

Chapter 5

The Arab World 2007

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The use of the term “Arab world” to connote a significant force in regional and international politics became outdated many years ago. Though still invoked by aging Baathists and Nasserists in the Middle East and their intellectual acolytes in the West, the notion of the “Arab world” as a coherent political entity has long lost whatever operational potency it might have had in the golden age of Arab nationalism, from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s. Even then, effective unified action was more an aspiration than a reality, and Arab states (or regimes) were positioned on a variety of axes, where the labels widely used to frame regional political alignments – “conservative,” “radical,” “moderate,” “pro-Western,” “pro-Soviet,” and so on – did not nearly do justice to extant political realities. Still, there was a hegemonic idea of Arab nationalism that the charismatic leader Gamal abd al-Nasser could employ to appeal directly to mass audiences and set a regional agenda to which others perforce responded. At the height of the phenomenon, some observers were even analyzing Arab political dynamics in a conceptual framework borrowed from nineteenth century Germany or Italy, with Egypt assigned the role of Prussia or Piedmont in a process that would ultimately lead to unification. Since then, Arabism has been increasingly challenged, not only by state-based identities but even more so by the emergence or resurgence of

competing subnational and supranational sources of political identity and loyalty – confessional or Islamic. Among the various explanations for the decline of Arabism, perhaps the most salient has been the discrediting of Arab nationalism as a result of military defeats (of Nasserist Egypt and Baathist Iraq) and the progressive weakening of the state-engines that drove the idea and the cause.

True, the idea of the “Arab world” continues to resonate in a cultural sense as well as in expressions of rhetorical solidarity with Arabs locked in conflicts with non-Arab adversaries. But even in this respect, there has been a noteworthy change, namely, a shift in the Arab world’s center of gravity from the Levant to the Gulf. The multifaceted background to this shift includes a growing preoccupation with the specter of Iranian hegemony, but perhaps even more significant is the progressive enrichment of the Gulf kingdoms and principalities due to a dramatic rise in the price of oil.

In both respects, 2007 did not witness new dynamics but it was marked by the intensification of these trends and processes.

Shadows of the Past

Perhaps the most noteworthy example of the continuing deterioration of state authority in both material and moral terms was Egypt, precisely because it had been the most important political engine of Arabism in the twentieth century. According to one analysis, 2007 was “the year of civil disobedience” in Egypt, as the country witnessed a wave of strikes, sit-ins, protests, and other forms of confrontation with the authorities. Most of these actions were concentrated in the (very large) public sector, and in almost every confrontation between workers and the state, the government backed down, as if tacitly acknowledging its fear of provoking a hitherto quiescent populace. The majority of these incidents focused on economic issues, though some activists were moved to hope that they signaled a potential for confrontation on political matters as well. In fact, however, there was little evidence that the political system was shaken in any way from its lethargy, and there was no perceptible movement in the process

of political reform. Cosmetic moves that might have suggested otherwise, such as the elimination of references to socialism in the constitution and the abrogation of the emergency laws in effect since 1981, actually served as cover for the continued stifling of democracy by other means, such as the introduction of new anti-terrorist legislation in the same spirit as the emergency laws and the elimination of judicial supervision of elections. Nor was there any real invigoration of party life. The opposition parties were unable to exploit what little maneuvering room the law allowed them because of internal disputes and rivalries, and the ruling National Democratic Party was largely preoccupied with the protracted preparation of President Husni Mubarak's son, Gamal, to succeed his father, vigorous denials to the contrary notwithstanding. Despite signs of significant macroeconomic growth (of about 7 percent), there were widespread perceptions that the benefits were largely confined to a narrow stratum of the population, and Egypt continued both to lack the resources and to project the vigor and vision needed to energize the Arab world as a whole.

The same was true for Syria. In May, Bashar al-Asad was elected to another seven year term as president, with the support of 97.6 percent of the voters. The result was hardly a proof of democratic legitimacy, but it did symbolize Bashar's success in entrenching his rule despite widespread assessments in 2000 when he succeeded his father, Hafez, that he lacked the character or experience to survive the rigors of rule in Damascus. After seven years in power, Bashar has managed to dispense with almost all of the "old guard" identified with his father and to appoint his own loyalists to most key positions. Bashar's achievement, however, was not matched by Syria as a whole. Political stability produced little in the way of economic and social development. According to a variety of indicators, Syria continues to rank very low in technological progress, economic competitiveness, and quality of life – even by Arab standards. Tentative steps to liberalize the economy have stalled, as did efforts taken immediately after Bashar took power to open up the political system. Syria

remains a focus of regional and international interest largely because of its capacity to stir up trouble, but it lacks the energy or resources to inspire others and its traditional pretensions of being “the beating heart of Arabism” have long since been deflated by a far more modest reality.

Egypt is a homogenous society, except for a minority of Copts who display no signs of a sectarian agenda. Syria is a far more fractured society but is held together by effective authoritarian rule. In most other Arab states, the reality or potential for sectarian/confessional conflict is greater. Apart from Sudan (which is beyond the scope of this review) and Iraq (which is treated in a separate chapter) the most extreme manifestation of this problem was in Lebanon.

When the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri sparked a wave of Lebanese protests and international pressure that eventually culminated in the withdrawal of Syrian forces from the country in the spring of 2005, it seemed that Lebanon might finally shed the Syrian-imposed straitjacket of stalemated politics and reassert its identity and independence. That hope was further encouraged by the aftermath of the 2006 war, which obliged Hizbollah to acquiesce in the deployment of the Lebanese army throughout the country, and by the wave of patriotic sentiment inspired by the army’s successful repression of a revolt by the radical Islamist organization Fatah al-Islam during 2007. However, none of these events was sufficient to close the sectarian rifts in Lebanese society. These manifested themselves in the crisis that beset the Lebanese political system during 2007, which was accompanied by a steady drumbeat of political assassinations (of anti-Syrian figures) and grounded in the efforts of a Hizbollah-led and Syrian-supported alliance to paralyze or overthrow the government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and, more specifically, to ensure that pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, whose (extended) term of office expired at the end of November, was succeeded by a candidate equally amenable to Syria (and Hizbollah). That crisis was not resolved by the time Lahoud had to step down, because while the main factions had tentatively agreed on a compromise

candidate (Army Commander Michel Suleiman), the opposition refused to carry out the vote in Parliament unless the Siniora camp first consented to form a broad new coalition that would effectively give the Hizbollah-led opposition a veto option on government decisions. While it was possible to attribute some of these problems to the bickering of politicians everywhere, they more fundamentally reflected the underlying fractiousness of Lebanese society as a whole, and especially the continuing prevalence of confessional loyalties and competing identities over any all-embracing sense of shared destiny. As a result, not only did Lebanon remain an object rather than actor in the interplay of regional politics; it was also unable to reclaim the role it once did have as a cultural and economic crossroads of the Arab world. Moreover, Lebanon's sectarian divides replicated a phenomenon present in many other parts of the Arab world. The most critical of these was the entrenched rift between Sunnis and increasingly assertive (Iran-oriented) Shiites. That divide was given little expression in the 1950s and 1960s, when Shiite self-awareness was much less pronounced, but of late has immensely complicated any efforts to present even a facade of Arab unity.

The Gulf Also Rises

The difficulties besetting Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon meant that the energies driving the idea of the Arab world during much of the twentieth century were no longer to be found in the traditional Levantine cradle of Arab nationalism. In recent years, a partial replacement for that center of gravity began to emerge in the Gulf, where the dramatic rise in oil prices – symbolized by the breach of the \$100 per barrel threshold – conferred on local rulers huge reserves of disposable income. This money has been used to buy a variety of assets that partially translate into regional and international influence and prestige. Modern physical and technological infrastructure and paternalistic cradle-to-grave welfare systems together with massive subsidies have somewhat blunted domestic opposition. The import of workers has created dependencies in labor-exporting countries in

the Middle East and South Asia that heighten attentiveness to the political sensitivities of the Gulf states (as investments and bail-outs by sovereign wealth funds have the potential of doing in the West). And the construction of state of the art universities and satellite television networks has seemingly shifted the intellectual magnetic pole of the Arab world from Cairo and Beirut to Qatar and Dubai; “Voice of the Arabs” and *al-Ahram* have effectively been replaced by al-Jazeera and several Gulf-owned newspapers (often published abroad) as the shapers of mass and elite opinion.

Politically, this transformation has been manifested in the progressive usurpation by Saudi Arabia of Egypt’s longstanding role as the source of whatever Arab initiatives there are. In 2007, for example, it was Saudi Arabia, not Egypt, that mediated the so-called Mecca Agreement between Fatah and Hamas that created the (short-lived) Palestinian national unity government, and it was Saudi Arabia that pushed the Arab League to reaffirm its support for the 2002 Saudi initiative aimed at enticing Israel into complying with Palestinian and Syrian terms for peace.

Ultimately, however, Gulf wealth was insufficient to instill a renewed sense of Arab dynamism. For one thing, the patina of modernity it provided could not obscure the fact that political, economic, and social reform and modernization were still in their early stages. Not a single Arab state, for example, ranked among the 25 most competitive economies in the latest Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum. Second, that wealth is not being used as an instrument to tie the Arab world together more tightly, largely because Gulf investors, cultural affinities notwithstanding, have made decisions mostly on economic grounds, and the uneven pace of liberalization in the non-oil countries has limited the number of attractive opportunities there. In 2002-2006, for example, only about 10-11 percent of Gulf Cooperation Council foreign assets (\$60 billion) were invested in the Middle East and North Africa. Finally, the massive accumulation of wealth (and weapons) was not accompanied by political self-confidence, usable military force, or an

ideological message that could resonate in the publics of other Arab countries.

For all these reasons, the Gulf countries – singly or together – were not able to become the alternative engine for unified action. The ostensible mechanism for such action – the Arab League – still existed, of course, and its secretary general could be relied on to release periodic declarations denouncing the enemies of the Arab nation and blaming them for its problems. But as a vehicle for organizing effective pan-Arab action on the most neuralgic regional issues, the League was a signal failure. Despite some highly publicized diplomacy, it achieved nothing in Lebanon, where the dominant actors, apart from Syria, were Iran and the United States. It was similarly powerless in Iraq, where the agenda was largely driven by Iran, the United States, and Turkey. It was essentially absent from Darfur, where involvement (however ineffectual) was confined to the United Nations and the African Union. In the failed state of Somalia – an Arab League member – Ethiopia was more a prominent factor. And on perhaps the most salient issues of all – the Palestinian issue and the specter of Iranian hegemony – the League was little more than a bystander.

Clearly, the Arab League's impotence is simply a manifestation of the rivalries among its member states. On most major policy issues, different states are divided by opposing approaches that reflect divergent interests. Sometimes these differences are papered over by formulaic declarations that obscure their real contradictions; that has been the case with Iraq, where rhetorical opposition to the American invasion and support for American withdrawal and the preservation of Iraqi territorial integrity conceal serious differences over the proper approach to the regime of Saddam Hussein, the Sunni-Shiite struggle within Iraq, the timing and circumstances of any American withdrawal in the future, and above all, the role of Iran. It is also the case with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where rhetorical support for Palestinians and, more recently, for the two-state solution outlined in the Arab initiative conceals serious differences over the precise

terms of settlement, the proper means of pursuing it, and the domestic Palestinian conflict between Fatah and Hamas. In the case of Lebanon, however, even rhetorical unity has been unattainable, and the divisions over outside involvement in Lebanese affairs are so deep that they resulted in a partial boycott of the 2008 Arab League summit held in Damascus.

The common thread in almost all these controversies is Iran, or more precisely, the alignment of Syria and several important non-state Arab actors (especially Hizbollah and Hamas) with Iran. The dominant if implicit subtext is the widespread apprehension in most Arab countries about the threat to their own domestic and national security implied by growing Iranian power and assertiveness, whether in the traditional military sense or in the support for potentially subversive Islamist movements and/or local Shiite communities. Given that the rift between the Iranian-led axis and the Sunni Arab governments involves not just interests but fundamental questions of identity, the farce surrounding the Damascus Summit will not be its last manifestation, and it is likely to dominate regional politics for the foreseeable future.

All in all, the notion of the Arab world continues to exercise a hold on the imaginations of many in the region. There is still a sense of cultural affinity and mutual sympathy, perhaps even reinforced by the spread of communications technology that often transcends national government control. In addition, solidarity with Arabs engaged in rivalries or conflicts with non-Arab adversaries remains strong. In a political sense, however, the best description of the “the Arab world” may well be “virtual reality.”