As I said, I will not attempt to draw a historical sketch of the evolution of the mechanisms proposed in the past. Let me only state that I find a dialogue and coordination on a possible regional security and cooperation process for the Middle East most useful and that I furthermore believe the OSCE experience can usefully serve the needs of the larger Middle Eastern region. The important question in this respect will be how this can be realized.

The Way-Ahead

We can start with the impracticability of the expansion of the OSCE, at least for the time being. Therefore, we must search for other means. I think enlargement of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership for Cooperation to those Mediterranean countries who are willing and able can be contemplated at the initial stage.

As a second or even concurrent step, establishing partnership arrangements with other willing Middle Eastern countries might be realized, never closing the door to those who may not be initially interested. We can and must also try to enhance the modalities of partnership, be it in its present form or in any possible expanded form.

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How can we achieve these?

First, a need towards change, a growing awareness and call for reform is evident in the Middle East. As Sheikha Mozah of Qatar also underlined, reform in the Middle East depends, among other things, on the existence of advocates capable of proving the eligibility for claiming reform. In that respect, there are many positive steps that could be taken. It is becoming increasingly apparent that progress depends on political, economic and social factors. Gradual steps towards more representative and accountable structures need to be taken. These need to be supported and I believe the OSCE can, if asked, contribute to this process.

The key concepts in this field are; full respect for the rule of law, effective functioning of the judiciary, transparency of state structures, respect for human rights and freedoms,

political and economic participation, accountability and good governance. In all these areas, the OSCE acquis and the support of individual participating states can be made available to Middle Eastern states to enhance the security situation and social conditions in the region.

Secondly, the necessity of security and political inputs need to be underlined. Establishing Confidence and Security Building Measures and Codes of Conduct and developing conflict resolution and post-conflict rehabilitation methods will be necessary to support the reform process. There again the OSCE experience can be utilized. I will come back to this point later on.

Thirdly, and very briefly, I also would like to refer to the necessity of making the influential sectors of the public in the Middle East more aware of the OSCE, its norms and structures, its acquis and experience.

Finally, while the Middle East is poised for a historical transformation, the need for understanding, cooperation and support from the West is crucial. However, we all know that this will not be an easy affair.

Let us not forget that the Muslim world suffers not only from its own shortcomings, but also from the prejudices in the West. Many in the West seem to be readily misled by those who claim to act in the name of Islamic religion and resort to violence. Violence and terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, culture or geography. We must collectively spend more effort to putting the record straight and presenting a more informed picture.

CBMs and CSBMs

Here, I would like to briefly mention the difference and relationship between Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and Confi-

dence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs). The CBM concept aims to create a climate of mutual understanding, cooperation and trust, and thus facilitate further interaction including military measures. CBMs also aim to overcome psychological apprehensions. CSBMs, on the other hand, are more action oriented and are based on practical/concrete measures, mostly in the politico-military field.

Let me now try to look into the experience of the OSCE in conflict prevention and confidence building. The CSCE/OSCE process has created over almost thirty years a unique set of tools and measures of preventive diplomacy. They have proven their effectiveness in preventing conflicts and in defusing tensions.

The preliminary CSCE Confidence and Security Building Measures were designed and put in place mainly for military purposes in a deeply divided and confrontational Europe. These CSBMs helped to eliminate the prevailing elements of secrecy and thus helped to create a climate of confidence. I must also stress that these CSBMs were of a living nature and they matured in line with evolving political and military circumstances. The political will of the participants was also a determining factor.

The present comprehensive set of OSCE CSBMs are the final product of several layers or generations of CSBMs. However, their two basic premises have remained unchanged. First, transparency through exchanges of information, and secondly intrusive verification that permits an assessment of the information received. An important by-product of this process is development of a culture of transparency and a habit of dialogue. In this manner, a new state of mind has emerged that transparency can lead to trust. This process is also the birthplace of the notion of cooperative and common security.

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In short, the OSCE has come a long way since 1975 in creating and also implementing CSBMs. Achievements in this respect are impressive. It should also be mentioned that establishing and successfully implementing CSBMs is a rather long term and evolutionary process.

Preconditions for a successful initiation of CSBMs can be summarized as follows:

- political will and motivation,
- recognition of borders and legitimate rights of partners,
- existence of not only political means and climate, but also incentives,
- engagement and readiness to change established patterns of behaviour.

On the other hand, the procedure in establishing CSBMs at the policy level should be from top to bottom, but the procedure in implementing them should be from the bottom upwards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

My starting point would be to work towards the creation of a regional cooperation and security **process**, rather than an organization, at the outset. The objective of this endeavour must be to provide a framework of rules and procedures for sustained and focused dialogue, transparency and cooperation, in a range of issues that should cover security, socio-economic challenges, democratic governance and human rights.

The “process” can function simultaneously on multiple layers: civil society/academia,

track-two, and governmental. Each of these layers should aim to contribute to the achievement of agreed goals. The success of the process (and eventually of the organization to be worked out) can be defined as a reduction over time, and eventual elimination of conflicts, improvement of social and political conditions and development of the economic situation. A side implication no doubt will be improvement of human interaction.

The objective of this endeavour must be to provide a framework of rules and procedures for sustained and focused dialogue, transparency and cooperation, in a range of issues that should cover security, socio-economic challenges, democratic governance and human rights.

In this respect, the first point I wish to underline is the necessity to be realistic and somewhat modest, at least at the beginning. The second general point that I believe deserves attention is the need for ownership by the regional countries. Tailor-made proposals by others might not be that conducive for concrete results.

Within these parameters, the very first step to be undertaken by the regional countries might be establishment of a conflict prevention centre. This centre could be tasked to serve as an early warning mechanism. This centre might also study the CBMs and CSBMs already in force in other regions, including the impressive set of OSCE CSBMs, and try to adopt those

soft CSBMs that meet regional specifications to be implemented on a voluntary basis at the outset. Modest but politically significant CSBMs might lead the way to more militarily significant measures. Such a centre might also undertake the simulation of further CSBMs, to see whether they would be applicable.

Another initial step may be developing channels of communication, especially between militaries. Reciprocal visits of military representatives can lead to structural contacts. On the other hand, developing a Code of Conduct to guide better relations both between various state institutions, as well as between states might also be contemplated. Lastly, the centre could be the focal point for advancing preventive diplomacy, concentrating, among others, on conflict prevention tactics.

On the other hand, establishment of a regional mediation commission to intervene in crisis situations might also be contemplated. This commission should be tasked to analyze conflicts and suggest recommendations for settlement. It is evident that, high level expertise, impartiality and means of capacity building would be required.

My final point in addressing a realistic and modest beginning will be transparency and an integrated step-by-step approach. The important thing is to begin a journey, a journey for peace and stability and prosperity.

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