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The Arab state system is more resilient than it appears

By Ezzedine Choukri Fishere

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Seen from outside, the Arab world looks like it is about to crumble. Four Arab states – Iraq, Sudan, Yemen and Somalia – are facing the threat of territorial disintegration. One country, Lebanon, has settled for losing its independence; another, Palestine, is losing hope to win it. The Arab League is unable to react effectively to any of these challenges, even when decision-making powers are transferred to it by the interested parties as the Palestinian president did recently.

Non-Arab states and non-state actors in the Middle East are becoming main political players. In contrast, traditional powers like Egypt and Saudi Arabia seem unable to project their influence in the region effectively, and have often had to content themselves with defensive postures or with playing the role of spoiler. In addition, most Arab states are faced with domestic challenges for which they seem ill-equipped. All this begs the question about whether the current Arab state system is sustainable.

Grand, sweeping narratives describing the rise and fall of regional powers have a certain attraction, but they are rarely accurate. In a mosaic-like region such as the Middle East, nuance and attention to detail are often useful. A closer look at the Arab state system shows that while some of these developments are new, most are new reflections of old dynamics.

At the heart of the latter category is the question of leadership. There has never been, in the modern history of the Arab world, a single hegemonic power. Leadership has been, and will remain in the foreseeable future, contested. When Gamal Abdel-Nasser's Egypt made a bid for regional hegemony, other key states coalesced to undermine it. When Syria, Iraq or Saudi Arabia tried their hands at it, coalitions changed to oppose the new contender. Arab powers, traditional and less traditional, were never able to project their regional influence in a way that resolved regional problems. They were more successful when they built coalitions, exercised restraint and respected the political realities of a crowded and tough region.

With leadership essentially contested among Arab states, it is hard to see how non-Arab states could hope to lead. Let me put it clearly: the Turkish and Iranian bids for regional leadership are doomed. Sooner or later, their hyperactivity will calm down and they will learn the virtues of restraint. When and how this happens depends on how fast they learn.

The question of non-state actors falls in the same category. In this region, non-state entities are proxies, not actors. They are sponsored, financed, armed, trained and used or tolerated by states. They do express genuine political grievances and respond to real political constituencies. But they are neither players nor are they technically "non-state": they are proxies and they aspire to become states. As such they are not a precursor of a new form of political organization in the region (take, for example, the case of the Palestine Liberation Organization in the late 1960s and in the 1980s).

The Arab League is as effective today as it has been since its creation 65 years ago. Regardless of what its charter says, the League has served three practical functions: it has been a lightning rod for Arab nationalism, a forum for Arab leaders to meet and greet, and cover for the inaction of its member states. It has served all these goals with relative success.

However, given the increase in regional threats and the inability of states to address them unilaterally, the Arab League is likely to be called upon more often to legitimize collective action under its auspices.

What could bring fundamental change to the Arab state system is the way it deals with two types of domestic challenges. The first is the status of minorities, which threatens the integrity of an increasing number of Arab states. Whether the minorities are confessional, racial, religious or geographic, Arab regimes have yet to find an effective approach to their claims and grievances. Blaming these on greedy minority leaders or foreign interventions or both, is unhelpful, even if it is true. The situation in Yemen is a reminder that the Iraqi, Lebanese and Sudanese civil wars were not exceptional cases. The situation in the latter two countries is a sad reminder that Arab states can live with civil strife for a long time.

The second challenge is generational: under the garb of Arab officialdom, a whole new generation is about to emerge. By this I am not referring only to the generational change

in the political leadership, but more importantly to that in Arab societies. According to United Nations statistics, more than 50 percent of the 350 million Arabs are now under 24, in other words they were born after 1985. Within a few years, most leaders of Arab states and societies will be from a generation whose active life started in the 1980s. The way they view their countries, region and the world is quite different from that of the generation now in power. This could bring about surprising results.

While these social changes are likely to put considerable pressure on the Arab state system, the latter has proven resilient to comparable changes in the past. For more than half a century the structures of this system, with its balances, rivalries and hatreds, have remained fundamentally unchanged. This is a sign of rigidity, but it also reflects the strength of underlying political realities.