

A View from the Arab World : Jan. 7-13, 2004

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Physics, history and the changing Middle East

Recent developments suggest that the Middle East region may be on the verge of an era of profound political change. Or, we may be living a mirage

of transformation, rather than the real thing. Among the possible signs of change are the Syrian president's historic visit to Turkey this week, Iranian signs of desiring a rapprochement with Egypt, Libya's decision to unilaterally end its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program, Syria's offer to negotiate a permanent peace with Israel, and both the continuing violence and the movement for reform inside Saudi Arabia. When the giants of

the region ? Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey ? all seem to be exploring options for new policies, we should pay attention.

These may be only passing events of little permanent impact. My hunch is that they probably reflect something deeper ? the instinctive feeling that relationships and policies in the Mideast region must change for the better.

This mirrors the fundamental unsustainability of current trends and ideologies. Some of these developments have been initiated, or just hastened, by the two new interlinked policies that define Mideast-US-Western

relations: the first is the terror campaign by various Jihadi Islamist groups against targets in the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and elsewhere, and the second is the consequent American-defined and-led war against terror that itself reflects the activist, militant worldview of neoconservatives who have captured much of American foreign policy-making.

The wars that changed regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, the parallel but smaller scale American-Israeli attempt to change the Palestinian leadership, and Washington's moves to pressure Syria and Iran with punitive legislation

and embargos all fall within the very explicit American neoconservative agenda that advocates securing American (and Israeli) interests by using US

force to change Middle Eastern leaderships, economic systems, state ideologies, and alliances.

There is no doubt ? the compelling laws of physics rule here ? that the threat and use of American force will induce short-term political changes around here. Libya's abrupt acceptance of responsibility for the Lockerbie plane bombing and ending its WMD program dramatically confirm this age-old political adage: when an angry giant holds a loaded gun to your face and you

are standing naked and alone, you treat the angry giant nicely and obsequiously give him what he demands. Self-preservation has always been a

great generator of humility and compliance.

Yet the laws of physics are counterbalanced by the equally compelling laws of history. These suggest that American threats and Anglo-American armadas will indeed achieve some immediate desired changes, in both native regimes and behavior in the Middle East. In the long run, however, local conditions

in the Middle East or any other part of the world will be determined not by

the dictates of imperial foreign armies, but by the strength of the sense of

collective dignity and well-being among the local folks. After the angry giant shoots thousands of natives, and thousands more stand up to resist, the angry giant eventually tends to pack up and go home. Self-preservation makes people and nations do that sort of thing, which is why imperial adventures tend eventually to collapse in a heap of colonial contradictions.

The important point about events in the region today is that local leaders

are feeling and responding to two simultaneous pressures for change: external pressures from the Anglo-American armada, and internal pressures from Middle Eastern political and economic systems that are widely seen as having failed to provide their people with much beyond subsistence living standards. Few people are dying of hunger or lack of medical care in the Middle East, but few also are whooping for joy.

Indigenous Middle Eastern pressures for change reflect a fierce combination of political discontent, economic stress, environmental vulnerability, and the indignities of ordinary people who feel abused at once by their own security-minded national power structures, Israel, the USA, global economic forces, multinational institutions, and other forces and powers. This combination of complaints is usually deadly to the status quo, as we saw most recently in the country of Georgia ? where regime change

was the will of the people, who then elected a new leadership. Why domestic

and foreign pressures do not lead to political changes within Middle Eastern

countries is one of the great riddles of the modern age.

Some leaders in the region who feel the pressures change respond by making

some of the political moves we witness today. Yet the causes and consequences of all this remain unclear. The best scenario would be for indigenous domestic forces to engage in public policy-making and steer change towards genuine democracy anchored in native identities and values. The worst case, which seems to prevail today, is for change to be managed by

unelected and unaccountable leaders who abruptly revise national policies primarily to preserve their incumbency.

Change and "reform" will be neither credible nor lasting if they are driven by foreign military threats, and defined by lone Middle Eastern leaders or cliques who are motivated mainly by preserving their power autocracies and oligarchies. Until Arab, Iranian and other citizens in the Middle East democratically contribute to national policy-making and transformation, most changes taking place now will remain superficial, reactionary, and illusory ? as both physics and history would suggest.
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