

Middle Eastern Opportunities

by Frank G. Wisner

Standing as we do at the beginning of a new century, I am challenged to draw conclusions about the opportunities and risks we face—whether we are Americans, Israelis, or Arabs (among whom I studied, lived and worked during more than three decades as a student and later as an American diplomat).

I will try to share reflections on the state of the world after the cold war, and America's special position in it. And I will comment on the opportunities open to Israel and the Arab world to forge a different relationship than the one of violence and traumatic upheaval we have known over the past fifty years.

After the Cold War

In thinking through the new world circumstances we face, I am reminded how ill-prepared we were just over ten years ago when the Berlin Wall fell, to fathom where the world was headed. Each of this century's great conflicts—the two world wars and the cold war—produced huge transformations in the global geopolitical order. The international community's success in coping with these changes was uneven, to say the least. Still, in the months preceding the convening of the Versailles conference in 1919, a great deal of thought was given to defining the post-war period. Conferences during the Second World War, held in the North Atlantic, Casablanca, Cairo, Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam, wrestled with the postwar order.

The cold war ended so suddenly and with so much ambiguity, that no similar preparation was possible. In adapting to new circumstances since the breaching of the Berlin Wall, we have yet to

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find a definition of the new world political order, nor have we secured consensus—in America or abroad—about the role the United States should play in it. The task of defining the world's shape and our respective places in it has been further complicated by other major changes which accompanied or followed the end of the cold war: the advent of the information technology revolution, the globalization of the international economic system, the Asian crisis, the rapid spread of democracy, and the weakening of the authority of nation-states.

Yet despite all the confusion, let there be no doubt: since the end of the cold war, Americans and Israelis have found themselves in new and much more favorable circumstances—circumstances so promising as to alter our assumptions about the risks we can take to secure the future of our peoples. It is glaringly obvious that the end of Communism is a hugely important event. Because of it, the world has changed decisively, and it has changed for the better. A new age of democracy and free markets has arrived; the erstwhile Soviet Union no longer confronts the world as we seek to secure peace and prosperity, and it no longer offers a pole of attraction to those who would resist these efforts.

Admittedly, many of humanity's ills remain to be addressed. The end of the cold war offered no universal panacea. Wars continue; poverty is widespread; disease is rampant; our environment is degraded. But the notion that the common ownership of property was the key to human progress, or that such progress could be imposed by force, has been laid to rest, hopefully never to return. And with the end of Communism, there is no serious ideological competitor to democracy. Sooner or later, with modest exceptions, the entire world will be run on the basis of free markets and political systems based on free and fair elections, in a framework of press freedom and judicial guarantees.

The end of the cold war has brought other benefits. The prospect of nuclear war between superpowers has diminished, opening the way for a debate about the place of nuclear arms in today's world. We can also turn our undivided attention to the pressing issue of the further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In a similar manner, America and the world at large no longer face the prospect that regional tensions—the Arab-Israeli conflict as a notable

example—will escalate into a superpower crisis. Incontestably, the opportunity to make peace in this region has been improved.

Other positive developments flowed from the end of the cold war. Tyranny no longer rules in Europe. Germany is united. However flawed, Russia and the former Eastern Europe satellites are democracies with increasingly successful free market economies. I do not intend to gloss over the present circumstances of Russia. Democracy there is being tested, a brutal war has been waged in Chechnya, a botched privatization of the Soviet economy is a brake on Russia's prospects for prosperity. But let us not forget that Russia still bears the legacy of seventy-four years of Communist oppression and centuries of Czarist despotism. Now the empire is no more. Instead, a new center in Russian politics is emerging; the economy, fueled by a devalued ruble and better natural resources prices, is showing spark. The press is vibrant. Russia will compete vigorously for its place in this region's future, and for the present its ambitions will complicate—but not threaten—our basic interests. With skillful diplomacy, we can work to accommodate legitimate Russian concerns.

The post-cold war thaw has also had negative side effects. Long-dormant ethnic and religious animosities—in Europe and elsewhere—have been unleashed, often (as in the former Yugoslavia) with the most bitter consequences. Violence, in different forms, has occurred in the Gulf, Afghanistan, Africa and East Timor. This said, we should not forget the Gulf War could not have been fought during the cold war. Nor could there have been interventions in the name of peace and humanity in Bosnia and Kosovo. Our hands are freer to tend to Africa's devastating wars—Sierra Leone, Eritrea-Ethiopia, Congo and Angola. These are internal conflicts, but they require external attention.

In Asia, there are positive developments as well. We can take some hope from the success of democracy in Indonesia, the challenge of preserving the territorial integrity of that great archipelago notwithstanding. Surely, the world faces a different China, even if economic progress has still to be translated into political rights for the Chinese people. China needs stability in its region if it is to pursue the long quest for national strength. It is profoundly sensitive to its relationship with the United States, which for the mo-

ment rests on uneasy premises, especially given attitudes in the United States. The regimes in North Korea, Vietnam, and Myanmar are dangerous. But they are exceptions in Asia. Cuba, Iran, Iraq and Libya pose challenges, but they too are exceptions. The Indo-Pakistani rivalry, while dangerous, is still more manageable in a post-cold war world.

One can reasonably conclude, therefore, that the overall international situation—even in the midst of renewed ethnic and religious conflict and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—presents an environment conducive to the pursuit of peace in the Middle East. There is a premium to achieving peace; those who resist, risk greater isolation. And the quality of peace being pursued is a peace of richer substance: free markets, growing economic benefits, stronger civil societies and democratic order, based on deeper respect for human rights.

America and Israel in Context

As the new century begins, America's standing in the world is unequaled. No great power threatens the United States. We enjoy a degree of domestic tranquillity and prosperity virtually without parallel in our history. America's word and leadership on the international scene are strong. We command a unique position in capital markets and in the development of technologies.

Yet history teaches us that the international system is competitive, and becomes uneasy when a single state enjoys a dominant position. It is almost the natural order that a balance of power will be sought by other actors. The technology that confers such strength upon America is not a monopoly product; it will be copied and developed further elsewhere—including military technology, where the United States enjoys, for the moment, a commanding edge. Admittedly, we face no imminent threat to our position of privilege. But Americans need to ask the hard questions and reflect on our vulnerabilities. They are real.

There is precious little agreement among Americans about the nature of America's responsibilities abroad. There are sharp and persistent divisions over when and how the United States is to intervene when crises affect world stability. Our role as leader cannot be

maintained if Americans are unwilling to focus their attention and intellectual resources, and commit blood and treasure, to maintain stability. A sharper sense of national interest is required—and is today absent from the American debate.

As for Israel, it would be presumptuous on my part to describe for Israelis their strengths and weaknesses or discuss Israel's standing in the world and in this region. You are a careful people; you calculate risks with precision. But I can safely suggest that Israel is at the top of its game. You have never been as prosperous; your technology sector is adding to your strength day by day. Inflation is down; growth is up. Your immigration, schools and universities add to your intellectual capital. You enjoy an edge in military capability so great that no nation in this region or beyond it would dream of taking you on. Your relationship with the United States is strong. Few doors in the international community are now closed to you. For someone who believed this ancient people had to find its home in the region of its origin; for someone who admires intensely what Israelis have done to build this nation, Israel's present strengths are a source of great joy.

But they also reinforce my conviction that the time is right to take advantage of your strengths and to spread the peace—to Syria, Lebanon, the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world.

As you consider how best to proceed, let me share with you some thoughts about the changes taking place in the Arab world.

The Next Arab Generation

Let me begin with two questions. What Arab world will Israel and the United States face in the decades to come, and what are the prospects of securing peace with it?

The transition has begun, heralded by Kings Muhammad VI of Morocco and Abdallah II of Jordan and Shaykh Hamad of Bahrain. In the years immediately ahead, heads of state across the Arab world will change. So will the leaders of governments, business leaders and intellectuals. Will a new generation be more favorable to peace? Will it be secular? Will it respond to the imperatives of prosperity and social justice. Will it join the worldwide shift to democracy and the free markets?

There are no summary answers to these questions; nor are there answers which apply without variation across the landscape. At the same time, it is possible to outline some of the answers, and to draw conclusions important to Israelis and Americans. And in my judgment, it is possible to begin to calculate more optimistically the risks of peacemaking.

First, a disclaimer: in speaking of the Arab world, I must simplify a very complex situation. I was first introduced to the Arab world in the mid-1950s and have lived with it episodically ever since. Whether as student or ambassador—and even now as businessman—I have been struck by what Bernard Lewis has identified as “the complexity and variety of the different identities which can be held at one and the same time by groups, even more than by individuals—the constant change of identity in the Middle East, of the ways in which the peoples of the region perceive themselves, the groups to which they belong.” The Arab world has changed over the past decades and it is changing now.

It is not only the variety and differences among Arabs that strike us; of equal or greater importance is the depth and velocity of change that has affected the Arab world, including the historical and national identities of its peoples. When I first knew the Arab world, I could not argue that the Arab nation-state commanded the primary loyalty of its subjects. Families, tribes, religious groups commanded loyalty. That is not the case today. By and large, the Arab state has become the focal point for decision-making and loyalty. It has the capacity to decide peace and command respect.

If Arab political identity has changed and is changing, so too is the Arab view of the world and the Arabs’ place in it. The grip of tradition remains strong in every aspect of the life of today’s Arabs. I have in mind the special hold of Islam. Even if the wave of politically radical, fundamentalist Islam has been mitigated in much of the Arab world, it is not a spent political force. It expresses itself in social conservatism. At the same time, younger Arab élites are more secular today than at any point in the recent past.

Admittedly, Syria may yet be a battleground. I suspect that there, the fury of fundamentalism has yet to be played out. In Iraq, the story remains to be written, and its future is hard to gauge. Its special ethnic and religious composition, and the hatreds which lie therein, can only provoke instability. But it has been centuries since

Mesopotamia was a beacon for broader Arab society. Neither can I say for sure that communal mayhem in Lebanon is a thing of the past. But the notion that the solution to the problems faced by an individual, a society or a nation, lies in strict application of Islam's fundamental principles, does not attract most of those Arabs with whom Israelis will have to make peace.

Globalization is striking deep roots. The information technology revolution, especially the material opportunities it offers, as well as the effect on political life of uncontrollable communications, are forces whose power is just beginning to be felt. Internet cafés are springing up all over the Arab world. The revolution in information technology drives Arab nations toward free markets, civil society, more open political systems and different relations with the rest of the world, especially the West. On a more negative note, the same revolution increases divisions in Arab society—between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not.

The challenges faced by rulers of the new generation are changing. With notable exceptions, crowns sit more firmly on the heads of rulers. The threat of violent change—assassination or uprising—has markedly diminished. The wave of fundamentalist terror has abated in Egypt; a new Skhirat is less likely in today's Morocco; Black September is not in the cards; order is gradually returning to Algeria.

But younger Arabs are skeptical about their political leaders. The blind idealism that transported the followers of an Antoun Sa'adeh or the mobs that listened to Nasser's rhetoric has largely disappeared. Anger at corruption in government is a new and pertinent phenomenon. The new generation sees itself facing new and different problems. In particular, they hope their economic lives will be shaped by decisions which they, as individuals, take. They do not wish to be at the mercy of tone deaf, all-powerful governments. As one younger Arab woman told me recently: "I want to belong to my country but I want to make political decisions and I want to make personal and cultural decisions."

They watch and follow examples they see in the West or the success of their fellows who have made their way in Silicon Valley and in the financial markets of New York. Younger Arab élites want a freer market for enterprise. The framework for their activity is based on the nation-state with a strong outreach to the global market. The

younger generation sees no benefit in the collectivist solutions. Nor do they believe in an abstract Arab market, preferring instead to pursue pragmatic deals with like-minded Arabs in other business centers.

Although sharply critical of American policies, they admire the United States deeply. Many have pursued studies in the United States, or wish to do so. American culture and styles are popular. Younger Arabs' perception of American power is huge. They ascribe special importance to American views, while at the same time hoping alternatives to American power will emerge.

The new generation is deeply proud of Arab culture, and of themselves as individuals. They regard themselves as Egyptians, Algerians, Syrians and Palestinians, not in a practical sense as Arabs. The shock of 1948 has faded. Redress of perceived grievance will be pursued more pragmatically and less under the impulse of revenge. At the same time, the plight of Palestinians continues to resonate throughout the Arab world. Justice is the motivating view. When the new generation of Arabs—leaders and élites—look at Israel, they ask whether Israel will be part of the solution to the problems they face, or part of the problem. The new generation is persuaded by facts; it is also moved by the signals, symbols and the attitudes of Israel. They are especially sensitive to any appearance of Israel “talking down” to them. They wish to be seen and treated with respect.

Younger Arabs tell me they wrestle with the new threats all of us face: proliferation, environmental degradation, skyrocketing birth rates, the new diseases. Most of all, they struggle with the fact of poverty. Some openly express the hope that Israelis could join them in finding solutions. But they are quick to add that the political context must permit cooperation, and that means fair, just deals between Israel on the one hand and Syria, Lebanon and the Palestinians on the other.

Here, a special word about the Palestinians, and their cousins across the Jordan River and in the Lebanese camps, is in order. Unlike many Arabs to the east and west, the Palestinian view of the future is more pessimistic. They regard with despondency the increasing cantonization of the Palestinian home area. Many believe their lives can only be made in the West, and they are leaving to pursue their studies and professions abroad, whenever the opportunity appears. Those who stay behind are a troubling prospect: their

attitudes toward Israel, and their view of their leaders, are not healthy. They are the potential “dragon teeth” of future violence.

If Arab leaders sit more securely in their chairs, they face new pressures. The quality of the transition to a new generation remains to be proved. If Morocco and Jordan are guides, the prospects are moderately encouraging. But there is more to come. New leaders will immediately face the problem of how to share the rewards and responsibilities of power.

Arab public opinion may appear at first glance to be apathetic. But below the surface there is ferment. Arab leaders are confronted with the demand for deep change: the unwinding of the domineering state, especially its economic embrace; a stronger civil society; a freer press; a greater role for women; more equitable systems of justice; strengthened civic institutions; and opportunities for the unemployed or those who work on the margins of modern economies.

There is also altruism in the younger élites. No affluent young Egyptian, to take a notable example, grows up without being deeply sensitive to the political consequences of poverty and the lack of infrastructure to provide public health, clean water, and schools which teach the skills needed by a modern economy. The consequences of environmental degradation are now sharply felt. The rapid increase in Arab populations is a matter of material concern. Younger Arabs want action.

The new generation’s agenda for change is important to Americans, Europeans, and Israelis. We have not made up our minds about an expanding civil society and greater political participation in the Arab world. We admit the broad principles; we are ambivalent about the consequences. But we cannot be blind to the fact that the Arab state, which seeks to exercise control, is under growing assault and will change.

Arab Militaries

We also need to keep a sharp eye on Arab military establishments. They will play a crucial role in the destinies of their countries, as the new generation moves to center stage.

Our insights into the attitudes of younger officers are limited. This said, I offer several observations. The composition of Arab

military establishments is in transition. Their ranks are increasingly filled by the sons of the less advantaged. They carry, in their hearts, and to a greater degree than the affluent élites, the traditions of Arab culture. They are proud and sensitive. And they are socially and culturally conservative.

At the same time, younger officers are affected by the same hopes and aspirations held by others in the Arab world's new generation. They are increasingly computer literate, and they are sensitive to the demands of globalization. There is no sense of privilege or responsibility so powerful that the new generation of officers can act outside the national consensus. Arab officers are nationalists, but their nationalism is centered on the state. Younger Egyptian officers were ready to go to war against Iraq on the basis of their view of national interest. They also believe in the stability of the states they are sworn to defend, and they see themselves as the guardians of that stability.

These officers are more professional than their predecessors. Many see the profession of arms as an end in itself. Unfortunately, a few find economic advantage in the manipulation of that profession. But gone are the days when Arab officers believed they would be assured of positions in business, politics or civil government.

No Arab officer of the new generation sees an alternative to strong relations with the United States and access to Western arms, training, and technology. The alternative which the Soviet Union once offered is gone; nothing replaces it. The more idealistic and perceptive younger officers recognize that their military establishments are not modern and capable. They look to smaller, better-trained and equipped armies, navies and air forces. They will continue to demand a large share of their national budgets.

The more modest social origins and the narrower professional outlook of Arab officers do have their downside. Arab officers speak our languages less well; they understand imperfectly the dynamics of our societies. Misinterpretation or even miscalculation is a troubling prospect.

Unlike Arab soldiers of my youth, today's younger officers see no virtue in and little prospect of a war with Israel. At the same time, they have not excluded that at some time in their lives, their countries may be attacked by Israel. Today's Arab general staffs think in terms of deterrence as a key national defense priority, second only to

the maintenance of domestic social order and political stability at home.

None are persuaded of the value of military alliances among Arab states, and none see merit in meddling in the affairs of neighboring Arab states. At the same time, Arab soldiers talk to each other. They consult on issues of organization, arms acquisition, and strategic perceptions, and are swayed by the mood of fellow officers in neighboring countries. Arab officers do not exclude dialogue with Israeli counterparts. But the political context for such a dialogue remains to be set. If it is, the contacts will have to be managed with great care, discretion, and sensitivity.

As for weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles, Arab officers are of mixed minds. They recognize the threat their nations face, notably from Iran. At the same time, they are deeply sensitive to Israel's capabilities. On balance, they have not ruled out the value of deterrent systems of their own. This is as troubling to Americans as to Israelis, and I see no easy way to deal with the threat. This is all the more reason for Israel to be seen as having achieved a fair, just peace, and to associate itself with Arab stability, economic well-being and social justice.

Promise of the Future

By now, my conclusions should be clear. I believe the international context, together with America's and Israel's circumstances, are uniquely promising, and give Israel the best opportunity it has had in its history to build the peace it has so long desired.

On balance, the arrival of a new Arab generation is also an event of promise, although the situation in the Arab world is fraught with ambiguity. At heart, the new generation of Arab leaders is prepared to engage Israel, if it finds a spirit of reciprocity. Its principal priority is domestic. The new generation gives precedence to maintaining order, achieving prosperity, strengthening civil society and political openness, and accommodating the world beyond—the West, the globalized economic system, and the new age of technology. But they would welcome seeking those goals in harmony with Israel, if the political context exists.

I would be remiss if I did not add, for emphasis, that dealing with Palestinians requires a separate and especially demanding strategy. With Palestinians, specific issues of day-to-day life must be addressed. Peace agreements and security arrangements are not enough. Palestinians, with Israelis, must work out issues of psyche, real estate, jobs and access to education, health and the other amenities of life.

Israel must make its own choices. It is up to Israel to decide if it wishes to “go it alone,” strengthening its economy, forging its way in the world at large and keeping its neighborhood at bay. I would regret this choice, for I believe Israel’s best interests lie in an accommodation with the region of which it is a part. The region can give Israel an additional dimension of security and prosperity. I would also argue that Israel needs Arab neighbors who see their interests in discouraging Palestinian violence, who are ready to cooperate to contain the threats of radical Islam, and who are prepared to help hold in check the weapons of mass destruction which will threaten Israel and Arab neighbors alike for years to come.

Israel has much to offer its neighborhood, beyond peace treaties. It is also important to consider what can be done cooperatively to strengthen Arab economic performance, deal with the issues of health and the environment, and strengthen civil society.

But it is also important to be realistic. In the wake of peace agreements between Israel and its Arab neighbors, the quality of official relations will be cooler than Israel might like. The same will be true of the dialogue between Israelis and Arab intellectuals, business leaders, and political figures. Peace will be regarded with a degree of skepticism. There is no culture of peace in the Middle East. One will only emerge slowly and with careful nurturing. An important part of the challenge Israelis face in pursuing peace is to moderate and adjust expectations and define the right ways to engage the Arab world. The tone and spirit of engagement is critical: one of equality, partnership and sensitivity.

I have described the new Arab generation as more pragmatic, disabused of the ideological excesses of the past—each of which led the peoples of the Arab world to disaster. Without budging an inch from that view, I also argue Arabs of the new generation are as passionate and believing as their forefathers. The secular ideological vacuum in the Arab world today is unnatural. The old causes—Syrian nationalism, Arab unity, Palestinianism, Ba’thism, political

Islam—have been found wanting. But one cannot rule out that in some form, at some time, a new set of beliefs and explanations of realities will emerge to fire the imagination of the Arab world. Of course the great religions will continue to exercise their influences, but something else will be added. Globalization and pragmatism are not sufficiently powerful to capture the soul and make sense of the disorderly and often threatening forces this region faces.

I do not dare to predict the shape or content of a new pattern of belief. I assume the next variety will draw heavily on the themes of past beliefs, for they sprang from the culture of this area. I am prepared to argue that a new secular dogma will include progress, social justice, tolerance freedom of expression and participation—and, hopefully, peace with Israel. Implicitly or explicitly, Arab intellectuals are gravitating toward a more liberal set of values. Israel has a vitally important contribution to make to the Arab debate, defining itself as part of this region, identifying itself with the solution of its problems, coping with its sensitivities and reaching fair peace agreements.

I recognize that peace must be built step by step. Indeed, its quest is a permanent fact. And yes, peace requires security. At the same time, its roots must be deeper: confidence, respect, and a sense of partnership. The achievement of one's maximum objectives are the enemy of stability and therefore of peace itself. The times are good for Israel, but the decisions are hard. The risks are many; they have always been so. But to my way of thinking, Israel is in a better position to run those risks than at any time in its history—to its benefit, to that of my country and the world at large.

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