The Consequences of Chaos

By Hisham H. Ahmed
SMC Professor Examines the Middle East at a Crossroads

Understandably, there has been an increasing interest in the West in Middle Eastern, Arab and Islamic affairs, primarily because of the consequences of one quagmire after another in a region long torn by seemingly endless conflicts, chaos and human suffering. Because of the intensity and high frequency of crises and breakdowns, the Middle East region has unavoidably become associated in Western minds with trouble, bloodshed, instability and uncertainty. Whether officially or unofficially, analytically or superficially, voluntarily or by compulsion, thinking about the Middle East — let alone dealing with it — has become burdensome and often draining.

The continuity of killing and devastation in the region has raised the eyebrows of all interested and concerned. Those who might contemplate the idea of escaping from the grip of events in the Middle East, even temporarily, may find their attempts doomed to failure: the region has too powerful a process of interaction between various internal and external factors to let go. The realities and the stereotypes associated with the region are too great to allow for spiritual or moral relaxation and/or decompression. Even when one wants to evade dealing with the

Middle East, questions pertaining to terrorism, fundamentalism, sectarianism and, perhaps, tribalism are bound to dominate the scene.

In essence, the impact of recurrent crises in the Middle East has inescapably seeped into the overall conscious and subconscious behavior of many human beings.

Notwithstanding problems of poverty, high unemployment rates, human rights violations and the lack of democratization in the Middle East, the most troubling three areas of contention are those related to Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In all three areas, there is almost a consensus that current strategies are outmoded, ineffective and actually counter-productive. The iron-fist policies against Palestinians in the occupied territories have contributed to further radicalization in Palestinian society. The latest Palestinian legislative elections in January 2006, when Hamas, an Islamist party that does not recognize Israel, won in a landslide, is a telling example, one which necessitates fresh thinking, a bold diplomatic initiative and an innovative, creative strategy.

Historic as it may be, the Hamas victory has positioned Palestinian society at a critical crossroads, politically and socially, but more importantly, ideologically. The determining factors of which direction the society may take depend, to a great extent, on the strategy formulated to deal with the new situation. Certainly, especially in the light of discussions to hold early Palestinian elections, a strategy based on miscalculated expectations of the size and/or the popularity of Hamas today could very well lead to untold results, if carried out to its fullest conclusion.

Hamas victory almost inevitable

While it came as shocking, tsunami- or earthquake-like news for some observers and policymakers, Hamas' sweeping victory in democratic elections, in fact, should bear no element of surprise. Compelling internal and external factors made that victory almost

inevitable. Compounded by rampant economic and political corruption in the Palestinian Authority, continued Israeli oppression forced the internal balance of forces in Palestinian society to be tipped toward the kind of transformation which Hamas purported to embody. The ongoing local self-serving, misleading, baseless and wishful-thinking public opinion polls, whose results repeatedly proved catastrophically false in the Palestinian presidential and in all four rounds of the municipal elections, should have rung the bell quite loudly on the eve of the legislative election. The most influential Arab media channel, Al-Jazeera, through its local office in Ramallah, played a pivotal role in influencing Palestinian public opinion in Hamas' favor during the election campaign by focusing its camera primarily either on unpopular, weak spokespersons from the ruling Fatah, Hamas' main competitor, or on harsh leftist critics of Fatah.

Therefore, this dramatic, yet not unexpected shift in Palestinian society is the culmination of the interplay of political, economic and psychological dynamics. Skyrocketing unemployment and poverty, as well as the absence of a political horizon due to the failure of the Palestinian-Israeli political process, are bound to deepen frustration and despair. In essence, while the Palestinian elections can be interpreted in many different ways, it is of utmost importance to realize that Palestinians were driven by an "Intifada mood" — that is, their vote was a vote of protest, first and foremost.

Thus, while Hamas' democratic takeover of the legislative branch of the Palestinian Authority needs to be read carefully and comprehensively, pushing Hamas and what it represents against the wall is destined also to push the transformation of Palestinian society more dramatically than might be expected or hoped. Especially in the absence of another appealing, credible alternative, due to the weakening of the secular Fatah, and because the leftists/liberals have become almost defunct, it is no

longer a far-fetched conclusion that Al Qaeda might gladly embrace the challenge and step in to fill the vacuum in an environment fertilized by profound frustration. Notwithstanding many spillover effects in the region, if the Palestinian people believe that their popular will is not respected and honored, their most probable resort will be toward further transformation. In other words, by disabling Hamas and, in effect, enabling Al Qaeda, secularism will be further victimized.

The merciless destruction of Lebanon in July 2006 has only deepened antagonisms in the region. The new Israeli government was neither able to project an image of strength nor to revive its credibility among Israelis. Hezbollah, a radical Shiite political party, is much stronger than it has ever been, contrary to the goals of the attack on Lebanon: Hezbollah now enjoys more support among Muslims and even among Christians. It can therefore be said that while Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon triggered the establishment of Hezbollah to resist the Israeli occupation, the 2006 attack helped Hezbollah acquire an unprecedented level of legitimacy on the regional level.

Iraq occupation threatens region

In Iraq, stability and democratization belong to the world of imagination and wishful thinking. There is neither order nor freedom. The occupation of Iraq has rendered Iraqi self-determination to sheer mockery. The model that Iraq was supposed to represent for the region has turned out to be one of political recklessness and unmatched physical destruction. To many people in the region, the cradle of civilization — Iraq — has been taken back to the pre-Stone Age. However, reducing the discourse in Iraq to "insurgency" and "civil war" did not alleviate a burdensome military involvement. As former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger put it, the military solution proved to be impossible. The heavy deployment of troops can deliver neither security nor stability. With thousands of innocent lives lost on all

sides, it has become abundantly clear that military power may achieve only short-term objectives, while lasting solutions certainly require human creativity, intuition and innovation.

No form of repression and/or suppression is capable of stopping the Iraqi people's drive for freedom and independence. The prolongation and deepening of the occupation regime in Iraq can only set the clock backward. Without any doubt, as the bipartisan Baker/Hamilton Study Group on Iraq reminded us, the power of reason is bound to have more beneficial far-reaching effects than the power of weapons. Only a political settlement which addresses the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can bring about fundamental positive changes. It is only when despair dissipates that hope for the future takes over. For this to occur, a new strategic vision is mandatory.

However, pursuing a new strategic course, particularly reviving the hitherto dying political process between Palestinians and Israelis, will require brave steps to be taken first in Iraq: the Bush administration has a unique opportunity to compensate for the military deadlock in Iraq with a vigorous, genuine diplomatic initiative to put the Palestinian-Israeli political process back on track. Yet, for the United States to play the role of an honest "peace broker" between Palestinians and Israelis, it will have to redeem itself from the stigma of being an occupying power in Iraq. The United States can enjoy no credibility in the Middle East as a peacemaker unless it rids itself of the negativity associated with occupation.

In view of the above, the required post-election strategy in the Palestinian territories must tackle internal/Palestinian, regional/Arab and global dynamics to revitalize the secular movement in Palestinian society, represented primarily by Fatah as the largest and oldest political force. In all three cases — Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine — the objectives of such a future strategy and the means required to achieve it undoubtedly need

to be intuitive, creative and atypical. Belligerency and traditionalism will certainly have the opposite effect.

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