What Really Drives The Middle East And North Africa Today: Religion Or Politics Or Both – And What Next?

Over the four decades I've been involved in the Middle East, one characteristic has been enduring: the region makes a fool of any optimist. A relatively new characteristic, however, is that no sooner have you made sense of the pattern you are observing and established how you want to describe it, than the kaleidoscope is turned.

Religion or politics as drivers? asks the exam question. Both, neither – depends on where you are and whom you're talking about. Depends also what you mean by a driver: there are real and there are synthetic drivers. What is undoubtedly true is that someone will use politics/religion to further their own narrative or interests – that is, religious differences will be politicized; and ethnic or regional differences will be sectarianized.

Consider the following:

Sectarianism was not a factor originally in the Syrian revolution; but it has become its overriding characteristic

The MB were elected by a plurality of Egyptians in three consecutive elections but are now branded as terrorists in Egypt/KSA/UAE – though interestingly the other Islamists (the Salafists who won a quarter of the vote in the 2011 elections in Egypt) are both legitimate and popular. Moreover, while the public is viscerally anti-MB, it

is not anti-religious

Those who criticised the recent constitution in Egypt or encouraged a vote against it were branded as 'pro-MB'; yet two years earlier, those who argued against the military's declaration of constitutional principles were dismissed by Islamists and the MB as heathen

The protesters of Tahrir Square in the first revolution were united on what they didn't want but could not articulate a political programme for what they did want

It has been well summed up by one Egyptian analyst: "We don't understand **politics.** Politics are war. We seem to have this idea that winning politically means total physical annihilation of your opponent."

In such a mindset, both sides are locked in a conflict viewed as an **existential fight to the end**. As another commentator pointed out: "The (Muslim) Brotherhood is very comfortable in this milieu, this cosmic battle between good and evil. When it comes to the Brotherhood, the government genuinely sees it as an organisation willing to burn the country down. And [the government] genuinely believe that dissent is akin to treasonous activity at a time that the country is fighting a war on terror."

Brotherhood/Islamist politics have always helped former regimes sow division among their opponents. Authoritarian regimes in Egypt were more comfortable with debates over secularism versus Islamism than debates about the transparency and accountability of state institutions, the powers and role of the internal security forces, equitable economic development, or anticorruption measures.

Obviously in some sense both politics and religion remain drivers; and in essence the region's core challenge is finding

a model that reconciles Islam and modernity, religion with non-sectarian statehood. However, dealing with the problems which the region faces at the moment may not best be achieved by trying to tackle the religious and political aspects – because the region isn't ready for those problems to be resolved. Moreover, experience indicates that attempts by outsiders just make matters worse.

Revolution is not new in the Arab world. To simplify brutally, the aim of local notables through the last century of the Ottoman Empire was not to overturn and replace Ottoman authority (though that might happen), but to become the sole and indispensable channel of communication between that authority and those it ruled.

But after the Second World War, the withdrawal of the British and French, the Ottoman successors, meant the office of ruler fell vacant. Those who wanted to exercise power now had to put themselves forward as possible rulers, prepared if necessary to destroy rival claimants and overthrow government using the only effective method – the army.

Which is when the real revolutions happened, involving not only the overthrow of regimes, but also overturning the social system in which they were rooted (Egypt in the first decade after Nasser; Syria from 1963 onwards). Political groups seized power on a wave of mass mobilization. They promised the restoration of national/Arab dignity; freedom; modernity; Arab unity; independence; socialism and social justice. However, they honoured this promise more in the breach than the observance.   In Egypt post-1952, people sacrificed political freedom/democratic representation for social welfare. And so arose the era of indigenous autocrats reliant on a powerful security apparatus.

Then throw in two further influences - Palestine and the Iranian revolution – whose effect was to expose the ineffectiveness of the indigenous autocratic regimes; and to focus popular disaffection not merely against those regimes but against the western powers which supported them. On both of these would Political Islam draw for its appeal.

Arab and western views of the causes of the region's current problems differ. For the Arabs, American and European efforts at reform have been both ineffective and destabilizing. The Iraq war of 2003 was the start of the problem and unleashed the forces that produced the revolutions that began in Tunisia seven years later. A strong central government based on brutally repressive security forces had been the tradition for 50 years. Moreover, with its collapse, the dyke Saddam had maintained against the Iranian revolution sweeping into the Sunni heartlands was breached and with it came increased influence of Iran – by no means confined to the Shia crescent - and further impetus to the ideology of "resistance" to the West and to what were presented as failed regimes. The remaining autocracies sought to ensure Iraq was read as a cautionary tale about the folly of unseating even the worst of despots, of humiliating Sunni Islam and of empowering Shiism.

But it was to get worse. Confessional politics, which had been largely confined to Lebanon with unhappy results, became - under US insistence - the process by which power in Iraq was apportioned. Strong central power under the old regimes had worked hard to suppress sectarianism, and with it religious, ethnic and regional fragmentation. Suddenly, post-2003 Arab religious vocabulary became sectarianized and politicized. As identity became increasingly determined by sectarian loyalties and AQ became the centre of gravity, so it prevented consensus about the nature of the state, the rule of law or a concept of citizenship which rose above sectarian allegiance. To the extent that now, with good reason, people seriously question

whether the post-Ottoman or Sykes-Picot borders will survive as populations are relocating on sectarian and ethnic lines and creating "soft partitions".

In short, it made it impossible to place the next generation's prosperity above the settling of past scores. Politics became, in that horrible phrase, a zero sum game. And the interests of rulers and governments throughout the region became directly threatened in a way that Palestine had not threatened for a generation.

Since then, in Arab eyes, Western efforts at reform have exacerbated the problem. They were instrumental in Mubarak's fall and the ensuing political and economic chaos in Egypt, to the point that now only the Egyptian military can bring order and stability. Nor was there any useful or concerted western effort in Libya or Tunisia.

And as the West's "occupation" of Iraq presided over spiraling casualty figures, the West gradually lost confidence and sought ways to reduce its profile in the region. To the point that the West, in all its naivety as seen through Arab eyes, appears determined not only to leave its historic allies in the region exposed and mortally vulnerable to an existential threat from their two overriding religious and ideological enemies, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, but with whom – to compound matters – the West seems intent on seeking an accommodation.

From a Western perspective, of course, it looks very different. The upheavals are the product of decades of authoritarian repression, weak and ineffective governance, failed social policies, poor economic development and growing inequality of income distribution, corruption, and crony capitalism – all identified in the searing series of Arab Human Development Reports issued by the UN since 2002.

The key theme at the heart of all this is not democracy, but the <u>dignity of the individual citizen</u>. With extraordinary prescience and directness over the following decade, the Human Development Reports, written by Arab experts for Arab governments, analysed the underlying tensions building in society. They identified how the actions of the State in the Arab world were stunting human development, the acquisition of knowledge, political freedoms, economic growth and women's rights. Education, they argued, was dominated by religion, and societies were dominated by autocratic, corrupt and unaccountable elites of families, business and security agencies. The result was that the bond between citizen and state was almost non-existent, preventing the embrace into the nation of those with differing origins and inclinations.

And here emerges a <u>key new factor</u>. Agents of change were no longer governments or established security forces, they were new civilian or armed groupings and individuals. Managing the region, for governments in and outside the Middle East, became a whole lot more complicated. If you had to visualise it, think <u>Jackson Pollock rather than the old Cold War chess board.</u>

Moreover, the 2008 global economic crisis led to a spike in commodity prices, repeated two years later which hit the poor despite the subsidies. Food inflation in Egypt averaged almost 20% in 2010. The requirement to increase subsidies and wages still further brought huge pressure particularly on budgets that did not have massive oil wealth to fall back on. Corruption accentuated a rising, visible disparity between rich and poor. Political activism was also increasing. In Egypt prior to 2011, the Kifaya movement (2004) was essentially a grouping of the Nasserite/liberal/secular elite. It was joined in 2008 by the 6th of April Movt (workers' rights) and 2010 by Wael

Ghoneim's page on Facebook 'We are all Khaled Saeed'– the young Egyptian beaten to death by security forces who assumed they could do as they liked with impunity. The result was that by 2011 there was a substantial reservoir of politicised energies that could also (and this is the important extra) be assembled by using advances in the technology of social network communications. That finally made mass demonstrations feasible.

The revolution in Egypt was not the idea of the religious. However, the MB thought that for the West their key assets were their religious credentials – their potential ability to control jihadists, whom they had the religious legitimacy to contain; and their potential ability to counteract Iran's "revolutionary" appeal to the street.

But like nuclear weapons, the influence of Political Islam flowed chiefly from its potential. Once in power, Islamists were beset by choices that inevitably created deep divisions: Side with secularists? or Salafists? Against Shiism? With Saudi Arabia? Work for the Brotherhoodization of politics? Or allow the movement to adapt to politics? Long term or short term? How do you reconcile the concept of individual rights, freedom of expression and so on with the collective good of the Umma? And so on.

This rapid move from prison to palace and back to prison will present the biggest challenge not just for the MB but political Islam. Its claim to the authenticity of traditionism has been rejected on a massive scale by Muslims who, though devout and conservative, refused to have religious practices imposed on them and declared the Islamist agenda not suitable for modern Egypt. At the optimistic end, it could produce a group which focuses on Islamic values rather than Sharia, according to the model of Turkey's AKP. But there will inevitably, I fear, be a strand which will resort

to violence, provoked by the failure of Islamization through democratic means.

This is a question Islam not the West will need to resolve, and it goes to the heart of the debates over identity and religious values. Who is the source of ultimate authority: God, King, People – or Army? In combating extremism, many governments of the region, far from separating religion and the state, believe they need to control religious space, both physical and ideological.   For them, "Moderate Islam" means an interpretation of Islam that accepts state authority and therefore you deradicalize your youth by making them more religious, not less. As with the Church in pre-Reformation Christianity, they can't separate the Mosque and State. This is profoundly uncomfortable for policy-makers in the West.

It is easier for governments to succeed in building the physical state religious network (mosques, religious schools, religious endowments and imam training programmes) that can compete with extremists.

But winning the ideological battle is harder. For the youth, state institutions are less appealing. More importantly, if religion is to be depoliticised, state-employed preachers will shy away from addressing those challenges of daily life which are inherently political: poor governance, economic exclusion and corruption. By limiting themselves to safe topics and championing respect for authority, state clerics are out of step with the rebellious spirit of Arab youth and lose ground to violent extremist messages.

However, I wonder whether in looking at the forces at play in the region and how we as outsiders might respond, we might more profitably focus on three other factors. The first I've hinted at already – it is the changing demographics or more specifically, youth.

The young were behind the revolutions – though of course didn't emerge as rulers. The UN reckons over half the Middle East's population is under 25 years old. 1/5 is between 15/24. Unfortunately, over half the unemployed are also from that age bracket. At the time of the Egyptian revolution, about ⅓ of youth were unemployed. Moreover, a high proportion were university graduates. But higher education is not a reliable social stabilizer; indeed, if you're unemployed it exacerbates unrest and appears to encourage disregard for the cautious politics of your elders. In Egypt, college graduates were 10x more likely to have no job as those who only had elementary education. Today, Egyptian entrepreneurs in their 20s tell me that the only thing their prospective employees are interested in is – you've guessed it, not religion or politics, but employment.

Moreover, Middle East youth, like their Western counterparts, are highly adept at social media. In Saudi Arabia, for example, mobile phone penetration is 200%, Facebook usage more than doubled to 5.5m between 2010 and 2012, while Twitter users doubled to nearly 2m in the year to March 2013 – that constitutes half the total Twitter traffic in the whole Middle East. 70% of social media users are in the 15-29 age group. Interestingly, 90% of those claim they are more connected to their society, understand it better and feel they have contributed more to it as a result of social media.

So Middle Eastern youth are more connected to the world, more opinionated, daring and entrepreneurial. If the economic and political structures are not enabling them to find satisfactory answers to the question "How do I create a future I want?", their alternative of resorting to rebellion will draw potency from their ability to connect with others who share their frustration. One effect could be to weaken further the centralization of power, already being weakened by the fragmentation of societies into community-based identities.

So one conclusion, while accepting the risk of a youth rebellious over dashed ambitions, is not to close off opportunities we can offer Middle East youth, whether in education or training; and keep working with civil society.

The second factor I've also hinted at in the Egyptian context, namely the economy of the region.

Most of the ruling structures established a dependency culture, which they manipulated to placate the populace. I remember telling key members of the Egyptian ruling party from early 2010 that they should not assume that their old ways of buying off discontent among their subjects would work any longer– the world had changed.

But I suspect it is in the Gulf where, out of necessity, one of the most profound cultural shifts is already taking place. And it comes down to oil price. Very simply put, the problem is that to fund their ever inflating benefits packages, the Gulf States need oil prices and export volumes that look like becoming unachievable given rising production in the US and elsewhere and Gulf energy consumption.

Here again is something to ponder. 8.5% of the GDP of the Middle East as a region goes on subsidising energy for their citizens (for advanced economies the figure is 0.03%). Energy subsidies consume 22% of government revenues and are equal to half the global energy subsidies.   On the current trajectory, Saudi Arabia will be importing fuel by 2030. As a result, the six GCC states collectively consume more primary energy than the whole of Africa.

Something has to give. Apart from more effective energy use and more realistic domestic pricing, one obvious answer is that there has to be a more productive indigenous workforce

that moves away from a culture dependent on government largesse: currently only 12% of private sector workers in the Gulf are Gulf nationals. As that change in working practices takes place, the relationship between citizen and government is going to alter radically.

And the final factor.   TE Lawrence's often quoted judgement that

> *Arabs believe in persons, not in institutions*

contains some truth. But I remain convinced that building institutions is the most important contribution we can make. In the words of the anthropologist Lawrence Rosen the aim should be to

> *transform the individual situated in a network of obligations into a citizen able to play a variety of discrete roles within a government of limited powers.*

Without that, any number of constitutional guarantees won't circumscribe the powers of a legislator who can't separate his office from his personal allegiances.

Where our influence is accepted (and we have to earn that acceptance), we should provide assistance in building institutions that restrain the aspiring or accidental autocrats; protect against the monopoly of power by those who won't tolerate "the other" and against corruption which has proved to be the breeding ground of extremism; and that distribute power to the largest possible number of qualified persons.

The title asks: What next? and I've got to this point having failed to mention the two most pressing issues facing us today in the Middle East: the barbarity in Syria and the

<u>Iranian</u> nuclear talks. I'm sure there'll be opportunities to discuss these over questions. So let me limit my comments on both to the following.

On the first, the Alawites need to see a solution that convinces them they have a place in post-Assad Syria. There is no consensus in the opposition – neither now nor three years ago - on a post-Assad plan. Regional powers have backed different opposition groups, aggravating the divisions. Russia, Iran, Iraq and Hizbollah have succeeded in helping Assad stay in power. There will be no solution without a political solution; but I can't see <u>how</u> to get there - still less post-Ukraine. Moreover, given the dramatis personae, it is hard to believe any political solution will be an improvement on what went before. As a stalemate grinds on in a country fragmented along an east/west axis, our immediate interests look to be humanitarian and counter-terrorist, with over 7000 foreign fighters from over 40 countries.

On Iran, this is an issue I'm prepared to risk making a fool of myself by remaining optimistic, principally because it is the biggest strategic opportunity since the end of the Cold War. Middle East politics have been predicated on US/Iranian hostility for 35 years. Alter that equation and you dramatically alter the dynamics.

Provided – and this is a big proviso – US and Western policy makers are sufficiently subtle to deal with the four key potential spoilers – Iranian hardliners, US Congress, a Saudi Arabia which feels vulnerable and exposed, and of course Israel, and who knows, may be now there is a fifth in the form of a vindictive Russia – this will make many challenges in the region much easier to deal with.   Of course success also means Iran, with an expanding economy, reintegrating into the region. If the P5+1 talks fail, it will be largely due to the spoilers being unable to change their mindset.

And so some final assumptions.

While democracy has not broken out after the Arab revolutions, the rulers will not escape the global trend towards greater accountability. Kings, Princes and Presidents will increasingly see their power limited by elected bodies and non-elected and non-state actors capable of applying pressure. "We must be in the kitchen, but not on the menu" as one in the Gulf so aptly put it.

The Arab revolutions occurred in those non-monarchical (but not necessarily non-dynastic) Republics where rule was passing from those who were long in the tooth to those who needed still to cut their teeth. But even monarchs are mortal. Over the next ten years, the biggest Gulf monarchy may face two successions, one of which potentially will be to a younger generation.

The appeal and capability of political Islam have been tested. But the test is far from over. In Egypt it failed. Tunisia is providing a fascinating laboratory. In Turkey it is under challenge. Like the monarchies and Republics, Political Islam also needs to grapple with the challenge of a younger generation which recognizes the mistakes of those who remain imprisoned in the mindset of an earlier proscription.

The Muslim Brotherhood will not suddenly fade away, whatever misgivings one may have over its practices and ideology; it has been a significant political movement in many Arab countries for decades. It will not slip into irrelevance. I believe Islam still needs to go through its Reformation. I often wonder whether we are witnessing the early stages of that now. Meanwhile, no modernization can succeed if political Islam monopolizes power, and no modernization can be sustained if political Islam is excluded from the democratic competition. We need to ensure it is not Arab Spring – Islamic Year – Militia Decade

While nationalism is ascendant in Egypt (another reason why Political Islam became so distrusted), regionalism and fragmentation are increasingly dominant motivations elsewhere. This will unquestionably put pressure on post WWI borders – at a time when state institutions are demonstrably ill-equipped to deal with the consequences. Even if borders don't get redrawn, increased transnational interaction (Kurds, Shia, Jihadi Sunnis etc) may make borders less relevant.

In such a confused and exposed environment, above all it is essential for us to <u>be consistent</u> – <u>in</u> our dealings and <u>to</u> our values. Among many other things, that means politics has to be inclusive.

Amin Maalouf has argued hard for recognizing the variety of factors that constitute a person's identity, factors moreover that may change in the course of a person's life; and against the rigid categorization of identity according to only one component part, namely religion. It is his message to the West with which I conclude:

> *the perennial fault of European powers is not that they wanted to impose their values on the rest of the world, but precisely the opposite: they have consistently renounced their own values in their dealings with the peoples they have dominated.*