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MIDDLE EAST THE GREAT UNRAVELING

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WHAT WENT WRONG WITH THE MIDDLE EAST?

Dominique Moïsi

MORE so than in previous years—if this is possible to say—in 2015 the Middle East has become the symbol, if not the cause, of everything that can go wrong in the international system. How can it be so?

In October 2001—a few weeks after 9/11—the great Princeton historian and Orientalist, Bernard Lewis, published a best-selling book entitled *What Went Wrong?: the Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*. The book was already in page proofs when the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington took place. The book, therefore, does not cover those events, yet raises questions that are even more valid today than they were nearly 15 years ago.

As is expected of a historian, Lewis took the long view by asking a fundamental question. For many centuries (at least from the eighth to the sixteenth),

Islam had been the world's greatest, most open, most enlightened, most creative, and most powerful civilization—with the possible exception of China, which during those same centuries had far less interaction with the rest of the world. And then everything changed, as the previously despised West won victory after victory. It did so first in battle—Lepante in 1571, Vienna in 1529, and, again, this time decisively, in 1683. And then, of course, it went on to be defeated once more in the marketplace. When 'we' in the West were in our Middle Ages, the world of Islam was in full bloom. Yet by the time 'we' had started to enter our Renaissance, the world of Islam fell into decline—first very slowly, but then inexorably.

Many Middle Easterners still concentrate on the following question: 'Who did this to us?' The answers have varied with time, ranging from Christendom, the

French and British imperialists, the West at large, Zionists, and (although not so much today) the Jews *tout court*.

But some others in the Middle East have been asking a more open and necessary question: 'When did it go wrong?' In this collective blame game, some find the explanation internally rather than externally. They emphasize religion and the specificity of Islam. There is also a problem with this interpretation, for in the Middle Ages the world of Islam allowed a degree of freedom of thought and expression that led persecuted Jews and even dissident Christians to seek refuge within it.

And so still others wonder whether the right question should be: 'What have Muslims done to Islam?', rather than 'What has Islam done to Muslims?' Of course, such an approach leaves to one side the views of Islam towards politics, as well as the well-known absence of separation between religion and politics in the Qu'ran. In the world of Islam, what belongs to God and what belongs to Cesar are not clearly separated—to say the least. The role of women is also very particular—but is this the product of pre-Islamic tribal sexism, or is the relegation of women linked to the very nature of Islam itself?

Instead of emphasizing the nature of Islam, or the role of Muslims, should one concentrate instead on the nature of regimes? On the whole, writes Lewis, they "have failed every test, except the test of survival." And lately—in particular since the so-called Arab Revolutions—not all of them have managed that.

TWO SCHOOLS

Today in the world of Islam, one recognizes two basic schools of thought when it comes to the reasons for decline. The first one attributes all evil to the abandonment of the divine heritage of Islam and advocates a return to a real or imagined past. In fact, from that standpoint, there is real continuity between the Iranian Revolution and ISIS—at least from an ideological point of view. By contrast, the other school of thought emphasizes another problematic and asks instead a different question: 'How do we put it right?' This last puts the focus on the absence of freedom and therefore on the need for democracy—even if getting there will be quite a long and difficult journey.

This is in fact precisely where Lewis—a renowned scholar who became George

One does not impose progress and happiness on 'others'—especially if they come from a very different world—without consulting or integrating them in the process of change.

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W. Bush's "favorite Orientalist"—went in a dramatically erroneous direction when he advocated going to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. I still remember a well-known disciple of Lewis explaining to me at the end of 2002 that since "the United States could not wage war on Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the countries from where the kamikaze of 9/11 had come, Washington would have to settle with Iraq." The same person also said that "democracy in Baghdad will bring peace in Jerusalem." For him, Arabs could not accept the existence of Israel because they did not accept themselves. Once they came to view themselves in a more positive light—thanks to democracy—everything would be all right. And Israel would become to the Middle East what Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore had become to Asia—namely, a model to follow on their path to modernity and normalization, the famous "bridge" Shimon Peres had been dreaming about for decades.

What a delusion such a vision proved to be. One does not impose progress and happiness on 'others'—especially if they come from a very different world—without consulting or integrating them in the process of change. The French may have known better, given their harsh Algerian experience. This explains, at least in part, France's refusal to join the coalition against Saddam Hussein in 2003.

If one looks at the Middle East in 2015, one can see just how wrong this American vision was—and how wrong it still is. It is important at this point to grasp the complexity of the present situation, and to stop for a while to consider the so-called Arab Revolutions process that began in Tunisia at the very end of 2010.

ANTECEDENTS & ANALOGIES

"It is our Gdansk," I heard a prophetic Arab intellectual exclaim even before the events in Tunisia had begun spilling over into Egypt. At the very onset, we were hearing comparisons with events that had taken place in Poland decades earlier. For people like him, what was happening in Tunis was seen as the "spark" that would, step by step, inflame the entire region, and in time replace despotism with freedom. He was convinced that the 'Wall of Fear' was about to fall in the Arab world, as surely as had the 'wall of oppression' in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. Of course, he was aware from the outset that the reference to 1989 had clear limits. No equivalent to the Soviet Union and its hold over Central and Eastern Europe existed within the Arab world: the 'stick' was absent, and so was the 'carrot.' The hope of joining the European Union simply did not exist in the Arab case, even if some countries from the Maghreb, such as Morocco and Tunisia, had been single-handedly toying with the idea for quite some time.

In reality, the French Revolution provides a much better analogy with which to understand the "Arab Spring" than the events that led to the collapse of the Soviet empire in Central and Eastern Europe. One could of course argue that the use of such an analogy was but the latest display of arrogance from the West, unreconciled as it was with the realization it was no longer the unique center of the world. Even so, the mother of all revolutions—i.e., the French Revolution—offered plenty of lessons to shed light on the complexity of the changes that were deemed to be taking place on the other side of the Mediterranean.

The first lesson of 1789 is to take the long view of unfolding events. When things started to go wrong, many Arab Spring protagonists stressed the fact that the story was just beginning. It would be long, confused, and complicated: there would be highs and lows, they argued. But in our present interdependent and transparent world, who has the patience to think in these terms? And so far, with the possible exception of the Tunisian case, there have been mostly 'lows' in the Arab revolutions. Our attention—conditioned as it is by the zapping culture of modern television

viewers—tends to shift easily. We want results quickly: the enthusiasm of one day gives way too fast to the fear and discouragement of the next.

Yet it is difficult to completely disregard the fact that by 2015 the Arab Spring had been replaced by the Islamic Winter—to refer to the view expressed by the majority of Israeli strategists and political commentators, and not just theirs. But, of course, presented in such a radical way, that sort of as-

sertion remains a gross oversimplification of the confused and complex reality on the ground.

THE ARAB SPRING

The Arab Spring—or whatever else one chooses to call it—is a revolutionary change. It has a 'before,' and it will have an 'after'—even if the 'after' remains totally open. Tunisia, the

starting point, possesses all the elements that constitute a revolution. It was the stage for, on the one hand, the encounter between the historical accident of a young Tunisian unable to put up with his situation any longer and who set himself on fire, and, on the other hand, deeply rooted structural causes (demographic, social, economic, cultural, political, and ethical)—all of which was facilitated and amplified by the information revolution.

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On the demographic front, the last generation of baby boomers in the Arab world had arrived on a labor market made even flatter by the impact of the world economic and financial crisis that started in 2007 in the West. These overqualified—but also too often under-educated—young people brought down the ‘Wall of Fear,’ driven by a combination of political and ethical reasons. Behind existing intense economic frustrations stood a desire for liberty and a rejection of corruption that was both real and deep, extending from Tunis to Cairo, and later on to Damascus.

What remains today of this confused period is an added sense of frustration and failure: ‘We are failing again to define the course of our history in a controlled manner,’ is a slogan we are increasingly hearing in the Arab world. To characterize this sense of deep frustration, it is tempting to speak of a “culture of humiliation.” In his acclaimed book, *The Looming Tower*, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Lawrence Wright describes in a very perceptive way the psyche of Osama bin Laden:

Humiliation, in the deepest sense of the term, is impotence. It springs from a belief that one has been dispossessed of the present and even more so of the future—a future which is in utter contrast to an idealized, glorified past; a future in which your political, economic, social, and cultural conditions are dictated by the Other.

On the existential plane, bin Laden was marginalized, out of play, but inside the chrysalis of myth that he had spun about himself, he was becoming a representative of all persecuted and humiliated Muslims. His life and the symbols in which he cloaked himself powerfully embodied the pervasive sense of dispossession that characterized the modern Muslim world. In his own miserable exile, he absorbed the misery of his fellow believers, his loss entitled him to speak for theirs, his vengeance would sanctify their suffering.

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the Caliphate comes precisely from that deep sense of collective humiliation, so prevalent in the Arab Muslim world. A ‘good’ sort of humiliation—such as the one that has motivated Asians to compete with the West and amongst themselves—requires a

minimum of confidence and favorable circumstances, such as a reasonably promising political and economic context, as well as a national leadership that is up to the task of rallying a disheartened people. Unfortunately, such conditions do not exist in the Middle East.

The sense of historical decline at the root of the Arab Islamic culture of humiliation has been reinforced and deepened by the cumulative impact of successive frustrations in the wake of World War II. These include the disillusion of independence, the creation of the State of Israel, the failure of oil to serve permanently as a successful economic, strategic, and diplomatic weapon, and, most of all—it must be said—the inadequacy of their own leaders and the resulting combination of despotism, corruption, and, in cases such as Syria, a unique form of cruelty towards their citizens. Within these layers of humiliation, the frustration over the existence of Israel occupies a very specific place. Bluntly put, one could say: ‘How could a handful of former slaves so humiliate the heirs of Ramses II, as proved to be the case in the 1967 Six Day War?’

HUMILIATION HAS LED TO TERRORISM

Humiliation has led to terrorism. As some may wrongly think, this is not a question of social status. Like the revolutionaries of late-nineteenth-century Europe, the terrorists of the

twenty-first century are not recruited among the poorest strata. In fact, their level of affluence and education is usually average—if not above average. At the same time, for the West to cover all terrorists with the same blanket would be a terrible mistake to make. The declaration of a “Global War on Terror” that followed 9/11 may have been emotionally understandable from an American point of view, but it was a policy doomed to failure.

Terrorism is not an enemy that can be vanquished. It is a violent tactic that will continue to be used as long as it is deemed effective. And though the ‘War on Terror’ can never be won—in the sense of eradicating terrorism completely, once and for all—terrorists also never win. Only their targets can defeat themselves, by losing faith in their cause or by violating the values for which they stand in their fight against terrorism.

DESCENT INTO CHAOS?

In 2015, the Middle East seems to be descending into utter chaos. It has long been one of the most problematic parts of the world, but this time the region gives the impression of outdoing itself in going beyond our worst predictions.

What is happening, and why? To explain this descent into Hell, three key words are necessary: fragmentation, radicalization, and expansion.

Fragmentation describes the processes taking place before our eyes, as the lines in the sand defined by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 are being overturned—precisely because they are a product of the West. Should we try to defend them at all costs, or should we accept the fact that they were doomed to be contested, with once strong and despotic regimes being shown that they could not maintain the artificiality of these lines by force? In short, from Syria and Iraq to Libya and Yemen, an irresistible process of fragmentation is taking place. Will it spread further to countries such as Lebanon, or can it be contained?

The answer lies in part in the evolution of a second key

word: *radicalization*. The war that exists first and foremost within the world of Islam has been radicalized and diversified. We are all confronted with archeological layers of conflict—which deepen in front of our eyes. There is the war between Shiites and Sunnis, which in Yemen is inching its way towards a direct military confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There is the war among Sunnis between fundamentalists and moderates, best seen at work in both Syria and Iraq.

There is also a morbid and brutal competition between fundamentalist groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS—not to mention smaller ones. They all want to impress the West and attract new recruits through the unique radicalism of their death instincts and their shrewd knowledge of the use of the internet as a propaganda tool. Our role is, of course, to show them that we embrace life more than they embrace death; our resilience will surprise them.

The third key word is *expansion*. The Middle East is becoming a state of mind. It has affected a new generation of young people, who can either be of Arab or Muslim descent, or converts from Christianity, and who espouse radi-

cal Islam in order to give meaning to their lives. It's the jihadist update of the Cartesian formula: "I kill you, I commit suicide, therefore I exist."

It is this culture of death—part nihilistic, part fanatical—that attracts them, as they sometimes confuse video games with geopolitical realities. Confronted with such extremists and their wish to destroy the values for which we stand as much as the territories we defend, we must show resilience.

Beyond our Western emotional determination, three principles should serve as our guideposts: we must not underestimate the threat, we must not overreact, and we must not overestimate the challenge.

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THE ISIS PHENOMENON

We were all taken by surprise by the rapid victories of ISIS—in particular in Iraq and Syria—and the fact that they grabbed such large portions of territory so easily. The Islamic State may be neither Islamic nor a state, but it occupies large swaths of land—even if it has had to relinquish 25 percent of the geography it initially took over, losing in the process nearly 75 percent of its sources of revenue (due to the fall of the price of gas and oil and our successful attempts to stop the flow of financial resources to them).

It is also essential not to overreact to the threat they represent. One must not repeat the errors made by the United States, which did too little before 9/11 and too much after. There is a war within the world of Islam. Let us not lose the moderates by declaring that all Muslims are "terrorists." If we were to follow that path, then the scenario of a clash of civilizations described by Samuel Huntington would become a frightening and destructive reality.

Finally, let us not overestimate the threat represented by ISIS—or

Al-Qaida, for that matter. They can inflict terrible harm—mostly on Muslims, as has been the case so far—but they cannot win. What we are witnessing in the Middle East right now are the consequences of a very long cycle of events.

We have to practice containment, if not rollback, against ISIS, being aware of the fact that positive changes—if they come—will be the product of internal forces.

Let us neither repeat our previous mistakes, nor give up hope. Is there light at the end of the tunnel, or will examining the question of 'what went wrong' make things even worse?

THE GOOD NEWS

Could the good news come from a possible rapprochement between Washington and Tehran? It is much too early to say. But the majority of Iranian society dreams of such a rapprochement with the United States.

So let us come to the end with an expression of hope, rooted in an undeniable reality. The majority of Muslims are at war against ISIS. In the coming months or years—with our help, of course—they will defeat ISIS. It will be the proof that moderates can win over fanatics, and that a clash of civilizations between the Arab and Muslim world and the West is not ineluctable. ●