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## SECURITY PERCEPTIONS AND COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

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## Security Perceptions and Cooperation in the Middle East: The Political Dimension

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This paper will concentrate on two main themes. First, it will focus on the fears and suspicions in Middle Eastern – and particularly Arab – countries regarding the future of the Arab world and the Middle East in general, and what is viewed as Western projects for that region. Second, it will discuss the political ability and preparedness of regional players to set up viable structures for regional security and regional cooperation. Finally, it will put some questions which, from a European perspective, seem to demand answers from today's political and intellectual elites in the Middle East.

### *1. Western Projects, Regional Threat Perceptions*

Following the political discourse in the Arab world, it is notable how much this discourse is currently marked by fears and suspicions regarding the new regional division of labour in the Middle East expected to emerge, in one form or other, as the outcome of the ongoing Arab-Israeli peace process. More often than not, this „New Middle East“ is basically seen as a Western project designed to establish a new form of Western-Israeli hegemony in the region, and thereby to undermine Arab security.<sup>1</sup> These fears may be exaggerated – and the author holds that they are. They are, nevertheless, real fears; and as such they influence political decision-making processes.

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1 For an expression of the opinion of Arab strategists who regard the ongoing Middle Eastern peace process as, above all other things, a threat to Arab national security, see Tal'at Musallim, "qadaya wa-mutatallabat al-amn al-'askari al-'arabi fi nihayat al-qarn al-'ashrin wa-matla' al-qarn al-hadi wa-l-ashrin" [Issues and Needs of Arab Military Security at the End of the 20th and the Beginning of the 21st Century], in: Markaz dirasat al-wahda al-'arabiyya, *al-tahaddiyat al-sharq awsatiyya al-jadida wa-l-watan al-'arabi* [The New Middle Eastern Challenges and the Arab Homeland], Beirut (Center for Arab Unity Studies) 1994. For a critical analysis of Arab fears regarding the peace process and its expected implications, see, in the same volume, Ghassan Salamé, "afkar awaliyya 'an al-suq al-awsatiyya" [Preliminary Ideas about the Middle Eastern Market]. For a representation of these fears see, among many others, Majid Kiyali, "al-nizam al-iqlimi al-jadid: al-itar al-iqtisadi wa-l-ahdal" [The New Regional System: The Economic Frame and Goals], in: *Shu'un al-awsat*, No. 36, December 1994, pp. 55-64; 'Ala 'Abd al-Wahhab, *al-sharq al-awsat al-jadid? sinariu al-haimana al-isra'iliyya* [The New Middle East? Scenario for Israeli Hegemony], Cairo (Sina li-l-nashr) 1995.

Certainly, as little as there is one single European notion is there one Arab, let alone Middle Eastern, notion of regional security and regional threats. One might differentiate between different perceptions according to ideal-type ideological positions – the conservative-radical, the idealist-liberal, the realist-pragmatic.<sup>2</sup> For our purpose, a rather functional distinction may give more insight. Different perceptions of security and threats are, in fact, not so much a matter of ideological stances as rather related to „where one sits.“ Very generally, therefore, we can distinguish between societal actors on the one hand – such as intellectual elites, oppositional movements, and the often referred to so-called popular masses – and incumbents or regime elites on the other. Above that, we will have to take into account that different, at times even conflicting, notions of national security prevail in different countries of the region. Such differences are rarely of an ideological nature. Rather, they are a matter of what the incumbents in any particular country define as national interest, and as vital national and regime-security needs. Syria, to give but one example, is not so much a radical state in terms of ideology as rather a state whose elites have some reason to fear that their country will lose – relatively or even absolutely – in this new regional division of labour. Once a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace is in place, Syria will lose its regional and international strategic importance, it is likely to lose the Lebanese card, and it will, moreover, most probably benefit less from whatever peace dividends may accrue to the region – foreign investment, aid, new opportunities for trade and services – than Israel and its other Arab neighbours.<sup>3</sup>

For the West and its policymakers – let us allow ourselves this analytical generalization – it is still difficult to deal with the fact, and accept it both theoretically and practically, that even in „friendly“ or „pro-Western“ states in the region popular attitudes toward the West, and toward what is regarded as Western projects, are not necessarily in line with the attitudes of the political elites. The West would prefer to treat these states as unitary actors, and Middle Eastern policymakers encourage their Western counterparts to do so. Differences between the views and attitudes of Middle Eastern incumbents, who for the most part are neither democratically elected nor accountable to their citizens, and the attitudes of those social forces that find themselves outside their countries' power structures should not be ignored, however.

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2 Cf. Abdel Monem Said Aly, „The Shattered Consensus. Arab Perceptions of Security,“ paper presented to the international conference on *Southern and Eastern Mediterranean: Notions and Perceptions of Security with Respect to Western Alliances*, Rome, 15-16 December 1995.

3 Cf. Volker Perthes, „From War Dividend to Peace Dividend? Syrian Options in a New Regional Environment“, in: Louis Blin/Philippe Fargues (eds.), *L'Économie de la paix au Proche-Orient*, Paris (Maisonneuve et Larose/CEDEJ) 1995, and more generally idem, *The Political Economy of Syria under Asad*, London (I.B. Tauris), 1995.

These differences tend to be larger, and more serious, than in countries with democratic practice, and they can and do at times erupt into violent domestic conflict.

It is not a secret that popular attitudes in the Arab countries towards the West tend to be much less friendly than those of the governments. This situation creates a problematic constellation for Western policies in that it negatively affects Western preparedness to deal with non-governmental forces or what is generically referred to as „civil society“, and to support, or promote, any serious moves toward democratization in these countries. Some Western pundits and politicians, fearing a peaceful takeover of unfriendly, Islamist, forces openly caution against a democratization of Arab states. This adds, in turn, to suspicions against the West, particularly among a substantial part of the intellectual and political elites in these countries. Recently, anti-Western suspicions have been increased through the parallelism of NATO's and the WEU's discovery, as it were, of the Middle East, the Western debate about Huntington's thesis of a forthcoming clash of civilizations between the „West and the rest“, with the fault lines of conflict to break up at the borders between Islam and Christianity, and former NATO secretary-general's (later denied) comparisons between fundamentalist Islam and the bygone communist threat.<sup>4</sup> While the initiatives of NATO and WEU towards the Southern Mediterranean were meant as a programme for dialogue and cooperation, not as a threat, they were not necessarily perceived as such by regional observers. International actors, as we know from Robert Jervis, always tend to underestimate the degree to which they menace others.<sup>5</sup> Not only Islamists, but quite a number of liberal and secular commentators as well, viewed the NATO initiative as confrontative, and as an intended declaration of enmity against Islam and some Arab-Islamic countries.<sup>6</sup>

Arab popular and intellectual suspicions against Western policies and projects are rooted in a series of historical experiences. Among them is the experience of the Arab world with classical imperialism and colonialism; the impression that Western

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4 For Claes' remarks, cf. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 February 1995; *The Washington Post*, 9 February 1995.

5 Cf. Robert Jervis, „Cooperation under the Security Dilemma“, *World Politics*, 30 (1978) 2, pp. 167-214, p. 200.

6 Cf., among others, Badr al-Din al-Hamami, „al-natu yu'lin al-harb 'ala 'al-usuliyya“ [NATO declares War on „Fundamentalism“], *tunis al-shahida* (issued by the Tunisian Nahda-Movement), Vol. 1, No. 22 (17 March 1995) 22; 'Ali Oumlil, „half al-atlasi wa-l-islam“ [The Atlantic Pact and Islam], *al-muntada* (issued by the Arab Thought Forum), Vol. 10, No. 114 (March 1995), pp. 3-5; and the article of former Egyptian diplomat Salah Basiuni, „ma' bidayat al-hiwar bayn half al-atlasi wa-l-'arab: ayn sidqiyyat al-half fi hadha al-taharruk al-jadid?“ [With the Beginning of the Dialogue between the Atlantic Pact and the Arabs: Where's the Trustworthiness of the Pact in this New Move?], *al-Hayat*, 20 March 1995.

powers don't mind to pursue their own economic and strategic interests in the region at the expense of regional peoples and their legitimate ambitions; the strong relationship between the West and Israel; and the pro-Israeli bias of Western, particularly US-policies in the Middle East. Anti-government forces in the region, of course, are unhappy, to say the least, with the support that NATO states give or have given for certain Arab regimes in their domestic conflicts with oppositional challengers, such as, most clearly, US support for the monarchical regimes in the Gulf, or French government support for the military in Algeria. In addition to that, there is the experience of the Second Gulf War which large parts of the population in the Arab countries have seen as an act of Western aggression. In the aftermath of the war, even a number of moderate voices, who did not in principle oppose a liberation of Kuwait by military force, started to ask whether the objective of the Western-led coalition war was the liberation of Kuwait or rather, aside from Western oil interests, the destruction of Iraq as the main military power of the Arab world.<sup>7</sup> Since the Gulf War, expectations as well as fears in the region have been centered on the peace-process and, more importantly, the prospects and risks of an expected redivision of labour – politically, economically, as well as in terms of regional security in a – supposedly – „new“ Middle East.

Regarding both the peace process and broader concerns for regional security, it is interesting to note that even political elites that are usually considered „pro-Western“ have shown considerable restraint in supporting, or engaging in, Western and US projects with respect to the region. Note, to give some recent examples, the outspoken unpreparedness of countries like Jordan, Oman, Qatar, or the UAE to support the US double-containment policy against Iraq and Iran, or the reserve, on the part of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, to give unqualified support to the American handling of the peace process, and to US projects for the new Middle East.

The causes, and the rationale, for such a kind of behaviour have rarely been properly understood by Western policy makers. Three main sets of causes can be distinguished. First, historical experience has taught Middle Eastern political elites that it may be dangerous to be considered to be closely connected to Western projects, particularly to projects with a military colouring. The Pahlavi regime of Iran – as well as, some 20 years earlier, the Iraqi monarchy – was not overthrown because it lacked Western support; the revolution was, partly at least, set off because the regime was considered an American lackey. Consider, also, Saudi fears to arouse popular anger by allowing a permanent deployment of US troops in the kingdom, or consider how

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7 Cf. George Joffe, „Middle Eastern views of the Gulf conflict and its aftermath“, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 19 (1993), pp. 177-199 (p. 186f.)

the Moroccan leadership, during the Gulf crisis, maneuvered between its support for Kuwait and the security-council resolutions on the one hand, and the popular anger against the Western-led coalition war on the other.

Second, there is the experience in Arab and other Middle Eastern countries that the West and the US are often unable to deliver on their projects and promises. Regional elites, in other words, have learned to limit their confidence in Western power. Let us assume, contrary to the perception of significant parts of Arab public opinion, that Western policies in the Middle East, indeed, are meant to achieve regional stability, a just and comprehensive peace between Israel and the Arabs, and generally a peaceful settlement of regional conflicts. If that is so, the West, the US, or the United Nations have not been too successful, not even more successful than the Arab League or other regional actors. Consider the failure of the US and others to mediate or enforce an end to the civil war in Lebanon. A settlement was eventually brought about by the Arab League and Saudi Arabia. Consider the failure of the international community to end the civil war in Somalia, or the failure of international – as well as regional – players to prevent the 1994 civil war in Yemen. And consider the lack of success, over decades, of efforts to broker an Arab-Israeli settlement from outside. The main breakthrough was achieved when regional actors, namely parts of the PLO-leadership and of Israel's labour government, decided to take matters into their hands and find a formula on their own.

Third, regional political elites have had to learn that the West often underestimates regional factors, and that their Western allies are not necessarily as concerned about regional developments and dynamics as regional actors are, and have to be. It is certainly wise to deal with the Middle East, or with the Arab world, as a regional system, i.e., as a group of strongly interrelated states that is distinguished from its international environment by geographic proximity, high density of interaction and at least some common cultural features.<sup>8</sup> In terms of security, this system is definitely not a purely Arab one. Empirical reality is well captured in the concept of a Middle Eastern conflict system or security complex<sup>9</sup> whose internal dynamics are more

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8 See among others Paul C. Noble, „The Arab System: Opportunities, Constraints and Pressures“, in: Bahgat Korany/Ali E. Hillal Dessouki (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Arab States*, Boulder (Westview) 1984, and the classic in this field: Leonard Binder, „The Middle East as a Subordinate International System,“ *World Politics*, Vol 10 (1957/58), pp. 408-429.

9 On regional security complexes, cf. Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Boulder (Westview) 1991, pp 191-193; on the Middle East as a regional conflict system, cf. Volker Perthes, *Risiken und Konfliktfelder im nächstlichen Raum: Hypothesen für die Zeit des Umbruchs*, Ebenhausen (Information Paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) December 1994.

important for the security considerations of regional players than are the dynamics of the international system. At least, these regional dynamics are, for the most part, more immediately threatening to regional forces, and they can also more effectively be manipulated by these forces, than international developments. Western policymakers often ignore, theoretically as well as practically, the relevance of the regional context for regional states, the fact that these states have their own agendas, and the legitimacy of such agendas.

Thus, to mention but a few examples, the West has given substantial value to getting the largest possible number of states sign the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), and to get the approval of the international community for an unlimited extension of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Arab states, in contrast, including such a strong Western ally as Egypt, have not really been interested in whether or not these treaties were signed or extended. They were more concerned with Israel's nuclear capacity, and were primarily interested in achieving, or maintaining, some sort of deterrence. And while Western powers currently show a strong interest in a quick resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict, some regional states – particularly Syria, but also, to some extent or other, Israel or Egypt – might, for different reasons, prefer a cautious, gradualist advancement. Their main interest is to ensure that whatever they consider their nation-state interests be not endangered. Such interests include, prominently, the maintenance of the own country's strategic position, the inflow of international and regional rents, and domestic stability. Finally, while the US government may find it wise to „contain“ and destabilize Iran, regional players may find it wiser – from their own security and threat perception – to seek some form of understanding, build confidence, and establish some cooperative structures, with Teheran.<sup>10</sup> They have, in the view of this author, good reasons to do so.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, the US, as well as the West in general, would be well advised to apply what Abdel Monem Said Aly has called a „constructive response to Arab security concerns“.<sup>12</sup> Basically, this would demand for Western policies to take the legitimate security interests of regional states and peoples into consideration rather than superimpose Western alliance interests; to help regional security structures to emerge – regardless of whether one likes or dislikes their particular participants –; and to abstain from paternalizing one's friends in the region – i.e., to not try to enforce solutions which these regional actors may not yet be ready for.

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10 Cf., for example, Jasim Khalid al-Sa'dun, „al-'alaqat al-iqtisadiyya al-'arabiyya al-iraniya al-rahina wa afaq tatwirihā“ [Current Arab-Iranian Economic Relations and Prospects of Their Development], *al-Mustaqbal al-'arabi*, Vol. 18 (December 1995), No. 202, pp. 114-130 (pp. 129 f.).

11 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8 f.

12 Cf. Said Aly, „The Shattered Consensus. Arab Perceptions of Security.“

## 2. *Will They Cooperate, Though?*

This all said, some critical remarks must be made regarding the ability of regional actors to find a constructive approach to their regional security. Four main issues seem to be of particular importance.

First, until now, there is no common agenda of the Arab – let alone the Middle Eastern – states for regional security. Pan-Arabism is sometimes pointed to as a common denominator of sorts for Arab security perceptions.<sup>13</sup> While this holds true for the rhetoric of the main Arab states, some Arab thinkers and politicians have openly given up the ideal of embedding their countries' security in an all-Arab frame. Particularly in Kuwait, after the Gulf War, as well as in Morocco or Tunisia, we find serious attempts to redefine national security in alternative contexts. In any case, in the Arab world of today, national or nation-state security doctrines are much more often, and more openly, spoken of than was the case in the 1960s or 1970s. And where reference is made to Arab security, very different notions exist of what exactly that means. The political and intellectual elites of the larger Arab states, in particular, tend to define what they consider their country's national security needs as Pan-Arab interests. Consider, among other things, Egypt's Pan-Arab justifications of its interest in playing a security role in the Gulf.<sup>14</sup> Smaller and weaker Arab states, in contrast, find it wise and justifiable to rely on powers from outside the region, rather than on their Arab brethren, to safeguard their security. Thus, Gulf security has become increasingly internationalized. Iraq's provocations on the Kuwaiti border, in the fall of 1994, clearly demonstrated how much the GCC states, in critical situations like this, are likely to seek direct protection from the US and the West, rather than from their Arab allies. Whether this is a matter of lack of confidence in the deterrence of the Damascus Declaration<sup>15</sup> – the alliance treaty which the GCC states, Egypt, and Syria concluded after the Gulf War, in March 1991 – or, rather, demonstrates lack of confidence on the part of the Gulf Arab monarchies in their Syrian and Egyptian partners, may remain open.

Second, multilateral Arab structures and organizations have not, as a rule, achieved what they were supposed to, particularly in terms of providing regional or sub-regional security. The Arab league, despite its time-honoured Joint Defense and

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13 Cf. *ibid.*

14 Cf. among others, Sa'd al-Din Ibrahim, „*misr wa-tahaddiyat al-mustaqbal al-'arabi*“ [Egypt and the Challenges for the Arab Future], in: *idem, misr wa-l-watan al-'arabi* [Egypt and the Arab Homeland], Amman (Arab Thought Forum) 1990, pp 41-47.

15 Cf., in this sense, Nasif Hitti, „*al-'arab wa-thaurat al-tanaqudat fi al-mafahim al-qawmiyya wa-l-iqlimiyya wa-l-'alamiyya. waraqat 'amal*“ [The Arabs and the Revolution of Contradictions in the Concepts of Nationalism, Regionalism, and Globalism], *al-Mustaqbal al-'arabi*, Vol. 18 (10/1995), No. 200, pp. 5-21 (p. 19).



Economic Cooperation Treaty, has not become an all-Arab security framework. The GCC has failed to develop into an effective means to maintain the security of its members. And the Damascus Declaration, as mentioned, has not been filled with life. None of these regional or sub-regional organizations, or others, has become a collective actor through which its members would speak, or negotiate, with one voice.

Third: These structural deficits on the regional level are, partly at least, the result of a general lack of confidence between the political elites of the Arab world and the Middle East. Such mutual mistrust goes along with the prevalence of rather antiquated security perceptions. Until now, in all countries of the region, particularly in Israel and Syria, the military has a substantial voice in foreign-policy and security-policy decision processes. The dominant mentality among the political and military leaders of these countries can be characterized as a zero-sum understanding of security and international relations, or as an extremely „realist“, power-politics approach. The essence of this political mentality is a deep-rooted conviction that whatever one's neighbour gains in terms of security will necessarily reduce one's own security.<sup>16</sup> Concepts such as cooperative security are still far from what military and most political leaders of the region are prepared to plan for.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, one has to take into consideration the limited degree of regional cooperation among Arab and Middle Eastern states in general, even outside security-relevant spheres. Consider, among other things, that inter-Arab trade amounts to no more than seven or eight per cent of the total foreign trade of the Arab states, and consider how often, still, fruitful inter-societal interaction is being disrupted through political conflicts. There seems to be little reason to expect that the degree of intra-regional cooperation will increase considerably in the short- and mid-term future – regardless, by the way, of whether one defines the region as „Arab“ or „Middle Eastern“.<sup>18</sup> There is an economic, and perhaps a cultural, dimension to this apparent inability to enhance cooperation. Looking at the political dimension, the main obstacle is to be

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16 Quite indicative for this mentality is the debate in Israel about the occupied Golan heights. The main issue in this debate are the potential military risks of an Israeli withdrawal, and how these risks can be managed - rather than the chance of enhancing the security of both states through a return of the heights to Syria and their subsequent demilitarization. See, for example, Gerald M. Steinberg, "Israeli Security and the Peace Process", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 25 (1994), pp. 51-62. The current Arab political-academic discourse, as mentioned in the beginning, abounds with expressions of fear that the ongoing Arab-Israeli peace process is in fact a security threat.

17 For a discussion of the prospects of cooperative security in the Middle East, see Efraim Karsh/Yezid Sayigh, "A Cooperative Approach to Arab-Israeli Security", *Survival*, Vol. 36 (Spring 1994), pp. 114-125.

18 Cf. in more detail, Volker Perthes, *Arab Economic Cooperation: A Critical View from Outside*, Ebenhausen (Information Paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) January 1996.

found in the prevalent structures of government in most countries of the region. Authoritarian and undemocratic regimes, often lacking even a modicum of domestic legitimacy, are particularly eager to be in control of the social and economic interaction between their subjects and those of other countries. As a result, highly centralized bilateralism, rather than multilateralism, is the preponderant mode of relations between regional states. Attempts to bring about networks and structures of regional cooperation, or a regional security framework worth mentioning, have very limited chances of success. Still, also, regional players actively seek both to involve external – mainly Western – forces into regional affairs, and to cooperate with partners from outside the region rather than with regional partners. This behaviour is not completely irrational from a regime-security perspective. It may help, and is indeed often intended to do so, to strengthen the domestic hold over power of the respective regime, to safeguard against the vulnerabilities of regional interdependence and against the potentially subversive power of uncontrolled inter-societal contact, and to prop up the capabilities of individual regimes to manipulate or dominate their regional environment.

### *3. Some Questions for Further Dialogue*

Regarding what has been reached, or has not been reached, in terms of regional cooperation and security, it makes sense to put some critical questions concerning the preparedness and the capacity of regional – Arab and other Middle Eastern – actors to make their region a safer place. The following four questions, the answers to which will be left to others, definitely derive from a European perspective, and they are, as such, meant to enrich cross-Mediterranean dialogue.

First, will regional leaders, and regional elites in general, be able to peacefully settle their conflicts; and will they be able to settle their conflicts in a manner that does not threaten broader Mediterranean security?<sup>19</sup> The Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian agreements, raise hope insofar as the regional actors themselves have negotiated and concluded them. It is important to hold in mind, however, that the states and elites of the region did not enter the current peace process out of a sudden conviction of the advantages of cooperation and compromise. They rather did so because other, alternative solutions had failed, because of being convinced that other solutions were no longer allowed in the New World Order, or

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19 Conflicts are, of course, not always settled by peaceful means. Military solutions of domestic or bilateral conflicts - such as advocated by the *eradicateur* faction in the Algerian military or, until recently, by Israeli governments vis-à-vis the Palestinians - are not only normatively questionable; they also tend to transport local or regional conflicts into their broader international environment, mainly in the form of forced migration and terrorism.

because such other solutions were considered over-expensive. The potentially risky issue in this respect is whether these governments will be able to convince their respective population of the advantages and of the necessity of the peace course, including the compromises any settlement will involve. If they fail to do so, some of the political equations in the region could well change, and the peace process could stall.

Second, will these same elites manage, and how, to develop a logic of regional cooperation that is based on economic rationality rather than geo-political considerations? Will they be able, and will they seek to, establish cooperative structures in a „New Middle East“ or a „New Arab System“ rather than unilaterally seeking access to the West, or individual support for their regional ambitions from Western powers?

Third, will they manage a transition from authoritarian rule to a more participative and pluralistic form of state-society relations – to a form of state-society relations, that is, that enhances the legitimacy of regimes, alleviates internal tensions, allows for non-violent solutions to socio-political conflicts, and thereby also reduces one of the presently major sources of regional instability?

And finally, what do Arab and Middle Eastern elites expect from Europe, or from the West in general, aside from additional rent flows? This is not to say that the quest for more economic aid is illegitimate. The question is, rather, what kind of political action – what kind of involvement, if we want to say so – could be demanded in addition to economic support. Normatively, one might come to the opinion that economic cooperation programmes should be intensified. whereas, as far as politics, internal affairs, and regional security arrangements are concerned, the West should leave the Middle East alone. Practically, we may doubt that such an abstention from political involvement is in the mutual interest of the peoples both on the Northern, and on the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean.

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