

Sovereignty's Dissipation: Consensus-Style Stabilization of the Arab World

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The adjectives weak and ineffectual come to mind when describing the military capability of most Arab regimes to exert internal and external territorial defense, a necessary component of sovereignty. We often hear about the clash of “crises of identity” among the multi-ethnic, religious, sectarian, tribal, and sometimes linguistic groups in the Middle East. It is often the reason given behind the “failure” of the Arab state. But naturally, this designation happens only if the said “identity” is inimical to the hegemon’s agenda. Otherwise, it absolutely requires Western help in order to save it. The state “failure” is trumpeted as the main reason for hegemonic intervention to “save” the world from “terrorism” and “insurgencies.”

Never acknowledged is the real cause of this “failure.” Dominant power intervention — military, intelligence, economic, and political — is presented as a reaction, and not as the reason that prompted some of these failures. Some obvious examples of Arab states’ growing territorial loss of control because of these types of dominant interventionist “fixes” are Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan. Palestine, of course, is the original lost territory / state and remains as a reminder of past colonialist injustice and of present racist hegemony. Even if we exclude the well-known inability of the state to deliver on promised socio-economic development goals, there is often an exogenous (dominant power) cause that fosters the growth of competing more narrowly focused identities that challenge the state’s sovereignty.

Increasingly, sovereign military defense has been ceded to the dominant powers. New arrangements are being invented and marketed in order to achieve dominant power objectives. In “What is NATO for?,” (Le Monde Diplomatique, English, 3/1/2009) Serge Halimi discusses (Sarkozy’s) France’s decision to re-join NATO as part and parcel of the increasingly expansionist and interventionist role of that military organization. This is done under the rubric of “stabilization” missions around the world. Moreover, the EU itself is also acquiring a new military dimension. On 2/19/2009, the EU announced they are forming an “earth without borders” (“une terre sans frontieres”) that will be the European counterpart and complement to the US’s “global fight against terrorism,” in that it too will be confronting international terrorism — among other things — and calling for a closer association with NATO. As justification / rationalization, the obligatory references to Hitler and quotes from Elie Wiesel were trotted out, implying a confrontation with Fascism, irrational criminality, and inhumanity.

Considering its potential implications for the Arab world, it is highly instructive to review the actual resolution that was adopted by the EU parliament which “integrated” NATO into the new “security architecture” of the EU. (1) Most notable is the intent to widen the range of military cooperation and interventionism between EU member states and other non-EU

members in Europe who are part of NATO. Subsection #L seeks to enhance the security and military arrangements with them because the old “Berlin plus” formula is no longer sufficient to achieve the EU’s new interventionist agenda in the world. And subsection #Q seeks to expand the “synergy” between the EU and NATO through “joint pilot projects.” In the resolution’s “Strategic Overview” section, the EU’s new international interventionist agenda is revealed and a rationalization / “ethical” dimension is provided as cover for this new role. Subsection #2 says that this will “prevent conflicts, promote stability and bring relief where it is needed” and further provide “a comprehensive approach to crisis management.” This is followed in #7 by explaining that this is now needed because of the new “threats of the 21st century.” This is only natural due to the “democratic consensus” that exists between the EU and NATO and the “security consensus” between the EU and the U.S. “reflecting their common values, goals and priorities, namely the primacy of human rights and international law.” (Try not to giggle at the multiple oxymorons.) Subsection #11 goes even further and “regrets” the doctrine of “non-alignment,” echoing George Bush’s Manichean division of the world into “good” and “evil.” Section #12 offers another rationalization, namely, that “security” (and its concomitant obligatory intervention) is necessary for “development.” Finally, in its discussion of “cooperation” between the EU and NATO, the marketing / rhetorical component of how to convince the public of the necessity for this new arrangement is revealed. It “[N]otes that the EU citizens support missions aimed at alleviating human suffering in conflict zones; notes that the citizens are insufficiently informed,” and calls on the “EU and NATO to better inform people of their missions and of the role those missions play in creating security and stability around the world.”

Dominant power assertion that “stabilization” is somehow beneficial to the world has been adopted hook, line, and sinker by Arab regimes. There has been no questioning of its possible deleterious effects on Arab state sovereignty by any Arab state “leader”. Not only that, but it is presented to their subjects as rational and beneficial-sounding “international legitimacy / consensus” (al-shar’iyya al-dawliyya). It thereby serves as justification for the implementation of what may be publicly questionable or unpopular. Thus, there was the recent announcement of the opening of France’s first base in the UAE, with the more or less obvious intention of counteracting the rise of Iran as a regional power / threat after the U.S. embroilment in its occupation of Iraq. (2) And before that, there was the establishment of the Canadian base in Dubai in 2005 to “help” the U.S. in Afghanistan. (As a member of NATO, Canada continues to display its official “neutrality” in this worldwide “Global War on Terror.”) Finally, there is the conspicuous plethora of U.S. bases dotting the region and occupying Iraq.

“Stabilization / moderation / democratization / liberation / development / peace” or whatever previous “reason” was given by the dominant states) also explains the massive military expenditures of most Arab regimes, especially the oil producers. (3) Seven of the top ten countries in the world for military expenditures as a percentage of GDP are Arab (and Israel makes eight). Given that no Arab state is (officially) involved in any external wars, the necessity of defense against purported external threats is a stretch to credibility and does not explain why Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, (occupied) Iraq, and Jordan need to (repeatedly) spend upwards of eight percent of their national product on military equipment. The magnitude only makes sense when viewed from within a dominant power-configured framework. The real reasons lie in both the recycling of dollars under hegemonic directives and for use against internal threats that might endanger politically and economically beneficial (for local rulers and dominant powers) arrangements.

But the rhetorical rationalization is also a two way street. The dominant powers are not immune to popular pressures either. For example, the American “Global War on Terror” is now re-packaged and marketed as the “Overseas Contingency Operations” (with all the obvious false implications in terms of scope, intensity and permanence) by the Obama administration. (4) This re-packaging was necessitated precisely because of increasing worldwide resistance to these endless hegemonic wars on humanity. And while it is too soon to be optimistic, the increasing “dialogue” that is ongoing between the U.S. and Europe with various parties that had been considered beyond the pale / non grata (Hamas, Syria, Hizbullah) a short while ago is also indicative that resistance is not always a losing proposition in a dominant framework.

We should not be fooled into thinking that these strategies pursued by the dominant powers are entirely novel and unique to this new world order George Bush Manichaeic world. Not at all. There are striking historical similarities with past imperial and colonial strategies towards weaker nations. Among the most prominent are reliance on dependent and compliant indigenous leaders; implementation of divide and conquer strategies and the promotion of inter-religious / ethnic / sectarian strife; use of military “solutions” to political problems; and provision of proto-ethical justifications and Orwellian rhetoric for unethical behavior. Of course, in the case of Israel all those strategies have been pursued, although waging war has been and continues to be the main instrument of achieving its hegemonic goals, including ethnic cleansing, territorial expansion, or quashing uncooperative leaders and resistance.

Well aware of these issues, but more desirous of maintaining their own seats of power, “moderate” Arab regimes have enthusiastically adopted dominant power agendas and are actively pursuing their implementation. Even when these policies are detrimental to their purported sovereignty or national interest or public good. Why else would they be “moderate?” Thus, even though Israel has consistently waged wars on its neighbors (and of course the Palestinians), continues to occupy Arab land, exclusively possesses nuclear weapons in the region, and so forth, “moderate” states still sponsor its agenda. Even though Israel also refuses to make peace, most recently ignoring the Saudi Arabian Peace Proposal since the year it was introduced in 2002, the offer never goes off the table. On 4/8/09, Saudi Foreign Minister Sa’ud al-Faysal requested that Israel “take a position” vis-à-vis the proposal. As if Israel’s “position” was some great mystery (!) when it consistently rejects or ignores Arab peace proposals. Even the ostensible exceptions of their peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan have functioned as a license to wage war on the Arab world – for example by removing Egypt as a military deterrent. Similarly, any non-biased assessment of the “Roadmap to Peace” at Annapolis would conclude Israeli rejection. In “accepting” it, Israel attached fourteen “reservations” that the U.S. also adopted and which essentially rejected any viable and sovereign Palestinian state, and hence, peace. But that is too “un-cool” to mention.

In fact, the opposite happens. On 4/9/09 in a meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Mahmoud ‘Abbas, term-expired (but who notices!) President of the Palestinian Authority insisted that Israel accept the Two State Solution envisaged in the Roadmap. He added that it also adhere to “international legitimacy / consensus” (al-shar’iyya al-dawliyya) and past signed agreements. (Aljazeera, 4/9/09) First, he must not have noticed the fourteen “reservations” that eviscerated the Roadmap. And second, he also did not acknowledge that dominant powers do not have to adhere to any “agreements.” In this Abbas’ PA has echoed other “moderate” Arab states, most notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

They all ignore that Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman recently pointed out that Israel does not accept and is not bound by the two state formula. (Ha'aretz, 4/1/09) They also ignore that Israel's new Interior Minister in Netanyahu's new government felt free to advocate for the "transfer" / ethnic cleansing of Israeli Palestinians via the "withdrawal of their citizenship" and also for the cutting off of their social security and state benefits. (Aljazeera, 4/5/09) Of course, everyone by now has heard of Lieberman's advocacy of the same and even worse for Palestinians as well as for neighboring states, i.e. flooding Egypt by bombing the Aswan dam.

The racism inherent in Zionist ideology is much more openly expressed nowadays because of the diminished sovereignty of Arab regimes who surround and now protect Israel's interests and because international law has never been enforced against the regional hegemon since it is backed by world powers. Israeli discourse about Palestinians necessarily (and intentionally) excludes any possibility of solving underlying problems and correcting original crimes.

The new "international consensus / legitimacy" (al-shar'iyya dawliyya) has made the fellowship and shared agendas between the US, the EU, Israel, and the dictatorial Arab regimes conspicuous. But you cannot accuse them of being unsuccessful. Au contraire! It's been a huge success in turning the general Arab public away from and against dominant powers. Thus, polls in the region indicate that there is a direct an inverse relationship between a state's internal and foreign policies with those of the US, on the one hand, and the public's approval of the US, on the other hand. (5) Especially on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, the majority of the Arab public is not swayed by US propaganda (or the proliferating Saudi-funded media outlets and satellite channels), however extensive and well-funded. When compounded with the internal policies pursued by these states to suppress all opposition, this has alienated the state from its own people.

In the Palestinian situation, there is the added complication that this same "international legitimacy / consensus" (al-shar'iyya dawliyya) does not seem to (or want to) acknowledge the original illegality of the occupation and the crimes and usurpation of rights committed under it. The result is that what "international consensus" is doing to Arab rights is beyond equating the victim with the criminal. For all practical purposes, it is in fact denying victimhood altogether for both non-state actors that resist hegemonic agendas in compliant Arab (and non-Arab) states, as well as for states that are the object of hegemonic wrath (as was the case in Afghanistan and in Iraq). The victim is now the criminal.

The deleterious effect on Arab public opinion and the not unassociated growth of resistance groups within Arab states due to the states' many internal and external failures, dependencies, and submissiveness is one result of this "stabilization" / "international legitimacy / consensus" (al-shar'iyya dawliyya) being forced down the (non) sovereign Arab throats. But, counter-intuitively, those same policies have also strengthened the intransigence, racism, and ambitions of the regional hegemon Israel enough so that its new government boasted that it is not bound by the international agreements. This has lifted the (very transparent) veil off the whole "stabilization" and "peace" package and has forced the Quartet / U.S. to intervene in order to "stabilize" the Israeli hegemonic (un)"stabilization," if you will... (Ha'aretz, 4/8/09)

For those desirous of peace and justice for Palestinians, this may be auspicious. For this precise lack of limit on dominant power aggression and self-serving rationalization has produced its dialectical opposite.

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Notes

(1) See <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?language=EN&reference=A6-0033/2009>.

(2) See <http://www.presstv.ir/detail.aspx?id=86532§ionid=351020205>.

(3) See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_military_expenditures.

(4) See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2005/jul2005/cana-j02.shtml>.

(5) See http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-zogby/arab-public-opinion-the-u_b_101073.html.

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