DOCUMENTI
IAI

TRENDS OF POLITICAL CHANGE
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

by Laura Guazzone

Paper presented at the conference on "Global Interdependence and the Future of the Middle East, Rome, 7-8 November 1994

TRENDS OF POLITICAL CHANGE IN THE MIDDLE EAST
by Laura Guazzone

Structural tendencies

In the last few weeks political events taking place in the Middle East and North Africa have been as prominent as ever in the international news. In Algeria, President Zeroual's decision to abandon previous efforts towards compromise with the imprisoned leadership of the outlawed FIS and his promise to hold presidential elections by 1995 (instead of multiparty general elections) were rejected by the opposition of all shades and moved the country one step further in the civil war ladder. In the Palestinian territories radicalization is fuelled by the extreme slowness of the dividends of peace to translate into improvements of daily life, while the Israeli right continues to obstruct the detente process and keep alive a security minded vision of peace with the Arabs. Meanwhile Saddam Hussein is still able to make his military gesticulations threatening enough for the US to mobilize their troops. In Teheran demonstration before Western embassies reminds of the worst days of head-on confrontation with the West, while dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promises of the Mullahs' regime is spreading among the population.

Seen against these gloomy pictures of domestic strife, spreading Islamist radicalism, and military and political confrontation with the West, prospects for conflicts resolution, political democratization and economic recovery in the Middle East seem very weak indeed. However, these dramatic events coexist with other factors and events which seldom make the headlines and point to the existence of prospects for another, more peaceful Middle east. To detect these factors one has to change the level of analysis and look for the more structural trends of political change.

Therefore, the main questions I would like to submit to the debate are the following:
Which are the endogenous political factors working in favor of an increased regional or sub-regional integration in the Middle East? What are the factors hindering new or renewed regional political integration?

The increased role of domestic factors

In trying to sketch out some preliminary hypotheses in this regard, I will leave out of the picture those factors specifically pertaining to the spheres of security, economics and international relations and concentrate my remarks on factors pertaining to the realm of domestic politics.

Obviously changes taking place in the Middle East in the political, economic and security spheres are highly interactive and throughout our research and this conference we must strive to consider them as a complex arrays of interrelated features, without artificially constraining the analysis and the debate.

However, it must be stressed that because of changes occurred at the international and regional

level, the role of domestic political and economic factors in shaping the overall direction of change has definitely increased.

In fact, the Cold war international system diminished the relevance of internal factors by putting a premium on the maintenance of the status quo, and the Arab-Israeli conflict had the same role vis-à-vis the Middle Eastern regional system in that patterns of alignment were valued over other political factors. Now that they are no more defined in relation to the major international and regional conflicts ('security complexes'), stability and security of the Middle East countries are increasingly determined by the parameters of political legitimacy and economic efficiency.

Levels affected by political change

Leaving aside for the moment the analysis of the economic factors, it seems to me that the are a few major trends of change dectetable in the Middle East at the level of domestic politics. These changes are simultaneously affecting three levels:

1- the nature of the relevant domestic political actors (i.e. the socio-economic groups that contribute in determining national policies, from government or from opposition) and the modalities of their interaction;

2- the nature of the political systems and their ability to foster national consensus;

3- the nature of the prevailing political cultures;

Although no country (not even Israel or Iran) is immune from changes occurring at these three levels, the evolution and impact of change is deeply differentiated between Arab and non Arab states and, among the former, between Maghreb, Levant and Arab Gulf countries.
In fact, other things being equal, in accounting for the different impact of the trends of political change the geopolitical context in which each country operates seems more important than the form of government ; nevertheless, within the same sub-regional setting it is the nature of the political system that determine local differences. For instance, while Maghreb countries have entered the post-cold war and post-Arab-Israeli conflict era well before the countries of the Levant because of their distinct geopolitical situation (characterized , among other things, by their distance from Israel and the intensity of ties with Western Europe), the different nature of the respective political systems account for the profoundly different reactions to political change in Morocco and Algeria (the same could be said of Saudi Arabia vs. Kuwait; Iraq vs. Iran; Syria vs. Lebanon..).

Keeping in mind the existing sub-regional differentiations, it is still possible to make some generalizations about the three levels affected by political change ongoing in the Middle East.

Trends of change

First, that the evolution of domestic political actors is characterized by:

an increasing request for political legitimacy and economic efficiency which is lead by the emergence and empowerment of formerly marginal social sectors and class segments, such as women and minorities (Ibrahim), or the middle class active in the organizations of the so called civil society (Norton) or the newly urbanized and lower middle class segments that form the base of the Islamist movement (Guazzone, Norton);

now, nor the emergence of new social sectors nor their request for increased efficiency seem likely to result in the overthrow of the middle class ruling most Middle Eastern states (Salem), but these factors may determine changes in the composition of the dominant coalition and therefore affect the policy choices of the countries concerned, for instance the role of the state bureaucracy and the military while the role of the new private entrepreneurs may increase (Egypt, Israel and Syria are countreis were these changes may occur); also, and more importantly, these factors of change have already substantially altered the balance of power between government and opposition (especially in the Arab countries, where oppositions now vocal and diversified were suppressed and almost non existent until less than 10 yrs. ago).

A second generalization about political change in the Middle East is that the evolution of most of the existing systems and regimes is characterized by a high degree of uncertainty:

some of the changes concerning the relevant political actors and their relations, like the shifts of power among sectors of the middle class already mentioned, may still be accommodated within the framework of authoritarian but more inclusive political systems. Examples of this kind of evolution are possibly represented by Morocco, Tunisia and Jordan ;

other changes, such as the empowerment of social minorities, have a more ambivalent role: if the demands emanating from these sectors are accommodated at least partially, they may hasten the transition to truly democratic systems, if their requests are not accommodatd they can threaten the survival of the existing national polities (the role of ethnic minorities such as the Berbers in Algeria, the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey or the Israeli Arabs is a good case in point);

however, the integration of new social and political forces require a capacity for mediation skills and political vision that some of the incumbent ruling élites seem unable to exercise; regimes unable to absorb change will inevitably loose power and in most cases this will be to the advantage of more exclusionary and authoritarian élites. A most worrying example in this sense is that of Egypt, whose regime, although still pursuing a skillful foreign policy, seems now unable to pursue the path of internal reforms it had set.

A third and final generalization concerns the evolution of regional political cultures, that remain characterized more by identities than by political ideologies:

the sources of individual and collective identities most relevant at the regional level are such to determine bipolar divides : Arab vs.nonArab, Muslim vs. nonMuslim, secular vs. religious, étatist-authoritarian vs.liberal-democratic; although the possibility to combine various identities available to groups and individuals: (eg. an Arab Muslim liberal) may

provide a basis to overcome the bipolar divides, the room for cultural mobility is subject to the contradictory pressures of globalization and authenticity and, in general, tends to be more and more restricted as a result of the anti-Islamist entrenchment of regional regimes;

as far as Middle Eastern identities are translated into more or less formalized political ideologies, it has to be noted a relative decline of macro-nationalism (Pan-Arabism, Zionism, Pan-Turianism and even Pan-Islamism) and the re-entry of liberalism in the regional political discourse (in the Arab countries as well as in Israel and Tyrkey); however, nationalisms of a more local brand may develop in connection to the emergence of neo-authoritarian regimes (Turkey could be moving in that direction), while radical nationalism is already well embedded in the Islamist discourse which is at present the most forceful of regional political ideologies.

Impact of change on prospects for regional cooperation

What all these generalizations on political change tell us about prospects for regional political integration is the issue to be debated. Now, I would only advance some hypotheses:

1) from the trends of political change observed may derive more or less severe forms of domestic and inter-state conflict. While the impact of these conflicts on regional and international integration of Middle East will depend to a large extent on how conflict will affect the key-regional countries, the most negative evolution would materialize if existing regimes, unable to absorb change, are supplanted by neo-authoritarian systems with an exlusionary ideological base.

2) regional integration (a long term and ideal scenario in any case) can only succeed if there is a progressive convergence of regional political systems towards democracy, of societies towards increased social mobility and political participation and of political cultures towards liberalism; in effect, democratization, broadly defined, would create the basis for commonality of intent and greater predictability in governments foreign and domestic policy.

3) regional cooperation (some prefer to call it weak integration) is again a long term scenario; one, however that can be compatible also with substantial differences in political systems and cultures provided that there are enough incentives to cooperate coming from the economic and security spheres.

4) the consolidation of poles of sub-regional integration linked to a wider network of regional cooperation seem the most likely of the integrative scenarios, as it is the most compatible with the existing political differences and as well as with the different pace at which the different states and societies will absorb political change.

5) the impact of some of the trends observed on prospects for regional integration remain ambivalent. For instance, while the strategy of eradication of Islamism practiced by most governments in the Middle East may provide a temporary basis for élites' consensus and regional

alliances (the recent Israeli-Turkish convergence is just an example), if practiced as an alternative to political reform (as in Algeria and Egypt) it will reduce the possibility to absorb social change and will radicalize the ideological divides in a way incompatible with regional or even sub-regional integration.

As already pointed out, another ambivalent factor is the enpowerment of new middle class sectors as they can support an evolution towards political and economic liberalism higly consistent with the integrative scenarios, but they can also be integrated into neo-authoritarian or even Islamist regimes.

6) Finally all hypotheses militating in favor of increased regional integration are predicated on the continuation of the Arab-Israeli peace process, and on the dedication to the Middle East of important extra-regional political, military and financial resources.