What does the Future Hold for the Arab World in Transition?

For most of the past decade, the Arab world has been facing many complicated, although at times overlapping problems, as it struggled to overcome political turmoil and historical transition that followed the 2011 Arab spring and its ramifications. It seems that the dramatic events that changed the region mark an important milestone in the modern history of Arabs as they try to solve all these crises and “catch up with the rest of the world”. Given the unrelenting developments in the regional geopolitics and new trends that have made it more difficult for the Arab region to tackle numerous internal and external challenges, local policymakers now face quite serious ramifications.

One of the most important issues is: What future can Arabs expect? Will it be prosperous, safe and sustainable?

While in this decade many key Arab countries celebrate their centenary, the overall sense of frustration is predominant as many believe that the state of the Arab world is deplorable. Each Arab state, built by elites after the Ottoman Empire collapsed and they proclaimed independence, needs huge transformative efforts in order to morph into a moderate and thriving society in all respects. Even before most people became disillusioned with the Arab Spring, Arabs found themselves in a calamitous situation as many thought that they had been absorbed by an everlasting crisis with no escape.

Although their misfortunes vary from country to country, one of the main reasons remains the dysfunctional nature of national states in post-independence era, which sometimes sowed the seeds of political unrest, disintegration, ethnic conflicts and civil wars. The Arab world stands on the brink of a new century and all eyes are fixed on the region to see if it has learnt from the lessons of popular uprisings of 2011 and paved the way for the so desired transition from nation-building to establishing robust and thriving states. Those issues are instrumental since they
are essential in terms of breaking the circle of ups and downs for political regimes engaged in building modern Arab states.

But while the development of political systems in each country was in the spotlight, the Arab world is generally entering a new stage of geopolitical uncertainty where long-term consequences of the Arab Spring remain largely unknown. Lingering instability in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, fragile transition in Sudan and Tunisia, as well as the threats, risks and vulnerabilities that other countries struggle with, continue to reveal internal dynamics that transcend national systems and affect the political order throughout the Arab world. Unrest and turmoil have prompted non-Arab powers, primarily Iran and Turkey, to try to fill the void and promote their self-centered national interests, to pursue a more decisive policy and seek to grab influence and sometimes even territory from volatile Arab countries. While the costs of their expansionist agenda may outweigh the benefits, adventurism of both of these countries continues to add up to significant uncertainty in the region. In addition to geopolitical shifts in the region, one possible ramification of their interference may be the internal transformations in a number of Arab countries that could entail further negative consequences for the political order.

Meanwhile, Israeli-Palestinian peace talks remain at an impasse, as Israel, with active backing from the US, persists in occupying the West Bank and does not recognize the independent Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital. While several Arab countries are endeavoring to bring their relations with Israel back on track and forge “strategic partnerships” with it, Tel Aviv continues to impose its de-facto annexation of Palestinian lands which leads to further demographic changes. Israeli actions have laid a precarious basis, which may entice another mess in the already turbulent region. Devastating war that Israel waged with Gaza last May, the fourth in the Gaza Strip since the end of 2008, is solid evidence proving that the US-sponsored and thoughtlessly imposed “peace plan” encompassing Israel and a range of Arab countries and dubbed the “deal of the century”, which was dismissed by the Palestinians out of hand, would not lead to peace, and may, in fact, become a prologue to a new war. The fancy idea that normalizing Israeli-Arab ties would encompass “a wide range of spheres” of cooperation and would lead to comprehensive regional peace is unlikely to translate into reality in the foreseeable future while status quo may usher in increased tensions.

As the Arab world is approaching its next century, economic stagnation and growing inequality are crushing the dreams of millions, especially among the youth that is still striving for education and employment opportunities. One of the main consequences of the economic woes that the Arab world is experiencing is that income inequality has increased, regardless of whether trans-regional or domestic figures are considered.

This stems from the fact that wealthier Arab states have been growing at a faster pace as the deep-pocketed people in each country were reaping more benefits than low-income and impoverished groups. This is why the Arab world is one of the most unequal regions globally, according to World Inequality Lab. While extreme trans-regional inequality, highlighted by a widening income gap between energy-rich Arab countries and other states, is a testament to their vulnerability against the backdrop of conflict-induced uncertainty in the entire Arab world, it also serves as the basis for all potential problems in less fortunate countries. In both cases, structural inequality undermines attempts to move towards greater political stability and democracy in the region. As a result, imbalanced economic landscape collides with risks of geopolitical conflict at the regional level, while political and social hurdles hinder reforms that provide incentives to domestic economic growth.

One of the major issues the Arab world will face in the coming years is the climate change that has already had a severe negative impact on many regional actors. As world organizations’ reports (including the World Bank) warn, global warming will have a crippling effect on the region while the blunt of this trend would be borne by the countries where summer temperatures are expected to rise more than twice compared to the global average. While some Arab cities and towns are arguably at risk of going under water as the global warming causes the sea level to rise, protracted hot weather, desert advancing and droughts would make some parts of the Arab region uninhabitable. These calamities may strongly affect agriculture and potentially trigger environmental migration and even demographic conflicts.

The issue at hand is COVID-19 pandemic that has been tightening its grip around almost all Arab countries, depending on how effective and fast governments responded to it and how efficiently they used their resources. Although the number of COVID-19 cases in Arab countries remains relatively low compared to other parts of the world, there is a looming concern that wealthy countries that have been struggling to reign in several consecutive outbreaks would suffer from long-term fallout. COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be a huge problem for most Arab countries, putting strain on such essential sectors as healthcare and education. Although COVID consequences have been arguably mild in wealthy countries due to their abundant resources, low-income countries would have to deal
with extensive damage that their businesses, hospitals and schools had to endure as national governments continue to fight structural economic and budgetary shortcomings.

In addition to the decline of democracy, geopolitical and socio-economic problems, the Arab region faces a sharp deficit of education, sci-tech gap with the developed countries and steadily and rapidly increasing population. All these challenges put the region on the crossroads, and, depending on the response to these challenges, the results would be different ranging from regional cooperation and stability to devastating conflicts in the Arab world that would see Western and, above all, the US active involvement. It is Washington and its regional minion that do not allow the Arab world to recover and bounce back from difficult legacy of the past, solving the problems at hand.

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