THE TRIUMPH OF THE "OLD MIDDLE EAST"
By Barry Rubin

For many years, and especially in the 1990s, problems and rethinking in the Arab world built toward the possibility of a new era involving domestic reforms and international peace. Around the year 2000, however, this era came to an abrupt halt for multiple reasons. This article tries to understand long-term trends in the region. It is an extract from the author's The Tragedy of the Middle East, being published in August by Cambridge University Press.

It was the end of an era for a young century in which lasting peace, rising prosperity, and expanding democracy seemed inevitable. A return to the past of irrational conflict or the triumph of forces opposing progress seemed impossible. Yet in August 1914, these dreams were being shattered for Europe. British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, looking out his window as twilight fell in London, said mournfully, "The lamps are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."(1)

In European cities, towns, and villages, crowds cheered war's advent as a relief from everyday life's boredom and disappointments, a manifestation of the all-too-human desire to leap over difficulties and to solve all the myriad problems of individuals and societies in a single bound. Once again from this moment and for many decades thereafter, Europe was engulfed in turmoil--including three major international conflicts-- as factions battled between democracy and despotism and over which political, economic and social system would dominate the modern world.

During this era of about 75 years from World War One's beginning to the Cold War's end prospects for stability and peaceful progress were repeatedly disrupted by national hatreds, unresolved ethnic conflicts, economic depressions, and ideological struggles. Attempts by a single leader, idea, or country to dominate the continent destroyed cities and piled up mountains of corpses. Only near that terrible twentieth century's close did the region evolve beyond that phase to achieve a basic consensus on key issues that made possible real peace and cooperation.

To start a book on the contemporary Middle East by referring to a European crisis of so long before may seem strange. Yet there are many parallels between the year 2000 for the Middle East and Europe's critical turning point in the year 1914. What was unique about the Middle East was not the existence there of turbulence and dictatorship but the inability to transcend these factors. Instead, at the very moment when the Arab world appeared able to escape the treadmill of a half-century of tragic history, it suddenly reverted to the old patterns. A new Middle East had seemed to beckon, a land of milk and honey just over the next hill. Now this vision was torn apart as that old, familiar and ugly landscape of war, strife and hatred reappeared instead.

Not only did the Middle East turn back to its well-worn ways in the year 2000, which was bad enough, but this outcome was greeted in the Arab world with enthusiasm, and an almost remarkable lack of debate over the alternatives. Like the joyous marching off to battle that Europe experienced at the start of World War One, it was almost as if there

was a visible sense of relief that history and ideas were returning to their proper course.

Ostensibly, this defeat for better times and hope seemed to reflect the downfall of the Israel-Palestinian peace process in 2000 as it appeared to approach its moment of triumph. Many observers argued that this failure resulted from the nearest of misses, the historical equivalent of a wrong word or gesture. In fact, though, these events reflected profound, powerful, and well-rooted forces—the mass and not the margins of the substances shaping Middle East politics and doctrines.

Almost exactly a year after the peace process collapsed so completely, a terrible terrorist attack struck at American territory, far from the Middle East, on September 11, 2001, killing more than 3,000 Americans. The assault was carried out by a small group that seemed the most extreme and deviant of Islamist radicals. Yet while the attack itself was the act of a few individuals, the sympathy and justification it received among Arabs and Muslims in the region also revealed far wider, deeper forces and powers.

A question of tremendous importance faced the Middle East at the onset of a new century that--itself a revealing fact—was defined by a Christian chronology powerful enough to define the world's sense of time. Why did the region have such a troubled history so hard for it to escape? Given this question's overriding significance—not only within the Middle East but throughout a world so affected by it—there was surprisingly little rethinking on how such a remarkable thing had happened. Some took it for granted; others were overwhelmed by specific events; still more accepted the view that all the area's problems had little to do with its own ideas and ways but were merely the product of Western misunderstanding, interference, domination, and imposed injustice. Sadly, this dominant approach only obfuscated the crisis's true causes. Tragically, it will make it harder to solve them and contribute to even more bloodshed and suffering in the region.

This crisis actually began at a time when the Arab-Israeli conflict was closer to resolution than ever before. It intensified in reaction to U.S. and Israeli proposals that would have given Syria all the Golan Heights and created an independent Palestinian state with its capital in east Jerusalem on a quantity of territory equivalent to all the West Bank and Gaza. Similarly, Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon a few months earlier was not taken in the Arab world as a step toward peace but as a signal to intensify violent struggle. At any rate, to blame Israeli or American "intransigence" or a lack of effort to resolve grievances for this regression—at a time when the biggest concessions in history were being offered—makes it impossible to understand what actually did happen and its meaning for the region's history.

Indeed, these circumstances suggest the Middle East's great leap backward took place not because of a failure to find a solution to the problem but due to the exact opposite reason—because of the apparent proximity of a negotiated agreement that would have satisfied most Arab grievances. Instead, Arab leaders and opinion-makers made a choice to "let" public opinion press for renewed radicalism after so many years of not trying to shift it in a moderate direction or ever heeding it on any other issue.

Whatever disagreements remained about precise borders, timing of implementing an agreement, refugees, and other details, why did this long-awaited imminent breakthrough coincide with an explosion of violence, hatred, and intensified hard-line stands in the Arab world? The answer must be that the very prospect of peace and change, along with the need for making compromises to move forward along these roads, appeared so threatening to Arab leaders, intellectuals, and masses as to promote a reaction that was exactly the reverse of what most Western observers had anticipated. In political and ideological terms, for example, peace with Israel was perceived as being more threatening than a continuation of conflict with Israel.

At first, this might seem paradoxical, yet it was actually an eminently rational calculation. Most of the Arab world—and Iran as well—is ruled by regimes that cannot or will not provide democracy, civic freedom, human rights, and economic progress. An end to the conflict with Israel would produce a

huge increase in demand for reform and change, threatening these regimes' very existence. Apart from often being apologists for their political leaders, much of the Arab intelligentsia—or the party men who, Soviet style, act that role as the rulers' servants—have staked careers and passions on ideologies that cannot accept or will not survive such a transition.

This is not to ignore the fact that these stands were ostensibly and perhaps consciously motivated by such virtuous concepts as solidarity, supporting the underdog, demanding justice, claiming one's rights, gallantly refusing to surrender a cause, preserving identity, and dreaming of an ideal society. Bad policies can always be justified by good excuses and solving problems can be made to seem very crass in comparison to having noble ideals. Yet those who preach hatred and dispatch suicide bombers on their missions reap the benefits of power while rarely suffering for the damage they inflict on other people's lives. As Hazem Saghia, a Lebanese writer living in London, suggests, "For the regimes and elites, [these are] deliberate policies to benefit themselves. But "the peoples are also responsible for it…and [ultimately] they pay the price.(2)

The masses, though, had been fed continually for many years--with little or no alternative vision available--on the same basic ideas from Arab nationalist rulers, their salaried intellectuals, and radical Islamist movements. Rather than offer truly competing visions, rulers and radical oppositionists compete to prove themselves more militant in the systematic cultivation of hatred, anger, and xenophobia, rejecting the West and excoriating Israel.

Blaming the foreigner for all difficulties and shortcomings is an old political tool found everywhere in the world and throughout its history. Nowhere, however, has it assumed such paralyzing and obsessive proportions as in the contemporary Middle East.

The information available to most people in the Arab world is extremely limited and often quite inaccurate. In the resulting dialectic, leaders manipulate the masses but then become partly prisoners of the very public opinion they have labored to produce or sustain.

Outside observers should not be bound by the same illusions, however, in failing to understand how these officially approved grievances preserve Middle Eastern countries and politics from the kind of scrutiny and expectations that apply for other parts of the world. What should have instead been at the center of concern and evaluation was the fact that the twenty-first century's onset showed an Arab world that had missed many opportunities to move toward democracy, human rights, economic development, and social progress on a wide variety of fronts. Leaders extolled as embodying great hopes for reform showed themselves to be little or no improvement over those they had replaced.

The real question for the Middle East during the 1990s was which of two paradigms would triumph. On one hand, there were powerful forces seeking to find some new version of the ideas that had dominated the region during the previous half-century: that the West was an enemy of the Arabs and Muslims, that Israel must be eliminated, that statist economies and dictatorial regimes were the proper systems for the Arabs, and that either Arab nationalist or Islamist ideas should guide these nations.

The alternative paradigm would bring the region more into line with what was happening elsewhere in the world. If Arabs, and Iranians as well, wanted to achieve peace, progress, stability and better lives they should adapt such ideas as privatization, democratization, a strong civil society independent of government control, open debate, Western methods adapted to their own culture, peace with Israel, and a closer relationship with the United States.

For reasons involving the interests of those groups already holding power, however, the forces of continuation defeated the proposals for change. On the political level, the global rethinking that followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc and Communism almost totally

bypassed the Arab world. There was remarkably little development of civil society, despite ample publicity for even the tiniest apparent progress on that front, much of which was quickly rolled back. As Saghia pointed out, "[We in] the Middle East are under the illusion that the world waits for us and will wait for us forever."(3)

It would not be inaccurate to say that the Arab world after the year 2000 was still governed largely in the same way—and often by the same people—who had ruled it in the 1970s and 1980s. At best, democracy exists in a formal structure of elections and parliaments that ensure incumbents always win and legislatures never have much influence. The scope of permissible debate is remarkably narrow. The media, schools, and other institutions remain overwhelmingly in government hands and in the service of the official political line. Each crisis seemed to reinforce rather than undermine this system.

In Algeria, the attempt to open the system through freer elections showed the rulers that such a strategy would result in an Islamist takeover. The military suppressed the voting and a bloody civil war resulted. The lesson taken was that democracy was extremely dangerous.

In Syria, the death of President Hafiz al-Asad brought his son, Bashar, to power. The junior Asad, despite being touted as a reformer, quickly squashed any steps toward change. In Iran, the popularly elected President Muhammad Khatami was stymied by hardliners who continued to control the country, block his reforms, and arrest his supporters. The conclusion drawn from these instances was that change was very dangerous and could destroy any regime that was too soft or flexible.

In Iraq, President Saddam Hussein survived his aggression against Kuwait, broke all his commitments to the West made in 1991, and still kept the offensive in weakening international sanctions against him. The lesson derived from this experience was that since the West would not really punish extremist behavior, the radicals should keep acting this way while moderates, unable to rely on Western protection, must continue to appease them.

On the economic level, the Middle East is slipping behind the rest of the world. In the midst of rapid population increases, regimes were unable to create jobs, improve infrastructure, or provide necessary services. Of course, petroleum and natural gas resources provided riches to some countries yet in real terms their spending and populations rose as their income remained level. Saudi Arabia's debt reached alarming proportions. Even in the richest states, higher expectations, demands, and social change intensified the potential for an explosion. Other Arab countries with far larger populations remained poor. Everywhere, government domination of economies created inefficient sectors, limited invigorating competition and made innovation extremely rare. Subsidies designed to ensure the regime's popularity damaged prospects for growth and productivity. Violence, turmoil, and hostility to the West discouraged foreign investment.

Many international studies confirm this poor performance and relative lack of progress compared to the West and even other Third World regions. The UN Development Program's "Human Development Report 2000" for example, placed all Arab states "low" on its index of life expectancy, adult literacy, school enrollment, per capita GDP, and similar factors. Between 1990 and 2000, most Arab countries showed virtually no improvement. Excluding the oil-rich Gulf Arab states and Libya, average GDP per capita in the rest of the Arab world stood at just $1,398 (less than $4 per day). In comparison, Turkey's GDP per capita was $3,167 and Israel's stood at $15,978.(4)

On the social level, increasingly large proportions of young people find the existing regimes cannot provide jobs or a better life. Urbanization and education produces people who are less passive and readier to question the system, including a growing proportion of women dissatisfied with their traditional social status and ready to play a public role for the first time in history. Most of all, there is a tidal wave of younger people who want jobs and housing, are less inclined to be passive, and have less engrained respect for the existing system. Demands for more of a

say in decision-making are coupled with the search for some set of ideas that will explain the Arab world's problems and solutions to them.

When considering their substantial problems, Arab leaders and intellectuals found themselves looking into an abyss. Yet this was not the same chasm perceived by Western observers. To those in the West—and also for a small group of liberal critics within the Arab world—the threats were conflict, economic backwardness, and social stagnation. To the Arab and Iranian ruling elites the real threats were instability, loss of power and wealth, destruction of tradition, triumph of Western influence, subversion of Islam and Arabism by globalization, and the treasonous betrayal of their most passionately held ideological tenets.

In this context, it is easy to understand why so many feared reform. At any rate, change has terrors of its own. It could bring anarchy and instability that intensified suffering. Even with all the risk and struggle required, progress might not bring the rewards it promised. The most difficult of situations can easily be considered preferable to the unknown. For Arab and Iranian leaders, the Soviet bloc's downfall was not a call to freedom and democracy but a threat that they would face the same fate as had befallen the old Communist elites. The West thought that the rational interest of the Arab world and Iran lay with conflict resolution, liberal capitalism, and democracy. Yet those who ruled and enjoyed privileges in those countries viewed such an outcome as a disaster, as threatening the destruction of their way of life and even their own physical extinction.

To preserve the status quo without altering it required finding some way to revitalize the old ideologies and causes to keep their people enthusiastic supporters of the government and system. Such ideas had to tap into the masses' deepest passions to persuade them to set aside aspirations for a better life, accept their current government with all its faults, and make them want to fight anyone challenging it. These dominant forces did not want to resolve grievances—at least by anything short of total victory--but to inflame them even

further. Rather than face very real, serious, and hard to solve domestic problems, then, it was far easier to re-ignite an ideological mobilization against external enemies who allegedly wanted to humiliate their people, trample their honor, kill their women and children, and destroy their religion. The target against which they focused grievances was the very people, institutions, and ideas that represented the alternative system they rejected.

All these ideas were familiar and, however repackaged, were precisely the same ones that had failed the Arab world—but also preserved the regimes—for so many decades. Once again it was argued that Israel is too evil to make peace possible but still could be destroyed if Arabs and Muslims united and devote their resources to the effort. The United States was to be hated as arrogant and ruthless but could nonetheless be chased out of the region. Violence was claimed to be a tool that could be exploited with profit at low risk, terrorism an instrument that might be deployed while denied, and war a vengeance that could be threatened without any costly consequences. Revolution and militancy supposedly might go hand-in-hand with economic development, and indeed was portrayed as a prerequisite for such progress. Democracy was said to be not a foundation for peace and domestic prosperity but rather a Western trick to despoil the Arabs and drain Islam of its meaning, a luxury that could not be afforded in a time of confrontation.

According to this doctrine, the way to victory was not a pragmatic adjustment to reality but rather having a correct political line. The speeches, articles, and sermons taught the people a series of basic principles to which all must adhere: You can get everything you want without compromise, and to demand all with no concessions is simply a matter of justice. The true hero is not he who achieves material improvements and benefits for his people but the one who does not bend no matter what the cost. The most radical ideology or state can be allowed to define others' political choices without inevitably threatening their survival.

Governments believed they could inflame the masses to win cheap popularity and then channel to their benefit the tidal wave of anger and hatred they have unleashed, like the otherwise destructive roaring flood of water directed through sluice gates to generate electricity. At any rate, with rulers, writers, clerics, generals and professors swearing that real peace, moderation, or reforms would destroy religion and betray people, delivering God and nation to demonic enemies, who could persuade the people otherwise?

While these forces opposing change were well-entrenched, those favoring reform were extremely weak. Even the most moderate among them knew they must be cautious to avoid an unpleasant fate that in some places meant death or imprisonment, in others, the loss of reputation and livelihood. Liberal democratic oppositions were only tiny groups of intellectuals and businesspeople lacking an organized base of support and far outnumbered by radical Islamists. Many of their best minds had exiled themselves to the West. Even the most courageous among those who remained had only limited access to the media and other state-controlled institutions.

On top of all these handicaps, the reformers were constantly on the defensive, accused of being Zionist puppets and American agents who were disloyal to the Arab cause and heretics against Islam. While Westerners might think change was rational and inevitable, their views counted for nothing in the Middle East. Whatever gestures Arab or Iranian leaders made to U.S. and European viewpoints in their English-language statements, this type of rhetoric often had little or no relationship to what they said and did at home.

What was taking place in the Middle East, then, was not so much a confrontation of civilizations as such but something far simpler and quite common in world history: the determination of elites and systems to survive; oppositionists' efforts to seize power for themselves; and reactionary hatred to a threat seen in what others call "progress." In European history, similar circumstances called forth Communism, fascism, Nazism, reactionary religious movements, extreme nationalism, and a wide range of retrograde ideas. Why should it be surprising that the Middle East experience such a parallel pattern when faced with a similar set of challenges?

The difference, however, is that in the Middle East—in contrast to all other parts of the world--the reactionary, anti-modernization forces won. Was this outcome inevitable? Obviously there were powerful tides--deep and long-term factors--pushing in that direction. The underlying real issues were hidden under a seemingly endless avalanche of dramatic events: wars, threats, declarations, issues, crises, negotiations, peace plans, debates, terrorist attacks, conferences and summits, to name a few categories. So dense was this veil that the real questions were hardly ever asked, much less answered.

In Saghia's words, "While the modern world is engaged in an unprecedented technological and communications revolution we are busy with questions and concerns that belong to the [past]….Rarely does someone talk about the need to achieve investment…about educating the youth to have the qualifications demanded by the global economy, about the development of regional water resources, about freedom, about the status of women, etc."(5)

A central issue must be to consider why the Arabs selected a strategy so objectively harmful to their own interests and prospects. It is a question often asked by Arab intellectuals themselves, albeit more often in private than in public. Yet there is no big mystery here. No matter how much damage these decisions did to the masses' lives or the countries' resources they were in still in the ruling elites' interests. And if this interest was a short-term, short-sighted one, this is hardly unusual in the world now or in the past. In discussing the prevalence of dictatorship and greed for power in Arab states, a Palestinian writer remarked, "Most of all this is human nature."(6) That assessment is quite true, but the question remains: Why can humans get away with more in some places than in others?

Perhaps the main reason in this case is the way solutions to the main problems are defined. The questions shaping the Arab and Islamic debate included: Why are we behind the West in terms of wealth, power, influence,

and development? How can we catch up with it or even surpass it? Does the West have some secret of success that we can adapt or copy, be it one of military organization, technology, economic system, constitutionalism, nationalism, socialism, the role of women, secularism, or something else? What should we accept and what must we reject from Western society in somehow finding a balance between solving these problems while at the same time keeping our own distinctive ways? Or is it better to fight and resist the West, to view it as an enemy that seeks to subordinate the Arabs and destroy Islam?

Being behind the West in terms of power, prestige and progress was especially galling to Arab and Muslim societies which viewed themselves as superior in civilizational and theological terms. They felt themselves heir to a proud heritage characterized by great empires that had once dominated the Middle East and surpassed Europe culturally. They also believed that their religion's precepts more closely approximated God's preferences. Clearly, the world was somehow wrong and must be set right by whatever means were necessary.

At the same time, though, this overweening confidence in their superiority was blended with a debilitating inferiority complex of being helpless, doomed to be subdued by more powerful outside forces. The fear that the West might actually be superior enhanced the bitterness, anger, and cynicism so common in the region. Perhaps there was something that meant the Arabs would never be worthy of development or democracy. These attitudes also reconciled people to dictatorship and failure. And if the glittering prizes of this world were out of rich at least honor and principle could be preserved by doctrinaire rigidity.

The ideal response to the problems of Arabs and Muslims had to take into account all these factors. Yes, Arabs and Muslims were the best of peoples who should defend their splendid heritage. Yes, the West was so powerful that its domination would be assured if current conditions remained unchanged. Yet the temptation to adapt to this world order must be resisted. Through unity and ideology,

suspicion and sacrifice, the battle could yet be won or, at least, never lost. There were three types of responses to this challenge of the West and modernity but only two of them met this test.

Sadly, the option that would have been most effective was least acceptable. The liberal response, ultimately strongest everywhere else in the Third World was weakest in the Arab world. This approach saw the West's success as based on the invention of new techniques that could be copied or adapted by their communities. These principles included pragmatism, economic development through private enterprise, secularism, parliamentary democracy, the individual nation-state inspiring its own patriotism while pursuing its own interests, and the creation of strong civil societies. In this view, the West was a potential ally and "club" well worth joining. Both Jews (through Zionism) and Turks (through Kemalism) adapted such a liberal European interpretation of progress, relative secularism, and nationalism.

But most Arabs rejected this approach, deeming it a failure when it had been to some extent tried by them during the 1930s and 1940s.(7) Like those who came to power in Russia in 1917, Germany in 1933, or China in 1949, the dominant view in the Arab world considered that dramatic political and economic progress required rebellion against the prevailing Western model. The 1990s saw some revival of the notion that imitating those who had succeeded made sense but this remained the worldview of a very distinct minority, even among intellectuals, and failed to transform a single state. Indeed, it was precisely against this model—and the West's alleged attempt to impose it on the Middle East—that nationalist and Islamist movements and regimes were struggling with such determination. .

Second, the Pan-Arab nationalist approach insisted that the Arabs were behind only because the West was oppressing them and holding them back. The answer was for Arabs to unite into a single nation-state (or at least to cooperate very closely) and expel Western influence from the Middle East, which included Israel's destruction. The best

political system would be a one-party state led by a populist dictator. For economic development, the model was state socialism modeled based on the Soviet bloc's system. This was the dominant ideology and guide to action for Arab leaders between the 1950s and 1990s.

Third, the Islamist political view agreed with Arab nationalism that revolution was necessary and that the West was the source of Arab and Iranian difficulties. In contrast, though, it argued that Arabs and Muslims had so far failed to overcome this subordination because they had abandoned their own religious tradition. Only a return to Islam would make possible the defeat of Western political and cultural oppression, while achieving rapid development and social justice. Borrowing from the West should be carefully limited to certain technological tools. This ideology became the motive force for Iran's revolution, the Afghan struggle against the Soviets, and the doctrine of most opposition movements in the Arab world from the early1980s onward.

Given the triumph of the Arab nationalist and Islamist responses over the liberal model, the twentieth century's second half in the Middle East can be called the Era of Radical Expectations. It began with the decline of European domination in the late 1940s, the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, and an ensuing wave of radical nationalist coups. It was characterized by the hegemony of Pan-Arab nationalism, radical dictatorships eager to intimidate moderate neighbors, moderate states imprisoned by this doctrine's constraints, regional instability, extensive violence of all types, a verbal obsession with the Arab-Israeli conflict, and key Arab states' alliance with the USSR. During the 1970s, two new aspects were added: the wealth of oil-producing states and revolutionary Islamist movements.

As a result, the Middle East's history between the 1950s and 1990s largely revolved around attempts to implement the Pan-Arab or revolutionary Islamist models. During that whole period, most Arabs professed to believe that some leader, country, or revolutionary movement would conquer and unite the region, transforming it virtually overnight

through some magical political and economic formula. If total justice and total victory were so close to realization there was no need to compromise. These doctrines promised that the Middle East would not have to adjust to the world and to the unfavorable balance of forces. Instead, they would have to adjust to the Middle East's desires.

Each of these efforts failed and yet none of them was really discredited. If they didn't work the effort would just have to be made harder, for a longer period and with greater sacrifice. The underlying premises were never really reexamined.

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NOTES

1. On Sir Edward Grey, see for example: <http://www.greatwar.org/Who's%20Who/grey.htm>.
2. Hazem Saghia, al-Hayat, February 28, 2001. Translation in: MEMRI No. 198, March 27, 2001.
3. Ibid.
4. Amy Hawthorne, "The Arab World and the Millennium Summit: Avoiding the Globalization Challenge," Washington Institute for Near East Policy Watch No. 485, September 13, 2000.
5. Saghia, op. cit.
6. Fuad Abu Hijla, al-Hayat al-Jadida, June 13, 2000. Translation in: Middle East Media Research Center (MEMRI), No. 102, June 16, 2000,
7. See Albert Hourani, Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939 (NY, 1970).