Inter-Arabic integration: a desert ephemera or a vague illusion?

The Arab world is chronically falling behind the industrial leaders, and the hanging up in the stage of transition to more intensive forms of labour and types of production is going to continue in the foreseeable future. The idea of integration as a means to escape backwardness and encourage economic processes lacks the necessary impulse even now, and in the future, it will remain a third-priority goal for Arab interests in the economic field.

Meanwhile, the Arab world is approaching the borderline beyond which ignoring most important aspects of its existence may have most disastrous consequences. Integration does clearly belong to the category of inter-state acts, without which estrangement between countries and groups of countries in the Middle East and the Northern Africa will become stronger with time, especially with account of the actually manifested split between religious confessions and the loss of faith in the Arab unity.

Yet in the nearest future, the influence of various factors, while each of them does not seem to be destructive if taken separately, but can produce serious effects in combination with others, may aggravate the situation in economy, society and the ecosphere in a rough and unexpected way in large territories. The danger lies in the possible domino effect in development of further events, while Arab states may not have the instruments and means, which are effective only if applied on a large scale – and this is unattainable for isolated countries.

In the future, prevention of such course of events must be recognized as one of the top-priority goals of the Arab world, and one likely to be solved by joint efforts. The only condition for ensuring capacity of corresponding mechanisms for countering the threat must be joint mobilization of efforts, resources and knowledge to combat crises and deficits.

We should not exclude the chances that the Arab world, now caught up in an area of increased risks of various natures, will soon be forced to demonstrate its political will on a certain issue of vital importance. Most probably, such issues may concern water sources, currently subject to physical depletion by natural and anthropogenic factors. This problem is likely to be followed by other hard, but quite predictable, issues that can considerably affect survival opportunities of the Arab East people.

These will be extraordinary circumstances capable of forcing some Arab states to undertake joint action in order to maintain their sustainability when faced with dangerous challenges also caused by lack of food, extreme deterioration of environmental situation due to excessive accumulation of harmful waste, increasing desertification, soil salinization, dramatic deterioration of conditions for reproductivity of the population, etc. Emergence of such imperatives in the relatively near future is quite possible, but Arab public opinion is still inert to these eventual threats (as it sees them) and tends to treat them as an abstract matter.

Monarchies of the Persian Gulf are the most goal-focused states in this aspect, and they take care to develop their living spaces. At a hectic rate, they are creating economic and social infrastructure that is going to provide a basis for a large unification of transportation, power-generation, and communication systems into a multi-purpose network in the Persian Gulf, aimed for the future. Despite such hopeful backgrounds, even their progress towards common goals in the currency and finance fields has come to a standstill, far from reaching the goal.
The Arab world is not barred from global tendencies and will develop in their tideway in one way or another. Yet in terms of integration, this region is falling behind the rest of the world and kind of deaf to the needs of the age of globalization and internationalization of the economy, politics, security, etc. In this light, there seems to be almost no doubt that in the future, the states making up the Arab world, will clearly lack the impulse required to initiate an internal integration process. This process will be hindered, at least, by the following factors:

- strong individualization of the Arab world when ruling regimes do not see operant motives to limit their freedom, both within and outside its borders,
- unpreparedness of national capitalism to create a common economic space due to a number of circumstances,
- national egoism ignoring the negative effects of separate existence
- inter-Arabic differentiation, which is in steady opposition to common Arab harmony,
- accumulated large-scale antagonism within the traditional dichotomy “poverty – wealth”, which provokes disintegration as a means to defend against excessive claims of one party to receive aid from the other party,
- practical absence of an Arab country capable of leading others into an economic alliance or bringing together pioneers of the process, apart from Gulf Cooperative Council, which is exclusively a thing in itself and a thing for itself,
- similarity of their market specialization and homogeneity of their products, in spite of desperate efforts to diversify both.

All of the above-mentioned are long-term circumstances that prevent Arab countries from solving the problems they have suffered from for decades – which would be a success given a teamwork approach.

Additionally, the future will see no demand for such – by no means unimportant – motivation for joint efforts that all Arab countries are members of a community united by geographical location, language and religion, and possessing an advantage so rarely found in most regions – their national and socio-cultural identity. These circumstances will not have a promoting effect onto the process of unification. Due to general inertness on issues of integration, it will not receive any impulse and, all the more so, will not gain a new quality just as the Arab ummah will not turn into a full-featured nation, the system-building element of which includes well-developed productive forces based on modern technologies, science and knowledge.

Even the fact that the Arab world may put a claim to be recognized as a kind of unity in terms of geo-political and geo-economic concerns, and is actually an organic civilization with an inherent stability of features, structuredness, and a powerful tendency to protect its system of values, it will not be able to check the centrifugal forces breaking the historically formed community, which is not protected by any corset of integration.

In this connection, a group of Arab countries changed the direction of their efforts and focused on rapprochement with their neighbours in the outside world, thus attempting to fall in the tideway of modern trends for global development, while combining these with their own ideas of their place and role in this process. For Arabian monarchies, this last way will become a natural continuation and development of the already consolidated tendency they are following. For them, the integration project has more to do with reality already, because it will develop in two ways – the internal and the external – that complement each other. In this, the external aspect seems more promising in case of favourable circumstances, and has improved chances to develop into a tangible shape.

Future of the sub-region is connected with the phenomenon noticed by a number of observers, which can lead to big changes in the integration component of Arab development. This is the entry of monarchies into strategic plane of action, in the course of emerging evolution in global foundations of international economic activities – dominated for a long time by the North Atlantic Region, which then lost a part of its influence area to the Pacific Region. In the nearest future, the main players may feel the influence of the new candidate for the leading role represented by countries from the Indian Ocean Region.

Arab states of the Mediterranean have also been actively looking for partners, and they also focused more on partners from outside rather than from inside the Arab world. Before the Arab Spring, they tried to improve their relations with the European Union within the framework of the Partnership for Progress and a Common Future, and with the Middle East and Northern Africa, anchoring more hopes on these than on the Arab project itself. Now this program has lost much of its capacity, and the future of destroyed economies in this part of the Arab world remains
vague, in terms of their cooperation with Western capital.

Maladjusted and demobilized Arab mechanisms of economic unification will only deteriorate in the future under the influence of current events in the Arab East. The mechanisms themselves are running a risk of becoming a factor of long-term destabilization that can dilute the idea of integration and cooperation between Arab countries. In the face of the world becoming economically consolidated, such a turn threatens with even deeper disorder and staggering among Arab countries, further exacerbation of crisis manifestations and growing deficits that cannot be compensated for at the expense of internal sources of accumulation.

Recent events brushed the still developing process of integration on the economic basis aside to the far periphery of Arab life, and it may come back into this life only after a very long time, which no one dares to predict. The entire situation is a dangerous and the real feature of today’s Arab reality, and it will affect the dynamics of its development.

It is real because Arab countries failed to accumulate integration experience, though they have had sufficient time and potential opportunities for such practices. Now, it handicaps them extremely in a situation when economic and political interests of the region are protected rather individually than by a unified league of states. In this case, each state may lack the general picture of the situation and its role in the common cause of involvement into the global economic order.

It is also dangerous, because the Arab region has actually entered a stage of reunification of the regional system, and in the future prospect, it will be losing and wasting its internal potential for integration even more intensively. Attempts to escape isolation through unification, not within their inner circle, but in partnership with foreign countries beyond this circle, will hardly be able to guarantee, even in the distant future, that the middle-level Arab states could develop equal relations and solve their problems quickly.

It is absolutely clear that the Arab world has been deep in doubt for decades, as to how beneficial and necessary integration efforts can be, and had little confidence as to results of such efforts. The years-long experience of declarations about short-term practical action suggests that Arabs (with little exception, though) will partake in the results of anaemic behaviour or full-value complex of their countries, while the former cannot, and the latter do not hurry to mobilize their capitals and assets for the sake of common benefit. That is why the chances are high the Arab nations will stick to this marginal position, in terms of integration between themselves, for quite a long time.

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