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AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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THE MIDDLE EAST ON THE BRINK OF TRANSFORMATION?
100 Issues of Tel Aviv Notes

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When the first issue of Tel Aviv Notes was published at the beginning of October 2000, the American Administration included a Secretary of State who had described the United States as "the indispensable nation" and the French Government included a Foreign Minister who had denounced American "hyperpower" as a threat to proper world order. Israel and the Palestinians were locked in violent conflict with little prospect of quick resolution. Hizbullah leaders in Lebanon were crowing about their recent accomplishments. Reformers were waging an uphill struggle against the conservative guardians of Islamic rule in Iran. And a young, Western-educated leader was inspiring optimistic predictions about the prospects for liberalization of Syria's economy and political system.

100 issues later, observers could be excused for thinking that nothing ever changes in the Middle East and that all the motion in the region ultimately signifies no real movement. It is not difficult to defend the thesis that continuity, not to say stasis, is the region's dominant characteristic. But other events over the course of the past forty months suggest a quite different proposition: that the potential has been created for a truly far-reaching transformation, perhaps as great as any since the retreat of the European imperial powers in the years after World War II. Of these events, the most dramatic is surely the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States.

The image of the Twin Towers crashing into the streets of New York City seared into public consciousness the conviction that systemic dysfunction in the Middle East – political repression, economic regression and social stagnation -- can no longer be accommodated or contained within the region but must instead be confronted and remedied, lest the manifestations of that dysfunction continue to be exported, at best in the form of capital flight and massive migration, at worst, in the form of more terror, perhaps involving weapons of mass destruction. In other words, September 11 crystallized the belief that if the underlying problems of the Middle East are not addressed at their source, they will increasingly beset not only the region itself but the rest of the world, as well.

This belief was not born in the ashes and rubble of the World Trade Center. It had already begun to percolate among American policymakers and analysts during the 1990s and had also animated a noteworthy European policy initiative – the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership – in 1995. But before September 11, thinking about transformation of the Middle East was long-term and generally focused on "friendly persuasion." After September 11, the objective became much more urgent and assumed a more proactive and muscular character, especially on the western

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side of the Atlantic. The first manifestation of this shift was the destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which enjoyed virtually unanimous support in the West. The second was the destruction of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, which did not.

The acrimonious debate over Iraq has been described as a trans-Atlantic rift, though it might more accurately be seen as an intra-European rift over trans-Atlantic relations and the role of force in the transformation agenda. But whatever the real character of this debate, it obscured a deeper trans-Atlantic consensus on the need for fundamental change in the nature of Middle Eastern systems. This consensus produced a wave of new ideas in both the United States and Europe about how to promote the desired changes. In many cases, the projects that flowed from this thinking – the Middle East Partnership Initiative, Wider Europe, the Greater Middle East -- were fairly inchoate and involved laundry-lists of objectives and headline goals rather than fully-formed action plans. More importantly, they failed to give definitive answers to some fundamental questions: Were local regimes partners in the transformation project or targets of it? If the former, how could those regimes be persuaded to cooperate in their own demise? If the latter, what policy tools could produce new realities better than the old ones they aimed to replace?

Despite these ambiguities and the uncertainties that remain, displays of Western resolve and commitment have already provoked far-reaching domestic debates in some Middle Eastern countries and persuaded some Middle Eastern governments that, whatever their long-term prospects for survival may be, their short-term interests demand far-reaching changes in their behavior. Such changes now include Libya's renunciation of support for terrorism and weapons of mass destruction development programs, Iran's adherence to the Additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the Sudanese Government's endorsement of a peace agreement (yet to be implemented) that would end the three-decade-long civil war there even at the possible cost of ultimate independence for the non-Arab south. In addition, the elimination of Saddam Hussein and the "conversion" of Mu'ammar Qaddafi have suddenly left Syria exposed on the "radical" flank of Arab politics and prompted it to try to cultivate European indulgence by signing an Accession Agreement with the European Union that it had delayed for years and to forestall American wrath by signaling a renewed interest in peace negotiations with Israel.

None of these changes signifies that the governments involved have embraced the transformation agenda of the West. On the contrary, all these actions, along with a variety of cautious domestic reforms elsewhere, are intended to ward off even greater pressure that might jeopardize even more immediately their ability to remain in power. But they do signify recognition of the imperative for change.

The same recognition seems to be intruding into Israeli thinking on the conflict with the Palestinians. In this case, the impetus for change has come, not from outside, but rather from a reinterpretation of the intrinsic nature of the problem. Instead of persisting in the long-standing and inconclusive debate between advocates of a political agreement with the Palestinians and advocates of the status quo, Israelis have increasingly abandoned both alternatives -- on the left, because of growing refusal to do nothing until agreement is reached or even despair at the possibility of achieving any acceptable political agreement, on the right, because of growing acknowledgement that the status quo is no longer tolerable. This has resulted in growing convergence around the need for unilateral withdrawal, that is, in a paradigm shift that has the potential, if not to resolve the conflict, then certainly to transform it in some truly significant fashion.

It is no more certain that this conceptual shift will be translated into action on the ground than it is certain that the West's objective of regional transformation will actually materialize. But the mere fact that the need for change is no longer denied by anyone is itself an indication of how much the Middle East has already changed.

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