



Georgy Mirsky's views on the Middle East

It would be very hard to recall any period in living memory when the international community was in such a state of disarray and confusion in regard to the situation in the Middle East as at present. How far removed are we from the state of affairs in the area 20 years ago! Back then, various aspects of the situation seemed to converge and present a picture of definite stability and bright prospects. The U.S., in the aftermath of its brilliant victory in the first Gulf war, was an undisputed hegemonic power in the region. Americans not only successfully played the part of the international policeman, punishing a brutal ruffian and carrying out a noble mission on behalf of the UN. They proved wise enough to stop short of capturing Baghdad and changing the regime in Iraq which would have been pretty uncomfortable, to put it mildly, to their Arab allies. The Iraqi dictator was out of the way, at least temporarily, to be dealt with later on while the other regional "bad guy", Iran, was licking its wounds in the wake of the disastrous war with Iraq. The PLO and Israel were on the verge of an agreement that promised to open the path for reconciliation, and many an observer began to believe for the first time that the long-awaited breakthrough was within reach. The Soviet Union was no more, and the task of combating the Communist menace in the area had disappeared as the left-wing regimes crumbled. The main Western allies –Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan- were safe under the leadership of stable and reliable, if autocratic and repressive rulers. The civil war in Lebanon was over, Syria was sidelined. Oil deliveries appeared quite secure. President Bush was riding high. It was the zenith of American power, a promise of lasting stability was in the air.

Today, virtually nothing has remained of the great illusion. American prestige has plummeted largely as a result of the unfortunate intervention in Iraq. Anti -American mood is ascendant. Prospects for an Israeli- Palestinian settlement are pretty bleak / more about it later/. The expansion of a militant, violently anti – Western and adamant Iran has been resumed, the Shiite state has become a virtual leader of Sunni Arab resistance to " the forces of imperialism and Zionism", a real regional heavyweight, while its increasingly robust nuclear program is justly regarded as probably the main threat to global security at this point.

On top of all this, an "Arab spring" has struck everybody as a momentous event capable of throwing the whole area off- balance. The simultaneous upheavals in the Arab countries had certainly not been in the cards, nobody had expected a shock this violent. The Arabs had always been believed to be capable of nothing more than anti= colonial revolts, sectarian feuds and military coups. Now, the whole perception of the contemporary Arab community is in need of a thorough reassessment.

Causes of the Arab revolution have been amply analyzed by now. In this author's view, it is better to speak not about the Tunisian, Egyptian or Libyan revolutions since the end result of the overthrow of old regimes is by no means clear. It cannot be ruled out that in Egypt, at least, the new power system will not be terribly different from the one headed by Mubarak. Revolutions are always initiated by one group of people and hijacked by other groups; Libya is the best example so far as regards the region under discussion. At the end of the day, social and political changes may prove to be not so fundamental as was hoped for by the rebellious lot that started the protest demonstrations. Taken in sum, however, all the upheavals of various sorts and degrees that have occurred in the Arab world, from Morocco to Syria, surely deserve to be branded The Arab Revolution of 1911, in singular. The common motto of all those who resolved to brave bullets and repression in Egypt, Tunis, Libya, Yemen and Syria might sound like this:" Enough is enough! We don't trust you! We are not afraid of you!"

Now, the main issue to ponder seems to be this: to what degree will the Islamists be able to throw their weight around in those countries where old rulers have definitely been booted out. Two lines of reasoning appear to be paramount: the proponents of a " quiet approach" believe that a moderate trend among the Islamists will prevail and hope that it is the Turkish model rather than the extremist Salafi one will carry the day. The "alarmists", argue that basically there is no such thing as moderate Islamism. They like to reiterate the famous motto designed to describe the Islamists' attitude to general elections : " one man, one vote, one time". Results of the elections in Tunis and Egypt cannot, of course, provide an answer. Time is needed to see which way the wind is blowing.

The term "Islamists" is rather vague and ambiguous. Bloodthirsty, intolerant Taliban, Al- Qaeda, ruthless thugs in Algiers are Islamists, and so are the leaders who are now in charge in Turkey; the difference between them is enormous.

Broadly speaking, three categories of people who are usually called Islamists : 1/ Intransigent, bitterly anti- Western Jihadi- Salafites such as extreme Wahhabis, Al-Qaeda, Taliban, regional groups and networks associated with Al- Qaeda, 2/ relatively moderate militants chiefly represented by Muslim

Brotherhood, although its Palestinian branch Hamas can be quite cruel and ruthless in its practices while engaged in terrorist activities, 3/ “civilized” followers of Erdogan in Turkey. The hope in the West and amongst the educated youth in the Muslim world is that the third or at least the second variety will prevail after an imminent struggle. What is practically out of the question for the time being is leadership or even predominant influence of pro- Western liberals.

Let us turn now to the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. If one looks today at the Mideast political landscape, it is pretty hard to find any ground for optimism. The huge gap which has always existed between Israel and the Palestinians in regard to such major issues as the status of Jerusalem, the borders, the Jewish settlements on the West Bank and the fate of the Palestinian refugees, has only grown wider as the “hawks” strengthened their positions on both sides. It can be argued that all of these problems could be resolved on the basis of a compromise given genuine good will on both sides. It is precisely the lack of good will and mutual trust, however, that has over the years inevitably ensured failure of any attempts to reach a compromise solution. Compromise means mutual concessions but the prevailing mood in both camps is imbued by hatred and mistrust to such an extent that any concession is regarded by one side as excessive and by the other side as insufficient. Whatever offers can be made by the Israeli government, the response among the Palestinians will surely be:” Not good enough”, and vice versa.

The two- state solution, logical, legitimate and inescapable as it may look, seems more remote at present than at any time since the Oslo agreements because the formula upon which it is basically founded, namely “land for peace”, has been thoroughly compromised in the eyes of the Israeli population. “We have withdrawn from Gaza only to get Hamas with rockets, and before that we had withdrawn from South Lebanon only to get Hizballah with rockets, so why should we fall back on the 1967 borders if we know for sure that new Iranian missiles will sooner or later emerge quite close to our heartland?”- this is a virtually obligatory refrain to any conversation with most Israelis on the subject of the so called peace process. The majority of Israeli Jewish population seems to believe that the real aim of Palestinians is to destroy their state by using a gradual step-by-step approach, whatever their leaders’ official declarations. Paradoxically, polls show that the same majority supports the idea of a Palestinian state. The point is, however, that the sort of Palestinian state both the Israeli government and population are prepared to accept is a farcical entity devoid of major attributes of independence and, as such, utterly unacceptable for any Arab leader, quite moderate as he may be. Suffice it to look at the kind of conditions the Netanyahu government has put forward in order to accede to Palestinian demands. Since this government appears to enjoy broad popular support judging both by the election results and numerous polls, it is difficult to foresee any significant change in Israel’s position even if the talks are to resume.

The Palestinians, on their part, seem to believe that there is no way Israel will ever agree to granting them real independence. Some of them, in desperation, have been turning time and again to the old ‘one- state solution’ although simple logic suggests that the whole idea is by no means viable if only because its realization would mean nothing less than Israel’s rapid transformation into an Arab – Jewish state. The bulk of the Palestinians, however, probably just hope that time is on their side and that some kind of combination of an incessant small –scale warfare / including such means as shelling of Israeli towns/ and external pressure would eventually bring about a fatal exhaustion of Israel’s vitality. Thus, whereas on the Palestinian side the motto seems to be “wear them out”, the Israelis hope to “tough it out”.

Under such circumstances, although a large – scale inter-state war can safely be ruled out, and a literal repetition of the second intifada appears less than likely, no stability and no meaningful security can be expected in the foreseeable future.

The Israelis’ apprehension has been exacerbated lately by the steady growth of Hamas’ power and by the obvious inability of their government to deal with this extremist organization as well as by the undoubted boost of Hamas reputation as a result of the recent prisoners’ swap. It is feared that the next general election will bring about not just a new Hamas victory but a real takeover of the West Bank. This would mean virtual eclipse of Fateh as a moderate force in the Palestinian movement and the disappearance of any meaningful interlocutor in peace negotiations. In this case, Israel could face a really grim prospect of a new type of warfare that its enemies spearheaded by Iran could try to unleash against it. This could include escalation of rocket shelling, this time around not only from South Lebanon and Gaza but also from the West Bank, as well as attempts to penetrate into Israel from various points. In the worst-case scenario, if Sunni Islamists succeed in overthrowing the Assad regime in Syria, Palestinians from the refugee camps might be prompted to cross the border.

Prospects are bleak indeed, and there is not an awful lot the West can do about it. This, of course, applies to Russia, too. The only consolation is that many people in both camps may realize by now that any attempts to force the issue, to reach a breakthrough no matter what could result in a serious escalation of the conflict, in new bloodshed. So, it would probably be better to leave things as they are, unsatisfactory as the status quo is for both sides, and let future generations try to do the job that the current one has proved unable to cope with.